

The Feasibility of Regional Public Television Services in South Africa

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Abstract

Most African states have inherited the British model of broadcasting, where a state-owned broadcaster funded by public resources produces public service broadcasting. Against this backdrop, television in South Africa started as a single service, TV 1, on 5 January 1976. Until 1990, TV 1 was targeted predominantly at a white audience. It lacked credibility among both blacks and whites because it was perceived to be in favour of government as its news and information were significantly controlled by politics. TV 2, the second service, was launched in 1981. This was expanded into two separate services in 1982. A fourth channel, TV 4, was introduced in 1990. At that time “the South African Broadcasting Corporation was re-structured ... when TV 2, 3 and 4 were consolidated into one multilingual channel, the CCV” (Forbes, 1999: 1).

This research paper focuses on the attempts by South African government of establishing a regional public television services of which there is no existing model yet for implementation in the country. Regional public television services need approaches that build up to broadcasting knowledge within communities and take into account the needs for local content and different cultures of South Africa. The approach needs to address South African context and languages in broadcasting. In this study broadcasting will mean sending video material or audio material signal through a transmitter, macro wave and satellite to the individual communities that will be receiving through antennas, internet and satellite services. In this study Public Regional public television (Regional Public Television) is seen as services belonging to communities, owned and managed by the public.

Key terms: broadcasting, regional broadcasting, television, implementation, model, approach, and public broadcasting.

Background

Regional public television services in the South African context refer to “television services targeting particularly designed communities from the nine provinces, either through the description of language groups or demarcation rules” (Amended South African Broadcasting Bill, 2005: 21). For example, there might be a region of Nguni languages or a region of Sotho languages.

According to the Amended South African Broadcasting Bill, 2005: 22, “regional public television services are seen as services belonging to communities, owned by the public, and managed by the same public”. Regional public television broadcasting may be an organisation made up of a body of programme providers who are interested in delivering a regional public television service to the immediate people. It could also be aimed at expanding and developing community participation in a free to air television service (South African Broadcasting Bill, 2003:20). Television programme providers who are participating should have extensive experience over the years of producing the best television services for communities. Transmission services of this type operate from the region. It is a fact that “the audience of the regional public television broadcasting is people from the community who are brought together either by the influence of culture or the new South African political dispensation” (Tomaselli, 1989: 17).

In South Africa, the South African Statute Law created the apparatus for broadcasting, in defining the public regional broadcasting service, its powers and activities, and providing for its financial means and establishing the system of authority by which it is managed. These laws also limit the way various kinds of radio technology can be used. The government created conditions of use for CB radios, radio hams (amateurs), emergency services, the police, the military, private radio listeners and commercial air traffic radios. Marine and naval radios were also controlled by the government (Tomaselli, 1989: 16). The South African government under the leadership of the Ministry of Communications held discussions in 1999 and again in October 2009 on the Amended Broadcasting Bill and the issue that South Africa should introduce regional public television broadcasting services. All stakeholders were asked to submit suggestions and to provide input through the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA) on the structure and the format of such regional public television broadcasting services (Stewart, 2002: 24).

Theoretical Framework

Modernisation, according to Horace Miner (2002:21), is a social process of which development forms part of the economic component of the particular country. If economic development produces the “rising out-put” per head then modernization produces the societal environment in which rising productivity is effectively incorporated. It also involves the institutional disposition of the full resources of a society in particular, and its human resources.

For an economy to sustain its growth through its own autonomous operation, it must be effectively geared to the main components of the skill infrastructure and the value of superstructure in its societal framework. As a result, regional public television broadcasting also plays an important role in the empowerment of the local economy of any community (Neuman, 2000: 22). Underlying the dominant modernisation

paradigm is the assumption that "Third World" nations are poor as a result of internal political, economic and sociological problems and that these problems have little or nothing to do with their relationship with the outside world. Such development theories concerning Third World countries were first conceived in the 1950s in Europe (Kasongo, 2000:31; Kumar, 2000:77; Melkote, 2001:20).

