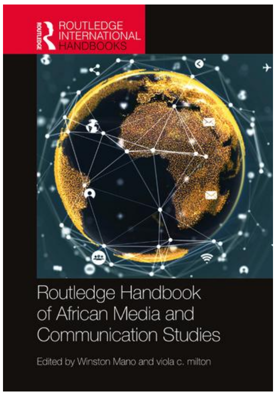

Routledge Handbook of African Media and Communication Studies

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Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351273206-15
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Published online on: 12 Feb 2021

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Not just a benevolent bystander

The corrosive role of private sector media on the sustainability of the South African Broadcasting Corporation

Kate Skinner

Introduction

Post-apartheid, South Africa's public service broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), has been one of the only examples of public service (as opposed to state) broadcasting on the African continent (Bussiek 2013). Once one of Africa's most notorious state broadcasters, the SABC was transformed post 1994 into a public-service broadcaster through a number of policy and legislative processes. This, however, has been a difficult, stop-start process. The corporation has experienced challenges at the level of governance, management, finances and editorial independence. These problems intensified from 2007 onwards, with the SABC experiencing near constant board and management instability and also financial instability (Lloyd et al 2010; Ad hoc Committee 2017).

Throughout these challenges the dominant explanations and narratives in the media – but also in academic debates – have centred around the SABC's 'incorrigible incompetence and corruption'. The story told is one of a technology luddite, a lumbering, wasteful public institution under constant government encroachment, an institution that should ultimately be privatised (see De Vos 2018). But there is another important set of explanations that is more rarely explored – the constraining role of private sector broadcasters on the SABC and on the broadcasting environment as a whole in South Africa.

The dominant narrative, especially in the media, has been that subscription broadcaster MultiChoice – a company that operates across Africa – has exhibited 'breath-taking technological innovation', financial astuteness, efficiency and effectiveness (Harber 2012). And it is true that MultiChoice has been at the forefront of implementing new technologies (ibid). It is also true that it has become a hugely successful and profitable international business, with its parent company Naspers dominating the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. However, alongside, and core to these successes have been 'cut-throat' business practices including the strong lobbying (manipulation) of a number of broadcasting players, including the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), its predecessor the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), the SABC and government itself.

This chapter explores this private sector impact on public service broadcasting, using the South African case study of the SABC and subscription broadcaster, MultiChoice. The focus is specifically on television. Broadcasting policy debates in South Africa – over the last decade – have been focussed particularly on television transformation and the digital migration from analogue to digital terrestrial television (DTT).

A critical political economy approach

The chapter adopts a primarily critical political economy of the media analytical frame. At the centre of critical political economy critiques are analyses of power and inequality (McChesney 2013; Wasko et al. 2011). Critical political economists examine the socio-economic aspects of media systems. They acknowledge that in the new evolving digital media environment there has been an explosion of content, channels and programming – and with the proliferation of "on demand content" and social media – greater interactivity and audience participation. They agree that this is an important starting point for the production and distribution of a diversity of content and citizen engagement with this content, all essential to the deepening of democracy (McChesney 2013; Wasko et al. 2011; Durdag 2016).

However, simultaneously, critical political economists also make important observations about the *nature* of content and audiences' *access* to content. Here they distil some important challenges to media and democracy developments in the digital environment which is pertinent to this study.

Critical political economists focus on the important issue of diversity – an issue that lies at the heart of media and democracy debates. The theorist Napoli, for instance, looks at issues of 'source', 'content' and 'exposure' diversity. Napoli (2001) refers to 'source' diversity as the diversity of ownership of media outlets, ownership of content/programming, and diversity of the workforce within individual media outlets. He considers 'content' diversity as including format-programming diversity, demographic diversity reflected in programming and the diversity of ideas in programming. Finally, he refers to 'exposure' diversity as the diversity of content received by audiences (Napoli 2001). Napoli argues that there may be a cornucopia of content produced but what is critical is that this media is in fact consumed, engaged and interacted with – and by all citizens.

