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Monitoring the media since 1993

# Whose blacklist is it anyway? Securing the independence of the public broadcaster.

Report by the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) on recent  
challenges to the editorial independence of the public  
broadcaster.

Produced for the Open Society Foundation



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## 1. Introduction

In a constitutional democracy like the South African, it is commonly accepted and entirely uncontroversial to assert the central role allocated to an independent public service broadcaster in facilitating informed public debate based on the central tenets, as stated in the SABC Charter, of free speech and journalistic and programming independence. However, as witnessed by recent public debate, the SABC is currently being challenged on the extent to which its editorial policy remains in compliance with these basic democratic principles.

In this context, the Media Monitoring Project (MMP), an independent media monitoring organisation which has been monitoring the media since 1993, sees its role as to assess the merits of these claims. As an independent organisation of civil society, the MMP remains independent of all parties and undertakes evaluations of compliance with constitutional principles and professional media practices. In this sense the MMP's aim is to secure the primacy of the constitution, which constitutes the MMP's only substantive bias.

In the defence of these principles, the position of the MMP is to assert the necessity of publicly interrogating any substantiated suggestions that potentially threaten these principles. The significance of the political independence of the public broadcaster is of such centrality that in all instances of doubt as to the continued integrity of the public broadcaster, public interrogation should err on the side of protection and enforcement of constitutional principles, rather than otherwise. In line with this general approach, it is the assessment of the MMP that the substance of recent allegations against the SABC clearly warrants an interrogation of this kind.

In the context of the historical transgression of democratic principles, which the SABC for most of its 70-year history has represented, the public concern for the independence of the public broadcaster is entirely justified and vigilance as regards constitutional compliance is therefore to be welcomed and encouraged. It also needs to be pointed out that the opportunity for the SABC to act in compliance with democratic principles is a fairly recent achievement, which has emerged with the democratic transition. For these reasons, the current debate on SABC editorial independence is a fruitful process, which affords the opportunity of asserting the constitutional principles with renewed clarity and how these can find expression in the day-to-day operations of the SABC.

In conducting such interrogations, it is essential that all sides of the debate are heard and that all relevant concerns are brought to light in a balanced and fair fashion. This includes giving fair voice to the SABC. The pursuit of rational debate is a central element of any approach wishing to defend public broadcaster independence. This is especially so in the context of a functioning democracy, where many constituencies exist who potentially have an interest in influencing the approach of the public broadcaster. The government of the day is not the only source of potential bias. For this reason the public broadcaster must be defended against *all* attempts to influence its editorial independence, regardless of the source of the potential interference.

In this report, the MMP presents its indicative findings on the above questions. It should however be noted that these findings are limited by the following:

- Focus on news, as opposed to additional broader public service mandate responsibilities
- Focus on the print media, specifically on the non-airing of the biography of President Mbeki and the later allegations of the SABC banning of various public commentators/journalists
- The time-frame of roughly six weeks for print media
- Quantitative data based on 6 days of Television monitoring of SABC and E-TV (106 news items)

A fuller substantiation of the findings depends upon further analysis, currently being conducted by the MMP.

## 2. Substantive results of recent monitoring:

### a. Qualitative Print media analysis

A qualitative analysis of selected print media over the past six weeks has been conducted with a view to identifying tendencies in the manner in which the two points of focus (withdrawing the Mbeki biography documentary and the blacklist allegations) mentioned above were covered as news points and as items of editorial comment.

Two phases were identified:

*First phase:* The decision by the SABC not to screen the Mbeki biography was covered in a manner which suggested a range of causes behind the decision, ranging from undue political influence, to lack of SABC professionalism, managerial ineptitude and finally to the legal grounds (defamation fears) presented by the SABC for not screening the documentary. (*The Weekender*, June 17-18 2006, pg 6, as a good example) In general, a fairly balanced picture emerges which does not necessarily ascribe overt political intent to the SABC but illuminates a range of factors, both political, organisational and legal, which could cause the less than professional actions of the SABC, about which there seemed to be little disagreement. The fact that the withdrawing of the documentary came on the back-ground of earlier concerns about the political independence of the SABC (the non-screening of the Mlambo-Ngcuka 'booing' incident) served to flag the question of editorial independence as one of a series of concerns surrounding the general operations of the SABC. During this phase the SABC is still generally represented as an organisation in the throes of development and organisational transformation, trying to find a professional and constitutionally appropriate role in the post-apartheid South Africa.

