

Public Service Broadcasting Bill: debate rages on

The Public Service Broadcasting Bill, deemed 'scrappy' and 'complicated' by Wits University's Prof Anton Harber but fiercely defended by Minister Sipiwe Nyanda, continues to be hammered by many critics who firmly believe it will further damage the independence of South African media which is already stressed by the Film and Publication Amendment Act, the proposed Harassment Bill and the ANC's never-say-die proposal of a Media Tribunal.

 By [Issa Sikiti da Silva](#) 12 Nov 2009

Brushing aside Minister Nyanda's latest defensive arguments, a number of critics continue defiantly, through the Alternative Media Amandla Forum, to voice their frustration and dissatisfaction about the Bill.

Many are angered by the Bill's recommendation that community media be run in partnership with municipalities - something critics say is unworkable and incompatible with the role and purpose of community media, warning that it could stifle these media houses' editorial independence.

Community radio should empower communities

Prof Harber said yesterday: "The role I would hope for community radio is to empower communities to participate in and lead development in their own areas in whatever partnerships they consider appropriate.

"A successful community station would, I believe, be the platform for the kind of two-way conversation between communities and local government which promotes participative development."

The Bill recommends that local municipalities provide, among others, facility-sharing, information about development, physical spaces, facilities and infrastructure, and financial support to community broadcasting services.

But Prof Harber said: "There is nothing wrong with partnerships with municipalities *per se*, but they need to be constructed to ensure they don't compromise the independence of the station and its responsiveness to community needs and demands (rather than those of authorities), and such partnerships need to be voluntary and negotiated.

Municipalities unlikely to be impartial

"You cannot assume that a municipality will fund a station and provide or share facilities, and then be relaxed about how it is covered or what is said about it on the station. This Bill could turn many community stations into the voice of the local authority, and that would disempower communities and impede development."

However, Dr Mashilo Boloka, head of policy at the Department of Communications, came out guns blazing threatening to quit the forum over Prof Harber's remarks.

He said: "I do not think we should undermine the intelligence of everyone by acting on the comments from Anton Harber, unless the agenda of this forum is set elsewhere.

"Personally, I have a fundamental problem with Anton Harber's comments because not only are they misinterpreting the provisions of the Bill in respect of community broadcasting services, they are oblivious

the challenges faced by the sector particularly sustainability.

'I will quit'

“There is no way that community broadcasting can play a role in development without partnering municipalities as champions of development. It is as simple as that...because the mandate of community media is not purely resistance.

“This was an old agenda which was concomitant with the fight and struggles against authoritarianism. If it is the intention of this forum to advance an agenda of resistance, I will quit it without any apology. Because I thought the aim of community media in a democratic society is to foster development.

“To [accomplish] this, partnership with institutions or bodies at the coalface of development becomes critical in pursuit of these objectives. This obviously has to happen without comprising the editorial independence of community media.”

Dr Boloka urged all South Africans, including the media, to stop relying on comments made by a few commentators in the industry, whose focus was on the SABC and the licence fees.

“Do the right thing: read the Bill first, make your own observations and get ready to engage,” he advised.

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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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