Taking all these aspects of diversity into account, critical political economists point to the fact that diversity principles are in fact (strongly) compromised by market conditions and in market-led economies – and at all three levels.

Critical political economists point to global, regional and national concentrations of ownership of the media – and the impact on content – which is a significant problem in South Africa, across the broadcasting landscape (see Bagdikian 2004; Rumney 2014; Dugmore 2018).

In terms of 'content diversity' they point to the strong growth in the commercialisation of content, over time, including the dissolving of the Chinese walls between editorial and advertising, and with this the growth in native advertising and product placements. They point to the explosion in light entertainment and with this the marginalisation of more democracy-enriching content including news, current affairs, foreign and local news, especially for poorer, lower living standards measure audiences (Lowe and Berg 2013; BBC 2015).

Finally, critical political economists highlight issues of access and the growing cost to the ordinary media user of accessing content. Critical political economists point to the costs of data, the cost of upgrades to devices and the growth of pay-walls and subscriptions to access "quality" content (see Reid 2016).

It is in this unequal context of media ownership concentration and unequal access to quality programming and content, especially for poorer audiences that this study is located. The chapter can be read in terms of the broader efforts at post-colonial transformation and indigenisation of public media institutions.

Qualitative research methods

In line with a critical political economy frame the chapter has adopted a primarily qualitative methodological approach. The chapter presents the information gathered from a series of in-depth interviews with policy makers (including government representatives, representatives from the regulator, ICASA and members of parliament) and other key stakeholders (including broadcasters, independent producers and civil society organisations) "pushing" to shape and influence policy and policy-making processes. Further, it presents the analysis of a number of policy documents, particularly DTT policy documents.

Twists and turns: developments in South Africa's broadcasting policy

Broadly, there has been one major restructuring process in broadcasting in post-apartheid South Africa – and two failed attempts. The first was the restructuring process initiated after the passing of the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act of 1993 – this established South Africa's three-tier broadcasting system (including public, commercial and community broadcasting). The second and third processes include South Africa's failed Integrated Information Communication Technology (ICT) policy process and the digital terrestrial television (DTT) migration process. The focus of this chapter will be on the first restructuring process and the failed DTT migration – these processes were most directly impacted by MultiChoice.

First phase of broadcast restructuring: SABC transformation but fiscal austerity and MultiChoice constraints

During apartheid, the SABC dominated the broadcasting landscape as a state broadcaster. However, even before the end of apartheid, significant policy changes were implemented. The appointment of the first democratic board of the SABC in 1993 was seen as critical to transforming the SABC into a public broadcaster, a move that was seen as essential for the holding of free and fair elections. The board selection process was broadly open and democratic and stood in sharp contrast to apartheid days when the president, in line with the Broadcasting Act of 1976, appointed the board and selected its chair (see Duncan 2001; Horwitz 2001).

Simultaneously with the appointment of the new democratic board the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act of 1993 was passed, also before the end of apartheid. One of the central purposes of the act was to create a new diverse broadcasting landscape. The law established an independent regulator for broadcasting, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), to regulate public broadcasting in the public interest, open up the airwaves and promote the provision of:

> A diverse range of sound and television broadcast services on national, regional and local levels which when viewed collectively, cater for all language and cultural groups and provide entertainment, education and information.
>
> *(RSA 1993, IBA, Section 2)*

The IBA Act required that the regulator conduct an inquiry into three key issues (public broadcasting, cross-media control and South African content) before fully commencing re-regulation of the broadcasting sector. The Triple Enquiry Report, drafted as a result of this inquiry, adopted a rich and multifaceted view of diversity focusing on access, equality, independence and unity. Further to this, the report put forward a set of recommendations to implement a new, diverse post-apartheid broadcasting landscape. The report included a detailed financial modelling exercise. It linked this model to concrete ways in which the SABC and the broadcasting landscape as a whole could be restructured (Duncan 2001; Horwitz 2001).