According to White (2001b:1), "the paradigm of dependency and disassociation uses logic of a political metaphor whilst development is conceived as a strategy of mobilizing and motivating a population, through a process of collective decision making to form a nation". Therefore, nationhood is considered to be central to the development process. Kohn (2003) maintains that "growth of nationalism is the process of integration of the masses of people into a common political form whereas nationalism therefore presupposes its existence in as far as ideal of a centralized form of government is concerned over a large and distinct territory". Benedict Anderson (2001:9) observed that no more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of unknown soldiers. This historicist way of defining a nation is also reflected in Teer-Tomaselli's (1998) argument that "national mythologies devolve into a series of motifs or elements and those they commonly follow a set pattern". Friedland and Rosberg (2000:4), on the other hand, elaborate that it was in these circumstances that an African form of socialism began to emerge. A mythos of an African socialism developed as political leaders sought a doctrine to replace the outmoded unifying influence of anti-colonialism. Anti-colonialism had been a powerful force for organising the African people during the pre-independence era.

International precedents

An assessment of regional public television services in the global environment indicates that it is possible for a country like South Africa to establish regional public television services. This relies on the acquisition of skills, funding and a sustainable model. There are a number of lessons to be drawn from international experience. Firstly, the establishment of regional public television involves government participation together with that of private business entities. Secondly, individuals must be trained in proven human and technical regional public television service models or methods. The combination of well-resourced technical skills and an efficient regional public television model qualifies the establishment of regional public television services.

However, this study has identified several best practices regarding the establishment of regional public television services from the international environment. Firstly, the global television environment uses public universities in partnership with business

and communities to protect the sustainability of the regional public television services. Secondly, international communities use partnerships comprising academic, public and private business. The intention of such partnerships is to share the burden of regional public television from the ground and to encourage forward-looking initiatives that partnerships are best able to harness. Thirdly, regional public television can be established with the help of a model supported by international precedent.

Television broadcasting services in South Africa

The SABC pioneered the regional public television model in South Africa in 1996. Its programming was spread through SABC 2 as splits on weekdays, broadcasting mostly news and information specifically focussed on and in languages of the targeted provinces. This service was discontinued as a result of financial constraints (Bourgault, 2001:85). Reith observes in Thompson (2000) that “public broadcasting service in terms of four elements: the rejection of commercialism; the extension of availability of programmes to everyone in the community; the establishment of unified control over broadcasting and the maintenance of high standards; “the provision of the best and the rejection of the hurtful”. The fact that the SABC was used to support and legitimate the apartheid regime (Teer-Tomaselli, 1999:2) at the expense of the majority of South African citizens is reason enough to justify the claim that public service broadcasting as understood by Reith can only work successfully in cases where there is total political stability, democracy and a high economic level. This claim is supported by Teer-Tomaselli and De Villiers (1998:154) who argue that the recommendations made by Reith on how best to improve the services of the SABC seem not to apply to the South African situation. The structure of the SABC was outlined in the broadcasting Act of 1936. The act, based on the Charter of the BBC, assumed a consensus between English and Afrikaans speakers which in fact did not exist at the time. Clearly, Reith was unaware of the degree of conflict which existed between the two main European language groups, and the political tendencies they represented, not to mention the implications of excluding black audiences (Teer-Tomaselli & De Villiers, 1998:154).

In June 1983, the office of the President of Bophuthatswana homeland, President Lucas Mangope, confirmed that the Bophuthatswana government’s cabinet committee would investigate a proposal for a commercial television service beaming to Pretoria and the Reef. According to the Bophuthatswana cabinet committee, the television service would among other things, do the following:

- Attract national and regional advertising at lower rates than SABC-TV;
- Develop an independent programme network;
- Transmit daytime educational programmes in Tswana and use all three official languages, that is, Setswana, English and Afrikaans, for its general service (McDonnell, 2001: 25).

