

# MANAGING DISSENT

Institutional Culture and Political Independence  
in the South African Broadcasting Corporation's  
News and Current Affairs Division

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## COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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# ABSTRACT

Despite a fairly successful institutional transformation in the early 1990s, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), in particular its News and Current Affairs division, is widely perceived to lack political independence from the African National Congress-led government and to have neglected its role as a political watchdog in South Africa's young democracy.

Most academic studies continue to be concerned with formal factors such as the SABC's institutional structure, media laws, or commercial imperatives – yet have not been able to explain the above anomaly. This paper focuses instead on the institutional culture around editorial independence which is conceptualised as comprising of beliefs (journalists' role perceptions), values (news values and the professional ethos) and internal practices (news decision-making, internal debate etc.). The main focus of analysis lies on the ways dissent is being managed within the corporation.

This paper transcends the classical boundaries of political science into the neighbouring disciplines of media studies and sociology and draws specifically on (a) the literature on public broadcasting in young democracies, (b) debates around journalists' roles and professional values, and (c) conceptualisations of institutional culture as well as power and power relations within organisations.

In-depth interviews with 17 current and former SABC employees suggest that beliefs and values around editorial independence are highly contested at the SABC – in particular among staff and management and so much so that the struggle around which ones should be dominant has become part of the institutional culture itself. The resulting dissent is being managed both from above (by management and senior editors) and from below (by newsroom staff).

The SABC does not seem to be subject to unusual levels of political pressure from outside. Instead, threats to editorial independence seem to originate mostly on the level

of the SABC's board and senior news management. They take the form of pressure and rewards which, in combination, effectively stifle independent thinking and hence work against editorial independence and a professional ethos integral to the SABC's public broadcasting mandate.

Hirschman's concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty are used to analyse how journalists respond to such pressure and rewards. While *exit* is not an option for many staff and *voice* is perceived as costly, *loyalty* (towards the idea of public broadcasting) does not appear to be very common either. Instead, what I call *opportunistic loyalty* or quiescence in the face of power seems to be the preferred way of dealing with the dilemma of individually-held values and beliefs and a dominant institutional culture that runs contrary to them.

As a result debate is silenced, staff morale suffers and routine processes of news decision-making are easily manipulated by senior managers or other powerful individuals with the will to enforce their preferred values and beliefs (which in turn might have little to do with the ideals of public broadcasting). Journalists and editors seem to generally be reluctant to get involved in sensitive news decisions, to take responsibility and exercise their professional judgement which *then* makes the corporation potentially vulnerable to political interference from outside as well.

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# INTRODUCTION

During the apartheid era the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) had become notorious for being a crude apologist for minority rule and a mouthpiece of the National Party government. It was tightly controlled by the political establishment from within and without the headquarters in Auckland Park, Johannesburg. While direct interference by political office holders with programming matters was a common occurrence, the broadcaster's pre-1993 board was also packed with political appointees who, as veteran journalist Allister Sparks writes, "in turn filled all key editorial positions with ideologically reliable apparatchiks.... No critical item ever made it on air" (Sparks 2003: 69).

In 1993 the SABC was formally transformed into a public service broadcaster. It underwent extensive institutional restructuring and was provided with a new and democratic policy environment aimed at, among other things, ensuring the broadcaster's editorial independence from government. Financially, the new SABC has been heavily reliant on advertising revenue with an almost negligible proportion of its funding base being provided by the state<sup>1</sup>.

Yet the reputation of the SABC's news and current affairs programming seems to have improved much less than could be expected. The broadcaster's political independence still makes for an ongoing concern, albeit on a much smaller scale than before 1993. The allegations point specifically to a lack of political independence (Sunday Independent, 11.07.2004) – but also to “mismanagement, nepotism, incompetence and a drop in quality” (Fourie 2004: 13; Finweek, 03.08.2006), a perceived “absence of investigative and fresh news” as well as an “over-dependence on news wire services” and information originating in government (Baker 1996: 215). This refers to virtually all the SABC's radio and TV stations, regardless of whether they belong to the commercial or public broadcasting portfolio of the corporation. The SABC's critics are to be found not just in rival media organisations and opposition parties, but also in academic circles,

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<sup>1</sup> For a compact overview of the SABC's structural transformation cf. Tleane/ Duncan 2003: 56ff.

the broader public and, as this study will show, not least in the public broadcaster itself (cf. Lansner 1995; Baker 1996; Du Preez 1999; Kadalie 2003a, b; Harber 2004); Sunday Times (25.07.2004); Teer-Tomaselli 2005).

The problems listed above are by no means an occurrence of recent years. Yet while there is much anecdotal and sufficient empirical evidence to substantiate them, possible explanations have been largely neglected or simplified in both the media and academia. It is the objective of this paper to explore an alternative argument based on the institutional culture within the corporation, i.e. to take an approach that is almost completely missing in the current debate and to open up a new avenue of research in this field.

### **Background I: The Role of Public Service Broadcasting**

Mass media are an important institution in any political system, be it for the purposes of spreading government propaganda in totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, be it in order to facilitate the free flow of information in a democratic system, or be it to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and nation-building as in the case of South Africa. Whether liked or not, in free societies especially they are widely regarded as powerful political actors (Scammell 2000: xl; Altschull 1995; McQuail 1987). Yet history shows that commercial mass media tend to be partisan and, perhaps even more importantly, cater for consumers rather than citizens, which prevents them from fully rising to their democratic role. The emerging gap has in many countries been filled with a public service broadcaster which, classically, stands outside the conventional media market and is accountable to the public.

In itself an ambiguous and in some respects problematic concept, public service broadcasting (PSB) caters for citizens as opposed to consumers (equal access) and aims to provide the public with sufficient, balanced and high-quality information to enable the citizens of a democratic state to make informed political decisions. This assigns a prominent and crucial role to news and current affairs programming (Orgeret 2005: 16).

In addition, PSB is often expected to “foster ... development, curiosity and education” and preserve and promote local culture in order to build or solidify cultural identity (Fourie 2004: 5). Programming is ideally free from both commercial and political pressure and, as such, adds value to society as “the last best hope for socially purposeful media acting in the public interest” (Raboy 2003: 46; cf. Mpofu 2000: 7ff.; cf. Tleane/Duncan 2003). Therefore, “authoritativeness and independence must be the heart and soul of a public broadcaster” (Teer-Tomaselli 2005: 211).

## **Background II: The Role of Public Service Broadcasting in Young Democracies**

In countries that have recently undergone political transition and are in the process of democratic consolidation the role of mass media is a particularly critical one as they are in a position to “promote civic consciousness” and to “re-socialise both masses and elites to the new democratic rules of the game“ (Hyden/Leslie/Ogundimu 2002: vii; Gunther/ Mughan 2000: 412). Public broadcasters, if true to their mandate, are formidably placed to take on this task, and arguably more so than any other type of media (Rozumilowicz 2002: 21, 23; Raboy 2003; Orgeret 2005: 16, 18; Tomaselli 1998; Arndt 2005; Emdon 1989: 206; Barnett 1999: 275).

By serving the democratic public, part of the role of PSB is to expose wrongdoing on the part of the state and to alert the people to political corruption through its so-called 'watchdog' function (Curran, quoted in Orgeret 2005: 18). This is not to say that acting as a watchdog is a public broadcaster's core function; but keeping a critical distance from the state is an indispensable principle without which the essence of the PSB idea would be lost.

Unfortunately journalists do not automatically play a pro-democracy role just because the political dispensation has become democratic. While they are in a position to help consolidate democracy they can also contribute to its destruction by eroding trust and legitimacy or by giving outright support to non-democratic forces. A tragic example in this respect is Radio RTLM in Rwanda that waged a campaign over several months

encouraging Hutus to genocide against their Tutsi neighbours. One needs to keep in mind that journalists always work in a specific political, social and economic environment, in a specific media organisation, and under specific conditions. They hold personal values, but are also faced with an institutional culture, and they are usually subject to pressure from various sides. There is always an inherent danger that journalists or whole media institutions are co-opted by the political or economic powers of the day. Depending on factors such as professional ethos, the policy framework regarding media freedom, the political, economic and institutional environment and not least the stability of the democratic system in general (Rønning 2005: 160), the likelihood of such can vary considerably. For a transitional context it needs to be kept in mind that the public broadcaster frequently arises out of the ashes of a former state broadcaster or pseudo-independent, but tightly controlled public broadcaster (Rozumilowicz 2002; Jakubowicz 2002). This poses a specific problem, and the SABC is one of these examples.

The general academic work on PSB is heavily tilted towards a Western context of long-established democracies and as such focuses predominantly on the broadcasters' independence from commercial forces. This has led to an underestimation in the literature of the "potential danger of state intervention" and the "risk of creeping authoritarianism" that easily forces its way into public broadcasting, especially in transitional societies. Conflicts between political power on the one hand and crucial PSB values such as editorial independence and professional autonomy on the other hand are under-researched, especially with regard to Africa (Orgeret 2005: 20).

Africa's media system especially is in many respects unlike that of Western countries. It tends to be weak and lack diversity: Private electronic media require audiences with spending power, newspapers depend on a literate population and an infrastructure for distribution. With few exceptions, conditions in sub-Saharan Africa especially are not conducive to this. As a result, broadcasting, particularly radio, is the number one medium in Africa and many other developing countries. And if the experience of Southern African countries such as Namibia, Malawi, Botswana (Fombad 2002) is anything to go by, the former state broadcaster tends to monopolise broadcasting for a

long time to come – even once (and if) the airwaves are liberalised. In the case of South Africa, well over a decade into democracy, the SABC is still by far the most important source of information for most citizens (Media Tenor 2004).

A PSB monopoly is problematic only if, under the surface of institutional restructuring and official pleas for editorial independence, old values and ways of news-making survive or are only slightly changed in order to please the new political masters. The allegations levelled against the SABC in this regard bedevil many a public broadcaster, particularly in transitional societies. The substantial body of research on eastern European media shows that there, typically after a short period of newly-found media freedom, many public broadcasters were quickly reigned in and instrumentalised by the new political elite (Milton 2000: 30-33; O'Neill: 1998: 2; Jakubowicz 2002) resulting in a rapid loss of credibility and an “identity crisis” for the journalists concerned (Cf. Achille 1994, quoted in Mungiu-Pippidi 1999).

The growing literature on democratisation in Africa by and large neglects the role of the media. Some studies conducted in a sub-Saharan context have pointed to similar problems (Carver 1995; Fardon/ Furniss 2000; Hyden/Leslie/Ogundimu 2002; Duncan/Seleoane 1989), but tend to focus on the political and economic environment and, in the case of PSB, the broadcaster's political independence based on its institutional, legal and financial independence (e.g. Mpofu 2000). A cultural approach which could provide alternative explanations for good intentions gone wrong is almost completely neglected.

### **The Case Study of the SABC**

Compared to public broadcasters in other recently democratised countries in eastern Europe and Africa, the SABC seems to be doing remarkably well. It makes for an interesting and fairly unique case study, for three reasons:

(1) The political environment of the new South Africa is generally regarded as one

conducive to independent public broadcasting: After a by and large peaceful political transition the country has reached a state of reasonable democratic stability based on a democratic constitution protecting freedom of expression (and specifically freedom of the press and other media (RSA 1996)), fairly sound governance and respect for the rule of law.

(2) Although not without challenges, the institutional transition from the old state broadcaster to the new independent SABC with the state as its sole shareholder took place in a fairly orderly manner and included consultations with all relevant stakeholders. The process focussed on political independence and editorial autonomy and resulted in a public broadcaster which is indeed institutionally<sup>2</sup> (legally) independent from government. In other words, with regard to the policy environment and *formal* independence, little more can be desired (Banda 2003, quoted in Fourie 2004: 13; Orgeret 2005: 25; SABC 1994; Teer-Tomaselli 2004). This allows for control of variables that regularly dominate the debate on broadcast transition drawing attention to 'soft factors' such as the institutional culture.

(3) Because of its unique position within the South African media market, the SABC has in recent years been able to become financially self-sustainable<sup>3</sup> which is crucial since its current funding model only allows for a very limited amount of state funding<sup>4</sup>. This is not to say that an increase in state funding of the SABC is not desirable – in fact this argument is a very compelling one (Tleane/Duncan 2003: 95).<sup>5</sup> But while the commercialisation of the SABC is much bemoaned and has certainly led to increased pressure on staff, the fact that the broadcaster does not depend on state funding puts it in

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2 This refers to media laws that protect media freedom, the existing buffer institutions between the broadcaster and government, election of SABC board members by members of parliament and editorial policies as guidelines for day-to-day newsmaking (cf. RSA 1999, 2002; SABC 2004a).

3 According to its 2004 financial results the corporation has, for the first time, returned a healthy economic profit (Business Day, 29.08.2005) and is one of the few public broadcasters worldwide to do so.

4 In the 2004/2005 fiscal year the SABC generated 78% of its income from advertising, 15% from TV licence fees, about 5% from other sources and only about 2% from government grants (Business Report, 31.03.2006).

5 The SABC has been divided into two sections a public commercial section and a public service section, with the former expected to fund the latter (Fourie 2004: 10). While this works in practice it does not only create an ongoing tension between commercial imperatives and the SABC's mandate; it also skews the advertising market in the SABC's favour which can be argued is detrimental to other free-to-air broadcasters.

an easier position to act at arm's length from government when it comes to political reporting.

Despite these three conditions working in favour of a strong and independent SABC, it would be premature to declare victory of editorial independence, and those who have critically followed the SABC's transition have generally been reluctant to do so – albeit often on a shaky empirical basis as access to the necessary data is difficult (cf. Fourie 2003, 2004).

### **The SABC's Independence in the Focus of Academic Research**

So far, academic interest in the political independence of the post-Apartheid SABC has predominantly centered around the formal factors such as the legal framework, the public service mandate and the structural transformation (cf. Louw 1993; Tleane/ Duncan 2003). Ruth Teer-Tomaselli (1995, 2005) and Keyan Tomaselli are long-standing observers of the SABC and have made an invaluable contribution to the academic debate around its restructuring and broadcast legislation. A range of scholars have also discussed the impact of SABC programming on issues such as nation-building (Balseiro 1997; Steenveld/ Strelitz 1998; Teer-Tomaselli 1995), the creation of historic memory (Nuttall/ Coetzee 1998) and identity (Zegeye 2001), usually on the basis of content analysis.

The problem of funding has been thoroughly discussed in the literature, especially with regard to the tensions between the SABC's dependence on advertising revenue as opposed to its inclusive public broadcasting mandate (Tleane/ Duncan 2003, Tomaselli 1998, Fourie 2004). Interestingly, Mpofu also argues that essentially it is “the programming ethic and not the source of funding that determines the achievement of public service objectives” (Mpofu 2000).

From 2002 on especially, the independence of the SABC has become a much-debated issue, triggered by the introduction of the controversial Broadcasting Amendment Bill

by Communications Minister Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri (cf. Lansner 1995, Duncan/ Tleane 2003, Berger 1999, Jacobs 2004).

Today there is considerable agreement among scholars that, institutionally and financially, the SABC is independent from government. What increasingly attracts criticism is the fact that the ANC's dominance in parliament enables the party to 'take control' of SABC management which has not helped to counter the broadcaster's "lapdog of government" reputation (Sunday Times 05.10.2003). Despite undisputed successes such as the covering of national elections (cf. Teer-Tomaselli 1995) the SABC is often regarded as a state broadcaster in public commentary.

There is some empirical evidence to add weight to the concern that SABC journalists are too close to government: Media Tenor South Africa (2001) has found by means of content analysis that, compared to the heads of state in Germany, the US and the UK, President Thabo Mbeki is presented in the most favourable light and is given a more prominent position in SABC news bulletins than his international colleagues are given by their respective public broadcasters. Similarly, research by the Media Monitoring Project (Sunday Independent, 11.07.2004) found that in the wake of the 2004 national elections 35 percent of all SABC news stories were about the government (as compared to 25% on e.tv), and 44 percent of these were found to be slanted positively (as compared to 28% on e.tv). In addition, numerous "scandals" have erupted in recent years in which the SABC seemed to be shielding senior politicians from criticism, curtailing public debate or favouring the ANC over other parties (Cape Argus 02.09.2003; The Star 12.01.2004; FIN24 04.07.2004; SAPA 10.2.2005; SAPA 11.08.2005; cf. also MISA 2001, 2004).

However, the broadcaster's critics tend to jump to conclusions when it comes to identifying the reasons and motives behind this tame stance towards government: Whenever something goes wrong, malicious intent is assumed, ANC propagandists are lurking behind every story and a political agenda is thought to drive the 'parades of ministers' in news bulletins. What is being overlooked is that journalistic products such as news are a "subjective, specific construction of reality, a product of the cultural

context” (Venter 2002: 2) and therefore also a mirror of the institutional culture of the media organisation at hand.

### **The Institutional Culture of SABC News and Current Affairs**

Generally, the SABC is being analysed from either an institutionalist or a political economy perspective<sup>6</sup>. Most of the academic work does not, or not sufficiently, take into account *how* and *for which reasons* news decisions are made by SABC reporters and editors on a day-to-day basis and what the actual factors are that impact on the way staff go about their work. Yet broader research on institutional transformation has shown that pre-democratic values and attitudes in the newsroom tend to survive structural changes and that the slow process of cultural transformation tends to destabilise the organisation, making it vulnerable to pressure from outside (cf. Mungiu-Pippidi 1999, Petersen 1998).

I therefore argue that if one is to understand the phenomenon of often uncritical, government-friendly and sometimes surprisingly unprofessional journalism as can be witnessed at SABC News and Current Affairs one needs to look beyond formal structures and policies and take into account the institutional culture (cf. Mpofu 2000: 6). Herman and Chomsky (1988) were among the first to point out the discrepancy between normative assumptions about journalists' roles in society and the media reality of day-to-day news-making that is more often than not based on practical considerations (Baker 1996: 215f; Orgeret 2005: 34). Similarly, it would be naive to think that even the most laudable editorial policies *in themselves* ensured professional integrity and political independence. Editorial guidelines provide a framework within which reporters and editors should strive to fulfill their public broadcasting role. Yet the *actual practices* of the broadcaster “are often far from ideal“ (Mpofu 2000: 6). Practices can be deeply

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6 The former refers to various studies published on the SABC's transformation in the early 1990s, concerned mainly with organisational structure, content, broadcast laws, and internal SABC policies such as editorial guidelines. The latter places the public broadcaster within the wider focus of the South African media landscape and the general problem of growing commercial pressure. Academic work centres around the privatisation and commercialisation of parts of the SABC and discusses the SABC's public broadcasting mandate versus the corporation's need to attract advertising revenue. For an excellent overview cf. Jacobs 2004; also Tleane/ Duncan 1003; Louw 1993; Mpofu 2000; Teer-Tomaselli 1998, 2004.

ingrained in the institutional culture and need to be unraveled along with the underlying beliefs and values. Similarly, it is worth looking at the dynamics through which culture is negotiated, contested and consolidated. After all, culture does not only matter with regard to the status quo; it is in its very nature to impact on and shape journalism at the SABC for the medium and long-term future.

