



SABC NEWS AGENCY LAUNCH

08 MAY 2008

SPEECH BY BHEKI KHUMALO, SABC BOARD MEMBER, at the LAUNCH OF THE SABC NEWS AGENCY

Acting Group Chief Executive

SABC Board Members, Group Executive and Management Team,

Distinguished Guests and

Members of the Media

Good morning, and thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us this morning for the launch of an exciting new initiative from SABC News - the SABC News Agency.

This launch, indeed, is splendid good news about the SABC at a time when less encouraging news can be the order of the day.

There is, let us admit it frankly, considerable doubt and disruption, clouding the activities of the SABC - all of which have of late put the organization under stress. There is a tendency, fuelled by the media - whose natural habit is to hunt in the security of a pack, and who see the SABC as a convenient whipping boy or girl - to see everything that goes on in our organization as reflecting this or that political personality or

faction in SA politics. It is time that we broke this clammy and expedient grasp, and set out – for all to see – the valuable wares that we have to offer, as an institution of merit and significance, of technological and marketing excellence, and of value to the democracy that we all, perhaps haltingly at times and warts and all, are slowly coming to love and nurture.

Like all great organizations in a democracy, we shall shake off the things that would deter us from our prime task of being a credible public broadcaster in the best tradition – an influence for the good in our country, our region, our continent and the world. Be sure of that.

Our Board has been duly constituted under a democratic Constitution and the rules of Parliament, and it will work tirelessly to mend any things that need correction, and to develop this institution as a force for all South Africans to be immensely proud of. Be very sure of that.

We shall discharge our responsibilities of oversight, direction and financial and other prudence, as well as all our fiduciary responsibilities, with unswerving attention. Be absolutely sure of that.

Permit me, then, just a few opening remarks about the state of the SABC as we stand here this morning. It is an organization (though for so long sullied by racism and chauvinism) with a long vintage, nearly as old as the venerable world broadcasters such as the BBC, which traces its early beginnings to 1922 and received its Charter in 1927. It was the

estimable, memorable Lord Reith who, in its early years, resolutely steered the BBC into a path of fierce independence and news reliability. Even Britain's enemies relied on the BBC for accurate reporting of what was going on.

Indeed, Reith even stood up to people like Winston Churchill in Government who for instance, at the time of the General Strike in Britain in 1926, wanted to commandeer the organization for government ends. Not because he was British (in fact he was a Scot) but because he was a broadcaster to the bone, Reith left us all a legacy which is a lodestar particularly in troubled or uncertain times. And the august radio lectures which carry his name have become an event in the intellectual life, not only of Britain but across a far wider front. That Nigerian icon, Wole Soyinka, poet, playwright, thinker, activist and former prisoner, who was Africa's first Nobel laureate for literature, in 2004 left a deep imprint on so many minds with his lectures around the theme "Climate of Fear", in the heyday of the so-called War on Terror; and asked memorably and arrestingly: "What exactly are we afraid of?"

We in South Africa, faced with enormous challenges and substantial uncertainties, should ask ourselves that crucial question now. We are bigger than our problems and any problem people. Our broadcaster has the clout, the skill and the sound institutional base to lift people's spirits and show where this nation stands as it approaches the halfway mark through its second decade of freedom.

We should re-commit ourselves to a public broadcaster which is independent of government, corporations and institutions; one that carries the news without fear or favour; one that seeks to add to the body of knowledge and good in society; and one which unashamedly sees public broadcasting as, in Reith's thinking, a cause of social betterment rather than an end in itself. We have to distance ourselves from the purely commercial, inter or even intra political party squabbles which are such a preoccupation of so much of the media in South Africa while maintaining our financial and marketing strength and expertise. We must be different from all other media, since we are a solemn part of a public trust. And we must not fail those who, whether in a shack in Khayalitsha or a mansion in Morningside, want to know one thing: That what they see and hear on the SABC is as close to the truth as humanly possible. And this means a wide diversity of viewpoint, and no predisposition to corral off some trends of thought from the air.

Which brings me to the exciting new project and milestone that we celebrate today, the launch of the SABC News Agency,

News shapes our world. As the country's public broadcaster, we are mandated to provide a variety of Television and Radio services to ensure that all South Africans are informed, educated and entertained, in their language of choice. However, at SABC News, we have elected to move beyond this mandate and have converted it into a passion - a passion which enables all our citizens, through our extensive radio, television and news media services, to understand more about our ever increasingly complex world on a daily basis.

