

# SABC, where art thou channels?



By [Bonnie Ramaila](#)

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The media's obsequious reportage on Hlaudi made me ponder on a few things that, in my opinion, need attention at the SABC. Frankly, I have heard enough of Hlaudi this, Hlaudi that. The media has turned him into some pygmy of impeccable credentials. I feel the real sense of issues around him or SABC are not articulated well in the public discourse - is he a bad guy in a good situation or good guy in a bad situation?

As far as I am concerned, he is in that position to implement, period. When we start a new job, we are introduced to our bosses, sign performance agreement and start doing what we get paid for. Hlaudi reports to the Board and the Board to the Minister - normally. But I'll leave the politics out, because my issue about SABC is not Hlaudi, but on channels, programming and pay the TV licence.



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When I think about television, i.e. DStv vs SABC, I feel the latter is letting us down in terms of delivery. Programming has changed to give local content representing the various demographics and changing culture opportunity and air-time. I must say the quality of most programmes has improved. But, (*there's always a but, isn't it?!*) I have a problem that 22 years down the line we still have three channels, not much of an improvement from the time of 'SAUK' when we only had one channel. At least content has changed, but the fact that we still have only three channels that are demographically segmented, is a cause of concern.

DStv started off with M-Net open time around the 80s, it progressed to more over the 27 years, until now we have more channels. SABC? Dololo!

What's wrong with having six to seven channels that cater for the various preferences for people. People would rather pay a monthly fee for DStv as opposed to an annual TV license, which most people don't pay, because they are not seeing bang for their buck. SABC has an advantage over the private broadcasters that are relatively expensive, using satellite dishes that need cash to install and a monthly fee vis-à-vis using a bunny aerial and once-off annual fee. Okay, bunny aerials are so last season; SABC behaves like an analogue player in a digital world. By the way, when is the digital migration taking place? The 'big switch' was scheduled for November 2008, it's almost 10 years down the line... and still waiting.

By now, we should at least have six channels; the existing three and the following:

- **SABC Prime Channel** – this is where prime-time quality local shows, soapies, series, doccies, TV with quality content are showcased, including international ones like *Revenge*, *The Fixer*, etc.
- **SABC Sports Channel** – need I say more! A separate 24-hour channel needed urgently. Period.
- **SABC News Channel** – similar to the DStv channel with local news for SA audience and variation for the international audience.
- And last but not least **SABC Encore** - what the heck is this channel doing on a private broadcaster. Honestly, I cannot for the life of me imagine anyone from the Arab countries relating to *Usenzekile* or *Wielie Wallie*, let alone the language. This channel is so relevant to our local people it's supposed to be the fourth SABC channel. Maybe I don't understand the strategy or the objective of it being there. Enlighten me.

All of the above with the existing three channels on air, no monthly fees, just the normal once-off annual fee as per norm and no dish installation, those set-top boxes should be ready. That would be progressive, isn't it?

It is doable, all the monies mentioned in the media lately could be used to trial at least a few channels for starters, and not going to competition and giving them money to air what SABC is supposed to be doing in the first place. Besides, half of the DStv staff are ex-SABC staff members.

So this is how I see it - the problem appears to be lack of strategic focus and what to achieve to make SABC competitive and worth having. The SABC Board seem to be missing a long-term (10-year) strategy, that includes succession plan and clear outlined phases of implementation that would change the face of SABC to be more relevant to the changing times and evolving audience. In this way, every chairperson that comes in or remains would ensure that a specified phase in the strategy is implemented, finalised and maintained during their term of office, so that when new ones take office, they implement second phase for continuity. In that way, we are able to hold office bearers accountable. Instead, we have had so much change in board members to a point that it lost focus, relevance and continuity, thus affecting the public broadcaster and putting it under scrutiny.

We need a transmogrification of the SABC image through a new focused strategy from the board and a public broadcaster with more channels that caters to the needs of all South Africans far and wide, young and old, and new. I am least concerned who the CEO is or will be, as long as it's not someone who would be reprehensible in the face of the media or politicians. Frankly, anyone capable to implement a well-greased strategy with creativity and focus would do.

But at the rate things are going, I'll turn 80 in the next 40 odd years still watching SABC 1, 2 and 3 with a bunny aerial! Honestly?

I rest my case.

## ABOUT BONNIE RAMAILA

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