Apart from often highly critical personal accounts by former SABC journalists (Sparks 2003; Du Preez 2003), very few academic attempts have been made to systematically study the SABC's institutional culture. Baker (1996: 215) touches on it with some anecdotal evidence regarding editorial practices and the observation that internal communication between staff and management is under-utilised and that an “absence of creative input from all staff is possibly a function of an organisational culture which previously attempted to strictly, and in a hierarchical way, control the flow of information through the national broadcaster.”

In focus group interviews with SABC employees, Tleane and Duncan came across perceptions of fear of political suppression during times of institutional restructuring (in this case the implementation of the bi-media strategy from 1998 onwards). They also found that there was a wide-spread view that “SABC news is geared towards advancing the propaganda needs of the government rather than informing the public” and that it was not performing its watchdog role properly. Interviewees repeatedly pointed to a culture of officialdom, self-censorship and a stifling of internal debate: “Those who raise questions against these practices are either censored, isolated, or suppressed, with labels of unpatriotism given to them” (Tleane/ Duncan 2003: 108-110). Unfortunately, these observations are not systematically analysed or put into theoretical context. All of them do, however, call for further and more in-depth investigation.

The so far most comprehensive attempt to study the SABC's culture within a sound theoretical framework is a recently completed PhD thesis on the SABC TV English News (Orgeret 2005). While the main focus of the study rests on the narrating of nationhood (again employing content analysis) and various aspects of identity and institutional culture between 1994 and 2004, it nevertheless addresses to some extent

the questions of political pressure versus journalistic integrity that constitute the core of this study (ibid.: 141f). With regard to the latter, Orgeret argues that in the 1990s the nation-building concept was often used to promote government actions and policies – rather than to serve the public interest by also keeping a critical eye on “the flaws of the ruling power”. This had led to a “conflict between a political ethos and a professional journalistic ethos in the SABC news” which intensified after the 2004 general elections “indicating that the SABC yet again had been 'domesticated' by the political forces in power” and that sunshine journalism was being practised despite resistance from many staff members. Orgeret concludes that a “culture of fear” has “led to self-censorship and suffocates discussion about editorial choices and good journalism”, but argues that increased commercial pressure on stations keeps the growing political bias in check as the broadcaster's credibility is at stake (ibid.: 143).

Perhaps the lack of further-reaching academic interest in the field is not surprising. The subject is indeed a rather elusive one as cause and effect relations are difficult to validate and the dynamics at play are inevitably complex. A major problem relates to the concept of institutional culture itself which is anything but clearly defined and not easily measured. In the case of the SABC there is also a notorious scarcity of available data as the management of the corporation tends to be sceptical of researchers showing an interest in its internal matters which makes access difficult. The classic method of content analysis has served media studies well, but is unlikely to provide satisfactory data in this case because the newsroom culture itself may or may not (yet or always) be directly reflected in the journalistic output (cf. Schudson 1991). Also, with limited competition in the broadcasting market and keeping South Africa's unique political situation in mind, content analysis provides a rather dull scalpel for those wanting to dissect the SABC's ideology and practices today and, perhaps more importantly, tomorrow.

The point is of course that these difficulties do not make the institutional culture a factor of lesser importance. By downplaying it, important and possibly negative developments are overlooked until they start manifesting themselves in the product as well. In a contribution to the Index on Censorship, veteran journalist Max du Preez (1999), after

having been pushed out of the SABC, warns that post-independence “sunshine journalism” (officially lauded as development journalism) in Zimbabwe has paved the way to the “present darkness” in that country. This is not to dismiss development journalism as anti-democratic. But it is a strong reminder of how fine the line is that an independent public broadcaster in a young democracy is treading and how easily even good intentions can have undesirable consequences.

### **The Objectives of this Paper**

I am going to define institutional culture broadly as consisting of dominant values, beliefs and practices (for a more detailed discussion cf. chapter 2). As it happens, dissent with dominant values or beliefs usually pits more or less powerful individuals or factions within the broadcaster against each other. My focal point in this study is the individual reporter, editor or news manager who finds him- or herself in dissent with the dominant culture – dominant in the sense that it is either enforced by management or deeply rooted in the organisation itself.

In order to illuminate the response options available to the dissenting individual I am going to draw on Hirschman's (1970) concept of exit, voice and loyalty, but not without extending and adapting it to the context of the SABC. It is the processes of cultural negotiation that I am interested in: How are dominant values and beliefs impressed upon the individual from above and how do individuals in the lower echelons of the hierarchy respond. This is the daily struggle that constitutes much of the institutional background for day-to-day news decisions.

It needs to be noted that I am interested in the SABC's institutional culture only as it manifests itself in the News and Current Affairs division (leaving out, e.g. entertainment and educational programming) and with regard to editorial independence and journalistic freedom in relation to government. This is not to imply that other aspects of the institutional culture are of lesser importance. On the contrary, questions of mounting commercialisation, for instance, do indeed give much cause for concern – not

least because market pressure might increase the SABC's susceptibility to political pressure (cf. Steemers, quoted in Fourie 2004: 16). Those questions deserve to be researched thoroughly. They are, however, not the ones I am concerned with here.

With its limited scope, this paper cannot provide an in-depth study of the institutional culture, nor will it touch on cultural dynamics and changes over time. Conclusive findings are not the objective. Instead, I set out to explore aspects of culture as an alternative explanation by suggesting a conceptual framework which will help to shed light on some of the dynamics at play. This framework has been systematically developed through the interaction with in-depth interview data. It draws attention to some of the defining features of the insitutional culture within the News and Current Affairs division and singles out some deeply ingrained *modi operandi* that have so far been largely overlooked. I hope that as such it will provide a solid base for future research.

Chapter 1 addresses the methodology employed for data collection and analysis. Because existing research in this narrowly-defined field is so scarce, I rely heavily on empirical data generated in a series of in-depth interviews with current and former SABC employees. In chapter 2 I am going to sketch a conceptual framework in terms of which the institutional culture of the SABC can be assessed. Key concepts and variables are identified and theoretically developed in a brief way. The aim is to provide a context for what is at the heart of this study: institutional practices (as opposed to beliefs and values), specifically the ways dissent is being managed in the newsroom (chapter 3).

# **1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

## **1.1 Motivation and Personal Background**

An academic journey into the inner workings of South Africa's public broadcaster is bound to be controversial. The SABC marks politically contested terrain – and the issue of editorial independence in particular is a sensitive one. Add to this subject matter a somewhat unconventional research approach (qualitative in-depth interviews), data that is collected largely from anonymous sources, an author who is a journalist herself – and suspicions arise that there must be some sort of agenda at work. It is for this reason, and for the sake of transparency, that I am including some background information here on myself as the author of this paper.

This study is set against an academic background in political science and has arisen out of an interest in South African politics, democratic transition and consolidation, and the role of the media in society. It is also inspired by the fact that I have been working as a freelance radio journalist for the past six years – first exclusively for the German public broadcasting network, now also for the BBC. I have a passion for high-quality journalism in general and the idea of public broadcasting in particular. This paper gave me the unique opportunity to merge my academic background with my practical experience and insights. It ventures into the grey zone between political science and media studies – a field that has long been neglected by both political scientists and media scholars.

In 2003 I did a four weeks internship at SABC TV News in Johannesburg – partially to build my journalistic skills, but I was also curious to observe the institutional culture of a public broadcaster in transition. I had a chance to work closely with journalists in the TV newsroom as well as in radio news and current affairs. Without the experiences, insights and contacts gained during that time this research would have been almost impossible to conduct. In hindsight, I am convinced that relying exclusively on official

gatekeepers would have proven disastrous and, in all likelihood, fatal for the project (cf. chapter 1.5).

Having said this, I am sure that these obstacles are not going to deter others from asking questions about and seeking answers from the SABC. Indeed I hope this paper with its methodological strength and weaknesses will encourage others to conduct their own investigations into the public broadcaster. The field is wide open, and much is untouched. A constructive, unemotional public debate relies on credible and systematic research. It can be controversial, it can be proven wrong. But I dare to say: It is relevant not only to those directly involved, but also in terms of the democratic future of this country – a future for which I care deeply.

## **1.2 Research Approach**

This paper is a case study on the basis of empirical, qualitative research. The approach is exploratory, but not purely inductive. I follow what Wengraf calls the “romantic model” that aims at improving the original conceptual framework in the course of the research process (Wengraf 2001).

The conceptual framework has been developed specifically for this study (cf. chapter 2) on the basis of democratic theory, media theory as well as concepts borrowed from sociology. Research in the field of institutional culture with regard to media institutions is extremely scarce, and almost non-existent in South Africa. Studies tend to focus on partial aspects and very specific problems (e.g. framing of news stories, skills problems, or editorial policies). This attention to detail is invaluable, but there is also a need to place these aspects into their broader context – something that has certainly slipped academic attention with regard to the SABC.

Institutional culture is a complex concept characterised by a multi-layered network of interacting factors that shape and re-shape each other. There are few simple causal

relationships to be found. For example, looking only at news decision-making on the editorial level, it would be misleading to hastily explain a perceived political bias with the “political agenda” of senior editors when it could simply be the result of role perceptions, or a lack of editorial skills. Institutional rules (such as editorial codes) taken into account, there is still room for different approaches to journalism, competing conceptions of news value and so on. Dissecting this complex web of causal relations comprehensively using a quantitative approach would fill volumes and provide little clarity of the overall phenomenon. I am therefore aiming not so much for representivity or measurable results, but for originality and depth – and qualitative methods are most appropriate to meet this objective.

The initial conceptual framework has emerged against the backdrop of existing academic work on the SABC and other media institutions on the one hand, and unsystematic observation at the SABC as well as informal discussions with journalists on the other hand. On first sight, three factors seemed to be central to the institutional culture when it came to editorial independence from political parties and government: editorial policies, journalistic role perceptions, and political pressure. After conducting a pilot interview the issue of skills emerged as another crucial variable.

As the field work progressed it became more and more clear that editorial policies played only a marginal role and that individual perceptions were much more important. This caused me to exclude the variable from this study. I also learned that the variable 'political pressure' needs to be qualified with regard to its source (external forces, SABC board, news managers or editorial staff) and as to how it is handled (responses to pressure) and also, that rewards for conformity can be just as effective as pressure. On the issue of role perceptions I was surprised to find that perhaps the problem here are not competing role perceptions, but rather wide-spread insecurity and confusion about different approaches to journalism on the part of many journalists.

The conceptual framework as presented in chapter 2 is therefore the result of constant shaping and adjustment, especially during the first half of the field work. The current version is backed by the empirical data that was available to me – with all its depth,

richness and shortcomings. By quantitative standards, the scale of this research is small; by qualitative standards, however, it is big enough to ensure sufficiently the internal validity of the findings.

It is a general weakness of in-depth interviews with respondents from inside a rather intransparent institution, that the information given is often difficult to verify. Wherever possible triangulation was used, i.e. interview information was cross-checked with the accounts of other respondents, academic research and other secondary sources, internal and official SABC documents, media reports, or information given by independent observers (e.g. the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI), media scholars, journalists who are not part of the sample).

## **1.3 Interviewees**

### **1.3.1 Selection Process**

#### **1.3.1.1 Sampling**

The 17 respondents (reporters and editors/ producers) were identified through a combination of purposeful (or judgemental) and snowball sampling.<sup>7</sup> Given both the difficulty of access to the field and the nature of the study (qualitative), the sampling process did not aim for representivity, but was based on conscious selection.

Eligible interviewees had to be involved for at least two years in covering politics, government, and public affairs at the SABC on a regular basis. Journalists covering areas such as sports, travel, entertainment and education as well as technical staff (e.g. video editors) were excluded. The ideal respondent also had an interest in the subject matter of this paper that goes beyond the fact that they happen to work at the SABC, was aware of and had done some reflection on her or his political role, on professional values, editorial independence and so on. While this precondition could not be met in all

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Babbie/ Mouton 2001.

cases, it was thought important as in-depth interviews aim for information-rich data. Finally, it was essential that respondents trusted me enough to not only consent to the interview, but also to speak freely about fairly sensitive matters.

In addition to the above, the sample was built around six criteria for which balance was sought:

**Criterion (a): Time of employment at the SABC**

Since the paper, although not concerned with cultural change over time, roughly covers a period of 13 years (1993-2005) on the basis of only 17 interviewees it was important to avoid a situation in which a disproportionate number of respondents cluster around a specific time period in terms of their employment history. I also deliberately set out to include some journalists who were carried over from the pre-1993 SABC.

**Criterion (b): Position in the news hierarchy**

Electronic media, especially television, involve complex processes of decision-making and cooperation among staff. A single news report passes through many hands before it goes on air: Typically, planning editors include it in the diary; an assignment editor briefs the input or field reporter who then goes out and actually covers it. The script will then be checked and sometimes changed by "approved editors" (radio) or "bulletin editors" (TV). In TV, video editors have a say in which footage is presented. And, of course, regional editors and other senior editors, up to the head of news, can exercise their editorial rights. The attempt to assess the institutional culture by only gathering data that originates at one level of the news hierarchy would have distorted the reality of news-making. But obviously there were also practical constraints to be taken into account. I therefore decided not to interview technical staff (e.g. video editors or camera persons). The aim was to include roughly equal numbers of reporters (input journalists) and editors (assignment editors, producers and other senior editors up to head of news). I further included senior as well as relatively junior staff.

**Criterion (c): Ethnicity**

South Africa is still a racially divided country and it had to be anticipated that race

might matter within the SABC. The broadcaster used to be a powerful organisation dominated by white, male Afrikaners. Much like in the civil service old-guard staff could not simply be replaced overnight which has forced white and black people as well as old- and new guard journalists to work closely together up to this day. In addition, care was taken to specifically include black African, Coloured and Indian as well as Afrikaans and English-speaking white staff.

#### **Criterion (d): Region**

SABC News and Current Affairs is centralised in many respects, but it does have a regional presence in all of South Africa's provinces. Considering the geographical proportions of the country and the profound differences in the political landscapes between provinces, it had to be taken into account that newsrooms and newsroom culture also differ regionally. This called for a sample that is fairly balanced, not just in terms of 'head office' versus 'regions', but also in terms of the regions themselves.

#### **Criterion (e): Medium of reporting**

The SABC runs radio as well as television stations. Yet for most of the time (with the exception of the attempted bi-media project) radio and television journalists work separately from each other, bound by the weaknesses and using the strengths of their respective media. For instance, it lays in the nature of the job that radio journalists operate more independently in the field than television journalists who usually work in a team. Public perceptions of the importance of the two media also differ greatly. When it comes to political sensitivities television is much more in the focus of public attention than radio. This has led to a general neglect of radio with one of the consequences being that media monitoring (content analysis) in South Africa is often limited to television, and specifically to English language television. Radio, however, is the primary medium of the poor and the only mass medium many people in rural areas have reliable access to. It would have been easier to focus on TV only – but the purpose of this study is to establish an inclusive and comprehensive picture, in other words, to take the 'wide shot' before zooming in later.

#### **Criterion (f) Programme**

Finally, Current Affairs requires a different mode of working than a newsroom with at least one daily deadline. While this was treated as the least important criterion, an effort was made to include journalists who had experience in current affairs, not just in news.

### **1.3.1.2 Securing the Interviews**

The obvious way of approaching potential interviewees was through the corporate communications office, the HR department, or the office of the head of news. However, having had a first-hand impression of the SABC from inside and numerous informal discussions with staff and external observers I had reason to be cautious about taking the official route. In order to provide meaningful data respondents had to be able to speak freely and without fear. This is not easily done when they feel that they work in an insecure environment and under a boss who might disapprove of what they have to say.

On the other hand, an ethical approach to field work requires transparency and fairness, not just towards individuals, but also towards the organisation under scrutiny. SABC employees are contractually barred from speaking to outsiders about internal SABC matters without official permission. Asking for permission would have immediately disclosed the fact that they intend to participate in the research while speaking to me without permission would have put them at risk the moment their transgression became known. There is no easy solution to this problem. I had to find a compromise that would ensure access to uncensored data (and this including self-censorship); a compromise which would not put respondents at risk in their work environment, and a compromise that would not flout standard procedures for gaining access.

I eventually decided on a two-fold strategy: During the first part of the field work, I approached journalists directly and conducted eight interviews without news management being aware thereof. I was, however, always completely transparent with my respondents. I then officially approached the SABC, detailing my research and asking for assistance in terms of access to interviewees and internal records. While some individuals were helpful, the overall outcome of these official attempts to collect data was rather disillusioning (cf. chapter 1.5).

In selecting the respondents I tried to steer clear of selection biases as far as possible. Presumably, those who are frustrated are more eager to take the risk of speaking out than those who are generally happy or more loyal to the forces in power. It was my initial hope that my official request to be put in touch with journalists for interviews would neutralise this concern to some extent.

When approached, potential interviewees were granted the following: (1) complete transparency about my intentions and the nature of the research project, (2) ample time to voice their views and the option to add onto their accounts even after the interview, (3) the option to withdraw consent any time before completion of the thesis, and (4) anonymity if they so wished and the assurance that care would be taken to ensure that their anonymity was not going to be compromised in any way. It is for this reason that the transcripts of the interviews cannot be provided in the appendix of this study<sup>8</sup>.

