

# **The Post-Apartheid Politicisation of the South African Broadcasting Corporation**

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# Abstract

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This dissertation draws on concepts from political science, sociology, media studies, organisational studies, and psychoanalysis to describe and explain the manifestations and process of politicisation of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) after the end of apartheid (1993-2013) through the lens of organisational culture. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2011, including six months participant observation in seven SABC newsrooms and 117 in-depth interviews with journalists and managers.

The study links an intra-organisational analysis of journalistic practice with the macro-level of the political field and the micro-level of individual actors. It explores in detail the unconscious processes inscribed in the SABC's culture and subcultures, as well as their interplay, before approaching the understudied problem of agency in newsrooms, in particular agency-as-resistance to politicisation.

The thesis makes three main contributions to the literature: (1) The most in-depth empirical account of the SABC's politicisation to date, and an example of an African public broadcaster in a post-authoritarian environment. Findings challenge conventional explanations for the failures of public broadcasting transformations by showing that politicisation is far more than a top-down phenomenon, and that organisational culture shapes susceptibility to it profoundly. (2) A systematic and chronological analysis of drivers, enablers and inhibitors of politicisation, highlighting the multi-causality and multi-directionality of the process. This contests the over-reliance on structural explanations in political science by emphasising culture and subjectivity, e.g. by introducing the concept of 'anticipatory politicisation'. (3) A conceptual framework that integrates group relations theories with Bionian concepts and Lacanian discourse theory to shed light on individual agency in the context of collective unconscious processes. Findings are of interest to scholars working on the SABC or media in transition, on politicised organisations, organisational culture, or agency.

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# Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
ANCYL	African National Congress Youth League
baD	Basic assumption dependency
baF	Basic assumption fight/flight
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BEE	Black Economic Empowerment
COPE	Congress of the People
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
DA	Democratic Alliance
EP	Executive Producer
GEAR	Growth, Employment and Redistribution
IBA	Independent Broadcasting Authority
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
IMP	Subculture of Independent-minded Professionals
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
MK	uMkhonto we Sizwe
NP	National Party
OG-B	Subculture of the Black Old Guard
OG-W	Subculture of the White Old Guard
P	Subculture of Partisans
PSB	Public Service Broadcasting
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SACP	South African Communist Party
SANEF	South African National Editors Forum
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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# 1 Introduction and Methodology

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This dissertation describes the politicisation of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), specifically its News and Current Affairs Division, between 1993 and 2013 and explains it through the lens of organisational culture. It contrasts with and complements existing studies on the SABC and other public broadcasters that stress formal and structural factors and rely mainly on secondary sources, content analysis and relatively small numbers of interviews. Findings rest on extensive ethnographic research and reflect a view from within the organisation based primarily on the perceptions of SABC journalists. I proceed from the assumption that perception drives behaviour, that subjectivity is immanent in practice, and that practice informs culture. I also take seriously the fact that much of human behaviour is not consciously directed. I show how this plays out on the level of collectives and individual actors in a politicised organisational environment and argue that the dimension of the unconscious is central to understanding politicisation as well as resistance to politicisation.

My aspiration to take as comprehensive a view as possible of the phenomenon of politicisation, and this has necessitated an inter-disciplinary approach. While anchored in Politics, the argument transcends the boundaries of Sociology, Media Studies and Psychoanalysis. I also use multiple levels of analysis, moving from the SABC's political context to the organisation as a whole, to sub-cultures, to groups, and finally to

individuals. In the course of this I proceed from the more to the less obvious, from conscious factors to unconscious dynamics. As a result, chapters have quite distinct flavours and theoretical underpinnings, and contributions are made to a number of fields.

This research was prompted by an empirical problem: the poor record of turning former state broadcasters in Africa and Eastern/ Central Europe into credible, independent public service broadcasters that may contribute effectively to the consolidation of young democracies. Existing studies (to be discussed in Chapter 2) conclude that transformation either never takes off in a meaningful way or is stalled, sometimes reversed, within a few years. The five main obstacles to successful transformation have been identified as (1) problems associated with transplanting the institution of public broadcasting from the context of a mature democracy to an emerging one; (2) a lack of political will and commitment to broadcasting transformation on the part of the new political elites; (3) a lack of legal provisions to safeguard editorial independence; (4) the absence of viable funding models; and (5) direct pressure by political actors and the associated interference in editorial decision-making processes. These factors have been shown to either drive directly or facilitate indirectly the politicisation of broadcasters, but, as I am going to argue, do not explain the phenomenon sufficiently. I contend that the SABC takes up a singular position against this background and is well placed to enrich our understanding of broadcasting transformations, specifically with regard to the role played by organisational culture in the process of (re-)politicisation.

Being the largest broadcaster based on the African continent the SABC runs free-to-air

TV and radio channels in eleven South African languages. Despite growing private competition its audience reach is unmatched in the country: in 2013, 86.6% of South African adults regularly watched SABC TV, and 73% listened to SABC radio services (SABC 2014). Established in 1936 with the direct assistance of John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, the SABC retained its formal similarities to the BBC while serving as a state-controlled propaganda instrument of the Apartheid government. Following the political negotiations with the anti-Apartheid movement the broadcaster underwent a process of transformation and was 're-launched' as an independent public service broadcaster ahead of the first universal democratic elections in 1994. The subsequent adoption of the Editorial and Ethical Code in 1994 (SABC 1994) has been described as the “final symbolic and practical break with the tradition of taking direction from outside the ranks of journalists themselves, whether from the government or the hierarchy of the Corporation” (Teer-Tomaselli 1995, 581; Baker 1996, 214). Editorial independence, now one of the SABC's core values, explicitly refers to political, commercial and personal influences. The code, reviewed over the years, continues to demand of journalists to “evaluate, analyse and critically appraise government policies and programmes” while observing high standards of “accuracy, fairness, impartiality and balance” (SABC 2004, 4, 24). It warns against “suppressing relevant, available facts, or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis” (ibid, 4). The SABC's autonomy was further backed up by the Broadcasting Act of 1999 which required the broadcaster to adhere to “the highest standards of journalism, as well as fair coverage, impartiality, balance and independence from government, commercial and other interests” (RSA 1999; Berger 1999). There is near consensus in the literature that, with regard to the policy environment and legal guarantees given to journalists, little more could have been

desired at the time (Banda, cited in Fourie 2004, 13; Orgeret 2006).

In comparison to other broadcasters in transition, the SABC stands out as an exception in two ways: Firstly, its transformation cannot be considered a 'failure'. During my period of fieldwork, news reports critical of government, the ruling party, politicians and state institutions were not uncommon; there was no formal censorship, and news and current affairs staff had considerable professional autonomy. Compared to other public broadcasters, the SABC's level of political independence was and is unmatched in the region. It is not a state broadcaster in disguise. Secondly, while the SABC has faced all five previously mentioned obstacles to broadcast transformation to some extent over time, I argue in Chapter 2 and 3 that conditions for a successful transformation in South Africa have been comparatively conducive, perhaps even extraordinarily so. This allows for some (certainly not complete) control of nearly all the variables that dominate debates on broadcasting transition and their failure.

And yet, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, the SABC has faced a consistent stream of public criticism alleging a lack of political independence, incompetence, nepotism, mismanagement, and corruption. In the first two decades of its post-apartheid existence, a number of scandals have erupted in which the broadcaster seemed to favour or protect certain political leaders, government, or the ANC. There is also near consensus among public commentators, media scholars and even the SABC staff and management interviewed for this and other studies (Tleane and Duncan 2003; Ngwenya 2015; Orgeret 2006), that the quality of the SABC's journalism with regard to the 4<sup>th</sup> estate function of the media falls considerably short of what this relatively well-resourced

organisation is capable of. While there has been little evidence for heavy political bias in news and current affairs content, I survey a number of empirical studies that confirm concerns around fairness, balance, the lack of critical reporting or 'watchdog' journalism, self-censorship and the stifling of internal debate.

All this suggests that the post-apartheid SABC has been politicised either temporarily or consistently to an extent that it falls short of its own mandate and editorial code – despite comparatively favourable structural conditions in South Africa. In the light of this we need to ask whether our current understanding of broadcasting transitions which tends to rely on institutional structure, legal frameworks, funding provisions and the presence or absence of editorial interference by political actors, does not have serious limitations. The point is not that these factors do not matter; on the contrary. Hanretty (2010) has shown in a quantitative analysis that de-jure independence is the main explanatory variable for the variance of PSB independence and found that two other often suggested variables (the polarisation of the political system and the partisanship of the bureaucracy) are largely insignificant. Yet this leaves almost half of the variance still unaccounted for. In other words, we do not know what factors other than de-jure independence (and, to a much lesser degree, 'size of the market for news'), may influence the likelihood of successful broadcasting transitions. This is also reflected in the fact that no comprehensive theory of change has come out of the extensive study of post-communist media transformations (Coman 2000).

I intend to argue that less tangible, non-structural, informal, subjective and even unconscious factors on the organisational and individual level are much more central to

the process of politicisation than previously assumed and deserve to be studied more systematically, despite the obvious methodological challenges. I gather these factors under the concept of 'organisational culture' and develop a conceptual framework for analysing politicisation as inscribed in org. culture by looking systematically at the product (Chapter 4) and the process of politicisation (Chapters 5), exceptions to the dominant culture and unconscious collective dynamics (Chapter 6), the internal differentiation of organisational culture (Chapter 7) and the question of collective and individual agency-as-resistance to politicisation (Chapter 8). Following this chapter which also includes a description of my methodology, the argument proceeds as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a review of literatures I found to be most fertile for approaching my topic. It starts with a discussion on the challenges of public service broadcasting in young democracies. I then survey studies conducted by political scientists and media scholars on broadcasting transitions in Eastern/ Central Europe and Africa. Following this I move to the sociology of journalism and news production with a focus on empirical studies of editorial independence, particularly with regard to public broadcasters. I engage critically with both literatures by introducing a systematic focus on organisational culture in relation to politicisation – something few authors have attempted to do – and demonstrate the SABC's potential as a case study to highlight and study this dimension in depth.

