

# Slouching towards Auckland Park



By [Ed Herbst](#)

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"The senior management at the SABC couldn't even be bothered to do the numeracy test that was required for a proper skills assessment. The entire senior management of the SABC is in a dire, dire state." Marian Shinn, Parliament 4 February 2005

"SABC is doing well. People are saying get partners from outside the country - BBC and others. We said 'no, we have relevant skills set within SABC.'" Hlaudi Motsoeneng, Parliament 4 February 2005

## Story summary: The ringmaster is dubbed a dummy

On 10 November 2012, the BBC's Director General, George Entwistle called a media conference.

Standing against the backdrop of the BBC headquarters in central London, he announced his resignation.

A week earlier, Newsnight, a current affairs program, had wrongly implicated a former MP in a paedophile scandal at an orphanage in Wales. Saying that the broadcast reflected unacceptable journalism standards, Entwistle announced his immediate resignation. It was, he said, the honourable thing to do. He then took questions.

The BBC [published a lengthy article about Entwistle's resignation](#) on its website with a video clip of the press conference and backup reports and audio clips from politicians and media experts.

In June 2008, Special Assignment, the SABC equivalent of Newsnight, broadcast a programme, Finale for a Paedophile that falsely portrayed Professor Graham Fitch of UCT's College of Music as a drug addict and paedophile.

Despite protests from the lawyers representing Prof Fitch, Special Assignment then broadcast a second programme a month later.

The programmes were referred to the [Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa](#). [The BCCSA fined the SABC R80,000](#), the highest amount in the history of South African broadcasting at the time. The Commission said the programmes were bereft of convincing truthful evidence, that they constituted an unfair trial by media and that Prof Fitch was "degraded to the status of the hunted." Leave to appeal was denied and the SABC was instructed to remove the material from its archives.

Nobody resigned.

## Bland statement

I was reminded of this when around noon on 3 February, Kaizer Kganyago, SABC spokesperson, put out a statement finally confirming what had been common cause for the previous week - that the SABC CEO, Lulama Mokhobo, the dubiously appointed aunt of the corrupt Dina Pule's corrupt lover, Phosane Mngqibisa, was trying to negotiate a severance package after working only two contentious years of her five-year contract.

(Any suggestion that this was to forestall a [potentially damning report by the Public Protector](#) is, of course, utterly without foundation.)

There was no media conference and while the SABC's news rivals immediately started broadcasting the news, the state

broadcaster appears to have [waited nearly six hours](#) before carrying a short insert on its 7pm TV news bulletin - something that enraged broadcasting authority Thinus Ferreira.

The next day, SABC on its 7pm Channel 404 TV news bulletin, carried a brief but upbeat insert about a meeting that day between the SABC's board and its top executives and the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communication.

It showed the acting COO Hlaudi Motsoeneng informing MPs that the SABC was "doing well", and had "the right management team in place". He said any suggestion that the SABC was not ready for digital migration was devoid of truth. "We can switch it today". [There was also an upsound from a distressed Marian Shinn, the DA Shadow Communication Minister, suggesting the opposite.](#)

## Dummies

The next day newspapers revealed that much of the meeting was a discussion about a PricewaterhouseCoopers skills audit at the SABC which was done at the insistence of the Committee and the Times had the most succinct headline ["SABC run by dummies."](#)

However the meeting did provide Mokhobo with the ideal platform to elucidate the reasons for her resignation and to provide details of her severance package - and she was asked.



Unlike the BBC's George Entwistle, who did not receive a severance package, she declined to respond.

## Severance package

For those negotiating a severance package at the SABC - and indeed elsewhere - the state broadcaster offers a fascinating variety of case studies and role models.

The Big Daddy is Dali Mpofu who in 2009 received a R13.4 million pay-out courtesy of the chairperson of the interim SABC board, Irene Charnley.

## Bizarre aspect

The most bizarre aspect of this settlement, therefore, was the [R4.4 million restraint-of-trade](#) paid to Mpofu by the Department of Communications with your money and mine. This was just one of the [many Mpofu controversies](#).

Less successful was [Solly Mokoetle](#) who was highly regarded by former SABC board member Pippa Green but had to leave with a disappointing R3m after he, like Mokhobo, also departed after only completing two years of a five-year contract.

## Tipping point

A former colleague who resigned shortly after the launch of new 24-hour news channel in August last year said that not a single extra person has been appointed in the Corporation's regional news offices despite the extra workload required by the launch of the new channel.

The tipping point, I was told, was the professional embarrassment caused by a massive increase in mistakes since the launch. If you routinely misspell your supers - even on your news presenter's name, i.e. Natasha Throp instead of Natasha Thorp, then things have, as Marian Shinn indicated in parliament, become pretty dire.

Contrary to what Motsoeneng told parliament about the SABC having the "relevant skills set" even the most basic elements of television news production appear to be ignored.

Take the 6:30pm TV News bulletin on 5 February. One of the stories featured on the bulletin was an election debate held in Johannesburg and organised by the SA Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It focused on the role that opposition parties will fill in the forthcoming election and the possibility of co-operation between them. There were "sound bites" from three of the speakers but they were virtually inaudible because the team covering the event did not appear to have put up a mic stand. I recognised two of the speakers, Lindiwe Mazibuko of the DA and Terror Lekota of Cope, but I did not recognise the third person and there were no supers to identify any of them!

The sound on eNCA is routinely better - why?

However, that is not to suggest that the SABC does not have suitable training programmes; innovative opportunities are available to you - but not all of which relate to broadcasting...

## ABOUT ED HERBST

Ed Herbst is an author and a prize-winning reporter. He worked for SABC television news for 28 years but left in 2005 without other employment in prospect because of the pervasive news and other corruption at all levels of the corporation. He is also a fly fishing enthusiast.

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