Out of 25 current and former SABC staff that I approached for interviews, 17 agreed to participate in the research. Those journalists who did not want to be interviewed, either on or off the record, often hinted that they were anything but satisfied with the state of affairs at the SABC, but were not prepared to take the risk of speaking up. It is worth mentioning that the success rate dropped considerably with regard to white journalists (4 out of 7 who were approached refused) and those who had been employed by the old SABC (3 out of 6 refused). Without judging their individual decisions to decline an interview, the reasons they stated further underscored the need for a study into the SABC's institutional culture:

old-guard black journalist: *"I looked at the situation in the office and decided not to partake in the research. ... This place [the SABC] is so unpredictable."*

old-guard white journalist who had called his last day at the SABC "the happiest day in my life": *"I have given the matter some thought. I don't want to think about the SABC any more, I want to put it all behind me. ... I don't have much insight anyway."*

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<sup>8</sup> This is not unusual with regard to studies of a sensitive nature (cf. Shaw 1997: 44; Orgeret 2005).

old-guard white journalist: *"I would speak to you on record, not anonymously. And that I can't do because I am still involved with the SABC."*

new-guard white journalist: *"The frustrations... the unit has been robbed off its ability to produce quality programming. The skills are not there. And there is no effort to develop people. ... But I actually don't know much, you should speak to [X]!"*

new-guard white journalist: *"I am not keen. I'd rather stick with doing my part [i.e. work, and not comment]."*

new-guard black journalist: *After promising an interview several times ("I really want to do this!") the journalist cancelled three meetings on short notice and has never communicated his final decision.*

new-guard black journalist: *"I don't want to destroy all bridges behind me."*

new-guard black journalist: *"It's a lost cause, I don't speak about it."*

Just upon hearing of the research proposal emotional reactions ranged from being excited or agitated to becoming deeply suspicious and careful. The question of trust overshadowed everything, especially with those journalists who are in the middle of their professional careers.

Asked about their motives for agreeing to the interview, about half of them expressed a strong loyalty towards the SABC as the public broadcaster. "It is a matter close to my heart because I had placed so much hope in it", said one. Another stated that "it still hurts having had to throw in the towel". Some of those who were still working at the SABC welcomed the opportunity to make themselves heard. One senior reporter stated, "I just want to get it all off my chest". There was an overwhelming desire to share insights and put things into perspective; a desire that, for most, exceeded the risk involved. I strongly suspect that much of this openness was driven by the perception that

critical views cannot be expressed openly *within* the SABC, that concerns are not being taken seriously by management, that the issue of low staff morale is not being sufficiently and constructively addressed and that therefore respondents found it legitimate to draw public attention to these issues. Some explicitly expressed hopes that this study would trigger public debates about the current state of the SABC, public broadcasting in South Africa and media ethics.

### 1.3.2 The Sample

I interviewed a total of 17 current and former SABC employees, among them the current Managing Director (MD): News and Current Affairs, Snuki Zikalala. In this paper respondents are referred to by numbers (1SABC – 17SABC). Most remain anonymous, with the following exceptions of respondents who agreed to be quoted with their full name: Jimi Matthews (5SABC), Amina Frense (6SABC), Karima Brown (7SABC), Snuki Zikalala (9SABC), and Luzuko Koto (17SABC). Respondents were spread over the six categories outlined in chapter 1.3.1.1 as shown below:

<i>a) Time of Employment</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
pre 1993	3
1993-1997	7
1997-2000	11
2000-2004	15
2004-2005	16
employed by SABC at time of interview	10

<i>b) Position<sup>9</sup></i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
Reporters	15
Editors (middle management)	10
Senior Editors	2

9 In the frequent case of respondents having held various positions in their SABC career this is counted separately.

<i>c) Ethnicity</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
Black <sup>10</sup>	14
White	3

<i>d) Region</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
Head Office JHB	11
Regional Offices <sup>11</sup>	6

<i>e) Medium</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
Radio	11
Television	11

<i>f) Programme</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
News	17
Current Affairs	7

On average, respondents have spent 9,4 years working at the SABC (7 respondents have worked there for more than 10 years). 6 respondents have never been substantially exposed to other media organisations (i.e. their professional careers centre around the SABC) whereas 11 were in a position to compare the SABC's institutional culture with that of other media houses.

On average, respondents rated their overall job satisfaction while working for the SABC as 6,1 on a scale from 1 (dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied)<sup>12</sup>. Answers did, however, vary substantially between 4 and 8. It also needs to be noted that obviously, job satisfaction can change considerably over time.

Asked to rate the success of the "transformation of the SABC" at this point in time,

<sup>10</sup> 'Black' includes black Africans (6), Coloureds (5), and Indians (3).

<sup>11</sup> Provinces covered: Gauteng (Pretoria), Western Cape, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo.

<sup>12</sup> With n = 13.

responses averaged at 5,1<sup>13</sup>. Here answers varied even more (between 3 and 8). It also became clear that respondents had very different understandings of transformation. Those who defined transformation in terms of staff changes and language policies tended to give higher ratings than those who focused on issues such as editorial independence and professionalism.

These findings are obviously not representative and do, on their own, not explain much. I included them here in order to provide some indication of where the respondents 'are coming from' when talking about the SABC and in which ways they could possibly be biased.

### **1.3.3 Faceless Critics? The Issue of Anonymity**

It is problematic to judge an organisation of the size of the SABC based on the accounts of 17 people. It is even more problematic, if out of these, 13 are remaining anonymous, depriving the reader of the opportunity to thoroughly interrogate the analysis and confirm the validity of my findings claims. I acknowledge this. But without granting respondents anonymity, this study would not have been possible. Of course, it is possible to accuse anonymous sources of cowardliness or of having malicious intent. Indeed, I cannot rule out that respondents 'stretched the truth' and abused their anonymity to settle old feuds and the like.

But conducting in-depth interviews gives the researcher a fair chance to thoroughly interrogate claims, personal motivations etc. on the spot. As far as possible, information was cross-checked, preferably with written sources, routinely with other respondents. This in itself has caused some enlightening moments, for instance in the interview with Snuki Zikalala: Confronted with accusations other respondents had levelled against him, he became agitated and defensive, subsequently accusing me of making unsubstantiated claims, insinuating I had hidden agendas against him or was, under the cover of academic research, conducting a journalistic interview with him – to the point at which

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13 With n = 10.

he warned me that he was prepared to take legal action.

This observation might be irrelevant. But the tone of Zikalala's response to criticism levelled against him seems to have hit home with many a journalist I approached. I strongly suspect that journalists' reluctance to go on record is symptomatic for the very substance matter this paper is dealing with. Simply put, respondents do not want to be named because they are convinced that even constructive criticism is not welcome and will be penalised. It is the internal climate, the institutional culture of the SABC and the very problems under focus here that make journalists extremely cautious when speaking to outsiders. Few people can afford to lose their jobs on a matter of principle. Those who granted interviews took a considerable risk. At least in some cases this can be seen as an act of courage.

The conclusions drawn from this kind of data stand perhaps on shifting ground, but they are not haphazard. And I believe they will provide a good basis for further research, in particular systematic quantitative analysis.

## 1.4 Interview Process

All interviews were semi-structured in-depth interviews and conducted face-to-face between November 2005 and March 2006 in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban. All except one were electronically recorded for transcription purposes. The average duration of an interview was about two hours leading to a total of 35 hours of interview time. In many cases, short follow-up interviews were conducted (in person, by phone or email).

These interviews were designed as informative interviews (respondents speaking *about* their work environment) and covered questions relating to editorial independence and the institutional culture in general<sup>14</sup>. Every interview started with a comprehensive

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<sup>14</sup> For a full interview guide cf. appendix.

briefing of the interviewee on the nature of this research, research intentions, issues of confidentiality and anonymity, and on how interview data was going to be used and published. Respondents could (and did) ask questions, and eventually informed consent was obtained.

Part I of the actual interview was a highly-structured section that covered personal information, including respondent's professional background, their SABC career, journalistic role perceptions and attitudes towards democracy<sup>15</sup>. Part II focused on the institutional culture of the SABC (beliefs, values and internal practices) in general, decision-making procedures in particular, the skills question, staff morale and management issues as well as on editorial independence and political pressure within the SABC.

By and large, the same questions were asked, but I decided against fully-structured interviews for various reasons: (1) A fixed set of questions is useful when testing a hypothesis or well-developed theory. As explained in chapter 1.2, my approach this was not the case here. Having started off with a preliminary conceptual framework I set out to rework and improve it as data came in. With my understanding of the subject progressing and new questions arising it was essential to keep some flexibility with regards to which questions to ask. (2) The professional background of respondents varied considerably (radio/TV, junior/senior, different political environments and newsrooms). It seemed most appropriate to account for this by focusing relatively more on those topics that seemed important for the interviewee (e.g. political pressure, skills, morale) and where he or she had had some direct experience. And (3), a less controlling and more responsive interview style helped some cautious respondents to feel safe; it also reassured them that their individual experience and perceptions were valued. This does, however, not mean that no probing questions were asked – on the contrary.

Questions themselves were mostly open-ended and encouraged respondents to reflect and elaborate on the concepts they were employing without too much prompting. As the interview progressed, I did prompt for all the variables that were crucial to the

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<sup>15</sup> This section was left out of the interview with Snuki Zikalala because of time constraints.

conceptual framework.

## **1.5 Access to Information at the SABC**

As indicated earlier, access to internal information through official routes proved to be extremely challenging. In the interest of transparency I thought it appropriate to document my efforts in this regard in more detail.

In late 2005 I officially contacted Graham Welch who works closely with the MD News and Current Affairs, Snuki Zikalala. I briefly outlined the nature of my research and requested him to identify possible interviewees on the editorial level. He readily furnished me with a list of senior editors; unfortunately, none of those I contacted wanted to be interviewed on the record. Asked to be put in touch with newsroom staff as well, Welch referred me to the head of TV news, Amrit Manga, and the head of radio news, Solly Phetoe (January 2006).

Over the following weeks I spoke to both managers repeatedly, and both assured me that they would assist with the research. I also sent emails to both detailing my request and informing them that I would be doing field work in Johannesburg in early March (after the local government elections because of journalists' heavy workload during elections).

I also requested an interview with Snuki Zikalala which was conducted on 25 January and at the beginning of which we discussed the nature, scope etc. of my research. Interestingly, when I followed up with Manga and Phetoe a few days later (reg. interviews with journalists) both managers expressed surprise that I was "still" wanting to interview journalists in their departments. Their almost identical explanation was that they were told that it was not necessary for me to speak to other journalists since I had just had an extensive interview with Zikalala. I assured them that this was a misunderstanding. Phetoe then indicated that he would forward the request to his assignment editor and that they would identify interviewees for me when I was in

Johannesburg. Manga advised me that he would need clearance from Zikalala before he took any action.

When I eventually arrived at the SABC to conduct interviews, Phetoe was on leave for the entire time, but I was assisted by the radio assignment editor. Manga informed me that I would not be allowed to conduct any interviews with SABC journalists since internal policy prevented them from speaking to me about internal SABC matters without approval from the HR department. When approached, HR was not prepared to approve the interviews.

It was at that point that I decided to abandon my attempts to obtain any information from the SABC using the official access route. When meaningful assistance was given, it was usually on the lower or middle management levels. Senior editors and managers have time and again implicitly and explicitly stated that they might put themselves at risk by assisting with research that is not welcomed by the MD of news. There seems to be no understanding that the findings could well be of value to the organisation and to management itself.

## **1.6 Data Analysis and Limitations**

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed the data was coded in accordance with the initial conceptual framework. Data analysis was based on Miles' and Huberman's approach to qualitative data analysis using the programme Nvivo (Miles/ Huberman 1994). Some variables that only rose to prominence in the course of the field work were also included. Others, for instance "political interference" were subdivided, in this case in political interference from "outside", from the "board" and from "management/ senior editors". As the conceptual framework was shaped and re-shaped codes were redefined, adjusted, grouped together and so on.

In general, the analytical process was guided as much by the conceptual framework as

by the data itself. Because of the weight that is given to interview data in this paper, it needs to be made very clear that this kind of data has been analysed as what it is: individual perceptions that are sometimes contradictory and inconsistent. Despite all efforts to neutralize possible biases, whatever conclusion can be drawn from this kind of data, it will not be the final truth. This study therefore has one major limitation: Conclusions are almost exclusively based on *perceptions* of SABC reporters and editors and can therefore not be considered representative. Strictly speaking, all findings need to be treated as tentative propositions. While qualitative research can provide new insights into institutional dynamics it is desirable that the findings are tested in a larger-scale quantitative study that is based on more representative samples.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:**

### **The Institutional Culture around Editorial Independence within SABC News and Current Affairs**

The bulk of academic research into the SABC only captures the institutional transformation in its legal or structural aspects. The implicit assumption is 'change the rules and structures, and value and behaviour change will follow' – an assumption that has been heavily criticised in other academic fields (e.g. cultural studies and studies of democratic transitions; cf. Fourie 2004: 13). Human behaviour may be shaped by formal rules, but it is also shaped by informal rules. And it is shaped by the way things are being seen and done by others around us. Media organisations are no exception to this (cf. also Daymon/ Ybema 1999: 5; Perry/ Gade 2001). As Bantz (1985: 124) has rightly argued, only “when researchers understand the culture of an organisation, they can understand the life world of its members”, “what they value and devalue” and “the way news stories are defined” - in other words “how the organisational member interprets and constitutes social reality.”

'Institutional culture' is a broad concept that needs to be tailored towards the context of the SABC. In the following sub-sections I am going to discuss the relevant academic literature in order to then develop a conceptual framework that underlies much of the empirical work of this study. This will be complemented with interview data in order to unpack the multiple dynamics that characterise SABC newsrooms in terms of the institutional culture.

## 2.1 'Institutional Culture' in the Literature

The concept of institutional (or organisational) culture is contested in the literature (cf. Brown 1995; Alvesson 1993; Sackmann 1991; Cartwright 2000; Tepeci 2001). Some agreement exists that values and beliefs constitute its key dimensions (cf. Chatman 1989, 1991; O'Reilly et al. 1991; Schein 1985, 1996; Vandenberghe 1999, all quoted in Tepeci 2001: 7; Denison 1996). Some authors have also included behaviour or practices ('ways of doing') into their definitions, and much of the academic debate centres around how broadly the concept should be defined. There are two streams of thought in the literature:

(1) The first stream defines institutional culture as the "deep" levels of values, beliefs, and meanings – something an institution "is" (i.e. Schein 1999; Smircich 1983, both quoted in Beugelsdijk/ Koen/ Noorderhaven 2004). Within this stream, a number of scholars have pointed out the link between attitudes and behaviour: Scholz (1987) defines organisational culture as “ the implicit, invisible, intrinsic and informal consciousness of the organisation which guides the behaviour of the individuals and which shapes itself out of their behaviour.” Relatively influential has been Schein's three-tier model. It describes culture as consisting of tangible objects (e.g. the news output of a broadcaster) that emerge from values and behavioural norms which are in turn based on subconsciously held beliefs and assumptions (Schein 1985). Similarly, Ott (1989), speaks of culture as a “socially constructed, unseen, and unobservable force behind organisational activities”.

(2) The other stream in the literature argues that culture is directly reflected in internal practices (or forms). It is something an institution "has". This view has often been employed in research concerned with cultural change and comparison (cf. Fakie 2004 for a more detailed discussion). Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv and Sanders (1990), for instance, explicitly focused on organisational culture as practices. Similar arguments have been made by Chatman and Jehn (1994) and Denison (1996).

Some authors have also attempted to integrate the two traditions of cultural research. This has proven useful with regard to empirical studies (i.e. Morris et al. 1999; Martin 1992; Trice/ Beyer 1984; Wuthnow/ Witten 1988, all quoted in Beugelsdijk/ Koen/ Noorderhaven 2004). While the explicit inclusion of practices broadens the definition, it does so not without adding value to the concept. Beliefs and values shape behaviour and therefore practices which can in turn – when dominant in an organisation – create, challenge or perpetuate the former. It can be argued that all three elements are therefore so closely linked that a meaningful analysis of an institutional culture should not ignore either one, even if such analysis is only concerned with one particular aspect such as a broadcaster's editorial independence.

### **The Study of Institutional Culture in South Africa**

In South African, institutional (or organisational) culture has been studied almost exclusively in a non-media context, namely with regard to higher education, company management, and political institutions.

Scholars concerned with higher education (Toma/ Dubrow/ Hartley 2005; Damian 2000; Thaver 2006), usually focus on the transformation of tertiary institutions, often with an emphasis on racial integration (Steyn/ Van Zyl 2001; Fakie 2004). Assessing how diversity should be managed (Fourie 1999; Walker 2005) – especially in the face of resistance to change initiatives (Strydom/ Zulu/ Murray 2004) – many authors have concluded that values, beliefs and practices cannot be overestimated and that communication among sub-groups is key to the creation of an inclusive institutional culture.

From a management studies perspective similar questions are raised, but usually with commercial objectives in mind (Thomas/ Bendixen 2000; Thomas/ Lindsay 2003; Kock 2006; Morrison/ Brown/ Smit 2006). The implicit assumption here is that institutional culture can be both beneficial or detrimental to a company's success in the market. A

handful of studies have shown that a strong and homogeneous<sup>16</sup> organisational culture in line with the company's vision correlates with above-average corporate performance. It is then concluded that culture is best built, managed and controlled by skilful managers who also provide employees with a sense of empowerment and creative freedom (Shaw 1997; Van der Post 1997; Schlechter 2000; Sales 2006). Consequently, considerable attention is also given to institutional culture as an obstacle for the leadership and its objectives (Vinjevold/ Fleisch 1992).

With regard to political institutions, Higgs (2000) analyses the challenge of developing a shared institutional culture within the South African National Defence Force. In a similar study on the institutional transformation of the South African Police Service institutional culture has been identified as a main obstacle to change (Gqada 2004; Collier 2004). Clapper (2000: 247) uses the concept to explain the “apparent minimal success of the transformation of the public service” and Roux (2004: 538) argues a similar case with regard to the unsatisfactory performance record of the Land Claims Court.

Unfortunately, in many of these studies, institutional (or organisational) culture is used as a convenient label, but without much theoretical grounding. Where it is operationalised using various dimensions it becomes clear that such dimensions are best used within the context of a particular institutions and cannot easily be applied to others.

The wide-spread assumption of 'the stronger and more homogeneous an institutional culture the better' needs to be treated with caution. It might work for a chain of retail stores or the military, but not necessarily for a media institution such as the SABC. The public broadcaster is less concerned with financial profit than the average company. It is mandated to serve the public in a very complex way and, as part of this mandate, needs to reflect and to some extent protect the diversity of views in the country. It would indeed be worrying if the SABC had a homogeneous institutional culture that was smoothly determined and managed purely in a top-down approach.