At that point I explicate my conceptual framework and its two central pillars – organisational culture and politicisation – and critically discuss both by drawing on the field of organisational and management studies as well as political science research.

Finally, I introduce the dimension of the unconscious in organisational culture by bringing in a third core literature: the psychoanalytic study of groups and organisations. As I will be engaging with this literature in detail in the last part of the dissertation, I provide in this chapter a summary, mainly for reference purposes, of key theories in the group relations tradition as well as Lacan's theory of the four discourses. I will briefly highlight their potentials and shortcomings, and argue for an integration in order to understand the problem of collective and individual agency-as-resistance to politicisation.

Chapter 3 introduces the case study. I describe the political context of post-apartheid South Africa and its media ecology and then provide an overview of the SABC's organisational history. Discussing public perceptions as well as academic studies on the SABC's editorial independence I highlight discrepancies as well as gaps in the research that I intend to close.

Chapter 4 lays the empirical foundation for all following chapters. Following some introductory remarks on the relatively well-documented politicisation of the SABC's board and senior management, it provides a detailed and systematic description of four salient patterns of everyday behaviour in SABC newsrooms that can be thought of as manifestations of politicisation that have become characteristic of the organisational culture and, as such, undermine the independent journalism the SABC is mandated to deliver. The chapter is anchored in the media studies literature; the level of analysis is the organisation as a whole.

Having shed light on the product of politicisation in the SABC's journalism, I move on to the process of politicisation in chapters 5/I and 5/II by providing a descriptive and explanatory chronological account. Covering a 20-year period (1993-2013) this double chapter forms a unit that traces politicisation over time identifying a number of distinct phases that are closely linked to wider political developments in the country. The core literature for Chapters 5/I and 5/II is the one on politicisation, consisting mainly of empirical studies that have focussed on non-media organisations. Forms and dimensions of politicisation identified by others (Betts 2002; Ransom 1987; Rovner 2008; Peters and Pierre 2004) are used to structure the argument around the SABC's politicisation, with some modest additions to the literature, such as the concept of 'anticipatory politicisation' as distinct from both top-down and bottom-up politicisation, and the politicisation of individuals and discourse in addition to the politicisation of institutions, issues and decision-making processes (cf. De Wilde 2011). Changing levels of politicisation are explained using a range of drivers, enabling and inhibiting factors. In themselves, these two chapters constitute the most comprehensive qualitative empirical study to date of the SABC's politicisation, or indeed of the politicisation of a public broadcaster in a post-authoritarian environment. As such, they fill a gap in the literature on broadcasting transitions and join the small number of studies with a similar approach that have been conducted in mature democracies (Born 2005; Schlesinger 1978; Küng-Shankleman 2000).

Up to this point the analysis implies that the SABC is a fairly homogenous organisation with a fairly homogenous culture. This is an illusion that needs to be deconstructed, and the remaining Chapters aim to do justice to the more messy and difficult-to-grasp

aspects of empirical reality, such as internal differentiation and unconscious processes. This part of the argument was prompted by my observations of groups and individuals that did not exhibit the patterns of dysfunctional behaviour described in Chapter 4 and thus constituted exceptions to the dominant culture. At the same time, it takes up and engages with a layer of my empirical data that has continuously pointed towards factors and dynamics that lie outside journalists' awareness despite being potent influences on behaviour. Bringing these two observations together I pose the question of collective and individual agency from a psychoanalytic perspective.

In Chapter 6 I take the newsroom of current affairs show 'Special Assignment' as a departure point to explore the anxiety-alleviating function of the behaviour patterns first identified in Chapter 4 that are so prevalent elsewhere but not in that newsroom. I employ Menzies Lyth' theory of social defences – which I discuss critically and extend – to demonstrate how unconscious collective dynamics serve to stabilise a public broadcaster in a volatile environment by binding anxiety continuously generated within the system by a range of work-related factors. I explain why these SABC-specific social defences are less present in some exceptional newsrooms and argue that where anxiety is processed differently space opens up for agency that helps journalists resist politicisation.

Chapter 7 takes this line of argument to the level of sub- and counter-cultures of which I describe and analyse the four I found to be most prevalent and reliably present across the organisation over time. I show how sub-cultures differ in the way they position themselves towards the SABC's mandate (task), and how this affects politicisation as

well as de-politicisation efforts in significant ways.

Chapter 8 deals with the interconnectedness of cultural, group and individual psychodynamics in relation to politicisation. It makes the case that an integrated analysis of the three is necessary for understanding agency-as-resistance. To this end, it builds a bridge from Menzies Lyth via Bion to Lacan. I analyse sub-cultures in the light of Bion's theory on basic assumptions and discuss their respective roles in the process of politicisation as described in chapters 5/I and 5/II. Specific attention is paid to counter-culture in relation to collective agency-as-resistance. I then connect sub-cultures to actual group processes in newsrooms via the concept of valency, thereby extending Bion's framework by introducing a cultural dimension to group dynamics and follow this up with a discussion on the problem of leadership in this context. This leads me, finally, to the question of individual agency-as-resistance that is at the heart of the problem of de-politicisation in organisations. I agree with Born (1998) in arguing that the group relations tradition fails to adequately address this issue leaving unanswered critical questions, such as whether resistance is something only certain people or groups are capable of or responsible for, or what, actually, constitutes resistance within the matrix of cultural/ collective and individual psycho-dynamics. I propose Lacan's theory of the four discourses (which locates the individual in its conscious and unconscious dimension firmly within social interactions) as an alternative way of thinking about resistance.

## Methodology

My mapping of the politicisation of the SABC is based on two dimensions. The first is historical and relates to the process and degree of politicisation the SABC has experienced since the end of apartheid. Here, the main method has been in-depth, oral history interviews. The second dimension involves understanding the actual process and product of politicisation in the context of the SABC's organisational culture as well as journalists' responses to it. For this, data collection mainly took the form of ethnographic fieldwork.

Reflective ethnography is ideally positioned to capture organisational dynamics, including phenomena such as conformity and resistance, allowing insights into problems of culture and change. Yet ethnography has only relatively recently come to be recognised as an effective method for studying modern institutions and professional cultures (Born 2005; Marcus and Fischer 1986). It involves spending extensive time in the field, engaging with informants formally and informally, building personal relationships based on empathy and trust, and using participant observation as the main method of data collection. The aim is to “become sensitive to unspoken assumptions and implicit forms of knowledge and belief”, to understand organisational complexity by uncovering the difference between what is said and what is done, and to notice “not only what is insistently present, but the characteristic absences and rigidities – what cannot be thought, or what is systematically 'outside'” of official discourses (Born 2006, 14f). Alternative methods, such as document or content analysis, surveys and structured interviews are less likely to unearth this kind of information, even more so when it is

consciously withheld (the politicisation of 'independent' media tends to be a sensitive issue) or lies outside of the subject's awareness. Being primarily concerned with intra-organisational dynamics, it is imperative to link this level of analysis to both the micro-level of individual actors, and the macro-levels of the South African journalistic and political fields. As Born (2005), drawing on Strathern (1994), has shown, ethnography is particularly useful for tracing such interrelations by giving attention to the complexities and multi-causality involved.

However, my choice of method also has disadvantages. Ethnography has been criticised for its subjectivism and susceptibility to researchers' bias hidden behind a seemingly objective Grounded Theory approach (Brewer 1997, 41f). These valid concerns can be addressed by a high measure of reflexivity. After all, "there is no perfectly transparent or neutral way to represent the social world" (ibid.). As a journalist myself with a history of working for public broadcasters in German-speaking Europe and the UK, I am acutely aware of having been a partial outsider at best, which raises additional issues around practitioners researching their own fields. While this can be beneficial (Hammersley 1992, 139) it requires a conscious effort to adopt the 'child-like' attitude required to keep an open mind and avoid premature conclusions before, during and after the fieldwork.

Ethnography always involves a trade-off between information-rich data/ 'thick descriptions' and representativeness/ generalisability. However, as Born (lecture, 2009) has argued, it does not necessarily lack rigour. I have taken several measures to guarantee a high degree of internal validity, such as identifying and representing

multiple perspectives among subjects, careful corroboration of data in different interviews and triangulation (involving observation, interview, oral-history and document analysis). Care has also been taken to avoid an over-reliance on a specific group of respondents, such as those most easy to access (e.g. former employees), those with particular political views or those who share my own ethnic background. Despite these measures, the dangers of subjectivity and bias persist and can ultimately only be mitigated by the highest possible degree of transparency (Goldthorpe 2007, 75).

Findings are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2011 at the SABC. This included six months full-time participant observation in seven SABC newsrooms across South Africa, countless informal conversations, some document analysis, and semi- and unstructured in-depth interviews with 117 current and former journalists, editors, news managers, board members, and technical staff in radio and television news and current affairs, as well as with a small number of informed outsiders (e.g. from the ANC or NGOs). Individual interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. A number of respondents were interviewed multiple times over the course of weeks, months, or years.

I identified respondents through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling (Babbie and Mouton 2001). The process of conscious selection of interviewees does not aim for representativity as it does not amount to the stratified random sampling demanded by Goldthorpe (2007, 70), but it aims to account for variation within and across field sites within the practical constraints of fieldwork. I was mindful of obtaining a fairly balanced sample with regard to six criteria: time of employment at the SABC,

position in the news hierarchy, ethnicity, location (head office or regional offices), medium (television or radio), and genre (news or current affairs). For oral history interviews covering developments predating 2004, I ensured that respondents had been present in the newsroom they provided information on, i.e. that they relate direct, first-hand experience.