-Today it is a cliché, but never more true, that the world is a global village and our society is becoming more globally interconnected. As a result of the technological advancements in our increasingly interdependent world, events that take place in distant countries on our African continent or across the oceans may be of vital significance to our country. And, in turn, the choices and actions that we make and take right here on our own doorstep may reverberate around the world. And that happens in an instant, in the blink of an eye – so fleet-footed is modern technology.

How we comprehend the world and the major issues that confront us daily - such as peace and security, politics, energy, sustainability and the environment, economic development, health, and the arts and culture - will shape how we live in it and how we react to issues. And an essential part of this is using properly-researched knowledge and contextualising issues.

Yet, despite what the developed world considers relatively easy access to world news at the mere press of a button, it remains a fact that there are still many hundreds of thousands of South Africans who have no access to technology. Their only link with the outside world might be at best the ability to tune into a radio station and, at worst, no link at all, and the need to rely on local conversation and discourse.

The role of the SABC is to provide this link and we continue to work tirelessly to ensure that our citizens, even those situated in the most

remote of rural areas, have access to this global village. With the impressive increase in the licensing of community radio stations, which supplements the SABC offering in many regions, more people are being reached. However, these radio stations have limited budgets and limited resources to bring the news of the world to their listeners, and it is necessary constantly to review this matter so as to make them strong and viable; and as diverse in viewpoint as possible.

This is where the exciting new offering from SABC News, in the form of the SABC News Agency, can step in and deliver the news! With our extensive network of news bureaus, crews and correspondents based on the ground across Africa and the world, SABC News has immediate access to a vast repository of exclusive video and audio content on a daily basis, to deliver news about Africa and the world, with a strong pan-African perspective, to our citizens. This helps to counter the skewed view of the world that sees events from only one side, usually that of the developed nations.

Acknowledged as the largest news-gathering and packaging organisation on the African continent, SABC News has a strong presence with news crews on the ground across the length and breadth of South Africa, news bureaus in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Washington, New York, London, Brussels, China, Brazil and Jamaica. This is the envy of many large news organizations.

With this extensive footage available exclusively to SABC News, it was the next obvious step for our organisation to make this content available for sale in various packaged formats to meet the specific needs of clients within our identified target audiences - news organisations; independent and community-based broadcasters, both radio and television; film and documentary makers; media owners; advertising, marketing and PR agencies; production houses; corporate clients; and government departments and agencies.

We have the capacity to provide comprehensive coverage of news, current affairs and events that occur around the world, and in the most remote rural areas of South Africa. Another unique feature of the SABC News Agency is our ability to offer content in all eleven of South Africa's official languages which will guarantee that our clients have access to immediate and accurate news with a strong African flavour, in the language of their choice. An added advantage is the provision of news bulletins and content in French, through the programming offered on our newly-launched 24-hour SABC News International channel. That opens whole new vistas for us, particularly on the African continent where the French linguistic tradition is so strong.

To ensure that we are in a position continually to offer our clients relevant daily news footage and current affairs content, we review our schedules and programme offerings on an ongoing basis. In line with this, I am pleased to announce an exciting new addition to our current affairs programming line-up.

-Launching tonight on SABC 1 at 9.30pm is "Cutting Edge", an investigative, hard-hitting documentary-type series which will delve deep into topical issues affecting the everyday lives of young South Africans. Tonight's launch episode is titled "Up in Smoke" and examines young teenagers in and around Durban who are experimenting with a new drug on the market: a mixture of dagga and Stocrin – one of the tablets prescribed by a medical doctor for some HIV-positive patients. Apart from the dangers of smoking such a mixture, medical practitioners are concerned that this could escalate into another drug resistant strain – this time for HIV&Aids. I encourage you all to watch this series.

It is also fitting that we are launching the SABC News Agency during the week in which the annual World Press Freedom Day was celebrated around the world on the 3rd of May.

This year's theme for World Press Freedom Day, which was established by the UN in 1993, is: "access to information and the empowerment of people". By ensuring access to SABC News content and footage, and the SABC's extensive archive library, we are ensuring total citizen empowerment. That, after all, is what public broadcasting is all about.

I thank you.

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