

## Ten years of democracy = 10 years of broadcast media circus

Ten years ago the SABC was in the infancy of a journey to break free from the shackles of the Afrikaner Broederbond. There was no competition in the form of free-to-air TV channel etv; there were no independent commercial radio stations. Mediocrity could be forgiven. After all, the Broederbond's strategic mandate was to spread as much propaganda as humanly possible - quality was always a secondary issue – if at all.

 By [Benedicte Dube](#) 27 May 2004

As we sit in 2004, celebrating 10 years of freedom, the broadcasting news landscape is different. etv has been on air for five years; most Greenfield radio stations are now coming into their own. The Y-culture is v much a part of the democratic South Africa. And so, is the litany of mediocre broadcast news journalism.

Commercial radio stations could be pardoned for this failure. For most of them news is not a core business. Indeed, it is tough fighting for a very limited advertising pie for smaller radio stations with hardly any resources (hint, hint MDDA, if you are still there!). Just over a year ago, I warned on these pages, that unless the broadcast media uses the window period ahead of the 2004 general elections to invest in newsroom training and skills development, South Africans could brace themselves for dull election coverage. Anyone who has been paying attention would realize that for most independent commercial radio stations, news bulletins were littered with stolen copy from News24 and reproduced newspaper material. The word "plagiarism" does not exist in the vocabulary of most commercial radio journalists and their editors. But, bearing in mind that some of these "News Editors" have hardly clocked up a year in real radio news management, one can scarcely be surprised. As for SABC Radio News, well...

What is perturbing is Television News. Let's start with SABC News @ 7. In the run-up to the 2004 General Elections, the nation was tortured with unintelligent commentary and political coverage from individuals who are yet to cut their teeth in newsrooms as interns. A day after the announcement of the election results, the Board of the Public Broadcaster announced a major coup – the return of one Snuki Zikalala (PhD Bulgaria Hurray! The press release issued by the broadcaster went to all lengths to shoeshine what was evidently a very difficult Public Relations exercise for the SABC's communications office.

The spoilers were the Democratic Alliance, assisted by etv and Madame Patta. Missing the point all together, the DA and Debora Patta were questioning whether an ANC man should head up the SABC's News and Current Affairs Division. A bit of an inane question really, as one analyst commented on etv. He asked whether the public should be asking if Patta herself was a member or, might I add, silent supporter of the DA? The real argument was lost in all the gobbledygook.

For those who have been on extended leave in Alaska for the past four years, let's recap on the story of Snuki Zikalala. Until about 1998, the "award winning" Snuki was an ordinary labor reporter at SABC TV News. He worked his way to Radio News, taking up the position of Deputy Editor-in-Chief: Radio News, deputizing for one Barney Mthomboti (remember him?).

Legend has it that the award-winning labor journalist immediately set out on a task to push Barney Mthomboti out of his job (It turned out not to be a difficult assignment at all!). Snuki introduced Bi-Media, giving a whole

lot of the dead wood that had remained at Radio News their three minutes of fame on Television. And thus Bi-Media was born. Having fast-tracked Barney's exit and implemented Bi-Media, he moved up to become the Executive Editor of both Radio and TV News. The people had conquered! Snuki managed coverage of the 1999 General Elections for both Radio and TV News. The less said about that, the better. Suffice to say that a report released by a team of Canadian consultants monitoring the SABC's coverage of those elections stated; "...There were several hundred people involved in the 1999 election project. However, the over-all racial makeup was not balanced. In a few cases, blacks had high-profile roles in the planning and implementation. But, in general and particularly in Television, blacks were assigned (to) less meaningful tasks". So much for a commitment to transformation and skills development!

Needless to say, with the 1999 elections out of the way, and with a new board in place, the management of the SABC, having taken stock of his costly Bi-Media project and his perceived resistance to new legislation aimed at Corporatising the SABC, decided it was time for Snuki to go. Who else to facilitate this intricate process other than the erstwhile head of Radio News, Barney Mthomboti? So, Barney returned to the SABC less than two years after his unceremonious departure. This time he was Chief Executive of SABC News and Current Affairs, Snuki's boss once again. So, it was to be the end of Snuki at the SABC. Bi-Media was summarily abandoned - Snuki left to become a government spin-doctor.

With his key task accomplished, before he could even blink, Barney was also out of the SABC. His post remained vacant for two years, until the glorious announcement on Friday, April 16, 2004: Snuki was back! Not one journalist bothered to ask him whether he regretted having made the SABC incur huge costs to implement the failed broadcasting system of Bi-Media. No one cared to know what it was that he planned to do this time around, that he failed to deliver during his previous tenure? No one bothered to ask him whether he had any plans to change his much-spoken-about "gung-ho" management style that apparently alienated a whole lot of gifted broadcast journalists, while he was still the chief boss of news. Those questions were replaced with some linear-minded queries around his political affiliation. Who cares if Snuki is a member of the ANC, the AWB or the KGB? SABC Chief Executive Peter Matlare has a very prominent association with the ANC (just like every other black person in this country), along with his Chief Operating Officer Solly Mokoetle. But SABC TV channels have not been renamed GCIS.

Watch this space for the sequel in the SABC News cartoon series; it'll premiere in the next 18-24 months. The upshot is that South Africans are deprived of quality broadcast news. SABC News is still trying to figure out how to transform itself, 10 years after democracy, whilst at the same time figuring out how to deliver quality news to the nation. e-News Live @ 7 is in a state of oblivion, or shall I say disorientation? What's with Debora Patta hogging the screen and imposing herself into our living rooms every day for hours on end with news content deprived of any substance and bankrupt of any context?

Since April 14, I suspect a few South Africans, myself included, have been suffering from "Patta-fatigue". Others are suggesting that she might as well be offered all the roles on the absurd drama series "Backstage" in order to complete the equation. After that, it is suggested that etv change its name to Patta Patta TV (shortened to PPTV). The signature tune could be pinched from Miriam Makeba's hit song "Pata Pata". In the meantime, don't bother asking why newspaper circulations are continuing to grow. And don't be surprised if Snuki is back in another government spin-doctor job in 24 months. Of course, Barney will be dug out from wherever he is lying dormant (apparently somewhere along the East Coast) to sort out the anticipated turmoil.

## ABOUT BENEDICTA DUBE

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