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Van der Post (1997: 146) shows that organisations are relatively more successful if there is less variation in member perceptions of the organisational culture.

This leads to another weakness in the literature: the view (if simplified) that, ideally, management leads, staff must follow, and problems arise only with staff resistance to management objectives and initiatives. What if management is wrong and does not act in the best interest of the institution? Can, should it be challenged? With the SABC especially, this is one of the most central questions. And it asks for a more thorough interrogation of the power dynamics within an institution.

Perhaps one way of addressing this question is the notion of a 'superordinate culture' that has come up in a few studies. Clapper (2000: 64) refers to it as a "maternal holding culture" or "umbrella culture to which sub-cultures are expected to pledge allegiance and commitment while maintaining a sense of individuality or independence consistent with the goals and functions of the maternal holding culture". It is not unlike the concept of inclusivity favoured in the higher education debates. However, these are normative concepts that are not central to my analysis.

In this paper, I conceptualise institutional culture as consisting of both observable elements which is in line with the 'cultural adaptationist view' in the literature *as well as* underlying assumptions that are difficult to detect and measure as the 'ideationalist' school argues (cf. Fakie 2004: 8). What follows from this is that, while institutional culture can to a great extent be observed, assessed and empirically measured, there are also hidden deep-level assumptions of employees the inaccessibility of which will almost inevitably lead to some distortion in the final analysis.

Since the 1980s scholars have also been arguing that institutional or organisational culture is subject to change and even manipulation and that, furthermore, it has an effect on an organisation's performance (Fakie 2004: 10). This is particularly evident in a media environment and the journalistic product: The nature of broadcasting – constant time pressure and the need to ensure a regular supply of fresh content – does not leave much time for extended deliberation, reflection and conscious decision-making. Hence journalists resort to techniques of automation, to readily-available filters and assumptions shared by reference groups (Schudson 1991). Within media studies these professional routines are referred to as, among others, "framing" (the contextualising of

a news story) and gate-keeping (referring to the journalist's decision on whether or not a story is considered newsworthy; cf. Shoemaker 1991). A term more commonly used in newsrooms is "slanting", defined by Berkowitz as "the way that a story is managed to conform to [formal or informal] policy" of the media organisation at hand (1997: 105). Slanting can involve omission or selection of specific facts or sources, changing the angle from which a story is told or even more subtle techniques such as camera movements and lighting (cf. Venter 2002: 5).

None of this necessarily conflicts with either professional norms such as objectivity, accuracy and impartiality or with the SABC's official editorial policy which all staffers are expected to adhere to. Within these rather broad boundaries journalists, particularly editors, have considerable freedom to exercise their news judgement. Yet what is important to note is that their decisions on both form and content of stories (the way stories are identified, selected, framed and told) are – albeit by no means exclusively – shaped by the culture of the media institution concerned (cf. Orgeret 2005: 34f.). Factors such as "occupational ideologies and routines, institutional systems or cultural practices" (Polumbaum 2000) come into play. What makes employing a cultural approach challenging is that there are few simple causal relationships to be observed: Values, beliefs and practices interact with each other in multiple ways and affect news production on many levels (ibid.).

## 2.2 The Conceptual Framework

As I have outlined in the introduction, I am interested in the SABC's culture only in connection with editorial independence and journalistic freedom in relation to the political establishment, in particular government.<sup>17</sup> Therefore the conceptual framework put forward here is by no means inclusive of all possible aspects of institutional culture. It is, however, intended to provide a basis for future cultural research into the SABC.

I define 'institutional culture' as encompassing values, beliefs and internal practices that are commonly shared within the SABC. The term 'dominant institutional culture' refers to either whatever is believed or practised by the majority of staff or whatever is successfully enforced by management. Dominant values and beliefs can be – and frequently are – accompanied by dissident ones (cf. chapter 3 for a detailed discussion). Note that 'culture' is a highly subjective concept: It is real to those inside the organisation, and they might even perceive something as dominant which, objectively speaking, is not dominant at all. What I am first and foremost concerned with here are individual perceptions, not a detailed description of objective institutional reality.

In the process of analysing the interview data it emerged that the three main elements of the concept of culture in the narrowed sense as defined above can be captured in the following way:

**Beliefs** are in this paper limited to journalists' perceptions of their political role; i.e. what they believe they are expected to be and do as SABC journalists in the new South Africa and what role they feel their colleagues subscribe to.

The analysis of **values** will focus predominantly on news values (relating to the story

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<sup>17</sup> It is not the aim of this paper to assess other factors, such as independence from advertisers or the pressure of the bottom line. While this is by no means less important than the political dimension it is a global phenomenon that has received a lot of academic attention, even in South Africa. In the commercialisation debate the problem is much more clear cut and known, and the remedies are quite obvious (e.g. diverse media markets, public funding for public broadcasters (a different funding model for the SABC), media ethics training for journalists etc.). Independence from economic interests or civil society is not the focus of this study.

itself) and professional values (relating to the process of reporting and editing, including media ethics). The interview data also suggests that a "non-cultural" variable, journalistic skills, needs to be included and assessed together with news values. Although this does not seem obvious and I did not initially expect it, the two variables are closely linked and their respective consequences in the news-making process are easily confused with one another (cf. chapter 2.2.2).

The third aspect of the conceptual framework refers to internal **practices** (cf. chapter 2.2.3). This stretches from accepted patterns of action in terms of routine news decisions and the nature and level of debate to the ways dissent and conflict about beliefs and values is being managed. I am particularly interested in the latter and will focus solely on this in chapter 3.

Institutional culture is of, course, subject to change, however substantial or non-substantial this change may be. This paper does explicitly *not* focus on cultural change, but instead on some of the intrinsic features of the culture in News and Current Affairs as they have emerged in the interviews. The intention is to unpack some of the dynamics around beliefs, values, practices as well as the interaction of these variables and lay a basis for future research in the field.

## **2.2.1 Beliefs: Journalists' Perceptions of their Political Role**

From a political scientist's point of view, the media's normative role in a democracy varies depending on which theoretical concept of democracy is used. In general, however, not much attention is paid to this question. Media studies, on the other hand, have seen the emergence of a number of approaches to journalism (liberal media, developmental media etc.) in general and journalists' roles in particular (e.g. watchdog, educator, facilitator etc.)<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion and systematisation of media theories in their relation to democratic theory cf. Arndt 2004.

Formally, the SABC's role is defined by various policy documents, such as the Broadcasting Amendment Act no. 4 of 1999 (South Africa 1999: 6 (2)) as well as the amended version that came into effect in 2002 (South Africa 2002: Section 6 (4)), editorial and ethical codes developed since 1993, and editorial policies which came into effect in 2004<sup>19</sup> (SABC 2004a).

But as I have argued before, at least from a cultural point of view, policies do not make culture, or in this case: Journalists may have quite different, even conflicting beliefs on what their political role *actually* is. And as emerged in the interviews, they do indeed. Drawing on Patterson's (1998) framework of journalists' role perceptions respondents were asked questions about both their own role perceptions and those of their fellow colleagues with regard to two dimensions:

(a) their positioning towards nation-building, arguably the dominant, if not omnipotent, ideology of the new South Africa (Do they report in a way that advocates nation-building or do they aim for neutrality on the issue?)

(b) their autonomy in relation to the ANC government (from passive-supportive to active-critical)

The interview data shows that, according to the respondents, SABC journalists overwhelmingly aim to support nation-building with their reporting; they feel that they have a role to play in stabilising South Africa's young democracy and in helping the nation overcome its past. There was a remarkable consensus in that all respondents rejected the classic liberal notion of detached and 'neutral' journalism. As one respondent put it: "I don't think that apart from the lunatic fringe, you would find anybody who is a thinking journalists who would say: 'I don't support nation-building'"(1SABC). This is in line with not only formal policy, but also with demands of the current board and management (9SABC).

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<sup>19</sup> The editorial policies have led to some controversy, particularly around the rule of upward referral and the GCEO acting as editor-in-chief, but were otherwise well received in and outside the SABC.

The picture looks more varied with regard to journalists' role in relation to government. Here the spectrum stretches between the extremes. The dominant perception was that of a passive stance towards the ANC government. A number of respondents even felt that many staff are led by personal party-political loyalties and a sense of duty towards the ANC. This allegedly includes reporters and editors (1SABC, 2SABC, 7SABC). Others suggested that many staff, especially those carried over from the old SABC, feel almost obliged to actively support the government of the day regardless of the party in power. But there were also a few respondents who perceived some groups within the SABC as being too liberal in their approach to journalism, criticising that those defined themselves as an adversary to government and were disrespectful of political leaders (3SABC, 10SABC).

Indeed, it would be highly unusual if there was complete agreement on the role of SABC journalists. The real problem – and a surprising finding – is that the majority of staff seem to feel that they simply do not have *any* meaningful role to play. To them, journalism is a job with no particular value in society: It pays the bills. This perception was confirmed numerous times in the interviews. Responding to the question whether colleagues think about their role, one journalists said: "They don't. That's the problem" (4SABC). It also emerged from the interviews that even with those individuals with an interest in the matter, confusion and inconsistencies in their beliefs were not uncommon.

To sum up, there are conflicting views among SABC journalists about what constitutes the purpose of the organisations in general, and their role as journalists in particular. 'The SABC' does not exist; instead I found competing role perceptions, wide-spread confusion, a lack of a common vision and a disinterest in any notion of 'role' one could or should play. It needs to be noted that this is a very general observation which does not take into account changes over time or differences between departments or specific newsrooms.

## 2.2.2 Values and Professional Ethos: Agenda versus Skills

News values and professional values shape journalistic reporting. More specifically, they underlie the processes of news selection and presentation such as gate-keeping and framing.

Basic professional values, or norms, as Soloski (1989: 143) calls them, include objectivity (as an ideal, not an absolute concept), balance (giving voice to all relevant views on an issue), impartiality (aiming to not take sides in a report) and factual accuracy. Diversions from this professional ethos are generally blamed for politically biased news stories, for the omission of events that critics think the public has a right to know about. Examples would be news bulletins that resemble 'parades of ministers' or that feature 'non-stories' which mainly serve to present government in a favourable light.

There was a broad consensus in the interviews that editors (more so than journalists) generally attempt to adhere to the basic professional norms. Interestingly, rival TV station e.tv serves as a quality control in this regard. The conventional view among respondents was that the SABC is thought to be "doing okay" as long as they keep up with the competition (1SABC, 8SABC). Therefore certain professional requirements are generally not up for debate, e.g. that the issue has to actually *be* news and of interest to a national audience, that the story be true and told coherently, that it is well-packaged and voiced and, in the case of television, visually appealing.

Beyond this journalists can and must exercise news judgement in more specific ways: Whether, for example, a story has to be 'controversial', 'sensationalist', 'developmental', 'critical of power' or 'positive about delivery' in order to be newsworthy is up for debate. These news values do, of course, depend on the line management and superiors are taking in this regard, but also on the journalist's role perception discussed in the previous sub-chapter.

The interview data suggests that SABC journalists do not subscribe to a coherent set of news values. News judgement tends to be extremely inconsistent, with differences

between TV and radio, stations and channels and specific newsrooms. This is perhaps not surprising considering some of the underlying beliefs discussed earlier. It does, however, suggest a great measure of confusion within the organisation and leaves much room for conflict between individuals, subgroups of staff, and management (1SABC, 4SABC, 5SABC, 9SABC, 10SABC, 11SABC).

The subject being editorial independence the obvious way of action should now be to analyse how these diverse and conflicting news values affect the broadcasters positioning vis-a-vis government. But the interview data points to yet another phenomenon that needs to be discussed here as it is closely linked to the professional ethos.

It is quite obvious that politically biased stories can be the product of beliefs and values held by journalists as long as journalists are *aware* of their bias and *able* to translate it into slanted news stories. What is perhaps less obvious is that the *absence* of such awareness or a *lack of reflection* on seemingly well-known professional values as well as a lack of basic journalistic *skills* can lead to equally regrettable results as a bluntly propagandist agenda.

What if a journalist has never reflected on what is or could be newsworthy? What if he<sup>20</sup> does not care about news value because he sees himself (literally) as a teacher, rather than a journalist? What if he does not have the basic skill to tell a television report in a logical and coherent way? What if he is not aware of the basic rules of journalism in his work although he would no doubt subscribe to them if prompted? If he does not think it necessary to do research as long as he has a government-issued press statement on his desk? What if he does not ask critical questions simply because he is not aware of the context of the issue he is reporting on as this would have required some additional research?

These questions may seem ridiculous when asked in connection with the biggest

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<sup>20</sup> For reasons of clarity and legibility I chose to use the male form as a generic pronoun throughout this paper. The female equivalent is, of course, implicitly included.

broadcaster on the African continent. But judging from the interviews, there are good reasons to ask them. It is one thing to have state-of-the-art editorial policies. It is quite another to have journalists who apply them in their daily work. This point was made by respondents over and over again. There seems to be a wide-spread *absence* of professional values and news judgement (or a lack of reflection thereon) combined with a lack of journalistic skills. This in turn suggests that one should exercise caution when exploring the reasons and motives behind a news story that seems to be biased towards government. There might be an agenda based on how the journalist sees his political role in society. But this is not necessarily the case, and perhaps even much less so than generally expected. This is how one respondent explained this phenomenon:

*"Don't ask people to be analytical! Some people are just incompetent. I am sorry, but that's the reality! They don't do things with a mission and a purpose on their mind, sometimes they are just mindless when they shouldn't be mindless. It's as simple as that. A lot of it is incompetence and not deliberate omission." (6SABC)*

The SABC has a major skills shortage. This is in fact a problem not just of the SABC, but of the South African media in general (De Beer/ Steyn 2002) and has been acknowledged by most respondents, including the current head of news (9SABC). According to the interviews, many journalists have difficulty with such basic matters as script writing, packaging (video and audio) and presentation of stories, command of the English language (in cases where they report in English) and basic research skills such as using at least two sources for a story. Many respondents also pointed to a lack of critical analysis: Journalists (especially those carried over from the old SABC) "don't ask 'why'" and take statements from official sources in particular at face value (2SABC, 4SABC, 5SABC, 6SABC, 14SABC). And because this skills shortage carries through to the editorial and management level (here respondents referred to a lack of professional news-making and management skills), there are few role models whom young or inexperienced reporters can learn from and through which a professional ethos and organisational knowledge would be preserved. According to the interview data, *excellence* is not seen as something most SABC staff would aspire to – partially because it is not seen as necessary in building one's career, but also because it is often not

encouraged by editors (15SABC). One respondent expressed his feelings in a somewhat drastic way, but he was by far not the only one who held this view:

*"In most news organisations around the world, the good journalists are the 'gods'. But who could you say is a good journalist, who is a 'god' at the SABC? There is no one! There is no one, really." (1SABC)*

### **2.2.3 Internal Practices**

As argued before, beliefs and values are closely linked to the ways journalists go about their daily work. This includes news decisions with regard to specific stories or issues, the way conflicting role perceptions and values are being negotiated within the SABC, and not least the overall level of enthusiasm, dedication and organisational commitment in terms of the SABC's mandate as shown in daily work routines.

What respondents felt most strongly about here was the problem of "laziness" and "complacency" among journalists on all levels (1SABC; 6SABC). There are, of course, numerous exceptions of hard-working, passionate and committed staff. But according to the interviews the number of employees who routinely do their research with minimum effort, who are passive instead of pro-active in setting the news agenda, who are satisfied with performing to the absolute minimum of what is expected of them and who liberally give away autonomy over news decisions to colleagues and superiors is disproportionately and unacceptably high (4SABC, 5SABC, 6SABC). This is how one respondent voiced his anger about this situation:

*"Nothing stops you from [doing an investigative story]. But it requires you to work hard. It requires you to know the other side. You can only dispute information that someone parades as fact if you know the real fact. The standard of journalism is appalling, to say the least. Journalists have no expertise, no knowledge of what is going on." (4SABC)*

The implications of not just a lack of skills and knowledge, but first and foremost the absence of a will to overcome this lack can easily be imagined. A number of respondents complained that many journalists “don't read” (5SABC) and that they do not sufficiently develop and cultivate professional contacts (6SABC). This situation is made worse by the fact that reporters get very little feedback on their work from senior colleagues and editors. The common perception is that 'you will only be told if you have done something wrong' (13SABC). As a result, stories become, for example, event-driven instead of issue-driven, i.e. the news agenda is set by others than the news workers (8SABC).

Add insufficient editorial guidance to counter this, and journalists almost inevitably become vulnerable to undue political manipulation from outside and inside the SABC. Government's PR machinery is bigger than any other in the country. In order to fill the bulletin with pro-government stories one does not need “reliable cadres” in the newsroom; it suffices that journalists do not question official statements to effectively 'outsource' the media's gate-keeping and agenda-setting role to government spin doctors.

In conclusion, a number of problems have been identified in this chapter.

(1) SABC journalists generally subscribe to basic professional values as outlined in the editorial policies, but due to a severe shortage of journalistic skills, newsroom staff often struggle with getting even these basics right. In addition there is also wide-spread confusion among staff as to what is expected from them and which role they ought to play as SABC journalists.

(2) Linked to this is a worrying lack of passion and enthusiasm in many SABC newsrooms. Journalists who do not care about their product are, in themselves, cause for concern. But it is also precisely these conditions that make the broadcaster vulnerable to manipulation and political interference.

(3) This said, markedly different perceptions among staff and management of the SABC's role and of what is newsworthy naturally led to interpersonal or even inter-group conflict. While it is usually management who determines what is formal and even informal policy, "conformity [on the part of staff] is *not* automatic" mainly because of the existence of a journalistic ethos that, *if* invoked by staffers, cannot easily and openly be bypassed by managers (Breed 1955: 107).

The dynamics that follow from a situation of dissent (particularly between staffers and management), hence the struggle for the dominant institutional culture, is the subject of the next chapter. There I am going to concentrate on a specific aspect of internal practices, namely the ways dissent and conflict about beliefs, values and patterns of action in terms of routine news decisions is being managed at the SABC.