In terms of the broadcasting landscape, the recommendations included a call for the SABC to sell eight regional stations and one of its three television channels and to re-licence this channel as a free to air commercial channel with significant public service obligations. The understanding was that the funds generated through these sales would return to the SABC (see Lloyd et al. 2010).

In terms of the SABC, the report called for a mix of advertising and sponsorship, licence fees and government grants. Advertising was to be reduced to approximately 50 percent of the SABC's total revenue. The report called for significant local content, educational and African language programming targets and for provincial programming (IBA 1995, 47).

This carefully balanced set of proposals, however, was overturned in Parliament. The SABC was allowed to retain its third television channel and to sell off six rather than eight radio stations. Further, the money made on these sales was handed over to the national fiscus and not to the SABC as promised. The SABC thus had a huge public mandate, many channels and limited funding. This created an immediate financial crisis for the corporation – in 1997 it recorded a deficit of R64m with predictions of much higher sums in future years (see Horwitz 2001).

In an environment of strong fiscal austerity in South Africa, international consultants, McKinsey, were then contracted. McKinsey's key objective was to make the SABC sustainable without accessing public funds. The diversity targets initially implemented were then reversed. Certain public programming (including local content) was removed from primetime in favour of more commercially viable programming. Further, the SABC decided to outsource all production except news and current affairs (Lloyd et al. 2010).

The Broadcasting White Paper, 1998 and Broadcasting Act, 1999 consolidated these recommendations by proposing and implementing a cross-subsidisation, commercial funding model. The SABC's television and radio channels were divided into public and public–commercial channels and stations, with proposals for the public–commercial channels to aggressively pursue advertising and for these channels to then cross-subsidise the public channels. The ultimate outcome of these proposals was a cumbersome, bureaucracy-heavy model that was never fully implemented. Ironically the public channels made more money than the commercial channels, entirely undermining the model (see Lloyd et al. 2010). Further, it was a model that – because it did not place caps on advertising – encouraged the aggressive pursuit of advertising across all channels and stations. The implications of this was that the SABC found itself significantly constrained in terms of fulfilling its diversity targets, specifically its African-language targets (see Tleane and Duncan 2003).

While government was taking decisions that directly constrained the SABC and its long-term possibilities for stability and its ability to deliver on its content diversity mandate for all citizens, it was simultaneously taking decisions that directly benefited and bolstered the subscription broadcasting sector – and in particular MultiChoice – targeted at more elite audiences.

Background to Naspers, M-Net and DSTV

The original print media company, Nasionale Pers (later Naspers), was established in 1915. The company played a specific role in bolstering apartheid (see Horwitz 2001; Matisonn 2015; Van Vuuren 2017).

In the 1980s, South Africa's print media companies started to lose advertising revenue due to the advent of television in 1976. A plan was then made to launch a subscription channel owned by the print media companies. Although all four major newspaper groups originally owned shares, Naspers ultimately became the sole owner. M-Net was launched in 1986 (see Harber 2012).

A number of decisions were taken in the apartheid and post-apartheid periods that specifically bolstered the power of M-Net – and eroded the power of the SABC. Firstly, it is critical to note that the IBA Act included a grandfather clause protecting the M-Net Licence "under existing conditions" for 13 years (Matisonn 2015). As part of this arrangement, M-Net was allocated valuable, scarce terrestrial frequencies – a highly unusual allocation for a subscription broadcaster (Horwitz 2001; Matisonn 2015).

Then, in addition to occupying valuable spectrum, M-Net was allowed to continue with its lucrative initially one-hour and then two-hour daily "open time" window. This "open time" slot allowed M-Net to broadcast its signal unencrypted during primetime television viewing, giving M-Net access to significant advertising revenue and opportunities to lure wealthier audiences over to pay-TV. The "open time" window was to be closed as soon as M-Net broke even, namely, as soon as it signed up 150,000 subscribers. M-Net achieved this in 2 years, but the window was allowed to continue for 21 years (see Harber 2012). The SABC fought this arrangement. The Corporation argued that the window's closure was essential to freeing up advertising revenue for itself and also for South Africa's new proposed free-to-air commercial broadcaster, launched later as eTV. This plea fell on deaf ears (see Horwitz 2001).