*Second phase:* Subsequent to the publication by the *Sowetan* on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2006 of allegations that four specific commentators had been systematically banned by

the SABC, the tone of the coverage of the allegations against the SABC sharpens and the organisation is increasingly portrayed as clearly under the direct political influence of pro-government sentiments. This influence is described as having two main sources. *Firstly*, internal to the SABC in the form of both managerial predisposition, which causes direct politically motivated intervention in news production, and in the form of national and regionally decentralised newsroom biases amongst SABC operational personnel favouring the ANC. Anecdotes substantiate tensions between pro-independence elements and pro-ANC elements within the SABC, linking these to personal conflicts. *Secondly*, an undue external political influence is held to emerge as a result of SABC responsiveness to mainly governmental concerns.

On this basis, allegations are made of 'rot', (*Mail and Guardian*, 30th June 2006, pg 27) and there is a tendency to write off the SABC as essentially perpetuating apartheid era practices (*City Press*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2006, pg.22) on the above stated grounds, bar the existence of minority of so-called 'pockets of excellence'. (*Mail and Guardian*, 30th June 2006, pg 27) The principle of freedom of speech and the need for the independence of the public broadcaster is consistently tabled, primarily as an illustration of how the SABC is contravening the principle. Certain commentators raise the question of the extent to which this represents the 'first step on the road to totalitarianism'. (*Business Day*, 20<sup>th</sup> June, pg 10)

Within these developments, the so-called Perlman incident, in which SAFM radio host John Perlman publicly contradicted SABC spokesperson Kaizer Kganyago's assurances of the non-existence of a blacklist, was widely used as a patent validation of the fears of undue political intervention.

During these processes, notably underrepresented were the ideas that *firstly*, editorial guidelines which seek to secure news quality might have a productive role to play, and *secondly*, that managerial prerogative as *ad hoc* participation in news production might not necessarily equate undue political intervention.

Another area of key concern, namely the question of the potential interference by the SABC Board in editorial matters, was also underrepresented. Despite suggestions that evidence exists which suggests a potential contravention of the almost universally accepted 'arms length principle' in a public broadcaster institutional design, this aspect was not systematically raised. Rather, focus was consistently placed on operational SABC personnel, managers and others, and their personal political pre-dispositions. SABC News Chief Snuki Zikalala was the consistent focus and exemplification of this kind of criticism. The angling of criticism of individuals entailed the development of a critique of systematic politically motivated bias within the SABC, which served to limit the extent to which lack of SABC professionalism is generated by institutional factors.

This approach was also exemplified by an article centring on Pippa Green's *Nieman Reports* article, in which a reference is made to the SABC as a 'political grazing ground for ruling-party faithful'. (*Mail and Guardian*, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2006, pg 10). Although referring to the problems of organisational inertia as an impediment to transformation away from apartheid era editorial limitations, the approach tends to represent an SABC in which individual political persuasions are

incapable of being transcended by a process of appropriate institutional transformation. Individual political persuasion is an inherent and indeed acceptable factor in any democracy and the possibility that a public broadcaster can be built which remains uninhibited by the personal opinions of its staff is lost in an approach which problematises these opinions. The problem is not the fact that SABC staff have a political opinion, which will always be the case regardless of who staffs the organisation, but the rather different suggestion that an independent public broadcaster is built by ensuring that these persuasions are not allowed to influence the production of news.

Finally, it can be stated that although empirical evidence is cited in many articles covering the two points of focus, there seems to be a lack of symmetry between the quality of the empirical evidence and the conclusions, which are drawn upon it. For example, speculations of a blacklist composed of four individuals would struggle to conclusively substantiate that the SABC perpetuates apartheid era public broadcasting by allegedly being a government mouthpiece. The point here is not to assert the irrelevance of allegations of a blacklist (see *Introduction*), but to question the somewhat sweeping conclusions, which are being drawn on the assumption that such a list indeed exists.

b. Addressing issues of fairness: an operational definition of bias.

