The South African Broadcasting Corporation in Championing Transparency and Accountability in Government: the Bigger they ARE the Harder they Fall

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Abstract: While transparency can be viewed as functioning in a way that is easy for others to see what actions are performed, accountability refers to answerability, blameworthiness, liability, and the expectation of account-giving. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), as a public broadcaster in a democratic state, must strive to promote transparency and accountability in the activities of government. The SABC is a people centered, content driven, technology enabled, and a sustainable public broadcaster. The mandate of the Corporation is to supply broadcasting and information services to the general public in the Republic of South Africa and beyond its borders. The SABC as a public broadcasting service, ensures the maintenance of South Africa’s identity, equality, unity and development of society, nation building, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of South Africa; ensure plurality of news, views and information and provide a wide range of entertainment and education programmes. The SABC will in pursuit of the above mentioned objectives and in exercising its powers, enjoys freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. This paper seeks to put forward a theoretical crossing-point between the SABC as a public broadcasting service, and its roles in promoting transparency and accountability in government activities. The paper further seeks to determine the capacity of the SABC in promoting transparency and accountability against political interference in South Africa by collecting data through peer-reviewed literature, policies and pieces of legislation.

Keywords: SABC, public service, transparency, accountability, government

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to put forward a theoretical argument on how the SABC as a public broadcaster can against political influence play its role in a democracy by promoting transparency and accountability in government. Broadcasting policies and codes of conduct of the SABC are appealing on paper yet dismally fail in portraying practicality. The vision and mission of the corporation as clearly defined as they are; display ambitious prospects particularly in a democratic dispensation like that of South Africa. The fact that the SABC aims to be people-centered and an information service provider to the general public, presupposes that the general citizens of the Republic will be a central focal of its operations. However, in pursuit of values and broadcasting code, the SABC is proving to be immensely influenced politically especially by the African National Congress (ANC), the ruling party. It is in this regard that the corporation is unable to enjoy the freedom of expression as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and thus fails to encourage and promote transparency and accountability in government affairs.

Contextualizing transparency and accountability

Often times accountability is read together with responsibility whereby officials vested with powers are able to give account in conducting their personal dealing, transparency can be viewed as functioning in a way that is easy for others to see what actions are performed, accountability refers to answerability, blameworthiness, liability, and the expectation of account-giving (Ebrahim 2003).

Transparency

Baur and Grimes (2012) traces the history of the concept of transparency and identifies the “broadest doctrine of openness” as the dogma that the general conduct of executive government should be predictable and operate within the strict confines of published codes and standards rather than arbitrarily (O’Hara, 2010). Codes of conduct and set standards are inadequate for the purposes of enforcing transparency in government since there is failure to provide a working definition of what transparency is, or how officials ought to conduct their duties in exercising public affairs. Moreover, transparency comprises the access and the comprehension of information by the public than mere active disclosure. Transparency may be defined not only as the disclosure of government information but also as the access, conception, and its use by the general public (Parigi Geeta and Kailasam 2004; Ginsberg Maeve Halchin and Keegan 2012). According to Sturges (2004), social scientists and practitioners have presented different explanations for transparency; among them is “active disclosure”. To this end, transparency requires a public that can acquire, comprehend, and manipulate information that it receives from government and all its agencies. Transparency International, a global civil society organization that seeks to fight corruption in government, defines transparency as a principle that allows those affected by administrative decisions, business transactions or charitable work to know not only the basic facts and figures but also the mechanisms and processes government engages on (Ginsberg et al. 2012). Baur and Grimes (2012) states that international organizations and NGOs advocate transparency as a precondition for better government quality (Bhatnagar 2003), greater accountability (OECD 2006) and a more limited scope for corruption and impunity.
The concept of publicity, which requires government to publish its information, goes somewhat outside the narrowest definition of transparency, as it factors in the willingness and capacity of media actors to address and draw attention to abuses of power by government officials once detected. Transparency advocates maintain that greater access to government information is a \textit{sine qua non} for greater accountability and better quality of government in the long term (Pasquier and Villeneuve 2007; Maiani Villeneuve and Pasquier 2010). To this end, competition and press freedom as opposed to public broadcasting as a public service would necessitate the SABC to be more rigorous in finding and exposing malpractices in government affairs. However, it should be acknowledged that a public broadcaster enjoying freedom of expression will not necessarily guarantee the detection and the exposure of abuses of power and corruption but somehow plays a role in strengthening the democratic objectives in any government through transparency.