### **3. THE INDIVIDUAL'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE INSTITUTION: WAYS OF MANAGING DISSENT**

The importance of focusing on the interactions between the individual and the institution has emerged in studies similar to this one: In a comparative paper on the Australian and Canadian Broadcasting Corporations (ABC and CBC), Petersen (1998) argues that "we need to pay much more critical attention to the ways structures and values in news organisations are shaped by internal processes of negotiation and conflict." The author points out the "need to return to the theme of hierarchical control of journalists, producers, and editors by broadcasting bureaucrats and the constraints of the cultural setting in which they operate" (ibid.). This translates into questions such as: Which behaviour is rewarded and which behaviour is being penalised by management? How and why do journalists question "official definitions of 'impartiality' and 'the national interest' in order to preserve, in their view, both professional and organisational 'credibility'"? (ibid.) What are the beliefs and values they act upon? And what are the consequences for the broader institutional culture?

With regard to the theme of editorial independence it has been argued that ongoing negotiations around competing values and beliefs can become "a significant component of the newsroom environment" (Ericson et. al 1987, quoted ibid.). It is the dynamics around this that deserve closer attention:

Naturally, management seeks to define values, shape beliefs (such as role perceptions), and enforce their own within the institution. Sometimes even outsiders or board members may want to influence the process of news-making in their favour or in the favour of what they perceive as a greater good. These attempts to change values and beliefs inevitably cause dissent and conflicts between (groups of) individuals and the dominant or otherwise powerful group. Staffers are especially likely to disagree with informal policy dictated from above if they feel that it contravenes professional norms or, in the case of the SABC, the public broadcaster's mandate (cf. Breed 1955: 108; Soloski 1989). If and when such dissent occurs, the individual encounters the institution

and needs to make a decision as to how to respond. Since the news division has rarely had a few years of coherent and stable management it seems likely that most, if not all, senior journalists have experienced this situation of dissent. This in itself does not give reason to worry, but it is at this point that questions need to be asked about the distribution of power among individuals and groups of people within the organisation (cf. Wade 1996, 1997; Goldman 2001; Bebbington et al. 2000, all quoted in Lewis 2003).

### **The Question of Power**

Institutional culture does not evolve magically; it is shaped by various agents within an organisation, in particular management, but also staff members. All of these agents hold power – some more, some less. I shall therefore briefly discuss the concept of power as it relates to this paper.

In his very influential definition, Max Weber describes power as “the possibility ... within a social relationship of realising one's own will even against resistance, no matter what such possibility depends upon” (1956: 28, my translation). Without being able to discuss the academic debates around the concept in much detail, I am going to draw on this as well as on Lukes' subsequent definition according to which power is “a capacity not the exercise of that capacity” (2005: 12). It manifests itself in three dimensions: (a) in decision-making in conflict situations, (b) in decision-making as well as nondecision-making in situations of overt or covert conflict, and (c) in the shaping of the agenda by the powerful with the aim to suppress even potential issues in latent conflicts and thereby ensuring willing – but not always conscious – compliance (Lukes 2005: 29, 106).

Because power held by the powerful is inevitably based on respective perceptions on the part of the powerless, power relations are seldom static. While Dahl (1957: 202f) still assumed that “A has power over B”, others have suggested that B (the subordinate agent) is merely less powerful, but never completely powerless (Boulding 1989: 45;

Wartenberg 1990: 173). Bachrach and Baratz (1962) introduced a relational concept of power and argued that resistance is an intrinsic element of any power relationship (von Beyme 2000: 202). Consequently, “all sanctions, no matter how oppressive they may be, require some form of acquiescence from the 'power-less'” (Olga 1996: 79). In other words, the subordinate agent “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault 1978b: 202f).

With regard to the study of the SABC this means that dissent is inevitably not only “managed” from above (by those in power, such as superiors on editorial and management level, board members or even forces outside the institution), but also from below (by the dissenting individual). Boulding (1989: 33) employs for this the concept of “active power” held by leadership versus “defensive power” exercised by subordinates. In line with this I subscribe to a relational-agency view of power which is generally connected to an individual level of analysis (Olga 1996: 81f; Wartenberg 1990: 18).

### **Managing Dissent from Above**

The editorial policies (SABC 2004a) state that editorial decisions are not to be influenced by (among others) "political or personal considerations". Instead, the principle of editorial independence is emphasised, especially with regard to the news division. Yet it is not uncommon in organisations for management to promote conformity to its preferred institutional culture in the face of dissenting views and thus to try and enforce what Soloski (1989) calls “organisational policy”.

Managing dissent from above can take the form of penalising unwanted behavior, e.g. by means of pressure or interference with decisions (to be) made by the a subordinate staff member (chapter 3.1.1). It can also take the more subtle form of rewarding desired behaviour (chapter 3.1.2). Both, pressure and rewards, serve to ensure that journalists conform to an institutional culture (or what Breed (1995) calls “policy”) which is enforced in a top-down approach. In his study of American newspapers, Breed found

that new reporters are never explicitly told what “policy” is; instead they learn it “by osmosis”: “He [the reporter] learns to anticipate what is expected of him so as to win rewards and avoid punishments” (ibid.: 109).

Pressure can manifest itself in various forms. Chapter 3.1.1.1 deals specifically with editorial interference originating outside the SABC. While this in itself has little to do with the institutional culture it is important to understand the outside environment before assessing the internal dynamics. The SABC's critics often assume that the broadcaster is being directed from outside, that journalists are under direct pressure from the office of the president or the ANC headquarters. While this may or may not be the case, the answer is of limited explanatory value, for two reasons: (1) Even the widespread existence of such pressure would not allow for conclusions to be drawn about the state of the SABC's editorial independence because undue interference does not start and end at the gates of the SABC: It can be passed on to journalistic staff or not, and staff can succumb to it or not. (2) The absence of pressure from outside would in turn not be a sufficient condition for editorial independence because undue political pressure can also originate within the SABC, i.e. on various levels of the internal hierarchy.

When it comes to pressure from outside, the SABC's first line of defence is the board which is supposed to be an independent buffer that protects staff from unprincipled political forces. Many respondents complained about either a lack of such independence or a lack of competence with regard to board members (or both) and considered a dysfunctional, weak or politically partisan board as highly problematic. Chapter 3.1.1.2 therefore focuses specifically on the role of board members in connection with editorial independence. Chapter 3.1.1.3 deals with pressure or interference that originates on the level of news managers or senior editors.

## Managing Dissent from Below

Political independence depends not only on “the willingness of politicians to abstain from interfering with the day-to-day running of the corporation”, but also with the latter's ability and willingness “to resist such interference by remaining in control of the reporting and analysis of news and current affairs” (Teer-Tomaselli 2005: 209f). While pressure serves to promote conformity, I have argued in chapter 2 that no broad consensus on beliefs and values has yet emerged. This inevitably leads to dissent and conflict and puts dissenting journalist and editors against their powerful superiors in the higher echelons of the news hierarchy. At the same time, journalists, as most employees, have career aspirations that require strategic decision-making, not least when it comes to potential conflict with superiors. In other words: Dissent over dominant values and beliefs is not only managed from above, but also – and perhaps equally! - from below.

In any given situation the dissenting individual has a number of response options which are well captured by Hirschman's theory of "exit, voice and loyalty", developed to analyse responses to a decline in quality or performance of a product or and organisation (Hirschman 1970). In the case of the *exit* option, an unhappy customer, for example, ceases to buy the product. Similarly, the dissatisfied member of an organisation may leave to join a competing organisation. *Voice* is defined as "any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs" (ibid.: 30). According to Hirschman, *voice* is the only option when *exit* is not available (ibid.: 33) and its role increases as exit options decline (ibid.: 34). The availability of *exit*, in turn, tends to reduce *voice* (ibid.: 76). The interplay between *exit* and *voice* is managed by *loyalty*. *Loyalty* makes *exit* less probable and increases the likelihood of *voice*. According to Hirschman, *loyalty* relies on the expectation that matters are going to be improved or that "reform can be achieved 'from within'" (ibid.: 78f). *Loyalty* is believed to ensure that "the most quality-conscious" do not leave the organisation, but are more likely to voice their dissent. He concludes that "[t]he likelihood of voice increases with the degree of loyalty" (ibid.: 77-79).

Despite its simple beauty, Hirschman's concept needs to be revised in order to be of

conceptual value to this case study:

(1) The conception of 'quality' needs to be broadened. From a journalist's point of view it can refer to the quality of news output, but also to less visible things such as management, newsroom resources, degree of editorial independence, compliance with the public broadcasting mandate, internal policies, changes in news values, dominant role perception or the level of professionalism.

(2) In the context of the SABC *exit* is an extremely costly option for journalists, perhaps even more costly than *voice* whereas Hirschman suggests the reverse is true (1970: 40). The reason for this is that the media landscape of South Africa is small, and the broadcast market is even smaller. For a journalist who does not want to join e.tv or leave the country, resigning from the SABC means he will hardly be able to continue working as a broadcast journalist. Hirschman argues that, in a case like this, *voice* is likely to be delayed because the unhappy individual can rarely use *exit* as a threat (ibid.: 97).

(3) The concept of *loyalty* needs to be revisited. Hirschman defines *loyalty* somewhat vaguely as "special attachment to an organisation" that serves as a delay to *exit* and increases the likelihood of *voice*. He overlooks that *loyalty* can be derived from a number of sources and that, as a consequence, it is not necessarily related positively to *voice*. In fact, it has been shown that the more loyal an employee the less likely he is to exercise both *voice* and *exit* (cf. Boroff/ Lewin 1997).

In my observations and interviews with SABC journalists I found it striking that a large number of journalists apparently claim to be dissatisfied with the SABC, but exercise neither their *voice* nor their *exit* option. Are they all incredibly loyal to the SABC? And why?

Hirschman's concept of *unconscious loyal behaviour*, based on self-deception which serves to fight "the realisation that the organisation ... [is] deteriorating or defective"

(1970: 93) does certainly not explain this observation<sup>21</sup>. More helpful is his brief analysis of "loyalty-promoting institutions" that suppress *voice* alongside *exit* because it is in the short-term interest of managers to "entrench themselves and to enhance their freedom to act as they wish, unmolested as far as possible by either desertions or complaints of members"<sup>22</sup> (ibid.). The phenomenon of managerial control has become quite a popular field for scholars interested in institutional culture, with the main argument being that managers use corporate culture as a way to control staff. What Hirschman does not account for is that such "enforced loyalty" might not be the same as 'genuine' loyalty towards the SABC as a public broadcaster which is accountable to the public – and only to the public. It can be argued that, instead of *loyalty*, suppression of *voice* in connection with high costs for *exit* merely produces *silence*.

Hirschman's failure to adequately capture the different forms of loyalty has invited some criticism. His concept of *loyalty* has been criticised for being an ad hoc explanation for "why some people who could be expected to quit do not in fact do" (Barry 1974, quoted in Boroff/ Lewin 1997). Barry proposes that an employee who decides to stay with the organisation faces a choice between *voice* and *silence*. As a result, "loyalty may well be uncorrelated with voice but positively correlated with silence" (Boroff/ Lewin 1997: 59). The rationale is that "fear of reprisal for exercising voice is significantly inversely related to the probability of employees actually exercising voice, and these "unfairly" treated loyal employees might arguably be said to suffer in silence" (ibid.).

For the purpose of this study, I am going to distinguish between *loyalty* and "opportunistic loyalty"<sup>23</sup>: (a) When I speak of *loyalty* I shall refer to loyalty towards the SABC as being the public broadcaster, or towards the idea of public broadcasting in general. (b) *Opportunistic loyalty* is closely related to Barry's concept of silence. But

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21 In the interviews I found very little "denial" of organisational problems – on the contrary: Most respondents were remarkably open and critical.

22 According to Hirschman, loyalist behaviour can be ensured by a variety of institutional means, most commonly high fees for entering the organisation, and high costs for exit. Another way is the attempt to turn *loyalty* into *unconscious loyalist behavior* by, presumably, hiding the causes for dissent from as many members as possible. In the case of the SABC where *exit* is already costly, it should then be sufficient to suppress *voice* in order to achieve *loyalty*.

23 Hirschman himself only briefly focuses on loyalty as opportunism in the context of the delivery of public goods (1970: 103). Yet this refers to a dynamic which is unrelated to both the SABC context and the concept of "silence".

while silence implies that the employee's level of unhappiness remains unchanged after having decided to be silent, *opportunistic loyalty* also and explicitly takes into account the possibility that an unhappy employee consciously embraces the dominant culture he has been opposing for, e.g., a material pay-off and as a result of a cost-benefit analysis. In other words, *opportunistic loyalty* refers to individuals either suffering in silence or to individuals being “corrupted” by the system itself. The latter implies that they internalise the (dominant) values, beliefs and practices they used to disagree with.

*Opportunistic loyalty* thrives when three conditions are met: a) *Exit* is too costly to be an option; b) *voice* is similarly costly; and c) there is, in fact, little (!) *loyalty*. *Opportunistic loyalty* is loyalty towards the SABC as an organisation that provides certain benefits, in particular monetary and non-monetary incentives such as car allowances, office space, trips to foreign countries etc. It is loyalty towards whoever is in power and thus in a position to distribute these benefits.

In the following sub-chapter I am going to discuss in more detail what I have briefly sketched above and illustrate my argument with interview data. It is not my intention to describe *the* institutional culture of News and Current Affairs (a matter far too complex for a paper of this scope); instead the idea is to shed light on how the factors and dynamics discussed above play themselves out at the SABC. Further research will be needed to quantify the actual weight of each variable in relation to the institution's history and change in general.

## **3.1 Managing Dissent from Above**

### **3.1.1 Pressure**

Breed (1955) has argued that institutional authority and sanctions are the main reasons for individuals to conform “to policy”, or, in our case, to the dominant culture. Pressure serves to enforce consensus diametrically opposed to the way of open debate, negotiation and deliberation. Pressure can be overt or covert. In his case study on newspapers, Breed suggested that junior journalists pick up the institutional culture “by osmosis”, a phrase that was also used by one of the respondents in this study (8SABC). Lastly, pressure can originate at different levels. In the case of SABC News and Current Affairs this can be outside the organisation, at the level of the board, or within top and middle management (including senior editors). Of course, there is also the possibility of peer pressure; but judging from the interview data this is a negligible concern at the SABC.

#### **3.1.1.1 Outside Interference**

In the public debate, outside interference is the prime evil. According to the current head of news, political pressure is not a big concern (if any at all):

*"Our ministers are not anti-journalism! No, they are not! They are not! And our president protects the media! The president of South Africa protects the media! Very much so!" (9SABC)*

In the interviews, perceptions differed substantially. In general, political pressure is a problem for senior editors and news managers, not so much for newsroom staff (1SABC, 3SABC, 7SABC, 8SABC). But there are exceptions. A good example of undue political interference from outside the SABC are the province KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and, to a lesser extent, the Western Cape. All respondents who have worked in the respective newsrooms have raised concerns, especially about KZN premier S'bu

Ndebele's understanding of the role of the SABC in the province. One respondent describes the situation of recent years.

*“According to the premier, each and every journalist in the SABC in KZN has a political agenda. Of one of my colleagues he said: “She is DA!”. And another one ‘is IFP!’ He said it! He said it to our editors.” (12SABC)*

The same journalist related an incident where the premier took offence in the fact that he 'was dropped out of a news story' (this was confirmed by 11SABC and 15SABC):

*“[After the story had been broadcast] the premier wanted to see a copy of my unedited script before I sent it to the bulletin desk. He basically wanted to see who to be pissed off with: me or the bulletin desk who checks the script. In fact, he had contacted the PR [division] of SABC to ask me for the script. I told them: ‘You don't have anything to do with the newsroom, I am not giving it to you!’” (12SABC)*

KZN's political turf is highly contested between the ANC and the IFP, and journalists frequently reported that politicians would exert pressure in order to get exposure on TV and radio, preferably in the English News: “That's a big thing. When [the premier] is not on English news he gets really pissed off” (12SABC). There was consensus among those respondents familiar with KZN that radio was still more likely to succumb to political pressure than the more high-profile TV:

*“For example, there is one spokesperson of the ANC: He phones in, himself!, to the radio bulletin desk – Ukosi or to Lotus or whatever – and says, he wants to give a comment. And he always gives some long drawn-up thing. And it will be on radio. ASAP.” (12SABC)*

Other respondents described the situation within the province as follows:

*“They [provincial government] are taking their chances. They think they own the place or can intimidate you or think a journalist belongs to them or they think they can call*

*and say 'I don't want this or that said' ... I think, it's just an abuse of power!" (6SABC)*

*"In KZN the situation is a bit like in the Western Cape [with its political rivalry between the ANC and the DA]. Yeah, there is a lot of pressure. ... And our stance of neutrality and impartiality is just like taken away from us! So it's a sad one." (3SABC)*

It does seem, however, that the situation in KZN and, to some extent the Western Cape cannot be generalised with regard to the whole country. To the question whether he had ever experienced political pressure, a journalist responded: "No. None whatsoever. I have never experienced that [in the Eastern Cape]." (17SABC, similarly 2SABC)

Others insisted that pressure was not uncommon, but that it tended to be subtle. This refers, for example, to government-sponsored trips during which members of the government delegation may try to usher journalists into the government's camp by attempting to restrict their exposure to other views. One respondent remembers such an occasion where politicians would go as far as referring to the accompanying SABC journalists as "my reporter" and "my camera man":

*"It's like they own us!... But I don't remember any instance where they would want to know what am I saying in my story." (10SABC)*

Most respondents shared the view that *if* political pressure happens, then it usually manifests itself at a higher level of the hierarchy and that it more often than not draws on existing political loyalties and political friendships.

Some respondents were more critical arguing that interference in editorial matters from outside is indeed a frequent occurrence:

*"There is the incredible political pressure. ... Some of it is overt: Politicians would call, either they themselves or through their minions, to suggest you do certain stories. ... Or the minister is addressing a press conference, and 'no, we cant tell you what the press conference is about until you get there.' And then we have had those absurd situations*

*where the politicians won't start their press conferences until the SABC has arrived. And then the reporter comes back and you decide not to use the story. And then you deal with the hysteria of 'Why didn't you use the story?!' First they would call editors. Then the calls would be made to the CEO's office or to the board or to senior executives who would then say to you things like 'you know, that wasn't really a smart thing to do' or 'you don't really have to do it, but it wouldn't be a bad thing if you did'. And you quickly start to understand which [stories] are the ones you are expected to do and which are the ones you might be able to get away from." (5SABC)*

*"It's really difficult to quantify. But there is probably less phone calls and less direct pressure – it's just a question of 'it would look good'. ... You might have read reports of the minister calling Snuki [Zikalala]. Those kinds of things also happen." (6SABC)*

Respondents did, however, also point to the fact that the level of political pressure has been changing over time (1SABC, 6SABC, 8SABC) and that similarly, pressure is used by specific individuals or offices; it is clearly not the generally accepted way of dealing with the media within the ANC or government as such (2SABC).

