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# What's on the Menu? Understanding the Diet of Programming for Citizens

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## 1. Introduction

As the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) remains a vital source of information for a large majority of people in South Africa. It is therefore critical that the SABC gives viewers and listeners content that not only reflects the diverse nature of South Africa but also helps South Africans learn and respond to the world and issues around them. In other words, as part of its democratic and democratizing role the SABC ought to reflect and represent society in its diversity. The diversity of programming is not only essential to the country's democracy but also to meeting the viewing needs of all audiences.

That being the case, how and what media we consume are as important as the kind of food we eat. This is because the programmes we watch on television for example can be nutritious in so far as they stimulate or expose us to new ideas, fresh perspectives or challenge our beliefs, values, etc. On the other hand, the programmes can be junk in so far as they perpetuate stereotypes or encourage violence as a means of solving problems for instance.

Accordingly, Media Monitoring Africa examined the SABC television programming more like a menu, to see not only what is on, but also to look at the variety and diversity of programming available. We found that, if one was to consume or watch SABC television for 24 consecutive hours, more than 15 hours of that would be analogous to consuming junk food. The implications for this are that audiences are receiving junk and therefore likely to be uninformed, meaning that it would be unlikely they would participate meaningfully in the country's democracy.

This report is therefore an indictment on the SABC as the public broadcaster that is mandated to broadcast: quality, independent programmes that contribute to a plurality of opinions and an informed public; as well as a range of material that strikes a balance between programming of wide appeal and specialised programming that serves the needs of different audiences, among other things.<sup>1</sup>

The report forms part one of a series of reports that Media Monitoring Africa will release in the course of the next few months which will examine the SABC television menu for aspects like local versus foreign programmes, genre of programmes as well as the language of programmes. This report however, is about the diversity of programming on all SABC television platforms using a food analogy. This analogy allows the content of SABC programming to be viewed as a "TV Diet"<sup>2</sup>, that is, how healthy or unhealthy our TV consumption is.

The report has two parts. The first part explains how the SABC television menus were examined. The second part details the findings from the menu analysis.

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<sup>1</sup>For more on the SABC's public mandate, see the SOS vision document, accessible from [http://www.supportpublicbroadcasting.co.za/images/uploads/SOS\\_vision\\_document\\_-\\_26\\_Jan\\_2012\\_.pdf](http://www.supportpublicbroadcasting.co.za/images/uploads/SOS_vision_document_-_26_Jan_2012_.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The 'TV Diet' is a game developed by Media Monitoring Africa which allows the user to determine their 'TV Diet' using this platform. The viewer logs onto the TV Diet and selects the channel and programme they are currently viewing. The viewer is also able to give feedback on the programme as well as see what their average viewing hours are. The TV Diet can be found at [www.tvdiet.co.za](http://www.tvdiet.co.za).

The report does not only offer a fresh way of looking at what the public broadcaster feeds its audiences but also an innovative way of making audiences examine the television programmes they consume.

## 2. How the items on the SABC television menu were examined

The SABC television programming reviewed for this report was aired between 23 May 2013 and 23 June 2013 on SABC 1, 2 and 3. This period was chosen purely for logistical reasons. By 23 June 2013 we had collated all the television schedules over a period of one month hence we worked with that information.

In order to associate programmes (items) with particular food items, we assumed that:

- Knowing what is going on in the world around us is a good thing;
- Healthy programmes are those that help open our minds, either by offering educational or academic knowledge and messages, or they may be news current affairs and documentaries;
- Less healthy programmes are those that are there simply to entertain, like some sitcoms or soaps;
- Programmes that contain and promote extreme violence, gender and or racial stereotypes, or that promote consumerism and materialism to the exclusion of all else are bad;
- Local content is better because it promotes local production industry, local talent and gives back to the local economy;
- Multilingual programmes are better if they are locally produced; and,
- Harmless adult programmes and talks shows may teach children and can also harm children.

