

SA's 'last chance' to save community TV

'Marginalised', 'neglected', fragmented and left to fend for itself, the SA community TV ship is gradually sinking, prompting calls for desperate measures. The fate of SA community TV lies with the Department of Communications (DOC), ICASA, Sentech, Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) and other stakeholders, which are currently locked in an emergency summit in Boksburg.



Bylssa Sikiti da Silva 26 May 2010

Accusations all-round

Accusations and counter-accusations have been flying thick and fast behind the scenes, with some delegates lashing out the government - DOC in this case - for its litany of bureaucratic processes and failing to fulfil its promises.

Others hit out at communications regulator ICASA for its 'discriminatory' and inconsistent approach in issuing licences and monitoring fiasco. Soweto TV has a seven-year licence, Cape Town TV operates on a one-year licence, while others apparently have no choice but to settle for a three-month licence.

Another mob slams the MDDA for its meagre funding, but the Parktown-based organisation says it is under-funded and can do better than that.

Signal distribution agency Sentech also took a punch in the face, and stands accused of being greedy and unpatriotic for charging exorbitant fees to struggling community broadcasters.

The corporate sector was also not spared. Some say it unfairly pumps mainstream broadcasters with tons of lucrative advertising contracts while overlooking community media. Community broadcasting took just 1% of the 2009 total adspend figures (R24.4-billion).

Under-funded and marginalised

But then, what goes around comes around. Those who are running community TV stations are also accused of being lazy baby-crying and unrealistic.

"These people just keep moaning and moaning, but what are they doing to help themselves? They cannot all look at government to bail them out all the time. They should be creative and come up with ideas that can help their stations," one government delegate told Bizcommunity.com.

Dimakatso Mashilo, of ICASA, told delegates: "This sector has been under-funded and has been marginalised and neglected for a long time. But we don't have to lose hope. We should use the international benchmarking and engage with our international peers to see how they can help us.

"We should draw strengths for those who have been creative and successful in this sector."

International successes

There are at least 300 community TV stations in Canada, and 81 stations in Australia, 79 of which cater for indigenous populations. SA has just four operating stations. The fifth licensee, Tshwane TV, will go on air on 1 June this year, the stalwart boss Kopano Molefe said, yesterday, 25 May 2010.

Describing community TV as a vital tool to reinforce social cohesion, Mashilo said: "Look at the 2008 xenophobic violence. Community TV can play a major role in promoting integration with regard to our African brothers and sisters.

"How best can we integrate them into our society? These are the tasks community TV, if well-funded, can do."

Collective effort, bargaining

Mashilo, who acknowledged his organisation's shortcomings, lashed out at community TV managers for individualising the sector. "This sector needs a collective effort and a strong lobby to move forward."

Franklin Huizies, CEO of the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF), echoed Mashilo's sentiments.

He told Bizcommunity.com, "There should be unity in this sector. These guys should learn from us. They should establish network, a lobby group that will speak for the whole sector and facilitate capacity building.

"Even when it comes to advertising, each station is selling as an individual, meaning that everyone has a different rate card which is not good. There should be a collective bargaining."

The community TV policy summit ends today.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.
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