Interestingly, some respondents suggested that, in many instances, political pressure can be safely ignored by the SABC ("You know, there is nothing sinister going to happen like someone's going to drag you off to somewhere...!" (5SABC)). On the contrary: when journalists took a strong independent stance, often politicians would refrain from similar attempts to interfere in the future ("They are now also watching their step" (3SABC)). Unfortunately, as I am going to argue in chapter 3.2 resistance to pressure does not seem to be a wide-spread occurrence.

### **3.1.1.2 Board interference**

The board is the SABC's first line of defence in terms of political pressure from outside. The rationale behind the procedure of having board members appointed by parliament (not by government) is to ensure their political independence. Nevertheless, because of South Africa's political history and the vast majority the ANC holds in the National

Assembly, it can be expected that many board members will be pro-ANC in their personal capacity. This is not unusual in young democracies, nor does it automatically violate the independence of the public broadcaster. The challenge is, however, to ensure that board members are non-partisan in their professional capacity, that they are aware of what their role entails (and what not – such as editorial decisions) and that the board as a whole has sufficient experience in the broadcast industry to give adequate guidance to the corporation.

According to respondents, boards have filled their role in different ways and with varying success. Some did hardly provide any leadership, others tried to ensure the independence of the SABC. Evidence suggests that the way board members understand their role is crucial to the board working in favour of editorial independence – or effectively undermining it. This is one example given by a respondent:

*"At the time under Vincent Maphai's stewardship of the board there was some semblance of independence. We had somebody who could withstand the political pressure. Peter Matlare [then CEO] was fortunate to have Vincent Maphai as a board chairperson because he didn't get involved at an operational level. He protected them from political influence."* (2SABC)

*"[The Maphai board] had a very sophisticated understanding of its role and the role of the public broadcaster. Its chairman ... kept a distance from the affairs of news and came in and remedied the situation when it needed to."* (7SABC)

The current board is an example of a somewhat different, more hands-on approach: It has made use of its mandate by announcing a strategy to "promote national identity", "contribute to nation-building" (in order to prevent a culture that is "anti-democracy", "anti-politics", and "neutral") and offer "patriotic programming" in order to build an "emphatic, patriotic and thoughtful citizenship" (Zikalala 2004). The board's goals which are to "drive daily operations in the newsroom" also include a commitment to support Thabo Mbeki's idea of the African Renaissance, and Nepad (SABC 2004b). It is worth debating whether or not such specific goals are in line with the spirit of the

Broadcast Act and the editorial policies; but the policy framework does indeed leave considerable scope for interpretation. What matters for this study is that many respondents *felt* that the current board was partisan and too closely involved with the newsroom. For example, after a controversial interview with the president, in which a young reporter, Redi Direko, had pushed him to talk about his stance on HIV/Aids, board members allegedly got involved:

*"There were very strident demands from the new board that this young woman needs to be disciplined and that this young woman must never again be allowed to interview the president." (5SABC)*

*"If a board member is pissed off with something he phones Snuki [Zikalala]. And I suppose then Snuki gets upset and maybe he phones Solly [Phetoe, then acting head of radio news]." (14SABC)*

Some respondents raised doubts about whether some current board members specifically misunderstood their role causing them to blatantly overstep their mandate:

*"At the last election [2004], the board members were up and down in our editorial suites! What were they doing there?! In some instances they even wanted to make suggestions for story angles! ... There's always been a misunderstanding of what the role of the board members is and what they should do and what their relationship should be with the various business units. And I think the most important relationship that is misunderstood and misinterpreted is the board's relationship with the news division." (7SABC)*

In the absence of clarity on the level of the board it is then, according to respondents, up to the editors to assert their authority over editorial matters:

*"It is also a question of informing them that they can't just make demands. ... And if you explain that to them, of course they get angry at first, but I mean, they respect that. But a lot of people are scared to engage and interact." (6SABC)*

Considering the fact that political pressure tends to be applied from the top-down it is noteworthy that responsibility to withstand such pressure is usually located one level down the hierarchy. This means that the board is the SABC's first line of defence with regard to political pressure from outside the corporation. Should it fail to protect editorial independence or – worse – even become a source of political pressure itself, the responsibility to resist moves to management and senior editors. The problem with this dynamic is, of course, that, on each level individual decision makers are going to be less powerful and influential than those on the previous one.

### **3.1.1.3 Interference from Senior Editors and News Managers**

My interview data suggests that, compared to political pressure from outside and undue interference by board members, pressure originating or being passed on within the news management structure is a much bigger worry for journalists.

*"Sometimes it [pressure] is exercised individually. I may be in a top executive position and may just exercise it as it's good for the image ... or to get brownie points with the ANC or the board. So a lot of it is self-imposed, what I might think people watching me might like. (6SABC)*

The ultimate sanctions for resisting pressure are well known: Journalists are being taken off stories and assigned to another beat, they are publicly criticised (and in some cases humiliated<sup>24</sup>) in meetings or editors simply drop or significantly change finished stories (cf. also Breed 1955: 112).

What aggravates the problem at this level is that because of structural inconsistencies within SABC News and Current Affairs lines of authority sometimes become blurred with no clear indication of where final responsibility lies. Add to this the skills deficit

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<sup>24</sup> "People are often humiliated in news gathering meetings and made to look and feel stupid, and that is very disempowering. We have had quite abusive managers at the SABC who can out-scream and out-embarrass people. ... There is a profound lack of appreciation for people at the SABC in many, many, many ways!" (7SABC)

among managers and editors and the stage is set for a fairly confusing newsroom environment: confusing not only for reporters (and even camera men as the incident around the omission of 'embarrassing' footage of the 2005 "booing" of Deputy President, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka shows (cf. Sunday Times 19.08.2005; SABC 2005), but also for editors and producers. This creates an atmosphere of uncertainty with shifting alliances that only serves to accelerate the erosion of trust between management and staff.

*"This is the only place I have ever worked where the management is actually your adversary, rather than your superior representative of what you are doing. And you were always guilty until proven innocent." (ISABC)*

Most respondents felt that while the relationship between news management and staff has never been easy, interference and pressure is a particular problem with Snuki Zikalala occupying senior editorial positions (currently Managing Director: SABC News and Current Affairs). This concern was voiced so consistently that I am going to discuss it briefly as an example of a senior manager who was widely perceived as authoritarian and despotic by respondents. This serves to explore some of the consequences of such a situation for the institutional culture with regard to editorial independence.

The head of news has the right in principle to 'interfere' with editorial decisions on a lower level (and indeed, the 2004 editorial policies clearly state the procedure of upward referral (SABC 2004a)), but he is not supposed to micro manage editors and producers, let alone reporters. Zikalala himself has always rejected any criticism of him interfering unduly with the newsroom (cf. Berger 2004):

*"There is no journalist I have stopped from doing any story. That is a lie! You want to do a story on corruption? Do it! [On a] cabinet minister? Do it! But bring your facts correct. You must not be vindictive – I don't like vindictive journalism." Or: "I as Snuki, I don't sit and assign journalists. I don't do that." (9SABC)*

In the interviews it became clear that many respondents had very different experiences

in this regard. Some, mostly junior reporters as well as journalists in the regions, did not have any complaints (3SABC, 13SABC, 16SABC, 17SABC). Others had experienced pressure only indirectly:

*"In the past year Snuki [Zikalala] has phoned me directly once, and it was because of a factual error. But sometimes I get unhappiness filtered down to me through my immediate boss." (14SABC)*

But there were also those who insisted that journalists and editors were and are exposed to direct or indirect pressure from Zikalala to 'toe the government line':

*"There is a journalist I know who had some voxpops<sup>25</sup> on the president's views on Aids. And Snuki took the tapes off her, so she couldn't put it to air." (1SABC)*

*"He keeps on saying 'I don't do this and I don't do that' – and it's sad that people won't talk openly about it –, but he does phone the news desks. He does phone editors ... to tell them what to do and how to cover stories. In fact, there are instances where he tells people which journalist to put on what story. And it has nothing to do with people's skills or their abilities to understand a story. It's about his personal likes and dislikes. It's outrageous! ... Essentially, government must be shown in a good light. He pretty much doesn't care how [you do it]. That's the bottom line." (7SABC)*

*"He can get very emotional. ... Snuki doesn't have to say: 'I am going to crush you'. The way he behaves tells you, you dare say something against him, you are in shit! And he doesn't say 'don't do it that way!'" He says: "Tell it as it is!" I can't remember Snuki interfering with a story. ... He's got operational people who do that for him. [For instance] Amrit [Manga, acting head of TV news] is his ears and his eyes. I don't think Amrit will let anything go through that would offend Snuki. That would put his job on the line." (10SABC)*

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<sup>25</sup> Voxpops (short for Vox Populi) are brief statements by members of the public on a particular issue, collected from an unrepresentative ad-hoc sample, e.g. passers-by on a street corner.

As in any organisation, managers in powerful positions may be tempted to abuse their power. In the case of the SABC, news managers are accountable to the CEO who is in turn accountable to the board. If authoritarian managers do not face corrective action from above, managers and editors further down the line become vulnerable to pressure (a case in point seems to be Zikalala who, despite wide-spread complaints about undue interference with editorial decisions that were eventually backed up with evidence in the 2006 blacklist report<sup>26</sup>, is still being protected by the board).

Many respondents pointed out that middle-management editors and producers especially are in a crucial position here. They have to deal with attempts to interfere with programmes wherever these attempts may originate from; and the way they respond has repercussions for newsroom staff. They are expected to give leadership and ensure that an excellent product is put on air. There was wide-spread agreement in the interviews that this 'backbone' of any news organisation was weak in the case of the SABC. Reasons given referred to a high turnover rate among senior managers some of whom preferred to appoint "yes men" instead of independent-minded, professional editors:

*"The middle management has been worn down and assassinated. And this was because of the [ongoing] change of bosses... The whole management structure was torn apart. And then somebody would come in and hijack the newsroom or somebody would be reappointed." (8SABC)*

*"[Editors] are appointed without power at the SABC. That's the problem also. You will often be told, 'when you come in you can do a, b and c' – and then when you come in you can't do anything. You are just there to be abused by whoever is in power. They just want someone [to be blamed] when something goes wrong. ... You see, the place is very coded in that way. A lot of what can really be done is hidden. People aren't always clear about what they can do. And it happens at the different layers." (7SABC)*

Because of what one respondent called the "erosion of the editorial core" (8SABC),

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. the report by the Commission of Enquiry into Blacklisting and Related Matters. URL: [www.mg.co.za/ContentImages/286848/SABCBLACKLISTREPORT.pdf](http://www.mg.co.za/ContentImages/286848/SABCBLACKLISTREPORT.pdf), accessed 15.02.2007.

interfering managers can expect to meet little resistance, especially if they have the backing of the board as in Zikalala's case. With such a constellation it can become fairly easy to enforce the views of whoever is at the helm and shape the institutional culture in a very powerful way.

Managers and editors who aspire to independence and professionalism, who want to encourage dynamic newsrooms and fearless journalism, then meet resistance not only from above, but also from colleagues (especially those who lack either professional skills or political clout) anxious not to get into the firing line themselves (cf. ISABC).

### **3.1.2 Rewards**

As explained at the beginning of this chapter, dissent can not only be silenced with pressure and authority. But it can also be neutralised with rewards given to those who accept desired values and role perceptions and report news and current affairs issues accordingly. Because of the SABC's undemocratic history, this system of rewarding loyalty is deeply entrenched in the corporation and its institutional culture (1SABC, 4SABC, 5SABC, 7SABC, 8SABC, 10SABC). What changes over time is merely 'the provider' who has the power to choose what exactly is being rewarded. According to respondents it is common knowledge among staff what they are expected to do if they want to advance their careers. Asked about what behaviour is being rewarded at the SABC one respondent replied:

*"(A) is being loyal. (B) is doing whatever you are being told. (C) not complaining. (D) not disputing." (1SABC)*

*"If you want to get ahead you have to please the boss because he is the one that makes decisions about your promotion, about whether you are on the next trip with the next minister to Malta or wherever. ... I could understand why people wanted to fly all over the world, especially if you have never had the opportunity to travel outside of the*

*country. Now you can do it with the government minister and come back and tell all your friends." (2SABC)*

Sometimes it is simply the desire to get or keep a consistent screen presence that makes journalists abandon their principles, one respondent said. This suggests a rather problematic dynamic, namely that professional success becomes associated with “celebrity status”, not with a reputation for good and fearless journalism or simply consistently good performance on the job. This ties back to the observations discussed in chapter 2: that the institutional culture of the SABC does not reward professional effort and excellency. These are some of the thoughts respondents related in the interviews:

*"You go to the SABC and, all of a sudden, you are finding yourself in this important institution with so many platforms. You can't help but feel important. I mean, you can be all over the place, in many languages, you have the television channels, you have radio programmes, everyone calls your name and wants to hear, talk about this, talk about that, 'do this for us'. And easily you can feel important. Easily, because you are going to rub shoulders with all those important people, people that matter in society today, and they treat you nicely because you can make them look good. It's easy to be corrupted by those factors or influences." (4SABC)*

*"If you are a smart young journalist you figure out what you need to do to get on air and convince the executive producers and the news editors. You know what they want! Because they have to give Snuki what he wants!" (2SABC)*

What starts with trips to foreign countries and on-air exposure on the newsroom level soon progresses to an extensive list of benefits offered to editors and news managers – benefits that come with a certain position and are usually not bound to performance levels. There was a dominant view among respondents that the SABC's management culture in this respect was particularly problematic:

*"When the SABC was transformed in terms of its leadership, nobody said 'the way*

*managers behave in this place is wrong!' Instead they said: 'The way managers are treated in this place is fantastic!' So people are more interested in the perks that their jobs bring [than in the job itself]. If you are a manager at a certain level you get a car allowance, you get parking, you get an office with a fridge. If you are at a different level you don't get the fridge. If you are at a higher level you travel business class, you stay in five star hotels and you get housing allowances. At a certain level of management, you must have a secretary! One of the first things they ask you is: 'What car do you want? You must have a new car.' And there is a range of cars that you can choose from. But at the next level it is a range of bigger cars. And at the next level it's a range of much bigger cars. All of this stuff was inherited from the apartheid state." (5SABC)*

*"I think a lot of people found it very comfortable. There was never a new culture of scaling down the benefits and the perks. The old SABC culture was always very good with managers. They were always the fat cats, they always did very well. And there were always lots of them." (8SABC)*

Of course, the SABC is not the only organisation that offers benefits to its managers. But the extent as well as the manner in which benefits are distributed poses a number of problems that, in combination, have a problematic – if indirect – affect on the institutional culture of the news division: (1) The current system allows for the possibility of under-skilled or incompetent managers to enjoy benefits, even if they do not perform in their job. (2) Excessive benefits for management negatively affect the morale of very moderately paid newsroom staff and alienate journalists from managers, especially in cases where the latter are perceived to be incompetent. (3) Given the widespread perceptions that good work is not being recognised and valued by superiors and that there is almost an absence of professional role models, staff then start to aspire to material benefits *rather than* to journalistic ethics and professionalism. They compromise their own values and professional standards for those of whoever is in a position to advance their career (1SABC, 2SABC, 4SABC, 5SABC, 6SABC, 7SABC, 8SABC, 10SABC).

This means essentially that, from two classic career ladders for journalists identified by

Soloski (1989: 145), “the management ladder and the professional ladder”, the former is much more attractive for SABC journalists than the latter. Instead of greater freedom to shine as a journalist, a managerial position offers higher salaries and status at the cost of buying into the dominant culture, in particular the one advanced by the board and management. This was confirmed in the interviews:

*"In the middle [management] you have got a bunch of greedy and scheming opportunists who can see that serving the people on the very top, the board and the politicians, they can get a career out of it, and they can get a big car out of it with a personalised number plate. They can get a big office and be in charge of people and they can do whatever they like." (1SABC)*

*"All they want is salary increases, notches, more perks and fat car allowances. That's the crowd that must be gotten rid off! And I am telling you, they will fight the hardest." (7SABC)*

The point here is not to judge individuals for working the reward system in their favour. The point is that the system itself is deeply flawed. It has become an impediment to the values of public broadcasting, to professionalism, impartiality, and independence. From a public broadcasting perspective, undesirable (opportunistic) behaviour is constantly being rewarded whereas independent journalism and the values and beliefs attached to it is not – or not enough. It must be acknowledged that this reward system has been carried over from the old SABC, and the SABC is not the only institution faced with this problem. But as long as it is not being addressed at the public broadcaster most other attempts to tackle the SABC's problems may prove futile: “As long as there is a gravy train for thousands of people nothing will change” (1SABC).

In concluding this sub-chapter, three findings made on the basis of interview data seem to be central, partially because they question commonly-held perceptions of the SABC as portrayed mostly in the media:

(1) While there is anecdotal evidence of political pressure being applied to SABC News

and Current Affairs from outside (especially government entities), a much more serious concern, comparatively, is pressure originating within the public broadcaster itself, in particular on the level of the board and senior news management.

(2) In addition to pressure aimed at punishing non-conformity with regard to “policy” as Breed (1955: 112) calls it there is also a highly effective reward structure that has become an integral part of the institutional culture and that serves to reinforce dominant values, beliefs and practices that are desired by management. This system of rewards should not be underestimated when editorial independence is at stake.

(3) Considering the existence of both pressure and rewards, it now becomes vital to focus on individual *responses* to such attempts of managing dissent from above. Journalists do indeed have a choice. One respondent (6SABC) related this example: “The minister of health has a right to call you. But you have a right as an editor to make a decision whether you send somebody [to her press conference] or you don't!” These choices, however, come at a cost. This is what I am going to focus on in the following sub-chapter.

### **3.2 Managing Dissent from Below: Individual Responses to Interference**

In contrast to Breed's (1955: 113) observation that newsrooms are “friendly, first-namish” places where “job morale is high” and “[n]ewsmen like their work” at the SABC these conditions are often perceived to be quite the opposite. Breed argues that there is a positive correlation between job satisfaction and morale on the one hand and the willingness to conform to policy on the other. The scarcity or absence of these conditions should then in turn lead to higher levels of dissent and less identification with the dominant culture. Whether this is the case at the SABC or not would need to be established in further research. In this paper I am not concerned with a quantitative “measuring of dissent”, but rather with the nature of the phenomenon that seems to be generally based on the incompatibility of the dominant culture and the journalist's

professional ethos. I shall now proceed to illustrate the dissenting individual's response options – exit, voice, loyalty and opportunistic loyalty – with empirical data collected in the interviews.

