

# If TV isn't live, it's dead

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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I am not among those who have leapt up to criticise the SABC for launching a new channel, nor for doing it on DStv.

Broadcasting news has been shifting to the live, 24-hour format for over two decades and it is time the SABC moved to catch up. To be stuck in the confines of their regular evening news slots was so primitive; it is unthinkable that they should not plan a 24-hour news operation. Besides, there is a large play going on for the continental audience among a number of players (such as e.tv's eNCA channel and China's StarTimes, not to mention CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera), so it does not make sense to leave the field for others.

That SABC News is only available on pay-TV has drawn criticism, but they had little choice. Of course, a public broadcaster should be available to all, but with only three of their own channels this is the only way to get on air at this stage. I hope that this will change when we finally get the much-postponed digital terrestrial television.

The question is why the SABC is rushing to do it now, especially since it is obvious to anyone who has watched the new channel that the broadcaster was not ready. It wasn't just that the launch was full of technical blunders (Did anyone else catch the presenter talking about her boobs, not knowing she was on air?), but how extraordinary that anyone could think to launch a news channel with live coverage of a dinner and long, boring speeches by politicians and business partners.

## Inappropriate and tacky

They chose to display not sharp, informative, on-the-ball journalism but a public genuflection to their political and financial masters. The inappropriateness was matched only by the tackiness. The channel design - the logos, the badly shot, over-used promos - look like something out of the 1970s. What became clear in the first few days of watching is that the SABC's sleepy news operation has not geared up for the speed, immediacy and interactivity of the digital age.

What summed it up for me was to see the SABC's head of news, Jimi Matthews, on the wrong side of the camera, eating dinner with the guests during the launch. How can the main man not be in the control room at a time like this?

Some suggest the SABC was rushing to get a propaganda machine in place before the 2014 elections, but I doubt such a conspiracy. This channel is not going to be a factor in the voting. More likely, the reason is something like the SABC needing to justify itself in its negotiations with Treasury over their R1,5bn bailout and performance requirements.

## SABC needs to up its game

The SABC will have to do a lot sharper on content if it is going to compete both here and on the continent, and stop shedding audiences to e.tv and MultiChoice. e.tv has announced what could be a game-changing move: it is going to offer free-to-air satellite television. From October, you will be able to access 15 channels by buying a set-top box for about R1,900 as a once-off cost.

This is an interesting challenge to both our existing free-to-air models and pay-TV. Moreover, it comes as the StarTimes takes up its minority stake in the new pay-TV operator, TopTV, which has been struggling. The Chinese state operator, which has a growing presence across Africa, may be the one player that can throw as much money into this competition as Naspers' MultiChoice. So concerned was Naspers at the StarTimes arrival in this country, that they tried to chuck R500m at a rival bidder for TopTV.

DSTV/MultiChoice and StarTimes are battling it out in other big African markets, notably Nigeria, where StarTimes' offerings are very competitive.

Soon to arrive here as well is Gupta television, the 24-hour channel promised by the publishers of the New Age newspaper. There is certainly going to be no shortage of media looking for ways to butter up one or other faction of the ruling party. The question is: Which of it will add to our fount of news and information?

## ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote Diepsloot (Jonathan Ball, 2011), Recht Malan Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of The A-Z of South African Politics (Penguin, 1994/5), What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic (Jacana, 2010) and Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism (Jacana, 2010).

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