

NEWS

CURRENT AFFAIRS AND INFORMATION PROGRAMMING

INTRODUCTION

The SABC occupies a distinctive position of trust in the lives of its viewers and listeners. We are the most extensive, all-inclusive and diverse news organisation in South Africa. The SABC considers it a duty to provide consistent, relevant, useful and top-quality information and analysis on which all South Africans can rely as they discuss and deliberate, form opinions and build a common future.

The Independent Broadcasting Authority Act, the Broadcasting Act, the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters and the SABC's Editorial Code set out the essential requirements for news and current affairs services that are to be studied, understood and observed by every member of the SABC's news staff.

This policy covers all the news, current affairs and information programming broadcast by the SABC, including news bulletins and current affairs programmes provided for radio, television and SABC Africa.

THE SABC'S ROLE IN NEWS, CURRENT AFFAIRS AND INFORMATION PROGRAMMES

The SABC recognises the important part played by news and information in human, social and economic growth and development, especially in societies such as ours that are embarking on nation building. The SABC takes account of this, as it is in these circumstances that news, current affairs and information services can be the catalyst for positive and progressive development and change.

Through this policy, the SABC is well positioned - and unmatched in the market - to meet the challenge of telling the South African story with compassion, determination and resolution, while creating forums where South Africans from every walk of life can communicate ideas about their common future.


The SABC should offer information that is substantial, and analysis that is authentic and meaningful to ordinary, enquiring South Africans so that they can form their own opinions. Also, since our services are for everyone's use, they should take account of representation and identity, and reflect life as it is. This means accounts and interviews, and other forms of presentation, should reflect and draw on South Africa's diversity of people, languages, cultures, genders, abilities and classes, and the full spectrum of opinions, perspectives and comment.

For the SABC to achieve these objectives, we require - and our audiences rightly expect - the news staff to uphold the highest editorial and ethical standards consistently and diligently. Clearly what we uphold as a common good for society, such as decent and incorruptible values, robust and vigorous creativity, and healthy and wholesome growth and development, lies at the very heart of good journalism.

The SABC's freedom of expression and its journalistic, creative and programming independence is guaranteed and protected in law. The principle of editorial independence is therefore fundamental to the operations of the public broadcaster and especially important to the functions of the SABC's news division.

The SABC is committed to upholding the independence of its news division and, flowing from this policy, the news division will develop its own internal guidelines on how to entrench this independence and deal with potential conflicts of interest in the newsroom. These guidelines should deal with involvement of reporters in political organisations, declarations of financial or family interests, how gifts and free travel are to be dealt with, etc.





As a public institution, the SABC is often itself the subject of its own news reports. When reporting on itself, the SABC makes sure that it does so fairly and fully.

OBJECTIVITY, ACCURACY, FAIRNESS, IMPARTIALITY AND BALANCE

The SABC's right to freedom of expression comes with an obligation: the duty of every member of its news staff to uphold the highest professional and ethical standards. These are captured in the SABC's Editorial Code, some of the clauses of which are reproduced below:

- We report, contextualise, and present news and current affairs honestly by striving to disclose all the essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts, or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis
- We do not allow advertising, commercial, political or personal considerations to influence our editorial decisions. The SABC is expected to provide information, and as part of this duty should evaluate, analyse and critically appraise government policies and programmes. The SABC is not the mouthpiece of the government of the day, nor should it broadcast its opinion of government policies, unless they relate directly to broadcasting matters
- We seek balance by presenting relevant views on matters of importance, as far as possible. This may not always be achieved in a single programme or news bulletin, but should be done within a reasonable time
- We are guided by news merit and judgement in reaching editorial decisions. Fairness does not require editorial staff to be unquestioning, nor the SABC to give every side of an issue the same amount of time
- We do not accept gifts, favours, free travel, special treatment, or privileges that could compromise our integrity, and any such offer is to be disclosed
- We foster open dialogue with our viewers and listeners, as we are accountable to the public for our reports
- We aim to tell stories from a South African point of view and deal with issues that are important to South Africans. This includes local, African and global issues. We endeavour to contextualise for South Africans their life as global citizens, and to recount the story of South Africa in all its variety and complexity. Given our history, and that South Africa is part of Africa, we see it as our responsibility to endeavour to represent Africa and African stories fairly and diversely
- We are committed to being a truly national broadcaster, providing a showcase for all South Africa's provinces and peoples.

The Code of Conduct for Broadcasters also requires the SABC to report news truthfully, accurately and objectively. In this regard, the staff may not allow their professional judgement to be influenced by pressures from political, commercial or other sectional interests.