I also used a multi-site approach that considers both the SABC's organisational structure as well as region-specific political dynamics. Covering a number of sites inevitably means losing depth; however, narrowing the fieldwork to too few sites would not have adequately accounted for the problem of variation between locales (Goldthorpe 2007, 76). The fieldwork sites were as follows:

- Johannesburg: National TV newsroom with news bulletin desks in all major languages; Gauteng province TV and radio newsrooms; radio current affairs newsroom SAfm (English); TV current affairs programmes 'Special Assignment' (investigative documentaries, English), 'Cutting Edge' (documentaries isiXhosa), 'Asikhulume' (English/ isiZulu)
- Cape Town: Parliamentary office/ political desk
- Durban: Regional TV and radio news and current affairs for KwaZulu-Natal (English, isiZulu)
- Bloemfontein: Regional TV and radio news and current affairs for Free State (English, Afrikaans, seSotho)

At every site I built relationships with one or two key informants, making an effort to avoid individuals with obvious personal agendas, strong identifications with a particular sub-culture or faction in the newsroom, or limited experience and insight. Observational data was gathered in editorial conferences and staff meetings, every-day newsroom interactions, in the field with reporters, and after work. The final dataset consists of seven fieldwork diaries with observational and reflective notes, documents such as news diaries and editorial policies, and about 150 hours of audio-recorded interviews. My overall aim was to avoid limitations commonly found in similar studies (Epstein 1973; Gieber 1999; Ngwenya 2015; Orgeret 2006; Schlesinger 1978; Schudson 1991; Teer-Tomaselli 2005; Tleane and Duncan 2003; Tuchman 1973), including a focus on news to the exclusion of current affairs and documentary, and on television to the detriment of radio; a bias towards urban newsrooms and English programming; a reliance on smaller numbers of respondents, and a focus on a wide range of pressures (e.g. commercial pressures) on journalists rather than just politicisation.

While any single-case study faces challenges around the reliability and generalisability of findings, the SABC's singularity in the context of international broadcasting transformations allows us to study in depth explanatory factors linked to organisational culture that have been overlooked by much of the existing literature on the subject. There is a need to understand better the complexities of politicisation in an organisational context, especially the nuances of the social and psycho-social dynamics involved. Focusing on a single case in a longitudinal way allows for detailed contextual analysis of largely contemporary events, for the exploration of factors difficult to capture in large-scale comparative studies, and for a tracing of causality not dependent on a high

degree of reductionism (Babbie and Mouton 2001). An international comparative study with the same level of depth, as desirable as it may be, is not feasible within the scope of this dissertation, and this is an important limitation. However, the global context is taken into account, especially the parallels to the BBC that has been studied in similar depth using a similar approach. Further, it must be noted that, although the South African political context is an important part of my analysis, the main focus is on the SABC and its organisational culture leads. This means that political and historical developments are covered in so far as they relate to the SABC's politicisation.

For studying journalistic practice, my focus is on political coverage, broadly defined to include political stories as well as those on human interest, development, economic and social issues. I am not concerned with entertainment, sports or business news, or with programming outside television and radio news and current affairs. In addition, I am centrally concerned with journalists' perceptions of politicisation. Although many of the developments I describe, for instance, in Chapters 5 have been covered by South African media, I am using secondary sources cautiously, always giving preference to the rich ethnographic data that resulted from the exceptional access to the SABC I was granted and that took years to establish.

With this access came ethical challenges<sup>1</sup>. As SABC journalists were prohibited from speaking about their work to unauthorised outsiders I made every attempt to obtain permission for interviews and observation from the highest editorial level. This was granted by the Heads of TV and Radio in 2005<sup>2</sup> and again by the Head of News for the

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1 Ethics approval for the fieldwork was initially given by the University of Cambridge (Sociology) in 2010 (before my transfer to Oxford in 2012).

2 As part of my MA research, with ethics approval from the University of Cape Town

main part of the fieldwork in 2010 (audio-recorded). Occasionally, I encountered expectations by managers to write a sympathetic account of the SABC, tell them what I 'found out', or even 'keep an ear on the ground' in the newsroom. I made it clear that I could not be used in this way and that my research had to be independent if it was to happen at all. I however offered to share some general findings on request. This offer was never formally taken up.

High-level permission gave interviewees some reassurance that they would be protected from legal ramifications, but it did not mean that they would not face other risks as a consequence of their participation. Indeed, some were suspicious precisely because I had 'permission from Phil [Head of News]' and wondered whether I could be trusted. Obtaining consent on an individual basis was central.

Initially I presented those I intended to interview with a consent form (see appendix) that explained the focus of the research in broad terms, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw consent at any point. However, although nearly all staff welcomed interviews and observation, most were reluctant to sign a form. This seemed to reflect a lack of trust in the official SABC authorisation; managers were known to change frequently, and respondents did not want to leave a paper trail. Many also found it difficult to negotiate the terms of the interview when they were not sure yet how much they were going to reveal. In the course of ethnographic fieldwork interviews frequently happen on an ad-hoc basis (over lunch, during a quiet hour at the desk etc.), and it is precisely this spontaneous quality, gained by the researcher's immersion in the field, that often unearths the most relevant and interesting material.

At this point, people are ready to share what matters to them, and they have built up sufficient trust to go ahead with an audio-recorded conversation. The official form made them uncomfortable; they saw it as a distraction, and I realised that my insisting on a signature at this point would have compromised my data by making respondents more guarded and prone to self-censoring.

So I stopped asking for signed consent forms. Instead, I obtained consent orally at the beginning of each interview<sup>3</sup> and checked again if later-on particularly sensitive material came up: 'Is X something you would want me to write about? Are you sure I can quote you with Y? How would you want this information to be treated? Etc. Usually, I would confirm our agreement at the end of the interview. Consent to being named was withdrawn at that point in only two cases, but sometimes clarifications were given regarding the use of particular topics or passages.

For observations of newsrooms, consent was obtained in a more indirect way: I introduced myself and the research at the first opportunity, usually in a staff meeting, explained consent, invited staff to object to my presence, shared my contact details. Whenever possible I had the consent form sent out to all staff so individuals could request more information, raise concerns, or opt out. These emails were generally ignored. At times staff who had not yet met me, e.g. because of their particular shift pattern, asked what my role was in the newsroom, and I then explained on an individual basis. In about a dozen cases I checked back with respondents on the use of specific interview passages during the writing-up stage.

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<sup>3</sup> In most cases this is captured on the audio recording.

Although I offered every interviewee anonymity the vast majority chose to speak on record, often very candidly. It was me rather than them who seemed most concerned about potential consequences. Given the perpetually volatile political climate at the SABC, I decided after the fieldwork to act in what I think is their best interest by protecting respondents' identities throughout. Exceptions relate to senior managers and staff whose views were well-known in the public domain, or when I had significant reason to name the person within a specific context, for instance where corroboration of facts was difficult and I was confident that no harm would result.

Throughout this thesis aliases (R1, R2 etc.) are used. Some identifying information (e.g. 'camera person') is given when appropriate to contextualise quotes. Should my referencing seem inconsistent at times, it is a reflection of giving priority to confidentiality. This approach is in response to the trust placed in me by individual respondents with an implicit or explicit indication that I would somehow know best how to deal with sensitive information. It is my responsibility to honour that trust. Examiners were provided with a full list of interviewees that will not be made publicly available. Also, all interview data and observational notes were stored anonymously in electronic form and password-protected with all reasonable security measures taken.

Given the nature of this research, some reflective thoughts are in order on my role as a researcher. The trust I was afforded by most journalists seemed to be based on three things. Firstly, my role as an academic from a foreign university gave the research an air of neutrality and credibility: surely, I was out to find the truth, a truth that some hoped would put the record straight on the SABC's negative public image. Secondly, the fact

that I have also worked as a public broadcasting journalist led people to expect that I was familiar with newsroom procedures and the universal parameters of their work. Occasionally this resulted in me being asked to perform minor tasks, such as doing some research, organising interviews, helping produce a live show, editing audio, or writing a last-minute TV script. I tried to keep this to a minimum as it compromised my reflective stance and ability to observe. However, being available in principle to assist with work went some way in legitimising my presence in newsrooms and helped build trust with the teams. Respondents increasingly related to me as a colleague assuming I would protect my sources as a professional journalist would. Thirdly, I developed a reputation over time that I had lived in the country and been around the organisation for long enough to not easily jump to premature conclusions. As helpful as these multiple roles – detached outsider, trustworthy colleague and sympathetic insider – proved to be, they were not easy to navigate. Each came with its own projections (of who I really was), assumptions (of what I was really thinking) and expectations (of what I wanted to hear). The challenge was to not identify with these projections, especially with the presumed position of knowing that I was often placed in. I tried to keep the delicate balance between holding open a space for reflection, doubts and vulnerability for others while remaining open myself to being surprised, challenged and contradicted in what I thought I had understood about the SABC's organisational culture at any point in time.

This stance I sought to maintain throughout all research phases. After transcribing all audio data I collated the different sources in a qualitative analysis software package and systematically coded recurring themes that seemed to have some relation to journalism vis-a-vis the political, such as reporting practices, story selection, role conflicts, self-

censorship, emotions and so on. This allowed for the searching, grouping, cross-referencing and more detailed analysis of codes later-on with the aim of eventually reaching theoretical saturation (Glaser 1978). Story selection, for instance, became an umbrella for a number of sub-codes, such as official sources, untouchable topics, and event vs. issue-driven. Withdrawal and self-absorption emerged as a theme at the intersection of various codes (such as morale, creativity, initiative, or pro-formal balance) and came to replace the earlier concept of opportunistic loyalty which assumed a much more intentional and strategic stance towards political power than later data would support. By following these themes up in interviews, I involved respondents in an ongoing reflective process as to possible underlying causes of manifest behaviour in themselves and others.

At this point contradictions, sustained silences and other signs of internal conflict emerged alongside the conscious, rational explanations for behaviour. For example, a radio editor would argue passionately how important it was to him to protect his team from political pressure, then fail to do so a week later and deny or rationalise his actions in an interview afterwards. I started to develop an interest in what was not being said and what could not be thought about. For instance, I noticed that the desire to learn or discover something new, let alone to question apparent truths or challenge authority – professional curiosity and scepticism, if you like, ordinarily a driving force for journalists – seemed to be nearly absent in many staff. Any hint of potential conflict had an air of danger about it, repeatedly eliciting nervous reactions and general signs of anxiety. I began to think about some of these phenomena in terms of pre- and unconscious processes and psychological defences (denial, justification, rationalisation etc.). Initially

the temptation was to link these to individual journalists, and at this early stage I probably colluded with some of the collective projections by locating the problem of political pressure in a handful of senior managers. As time went on I realised that I was underestimating the social dimension involved and that any analysis that did not account for this would be inadequate.