Based on these assumptions, we developed and used the following 10 criteria:

1. Programmes that reinforce negative sex stereotypes were considered as **Deadly Poison**;
2. Programmes with extreme violence were categorised as **Hard Drugs**;
3. Reality shows like Survivor were classified as **Alcohol or Cigarettes**;
4. Programmes with mild violence and simulated violence were considered as **Fried Fast Food**;
5. Light adult entertainment like some soaps, series, and comedies were categorised as **Coffee or Coke**;
6. Violent cartoons or cartoons that show violence as a means to resolve problems, and sports and life style programme were classified as **Sweets or Ice Cream**;
7. Harmless adult programmes and talk shows were considered as **Grilled Fast Food**;
8. Programmes with life lessons, or other genres that carry life lessons were categorised as **Pasta Dishes**;
9. Edutainment, news and actualities were classified as **Lean Chicken or Fish**; and,
10. Educational programmes (academic and documentaries) were considered as **Salads or Fruits**. ``

The above criteria could be viewed as a continuum or sliding scale with Deadly Poison on the one end, Junk Food in the middle and Healthy Food on the other extreme end. We then assigned each television programme to one category, following which we counted the duration (in hours) of all the programmes that were categorised according to the criteria outlined above. All this information was captured into a specially designed database from which we were able to determine how healthy or unhealthy the SABC television menu was. Using the information from the schedules, we also

identified locally produced programmes as well as international programmes. This allowed us to determine local dishes versus international dishes on the SABC menu.

This methodology has its own limitations. Firstly, not all programmes were comprehensively described in the schedules hence it proved difficult to assign programmes to specific categories. In such cases, the specific information needed for the programme was researched online and added manually. Secondly, repeats were not excluded. By Examining overall programming, which included repeats, we were thus able to determine the amount of health or unhealthy programmes the broadcaster gives its audiences. Thirdly, the categories we used are very subjective and informed by MMA's human rights bias. We therefore welcome input and interaction regarding this categorisation so that we are able to improve it going forward. Overall, the findings that follow are based on a new and innovative way of examining what our public broadcaster gives us.

### **3. What we found on the SABC television menu**

This section details what consumers are offered on the SABC menu. It reveals that the majority of items on the SABC menu are junk foods. It also shows that the SABC 1 menu has more healthier items to choose from than the SABC 2 or 3 menus. The section ends by uncovering the diversity of local and international content on the public broadcaster's television menu. It shows that local content is far more healthier than international content.

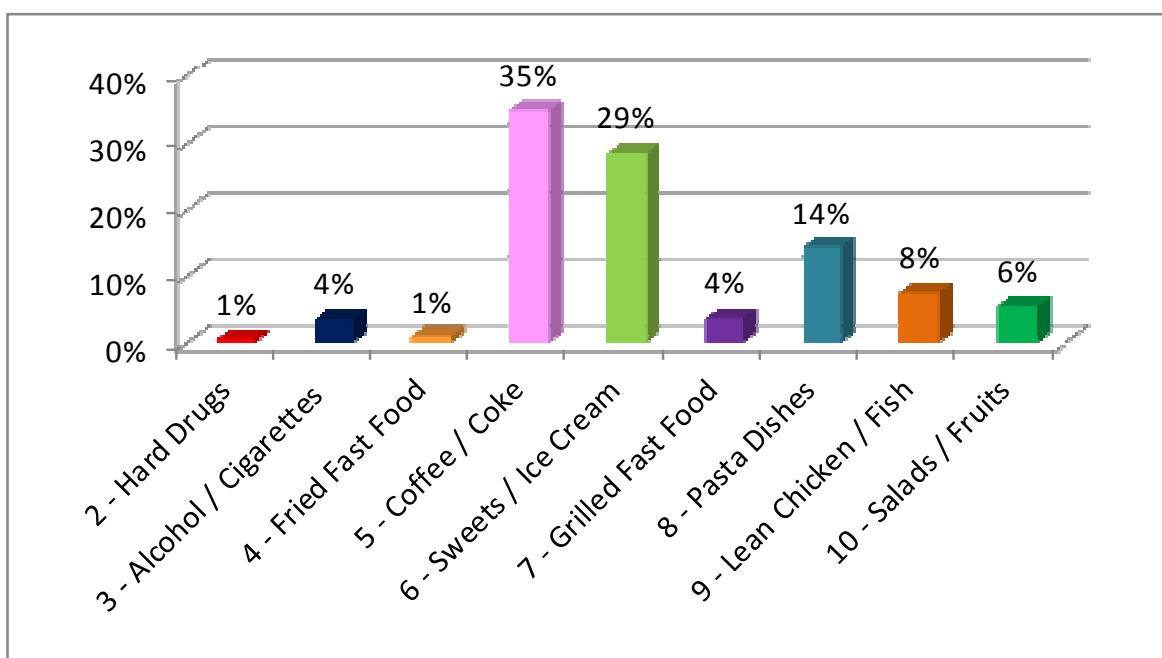
#### **3.1 Overall diversity of the SABC television menu**

