

Lessons from the NBC strike

The recent strike at the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation has underlined some important issues.

By [Robin Tyson](#) 28 Aug 2012

Obviously, the strike should never have occurred. With unions lowering demands from the original 13% and willing to accept 4.4% (even less for the higher salary scales) it should have been a relatively easy matter to resolve the impasse and ensure that employees received their rightful dues. Not a salary increase, but at least a salary increment, keeping up with inflation.

Indeed, careful planning and budgeting at any organisation would mean that rising personnel costs, as a matter of course, would be budgeted and accounted for. If staff costs in 2011 are, say N\$100 million, then in 2012 the organisation will budget for N\$105 million, allowing for a 5% rise to allow for cost of living increases. Staff are the most valuable asset - they get paid first, other aspects come afterwards.

But the strike also led to other, perhaps unintended outcomes. It forced listeners and viewers to go elsewhere for their daily broadcasting fix. Viewers, for instance, switched to the free-to-air commercial One Africa Television news bulletin, and some might have been pleasantly surprised at the quality of this station and its news. Indeed, some might have enjoyed it so much that they will not return to their traditional viewing habits of watching NBC TV and change loyalties for good.

In South Africa the main evening English news bulletin on the public broadcaster, SABC 3, has lost many viewers (viewership is currently less than one million) to the commercial competitor - e.tv - which now has approximately three million viewers for their evening news.

Similarly, on the radio side, listeners to the NBC German service were forced to listen to the new German commercial station, Hitradio (99.5Mhz), and Oshiwambo listeners turned to Omulunga Radio or Ohangwena Community Radio. Afrikaans listeners had Kosmos Radio or Kanaal Sewe, and those who understand English had a multitude of commercial and community choices as an alternative to NBC National Radio. Indeed, some listeners were pleasantly surprised at the quality of 'strike radio', and enjoyed the uninterrupted gentle music played on all NBC radio stations, with no interruptions from irritating jingles, adverts or inane chatter from radio presenters!

Internet websites and social media platforms such as Facebook became even more crucial for those wishing to keep up with news, and they deliver timely reports and photographs of news events, hours if not days before the print media are able to publish.

Of course, in many rural areas such alternatives are limited or non-existent, and a report in *New Era* (17 August 2012) outlined the difficulties faced by listeners in the Caprivi Region who, without the NBC Silozi Service were left without news, the essential community marriage, birth and death announcements.

Unfortunately, the actions of the strike will further result in a loss of credibility and trust in the national broadcaster by advertisers and listeners alike.

But those who have called for the 'closing down of the entire operation' (one comment which appeared on the SMS page in *The Namibian*, 20 August 2012) must surely realise the vital need for a public broadcaster. Not all Namibians have access to satellite television and not all have alternative radio stations to listen to.

The key question facing all public broadcasters globally is not whether they should exist, but how they should be funded. In some countries a small levy is added to electricity accounts, the assumption being that only those with electricity can afford to operate a television set.

Within a few months, during the process of digitisation, another funding alternative will arrive, one which many Namibians are already familiar with - PayTV. The national broadcaster is starting to realise the financial benefits of a steady income

flow of monthly payments for pay television as opposed to sporadic annual licence payments or, worse, unreliable government hand-outs.

NBC director general, Albertus Aochamub has indicated a number of between four and six channels in the NBC 'bouquet', and, to make it enticing it will certainly have to be cheaper than the MultiChoice option (GoTV), which currently has 15 channels on its digital terrestrial bouquet (no satellite dish is required) for N\$55 per month. At, say, N\$30 a month (N\$360 year) many Namibians would understand the benefit of a choice of channels and, of course, NBC revenue would be drastically increased, for no set would be able to receive channels without the digital set top decoder and, obviously, the monthly payment.

Of course, it would raise the interesting question of what would happen in the event of a future NBC strike. Even if NBC workers went on strike, the alternatives on the NBC 'bouquet' might still be on air, meaning less impact on viewers.

Source: [allAfrica](#)

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