



## Transcript of the SOS Coalition's National Coordinator's address at the SACP Media Transformation Summit

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02 October 2015  
Kempton Park

Dumelang,

Joalo ka ha ntate Mbalo a se a nkamohetse, 'na ke Sekoetlane Phamodi, Motsamaisi oa *SOS: Support Public Broadcasting Coalition*. Ha ke qale ka ho leboha *Mokhatlo oa Makomanisi a Afrika Boroa*, mmoho lebahlophisi ba kopano ēena ea bohlokwa bokamosoong ba sechaba sa rōna ka ho'ong mema ho tla buisana le lōna, kajeno.

Following the financial collapse of the SABC, various people, organisations and role-players who recognised the critical role of public broadcasting for the health of a vibrant democracy, coalesced to form the SOS Coalition.

In that dark and uncertain time when our national public broadcaster

- was bankrupt;
- had precipitated the collapse of our local production sector; and
- remained mired in recent political scandal

many of us rolled up our sleeves and committed ourselves to doing the hard work of rebuilding this once great national treasure to once again, tell the good stories of South Africa.

At the heart of our call, then, was the same demand we have of all media - even today:

- A coherent **vision** to represent and engage the people of this country in rich and robust dialogue with each other, this continent and the world;
- **Independence** from political, commercial and other sectarian influence and control;
- **Transparency** in the ways in which it does business such that it remains credible and trusted by the millions of households that see it as a mirror of themselves and a window to the world; and
- **Direct Accountability** to the people of this country who it serves, and by whom it is owned.

Six years later, and in the face of

- a pathologically dysfunctional Board;
- its unyielding protection and reward of officials who have kept it in the news instead of making them; and
- annual losses amounting to hundreds of million and consistently qualified audits;

can we really say ours is a visionary, independent, transparent and accountable broadcaster?

As we try to answer this question, over the next two days, perhaps we should start by reminding ourselves of the story of how we came to find ourselves and our SABC in this strange place.

## **Context**

The story starts with South Africa's media transition, the SABC's in particular, from a state-centric to public media which was directly tied to a nascent democratic society underpinned by the adoption of majority rule, and the cornerstone constitutional values of freedom, equality and dignity.

When the ANC was elected to govern, in 1994, the SABC was accordingly identified as the flagship transformation project that the State would undertake.

It would form the model for what we envisioned when we spoke of a transformed media: a medium that was truly **democratic**, **credible** and **open**, being

representative of the diversity of South African voices and lived experiences by promoting plurality, fairness and impartiality, particularly in news and current affairs programming.

The SABC, like the media landscape we desired, would be an open and deliberative public sphere for citizen engagement in participatory communication to empower themselves, without being beholden to the whims of commercial, political and sectarian forces.

And we had that, for a while.

In the glory days, the SABC was built up to be the single largest mass communication medium in the country, which turned significant profits which it would plough right back into the development of internationally acclaimed, citizen-oriented content.

- It commissioned gripping documentaries that explored our sour and complex past and what we had to do with it today for a better tomorrow.
- It was the nexus of debate about the relationship between public policy and social realities through both factual programming *and* local drama.
- It held up a mirror to the society we were crafting...are crafting...fearlessly speaking truth to power by exposing what was rotten in both the public and private sectors, while also celebrating our extraordinary achievements.

We looked to the SABC when we wanted to expand our very capacity to imagine what we needed to do to build the country our people struggled for.

## **Challenges**

Fast forward some twenty-something years ahead to today, and the very pillars that support a vital public broadcaster crafted in the image of a democratic society, seem intractably eroded and, indeed, about to collapse. The crisis is the same now as it was at the point of its collapse, six years ago. It is a crisis of independence, transparency and accountability.

## **Independence**

In recent years, we have seen frequent cases and complaints of political censorship and control in live *and* pre-recorded programming on radio and television.

Whether or not these happened on instruction, the very clear reading is that this is happening in the name of the ruling-alliance.

In the Black township communities where SOS works (because we're not in the

business of busing in rent-a-crowds), we are learning that the outrageous campaign for 70% "good" news and the banning of the depiction community unrest from our airwaves is being identified directly with the ruling alliance.

But this is not all they are worried about. They are also deeply fearful of the grip that corporate interests are tightening around the SABC.

Never mind the ultra-commercialisation of both the operations and content produced by the SABC, they decry the apparent take over of between the public broadcaster by it's biggest rival - a pay-TV operator that has gone so far as privatising the public broadcaster to the extent that the SABC handed over its archive for R100m a year, and agreed to change its policy on STB encryption thus decimating all future prospects for the demonopolisation of the ultra-concentrated broadcast media at the stroke of a pen..

We were there, contesting this takeover, at the Competition Tribunal on Wednesday, where both MultiChoice and the SABC attempted to defend this rotten and indefensible arrangement.

### **Transparency**

To stand here and preach the importance of transparency in any public institution, least of all the public broadcaster, would be trite and belabouring the point.

In this last half-decade alone, we watched this once open institution shut itself off from its public, become increasingly inaccessible and dictate to us, its public and owners, to take its word that things are going well, simply because it says so.

What has that borne us?

Well, I've already spoken to you of the unholy marriage the Board chairperson celebrated with MultiChoice, where the archive as the dowry.

Then there's the successive qualified audits which culminated in a disclaimer, just two years ago, and hundreds of millions in fruitless, wasteful and avoidable expenditure year-on-year in a country where the social need is vast, and the fiscus extremely stretched.

The cherry on top? The fourth brazen inflation of the salary of a singular executive director in 24 months, in the same year he presided over the R400m loss he swore to us and Parliament the Sunday Times lied about, just five months ago.

## **Accountability**

So it comes as no surprise that the SABC has dodged, ducked and dived away from being accountable to the Nation.

How many of the Auditor General's recommendations in his 2010 report has the SABC implemented and met?

Which of its highest ranking officials, who have been found to have misconducted, themselves have been appropriately disciplined?

How much has it cost the SABC, so far, to pay the legal fees of directors defending their fraudulent misrepresentation of their qualifications to itself, and how much more will it still pay to see these cases to their end?

How many of those Board members and executives who opposed and challenged the brazen looting of national assets saw themselves purged?

So does it come as any surprise that brick-layers, fish & chips spaza shop owners and till operators see themselves ready and fit for service on its Board?

### **So what is to be done?**

Truth be told, if we are serious about and hope to make any real gains in the transformation of our media landscape, we must first organize our own house by transforming the media that we own – the SABC.

After all, we have done this before, and in the face of far bigger demons. We need to look back to those days for instruction on how this is to be done:

We do not only need a clear commitment from the people of South Africa and government to re-establish an independent, transparent and accountable SABC, but to actually do the right thing and fight for our public broadcaster.

We need to cure the equivocation, vacillation and paralysis in the structures that oversee the SABC, parliament in particular, and force them to root out the cancer of mediocrity and dysfunction that has turned it into a shadow of its former self.

We must campaign for government to urgently force the SABC to cost its mandate, and then fund it otherwise it will continue to fall prey to the rapacious whims of the neoliberal forces that currently control all our media.

But most, importantly, we must continue to support and celebrate the workers of the SABC who, in spite of the great difficulties that come with working in so

beleaguered an institution, endeavor always to serve our information, education and entertainment needs with utmost integrity, and under great pains.

If we would see a hundred flowers blossom, and a hundred schools of thought contend, then we must return the course of our SABC to the independent, transparent and accountable public broadcaster we always dreamed it to be.

Kea leboha.