With regards to the overall SABC television menu, it is important to point out that the public broadcaster does not offer programmes that could be considered as Deadly Poison on its menu. This is positive because deleterious television content will impede the public broadcaster from playing its role in fostering dialogue that will create cohesion and nation building; and as a result undermine its ability to maintain, promote and deepen the country's democracy. While SABC does not offer poisonous programming, we found that 64 percent of the programmes (Coke / Coffee and Sweets / Ice Cream combined) could be seen as junk food. Put differently, if one was to consume or watch SABC television for 24 consecutive hours, more than 15 hours of that would be analogous to consuming junk food. These are programmes that are entertaining but not educational.

While it is necessary for the broadcaster to have such programmes, they do not add much value to people's lives other than serve an entertaining purpose. There needs to be a balance between informative, educational content and content which serves entertainment purposes only. Interestingly, a third of the broadcaster's programming lean towards healthy food, from Grilled Fast Food to Salads and Fruits. This means that there are at least some good programmes to choose from.



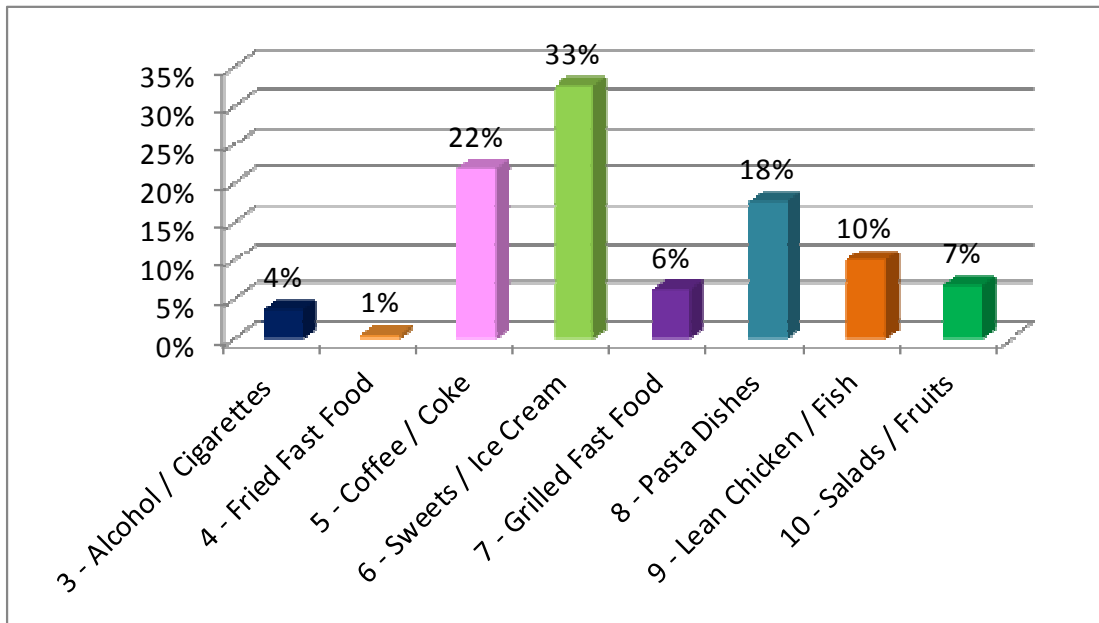
Figure 1: Overall diversity of the SABC menu



### 3.1.1 Diversity of the SABC 1 menu

When the menu was aggregated according to television channel, we observed that SABC 1 offers neither Deadly Poison nor Hard Drugs on its menu. Again, this is a positive finding because hard drugs and poison are not good for audiences. However, more than half the menu is full of junk (Coffee at 22 percent and Sweets at 33 percent). This translates into 13 hours of junk for every 24 hours of television. This however, is less than the average of 15 hours recorded across all the SABC television channels. In comparison to other channels, SABC 1's menu is better as 41 percent of the items on the menu lean towards healthy food, that is, from Grilled Fast Food through Pasta Dishes to Salads and Fruits. This means that audiences have far more healthy choices on SABC 1 than on SABC 2 or 3. Audiences therefore have a greater chance to be informed if they watch SABC 1 than SABC 2 or 3.