Using Glaser & Strauss' (1967) constant comparison method, I extended, adjusted and fine-tuned my codes in an ongoing dialogue with the emerging data and my own reflections on preliminary concepts that seemed to capture observed patterns of behaviour and meaning-making. Whenever possible I employed triangulation to verify claims and cross-validated interview data on observation. In the last stage of data analysis I re-visited much of the material in search of contradictory evidence until I felt reasonably confident that my inferences were indeed grounded (*ibid.*), i.e. substantially supported by evidence arising from multiple sources, recurring themes, or consistent absences.

This dissertation puts politicisation at the centre of enquiry. This is not to suggest that it has been the SABC's only or even most pressing problem: Much can, for instance, be said about commercialisation or the popularisation of content, and in recent years corruption and mismanagement have risen sharply. Politicisation does not stand in isolation of these. It is merely singled out here as one critical and understudied obstacle to the SABC's potential contribution to democratic consolidation in South Africa. A similar argument may well be made about other public institutions, such as the police or intelligence services, that face problems not unlike those of the public broadcaster.

While not the focus of my research, it is hoped that the interdisciplinary approach and conceptual framework developed here will be of use not just for the study of other public broadcasters and media in transition, but for the study of a wide range of organisations vital to the functioning of a democratic system.

## 2 Literature Review

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This thesis draws on and contributes to a number of literatures and disciplines, something that is also reflected in its structure. The present chapter maps the most salient features of the theoretical territory so as to give a broad sense of orientation, keeping some of the more detailed engagements for later chapters.

My point of departure is an empirical problem that has received scholarly attention in political science as well as in media studies: the unsatisfactory attempts in Eastern Europe and Africa of transforming former state broadcasters into independent public service broadcasters. Starting with a discussion of public service broadcasting (PSB) in young democracies I survey empirical studies of broadcasting transitions and locate the South African Broadcasting Corporation within this body of work. I argue that the case of the SABC is unusual in a number of ways and ideally placed to help us understand the 'soft', cultural dimension of politicisation as opposed to the structural determinants that dominate explanations in this literature.

I then turn to the sociology of journalism and news production and its tradition of the empirical study of editorial independence in newsrooms. I will give particular attention to in-depth studies of other public broadcasters and show how my research on the SABC, being similar in methodology and focus, adds to this a distinct focus on organisational culture in relation to politicisation and resistance. This literature forms

the backdrop for Chapter 4 which deals with manifestations of politicisation in the newsroom.

Having found my bearings in relation to these two literatures I explicate my conceptual framework. Two concepts are equally central to this: politicisation and organisational culture. The former, being foundational, will be introduced here in the context of the relevant political science literature. However, I engage with it mainly in Chapter 5/I and 5/II when I follow the process of politicisation at the SABC in the context of broader political developments in South Africa over a 20-year period. The latter concept, organisational culture, draws on the field of organisational studies. I come back to this literature when analysing subcultures in Chapter 7.

A third core literature – the psychoanalytic study of groups and organisations – was not part of the theoretical framework that I brought to the field. I have turned to it increasingly as I engaged with empirical data that pointed to the significance of the unconscious dimension of organisational culture. Eventually, I also brought in some Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to approach the problem of individual agency-as-resistance to politicisation. The psychoanalytic body of literature employed here is substantial, and I cannot possibly provide a comprehensive overview in this chapter. Instead, I give a summary of the most central concepts. I engage in detail with Menzies Lyth's theory of social defences in organisations, Bion's theory of basic assumptions in groups, and Lacan's discourse theory in Chapters 6-8 and use them to deepen my previous exposition of politicisation as reflected in organisational culture, namely by adding the dimension of unconscious dynamics.

## 2.1 Failed Transformations: Public Service Broadcasting in Young Democracies

With the term 'young democracies' I am referring to countries that have formally established a democratic dispensation through a process of transition from an authoritarian system and are in the process of consolidation. Drawing on Linz and Stepan, a democratic transition is complete when

“sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote, when this government *de facto* has the authority to generate new policies, and when the executive, legislative and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share power with other bodies *de jure*” (Linz and Stepan 1996, 3).

When referring to South Africa as a young democracy, I am thus not directly concerned with the early stages of liberalisation and transition. While the 'young democracy stage' can be seen as partially overlapping with the “late or mature” stage of the transition in which “legal and institutional questions” have largely been settled, the core challenge now is to “consolidate commitment to this new system while drawing ever larger segments of society into the forum” (Rozumilowicz 2002, 21, 23). At the end of the consolidation process stands (ideally) a mature, or consolidated, democracy. The criteria justifying this label have been debated widely since the quality of democracy can be improved in even the most mature context, and there is never a 'point of no return to authoritarianism' (C. Sparks 2011). According to Linz and Stepan's classic definition, consolidation is achieved once “democracy has become 'the only game in town’”

involving behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional dimensions (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5–7). It includes factors such as citizens having acquired a basic understanding of democratic processes and important policies, (relatively) conscious decision-making based on available options, some form of shared national identity, a general acceptance of pluralism in political discourse, and tolerance of opposition.

The term 'young democracy' is usually used in the context of the 'second wave' of democratisation (Almond and Verba 1989) – de-colonisation in Africa and Asia – and the 'third wave' (Huntington 1991) which occurred with the end of the Cold War (Hyden and Okigbo 2002, 31). Young democracies face distinct problems and challenges not, or to a much smaller extent, shared by the established democracies in the context of which the overwhelming majority of media research is produced. These distinct problems include fragile democratic systems, weak government/state, weak institutions especially those meant to hold political and economic elites to account, large-scale economic and social challenges, societies divided along religious, ethnic, or racial lines; severe economic inequality and poverty, political leaders with unproven commitment to democratic process, weak civil society, and a restricted public sphere where forums for, and a culture of, open public debate are lacking.

Political scientists studying rarely saw the media as a critical factor in democratic processes until the early 1990s when the relationship between the media and the state became a key problem. A consensus seemed to arise that, if democratisation is to be served, at least part of the media should act in the public interest without being dependent on either government or markets (Ronning 1994). In order to act in the

public interest, media in young democracies are confronted with a number of tasks that exceed the role of the media in consolidated democracies.

Firstly, they are expected to report the changes in the political, economic and social realm and explain them to the public in an impartial manner: “the first priority should be assisting the public in making sense of dilemmas of transformation and in finding their bearings under these new circumstances” (Jakubowicz 2002, 204). According to Larry Diamond's 'third paradox of democracy', for a democratic system to be perceived as legitimate, moral commitment is required which in turn is largely the result of effective performance over time (Diamond 1990, 49). Young democracies usually lack moral commitment *and* effective performance, especially if they have been undergoing simultaneous political and economic transitions. They are therefore “vulnerable to simplistic nationalist appeals from populist leaders offering instant solutions” (Hague, quoted in Milton 2000, 3) and thus in danger of an authoritarian backlash. By providing context, explaining changes and questioning, for instance, populist appeals, the media have a potential to defuse Diamond's paradox to some extent. Linked to the task of explaining change is the classic information function of the media meant to enable citizens to “make an informed and active choice in electing their political representatives” – that is, if democracy is to be more than a mere formality (Carver 2000, 188; cf. also Habermas 2006).

Drawing on the concept of deliberative democracy the media in young democracies are also expected to expand the public sphere (Berger 2002, 31); in other words, to provide space for mediated, public debate that includes government, opposition parties, civil

society and individual citizens (Hyden and Leslie 2002, 12) – space that has not been there before. Equally important in times of change is the watchdog role, whether with regard to political or economic actors. Traditionally, this role has been seen to be a prerogative of the independent private press (ibid.). This, however, becomes too narrow a view when presented with the reality of most African countries where access to print media is severely limited whereas access to (public) broadcasting, especially radio, is often near-universal (Gunner, Ligaga, and Moyo 2011; Hyden, Leslie, and Ogundimu 2002; Kivikuru 2006; Opoku-Menash 1998; Fardon and Furniss 2000; Wasserman 2011; Mosime 2015). Furthermore it has been argued that the media can (and should) play a role in integrating divided societies by helping to build a national identity and national cohesion. They are in a position to “promote civic consciousness” (Hyden, Leslie, and Ogundimu 2002, vii) and re-socialise citizens as well as political elites to the new, democratic 'rules of the game' (Gunther and Mughan 2000, 412).

In the light of the challenges young democracies face and the reality of media markets in post-authoritarian countries, especially in Africa, PSB is well- (if not best-) placed to perform the above tasks. In contrast to commercial media it is obliged to serve the public interest. This includes the provision of a comprehensive and universal service accessible to the entire public, including ethnic, religious and other minority groups. A varied, high-standard and balanced news coverage is central to the information function. The right of the public to be informed on *all* matters of public interest requires that the public broadcaster also acts as a check on government and corporate interests. It is also well-placed to educate the public, encourage participation, integrate fragmented societies and contribute to nation-building, for instance by guaranteeing diversity in

programming (Emdon 1998; Raboy 1998; Barnett 1999; Jakubowicz 2004; Volčič and Zajc 2013; Born and Prosser 2001).

Of course, whether public broadcasters will live up to this potential is a different question. Still, PSB as originally developed in the UK, has become a model internationally. Apart from Canada and Australia, a number of emerging democracies in Europe, Africa and Asia have seriously considered and, to some extent, implemented it, or at least kept a public service core media system as an alternative to purely commercial or state media (Price and Raboy 2003). Compelling normative arguments have been made about its virtues and advantages as compared to the US commercial-core system where the public service sector is marginalised at best, merely 'filling in the gaps'; and the state-core systems, traditionally the preferred model of the East Block (ibid.).