As argued above, there is evidence to suggest that the coverage of the two points of focus can be questioned for the extent to which it lives up to two of the critical elements of media coverage, namely balance and fairness.

It would be difficult to argue that one biased or unfair item in isolation would substantially alter the generally fair nature of the rest of the media's coverage. Instead, substantial and democracy-threatening bias occurs as a pattern - a systematically repeated political, ideological or in other way partisan bias - which over time, and through repetition, creates clear and distinctly unfair coverage.

This does not mean that bias need be intentional, in fact, very often a pattern of bias (for example in gender coverage) reveals a lack of intent, as well as the subconscious assumptions evident in societal discourses, which influence the selection of news, information and its presentation.

In evaluating whether or not news items are fair or biased, the following issues can be considered:

- *A broad spectrum of news needs to be taken into consideration*

For example, based on recent indicative monitoring of broadcast media, it can be seen that allegations against the SABC tend to be based on what SABC 3 News is reporting. As the SABC's flagship news bulletin this focus is understandable but it is also necessary to take into consideration the range of SABC's news services, across SABC 1 and 2 as well as the key radio services, like Umhlobo Wenene and Ukhozi FM. By looking at the full spectrum of news and by comparing it to other broadcasters any systematic bias, if present will be clearly revealed.

- *Coverage of government does not in and of itself constitute bias.*

It is clear that the SABC as a public service broadcaster has a duty to provide a spectrum of information to the public about that is happening in the country and the SABC also has a greater responsibility in providing the public with more citizen-focused information than commercial broadcasters. So, to some extent it is to be expected that not only would the SABC news services cover government activities but that they would also on average cover more government activities than other broadcasters. The question of fairness in government coverage then becomes a matter of focusing on how government is represented in each of the stories.

- *News production must be assessed over time for evidence of systematic favouring or disfavouring of particular individuals, parties or groups*

Bias is strengthened when particular actors are framed in consistently and clearly positive or clearly negative terms. This form of regularity, which also contributes to the production of stereotypes, can be directly identified and measured. Bias of this kind is thus a reliable indicator of a clear position or agenda behind newsroom coverage.

- *The choice of sources and topics over time should display sufficient diversity so as to make systematic unfairness improbable*

One classical tenet of professional journalism is to ensure as wide a range and diversity of sources as possible in order to guard against bias, intentional or otherwise. Diversity is the devil of bias.

- *Adherence to commonly accepted standards of journalism and ethical practice will also ensure fairness*

Adherence to basic principles, like the right of reply, contributes to professionalism and fairness in reporting practice.

#### c. Fairness and the SABC since 1994

In view of the current criticisms of the SABC, namely that the SABC is substantially and intentionally biased in favour of the South African government, and more particularly the ANC, the question arises as to whether bias in the above senses of the term can be said to be occurring?

In response to substantial concerns of precisely this nature against the SABC, the MMP was started in 1993. At the time, the ability of the SABC to cover the first democratic election in a manner that could be deemed to be free and fair was challenged. Whereas it always is the role of a public broadcaster to provide balanced, fair and impartial reporting, it is especially important at the time of

democratic elections, the procedural heart of a representative democracy, that the role of a public broadcaster must be beyond reproach.

The monitoring, which the MMP has conducted in the post-1994 period, indicates that there is no evidence of systematic bias in the above senses of the word. In fact, MMP's monitoring in the post-apartheid era has revealed a high level of fulfilment by the SABC in terms of fairness (see MMP Election Reports of 1994, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2004 and soon to be released 2006). These findings are supported by similar conclusions from the evaluations of the Independent Electoral Commission, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, now known as Icasa.

In other areas of substantive focus, the same tendencies are clear in the performance of the SABC. In 2004, MMP undertook a bias analysis of news coverage of government, which compared SABC and etv news coverage. The results showed that there was some cause for concern in that a relatively high incidence of unfair reporting was found on SABC3 News as far as government related stories were concerned, but that there was no general evidence to suggest systematic bias by the SABC. (*Whose Master's Voice? A Comparison of SABC 3 and etv News*, MMP Report, 2004)

In the present context, MMP monitoring of six days of SABC3 News indicates that 94 percent of the coverage can be described as fair.