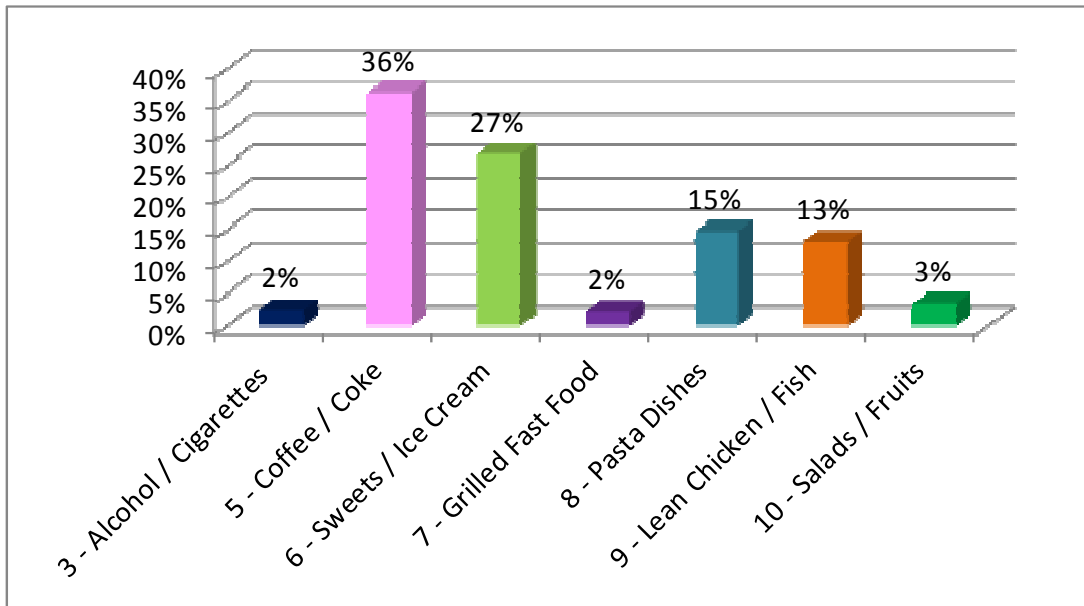
Figure 2: Diversity of the SABC 1 menu



### 3.1.2 Diversity of the SABC 2 menu

Although SABC 2 does not have Deadly Poison, Hard Drugs or Fried Fast Food on its menu, over 60 percent of its menu is junk food. This translates into more than 15 hours of junk for every 24 hours of television, which is the average across all the television channels. Unlike SABC 1, which has 41 percent of its items leaning towards healthy food, SABC 2 has 33 percent of its programmes leaning towards healthy food, that is, Grilled Fast Food, Pasta Dishes, Lean Chicken and Salads combined. Although this figure is slightly lower than SABC 1, it does indicate that there is programming which is of healthier consumption available to the viewer in the form of informative, enriching content.