However, "it is easy to hold models up for admiration without recognizing the conditions that underlie their existence" (Price and Raboy 2003, 117). This negligence has taken its toll wherever PSB was introduced in the context of a transitional society. In this specific situation, two challenges, each formidable on their own, converge: PSB is expected to perform a range of tasks as discussed earlier – "miracles", as Price and Raboy call them alluding to their normative, idealistic character. Not unusually these tasks extend beyond the classic BBC mandate of 'information, entertainment and education' towards nation-building, reconciliation, development, peace-building and such. Yet, at the same time, PSB itself is frequently subjected to the extraordinary pressure and obstacles that come with the wider, simultaneous political, economic and social "triple" transition"

(Ekiert, quoted in Jakubowicz 2004, 69). Political interference may be common, and the economic problems often surpass the funding challenges of broadcasters in mature democracies. Lastly, the historical trajectories of the society in question and its attitude towards, or demand of PSB, may differ fundamentally from those in established democracies. All of these challenges find expression in the empirical literature on broadcasters in transition which I turn to now.

### **Transitions from state to public service broadcasting: empirical studies**

Eastern Europe, possibly the worlds largest 'testing ground' for the implementation of PSB outside stable democracies, has provided a wealth of data on broadcasting transformation. It is not very encouraging, however, whether one looks at Bulgaria, Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia or Romania (Splichal 1994; Jakubowicz 2002; Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003; Iesmantaitė 2007; European Audiovisual Observatory 2007; Volčič and Zajc 2013). According to Jakubowicz, one of the most prominent scholars in this field, “the introduction of PSB has either so far failed, or has produced very uncertain results” (Jakubowicz 2004, 53; Galik 2003). PSB in post-Communist countries is in crisis because of shortcomings in media legislation, political pressure, inherited management structures and problems, and lack of funding and skills – but also because of “self-censorship of journalists and programme-makers; inadequate dedication of the staff to classic PSB values, including political impartiality and detachment, concern for the public interest, non-commercialism, high professionalism and high quality” (Jakubowicz 2004, 63).

In post-Soviet Russia, the system of politically tightly controlled, state-owned and -funded broadcasting collapsed with the end of the Cold War. Yet “the political legacy of Soviet state broadcasting survived in terms of the relations between government, power elites and broadcasting institutions” resulting in “excessive political control” along with “excessive commercial control” (Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003, 97; Oates 2006; Mickiewicz 2008; Hutchings and Rulyova 2009). A similar instrumentalisation of broadcasters by political elites occurred commonly in the wider region. It was particularly pronounced in the time of the 'media wars' in which political parties or factions of government fought for control of media outlets in countries such as Russia, Hungary, Ukraine and the Czech Republic (Price and Raboy 2003, 118; Lengyel 2007). The consequences usually resemble those recorded in Hungary where the 'media wars' have brought managerial chaos, a loss of viewership and little protection of editorial independence (Price and Raboy 2003). Given the political challenges, market pressure proved to be the final nail in the coffin of independent PSB in the region. In the absence of government funding, it effectively prevented the new public service broadcasters from getting “over the teething problems” before they had to show profitability in the newly-liberalised market (Jakubowicz 2004, 66). Broadcasting transformation in Eastern and Central Europe has failed partly because of a lack of legal guarantees for editorial independence; essentially, however, it has also failed because of a lack of political will to make it work and a lack of demand on the part of audiences that were not only confronted with the proliferation of commercial content, but to whom the concept of PSB was alien (Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003).

Scholarship on broadcasting transitions in Africa, with the exception of South Africa, is scarce (Opoku-Menash 1998; Fardon and Furniss 2000; Gunner, Ligaga, and Moyo 2011; Ndlovu 2015; Mosime 2015). Introduced by colonial powers 'public broadcasting' was modelled after the BBC but functioned as state broadcasting and later came under the control of post-colonial governments (Okigbo 1996; Ndlela 2007). Hence PSB in Africa does not work the way it was conceived and designed in Europe; but it also usually does not work the way it does in the post-Soviet context. Even after the arrival of multi-partyism the general tendency in Africa has been one of public service broadcasters seeing themselves as mouthpieces of the government (Okigbo 1996; Fombad 2002; Ndlela 2007; Mosime 2015; Ndlovu 2015). The Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, for instance, has a nearly uninterrupted history of being instrumentalised by government. This vulnerability to political manipulation and state control has been the "Achilles heel" of PSB on the continent (Fombad 2002, 665). It is partially due to scarce resources: licence fee collection is unrealistic with impoverished populations that also do not attract advertisers. Economic resources are typically concentrated in the state, and dependence on them invites political pressure. In Zambia the government-owned media were offered independence in 1991 – on condition that government would stop funding them. The offer was not taken up, and to this day the Zambian Broadcasting Corporation is under the editorial control of government (Ndlela 2007). Similarly, Zimbabwean media, especially broadcasting, have seen repeated waves of politically motivated repression (Ndlovu 2015).

In Kenya and Namibia the picture is marginally less bleak (Opoku-Menash 1998; Berger et al. 2009). Following Namibia's independence, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation

(NBC) was the first major broadcaster in Southern Africa to embark on the road of public broadcasting in a democratic environment. Structural change was but one challenge; similarly difficult was the “challenge of changing the attitude of the staff from being 'civil service' oriented ... to one of professional producers and journalists” (Gorelick 1996, 233). Also, funding proved difficult: while the NBC is supposed to be run autonomously in terms of editorial standards it is dependent on state funding and therefore subject to considerable state control (ibid.). The Kenya Broadcasting Corporation has been criticised consistently for being biased towards government, although a generally vibrant media ecology in that country has acted in some ways as a counter-weight (Heath 1992; Hyden, Leslie, and Ogundimu 2002; Gunner, Ligaga, and Moyo 2011; Ogola 2011).

Why is the global record of broadcasting transformation such an unsatisfactory one? Is it because the introduction of independent PSB is simply “so extraordinarily difficult to achieve ... that it could be regarded as a true test of [post-authoritarian] transformation overall, specifically in terms of the consolidation of democracy”, as Jakubowicz (2004, 54) suggests? What this literature suggests is that the broadcasting transformations across Europe and Africa have encountered five main obstacles.<sup>4</sup> The first relates to transplanting institutional models from one political context to another. Jakubowicz (2004, 53) notes that the belief that this can be done with media institutions from the context of a mature democracy to a young democracy has proved “overoptimistic”. It has also been shown that where a lack of PSB culture meets a history of exclusively state-run media the idea and credibility of 'independent PSB' is jeopardised from the start

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<sup>4</sup> *In addition* to the global problem of US commercial content flooding previously untapped markets, thereby changing consumer demand and national competition structures.

(Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003; Mickiewicz 2008; Oates 2006). A second obstacle has been the absence of political will to make PSB happen. Russia and other Eastern European countries saw “numerous attempts by power elites to obtain immediate political advantages by instrumentally using TV, but neglecting the public interest” (ibid., 96). Often political ambitions merged with economic interests. In Russia, this eventually led to a return of television being used for state propaganda (ibid.). The same argument has been made for African countries (Opoku-Menash 1998; Fardon and Furniss 2000; Ndlela 2007; Gunner, Ligaga, and Moyo 2011; Mosime 2015). A third obstacle lies in the lack of adequate legal provisions. In Russia, as in most African cases, the “lack of legal guarantees made broadcasting extremely vulnerable to political pressures”; a law that would have provided these guarantees was never adopted (Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003, 96f). While such legal provisions are never a sufficient condition for independent PSB, they are a necessary one. A fourth obstacle is related to funding challenges. In the case of Lithuania, for instance, it has been noted that state funding of the PSB contributes to its politicisation (Iesmantaitė 2007). However, no or limited state funding is no guarantee for political independence either, and might even actively work against public service obligations, as has been shown for several other Eastern European countries (Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003). In Africa, most state-owned public broadcasters have been commercially funded since independence (Berger et al. 2009) and are simultaneously faced with an environment of very limited commercial potential (Ndlela 2007). The fifth obstacle is perhaps the most obvious: persistent political pressure has been the one constant in all contexts. However, studies on established public broadcasters show that, even where political pressure is reined in by legal means, political interference is still experienced as problematic by journalists

and editors (Küng-Shankleman 2000; Page and Crawley 2000; Born 2005).

Put differently, these five main obstacles point to institutional and structural factors (organisational design and legal provisions), economic factors (funding models), and factors related to agency (political will and direct pressure). Agency, however, is mainly attributed to political elites. What is greatly underrepresented in the literature on broadcasting transitions are analyses of how media organisations respond to this, how journalists on all levels attempt to navigate these obstacles, or how they become complicit in the process of politicisation. Unless we assume that journalists do not have agency and are mere passive subjects to external influences and conditions, their attitudes, beliefs, habits and assumptions matter.

Some authors do acknowledge this. Jakubowicz observes that the (re-)politicisation of newly independent media can be so intense and rapid that there is simply not enough time to carry through all necessary structural and managerial reforms, let alone cultural change in the newsroom that would have journalists embrace “independence, impartiality, detachment from politics, dedication to public interest, commitment to quality [and the] ability to refrain from pandering to the lowest common denominator” (Jakubowicz 2004, 65). Lloyd (2009, 3) argues that, “whilst it is comparatively easy to put in place policies reinforcing independence, it is extremely difficult to change attitudes and practices of the leadership and staff of a broadcaster”. Price and Raboy (2003, 118) note that “for all the emphasis on statutes and structures, deep political attitudes [may] mean that the difficulties in reaching a public service goal can be quite substantial even if all the proper laws and appointment practices are in place”.

In Central and Eastern Europe a generally highly politicised media and society has been seen as contributing to journalists' inability to make a decisive shift from "advocacy, propaganda-oriented to impartial-reporter or watchdog function" (Jakubowicz, quoted in Price and Raboy 2003, 119; Zielonka 2015). This has led to them using their new-found freedom of speech to express personal views and biases; journalism remains "politics conducted by other means" (ibid.). An example of this is Poland where, a decade after the political transition, journalists continued to be politically involved in an environment where the legal framework was expected to protect media freedom and independence fairly effectively. Political collusion on the part of the public broadcaster was caused by either the "political leanings of particular program makers or ... the composition of the governing bodies... not [by] direct outside political interference" (Price and Raboy 2003, 151). Similar challenges were observed at the time with regard to PSB in the Czech Republic where "in spite of superficial changes in rules, old-style interference by the political elite, sustained by *passivity* [my emphasis] on the part of journalists, continues to prevail" (ibid., 140f). Clearly, structural reform had not been enough: "The political and professional culture that led to the crisis at Czech TV arises from attitudes that are deeply-rooted in notions of authority over and control of information that have no place in modern democratic society" (ibid.).