Since they are professionals, SABC journalists and other news staff have personal opinions, beliefs and preferences arising from social, educational, cultural and other forms of nurturing. South Africa's apartheid past, and individuals' experiences in contesting and living under it, also accentuates differences that could create unfairness and partiality, or perceptions of such bias. It is the responsibility of SABC journalists and editorial staff to ensure that these forms of individual and collective nurturing do not lead to any form or perception of inequity or prejudice.

In order to meet the required standard of journalistic objectivity it is the responsibility of SABC news staff to be aware of such personal opinions, beliefs and preferences, and to take them into account in gathering and transmitting news. SABC reporting should be, and be seen to be, accurate, fair, impartial and balanced. Our audiences have the right to expect SABC news and current affairs programming not to reflect the personal views of editorial staff.

In assigning staff, SABC editors should be sensitive to published views, associations and backgrounds, so as to avoid any perception of bias, or of vulnerability to undue influence.

SABC news staff are expected to present issues fairly, not to take sides, and to afford the public access to the full range of views on a subject. In this regard, editorial staff should not become emotional, or use emotive language, in writing stories or conducting interviews.

For the SABC to retain its credibility, accuracy is imperative. Research for any news programme has to be thorough, and be checked and cross-checked. Substantiation is also an important tool for ensuring accuracy. Another agency or SABC correspondent should substantiate national and international reports that are not obtained first hand. News and current affairs stories and feeds taken from international broadcasters, bureaux and correspondents are always to be acknowledged, and to be consistent with SABC editorial policies and standards.

SABC editorial staff should always endeavour to present stories in a fair and balanced manner. When exceptional circumstances make it impossible to achieve fairness and balance, or when a damaging critique of an individual or institution is presented, those criticised should be given an opportunity to present their side of the story: the "right of reply". When the response from such an individual or institution is reflected in a subsequent programme, it should be given comparable prominence.

With the best of intentions and efforts, mistakes still happen. When a serious factual error has been made, it should be admitted and corrected as soon as it is realised. The Code of Conduct requires any rectification to be presented with such a degree of prominence and timing as may be adequate and fair in the circumstances so as to attract attention readily.

LANGUAGE AND TONE IN NEWS

It is important for the SABC to get its facts and use of language right. Given our nation's divided history and previously unequal learning systems, the use of South African languages should always take account of the needs and sensitivities of our audiences. This means the use and tone of language should take account of our different cultures, abilities, classes and experiences; avoiding exaggeration, value judgment, unnecessary provocation, and lack of objectivity.

It has now become a standard practice for news stories and bulletins to be produced and broadcast in all eleven official languages. This is another important dimension of language. Since inaccuracies easily creep in when stories are translated, only staff who have the required language skills should translate stories, and they should do so accurately and fairly.

Further guidelines on language use are laid out in the Programming Policy and the Language Broadcasting Policy.


INTERVIEWING

Interviews are an important tool of journalism. In order to achieve the objective of an interview to break new ground and get new information, it is important for interviewing to be purposeful and well researched.

For an interview to be successful, it is important to inform an interviewee of the purpose of the interview, its duration and any other relevant matter, and to establish how he or she prefers to be addressed.

Care should be taken when interviewing ordinary people who do not have any experience of broadcasting. We should also make allowances for the language barrier: confusion and misunderstanding, or difficulty of expression, may arise when an interview is conducted in a language other than the interviewee's home language. If necessary, an interviewer should repeat questions and confirm that the interviewee has a clear understanding of what is asked, and may request the interviewee to clarify answers. We should not make assumptions, or reconstruct an interviewee's responses later; the interview is the opportunity to do so.

Conversely, interviewers are increasingly faced with interviewees who attempt to steer the interview on their own course. In such cases, interruptions may be justified. Any unwillingness to answer questions should be shown up, but this should be done calmly and respectfully.



Further guidelines for dealing with guests are given elsewhere in this policy, and in the policy on Programming.

ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS NEWS

SABC News gives special attention to economics and business news aimed at informing and educating our audiences. Examples are business, commercial and labour laws; harmful business practices; effective ways of saving and spending money; prices, inflation and other basic economic indicators, and how these affect our audiences.

In commissioning and broadcasting economics and business news, SABC news staff should ensure that a range of views, perspectives and opinions - not only the orthodox ones - are presented in a balanced, fair and accurate manner.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Investigative journalism, to which the SABC has made an important contribution, is a key element of our news services. SABC investigative journalism plays a vital part in pursuing matters of public concern systematically through innovative and reliable journalism, making it possible to access information that is crucial to the construction of a democratic society.

As a rule, and given its potential effect on the lives of a large part of society, investigative journalism at the SABC always takes into account the relative importance of an issue. Minor matters should not be dealt with when more significant issues warrant attention. Although investigative journalism is robust and thorough in its examination of issues, it also has to adhere to the highest ethical and journalistic standards, be in the public interest, offer valuable information and authentic analysis, promote public dialogue, and enable the public to form their own opinions.