Figure 3: Diversity of the SABC 2 menu

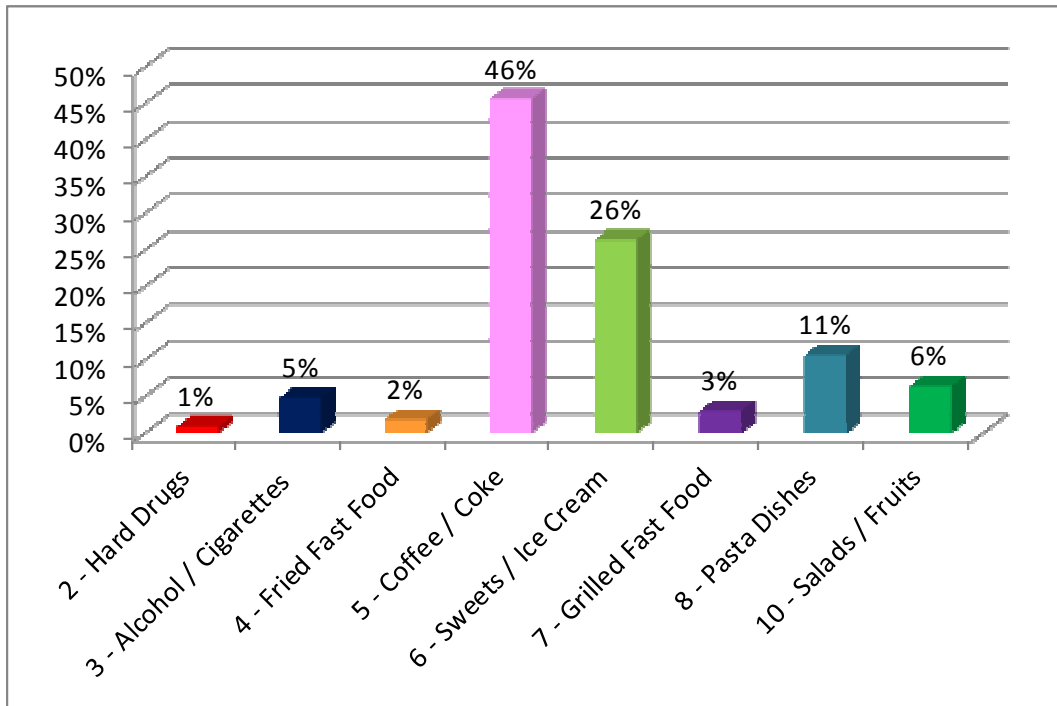


### 3.1.3 Diversity of the SABC 3 menu

Of all the SABC television menus, the SABC 3 menu is the worst for the following reasons:

1. It has the highest proportion of items that lean towards Deadly Poison, namely, Hard Drugs, Alcohol and Fried Fast Food at eight percent.
2. It has the highest proportion of junk food at 72 percent (Coffee and Sweets combined) translating into more than 17 hours of junk for every 24 hours of broadcasting.
3. It also has the least proportion of items leaning towards health food at 20 percent compared to 41 percent for SABC 1 and 33 percent for SABC 2.

Figure 4: Diversity of the SABC 3 menu



What is clear across the board is that there is a significant amount of junk programming on all SABC television channels. It is therefore important that SABC, as the public broadcaster strikes a balance between entertaining, informing and educating the audiences in its programming. Crucially, it should be concerned with having a positive impact on the lives of large numbers of people in the country. In addition, even though the effects of television may not be as linear and one-dimensional as a result of intervening variables such as age, gender, predispositions, perceptions, social environment, past experience, and parental influence, when it comes to consuming media, we assume that harmful content like violence and explicit sex has negative effects on society, particularly children.

It should be noted that this is a difficult mandate to fulfil and costing this mandate poses a challenge in carrying it out. Each of the three major sources of funding (government, viewers, and corporates) comes with its own set of constraints. As a result organisations like the SOS: Support Public Broadcasting Coalition have made calls for alternative funding models for the public broadcaster.<sup>3</sup>