Jakubowicz (2004, 54) also proposes that "subjective factors (i.e. elements of social consciousness and culture) have played a crucial role in the media system change", although this only became apparent once "imported' legal and institutional frameworks failed to function as intended". Looking back at the malaise of PSB in the region, he

claims that it is simply naive to expect journalists to act in line with western PSB professional standards when they are part of deeply politicised societies and subject to partitocratic<sup>5</sup> systems (ibid.). This point has also been made for South African by Orgeret (2006) and Ngwenya (2015).

In South Korea, too, journalists' attitudes have been shown to contribute to politicisation. While overt pressure and direct government intervention had largely disappeared with the adoption of a new legal environment after the political transition, the state still commanded considerable power over the media years later, and more so during economically difficult times (Park, Kim, and Sohn 2000). Three factors contributed to journalists' timidity within the two public broadcasters there at the time: The continued presence of 'old guard' editors in the newsroom who were socialised in an authoritarian context, and voluntary management cooperation with political elites; highly hierarchical newsroom structures and intense competition for limited job and training opportunities; and "traditional Korean culture" (Lee 1997, 141–46). The latter refers to a "feudalistic conception of the President" (ibid., 142). Lee argues that, in the South Korean case a naive assumption prevailed that, given some structural changes there would be an "irresistible expansion of internal newsroom democracy" (ibid.). He suggests that "if only Korean reporters had known that the liberalization of the legal framework would be one thing, and the democratic and independent running of the newsroom another, their situation today could have been better" (ibid., 135). While there might not be empirical evidence for such a claim, it certainly warrants further research and a deepened, and systematised discussion around 'cultural' factors.

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5 Systems of government where a dominant political party (or parties), rather than individual politicians, dominate political life.

This is particularly true for the African context where a relative dearth of empirical research on PSB meets an environment that presents particular challenges to democratic institutions and the media. Legacies of the colonial past have resulted in weak states that are simultaneously “hegemonic and volatile” (Zielonka 2015, 18), high levels of conflict and pressing needs for nation-building/ reconciliation and the consolidation of power (Stremlau and Gagliardone 2015, 291). Democracy is also shaped by a variety of political cultures: Stremlau and Gagliardone rightly criticise the tendency to study formal structures and relations between state and media actors while ignoring “informal networks of power” and “overlooking the ways in which governance actually works” (ibid.). Both are associated with 'hybrid governance' and neopatrimonialism (Bach and Gazibo 2012; Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009). All these factors facilitate the capture of media by political and private interests.

### **The SABC in the context of international broadcasting transformations**

Within the field of public broadcasters in young democracies, the SABC offers an instructive case study as it occupies the grey area between failure and success. Compared to other African broadcasters it has received a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention (Currie and Markovitz 1993; Teer-Tomaselli 1995, 2005, 2011; Baker 1996; Hultman 1997; Berger 1999; FXI 1999; Martinis 2000; Tleane and Duncan 2003; Fourie 2004; Jjuuko 2005; Orgeret 2006; OSF Media Programme 2007; Abboo 2008; Duncan 2008a, 2008b; Fokane and Duncan 2008; Hubbard 2008; Berger et al.

2009; C. Sparks 2009; Wasserman and de Beer 2009; Louw and Milton 2012; Ciaglia 2015, 2016; Ngwenya 2015).

However, until very recently, the question of politicisation has not been studied in any considerable depth. I have written before on the SABC's political independence (Arndt 2007), and Ciaglia has tackled the issue of politicisation in two papers (2015, 2016), albeit on a very limited empirical basis and without looking at the phenomenon over time. Ngwenya's (2015) DPhil thesis on the SABC's "crisis of 'independence'" is a highly welcome in-depth contribution to this field. He argues that divergent conceptions of 'independence' are constructed by SABC staff in response to commercialisation and ANC power struggles and, ultimately, the global macro-economic environment. I engage with these studies in more detail later, in particular in Chapter 3. For now, I propose that the SABC, at least during the time covered by this study, has occupied a fairly singular position with regards to the five obstacles to broadcasting transformations discussed earlier.

Firstly, the idea of PSB is not new to contemporary South Africa. The apartheid-era SABC may have been a caricature of the noble idea of PSB, but alongside its obvious instrumentalisation for the propaganda needs of the ancient regime, there was also the reality that it had obtained a powerful and monopolistic position in the country's media market, not least by offering some content in indigenous African languages (Louw 1993). Secondly, South Africa's negotiated settlement provided an unusual transition towards democracy. Recognising the fact that the SABC was already in a position of great power, but also of potential to help build an inclusive and democratic South Africa,

political parties across the spectrum had a vested interest in its impartiality, credibility and independence. What was present, therefore, was the political will to support its transformation, much more so than in other African or European contexts (Ndlela 2007).

Thirdly, although not without challenges, the initial transition in the early 1990s was comprehensive and far-reaching and based on consultations with a wide range of political and civil society stakeholders. The process focussed on political independence and editorial autonomy and resulted in an organisation statutorily independent of government with the state as its sole shareholder (SABC 1994b; RSA 1999). Unlike many other African countries, South Africa has a reliably functioning judiciary which provides media institutions and individual journalist with legal recourse and protection. These legal guarantees have proved to be a powerful limit to political pressure. Newspapers like the *Mail & Guardian*, for instance, have an impressive history of winning court cases against political and business interests<sup>6</sup>. With regard to the policy environment, legal guarantees and hence formal independence, the SABC stands on relatively solid ground, its role as a public service broadcaster being supported by law (Fourie 2004; Orgeret 2006; Fokane and Duncan 2008).

Fourthly, faced with a government that has shunned any responsibility for funding the SABC in a sustained and meaningful way<sup>7</sup>, the broadcaster has for almost the entire 20-year period depended on advertising for more than 70% of its revenue (Annual Reports 1994-2012). Tax funding was negligible and went mainly into educational

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6 Interview with M&G editor Nicholas Dawes, 2009.

7 With the exception of more recent bail-outs following a period of mismanagement – cf. Chapter 5/II.

programming; licence fees make a minimal contribution due to high level of poverty in the country. After struggling initially, the SABC became financially self-sustainable and remained so for most of this period, at times making a profit. By 2006 it had accumulated a R400 million reserve (SABC 2006).<sup>8</sup>

While financial independence from the state does not make a public broadcaster immune to political pressure, and may indeed make it susceptible to other kinds of pressure, it at least precludes government from leveraging funding for political control (Fokane and Duncan 2008). Finally, while political pressure has been documented in South Africa, I have found no convincing empirical evidence in the literature<sup>9</sup>, nor in my own fieldwork, that, in the first two decades after apartheid, such pressure exceeded significantly and consistently the pressures faced by PSB journalists in established democracies.

And yet the SABC's track record in terms of political independence is disappointing (cf. Chapter 3) suggesting that explanations around structural determinants and political pressure alone are insufficient<sup>10</sup>. While the SABC's specific situation does not allow for complete control of the variables that dominate the scholarship on broadcasting transitions, it offers us a rare opportunity to draw more systematic attention to the 'soft' factors – attitudes, beliefs, culture – impacting on editorial independence that are more

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8 The associated commercialisation has raised questions about the SABC's ability to deliver on its public service obligations, and for this reason an increase in state funding is often seen to be desirable (Tleane and Duncan 2003). However, using documentary evidence across SABC programming, Ngwenya shows that, compared to ANC power struggles, commercialisation “has been less significant in shaping the newsroom” in terms of editorial independence (Ngwenya 2015, 234).

9 While strong political pressure has frequently been alleged by those studying the SABC's independence (e.g. Abboo 2008; Ciaglia 2015, 2016; Ngwenya 2015), this is often based on media reporting and small numbers of interviews, often with former employees, civil society activists or union officials.

10 This view is echoed by a number of authors (Orgeret 2006; Wasserman 2010a; Ciaglia 2015, 2016; Ngwenya 2015).

difficult to capture and therefore easily overlooked.

A small number of authors on the SABC have engaged with aspects of this task. Using interviews, observation and content analysis for her unpublished doctoral thesis, Orgeret (2006) looks at political independence and professional autonomy during the first decade of democracy and also explores how journalists reflected on their situation and managed outside pressure. Coming from a culturalist perspective she offers a balanced and detailed account of how the SABC constructed representations of the new nation, and how this was translated into its news output and reflected in the institutional culture's values and symbols. Building on this, but focussing primarily on policy and institutional issues, Abboo's (2008) unpublished MA dissertation provides a damning assessment of the SABC's independence – albeit on a questionable empirical basis<sup>11</sup>. Ngwenya's (2015) unpublished doctoral thesis interrogates notions of independence held by staff on different levels of the organisation and links these to the broadcasters's political and economic environment and, ultimately, the SABC's macro-economic context. He bases his research on document analysis and 36 in-depth interviews with staff, but no observation. Ciaglia (2015), finally, without having done any research inside the organisation at all, argues that the SABC has moved increasingly from linear (direct) towards 'entrenched' politicisation; he describes the conditions conducive to this, but does not address why and how they have come about. Importantly, all these authors, despite their different perspectives and methodological limitations, acknowledge the subtle dimensions of politicisation in the SABC's journalism.

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<sup>11</sup> An analysis of newspaper articles and SABC policy documents combined with only 7 interviews, all of them senior managers and most of them former employees.

