

CHAPTER 8

The Media

In its second Report, COMSA recognised the extent to which an open and unbiased media will be an important component in making a considered judgment on whether South Africa's April 1994 elections have been free and fair.

Following the release of the second COMSA Report it was decided that media experts would be included in the next phase of the mission.

In particular, the media specialists were to:

- Monitor and report on the treatment of election news in the public and private media, giving special attention to the role of government information services and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).
- Monitor access to the media by the political parties.
- Maintain contact with the Independent Media Commission to be set up under the Transitional Executive Council and comment on its role and effectiveness.

Over the period covered in this Report, COMSA's media representatives held meetings with most of the political parties, attended meetings of the Multi-party Negotiating Council on the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and the Independent Media Commission (IMC) bills, and visited the news and public affairs department of the SABC and the editorial offices of a number of major daily newspapers. Regular contact was also maintained with a number of NGOs promoting a more open and balanced media, in particular the Public Broadcasting Initiative, the Campaign for Open Media, the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism and the Broadcast Monitoring Project.

The South African Media

The South African media have long been criticised both domestically and internationally for the extent to which they are monopoly controlled and for the pro-government bias of the SABC and the failure of the print media to accurately reflect the diversity of South African society. The media, in particular the SABC, were widely viewed as central to the dissemination of apartheid ideology and thus the protection of the state. The criticism of South Africa's media has not faded with the dismantling of apartheid.

Ownership of the media in South Africa is highly concentrated and almost exclusively in the hands of what is regarded as 'the white establishment'. Historically, the broadcast media has been controlled by the state. The print media is dominated by four monopolies.

While this situation has begun to change, there is no doubt that the most influential and popular media in the run-up to the elections will remain under the control of minority interests or, in the case of the SABC, managed on a day to day basis by the same group of people who were in charge in the past.

The Print Media

South African newspaper readers are an elite group. The country has a population of approximately 40 million yet only 1.5 million newspapers are sold every day. Weekend circulation is slightly higher at 2.2 million. Even taking account of the 60 per cent illiteracy rate and a youthful population, the disparity is only partly explained. Newspaper editors and others claim there is no reading culture and thus not many customers beyond the middle class which is largely white.

There are some interesting statistics in the latest All Media and Product Survey (AMPS) done by the South African Advertising Research Foundation that suggest that circulation figures might not tell the full story.

The survey divides readers into four groups: Whites, Coloureds, Indians and Blacks. The *Star*, which has a daily circulation of 216,000, registers more black readers (483,000) than all the other groups combined (400,000). However, more whites (53 per cent) buy the paper than the other groups. According to the survey almost 6 million South Africans (15 per cent of the total population) read a daily newspaper. The statistics show 3.1 million white, coloured and Indian newspaper readers. The figure for black South Africans is 2.8 million.

Four South African print media conglomerates control almost 90 per cent of the country's daily newspaper production and almost all weekend circulation. One group alone, Argus, produces more than 60 per cent of the newspapers sold daily in South Africa. There is also a high degree of vertical integration linking newspaper interests to production and distribution, the national press agency, South African Press Agency (SAPA) and the privately owned TV channel M-Net.

Although ownership of South Africa's print media is highly concentrated there is a degree of diverse political opinion reflected in the various publications.

A cursory scan of news headlines on any given day could lead one to believe that South Africa has a critical, probing and healthy written press. However, on closer examination it becomes clear that, with some exceptions, criticism of the Government is tepid. The examination and criticism of state institutions, in particular the police and army and the political parties, is still an area where journalists tread warily.

Following years of tight government control over the media it is not surprising that, with some notable exceptions, there is no tradition of investigative journalism in South Africa and particularly not in the subject areas cited earlier. At some of the larger newspapers this is slowly beginning to change. There is also a small number of newspapers, mostly weeklies, which do try to appeal to a wider cross-section of South African society.

These publications often contain probing articles on current issues and generally present more balanced and independent views. However, their circulations are small and many of them are in a constant struggle for survival.

At most South African newspapers, the journalists and the senior editorial staff are still overwhelmingly white and male. However, black journalists are filling positions at some of the major dailies in increasing numbers. Most newspapers are actively recruiting black journalists. In an effort to speed up the process some have established active in-house training programmes to upgrade the skills of new recruits and existing staff.