As observed in the *Sunday Times* “the news spread like wildfire in November 1983 from different newspapers that the Bophuthatswana government has been given green light by the Pretoria government to beam its proposed television service to a number of black areas in South Africa, but on a strict proviso”. In terms of an agreement

signed between the two governments in Pretoria, it was decided that the South African government would be entitled to extra revenue from the Bophuthatswana government if the new television station captured too large a slice of the viewing market. At the same meeting, the Pretoria government agreed to lease distribution facilities to Bophuthatswana in other areas, mainly black townships in the PWV (Pretoria Witwatersrand and Vereeniging area) and the Orange Free State, subject to conditions stated in the agreement (McDonnell, 2001:33).

There were important changes in patterns of institutional decision making in South African broadcasting policy in the course of the 1990s. During this period, the independent “civil society” groups had significant input in shaping agendas and seeing important political concessions from both the National Party (NP) and the African National Congress (ANC). As a result, during the inquiry process in 1994 and 1995, policy formulation took place largely independently of government direction (RSA, 1997:18). This process was, relatively to the South African past comparative international standards, a remarkably open, consultative and deliberate undertaking which drew on a diverse public sphere of opinion and interests. The policy review undertaken from late 1997 through to the middle of 1998 produced draft outlines of broadcasting legislation which significant revisions to the blueprints developed between 1993 and 1995 (Maphai, 2003:17).

Compared to the 1994-1995 inquiry process, the media for participation and political representation were reshaped during the 1997-8 policy review. This largely reflects the broader restructuring of the relationships between the state and civil society as the ANC consolidated its authority, and was therefore able to negate certain features of power sharing agreements which were put in place in large part to protect the entrenched interests of privileged minorities (Maphai, 2003:25). As Horwitz (2002) reiterated, “while there remains widespread support for decision making processes which extend beyond the confines of elected officials by including a broad range of interests in consultative policy ‘forums’, the dimensions and means of access to these forums have been significantly redefined”.

Regional public television services in South Africa

This study explores the statement by the Broadcasting Amendment Act 64 of 2002 (“the Broadcasting Amendment Act”) inserted in section 22A of the Broadcasting Act Section 22A (1), which places an obligation on the SABC, in performance of its public service mandate as set out in sections 10(1) (a) and (b) of the Broadcasting Act, to apply for a regional broadcasting licence within nine months of the commencement of the broadcasting Amendment Act. The Broadcasting Amendment Act came into effect on 7 March 2003. The SABC’s application for a regional broadcasting licence had to be submitted by 8 December 2003. This indicates that the SABC acted immediately after the broadcasting bill was amended. The debates on regional public television services in South Africa were opened to all SA communities with media specialists, academics, media houses and other stakeholders making submissions to ICASA.

A point to note here is that total audiences per channel are prone to “*double counting*” and therefore the quoted audience figure for all channels cannot be added to arrive at the total population. Considering the entire television audience, SABC 1 has the major share (20m), followed by SABC 2 (13.6m), then e-tv (13.3m). SABC 3 (8.7m) also makes the top four of television audiences. In terms of the population size, the remaining television channels have a low audience share (M-net Main Service: 3.17m, DStv: 1.5m, BOP TV: 0.75m, and M-net CSN: 0.109m) (Graham 2001:19). However, channels such as M-net Main Service and DStv, although they have an lower audience share overall, have significant audience share of the LSM 9 and 10 audience segments, which are the segments with the highest disposable income (1.7m and 0.94m respectively for both segments). Gauteng has the highest population of television viewers (15.5m), followed by KwazuluNatal (10.13m) and the Western Cape (8.56m). However, the Eastern Cape (6.67m), Limpopo (5.6m), North West (5.5m) and Free State (4.2m) have a significant television audience population size. The Northern Cape audience (1.2m) is very small in comparison with other provinces. In advertising terms, the larger audience you have the more money you make (Z-COM, 2004:39).

