

A new tone for His Master's Voice

*The ANC is demanding
that De Klerk surrender
his party's monopoly
control over SABC.
David Niddrie reports*

It is no accident that, despite its recently improved South African television image, the African National Congress has put the issue of government control of the country's near-monopoly broadcasting networks high on the pre-negotiations agenda.

ANC foreign affairs secretary Thabo Mbeki raised the issue publicly only hours after the Groote Schuur talks had started.

The issue of who controls the airwaves is vital in a period increasingly dominated by a contest of ideas.

In a country where daily newspaper sales fall far short of 2 million, the SABC commands an estimated 14-million listeners a day through its 23 internal radio stations.

Add the viewers of its four television channels, and the SABC's daily audience on occasion nudges 20 million - almost two-thirds of the total South African population.

With well over half the adult population functionally illiterate - thus exclusively reliant on radio or TV for anything other than word-of-mouth information - SABC exercises a powerful influence on the thinking of millions of South Africans.

For 40 years it has used this influence exclusively in support of the National Party government and its policies - rigidly segregating its stations and programmes on race and language lines when grand apartheid was in motion; stealthily adding black faces to TV screens and black voices to radio as Pretoria's policy shifted towards establishment of a multi-racial buffer against demands for non-racial democracy.

Nor has the corporation's assistance to the government's shifting priorities been limited to cultural reinforcement - with programmes demonstrating that white people can cohabit with certain classes of black people, as in 'People like us', a series whose title vividly indicates its political objectives.

An SABC-led 'task force', appointed late last year, is examining options for the future of broadcasting which parallel the broader privatisation programme of president FW de Klerk's government.

Deputy ANC president Nelson Mandela has described privatisation as a strategy to deny a democratically elected government control over the public sectors of the economy.

The SABC's initiative appears to be intended to maintain a similar advantage for the state and the economic interests it is attempting to defend.

For the past five months the government-appointed task force has privately been juggling options. Only after Mbeki's statement did it hastily broadcast a request for contributions from the public.

The composition of the force strongly suggests the directions in which it is looking. In addition to the fairly predictable representatives from the SABC itself, and the Departments of Information and Posts and Telecommunications, it includes the chaplain-general of the South African Defence Force and a strong showing from the government's two major intelligence agencies, Military Intelligence and the National Intelligence Service (NIS).

This is not a grouping any normal society would naturally associate with public - and, at least in theory, publicly accountable - broadcasting.

But NIS and Military Intelligence have been central to the government attempt to formulate the process of reforming apartheid without surrendering power.

And there are strong pointers to suggest that their attempts to restructure South African broadcasting are moving in the same direction.

The first public indication of the task force's work came last month, with the announcement that SABC was scuttling large sections of its foreign broadcasting service, Radio RSA - which, until then, had contributed to international broadcasting a far higher proportion than would reasonably be expected from a relatively small country.

Announced only days after the legalisation of the ANC and South African Communist Party, the decision reflects a shift in government strategy.

Originally underpinned by the theory of a 'total strategy', government thinking held that to defeat its opposition, it was necessary to internationalise the country's conflict, pushing its opposition physically as far as possible from South African soil. A corollary to this thinking was that the propaganda battle takes place substantially on the international terrain.

The reality that the South African struggle could not be won on the for-

eign battlefields of Cuito Cuanavale, but remained essentially a struggle between local forces, has seen De Klerk shift strategies.

By drawing the ANC back into the country and offering to talk, Pretoria has taken on the movement in a contest of ideas on a battlefield where the state has command of the heavy weaponry of propaganda.

For broadcasting, the implication is clear: international broadcasting is increasingly a wasted effort, a diversion from the main contest.

SABC has thus embarked on a process of scrapping its foreign-language, international services to concentrate its resources on the local market.

In similar vein, SABC is combining the African language TV2 and TV3 channels.

At most, however, these measures have only the medium-term benefit of increasing the capacity of a National Party-dominated SABC to intervene in the contest of ideas.

