

The SABC will never learn

 By [Benedicte Dube](#)

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The story of the SABC is haunting. I've been contemplating writing this article for weeks now. I just did not know where to start. Having consulted friends and colleagues, I have eventually relented. I thought I should perhaps start the story from the SABC of the late Zwelakhe Sisulu.

It was an SABC of idealists; it was to transform itself from a state broadcaster to a national broadcaster. Sisulu was the first CEO of the SABC in post-apartheid South Africa, a Nieman Fellow, a former editor of the esteemed *New Nation* newspaper, and respected journalist and unionist for media workers. He had the pedigree.

Sisulu died just over two weeks ago. In the *Sunday Times* of 7 October 2012, the current press ombudsman, Joe Thloloe, wrote a moving tribute to Sisulu. In essence, Thloloe hailed Sisulu as a courageous journalist, a leader and a great son of the soil. For us interns, back in those days, Sisulu was a hero, almost like a God - we swallowed and lapped at each word he uttered and we believed in his vision of the future SABC.

Even Sisulu could not save the SABC

Various transformation committees were set up at the SABC under his guard to expedite the transformation process. In the end, the SABC would be the voice of the people. For naïve newbies like myself, the task was easy; take the SABC out of the hands of the Broederbond and voilà, the corporation would be ready to serve the people. As history would attest, even Zwelakhe Sisulu could not fix or save the SABC.

We all know that the SABC of today is still battling various issues, if not worse. The corporation is perhaps in a deeper hole. In all fairness, we do not know the extent of the Broederbond damage, or at least I don't. There are stories being peddled, of course. One being that in the run up to the change of guard, a series of television footage and radio tapes went missing, the boys of the Broederbond were taking personal insurance, they were to sell the material to international networks at a later stage and become overnight millionaires. That story remains legendary.

Fast forward to the SABC of post-Sisulu. I do not have enough space to cover all areas, so I will limit my focus to News. In 2007, under one Dr. Snuki Zikalala (PhD Bulgaria), the SABC launched an international news channel, at a cost of millions of rands, apparently to bring news to the masses. It was a shocking announcement, and after a series of enquiries regarding the location of the channel, we were told it was broadcasting on some obscure platform that only three South Africans and government officials (I kid you not!) could reach. Needless to say that after much deliberation, the exercise was canned two-and-a-half years later in 2010. I have written a lot about Zikalala on Bizcommunity, along with his nemesis Barney Mthomboti (They coup d'état'ed each other at every turn - the story has become tedious and boring.). If you have

enough time and patience to want to educate yourself on the story of these two, you could always dig the archives for an [article I wrote on these pages in May 2004](#). it will give you some perspective.

More money to launch international news channel

The two are at least journalists of sorts and could arguably run a newsroom. What shock and horror to hear that the current chief operating officer of the SABC, Hlaudi Motsoeneng, uhm...not a head of a unit of the SABC, but the COO of the entire corporation, does not even have matric! Now that is mind-boggling. He's labeled as "Mr. Fix It", apparently because he claims to have turned the corporation around. Don't ask, but the SABC has been in parliament recently asking the treasury for more money to launch an international news channel broadcasting on the DSTV platform.

Of course, the treasury and Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan are saying, no way, not under our watch! Gordhan told parliament that the SABC executive management must take "credible measures to stop wasteful and ill-considered projects and expenditure". They are asking for R180m per year to run the operation. This figure will escalate to almost R250m over the next three years. Never mind that they have only R388m in sponsorship revenue for the current financial year, for the entire corporation. I am not a bean counter, but I do understand the concept of cost escalation in excess of revenue growth. Indeed, I have hung around those types for a while! Meanwhile, the man who is supposed to be running the SABC and News, Phil Molefe is on special leave. Let's leave his story for another column.

Can Ngubane steer ship in right direction?

So which part of the past mistakes, has the current SABC board missed? Ben Ngubane, the current chair of the SABC is a likeable, fatherly fellow. He made a great premier of KwaZulu Natal in hard times and a fabulous ambassador of the nation when tempers receded. As to whether he can steer this ship in the right direction is another story altogether. He has been quoted as saying the "ship has holes, but is not sinking, as yet"! In 2003, the SABC followed (or should I say copied) eNews, when the free-to-air news channel moved its prime time news to 7pm. Now, eNews, or its morphosis, eNCA recently launched its 24-hour news channel, the SABC feels the need to compete at that level. Now, the difference is that eNCA is not a baby anymore, it is an over zealous but clever teenager; the SABC on the other hand remains a dinosaur, battling to shed its skin and the legacy still haunting it. It will never learn.

Unfortunately, I can't promise a better tomorrow for the SABC, it remains an addict that goes into rehab and relapses after two days. Perhaps it needs a board that understands broadcasting and a CEO like the legendary Peter Matlare, who would be justified in claiming to be a "Mr. Fix It", because indeed, he did try to fix the SABC. And he was on course! But now the guy is a glorified bread merchant at Tiger Brands, when in fact, he is the right man to steer this national sinking ship, at least to safe shores. I know we all need bread, but we also need knowledge!

ABOUT BENEDICTA DUBE

Benedicta is MD of HQ Media, a strategic media and communications firm based in Johannesburg. She is a journalist, writer and editor by training and profession. Her experience in the media spans nearly 18 years, 10 of which were served in senior management positions, both in print/publishing and broadcasting. Email her at dube.benedicta60@gmail.com, or follow her on Twitter at [@BenedictaDube](https://twitter.com/BenedictaDube).

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