### 3.2.1 Exit

In the context of the SABC, the exit option is certainly the most drastic response for journalists. Unlike as in Hirschman's original scenario of a consumer ceasing to buy the product that does not satisfy him any more, giving up a secure, often permanent job is extremely costly. In many cases, especially with regard to staff carried over from the old SABC the prospects of finding a comparable job in the media industry are virtually non-existent which drives the cost up to a level at which *exit* does not seem to be an option any more. As one respondent admitted: "It is an issue. There is not a million radio stations where I can find a job" (14SABC). And the local South African TV market is even smaller. For example, there is a fair number of staff at the SABC who have already 'had their stint' with the only other free-to-air broadcaster e.tv and are effectively faced with no viable alternatives.

*"People on the 'approved desk' [i.e. editors] often say: 'If I had an option I would go away'. But this feeling of dissatisfaction is everywhere." (13SABC)*

Nevertheless, exit is an option; and quite a few former SABC journalists have made use of it. Those interviewed for this study, without exception, related that they had used *exit* as a last resort after *voice* had failed (though not all of them thought it wise to state this publicly at the time of their departure). One example:

*"The fighting about trying to keep non-editorial hands off my programmes and even in some cases managers and bosses who wanted to interfere was incredibly stressful. And it took its toll on my health eventually. In the end, this is probably what made me decide that it's not worth it. The place is too conflictual and it's too hazardous in that sense.*

*But yeah, when I had the energy and when I believed in the place – and I still think it's an important national asset – I was prepared to battle." (7SABC; cf. 1SABC, 2SABC, 4SABC, 5SABC)*

The interview data suggests that it tends to be experienced and respected journalists who leave for such or similar reasons. These journalists, however, are potential role models for junior reporters; hence, their departure also has implications for those independent-minded journalists left behind. One respondent remembers what happened when Jimi Matthews (then head of TV news) left his position in 2005,

*"We had one person who would stick up for us. Forget about the assignment editors, your regional editors – your head of TV news still ... was a newspaperman. We thought he was our last hope. And when he left it was like: Now what are we gonna do?! ... He was the one person who stood up to Snuki [Zikalala]. But I guess it was too much for him to take." (12SABC)*

In sum, exit is an extremely costly option for SABC journalists who dissent with the dominant culture. This is not to say that there have not been individuals who resigned from the SABC in order to further their career somewhere else. But for the majority of staff, resigning seems to be an almost unthinkable last resort. Considering this, every case of exit for reasons related to editorial independence is remarkable and can reveal a lot about the worrying aspects of the institutional culture.

### **3.2.2 Voice**

With *voice* dissent grows into open resistance reflected in the attempt to uphold and perhaps assert own values, beliefs and practices in the face of a dominant culture. Although not as costly as *exit*, there is a wide-spread perception that voicing dissent with bosses is going to spell trouble. For many, some respondents suggested a majority of staff, the *voice* option is too costly to be exercised. One journalist (10SABC) put it

drastically: "It's either you toe the line or you fuck off." Others expressed the desire to exercise voice, but felt discouraged by a lack of support when going against senior news executives: "You feel like you can't even fight the battle, you don't even have your assignment editor or your regional editor on your side" (12SABC).

Even for those who have resisted the dominant culture for some time, the price of voice has been high and increasing (2SABC):

*"It's easy to say: Why don't you challenge [the dominant culture]? The Japanese have a very good saying: 'The nail that sticks out is the one that gets hit!'... And it's not like a boxing match, it's not overt ... it was easier with apartheid because the forces were very clear. Now it's standing up against what? It's standing up against pressure – which I might think is pressure, but someone else might not. And it's not a linear thing. It's not like you have the editor and the deputy editor and the news editor and the assignment editor and the pressure kind of comes through like that. It can come from any number of ways!" (5SABC)*

It seems, however, that in many cases, this sort of caution is unwarranted and that there is more space for independent decision-making than many journalists themselves believe (14SABC, 17SABC, 14SABC, 15SABC). Asked what is going to happen if a journalist voices dissenting opinions and acts accordingly, one respondent answered sarcastically:

*"What's gonna happen? What are they gonna do? Come around and send a battalion or something or drag you down the streets? I mean, it's not gonna happen! It means, you are no longer going to be invited to cocktail parties, but so what, is that a hardship?!" (1SABC)*

However, this cannot be generalised. Respondents suggested that in many cases junior staff in particular felt intimidated:

*"If you have the courage, without a doubt, you can do it. But if you are going up the*

*ladder and you are getting the bosses involved, then people think twice about it. I mean, nobody wants to have a run-in with the MD [Managing Director: News and Current Affairs, i.e. head of news]." (11SABC)*

What perhaps can be concluded from this is that while the *voice* option, especially in combination with an extremely costly *exit* option, is not likely to be exercised on a large scale, it is nevertheless an option that has been used and could be used more, especially at the lower ranks of the organisation. A number of respondents suggested that the cost for *voice* is generally overstated. It would be unfair, however, to use this general observation to judge specific cases.

*"I think that the SABC by and large is a lot more open than a lot of people give it credit for. ... There isn't any institutional reason for that, but junior people are also intimidated by people who have been there for a long time; you can see that in any editorial meeting. They are allowed to challenge ... anyone, but by and large they don't." (14SABC)*

### **3.2.3 Loyalty**

The interview data suggests that those with strong loyalty to public broadcasting values and independent journalism find themselves outnumbered and under constant indirect pressure to comply with the dominant culture. These are some of the comments respondents offered in this regard:

*"I think I stood for what I thought was right and professional. I prayed often for things to improve. I realised I was one against many, many hundreds and thousands." (1SABC)*

*"People don't feel loyal to the SABC as a public broadcaster. And those who do tend to be marginalised." (13SABC)*

Consequently, loyalty in the sense it is used in this paper (namely to public broadcasting values) is surprisingly rare to find. Those who are loyal live with enormous pressure and inner conflict. One respondent chose the example of Vuyo Mvoko (then TV political editor):

*"I thought he was very independent, but he had a lot to put up with. And sometimes I used to say to him, 'I wanna do this story and get onto this'. And he would say: 'You know we can't. You know!' And it's so... agh! And there was lots!" (ISABC)*

Having exhausted the voice option in that respondent's view, Mvoko eventually resigned. Others try and make use of 'partisan strategies' and niches. Small, African-language radio stations, for example (cf. 3SABC). Others seemingly go into 'inner exile':

*"The only way to survive in the SABC long term is to hide, to hide in the mainstream. You don't deal with the big politics. You get yourself a niche somewhere where no one takes too much notice of you and no one bothers to check you out." (ISABC)*

This last option, however, often borders on *opportunistic loyalty*.

### **3.2.4 Opportunistic Loyalty**

*Opportunistic loyalty* reflects the attempt to repress the conflict between individually held beliefs, professional values and practices on one hand and the dominant culture on the other "amorally and anti-intellectually" (cf. Breed 1955: 118). If a journalist attaches little importance to, for example, editorial independence or impartiality, the values, role perceptions and institutional practices preferred by those in power are easily adopted and internalised. Judging from my empirical data, *opportunistic loyalty* is one of the most striking features of the SABC's institutional culture and perhaps the most underestimated of its problems.

It seems to be caused by the perception that *voice* is too costly and that *exit* is not a viable option at all and often leads to forms of internalised obedience and self-censorship in the newsroom. Many respondents were of the view that the prevailing attitude among staff is one of avoiding conflict. What aggravates this is that opportunistic loyalty is generally rewarded within the SABC.

*"I think a lot of them [journalists] cower into submission. They will just go 'yes sir, shall do, sir!' and maybe make the wrong decisions because it's difficult for them to stand up." (6SABC)*

*"The English desk [editors] don't think any more. They take what Snuki [Zikalala] feels is strong enough to be a story or they take what they think will make Snuki happy. At the line talks they take what they think is gonna make Snuki happy, man!" (10SABC)*

*"[The attitude is:] Lets not touch it [sensitive matters]. We will get our pay at the end of the month, that's it. That is one of the reasons why such a huge organisation can be turned into any direction that anyone wishes." (1SABC)*

Again, some respondents pointed to the fact that pressure is often *perceived* or *anticipated* pressure that might actually not be there in reality.

*"People think that Snuki is there, the board is there [putting pressure on people]... they don't have to, half the time! People just do it already! People actually do it before they are even asked!" (1SABC)*

*"You ask people [bulletin editors], what are you leading with? And they say: Mbeki. Nobody asks them to lead with Mbeki!" (4SABC)*

This invites the conclusion that there is in fact space for editorial decision-making at the SABC that is not being used – not because editors and journalists are prevented from exercising their professional judgement, but because they *choose* not to. It would of

course be presumptuous to judge individuals on the basis of the correctness of their perception; it should, however, not be forgotten that editors especially also have a *responsibility* to exercise their news judgement and to maintain and defend the editorial freedom they are entitled to. Media freedom means nothing if journalists themselves do not value it highly enough to risk conflict with interfering superiors.

If the prevailing attitude among staff is indeed one of indifference (“Agh, its easy, man. Just get along with it, don't complain, don't talk about it” (1SABC)) towards editorial independence, then public condemnation of political pressure and calls for protecting the independence of the SABC are not only ironic, but will also be futile.

There is, however, one serious deterrent for opting for *opportunistic loyalty*: Buying into the dominant culture in order to avoid pressure and get rewards usually comes at a cost to the journalists professional reputation. Because South Africa is a free and democratic society with free and competitive media, obvious self-censorship is problematic:

*"It is very difficult to censor yourself because firstly you are putting your credibility at stake, and secondly: If you are not going to tell it, the newspapers tomorrow morning are going to tell it. And it puts you in a very bad light." (10SABC)*

Once credibility is compromised, the costs for *exit* increase even more. This in turn makes *voice* less likely which effectively binds the journalists whose reputation is tarnished to the SABC. One respondent described this “trap”:

*"As the important person you [now] are within this institution you have to now maintain that view that the world has of you. You have to keep those people who are nice to you and who may be powerful and influential so that they keep you there where you want to be. ... That's the trap in which a lot of people would find themselves. Now the last thing you can do when you are in this little corner in your life is to be cheeky and speak your mind. Because... then you are out! And remember, the minute you start licking ass, outside someone is watching you! And you cannot now go outside when it gets hot in here. You are not useful [there]! Unless, of course, what they saw you doing*

*here is also what they want [out there]. And I doubt you would want to be that sort of a person." (4SABC)*

Judging from the interview data it seems, however, that most staff are not deterred by this prospect or – at the very least – simply do not reflect on it. In sum, we can tentatively conclude that at the SABC

(1) *Voice* is perceived to be very costly, although in many instances this perception may be wrong.

(2) *Exit* is an extremely costly option, preferred over *voice* presumably only by those who have career options outside the SABC.

(3) *Loyalty* is rare, although it is driving both *voice* and *exit*.

(4) *Opportunistic loyalty* is the prevailing way of navigating the arising dilemma between individual values and practices on the one hand and the dominant institutional culture in relation to editorial independence on the other. In addition, *opportunistic loyalty* can be seen as a one-way street: Once chosen over loyalty, voice and exit are even less of an option. This way, opportunistic loyalty tends to reinforce itself within the organisation, and even more so considering that both pressure and rewards are designed to encourage it.

## 3.3 Consequences for Internal Practices

As I have shown, SABC journalists who are faced with a dominant institutional culture they do not agree with seem to have been responding in a number of ways: Some resigned (*exit*), some openly defended their position (*voice*) – often being “sidelined” or “destroyed” as a result of their ‘acts of defiance’ (1SABC, 4SABC, 5SABC). Others – and many respondents said, the majority – resorted to *opportunistic loyalty*: “They put their head in the sand” (1SABC, 8SABC).

The question now is: How does this affect the broader field of newsroom practices related to editorial independence? The interview data suggests that culture is shaped or adversely affected with regard to the level of internal debate (3.3.1), general staff morale (3.3.2), and every day news decision-making processes (3.3.3). I am going to discuss the three aspects briefly.

### 3.3.1 Internal Debate

Internal debates are those that normally do not become public; they take place behind the scene: in news conferences, in the cafeteria, among colleagues and in workshops. There are two dimensions to this: debate around specific news issues (Should story A be covered or not, and if yes, how?) and debate around “meta-issues” such as the SABC's mandate, individual role perceptions, and professional values. Both types of debate are, in the eyes of virtually all respondents, an integral part of a dynamic public broadcaster.

With regard to debates on news issues, one respondent argued that “you need articulate journalists in the field. So they have got to have robust debate, they have got to argue these points out [in the newsroom]” (8SABC).

A similar view was presented by the head of news, Snuki Zikalala:

*"Debate must start between reporters... Once they have agreed on angles among themselves – because we have to share knowledge and experience – then your assignment editor is the one who will have to take it to a forum of editors. Then that story is debated there."*

When asked whether these debates were indeed taking place, he replied:

*"Yes, that's happening! It's happening! You know for a fact that the culture [of debate] is there. And that is the culture we encourage." (9SABC)*

The view that dominated in the rest of the interviews, however, was one that distinguished sharply between a desirable level of debate and *actual* debate taking place in most newsrooms. This starts with morning diary meetings (news conferences) where staff and editors are supposed to discuss the stories of the day. A number of respondents bemoaned that debate on news issues happened "very rarely, if at all":

*"Your diary is printed out, you are being told, this is what's happening, this is where it is. Some people don't even attend diary meetings, they just look it up on the system. There is not much interaction between journalists and editors." (11SABC)*

*"We go to the morning meeting, but we don't talk. I don't talk! There are two colleagues who still contribute in that meeting, but the majority say, no! Because he [the editor] doesn't create an environment for discussion." (10SABC)*

Indeed sometimes the problem seems to simply be caused by managers who do not engage their staff. One respondent talked about an editor he used to work under and where "eventually in every story you heard his view. ... You had a meeting of 15 people and none of them participated! Nobody got a thing to say!" (8SABC)

What this leads to is a "follow-my-leader-type-of culture: If the boss thinks this is a good story, then it must be a good story" (14SABC). While this seems to be a widespread phenomenon, it must be emphasised that this observation does not hold true for

all newsrooms. Exceptions that were mentioned frequently include radio (relatively-speaking as compared to TV), some current affairs programmes such as Special Assignment and also certain time periods in the SABC's post-1993 history (2SABC). Finally, whenever the issues on the table are not of a potentially sensitive nature debate seems to open up:

*"In our newsroom, yes, there is this culture of debate. But the news we do are often not politically inclined." (13SABC)*

With regard to the second of dimension of "meta debate" the situation looks similarly bleak. Respondents generally expressed a need for more debate:

*"Because when people talk freely the definitions of what is in the national interest and what is in the public interest and what is nation-building and what is not nation-building and what is in the interest of a political organisation become easier for reporters to understand. Those issues you have to debate and you have to debate it constantly, in the same way as what stories do you do! (5SABC)*

Debate without predetermined outcomes and consultation seems to be particularly lacking between staff and management (1SABC, 8SABC, 10SABC). This is in line with Baker's (1996: 220) findings that "in theory avenues of consultation between staffing and management hierarchies are open. In practice they seem seldom used" - which increases the "power distance" between management and staff shaping it towards one of dependence rather than interdependence or consultation (cf. Hofstede's discussion of the term with regard to national culture, as quoted in Shaw 1997: 17).

But even among journalists (i.e. peers) in some newsrooms certain issues are hardly discussed:

*"Journalists do not engage with each other. I don't tell you what I think about issues of race etc. We pretend that everything is okay, or assume that we are at the same level of understanding about what this country is supposed to be doing and where it is supposed*

*to be going. Because that engagement would inform our writing, our thinking, our reporting. But we don't engage." (17SABC)*

Those who felt that there was insufficient debate within the SABC gave a number of reasons. One respondent blamed "sensitivities, great sensitivities!" (17SABC), but most explanations given centered around three issues: (1) low morale (see above), (2) a perceived political bias of the corporation's management, and (3) managers who do not encourage debate. As one respondent put it,

*"given the attitude of the SABC as an organisation, especially towards government, there is no way that you can have lively debate or a dynamic newsroom ... because that would just be asking for trouble." (11SABC)*

### **3.3.2 Staff Morale**

Often (not always), respondents said, a lack of debate is caused by low staff morale. Low morale does not necessarily have much to do with political pressure; sometimes journalists are frustrated by structural issues such as confusing lines of authority. Another major reason for low morale seems to be a lack of quality feedback and appreciation for good work (e.g. 16SABC; cf. chapter 2.2.2).

*"Nobody cares [about quality]. You are not motivated, you never get feedback on your work unless you have done something wrong – at least not from your superiors. You never know when you have done something good. So why would anybody feel motivated or inclined to go the extra mile if your work is not appreciated or acknowledged?!" (11SABC)*

*"They'll say 'thanks'. That's it. If it was a big story and you get it in in time. But it's not a qualitative feedback. Often they take SAPA stories instead of that of the journalist who was there or they would rather go with the SAPA angle. So it's almost like your*

*journalistic integrity is being questioned." (13SABC)*

And lastly, many respondents reported that low morale goes hand in hand with authoritarian news managers, especially if those are also perceived as journalistically incompetent. This is confirmed by Breed's (1955: 115) observation of "strong-man" newspaper editors and their affect on the newsroom where "morale is spotty; staffers withhold enthusiasm, ...[and] are apathetic and sometimes hostile to policy."

### **3.3.3 News Decision-Making Processes**

With regard to editorial practices and, more generally, decision-making processes in the newsroom the problems discussed in previous sub-chapters lead to staff avoiding to take responsibility for decisions they are equipped, mandated and – normally – expected to make (1SABC, 8SABC, 10SABC). One respondent gave this example:

*"A manager will come to me and say: 'Snuki [Zikalala] says, he wants that story'. And when Snuki says it, you don't question. You do the story! ... Then the English desk [editing same story] would ask me: 'Your script... do you think this is a strong story?' And I would say: 'Don't ask me – you be the judge! I was told to do the story and I can't shoot it down. I have written it. You decide whether you want to use it or not.'" And then, because they are so scared of Snuki, they just throw it in [the bulletin]. And that's why we will end up with five stories on ministers in the first slot." (10SABC)*

The problem is thus not only that potentially sensitive decisions are quickly – too quickly – referred upward, but also that the option of deciding against what is *perceived* to be expected by superiors is often not considered. By doing this, editors especially effectively strip themselves off their news judgement and their professional ethos and, ultimately, demote themselves without any punitive action being necessary.