## 2.2 The Sociology of Journalism and Editorial Independence

This takes me to the study of journalists and processes of journalistic production and editorial independence, a tradition rooted in the sociology of media. There, the study of journalism has come a long way: From the determinism of macro-level theories such as the competitive and dominance paradigms (cf. McNair 1998) that assumed that, by understanding structural limitations and collective processes we automatically understand individual behaviour, to the micro-level studies of news content (Altschull 1997) – with comparatively little in between that focusses on the institutional level where actual and frequently conflicted people make decisions about media products in interaction with one another.

The newsroom studies in the Anglo-American tradition have overwhelmingly focused on constraints imposed on journalists by the bureaucracy of the news organisation, professional routines and reliance on official sources (Tuchman 1973, 1978, Glasgow University Media Group. 1976, 1982; Gans 1979; Golding and Elliott 1979; Fishman 1980; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989; Tunstall 1993).

Later research has turned to professional ideology with an increasing sensitivity to matters of institutional culture (Tuchman 1972; Ettema and Glasser 1998; Harrison 2000). This was followed by a move towards more complex models involving different categories of factors shaping news production from in- and outside the institution, such as political and economic variables, professional codes, news-gathering technology and

sources (Gans 1979; Gieber 1999; McNair 2006). This sizeable body of empirical research provides valuable insights, but also has shortfalls and limitations:

Firstly, it evolved in a specific historical context and has traditionally focussed on North America and Western Europe. This should lead us to be cautious about generalisations. For instance, partisan, market-driven, pluralist media as found in the US might sustain a consolidated democracy, but may have a very different effect when used as a normative model in young democracies. Concepts such as balance, objectivity, impartiality and independence have arisen out of particular historical circumstances and are continually shaped by global power relations. The Western-centricism of the discourse on media and democracy is a serious shortcoming in the fields of both, media studies and journalism education (Hallin and Mancini 2005). A notable exception, Curran's and Parks' (2000) (2000) "De-Westernizing Media Studies", draws together analyses of media systems in a variety of democratic, authoritarian and 'transitional and mixed societies' using, for the most part, a political economy perspective. There is, however, still a need for more in-depth empirical, especially qualitative, research of the scope of the classic 'newsroom studies' carried out in the US, Canada or the UK, the kind of data that allows us insights into actual processes of journalistic production in a variety of democratic contexts. Ngwenya's (2015) and Orgeret's (2006) SABC studies are valuable exceptions to this; both make strong points about the contextualisation of local journalism discourses.

Secondly, between cultural approaches drawing attention to journalists being embedded in their respective society's culture on the one hand and social-organisational

approaches on the other, the somewhat hybrid notion of the organisational culture as specific to a given media organisation within a greater cultural context has received little attention, with the exception of the BBC. The US studies in particular tend to underestimate the internal differentiation of institutions. This can lead to a perception of media organisations and newsroom cultures being frozen in time with journalists resembling a homogeneous group of rational actors subjected to a myriad of constraints, pressures and professional routines with little regard to how individuals are shaped by the organisational environment and vice versa (Tunstall 1971; Epstein 1973).

This links to a third shortcoming: a lack of concern with the question of agency. McNair's (2006) notion of cultural chaos which assumes multi-causality in media-society interactions offers a new perspective in a body of literature that has not given much attention to individual agency in relation to organisational culture. It prompts us to consider relations between journalists and other individual actors more seriously. Schudson (2005), for instance, notes that reporter-editor relationships are under-researched<sup>12</sup>. It also raises questions about why and how individual actors behave differently even when working under the same conditions. The existence of self-censorship is well-documented (Schlesinger 1978; Mortensen and Svendsen 1980; Born 2005; Orgeret 2006; Ngwenya 2015); much less so what makes some individuals resist it.

Fourthly, existing empirical research has centred around news production. This has led to the paradoxical phenomenon of some authors using the term 'news', 'media' and 'journalism' almost synonymously (Zelizer 1993). But while news, especially political

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<sup>12</sup> See Donsbach (1995) for an exception.

news, is a central pillar of the media's democratic role, it is by no means the only one. Compared to current affairs, feature reporting and documentary it is indeed a rather crude form of journalistic output and perhaps the one most heavily regulated by newsroom routines all of which necessarily impose limits on content. This is due to the need for immediacy, brevity, and clarity – reflected, for instance, in the near-universal use of the inverted pyramid structure. However, as Born (2005) has shown with regard to the BBC, it is in fact the whole spectrum of genres that matter, particularly in public broadcasting.

With my research on the SABC I intend to address all four shortcomings of this literature: The case is located outside the Western world and draws empirical data from a variety of journalistic genres in radio and television. It takes the organisational culture as its main area of enquiry and links it to the question of agency.

### **Empirical studies and the problem of politicisation**

Having raised some theoretical concerns about existing empirical studies of media organisations, this body of research has also brought to light many substantive issues directly related to the problem of politicisation. Three studies are particularly relevant here because they deal with the BBC, the organisation the SABC along with public service broadcasters around the world, is modelled after and has, at times at least, aspired to emulate: Born's (2005) ethnographic study of the BBC; Schlesinger's (1978) classic BBC study and, to a lesser extent, Küng-Shankleman's (2000) comparative work

of the BBC and CNN. Numerous others are concerned with notions of power, control and autonomy in journalism, particularly in the critical media studies tradition. Below I shall discuss their contribution to some of the key themes regarding the politicisation of the SABC.

(1) The politicisation of media organisations has been a cause for concern because it skews the representation of political reality in the journalistic product. In the case of a partisan newspaper this might not present much of a problem; in the case of media organisations whose credibility depends on independence, impartiality and balance it does. Empirical studies carried out by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1982, 1985) brought to light the extent to which coverage may reflect the views of those dominant in society. Schlesinger (1978) documented how the BBC's political reporting is weighed heavily in favour of official parliamentary politics. Born confirmed this, describing how staff working for 'Newsnight', "this most Westminster-focused, establishment-scourging programme", showed contempt for even the third-strongest political party considering it not powerful enough to warrant much airtime while struggling to deal with "the new politics of the margins" (Born 2005, 374, 417). 'Representing politics' in South Africa is perhaps an even greater challenge and responsibility given the country's enormous diversity, its one-party dominant political system and the fragile state of its democracy. Any systematic misrepresentation of politics carries considerable risks, and even more so when it is initiated by, or thought to please, powerful political actors with vested interests.

(2) External pressure on media organisations has been documented in countless cases,

suggesting that it is somewhat of an unavoidable evil for journalists around the world. In his classic comparative study of CBS, NBC, Newsweek and Time, Gans (1979) found evidence for overt external pressure, covert pressure (stemming from sources) and pressure internal to the organisation, but noted that despite its “chilling effect” censorship or self-censorship was rare (ibid., 248, 252). This suggests that this seemingly direct causality needs unpacking. Similarly, it has been argued that UK media “are shaped more by patterns of thought and power relationships outside the media ... than by direct controls” (Curran 1990, 116). The power external agents have depends only partially on the weapons at their disposal. In the case of the BBC the government's options for exerting control have traditionally consisted of periodic Charter reviews, the appointment of governors (until 2007) and funding decisions. All three have been used repeatedly (Born 2005). Born speaks of “intense pressure exerted by the government on the BBC before and during the Kelly affair, including attacks on governors” leaving the BBC with “little institutional autonomy” (ibid., 500). Pressure tends to be used more in times of crisis where the BBC's aspiration to impartiality conflicts with government's notion of 'national interest' (cf. ibid., 382). This shows that even at the BBC, the model for PSB in the world, conditions for journalists are less than ideal. Yet while the BBC has generally maintained its reputation for quality and independence, the SABC has battled to even create it (cf. Chapter 3). Whatever explains this paradox, it is unlikely to be found by looking at external pressure only.

(3) Existing studies have identified a variety of structural and other influences on journalists' autonomy that have their roots within the organisation, industry or profession. With regards to politicisation, the central factors reflected are institutional

structure, governance and regulation; the funding model; management policy and strategy; and the nature and routines of news production.

Editorial hierarchies in the newsroom have a long history (Solomon 1995). Harrison, working on terrestrial TV news in Britain, is one of many researchers who documented how control over news production is concentrated in very few hands on the top level of the editorial hierarchy and how journalists are encouraged to look upwards for decisions when faced with contentious issues (Harrison 2000). This corresponds with Schlesinger's (1978) and Born's (2005) observations of editorial control at the BBC disguised as "guidance". Such structures serve as a transmission belt for management policy and strategy. In his time as BBC Director General, John Birt consciously strengthened formal hierarchies and centralised power to enforce his New Public Management policy. The effect was what one executive called a 'thought-police atmosphere' which "diminished editorial bravery and originality, reinforcing 'institutional caution'" (Born 2005, 398; Blumler and Gurevitch 1995). Harrison also claims that "the *real* power is located at the top of the hierarchical pyramid" (Born 2005, 133) – a view that is worth interrogating given the power of informal hierarchies unaccounted for in official structures. At the BBC the role of the governors and the relationship between executive and governors was unclear for a long time, a problem that is certainly echoed in the SABC. In both cases irregular interference in editorial matters has been documented (Born 2005; Ngwenya 2015).

In the case of public broadcasters, the funding model can make or break their political independence. At the BBC, government wields considerable power over the

broadcaster's finances and can use this to secure political influence (Born 2005). As Orgeret (2006) has noted, for much of its post-apartheid existence, the SABC's commercial orientation has worked as a counterweight to political bias: too much propaganda, and credibility is at stake – and with it much needed advertising revenue.

Since the 1970s, a considerable number of studies has been devoted to identifying various factors that influence routine news-production. These include, but are not limited to, proprietorial pressure, professional values, personal bias, news gathering routines including source relations, limited resources, time pressure (Schlesinger's "stopwatch culture") and technology (Epstein 1973; Burns 1977; Schlesinger 1978; Tuchman 1978; McNair 1998, 2007). Gans (1979) concluded for the NBC, CBS and ABC that such constraints limit journalists' autonomy; Gieber (1999), working on US Newspapers, found that journalists' freedom is curtailed by the newsroom bureaucracy as such. Journalist-source relations have received considerable attention as collusion between reporters and, e.g., politicians makes the former susceptible to influence and pressure (Cohen 1963; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Waisbord 2000). However, as Born (2005, 8) has shown, collusion is not a given: When BBC journalists encountered New Labour's PR machinery they tended to "match aggressive spin with aggressive journalistic scrutiny of government".