Not only was M-Net given specific privileges, so was Naspers' satellite service, DSTV. As Teer-Tomaselli (2011) points out, the IBA Act failed to provide specifically for satellite broadcasting:

> The IBA was responsible for the regulation of terrestrial broadcasting. While aspirant entrants to the satellite sector waited in vain throughout the 1990s, the terrestrial subscription broadcaster, M-Net used the opportunity and the gap in policy prescription to declare itself exempt from the need to apply for a licence for satellite activity and established a direct-to-home digital satellite television service, DSTV.

DSTV was launched in 1995 and the service grew without a licence and without competition until 2007, when it was finally licenced and when ICASA (the IBA's successor) moved to introduce new subscription broadcasters into the market. At this point however DSTV was already so dominant that it was difficult to introduce new players. Four subscription services were awarded licences after a competitive bidding process. However, only one service – On Digital Media – launched. Within a year, however, it went into business rescue (see Lloyd et al 2010).

In 2012, ICASA introduced another subscription licencing process. Again, ICASA licenced a number of new stations. This time the process was entirely unsuccessful – no new stations launched (SOS and MMA 2017; ICASA 2017)

By 2017 MultiChoice owned 98.2 percent of the subscription market. It was beamed into more the 50 percent of all households. It consumed almost 100 percent of all subscription revenue and a substantial proportion of all advertising revenue (more than 50 percent). The overall largest percentage of revenue in the television sector is subscription revenue, i.e. 76 percent (SOS and MMA 2017; ICASA 2017). In a nutshell, MultiChoice, a subscription broadcaster, was now the dominant player in the post-apartheid South African broadcasting landscape, dwarfing all other broadcasters, certainly on the revenue front.

The second phase of broadcast restructuring: MultiChoice plays an active limiting role

As stated previously, there have been one major broadcasting restructuring process and two failed attempts. The two failed processes have included the DTT and the integrated ICT policy processes. As discussed, this chapter focuses on the DTT process.

To understand the DTT restructuring process – and its failures – it is critical to understand the original promises of DTT. Over the decades a number of television technologies have developed internationally, including terrestrial, cable and satellite technologies. Over time these technologies have shifted from less efficient analogue technologies to digital versions (Galperin 2004; Marsden and Arino 2000; Madikiza 2011).

DTT specifically affects terrestrial television technologies i.e. technologies that use Earth-based (terrestrial) broadcasting transmitters. Terrestrial technologies have dominated the South African television environment.

DTT technologies most importantly free up valuable spectrum important for mobile broadband services. Further, on the television front, they allow for a significant number of channels to be broadcast in the place of a single analogue channel. As the technologies have gained efficiency it has become possible for up to 20 channels to replace a single analogue television channel, allowing for the possibility of significant quantities of programming to be delivered cheaply and efficiently.

A number of policy processes have influenced the overall outcome of the DTT project. As stated previously, these have included government's digital migration policy (including various amendments) and various sets of DTT regulations, issued by the Regulator, ICASA.

My focus in this chapter is on the digital migration policy.

South Africa's digital migration policy: MultiChoice moves to protect its interests

South Africa's Department of Communication's original Digital Migration Policy of 2008 detailed the following, among a number of objectives for the migration: creating an environment for the uptake of DTT by all households including the poor; ensuring a future for existing services and introducing new services; filling information gaps in the present analogue environment in terms of government, provincial and parliamentary information; ensuring better coverage of all languages; ensuring more programming for people with disabilities; and developing South Africa's creative industries (RSA 2008; Waghorn 2011; Reid 2012).

