

# The New Diversity in Broadcasting and Telecommunications.

“Can established public interest broadcasters make a special contribution in a networked-media environment?”

Discussion by – C.M. Lekaukau  
Chief Executive - Botswana Telecommunications Authority.

## **Background**

I understand that this is very much the current debate in Europe in the context of an advanced media landscape comprising satellite, cable, Internet, sky broadcasting etc. Perhaps the key question for Europe and the developed world is whether there is anything left, any relevance for the public service broadcaster; more specifically is there any future role for the public interest broadcasters,

given technological advancements and so many broadcasting opportunities in terms of the available media, and therefore choices in terms of what the consumers and audiences can view or hear from the airwaves and online.

I would argue that this debate is equally relevant, if not more, to the developing world, certainly to my own country, Botswana, where the broadcasting and information industry is very much in its infancy with limited communication media and technological achievements, as well as the sources that inform both the media and the consumer.

At the same time, national radio and television stations continue to enjoy unlimited access to sources of public information and for that reason, remain the principal custodians of most public information for the most part.

Furthermore, these establishments have the unique advantage of being able to reach the majority of the populations for the simple fact that they benefit from public funds and are able to roll out the widest possible broadcasting infrastructure.

I would therefore argue further that the essential services that public broadcasters can and should provide, such as national news broadcasts and education and cultural programmes, are very much accepted and recognised. This is perhaps the reason most countries of the world, especially the developing world, have one form or another of public broadcasting establishments that characterised the early form of radio and television broadcasting.

Having given my perspective as a way of background, I'd like to preface my discussion with perhaps the most commonly accepted definition of a public service broadcaster. I think this is important so that we can have a basis for determining the future relevance of the public broadcaster or lack of it in a networked environment.

## **Definition & Context**

As I've already alluded, public service or public interest broadcasting, as opposed to private commercial interest broadcasting, is commonly recognised for its essential role of providing free information to the general population to satisfy the information and social needs of society. This is the broad traditional definition that I'm sure we can all relate to.

I think some basic principles of communication that underpin this definition are relevant here. They include fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual such as: the right to free public information and free flow of ideas; the right to freedom of expression; the right and access to all available sources and channels of information; and the right to choose information.

If we recognise and accept these principles, I think we need to also recognise that the information needs and interests of society have also grown in complexity and scope. They are no longer confined and limited to just information about what government has to say, or education and entertainment. The consumer today, the viewer and listener, wants a lot more information about a range of issues in domestic and international politics, economics, social discourse, human interest issues including gossip,

and generally what's going on in the world around them. Furthermore, the radio and television consumer is no longer satisfied with just dry facts. They have a thirst for knowledge and a sense of cultural identity. I would argue that knowledge comes from context, impartiality, and at the same time from an accurate and comprehensive variety of information, music, drama and other kinds of entertainment. Cultural identity on the other hand is fostered through language diversity.

Arguably this public interest in terms of the foregoing elements becomes an expectation too onerous on any one category of broadcaster to fulfil. It would appear therefore that the public interest in broadcasting may best served by a multi-media information industry that combines the resources and programmes of both the public and private broadcasting establishments.

While it is expected that the public broadcaster must fulfil a public service mandate and therefore deliver quality programmes to satisfy a diversity of needs as I've already indicated, it must also be accepted that in practice the costs and resource requirements of public service programming often have limited, if any, potential for viable commercial return.

Further, it has to be recognised that the public service broadcaster would require a politically and operationally supportive broadcasting environment that facilitates a credible fulfilment of such an onerous mandate.

Consequently, there has to be a policy framework that helps to resolve a number of challenges that the public service broadcaster will increasingly grapple with in a technologically advanced and networked environment.

While the public service broadcaster depends for its survival on funding by public monies and should therefore be accountable to the public and by extension the state, the establishment will be of limited effectiveness in fulfilling its public service mandate unless it is free from undue state control and interference in terms of editorial policy and content programming. This is one of the key ways by which the public service broadcaster can hope to remain relevant, recognising that the establishment will have to compete for the ears and eyes of the audience that will also be targeted by private commercial broadcasters who use innovative programming and advertising to catch the audience's attention.

## **The Case of Botswana**

Against a population of about 1.7 million people (Botswana Central Statistics, 2001) the broadcasting landscape in Botswana consists of three public service (state owned) establishments comprising one television station and two radio stations. There are also two private radio stations that may be best described as quasi-regional broadcasters and one private commercial television station, also broadcasting to a short radius regional audience.

The state owned services have been in operation since 1960 (Radio Botswana for the general service), 1992 (RB2 for the commercial service) and 2000 (Botswana Television).