While a number of newspapers are making serious efforts in their news and feature pages to reflect the diversity of South African society, they are naturally driven by the realities of maintaining their revenues. These pressures inevitably result in some editorial policies and decisions which tend to play to the interests of their readership.

Advertisers in South Africa naturally target those groups with the largest amount of disposable income. This factor, despite the readership statistics cited earlier, has so far kept the newspaper market oriented toward the middle class which is predominantly white.

A notable exception is *The Sowetan* which is the largest circulation newspaper (234,000 copies issued daily) in the country. *The Sowetan* is a highly successful and profitable newspaper. The national readership survey shows that 1.5 million black South Africans read it every day. This is a staggering multiple of over 6 persons reading each copy. The paper does attempt to present and reflect the political views and aspirations of the majority black population.

However, the paper is still part of the Argus group. Argus is pursuing divestment options and there are proposals being discussed that would result in significant black participation in the ownership of the paper.

Radio & TV

South Africa has a small number of private radio stations and one 'border' television signal – Bophuthatswana TV (BOP-TV) – which reach listeners and viewers in some areas of the country. However, any examination of the electronic media must centre on the SABC.

The SABC exerts near monopoly control over the airwaves. With three TV channels and 22 radio stations, the SABC reaches almost 25 million listener/viewers a day. In a country where 60 per cent of the population is illiterate this

concentration will be of particular significance during the election campaign.

The SABC does speak to all South Africans. Their radio stations broadcast in English, Afrikaans and all the predominant African languages. The African-language stations draw the largest audiences (12 million listeners a day) and are by far the most popular media in the country.

Each of the three SABC TV channels has distinctive features. TV-1 broadcasts in English and Afrikaans and is considered by most people to be the 'white' channel. The AMPS survey bears this out. Of the 5.4 million viewers, 2.9 million are white and just over a million are black.

The second channel, CCV, has tailored its programming to appeal to the majority of South Africans. Many of its programmes feature black South African presenters, musicians and actors. It is watched by 7.6 million South Africans – 5.7 million of whom are black. The third channel carries educational programmes.

Over the past few months, we have noted a growing trend on a number of SABC TV programmes, particularly in the area of news and public affairs, to include more subjects and programmes that would be of interest to the majority black population. In addition, black spokespersons in increasing numbers are showing up as guests or experts not only to discuss political subjects but health, education and other lifestyle issues.

The SABC unlike most other state-owned broadcasters does not depend on the Government for its financing. The bulk of the R1.2 billion annual budget comes from a combination of advertising revenues and licence fees levied on radio and television set owners. Therefore, the future of the corporation is not simply a matter of restructuring the organisation and changes in programme policy. At the end of the day, the key issue will be how the new SABC will be financed in an increasingly fragmented and competitive media market.

Control of the SABC has only recently been removed from the direct authority of the Government to an Independent Board of Directors. Most of the management structures and indeed the senior managers who ran the corporation as a Government mouthpiece during the 1980s are still in charge.

Only small changes to the news and current affairs departments and their programming have been made so far. While it is generally agreed that the SABC must be restructured and have its mandate redefined, it is unlikely that this process will be significantly advanced before voting day.

The SABC Board, in anticipation of the approaching new media order, has begun to tackle the key questions of affirmative action in staffing and presentation of more diverse views and opinion in their public affairs and news programming. Discussions have also been initiated looking at the mandate, structure, financing and future of the SABC in the electronic media marketplace of the new South Africa.

The new Board of Directors has released a statement outlining the values and vision which they have agreed should guide the corporation in its renewal.

The statement stresses the board's commitment to transform SABC into an independent public broadcaster that will reflect in its staff and programming the diversity of South African society.

The news and public affairs management and staff have recently launched a consultative process aimed at renewal. This has produced a Code of Conduct for SABC editorial staff. The text takes its cue from the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters included in the IBA Act.

The SABC Editorial Code begins with the following statement: 'We shall report, contextualise and present news honestly by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts, or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis.'