There were three further sets of important issues covered by the policy. These included mechanisms to ensure universal access (including subsidies for poor households); mechanisms to ensure support for local content (including proposals for the establishment of digital content generation hubs) and a series of technical specifications for set-top boxes/decoders. This was to ensure interoperability (ensuring a number of services could be accessed from a number of service providers on the same box) and a "return path" capability (facilitating audiences' access to the Internet).

In summary, the original vision for the digital migration process was the creation of a 'smart box'/decoder with subsidies to facilitate citizens' acquisition/purchase of the decoder and subsidies to ensure that quality content could be accessed via the decoder. The original digital migration policy of 2008, however, was subject to major contestation. There were multiple amendments and multiple new start dates. The constant delays eventually threatened to render the entire DTT policy and its benefits obsolete as new technologies developed and started to overtake DTT.

The first set of amendments was tabled on 19 August 2011. The policy adopted a new digital standard – DVB-T2 in place of the DVB-T standard originally adopted – this allowed for up to 16 standard definition digital television channels for every 1 analogue channel (RSA 2011). This created the technical possibility for a significant plurality of content. However, the haggling that proceeded this decision led to loss of money, time and momentum on the project (see Armstrong and Collins 2011).

The second set of policy amendments was tabled in February 2012. Again, there were shifts to the 'digital switch-on' deadlines. Further, amendments were made to introduce new players during the 'dual illumination' period. (The dual illumination period is the period where both digital and analogue signals run simultaneously before the analogue signal is switched off.) This amendment potentially increased the diversity of broadcasters and content. However, no particular support measures were proposed as to ensure the sustainability of these new players (see RSA 2012).

The third set of policy amendments was then tabled in December 2013. Again, this set a new digital switch-on date as 1 April 2014, just over a year before the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) June 2015 deadline for analogue switch-off (RSA 2013). At this point, battles that had quietly simmered around the issue of 'set-top box control'/encryption 'exploded' into the policy arena. Contestations brought the migration process to a shuddering halt. It is during these policy debates that MultiChoice chose to flex its muscles and became a major campaigner against encryption (Gedye 2015a, 2015b).

The arguments for and against encryption

'Conditional access' is an encryption or signal-scrambling system. Encryption is usually used in the pay-TV environment. However, more recently, a number of countries have started to adopt encryption systems in the free-to-air environment e.g. Germany. In the pay-TV environment, encryption allows only those who pay for the service to watch the service.

In the free-to-air environment, encryption is used for other purposes such as preventing the copying of television content or restricting the geographic area in which the set-top box/decoder can be used. Finally, importantly, it allows for the launch of new services including subscription services. ('Set-top box control' is the South African term for conditional access (Lewis, 2014)).

MultiChoice put forward a number of arguments against encryption. They argued that one of the most important issues in the DTT process was to ensure that the costs of set-top boxes were kept as low as possible to ensure maximum uptake. They argued that conditional access/encryption would necessarily make the migration more expensive, as both the boxes and the call centres (needed to support the boxes if encryption was used) would be expensive. Most importantly, however, they argued that it was unfair for the government to support encryption because it could give an 'unfair advantage' to new pay operators – encryption would allow these operators to launch their services with government effectively subsidising their encryption systems. MultiChoice argued strongly that free to air broadcaster, eTV was intent on launching a new pay service.

On the other side: eTV argued that an encryption system was in fact critical for issues of diversity, the long-term survival of free-to-air television and diversity of content across the broadcasting landscape.

eTV argued that to allow free-to-air broadcasters to effectively compete with pay operators – in particular, MultiChoice – some form of encryption was essential. They stated that encryption would help stem the tide of grey boxes coming into the country as had happened in places like Mauritius during their migration process (see Berger 2010). eTV argued that without encryption, any box would be able to pick up the signal, allowing for the distribution of cheap and often ineffective boxes undermining the DTT experience and pushing people with money to pay options. Encryption, however, would create uniformity to the viewing experience as regards the electronic programming guide. It would assist installers and call centre staff to more effectively assist viewers with installation and reception issues. Further, it would allow free-to-air broadcasters to access high-definition 'premium content' more easily – international content sellers are worried about piracy and prefer high-definition content to be encrypted. They argued that encryption would ensure a strong, diverse, quality offering to begin to compete with pay-television (see Gedye 2015a). Finally, eTV flatly denied that they intended to launch a subscription service.