Given its nature, investigative journalism frequently involves legal considerations, and on such occasions the advice of the Legal Department is to be sought.

As a rule, SABC journalists work in the open. Clandestine methods of gathering news and information should be used with due regard to the law, the right to privacy, and the significance of the information. If it were to become necessary and in the public interest to gather information to which the public normally does not have access, the matter should be referred to the relevant Head of News. As a matter of policy, the SABC does not use hidden cameras and microphones to gather news. In exceptional circumstances - such as illegal, antisocial or fraudulent activity, or clear and significant abuse of public trust, and where alternative means of newsgathering are impossible - the use of such equipment might be in the public interest. If so, the matter is to be referred to the relevant Head of News, and in all these cases there should be consultation with the Legal Department.

USE OF GUESTS, ANALYSTS AND SPECIALIST COMMENTATORS

The SABC's principle of providing the full spectrum of opinions, perspectives and comment also applies to selection and use of guests, analysts and specialist commentators. This requires editorial staff to choose, as participants, people who have a wide range of views, opinions and perspectives, and are drawn from all over the country. Such people should be required to declare any vested interest they may have in the matter to be discussed.

PAYING FOR INFORMATION

The Code of Conduct prohibits broadcasters from paying criminals for information, unless compelling societal interests indicate the contrary.

As a matter of policy, the SABC does not pay people for information. In circumstances where compelling public interest and the right to know are involved, and access to information cannot be gained by other means, the matter is to be referred to the relevant Head of News for a decision. When payment has been made, this fact is to be reported in the broadcast.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

Polling and random sampling are methods used to discover facts, uncover attitudes and confirm hypotheses. However, to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings of such research, it has to be done according to proven scientific methods. Before broadcasting the results of non-SABC surveys, journalists should obtain information on the methods used and the main results of the survey; seek the opinion of experts in the field, and consult SABC Market Intelligence on the validity of the methods used and interpretation of the findings.

The SABC may also conduct its own public opinion surveys, for which it takes full accountability.

The Head of News Research approves any such survey, including the design, questionnaires and interpretation of the results, after consultation with the relevant Head of News.

Statements gathered (live or pre-recorded) from people chosen at random - vox pops - are not scientific surveys. These should be presented solely to illustrate the range and texture of popular opinion on a topical issue. There should not be any suggestion - explicit or implicit - that the views broadcast in such a survey reflect wider public opinion.

PROTECTION OF SOURCES

The SABC firmly upholds the principle of journalistic freedom and sees the protection of a journalist's sources as a key element of this principle.

At times, information that ought to be given to the public is available to journalists only through confidential sources. If the confidentiality of such sources of information were not respected, it would restrict the free flow of information in a free and democratic society.

In the event of a source not wanting to be identified publicly, the SABC uses the information obtained only when the source is known to the journalist and has prima facie credibility; the journalist has checked the reliability of the source and obtained corroboratory evidence from other relevant sources; and the identity and bona fides of the confidential source have been disclosed to the relevant Executive Producer ahead of the broadcast.

When protection of a source becomes a legal matter, the SABC does not advise its staff to refuse to obey an order of a court, but makes its legal counsel available for advice and to present legal argument in court to protect the source.

GENDER AND REPRESENTATION

Democratisation places an important responsibility on the SABC to include in our news services - consciously and with due prominence - the perspectives and opinions of women who are making a crucial contribution to the political, social and economic life of South Africa. This is one of the important criteria for ensuring that the full range of comment is offered, so that our audiences may have a comprehensive overview of issues in order to form their own opinions.

News staff should therefore endeavour to ensure fair gender representation in news and information programming.

PRIVACY

Promoting the dignity of all South Africans is a cornerstone of our Constitution, and it is for this reason that the Bill of Rights is so central to it. Unlike the private commercial media, the SABC has a special duty to uphold the Bill of Rights and to respect the dignity and private lives of individuals. For this reason, we respect individuals' right to privacy, and as a matter of policy do not violate such privacy unless it is justifiable in the public interest.

The Programming Policy expands on the SABC's approach to matters of privacy.





REPORTING ON SUFFERING AND DISTRESS

In terms of the SABC Editorial Code we are circumspect in the presentation of brutality, violence, atrocities and personal grief.

When covering any accident, disaster or conflict the SABC always gives a full, accurate and factual account of relevant matters such as time, location and casualty figures. In doing so, we avoid causing needless distress or anxiety to those who already know of their loss. SABC editorial staff cover accidents and disasters with compassion and sensitivity that is frank and genuine.