If local businesses are not strong enough to support the advertising revenue, there will be problems regarding the viability of RTV. If the real Growth Domestic Product (GDP) is low, it will affect the adspend, which in turn will seriously impact on the revenue streams of the new entrant (M-NET, 2003:14). The old BOP TV audience profile in the North West Province was 0.453m. However, BOP TV had a significant audience in Gauteng Province (of 0.191m), whilst Free State had 0.036m and Northern Cape 0.016. The channel’s audiences mainly had living standard measurements (LSM) of 1-4 (lower socioeconomic class) to LSM 8 (higher socioeconomic), (Nielsen Media Research, 2003:16).

The SABC is of the view that the public RTV channels will rely on a mixed funding model, consisting of money appropriated by parliament, grants, donations, sponsorships and advertising in accordance with the Authority on that matter. It is also argued by the SABC that, internationally, it appears that public RTV is often based on a mixed funding model. Primedia’s 2008 submission to ICASA reiterates that “broadcasting proposed that the SABC should sell some of its radio or television services to fund the public RTV. This would only serve as a viable funding model for public RTV if the SABC is allowed to retain the proceeds of the sale made from advertising” (NAB, 2003: 34).

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) maintains that “it must be pointed out that broadcasters’ share of advertising spending may not grow as a result of the introduction of RTV or LTV broadcasters”. New broadcasting licensees may have the effect of fragmenting television advertising spending on the broadcasting sector as a whole. Furthermore, Section 22A (3) of the Broadcasting Act observes that “the public service RTV service provided by the SABC must be funded by money appropriated by Parliament and may draw revenues from grants, donations and sponsorships” (NAB, 2004:17). M-NET submitted a funding model comparable to the

United Kingdom's (UK) regional public television services. Funding in the UK comes entirely from television licence fees, with no advertising allowed. In most other jurisdictions, the funding is mixed, coming from television licence fees, government/parliamentary grants, donations and advertising and sponsorships. However, in a number of these instances, the largest source of revenue is from television licence fees or government/parliamentary grants (ICASA, 2003:11).

The National Community Radio Forum's (NCRF) argument was that the Danish and the Australian funding models are interesting examples; the financing of Australian community television is based on the principle of "a third, a third, a third" – one third government support (spread over Local council and Arts and Culture), as the bottom-line reliable source of funding, one third market based activities (programme sales, equipment hire, services), and one third funds raised through fundraising events. NCRF's submission maintains that "Danish community television services were funded by a variety of government departments including local municipalities, the Film institute and donors". Media monitoring projects (2003: 32) reiterates that donor funding should still be perceived as a valuable additional source of funding. Community and regional public television networks are recommended as a forum through which to gain access to the necessary funding (IBA, 1995: 36).

Smith (2000:40) observes that "the license fee as a very simple device for funding the non-transactional medium. The license fee is precisely a very complex mechanism for controlling a framework of discursive practices and for organizing and directing the production and transmission of images and text designed to duplicate and develop the divergent levels of the dominant value system". It is also a price fixed by the government for the upkeep of a total service. It is important to note that people should pay their television licence fees which is also described thus,

- PBS tax is like a poll tax, it is so much of a national unity, because it makes things easy for PBS to reach almost everyone, rich or poor. For example, it took US TV decades to reach certain parts of the country. But in Britain the BBC, because of the licence fee, reaches parts that other instruments of social democracy cannot reach, such as the police, the army, legal and educational bodies. In Scotland, for example, differences in religion, law and education were ironed out by the BBC.
- Licence fees placed the SABC irrevocably inside the public sector but insulated it from the government. No institution in society is insulated from the government level to the society level. What viewers pay for through their TV licence fee is the SABC's liberty, because that underpins our liberty. In actual fact, the size and the wealth of the PBS station reflects or indicates precisely its willingness to incline to the wishes of the powerful nation (Smith, 2000: 39).

