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## All SABC editorial policy review contributions taken seriously

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The Editorial Policies that are under review currently define the framework within which all decisions about the content carried by the SABC need to be taken. (SABC)

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The SABC and the decisions taken by its staff are subject to scrutiny in the way few other institutions and no other media organisations experience. Whether there is a decision to cancel a programme or the announcement of a resignation, one thing is guaranteed – the generation of heated debate and acres of column space.

Often the passion that commentators, politicians, activists and members of the general public bring to these conversations is informed by the critical role the SABC plays as South Africa's national public broadcaster.

Many of the most intense conversations about the SABC relate directly to decisions that are taken about content carried on SABC platforms.

These content decisions are taken within a context. This context includes guidelines that

provide a framework for the way in which decisions around content, whether controversial or not, are taken. These guidelines are collectively known as the Editorial Policies of the SABC.

The Editorial Policies of the SABC are currently under review. Through-out the review process the SABC has recognised the importance of public participation.

The emphasis that the SABC has placed on public participation means that there has been and there remains an opportunity for those who care about the SABC, public broadcasting and content to participate in the Editorial Policy Review and play a significant role in defining the way in which the SABC deals with all content carried on its platforms for the next five years.

The SABC Editorial Policy Review process is also approaching a significant milestone – the 14th February 2014 deadline for written submissions from the public on the current policies.

This deadline is part of a larger process that began in June 2013 when the corporation began an extensive process of stakeholder consultations and public hearings.

The SABC hosted 15 public hearings, attended by almost 2,000 people, in towns as diverse as Kuruman and Khayelitsha, Thohoyandou and Pietermaritzburg. At these public hearings members of the public made inputs on the policies and raised their issues about the content carried on the SABC.

The hearings were recorded and the transcription of those recordings is underway. Additionally, 148 written submissions have been received to date from members of the public. All contributions – including the transcripts of the hearings and all the written submissions will be made available on the SABC's website.

Following the February submission deadline, the collation of all the inputs will be finalised. These, together with benchmark studies and inputs from SABC staff will inform any revisions to the policies. Any changes to the policies will also have to be guided by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and adhere to all legislative and regulatory requirements.

The revised policies will be released for public comment. Any changes that emerge as result of this round of engagements will be incorporated into the revised policies that will then follow the appropriate approval process before the process of implementation. Implementation will not be limited to the roll-out of the policies at the SABC, but will also include a public education element.

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The SABC views the finalisation of the Editorial Policy Review as a critical deliverable in 2014. This is because an effective and implementable Editorial Policy is essential to the SABC's success as a national public broadcaster.

The Editorial Policies that are under review currently define the framework within which all decisions about the content carried by the SABC need to be taken. They deal with general programming, news and current affairs, language, local content, universal service and access, religious programming

and education. In addition there is a section within the policies that addresses the Editorial Mandate of the Corporation, describing the core values, an editorial code and the process of upward referral.

The inputs made at the recently concluded public hearings dealt with a wide-range of issues, many of them – such as plotline developments in popular soaps – were of an operational rather than policy nature. These operational issues have been shared with relevant areas of the business and where they have policy implications will be considered in the review.

Despite sometimes straying into the operational, the public hearings saw the thorough dissection of nearly all aspects of the policies. Some of these policy issues were raised more frequently than others.

The emphasis that participants placed on the way the way in which the SABC uses language and the way in which the non-metropolitan regions are represented in both fictional and factual programming cannot be over-stated. The SABC's approach to religion and religious programmes and the ways in which the SABC could better service the needs of people with disabilities were also raised.

SABC News and Current Affairs programming – at both an operational and policy level – came under scrutiny, with issues around editorial independence, 'positive' coverage and urban bias generating discussion. As with the initial development of the policies, upward referral and the role and functions of the Editor-in-Chief were also subjected to scrutiny. There were also calls for the Editorial Policies to place greater emphasis on ensuring implementation, monitoring and adherence.

Sport, television scheduling and portrayals of sex, nudity and violence were some of the other hot topic issues.

The views presented at the hearings and in the submissions received were as diverse as the people who hold them. Contributions about similar issues often represented diametrically opposing viewpoints.

This diversity of views means it would not be possible for the SABC to adopt an approach where the revised editorial policies simply reflect all the different inputs received. All this would achieve would be an internally incoherent, unimplementable document. Nor is the review process going to be reduced to a popularity contest where if the majority of inputs call for a particular policy outcome that outcome will automatically be included in the final policies.

However, all contributions made at all points of the review process have and will be taken seriously. All substantive issues raised at the Hearings and in the submissions will be addressed, if not in the policies themselves, in an accompanying document that will clarify the reasoning behind any changes made to the policies.

The Editorial Policy Review provides more than just an opportunity for SABC's audiences to participate and make a contribution to content decision-making at the SABC; it is an opportunity to ensure that the SABC remains accountable to a public broadcasting ethos and delivers the services that South Africans require.

**The current Editorial Policies can be found at [www.sabc.co.za/editorialpolicy](http://www.sabc.co.za/editorialpolicy) and all submissions should be sent to [editorial@sabc.co.za](mailto:editorial@sabc.co.za). Submissions, or requests for copies of the Editorial Policies, can also be sent to Editorial Policy, Pvt Bag X1, Auckland Park, 2006.**

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