In terms of the Broadcasting Act, 1998, No.6 of 1999, broadcasting is the jurisdiction of the National Broadcasting Board,

whose specific functions include the issuing of broadcasting licenses, and control and supervision of broadcasting services.

The Botswana Telecommunications Authority (BTA) is the Secretariat of the Board and officers of the BTA discharge functions of the Board as delegated by the Board.

### **Draft Broadcasting Policy – December 2004**

The draft Broadcasting Policy of Botswana envisages developing a broadcasting industry built on the principles of diversity and independence. The draft policy “introduces the different tiers of broadcasting and describes the mandate, functions and responsibilities of public, private and community broadcasting services respectively”.

The draft policy is based on a research document with more detailed information which is available from the BTA or on

the website [www.bta.org.bw](http://www.bta.org.bw), titled 'National Broadcasting Board Draft Policy - 19 May 2003'.

The policy document is currently with our Ministry of Communications Science and Technology for deliberation by the Economic Committee of Cabinet after which we expect it to become operational.

The draft policy recognises the “need for a broadcasting service which renders a public service to the nation as a whole ... as a national point of reference and of national identification .., all the more so in a large and sparsely populated country where neither private nor community broadcasting services will be able to provide national coverage”.

## **Public Service Mandate**

The public service mandate of the established broadcasters in this category is set out in Section 3.1 of the draft broadcasting policy as “to inform, educate and entertain the public”.

The policy further advocates universal access of broadcasting services to every citizen throughout the country. “It has to address the entire population, whatever their social status or income”.

Currently in Botswana, there are various initiatives aimed at promoting access to Information and Communications Technologies in Postal Services, Telecommunications and Broadcasting. One such initiative is the broadcasting policy that among other objectives seeks to promote community broadcasting services.

Another such initiative is the Universal Service & Access policy study. Notwithstanding the fact that the three public service broadcasters in Botswana have nationwide licences, a vast majority of the rural population remains unserved. The current study serves therefore to augment the rollout of broadcasting and other communications services to parts of the country that are underserved or not served at all.

### **Special Contribution by the Public Broadcaster.**

I wish to now address the issue of special contribution that a public service broadcaster might make in an integrated multi-media environment, and I propose to discuss this in the context of my country, Botswana, and it may apply to other countries of the developing world.

I have already given you a general picture of the broadcasting landscape in Botswana, a few players in a relatively unsophisticated broadcasting environment.

I have no doubt in my mind that our public broadcasters can and should make quite a number of special contributions to the industry. Many new entrants to the industry in both radio and television sectors face quite significant start-up resource and financial requirements that often delay if not derail rollout plans of such operations. I believe one solution to this particular challenge lies in the ability of the established public service broadcaster to share facilities such as transmission stations and production studios with new players.

In the case of my country this would serve to facilitate a more rapid development of services that can be provided by new entrants to the broadcasting industry.

Another area of special contribution might be in the area of special interest programming for cultural identity and preservation. This is consistent with the objectives of the draft broadcasting policy that seek to promote community broadcasting services, and often there is not enough commercial interest in this area to attract the attention of private broadcasters who obviously are in the business for the money.

Yet another area where the public service broadcaster can make a special contribution would be in the case of national democratic processes, such as at general elections.

The public broadcaster, free of perceptions of financial and other influence is arguably best positioned to give impartial and credible information about such issues as the voting process and the general programme of electioneering.

### **Future Challenges**

As I move towards conclusion, I realise that the role and definition of a public service broadcaster in a networked environment becomes a moving target, as business strategies and practices become more innovative and competitive, and may be tactical in some cases.

We now face the advent of migration to digital broadcasting systems from the current analogue systems, with its consequent social and economic impact on our society.

We have to answer several critical questions to be able to determine in more specific terms the future role of the public service broadcaster not only in a networked media landscape but in terms of a digital environment as well.

Will there be an information gap as a result of new technologies that our communities must acquire? Will these new technologies be accessible to all our communities or will they hinder or help access to information as a result of the associated costs and user knowledge? Will the new digital environment disturb the social order of our communities who have up to now relied on the traditional broadcast media for their day to day information needs?

I do not have answers to these questions, but I recognise that they are critical to defining and appreciating the role of public service broadcasters in tomorrow's society.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that the public service broadcaster has and will continue to have a meaningful role especially in developing countries. We cannot however underestimate the challenges that a networked world presents to both the consumer of broadcasting services and to the public broadcaster who hitherto has remained the main source of information to the majority of our populations.

I thank You.