At least in some instances, this is directly reflected in the news product. For instance,

respondents felt that "the English bulletin is a mishmash of stories produced by scared and confused editors trying to second guess what is politically required" (5SABC) and that there was not much pro-active – let alone investigative – journalism at the SABC:

*"It's very event-driven. There is no looking-behind things. It's following up on things that are in the newspaper. We are not breaking stories." (11SABC)*

*"It's convenient! It's lazy journalism! It's easy. And it gets no real news." (8SABC)*

It is beyond the scope and the objective of this paper to interrogate this further. What can be noted, however, is that there were strong perceptions on the part of respondents suggesting that most SABC newsrooms did not only suffer from low morale and a lack of debate, but also that ordinary, every day news-decisions had fallen victim to dominant values and beliefs that have little to do with editorial independence and professionalism. This can and frequently does in turn adversely affect news and current affairs output.

With regard to internal debates, one respondent summed it up quite aptly: "We are in the business of communication, but we are not communicating" (10SABC). But why, one may ask, does this matter? To answer this question, we have to briefly return to the concept of power.

### 3.4 The Power Dynamics of Managing Dissent

I have discussed earlier that, while a high position in the institutional hierarchy is an important source of power, subordinates are never entirely powerless – perhaps least so in the case of media institutions. Because of their role in society journalists have access to an important power base of their own: their professional ethos which is at the SABC even backed up with a public broadcasting mandate and a respective legal framework. As opposed to factory workers, SABC journalists are expected to serve the public by exercising their professional news judgement on a daily basis and thus implementing a democratic mandate that transcends and can indeed override the views of the management of the day. If staff perceive management to act in violation of the SABC's mandate, this professional ethos can – and arguably should – serve as a source of resistance.

As I have shown in my discussion of the interview data, resistance can take the form of *voice* and has as such been relatively successfully exercised by some of those who felt particularly loyal to public broadcasting values and who found that their autonomy to professional decision-making was unduly restricted. Considering the wide-spread discontent with the state of editorial independence at the SABC, the surprising finding was, however, that *voice* was not being used more frequently: There does indeed seem to be very little resistance at the SABC, whether overt or covert. Instead, I found wide-spread *opportunistic loyalty*, a phenomenon others have referred to as sullen quiescence in the face of power (cf. Gaventa 1980). Apparently many – if not most, as some respondents suggested – SABC staff make little use of the power they have. They tend to choose not to participate in sensitive decisions and avoid taking responsibility which eventually results in a lack of internal debate and low morale. This quiescence also seems to be connected to a general lack of consciousness (of one's political role as a SABC journalist as discussed in chapter 2.2.1).

It needs to be noted that quiescence does *not* necessarily imply consent with an existing power relationship. But then the question one needs to ask is: Why do subordinates

comply, why do they choose opportunistic loyalty? Tilly (1991: 594; cf. also Spinoza, quoted in Lukes 2005: 86) identifies the following possible reasons which are not mutually exclusive. I am going to briefly discuss them in relation with my findings and in the light of Hirschman's concept:

The first of Tilly's explanations is that, actually, subordinates do not comply, but they use hidden forms of resistance (cf. Gaventa 1980). I would subsume this under the concept of *voice*. It does not seem to be wide-spread at the SABC, but would certainly warrant further studies as some respondents pointed to the existence of 'niches of independence' in some newsrooms.

A second reason assumes that subordinates get "something" in return for their acquiesce; i.e. they are 'corrupted' into compliance with the system. This "something" frequently takes the form of alternative values such as esteem, identity – or simply material values and other rewards that I have discussed in chapter 3.1.2. The result is a culture of complacency and a neglect of the professional ethos.

Tilly also suggests that 'willing subordinates' might lack consciousness about their own true interests as a result of mystification, repression or alternative frames of reference. This refers to the "third dimension of power" (Lukes 2005) in which the powerful shape the "perceptions, cognitions and preferences" of the subordinates in such a way that the latter happily accept their fate. Here Lukes criticises Bachrach and Baratz (1962) when arguing that because "the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent ... conflict from arising in the first place", power relationships can indeed be free of conflict. Hence, there need not even be hidden resistance (Lukes 2005: 27).

This seems to be the case when SABC journalists replace professional ambitions (to tell critical, truthful, balanced stories) with the 'will to please' those in power by buying into, for example, their interpretation of "developmental journalism" as government-friendly. This also applies when journalists are uncritical of government because they feel historically indebted towards the ANC. In both cases this is arguably linked to a lack of awareness of one's political role as an SABC journalist and of the fact that power is

never just a one-way-street (Olga 1996: 85).

The result is, of course, self-censorship – the media equivalent to Foucault's “self-surveillance” in which there is “no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer” (Foucault, quoted in Lukes 2005: 100). Translated into the context to the SABC this describes, for instance, a situation in which bulletin editors will turn the news into a 'parade of ministers' without having explicitly been asked to do so by news management.

Tilly also includes the more obvious power dynamics based on force and inertia. As argued before, according to respondents pressure can at times be so decisive that the criteria for “coercive power” (Wartenberg 1990: 96, 99) are met: The subordinate individual feels so threatened that he complies. Threats are even more powerful when resistance is costly (Tilly's last reason for compliance). In addition, defending one's professional ethos by exercising *voice* requires, in a media environment, certain skills (e.g. sound research skills in the case of sensitive stories), passion for the job (i.e. *loyalty*) and, preferably the availability of *exit* to be used as a bargaining chip. I have shown that all of the above is generally lacking at the SABC.

In sum and from a power perspective, all of the reasons for compliance suggested by Tilly can be found at the SABC. It is also evident, that they are mutually reinforcing. As Gaventa (1980: viii) argues, “[p]ower works to develop and maintain the quiescence of the powerless”. The interplay of these dynamics has created a sort of fatalism among many staff as a result of “repeated experiences of defeat” (Gaventa 1980: 254). This way, Gaventa argues, “[p]ower relationships may develop routines of non-challenge which require no particular action on the part of power holders to be maintained” ((*ibid.*: 255, 257). In other words, existing power relationships are being entrenched. This is, essentially, what seems to be happening at the SABC.

With this in mind, we need to repose the question asked above: Why does it matter? Why should the public care?

The nature and state of the SABC's institutional culture matter because if a substantial number of employees (or even the majority as many respondents alleged) think their views, expertise, work and integrity is not being valued, if they stop participating in potentially costly debates and go into 'inner exile' (sullen quiescence) then they render decision-making power to the powerful few. Consultation within the newsroom, debate and feedback are crucial elements of the fast-paced process of news production; elements that help create a high-quality and unbiased output that meets the criteria for the independent and professional journalism the SABC is mandated to provide. The more journalists stop to care about this, the more centralised news decisions are going to be. And depending on the calibre of top managers, the more easily the corporation will become vulnerable to political interference from outside.

# CONCLUSION

Like most other public broadcasters in countries that have recently undergone democratic transformation, the SABC is the subject of much public criticism. Although, comparatively speaking, it is doing remarkably well, not least due to a favourable policy environment and a fairly successful structural transformation, few observers would be tempted to declare it 'editorially independent'. The News and Current Affairs division in particular has been consistently struggling with negotiating its relationship with the ANC-led government. There is a wide-spread perception in the South African public that the SABC lacks political (i.e. editorial) independence, that it is subjected to pressure from government and that it neglects its role as a political watchdog.

So far most of the academic research in this regard has focused on structural and policy questions, in other words on *formal* factors. Yet these seem to not be able to explain why editorial independence is still – and some say increasingly – a problem at the SABC. It was the objective of this study to explore possible alternative explanations by focusing on *informal* factors. The institutional culture approach I have employed has so far received little attention in the academic debate around the SABC; yet it turned out to be a very rewarding one that seems to hold much explanatory value.

I have conceptualised institutional culture as comprising of beliefs (journalists' perceptions of their political role), values (news values and the professional ethos) and internal practices (news decision-making processes, the level of internal debate etc.). All these elements tend to be fairly stable and consistent, yet they are by no means inflexible or fixed – sometimes they can even be contradictory (cf. Daymon/ Ybema 1999: 17).

The empirical data my findings are based on was gathered in late 2005 and early 2006 by means of in-depth interviews with 17 current and former SABC reporters and editors. Developments that have taken place afterwards (e.g. the “blacklist scandal” around banned commentators and the subsequent internal inquiry) have been deliberately left out of this study.

The interview data suggests that the SABC's institutional culture is remarkably diverse with respect to values and beliefs – although many journalists appear to be unable to translate their views into day-to-day reporting because they lack the necessary professional skills. Respondents also pointed to wide-spread confusion or lack of reflection on role perceptions and the professional ethos. With regard to editorial independence there seems to be a considerable amount of dissent and conflict between groups and individuals within the news division – so much so that the struggles around dominant beliefs and values seem to have become part of the institutional culture itself.

Focusing predominantly on internal practices (as opposed to values and beliefs) I have set out to shed light on *how* this process of cultural negotiation plays itself out in the newsroom and how dissent is being managed at the SABC. This question seems to lie at the very core of the public broadcaster's problems with regard to editorial independence, political impartiality and journalistic professionalism. Dissent is constantly and inevitably being managed 'from above' as well as 'from below'. With regard to the latter I drew on Hirschman's (1970) concept of individual response options and discussed how *exit, voice, loyalty, and opportunistic loyalty* shape journalists' stance towards the dominant culture with regard to editorial independence.

Judging from the interview data, the direct threat to editorial independence resulting from political pressure is less serious and prevalent than the public debate on the issue might suggest. In any media organisation political pressure is inevitable. There is little indication that the SABC is more exposed to it than other public broadcasters such as the BBC or the German ARD. Instead, pressure originating within the corporation itself, particularly on the level of the board and senior management is a much more serious concern. The way dissent is managed from above includes pressure and rewards that, in combination, appear to effectively stifle independent thinking and hence work against editorial independence and a professional ethos integral to the SABC's public broadcasting mandate.

The question of how journalists respond to this then takes centre stage. The interview

data shows that the inclination towards one or the other response option is strongly connected to individually-held beliefs and values, but also to seemingly unrelated factors such as professional skills and career opportunities outside the SABC. Generally speaking, the *voice* option is perceived to be very costly, although there is evidence that in many cases it is less costly than staff tend to believe. *Exit*, on the other hand is extremely costly to the extent that it is a viable option mainly for highly skilled and “historically untarnished” individuals who have not yet exhausted the limited career options the South African broadcasting market has to offer. The tentative findings also show, that *loyalty* towards the idea of public broadcasting and the SABC's mandate is surprisingly rare among staff, whereas *opportunistic loyalty* seems to be the preferred way of dealing with the dilemma of individually-held values and beliefs and a dominant institutional culture that runs contrary to them.

As a result, dissent is not being managed constructively and newsroom practices (one of the aspects of institutional culture) are adversely affected in three ways: (1) Debate on both day-to-day news decisions as well as on meta-issues such as role perceptions and professional values is being stifled and often silenced. (2) Staff morale tends to be low with journalists showing little passion and commitment to their work. (3) As a consequence of both, routine processes of news decision-making are easily manipulated by senior managers or other powerful individuals with the will to enforce their preferred values and beliefs – which in turn may have little to do with the ideals of public broadcasting. The less journalists and editors involve themselves in sensitive news-decisions and the less they take responsibility and exercise their professional judgement, the more easily the corporation becomes vulnerable to political interference. This seems to be what, essentially, is taking place at the SABC. And these are dynamics that have little to do with formal policy and institutional structure.

It needs to be stated clearly that this study falls into the realm of exploratory research. My aim was to develop a conceptual framework that captures some of the most relevant factors and dynamics pertinent to the subject matter. My findings are based on a limited and non-representative sample of respondents and are therefore tentative and preliminary. The broader culture of the SABC is too complex a subject to be addressed

within the limited scope of this paper. It was also not my aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the institutional culture with regard to editorial independence. In particular, I have left out the very relevant question of how culture has been changing over time.

Further and more in-depth research is needed to interrogate the various aspects of the conceptual framework and their respective roles during different periods of the SABC's post-1993 history. The research potential for a longitudinal study lies, among other things, in identifying the factors that need to be in place for the institutional culture to be changed and re-adjusted. Conversely, it might also be valuable to map out the cultural violence and recalcitrance that an institution may visit on itself in order to maintain an anachronistic institutional culture (Thaver 2006: 7). Other questions that deserve to be addressed in more detail refer to power-relations that transcend the institutional hierarchy, to differences between the various newsrooms in both TV and radio (e.g. niches of independence and professionalism) and to the role of reference or sub-groups among staff with shared beliefs and values such as old versus new-guard journalists or different race groups<sup>27</sup>.

It is hoped that this exploratory research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the SABC's political independence – or lack of such. After all, the public broadcaster is a national asset that is not just of academic interest, but also of considerable – if not vital – importance to South Africa's democratic future.

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, in this study I did not find a correlation between respondents' race and their views on issues of editorial independence. With regard to responding to pressure the interview data does, however, suggest marked differences between those who had been with the SABC prior to 1993 and those who joined afterwards: The former tend to be more passive and resort to *opportunistic loyalty* more easily than the latter. Because the sample is not representative this is merely a hypothesis which needs to be tested in future research.

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# ACRONYMS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ANC	African National Congress
ARD	Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DA	Democratic Alliance
FXI	Freedom of Expression Institute
ICASA	Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
MD	Managing Director
MISA	Media Institute of Southern Africa
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
PSB	Public Service Broadcasting
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SAPA	South Africa Press Association
UNISA	University of South Africa

# APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Note: Not all questions were asked in every interview. Questions were also not asked in any particular order. Individual interviews lasted between one and three hours and were, without exception, conducted face-to-face.

- *Thanks*
- *Motivation/ research intention*
- *confidentiality/ anonymity/ consent*
- *What happens with the data*
- *Structure of interview*

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## PART ONE

*personal background, views, values, beliefs*

### 1. SABC Background

- How did you get into the SABC?
- Would you take me through your SABC career? Positions, medium, location, highlights
- What kind of news decisions do/did you make on a daily basis?
- on a scale from 1 – 10: How happy are/were you working for the SABC?
- on a scale from 1 – 10: How successful has the SABC's transformation into a public broadcaster been?

### 2. Own Role Perception and Values

- For South Africa's young democracy to thrive, what is needed most, relatively speaking?
  - more consensus-building or more vigorous debate in the public domain?
  - more accountability of political power or more support for government?
  - more participation of the masses or politicians that are more responsive and committed?

- economic equality or equal opportunities?
- guard political freedoms or empower the masses?
- democratically committed political leaders or an independent judiciary?
- more questioning of political power or more respect for democratically elected leaders?

- In your view, which institutions are critically important to hold the *South African* government accountable? (e.g. parliament, Chapter 9 Institutions, NGO's, media, the judiciary, political opposition, the public, the ANC as a party)

- Do you feel close to any political party? Very, somewhat or not very close?

- How do you define 'editorial independence'?

- What are the most important skills a political reporter/ editor must have?

- What does the concept of nation-building mean?

- In News and Current Affairs: what, if anything, is the difference between a commercial broadcaster, a state broadcaster and a public service broadcaster?

- Are there issues a journalist should not be neutral about? If yes, what are these?

- In a political sense: Who or what do you feel loyal to?

- There are different views on what role a political journalist/ editor at the SABC should play in this democracy. I am interested in your view of the ideal situation: what ought an SABC journalist aspire to? (attach weight 1-10):

- be a neutral reporter who mirrors reality
- support government in its struggle for nation-building
- be critical of political power
- support the ANC
- be an adversary to government
- disseminate information on behalf of government
- be a watchdog ("Fourth Estate")
- educate the public
- explain and interpret the news
- firmly support nation-building, but not necessarily government
- do not follow any ideology
- be a neutral facilitator of public debate, give people a forum to express their views
- other?

## **PART TWO**

### *SABC News and Current Affairs: The institutional culture*

#### **3. Institutional Culture**

- How would you describe the institutional culture within News and Current Affairs?
- Is there one or many? If applicable: describe sub-cultures
- Talk about dominant culture and how it has changed over time:
  - real power centres
  - in the event of clashes, who sides with whom?
- What are the driving forces?
- How have you experienced the relationship between SABC and government? How is/ was this reflected in the news coverage?
- How committed are SABC journalists towards nation-building?

#### **4. News Decisions**

Let's talk about news decisions and how they come about...

- what story to cover, what angle to use and which sources
- what to say and not to say, how to say it
- if the story makes it onto the bulletin and where does it feature on the bulletin

What do these decisions depend on?

##### **4.1 Dominant Role Perceptions**

- Whom do people feel most accountable to: their boss, the audience, their conscience, the public, government, democracy, parliament, the constitution, the SABC's editorial code, X?
- Are people aware of the editorial policies?
- Do staff know what is expected of them?

##### **4.2 Skills**

- What are the biggest problems in terms of skills at the SABC?

### **4.3 Management, Morale**

- How would you describe staff morale?
- How would you describe the management style practised at the SABC?
- Do you agree with what news management expects from you?
- What is your relationship with your superiors?
- Do you feel supported by management?
- Are there interventions by management that you would consider inappropriate?
- What would you do differently if you were GCEO or Head of News?

### **4.4 Pressure and Rewards**

- If you were a powerful politician trying to change an unflattering story, who would you approach and how? Why?
- Have you ever experienced pressure to make a news decision that you felt was inappropriate and conflicted with your own principles?
- Can you describe the situation?
- How did you respond?
- How did you feel about your response?
- Were you surprised that this happened to you?
- How many journalists do you think have made similar experiences?
- How do you think most other journalists would have responded?
- Have you ever been confronted with a news-decision in which you felt you had to consider your own future/ career prospects/ political loyalties?
- Can you explain what happened and how you felt?
- How prevalent is it?
- Which behaviour is rewarded, which not. How? How do people respond?
- How does self-censorship work at the SABC?

- 
- *opportunity for feedback*
  - *confirm arrangements regarding consent and confidentiality*