The consequences of a tragic event or disaster call for considerable sensitivity on the part of the SABC. Reporting on these events should follow well established principles:

- As a rule, intrusive visuals of the dead should not be broadcast unless the story demands it
- Those injured or grieving should not be put under any pressure to give interviews
- As far as reasonably possible, next of kin should not learn bad news from a radio or TV newscast
- A funeral should be covered only with the permission of the family, and treated sensitively and without intrusion, unless public interest considerations are apparent
- The time of day of transmission - before or after the watershed - and audience sensibilities should always be considered
- When the content of a report or programme may upset sensitive viewers or children, a warning to that effect is to be given.

News bulletins should be prepared bearing in mind that children watch TV during the day and early evening, especially in school holidays. This could mean delaying graphic details and visuals of particularly disturbing events until the later bulletins, when it is reasonable to expect parents to be in a better position to monitor their children's viewing.

In its coverage of crime, the SABC avoids sensationalist reports that have no context or explanation. The SABC seeks to report not only on the event, but also the human consequences and the subsequent judicial process.

The guidelines are elaborated on further in the Programming Policy. Editorial staff should also consult the Legal Guidelines for Editorial Staff.

BROADCASTING EVENTS OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE

The SABC gives full, or extended, live television and/or radio coverage of events of national importance. In scheduling these events, editorial staff should take into account that they inevitably result in schedule changes. Such events may include the Opening of Parliament, the budget speech, State occasions such as visits by foreign dignitaries and State funerals; major commemorative occasions, and the proceedings of national commissions of inquiry.

Other events that may warrant live coverage and involve scheduling and programming changes include major parliamentary debates, the opening of provincial legislatures, and significant conferences of the major political parties. Live coverage in this category requires approval of the relevant stations and channels, in consultation with top management.

When an event of national importance is of a party political nature, editorial staff are to ensure that the SABC policies on objectivity, accuracy, fairness, impartiality and balance are adhered to.

The Policy on Language Broadcasting outlines further requirements for broadcasting events of national importance.

ELECTION BROADCASTS

This news policy is applicable both during elections and outside of elections. Outside of elections, the SABC approaches its coverage of political parties as it does its coverage of all other newsmakers - we are guided by our commitment to objectivity, accuracy, fairness, impartiality and balance. As such this policy does not deal specifically with the coverage of political parties outside of an election period.

Broadcasting during elections is a testing time for the SABC. This is because it is during elections in particular that our commitment to objectivity, accuracy, fairness, impartiality and balance is scrutinised closely and evaluated assiduously. Election broadcasts are regulated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act and ICASA's regulations. During an election period, the SABC is bound to comply with additional ICASA guidelines on equitable coverage of political parties, which are only applicable during an election period. Notwithstanding these additional requirements, news decisions during election periods have, as is the case between elections, to be driven by the news judgement of our news staff, and take account of the need to ensure that attention is given to thorough examination of the views, policies and campaigns of all the main political parties.

This is also a trying time for our editorial staff, who may experience pressure from political parties seeking to influence our editorial decisions. While remaining courteous, staff should always refer complaints to the appropriate offices.

News staff are required to study, understand and observe the statutory provisions on election broadcasts in the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act (see Sections 58, 59 and 60) and ICASA's regulations. These requirements include the limitations on party election broadcasts, the time to be made available to political parties, the duration and scheduling of party election broadcasts, and political advertising during election periods. News staff should also familiarise themselves with any internal guidelines developed for election coverage, including policies such as the Policy on Election Advertising.

The SABC shall, in compliance with the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act, cease party election broadcasts 48 hours before the polling period begins.

RESTRICTIONS ON SPONSORSHIP OF NEWS, CURRENT AFFAIRS AND INFORMATION PROGRAMMES

The SABC's approach to the sponsorship of news, current affairs and information programmes takes into account our public and commercial services' programming responsibilities, applicable legal and regulatory requirements as stipulated from time to time by ICASA, and the overall performance and well-being of our stations and channels.

Our overriding concern, shared by ICASA, is to preserve the editorial independence and integrity of the programmes concerned. Like ICASA, the SABC seeks to ensure that editorial control of programmes remains with the broadcaster. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of broadcasters to ensure that editorial independence and integrity are not influenced by the presence of advertising and sponsorship, and to demonstrate this to ICASA's satisfaction.

Sponsorship of television news and current affairs has been prohibited by ICASA, and is therefore not allowed by the SABC. For radio, ICASA has allowed a window period for sponsorship of news, but has encouraged the industry to phase it out. In line with the fact that it is currently permitted by ICASA, the SABC's policy is to allow for the sponsorship of radio news and current affairs programmes. Weather forecasts and sports bulletins that form part of TV news bulletins may be sponsored. Any product placement within news and current affairs programmes is strictly forbidden.

REVIEW

This policy is reviewed by the SABC Board every five years.