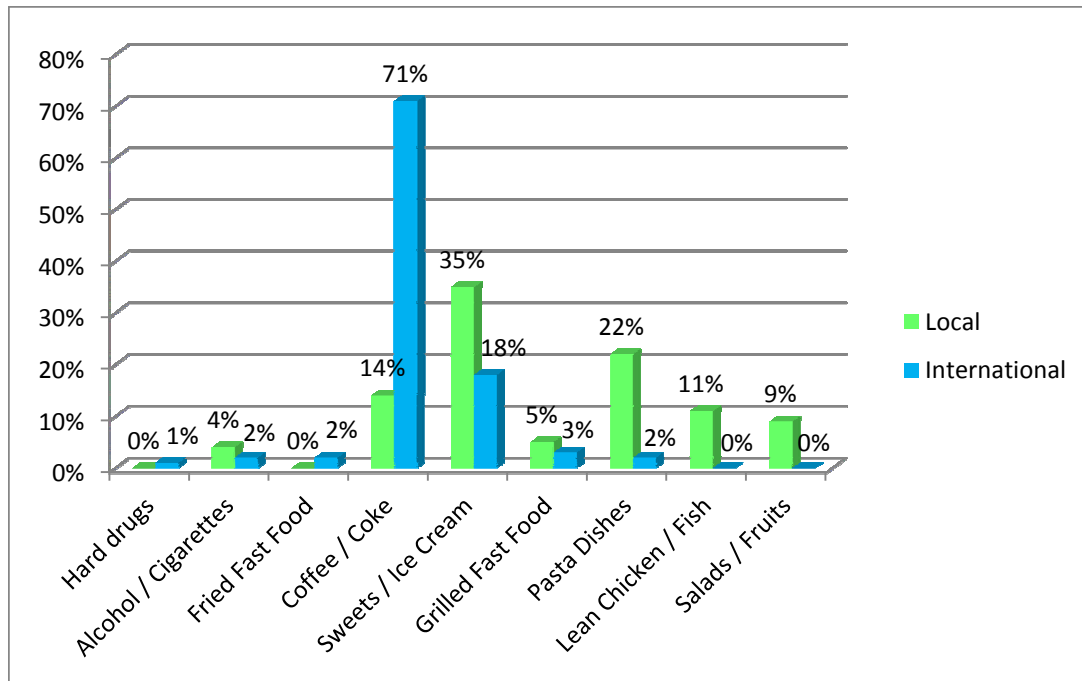
### 3.2 Diversity of local versus international dishes on the SABC television menu

The overwhelming presence of content from international providers reflects language, values and lifestyles that are often vastly different from those of the community “consuming” the content.

<sup>3</sup>For more information on the funding models see the SOS vision document, accessible from [http://www.supportpublicbroadcasting.co.za/images/uploads/SOS\\_vision\\_document\\_-\\_26\\_Jan\\_2012\\_.pdf](http://www.supportpublicbroadcasting.co.za/images/uploads/SOS_vision_document_-_26_Jan_2012_.pdf)

When likened to food, it could be argued that while international dishes may expose local audiences' taste buds to new tastes, they may sometimes be unpalatable. As such, we looked at the diversity of local versus international dishes on the SABC television menu.

Figure 5: Diversity of local versus international dishes on the SABC menu



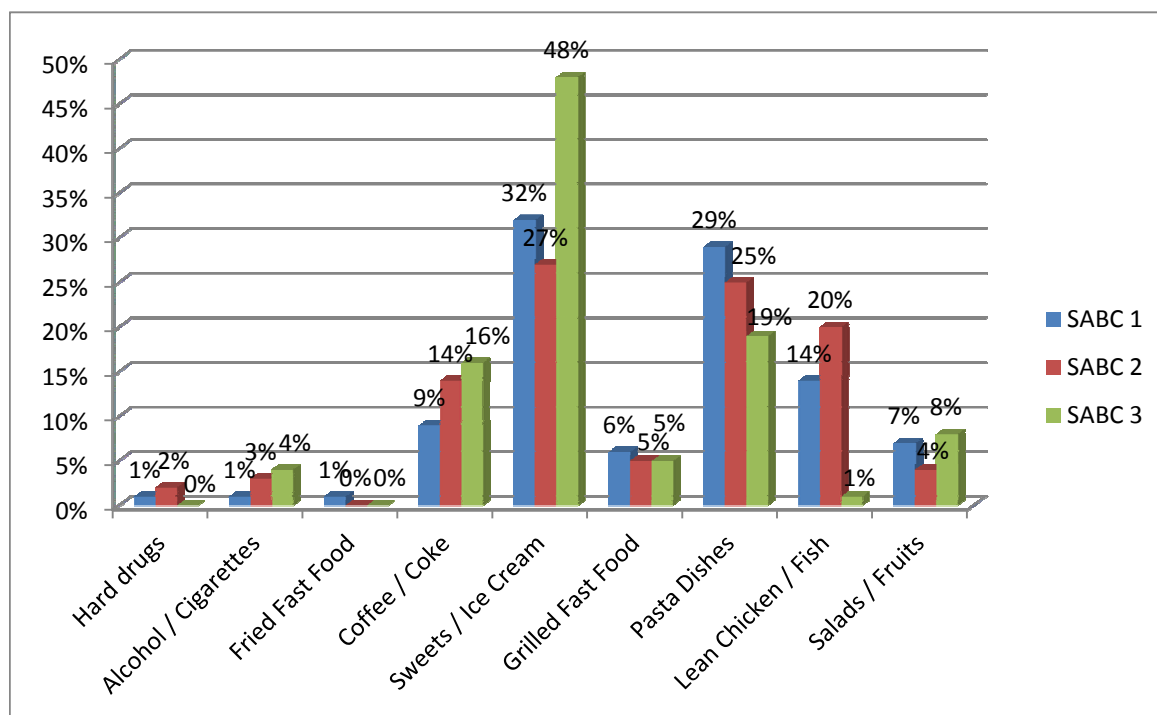
It is crucial at this point to note that international dishes are not cheap unless they are dated meaning that audiences are fed with old and recycled programmes that are analogous to stale food. This has been the case with the SABC bringing back programmes like *Mcgyver*, which were made in the 1980s. Also given the overwhelming reliance on international content, the authenticity of telling original South African stories in different genres becomes limited. International content also entrenches the current status quo characterised by inequalities of class, gender, race, languages, geographic location, ideologies that shape policy choices in all aspects of our lives. Furthermore, it entrenches the unidirectional flow of media content from the global North to South with consequences for identity formation and cultural diversity.