The Code goes on to deal with the issues of journalistic independence, responsibility for serving the public, allowing news values to prevail in reaching editorial decisions and ensuring that no person or event is depicted in a manner which would encourage or indicate any form of discrimination. All editorial staff were consulted before the draft Code was finalised. It was then submitted to the Board of Directors for approval.

In order to prepare and encourage SABC personnel to be agents of change within the corporation, a number of training programmes have been instituted. Editors, journalists, producers, technicians and some middle managers are attending these training sessions. Most of these sessions are funded by other countries but organised by local NGOs with an interest in a more open and independent South African media.

The lecturers are from European and North American broadcast networks. These activities are already proving helpful in improving the standards and competence of personnel but the freedom to apply these newfound and enhanced skills will rest in the final analysis with senior management.

In the short term attention will be directed at the manner in which the SABC conducts itself during the election campaign. Given its dominant position, and multitude of signals in all languages, what will be watched most closely is whether the corporation is giving fair and unbiased coverage to all political parties contesting the elections. The management is aware of the intense scrutiny that will be directed at SABC programming during the election period and they are examining various ways of dealing with the situation.

Two factors are causing difficulties for those involved in the election planning process. First of all no precedents exist of covering an all-inclusive election. This is being addressed by looking at experiences in other countries, training programmes and brainstorming sessions. But more importantly the media is faced with a stipulation in the law that all political parties must be treated equitably without this being clearly defined.

The SABC appears to be taking a defensive approach to dealing with this situation. Detailed logs of election coverage and programming will be kept. This is entirely legitimate.

However, what will be critical to observe is whether the psychology of the stopwatch will have an influence on editorial decisions and thus election coverage. For instance, it may lead to unimportant events being broadcast merely to establish balance between parties.

COMSA believes that time measurement is only one aspect of assessing balance and bias. In addition to keeping time logs attention needs to be paid to equitable and balanced coverage. This is far more complex, as it involves the actual content of reports and rests ultimately on the extent to which journalists and editors are fair and objective in their approach.

To help with the evaluation of election coverage, a number of Commonwealth countries are considering assisting local media monitoring efforts already in operation. South African and international experts from Commonwealth countries would work together to produce a daily snapshot of election coverage. It is hoped that this daily analysis will provide an objective point of reference and perhaps assist parties bringing complaints about unfair or biased coverage before the IMC.

In the period ahead, preoccupation with the election and campaign coverage is likely to divert some of the attention and energy of the board and senior management away from the major changes which must be made to convert the SABC from state broadcaster to public broadcaster.

Regulation of the Media

Given the importance of the media, the politicians engaged in the multi-party negotiations process took a number of steps that were aimed at creating a level playing field for the parties contesting the elections. The focus was on the electronic media where two bodies, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and the Independent Media Commission (IMC), were created. These are illustrated in Table 5.