**Accountability**

Ebrahim (2003: 813), delineates accountability as the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority/ies and are held responsible and accountable for their actions. Accountability is intricate, nonconcrete, a subtle concept, and is also viewed over time as bewildering, becoming a contested issue rather than one which can be resolved with ease (Ndou 2013; Onzima 2013). It is for this contention that Ijeoma and Sambumbu (2013) argue that accountability is increasingly becoming a barometer for effective government performance. Effective accountability results into improving among others; practice of good corporate governance, management of public finances, and service delivery. Ndou (2013) articulates that accountability emerges in various forms ranging from political, legal, public, managerial, professional, bureaucratic and personal, a propensity which is currently not part of the discourse presented by this paper. It should, however, be noted that accountability can extend into other forms not mentioned by Ndou (2013). Ijeoma and Sambumbu (2013) posited that in a liberal democracy, accountability arises the moment one is assigned the authority to determine the utilization of public resources. Furthermore, accountability is imperative because it checks and balances the abuse of powers and authorities by public officials (Mulgan 2003). It is for this rationale that accountability can be a very reminiscent word that is easily used in political dialogues and policy documents because it expresses an image of responsibility, transparency and trustworthiness to those entrusted with official responsibilities. The SABC as a public broadcaster in a democratic dispensation have a role through its media tools and mechanisms in ensuring that public servants entrusted with the role of fulfilling public duties are brought to account in public and be actively engaged. Such can be done through debates open to the public or through radio and television platforms, whereby the general community can actively interact with their own elected government on contemporary government versus community challenges and prospects. By so doing, the SABC will be upholding the democratic principles and perpetuating its role as a public broadcaster.
Public broadcasting in South Africa

Public broadcasting according to Berger and Jjuuko (2007) can be viewed in terms of ‘editorial independence, public accountability, universal service and access, programme diversity and pluralism’ for the purposes of serving the public interest while it remains free from interference. According to McKinsey (1999), public broadcasting plays an indispensable role in the citizens’ perception of their society (Juneau 2000) and the world around them. Because of the special status that broadcasting has, governments, and societies more broadly, have a special interest in the range and quality of their local broadcasting realm. According to Nyman-Metcalf Hills, Honeyman Mbaine, Nyamnjoh Kariithi and Kupe (2003), public broadcasting is critically imperative in African societies as the majority of citizens acquire information, education and entertainment from primarily radio and television. However, television has low permeation than radio because of the high rates of sets, lack of electricity and feeble coverage among many South African residents. In the overwhelming majority of African countries, South Africa included, broadcasting has been the most controlled medium for both technical and political reasons (Mohammed 1994; D’Arma 2009; Benson 2011).

Fourie (2003: 152) posits that the South African public broadcasting service finds itself in the same position as public broadcasting services in the rest of the world and most Africa countries with the same economic, political, cultural and social problems facing all developing countries. According to Duncan (2009) radio remains the most accessible medium in South Africa, reaching 94% of the population by 2008 while free-to-air television has grown steadily to 84% of the population. Radio and television are among the core functions of public broadcasting mandates of the SABC. However the SABC is criticized for mismanagement, corruption, nepotism, and a drop in the quality of news and documentaries, and too few local productions (Fourie 2003: 153; Harber 2014). Furthermore there is mounting disgruntlement that little has happened of the vision for public service broadcasting as formulated during the years of the struggle against apartheid.

There are principles that relate to the structure and autonomy of public service broadcasting in ensuring the credibility of the SABC so that it remains relevant in the democratic dispensation (Juneau 2000; Fourie 2003);

**Universality:** Public broadcasting must be reachable to every citizen of South Africa throughout the Republic, thus ensuring that every citizen understands and follows the programming, and contemporary affairs of government.

**Independence:** If public service broadcasting is to play a role in democracy, it should provide a public sphere where citizens can express ideas freely and in which information, opinions and criticisms can be circulated independently from political influence.

**Distinctiveness:** In the changed media environment where the public broadcaster exists side by side with commercial broadcasters, the issue of uniqueness is increasingly important. Distinctiveness requires that the service offered by SABC distinguishes itself from that of other broadcasting services. In public broadcasting, the public must be able to identify what distinguishes this service from other
services (i.e. commercial broadcasting) concerning the quality and particular ‘charm’ of its programmes.

**South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC): A public service**

Burger (2002) postulates that in 1934 General James Barry Munnik Hertzog, Prime Minister of South Africa, ordered an investigation into all facets of broadcasting in South Africa. The investigation eventually resulted in the formation of the SABC, under (Act 22 of 1936). In the beginning the SABC only broadcasted in English. The Act, however stipulated the inauguration of an analogous Afrikaans service while comprehensive transmissions in both official languages became a reality in 1937 and the A and B Programmes, as the services were called, came into being. In terms of section 7 of the *Broadcasting Act, 1999* (No. 4 of 1999), on the transfer date the minister responsible must apply for the establishment by incorporation of the SABC to a limited liability company with a share capital as contemplated in the *Companies Act, 2008* (No. 71 of 2008 as amended) in which the ‘Corporation’ is the successor of the old Corporation. Upon incorporation, government holds one hundred percent of the shares of the Corporation. It is within this context that the SABC became a public service that consequently distinguishes it from commercial broadcasting. The SABC is listed as one of the major public entities in Schedule 4 of the *Public Finance Management Act, 1999* (Act 1 of 1999). The SABC is licensed by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) to provide public service content in two categories of services: public services and public commercial services.