They will not help the present ruling group much if the SABC is politically 'neutralised' during a transition period, as Mbeki seemed to urge. Nor would they help once the ANC or an ANC-led alliance, having taken power (as even De Klerk regards as probable), inherits the broadcasting corporation.

Even in advance of the task force's appointment, government and pro-government media managers have been investigating possible mechanisms for denying a post-apartheid government access to the massive influence the SABC has provided the National Party.

At least four years ago Ton Vosloo, MD of Nasionale Media, publishers of Die Burger, Beeld and other National Party mouthpieces, was arguing strongly for privatisation of regional broadcasting networks, and the licensing of local stations for individual cities or towns.

Vosloo's Nasionale, which had just acquired the bi-weekly City Press newspaper as a vehicle to drive government policy into the townships, was on the lookout for further vehicles.

KwaZulu's Gatsha Buthelezi, whose Inkatha movement had just bought the Zulu-language Ilanga, was another potential buyer.

But the Transkei-based Capital Radio and Johannesburg's Radio 702 were beginning to demonstrate the potential impact of broadcasting not

directly tied into SABC's Auckland Park headquarters. So, at the time, the authorities could not bring themselves to take the risk of breaking with deeply entrenched traditions of a government-controlled near monopoly.

The task force has re-opened the debate.

Among the reasons for this was growing pressure from M-Net, a fifth TV channel launched in 1986 with a licence specifically prohibiting the broadcast of news or current events. Owned by the country's major newspaper groups, but with Vosloo's Nasionale as the biggest single shareholder and directly responsible for managing the channel, M-Net has been agitating for a second channel with the right to broadcast news. It also wants the right to do so openly, rather than through the costly de-coders currently needed to see all but two hours of M-Net's daily diet of 12 hours of mainly North American trivia.

The M-Net bid has brought major commercial considerations into play. And on this as well as other initiatives for private broadcasting, SABC's resistance has gone beyond the original political objective of keeping the airwaves under official control.

Just 22% of SABC's income comes from its 2 million TV licence holders. More than 60% of its 1988 income of R600-million comes from advertising. And although M-Net has drawn away just R30-million in advertising revenue, according to SABC officials, news broadcast rights could both destroy SABC's advertising base, and finally wrest control of the country's dominant information media from Pretoria's direct control.

Dominated by the pro-government Nasionale group, M-Net might not radically transform TV news coverage. But once the precedent had been set, demands from other quarters for

their own licences would be difficult to ignore.

The issue is still awaiting a government decision. But broadcasting sources say M-Net is quietly shelving its plans for a TV news service - possibly because of the prohibitive cost of generating TV news, but equally possibly as part of a government compromise which will give M-Net its second channel, but without a news slot.

At least one of the independent radio stations has extracted a similar deal. Although no official announcement has been made, Radio 702 is about to supplement its existing medium wave channel - less accessible than on the FM frequencies so far monopolised by SABC - with an FM stereo channel. This will greatly boost its attractiveness to advertisers, but it will also be broadcast without medium wave 702's increasingly assertive news programmes.

A second process of de facto privatisation has been underway virtually since the launch of SABC TV in 1976.

This has involved tendering out documentary and drama production to private film companies, in terms of an SABC-defined mechanism which effectively excludes all but a handful of the country's dominant private producers.

This preference given to the major producers, known derisively as 'the Broeder Five', is similar to the process of preferential government printing contracts - for telephone directories and other large government orders - by which Pretoria has, over the past four decades, guaranteed the profitability and survival of the two main pro-government newspaper groups.

Disgruntled private producers say the SABC system has recently been formalised, with single-programme tenders now replaced by long-term, multi-programme contracts. This effectively means that, with the exception of sport and news, there is little of SABC's locally-produced content not in private hands.

Whoever inherits SABC will thus be both contractually locked into a system which denies it direct control of what it broadcasts, and - even if it chose to break that tie-in - without the physical resources to produce alternatives.

Thus the ANC's concern that the question be addressed - and urgently.



Mbeki: questioned the government's control of SABC