The different broadcasting roleplayers lined up to take up the different positions. eTV had a number of supporters, including the SOS: Support Public Broadcasting Coalition, Media Monitoring Africa, a section of the National Association for Manufacturers in Electronic Components (Namec), the South African Communications Forum (SACF) and the community broadcaster, Cape TV.

MultiChoice's fierce lobbying created splits in two organisations. For example, Namec split to create two Namecs – one supporting encryption, the other opposing it. Also, splits developed within the community broadcasting body – the Association of Community Television, South Africa (ACT-SA). Both groupings were susceptible to this lobbying – community broadcasters were dependent on MultiChoice to broadcast their channels on DSTV to gain national coverage and to grow audiences and advertisers. Also, the faction of Namec that supported MultiChoice's 'no encryption' stance was offered a major joint contract with MultiChoice and a Chinese manufacturer, Skyworth Digital, to manufacture set-top boxes (Gedye 2015a). There were no clear benefits to either Namec or ACT-SA for supporting MultiChoice's position. Namec stood to gain more from the manufacture of encrypted boxes and community broadcasters had more to gain from supporting a robust free-to-air market.

MultiChoice also strongly lobbied the SABC. The SABC had originally been one of the key innovators and drivers behind encryption.

The SABC's decision to abandon encryption was linked to a confidential contract signed between the two players. The contract had a history. For a number of years, the SABC was under pressure to launch a 24-hour news channel. There were several international 24-hour news channels on MultiChoice's subscription platform, DSTV. Then, in 2008, eTV launched eNCA, the first South African 24-hour news channel. By 2013, however, there was still no free-to-air or public service South African 24-hour news channel available to all.

The reasons for this were numerous, but chief amongst these was National Treasury's strong fiscal austerity stance and thus resistance to funding public broadcasting. They continued to push for the SABC to be sustainable through mainly commercial funding streams making it difficult, if not impossible, to launch new channels (Underhill 2013).

It was at this point that MultiChoice stepped into the breach and agreed to pay the SABC R553m over five years to launch the channel (Underhill 2013). Further, MultiChoice pushed for the launch of an SABC entertainment channel – *Encore* – using SABC archival material. Both channels were to be hosted on MultiChoice's DSTV platform with an understanding that the 24-hour news channel would be launched on the DTT free-to-air platform once this was (finally) launched (Underhill 2013). *Encore* however was to remain restricted to the DSTV pay platform.

The SABC was not in a strong negotiating position. MultiChoice had superior finances and given government's resistance to fund new channels the SABC had few places to turn. In their secret contract, which was later leaked to the media, MultiChoice stipulated that the deal could only go ahead if the SABC agreed to drop its demands for encryption (Ad hoc Committee 2017).

The MultiChoice/SABC deal was a turning point – it pushed government to change its position on encryption. However, Communications Minister Carrim staved off this decision – but only for a while (My Broadband 2017).

A compromise is crafted, then scuppered

Minister Eunice Carrim, appointed by President Zuma in 2013, moved into the fray to find a compromise over encryption. He proposed a number of amendments that confirmed the inclusion of an encryption system in government-subsidised set-top boxes – but its use was not mandatory. Also, if it was to be used at some later point the subscription operator would have to pay. He thus created the possibility for the benefits of encryption to be realized, including the possibilities for new subscription services to be launched.