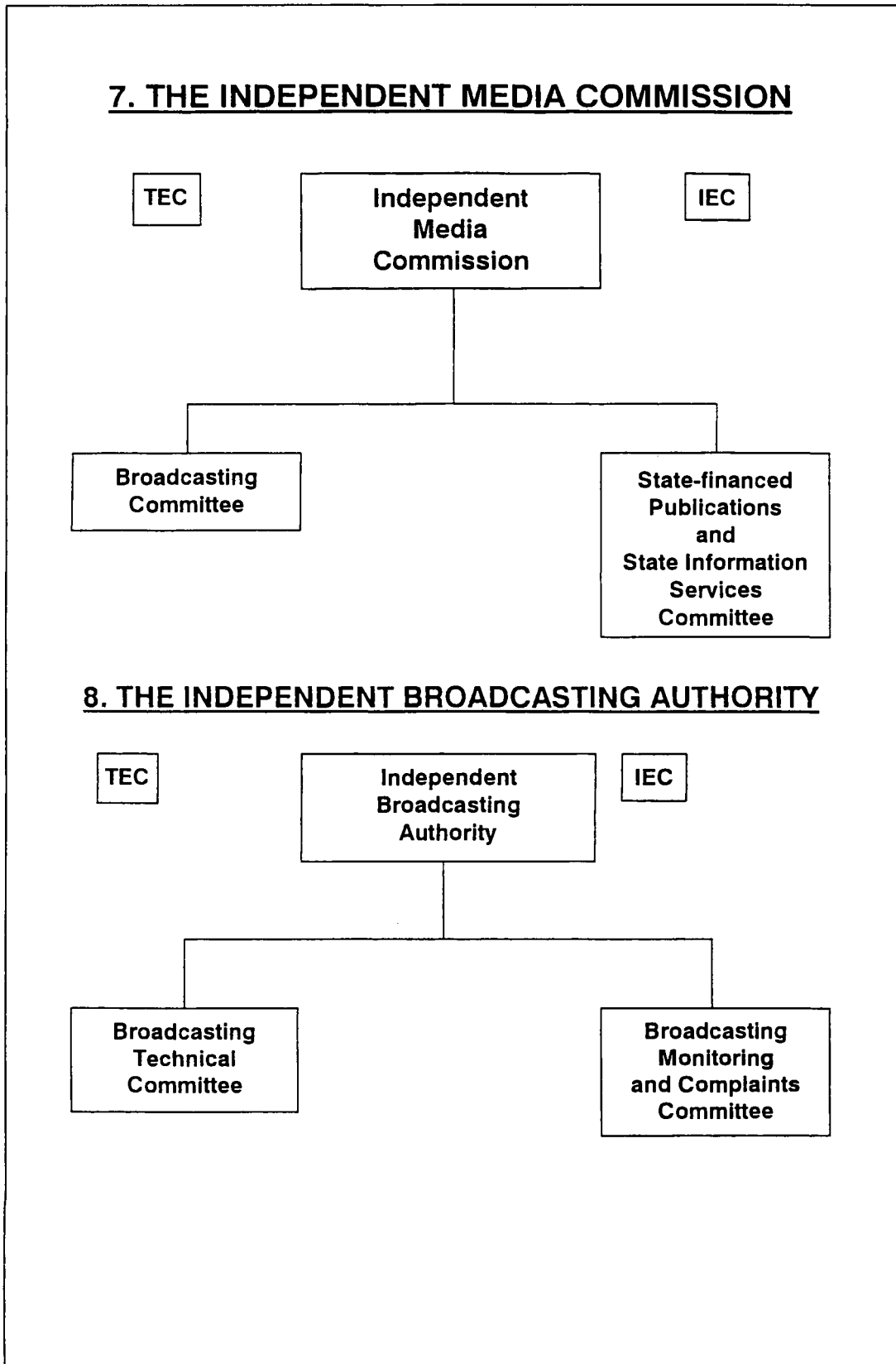
The print media has been left to regulate itself through its own established bodies including the Press Council.

The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA)

The IBA will be the regulator of the electronic media. The authority will grant new licences, establish conditions for the extension of new licences and following public hearings have a deciding role in establishing the responsibilities of both public and private broadcasters.

The IBA legislation includes tough provisions to guard against ownership concentration and cross-media ownership. The new authority is also charged with enforcing the South African content regulations under the Act, and a Code of Conduct which will apply to all broadcasting services. Advertising will be subject to regulations in the Code of Advertising Practice administered by the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa.

Table 5



Source: Consultative Business Movement

The IBA will have a monitoring and complaints committee to ensure compliance by broadcasters. The Act provides for stiff penalties, including fines and even imprisonment in some cases.

The IBA legislation also addresses a number of issues related to broadcasting services during an election. There are strict controls on party election broadcasts, the placement and content of political advertising and the equitable treatment of political parties by broadcasting agencies during an election period.

It is unlikely that the IBA will grant any new broadcast licences before the elections. Even if there were new licences, there is little chance they could be operational before late 1994. However, over the long term the IBA will be a powerful force to bring about fundamental changes such as more choice and greater competition in the electronic media in South Africa.

Most significantly, the new legal structure regulating broadcasting will over time lead to a break-up of the SABC's near monopoly of the airwaves. It is anticipated that the key questions of the SABC's mandate and structure as a public broadcaster, independent from government in the new South Africa, will be addressed by the IBA over the next year but not before the elections.

The Independent Media Commission (IMC)

The IMC Act builds on the election provisions in the IBA legislation. The commission which comes into effect once the election period begins is focused exclusively on the electronic media.