It is difficult to say whether regional public television can have a relatively similar structure because it depends on resources. In a vast country inhabited by many different communities, there may be a need for more local or regional programmes, a need that may not be felt in other countries. Monroe, Price and Marc Raboy (2003:

16) believe that all programmes of the PBS must be unbiased, with enlightening information, general interest and service programmes that should leave a mark through in-house productions, national content, and reiterate it as being unbiased, enlightening information: because of the PBS status and being funded by the state, expectations are very high and so are the requirements. PBS must appeal to the audience's intelligence and understanding. PBS information should enlighten citizens on issues at hand and in doing so, it enriches democratic life of the country. General interest and service programs: PBS programs enable citizens to find out about different subjects of interest to them and which often deal with matters of current or practical interest.

Programmes that deal with consumers or legal issues, give practical advice, discuss health issues and publicise community services, make PBS itself a service offered to the public. It is also through such programmes that the PBS gets closer to the public. PBS programmes should promote arts and culture, broadcast existing works, cultural products, and support the creation of original work, theatre, concerts and also light music or variety programmes. As far as national content is concerned, the majority of PBS programmes should be of national content, which is not to say that international content will not be aired, only that PBS should first promote expressions of ideas, opinions, and values current in the society where they operate (Monroe, Price & Marc Raboy, 2003: 16).

In South Africa today it is difficult to deduce whether people understand why they are paying licence fees to the SABC. This is because programmes that are broadcast by the SABC are not truly representative. The majority of SABC programmes are in the Nguni and Sotho languages. As a result, minority language groups such as Vhavenda, Tsonga, AmaNdebele, AmaSwati argue that they should not pay the licence fees until SABC programming is revised.

The broadcasting sector, as part of the wider communications industry, has become a key element in the programme of economic development under the policy of Reconstruction and Development pursued by the African National Congress (ANC) led government. The objective of developing an inclusive broadcaster with a national identity and representivity which balances the respect for cultural, linguistic, and regional diversity with imperatives of national unification and reconciliation has been central to the transformation of South African broadcasting since the 1990s (Valdez, 2002: 19). The issue of provincial public broadcasting (as distinct from privately owned regional public television services) has been a highly controversial one throughout the period of the new South African dispensation. The development of broadcasting policy has been characterised by an explicit commitment to open and participatory deliberation over different policy options. However, the social relations of ownership, production, distribution and consumption within the television industry were mainly forged during the period of apartheid South Africa (Donald, 2002: 136).

Attention has also been directed in processes of deliberation and decision making at questions regarding who is represented, by whom, and for what purposes. Some other questions might be concerned with how diverse cultural identities have been institutionally accommodated and managed in the broadcasting sector, and how, to

what extent, and through what mechanisms the transformed broadcasting system has institutionalised the representation of diverse interests in decision-making procedures (Barnett, 2002: 3). The language issue has featured in media debates in South Africa as part of broader political processes aimed at re-imagining identities and differences. Cultural politics in contemporary South Africa are not merely a matter of formal recognition of the equal status in a diversity of identities. The promotion and development of equitable treatment of cultures and identities implies a politically contested process over the redistribution of resources between different communities and interests. One pressing issue that has been there since the 1990s is whether the increasing commercialisation and co-modification of television services is compatible with the aims of constructing a broadcasting system that can serve as a medium for the democratic articulation of a plurality of political viewpoints (Bekker, 1999: 24).