Source	SABC 3 %	Etv %
Government	30	17
Political parties	17	17
Justice	4	11
Academic/expert	4	4
Unions	11	10
Business	7	6
NGO	4	3
Media	3	3
Survivor	6	1
Foreign Government	1	6
Residents	8	7
Family	0	3
Criminals	1	6
Health	3	3
Educators	0	3
Sports	0	3
Total	100	100

A breakdown of sources clearly indicates that a greater amount of government sources are accessed by SABC3 as compared to etv. It must be noted, as above, that this alone does not indicate a systematic bias and is to some degree to be expected. What it does serve to illustrate is the importance of on-going and more comprehensive monitoring of the SABC which the MMP currently is undertaking.

### 3. Conclusion

Whereas there definitely remains serious challenges to the SABC in terms of broader public broadcaster mandate issues, these being recognised by the SABC as central to its process of transformation, it is the assessment of the MMP on the basis of existing research that it is difficult to mount a convincing case which can carry a conclusion of bias as defined earlier in this report. This does not in any way reduce the relevance of the thorough and balanced investigation of the recent challenges to the impartiality of the SABC which threaten to undermine an institution of central importance to the South African democracy.

The idea of a code for quality control of external sources can be a useful tool in the day to day production of news, and guidelines for the formulation of such a code provides a fruitful avenue for further discussion. In practice, most newsrooms rely on unwritten policies and codes to fulfil this purpose, and the role of the media in general in explicating their practices and thus contributing to the formulation of a general code is thus clear. The MMP is happy to actively participate in this process.

#### 4. Method

The above analysis and this report in general has been generated by the monitoring of the following two sets of media data:

##### 1. For print media:

- The Mail and Guardian
- Business Day
- City Press
- The Star
- The Citizen
- The Weekender
- Die Beeld
- The Sunday Times
- The Daily Sun
- Sowetan
- Sunday Times
- Sunday World
- Sunday Independent

Period for print media for this report:

10th June 2006 to 6<sup>th</sup> July 2006

##### 2. For broadcast media:

- SABC 1
- SABC 2
- SABC 3
- E-TV
- Umhlobo Wenene
- Ukhozi FM
- Thobela
- Lesedi
- Metro
- SAFM

In MMP's ongoing monitoring into these issues, the above sources are being used and the following time periods apply:

Period for television media: 15<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> May 2006 (before focus points)  
10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> July 2006 (after focus points))

Period for radio media: 17<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> July 2006

The monitoring of these takes place using a standardised methodology and specially trained monitors who monitor prime time bulletins across these media. The date is then captured in a tailor-made database on the basis of which results



are generated. More than 20 individual parameters are used as a framework for data capture, including MMP's tried and tested fairness indicator.

Detailed information on method is available on request.

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## 5. About the MMP

The Media Monitoring Project (MMP) is an independent non-governmental organisation (NGO) that has been monitoring the South African media since 1993.

### a. Mission

The MMP aims to promote the development of a free, fair, ethical and critical media culture in South Africa and the rest of the continent.

### b. Objectives

The core objectives of the organisation are as follows:

- To be the pre-eminent media “watchdog” in Africa;
- To inform and engage media professionals and other key stakeholders to improve the quality and ethics of news reporting in Africa;
- To influence the development of robust and effective communication legislation and media codes of conduct in Africa.

### c. Activities

The MMP offers a wide range of services to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), media, government and NGOs in South Africa and other African countries, including:

- Reviewing and analysing the content, selection process and presentation of news reporting to monitor the quality and ethical practices of broadcast, print and online media;
- Distributing regular reports on research findings and highlighting infringements to media duties and responsibilities;
- Conducting in-depth research on specific issues (commissioned reports);
- Developing training materials, tools and best practices on ethical and fair media reporting;
- Submitting proposals and other material for the development or amendment of policies and laws.

The MMP applies internationally recognised, state of the art monitoring and research methodologies. The MMP is the only independent NGO in South Africa that monitors the representation of human rights issues in the media, and the only organisation that conducts in-depth, qualitative and comparative research in this field. The organisation’s expertise is widely acknowledged by media stakeholders, and the MMP is regularly invited to provide comments and presentations on a wide range of subjects within the media.