The SABC’s public service television stations, SABC 1 and 2 are the most watched stations (Duncan, 2009). SABC 3 is licensed as the broadcaster’s public commercial service TV channel. All three existing TV channels are required to carry some of public service programming, including news and current affairs. The SABC’s five national and 13 regional radio stations cover the spectrum of South African languages, and are broadcast on an analogue free-to-air basis (Duncan 2009). There has been some discussion inside the SABC about transforming Radio 2000 into a 24-hour news and current affairs station, using content generated by other stations. It is through this history and undertakings that the SABC came in to being and currently broadcast as a public service in South Africa. In conducting its affairs the SABC must conduct its affairs in conjunction with the provisions of media freedom and freedom of the press as enshrined in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* of 1996.

**Media freedom and freedom of the press**

In 1994, a democratic political system was established, thereby culminating South Africa’s long history of persecution and censorship. It was in 1996 that South Africa had a constitution that is comprehensive and aims at remedying the inequalities and legacies of the apartheid government. Freedom of the press is provided for by section 16 (Freedom of Expression) of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* of 1996. According to van Leeuwen (2012), the country’s long scuffle for press freedom is a fundamental element of a democratic society (Serfontein 2013), and should be upheld and respected as it has finally been realized. Since the promulgation of the *Protection of the
Information Bill in 2008 and the 2010 proposed Media Appeals Tribunal, it is contended that these developments may disturb the country’s press freedom awkwardly. When the ANC government proposed the Media Appeals Tribunal, several protests and campaigns were mounted by organisations such as the Avaaz and the Right2Know Campaign (Leeuwen 2012). Both the Media Appeals Tribunal of 2010 and the Protection of Information Bill have been condemned for being unconstitutional and aiming to disrespect the freedom afforded to the media and other broadcasting mechanisms. Rivals often refer to section 32 of the Constitution of 1996, which states that “every person has the right of access to all information held by the state or any of its organs in any sphere of government in so far as that information is required for the exercise or protection of any of their rights”.

Freedom of expression sits at the heart of a democracy. According to section 6 (2) of the Broadcasting Act, 1999, the Corporation (SABC) will in pursuit of its objectives and in application of its powers, enjoy freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence. In the absence of freedom of expression for the media, good governance cannot exist unless there is a free and independent media out there carrying out a watchdog role and ensuring transparency and accountability in government affairs (Somolekae 1998; Ayee 1998; Sebola 2012). Media that is tied to its government such as the media in Zimbabwe and Swaziland cannot carry out a watchdog role of the public officials administrative and government functions (Louw 2008). Such media will also be unable to criticize the government or show up its shortcomings and those of the incumbents in office. Such result in a slide into totalitarianism and corruption. Only a free and sovereign media independent from government controls and free to raise government-ills can be a public watchdog. One country where there is independent media in Africa, even though with variable results, is South Africa.

SABC as an agent for transparency and accountability

In a democracy as that of South Africa where there are principles, rules, codes of conduct and pieces of legislation, a public broadcaster (i.e. SABC), promoting transparency and accountability should not be an issue of contention. However, with the political squabbles within the corporation and political influence (Fourie 2003; Vavi 2014; NevondweOdekuand Raligilia 2014) injected by the government of the day (i.e. ANC), the SABC finds itself in a realm which prevents the proper exercising of its mandate. This consequently bears an adverse effect on the ability to expose corruption (NevondweOdekuand Raligilia2014) and malpractices among public officials. In a verge of ensuring that the SABC as a public service promotes transparency and accountability in government, it is expected that there is editorial independence in the corporation (Berger and Jjuuko 2007). Furthermore, Berger and Jjuuko (2007) alludes that using the similar principles like those applied in commercial broadcasting, the SABC could achieve its mandate in a democratic society. Promoting transparency and accountability consequently means that the SABC will be acting in the best interests of the general public. However, this position is far-fetched whereby the SABC fails to champion transparency and accountability in government. This is so because public broadcasting in South Africa is troubled with political interference (Fourie 2003; Sebola 2012; Harber 2014) and poor management.
Conclusion

As a result of political influence and interference in the affairs of the SABC, the corporation is under immense pressure and therefore fails to champion transparency and accountability in government. This paper attempted to put forward a theoretical perspective on public broadcasting and how the SABC, as a public broadcaster can be used as an agent for promoting transparency and accountability in government. To this end, South Africa has numerous policies and pieces of legislation governing public broadcasting but however fails to thrive in fulfilling its mandate, twenty years in to democracy. This paper therefore argues that there is a need to review and revise public broadcasting laws, if the SABC is to remain relevant in a democracy. This is critically important particularly with South Africa possessing a constitution that provides for freedom of expression as a pillar in ensuring transparency and accountability in government through public broadcasting and the media in general.

References