Challenges facing the establishment of regional public television in South Africa

The television industry is highly competitive: competing for audience, competing for a limited ad-spend with various other media, and competing for the most appealing programmes from suppliers. Entering a competitive and established market will require supreme effort in terms of sales and marketing. This is supported by several observers:

The need to attract audience from other TV channels, and deplete their market share is also a necessity. And this would be achieved by broadcasting programmes that are appealing to the targeted market. There is a need to build an attractive audience share of a significant market size in order to attract advertising. The completion of programmes also involves issues such as programme rights, acquisition costs, and production costs. The established television stations have already acquired programme rights which are not easy to terminate until the contract period has expired. Competing for a limited ad spend and attracting the advertisers to the new television station will not be easy (SABC, 1999:18).

The television industry is a high technology industry, requiring a wide range of scarce skills such as technical, management, marketing and journalism. These skilled people are hard to find and a high premium is usually demanded by the staff for television operations. Developing these skills requires time, money and a great deal of effort and commitment (Primedia, 2003: 16). The most pressing technical issue that needs addressing upfront is the availability of frequency spectrum for the new services. Although the authority might take a technologically neutral position, it seems more feasible to use terrestrial broadcasting rather than satellite broadcasting for FTV regional. This does not mean that FTA satellite broadcasting is not viable as it has been seen to work in the case of SKY-TV in the UK. The new entrant should be given the choice of an affordable and viable platform that best meets its objectives. Cost of technology could therefore be a barrier to new entrant (Z-COM, 2004: 42).

In fact, technological developments and the political will to steer the broadcasting system in accordance with a collective vision of the future of society are the main currents to have shaped the history of the media. What should the mission of PBS be? By what means, with what type of content and with what resources should it aim to fulfil its mandate? These are difficult questions to answer in a context where PBS is in

competition with its private sector rivals for commercial revenues. To free PBS from market pressures is therefore an essential condition for it to fulfil its mandate. So, where will funding come from? Many studies have indicated that the licence fee remains the best way of ensuring funding which is adequate and relatively free of political constraints (Lowe & Hujanen, 2003: 32).

Regulations that are difficult and expensive to observe could make it impossible for the new entrants to survive. These include obstacles: limitations of advertising time, local content regulations and ownership control. It would be difficult to get a foreign company to invest the required equity if it could not own a substantial share of the business within the regional public television in South Africa Z-COM submission (ICASA, 2003: 99). Licence conditions for regional public television should be more favourable than those for national broadcasters. The UK supported the success of ITV commercial regional public television by preferential regulations to protect the regional broadcaster. Policy on convergence of regional public television should not threaten new broadcasters. Convergence service providers will vie for a limited ad-spend with other media. The licence conditions for the regional public television should be in line with the convergence law (Orbicom 2003: 27).

All publicly funded bodies since the 1990s are or should be directly and visibly accountable and seen to be delivering against clearly defined objectives, and accountable to the highest standards of performance to the public they serve, BBC Board of governors (BBC, 1993:27) There is increasing pressure worldwide on PBS to account for everything they do. One of the main objectives of the commercial broadcasters is to marginalise PBS as a market competitor. Accountability as it has been in the past involved mostly licensed participants shutting out the voices of ordinary viewers and listeners whose opinions are measured in the ratings. In short, the system involved “upward” lines of accountability vis-à-vis power holders and the elite, rather than “downward” lines of accountability to the audience or public (Blumler & Hoffman-Reim, 2002: 219).

Conclusion

This paper began by defining and describing regional television broadcasting services in South Africa and in other countries. It was revealed in this research that regional television broadcasting services deliver television programmes to individuals who have the appropriate equipment to receive such a service, whether the delivery uses television frequency spectrum, cable, optical fibre or satellite. These services address issues such as language inequalities, social inequalities, government information dissemination and economic disparities in South Africa. The study investigated examples of regional television services, their challenges, finances, programming and social benefits in various countries around the world. Communication theories that have influenced public and regional television broadcasting services to communities were also elaborated on in this study. In conclusion, the discussion in this paper reveals that regional television services have been and are still a challenge for many countries to implement. Those countries that have regional television services have made huge efforts to achieve them and those without (some of them) are still trying to find a model from developed countries that they can successfully implement.

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