MultiChoice's opposition to these amendments was strong and immediate. The pay operator took out expensive full-page adverts in a number of Sunday newspapers in 2014 accusing the Minister of siding and materially supporting eTV. Carrim was then removed from his post after the 2014 elections. Speculation was rife that his removal was linked directly to his compromise position around conditional access (Gopal 2015).

A fourth set of policy amendments was then tabled in March 2015 by Carrim's successor, Minister Faith Muthambi. These policies moved to reverse Carrim's proposals. A number of paragraphs were inserted into the policy that stated that set-top boxes should 'not have capabilities to encrypt broadcast signals' (RSA 2015). Further, the policy stated: 'Depending on the kind of broadcasting services broadcasters may want to provide to their customers, individual broadcasters may at their own cost make decisions regarding encryption of content' (RSA 2015). It was eTV's turn to state their strong opposition, and they immediately took the Minister to court. eTV lost this court case, took it on appeal and won. The Minister, SABC and MultiChoice then took the matter to the Constitutional Court. The case was heard in February 2017 and judgement was handed down in June 2017. The matter was finally resolved in favour of the Minister, the SABC and MultiChoice (see TechCentral 2017; Karim 2017).

The Constitutional Court however was not ruling on the substantive issues. The legal arguments revolved around the rationality of Minister Muthambi's policy-making process and her reversal of Carrim's policy amendments. The final Constitutional Court majority judgement was that policy making was 'fundamentally a power assigned to the executive' (TechCentral 2017). A dissenting judgement however stated that the Minister's policy amendment should not be 'immunised from scrutiny as her disregard for her constitutional and statutory obligations was patent' (TechCentral 2017). Consequently, the court was 'not only entitled but obliged to intervene' (TechCentral 2017). This, however, was the dissenting judgement.

Ultimately, MultiChoice emerged victorious. Their subscription broadcasting monopoly remained intact. The prospects of launching a new subscription channel became more remote. In the context of the broadcasting landscape as a whole they remained the only substantive player that could offer a host of channels and host of quality content. They remained the only player that could easily access premium content.

South Africa missed the international analogue 'switch-off' deadline of June 2015 set by the United Nations' International Telecommunications Union. Some months later, on 1 February 2016, the government quietly, with little fanfare, 'switched-on' the digital signal thus launching the 'dual-illumination' period and the start of the migration. However, as no set-top boxes were yet commercially available this launch in effect gave terrestrial pay-TV broadcaster, Naspers-owned M-Net, a 'boost' as it was ready with its 'GoTV' offering and their specially designed boxes. The free-to-air broadcasters, SABC and eTV, made no announcements (see McLeod 2016).

Conclusion – the overall undermining of free-to-air television and the SABC

The original promises for DTT for the country and specifically for the SABC were substantial. The major promise for South Africa was the release of very valuable spectrum for new telecommunication and mobile applications – and in terms of television more content and programming for all South Africans in all South Africa's official languages.

In terms of content, the SABC was originally to have eight free-to-air digital DTT channels. Then, as the efficiency of the technology improved further, the promise was for the SABC to broadcast close to 20 channels. However, to date, the SABC has only been able to produce two new channels and only one for free-to-air TV.

When digital 'switch-on' was finally launched in February 2016, the SABC launched its original three channels (SABC 1, SABC 2 and SABC 3) and their 24-hour news channel. The *Encore* channel was restricted to DSTV.

This launch was a shadow of the original promise and what made matters more challenging was that the SABC had, through abandoning its rights to encryption, relegated itself (and all free to air broadcasters) to a cheap 'dumb box' for the future.

In summary, the near collapse of the DTT programme has left the free-to-air environment bereft of development and innovation. The SABC has been reduced to a four TV channel, technology laggard. Also, in the process, the very concept of public service broadcasting and its possibilities to innovate, re-create and re-imagine itself, in the digital environment, has been undermined. And sadly, the SABC has colluded in its own demise. Its secret deal with MultiChoice did not strengthen the public broadcaster but only further strengthened MultiChoice.

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