The IMC will have wide powers during the election period. It will oversee the allocation to the political parties of free broadcast time that will be made available, as the law states, 'on an equitable basis'. With respect to programme content, the IMC has been charged with monitoring all broadcasting services to see that coverage of political events on news and public affairs programmes is fair and balanced. Finally, the commission has been given overall responsibility for ensuring that all political parties who wish to purchase advertising time have an opportunity to do so.

The IMC Act also requires the commission to monitor all state-financed publications and state information services during the election period. This is to ensure they do not include any political advertising or issue any statements that the commission considers might advance the interests of any political party.

In order to enforce the Act, the IMC can conduct hearings and levy stiff fines on broadcasters. The commission also has the authority to make any regulations, consistent with the law, that it feels are necessary to carry out its mandate. The IMC remains in operation only until the elections are over.

COMSA would encourage those bodies responsible for conducting the elections and monitoring the media, the IEC and IMC, to inform the media at the earliest opportunity of the mechanics and rules of the game.

It will also be important for these bodies to have good media relations teams that are accessible to the media throughout the campaign. Only a well informed media can be expected to carry out its responsibilities effectively.

Provisions on the Media in the Electoral Act

There is also a number of provisions in the Electoral Act and the Independent Electoral Commission Act that impact on the media and set guidelines for their activities during the election campaign. The most notable are the 21-day pre-election ban on the publication of opinion polls and controls on the content and placement of political advertising in publications.

COMSA believes that most of the provisions contained in the different pieces of legislation are fair and reasonable and should help encourage the media to contribute responsibly to the public debate during the election campaign.

However, we feel there are three notable exceptions.

- The stipulation that all political parties are 'to be treated equitably' in electronic media coverage might have been defined more clearly. It has been left to the media and the IMC to interpret the meaning in practice of 'equitable'. We consider that common sense and good judgment applied by both the media and the Commission will be critical.
- In our view, allowing the print media to regulate itself through its own established bodies is unfair. Regulation by the Press Council cannot be compared as equal to the requirements and sanctions of the IMC legislation which applies to broadcasters. We can fully understand the pre-occupation of the politicians with the electronic media but surely a level media playing field should ideally include all the players.
- The new South Africa is headed toward a society where open debate and the free flow of information will be enshrined in law. We believe the 21-day pre-election prohibition on publication of opinion polls is excessive. We hope that sometime in the future South African legislators will reduce the 21 days to something like 48 hours before polling and in time perhaps eliminate this ban altogether.

The Media and the Elections

COMSA feels that the election campaign presents a unique and immediate opportunity to make some major changes. Covering these elections will be a new experience for the South African media. A great number of journalists, in particular black journalists, have never covered any election. The period ahead presents a formidable challenge not only for them but for their managers as well.

We are pleased to note the numerous efforts under way to train and re-train journalists. This will equip them with new skills and begin the process of

converting the country's journalistic culture from one which responds to instructions from state authorities to a more open, objective and independent approach.

During the forthcoming elections there will be periods of intense activity and often many events will be competing for media attention on a given day and in the same general location. The South African media does not have unlimited resources, and choices, often difficult ones, will have to be made on what to cover.

In this regard, COMSA has observed a certain unevenness in the press operations of the different political parties. Advance notice, proper facilities for media coverage and continuous and open relations with the media by all political parties will be important to avoid accusations of unfairness.

Violence and the Media

A critical problem in South Africa is that, as a result of violence, political parties and their supporters do not have equal, safe and unrestricted access to all areas of the country. The same can be said for the media. A number of journalists have been killed and others injured in the course of covering the events over the past few years. The election campaign poses equally formidable challenges.

In the current environment, which is exacerbated by intense political competition, there is a danger that intimidation will prevent the media from covering certain campaign events. We believe that the impact of violence on media coverage cannot be underestimated. Any monitoring of election coverage must look not only at what was covered and what was not, but also clearly determine the reasons why certain events were sparsely covered or not covered at all.

COMSA urges that every effort be made by the political parties to ensure access to events by the media and generally facilitate the work of the media in all areas of South Africa in the run-up to and during the elections.