That being the case and in line with our assumption that local programming is better, we observed that almost half (47 percent) of the local dishes across all SABC television menus lean towards healthy food (Grilled Fast Food, Pasta Dishes, Lean Chicken and Salads combined) whereas the majority (89 percent) of the international dishes are junk (Coke and Sweets combined). The SABC should therefore encourage local dishes as they tend to be healthier than international dishes.

### 3.2.1 Diversity of local dishes on all SABC television channels

As highlighted above, local content is better than international content. Therefore we sought to find out the diversity of local dishes on each SABC television channel. The Figure below shows diversity of local dishes on each SABC television channel. What is clear and in line with the findings on the overall diversity of the SABC menus is that local dishes also consists of junk food like Coffee and Sweets. What is more fascinating though is that if we consider healthier food from say Grilled Fast Food to Salads, we will notice that, proportionally, there are more local healthier dishes on SABC 1 than they are on SABC 3. Put differently, if one was to consume local content only on SABC 1 for 24 continuous hours, nearly 10 hours would be junk food and over 13 hours would be healthier food and the remainder would be dangerous to poisonous. On SABC 3, over 15 hours would be junk and about eight hours would be healthier food and the remaining hour would be dangerous to poisonous. The shows us that the majority of consumption is junk. Consumers of SABC are being offered content which does not add nutrition to one's TV Diet, meaning that there is not a lot of informative, educational programming available to the consumer.

Figure 6: Diversity of local dishes on all SABC television channels



## 4. Conclusion

This report has shown that although the public broadcaster does not offer outright deadly poison on its television menu, the majority of the items on the menu (64 percent) are junk food and six percent is healthy programming. The high levels of junk could be attributed to pursuit of advertiser funded programming and product placement as well as limited resources and cutting back on local content. Be that as it may, the SABC therefore needs to balance between entertainment content and educational and informative content. If the public broadcaster strikes this balance, audiences will be more likely to be informed and in turn participate meaningfully in the country's fledging democracy.

The report also revealed that local content offers healthier viewing in comparison to international content. In fact 89 percent of international content is junk whereas almost half (47 percent) of local content is healthier. Relative to what each channel broadcasts, there is however more healthier local content on SABC 1 than there is on SABC 3. We therefore encourage the SABC to broadcast more healthier local content even on the commercially driven channel. This will ensure that more audiences receive healthy information.

We hope that the findings in this report will not only inspire the SABC to offer more healthy diverse items on its television menu but also encourage audiences to think about the television they watch. In that regard, we will be releasing more reports on the SABC. The next report will be looking specifically at local content and diversity of language across the SABC channels. The next report will include analysis of eTV. For audiences, we encourage you to sign up on our "TV Diet" tool. The TV Diet allows users to know and understand what their personal TV Diet is, whether one is consuming healthy nutritious content, or more dangerous poisonous content. This is an easy, three step online tool which allows the user to give feedback on their favourite television shows, as well as to view your personal average television watching time. This tool is accessible from [www.tvdiet.co.za](http://www.tvdiet.co.za).