Within this literature a consensus has evolved that autonomy is relative: In democratic societies there might never be complete freedom from political influence, but there will also never be complete control over journalists (Gans 1979; McNair 2006). A strong case has been made with regard to British television that journalists, specifically TV

producers, tend to overestimate their autonomy, thereby creating a “micro-myth of independence” clouding the fact that they have long internalised their constraints (Schlesinger 1978, 135; Harrison 2000). At the BBC control is exercised as retrospective reviews and guidance filtered down in an unobtrusive manner (Born 2005). These mechanisms do not only preserve the professional values of independence and autonomy; they simultaneously help to ensure conformity within a culture that reliably reproduces itself (Schlesinger 1978). There is also an assumption that journalists strive for a maximum of autonomy (Tunstall 1971; Curran 1990; Waisbord 2000), even though it is not clear what this near universal assertion is based on.<sup>13</sup> What about journalists who do not consider autonomy to be supremely desirable? There is, it seems, little room in this literature for voluntary conformity and collusion, identification with national interest and developmental paradigms, or even for indecision and individuals that are internally conflicted. This is a something I address in this thesis.

(4) According to Gans (1979) there are three possible ways journalists can respond to pressure: fight back, give in, or avoid it by self-censoring. I have employed Hirschman's (1970) concept of 'exit, voice and loyalty' to analyse how individuals try to manage dissent within the SABC (Arndt 2007). Not many scholars have attended to this problem in depth. Breed, a pioneer in this regard, set out to study conformity at American newspapers and found a range of factors keeping journalists in line. For instance, reporters are socialised into the newsroom by 'osmosis', learning to avoid “rarely evoked” sanctions such as not being trusted for important stories (Breed 1955, 263). Other reasons for conformity include financial benefits; job security; trips, prestige,

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<sup>13</sup> Often it is self-report data which might not reflect journalists' actual attitudes and behaviour. An example is Tunstall's (1993) book on *Television Producers*, which has been criticised for its methodological weakness in this regard (Cottle 1995).

genuine loyalty, and career ambitions (Breed 1955; Schlesinger 1978; Arndt 2007).

Within the BBC both Schlesinger (1978) (1978) and Born (2005) found conformity induced and sustained by a system of rewards and sanctions. But they also encountered resistance. Born lists various examples of staff standing up to pressure: in their support for the World Service's autonomy in 1996, by attempting to evoke Reithian ideals against Birtist reforms, in the "stand-off" between government spin-doctors and journalists in the mid 1990s, and by carving out pockets of dissent and circumventing management strategy. However, those who choose to resist pay a price: they might make little progress in their careers or get sidelined. The "psychic costs are apt to be great", and eventually motivation and job satisfaction may decrease (Harrison 2000, 130; Sigelman 1973).

(5) Some writers suggests that we move beyond the mere description of the factors influencing news production to a more holistic attempt of understanding an organisation's logic of life (Bantz 1985). Culture is central to a media organisation, not last because it "drives motivation, drives creativity, drives content" (Küng-Shankleman 2000, 221). Within the media studies literature, organisational culture is rarely explicitly alluded to. However, in a seminal early study, Bantz (1985) claims that, because journalists are routinely exposed to conflict in their work (they distrust and dispute their sources, are exposed to conflicts between professional ethos and business norms in the workplace and routinely compete against each other), news organisations will "define conflict as a routine, expected, and appropriate occurrence", something seen as good and necessary. While he deserves credit for drawing attention to the importance of

conflict within organisational cultures, the fact that conflict is endemic does not mean it will be embraced. Sigelman (1973) even found that organisations are “structured to avoid conflict between reporters and their superiors”. I attend to this understudied aspect of culture in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7 using a psychoanalytic perspective.

In the context of the BBC, organisational culture has received some attention, and these studies are illuminating when looking at the SABC and its difficult relationship to political power. The BBC owes much to its “founding father” and first Director General, John Reith. As with Ted Turner's CNN, he played a central role in creating a culture that would serve to glue the organisation together (Küng-Shankleman 2000). The Reithian culture has proven to be a solid base for the emergence of a counter-discourse, for instance when it de-legitimised Birt's attempt to undermine the BBC's “capacity to fulfil its central democratic purposes and ethical ideals” (Born 2005, 81). The SABC, not owing much to a single person, has to make do with either its apartheid 'founding culture' or with its post-apartheid democratic foundations – something that will become evident throughout this thesis.

After taking decades to find its feet and define its role in society, the BBC's culture has been described to encompass four central, widely shared beliefs: a deep commitment to the nation, “a robust identification” with and “unusual devotion” (ibid.) to the BBC's heritage, a claim to being important and special, and an aspiration to programming excellence (Küng-Shankleman 2000). Quality output is also encouraged by internal rivalries and competition between programmes and different genres, accompanied by “fears that an error or misjudgement may damage [the BBC's] public image” (Born 2005,

70 drawing on Burns 1977). While Burns and Born link internal rivalry to self-absorption and narcissism blossoming in an “autistic world” (Born 2005, 70) the existence of such rivalry nevertheless points to the central value of quality, a willingness to learn from 'rivals', a commitment to the BBC's mission. These factors combined can stimulate creativity and “a virtuous circle of invention” (ibid., 449). Closely linked is another characteristic of the BBC's culture: the distinct identities of departments fosters “internal diversity and the space for dissent and debate [as] preconditions for an independent and innovative production culture” (ibid., 77). A pluralistic culture like this lends itself to the emergence of subcultures along with the opportunities they offer for resistance to political pressure. Similarly important is the prestige traditionally associated with the role of the 'autonomous' producer (ibid.), and the value of autonomy itself.

My own research stands in the tradition of these studies. It provides a case outside the much-researched media landscape of the developed world and, in particular, mature liberal democracies. It also contributes an in-depth focus on organisational culture: a long-term ethnographic study spanning 20 years of politicisation, and an in-depth analysis of this culture's internal differentiation and unconscious dimensions that also goes well beyond similar studies on the SABC (Orgeret 2006; Ciaglia 2015; Ngwenya 2015). Furthermore, it deals explicitly with the problem of collective and individual agency-as-resistance to politicisation, thus bringing together the social and individual level. Below I outline my conceptual framework before introducing a psychoanalytic body of theories that I will draw on when analysing my empirical data.

## 2.3 Politicisation through the Lens of Organisational Culture

### Politicisation

Politicisation as a theoretical concept is not well-established and has been used predominantly in applied studies of non-media institutions such as UN agencies (Imber 1989; Dutt 1995; Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012), EU institutions (Tallberg and Johansson 2008; De Wilde 2011; Krapels 2012), civil services (Peters and Pierre 2004; Doli, Korenica, and Rogova 2012), the military (Dudley 1976), and security and intelligence services (Ransom 1987; Betts 2002; Riste 2009; Coragic 2010). I discuss this literature in more depth in Chapter 5/I. There, forms and dimensions of politicisation (cf. Betts 2002; Ransom 1987; Peters and Pierre 2004; Rovner 2008) are used to structure the argument around the SABC's politicisation, with some modest additions to the literature, such as the concept of 'anticipatory politicisation' as distinct from both top-down and bottom-up politicisation, and the politicisation of individuals and discourse in addition to the politicisation of institutions, issues and decision-making processes (De Wilde 2011). Here, I restrict myself to a relatively brief introduction of the concept of politicisation and the way I use it in this thesis.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2013) defines politicisation as the “action or process of making political or of establishing upon a political basis; the fact of being politically aware or active”. Taking inspiration from Bourdieu's field theory<sup>14</sup> (1993, 2005) and

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<sup>14</sup> Field theory as such does not do justice to the “heterogeneous reality” of journalists (Marliere 1998,

subsequent writers (Born 1995; Hallin 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2006), one could also say that a media organisation becomes politicised as the political field impresses itself upon it, causing dynamics and rivalries associated with the wider political space to be reflected in the internal workings of the organisation<sup>15</sup>, effectively rendering it a heteronomous extension to the political field. Darras, for instance, documented empirically how the journalistic field (rather than a particular organisation) can be dominated directly by the political field. He showed how “the structural subordination of the journalistic field is made possible by journalistic self-censorship” based on a quasi-symbiotic entanglement between certain journalists and politicians and a journalistic *habitus* assigning disproportionate importance to political institutions (Darras 2005, 166). By *habitus* Bourdieu refers to “socialised subjectivity” - individual actors’ “predispositions, assumptions, judgments, and behaviours” acquired through socialisation (Benson and Neveu 2005, 3) that, in dialogue with the objective structural context of the field, regulate everyday practices in a way that is not necessarily based on conscious reflection. This concept has limitations. As Born (2006) argues, humans are limited in their actions not just by social dispositions, but also by their personal trajectory and dispositions. This is supported by a consensus in social psychology that “behavior is a function of both the person and the situation”, even though the relative influence of situational and dispositional variables has been subject of much debate between social and personality psychologists. I will go further by arguing that behaviour is also a function of unconscious dynamics on the collective and individual level and will employ psychoanalytic theory to capture this.

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223) and “adds little to our understanding of ... institutions ... as such” (Born 2006, 23), especially with regards to their internal complexity. The latter precisely is at the core of my work: an in-depth understanding of organisational dynamics and collective and individual agency.

<sup>15</sup> This goes beyond what the public service broadcaster is expected to do, namely to cover and represent political dynamics in as objective and balanced a way possible (RSA 1999; SABC 2004b). It means that the institution itself becomes a player in the political field.

My use of the term 'politicisation' relates to both a process and a product. More specifically, I refer to politicisation as a process by which political agents successfully seek or are granted influence in a statutorily independent organisation, to the extent that the political independence of that organisation is compromised (the product of politicisation). I do not assume that politicisation is necessarily linear or unidirectional; nor is it by definition problematic. No public broadcaster could (or indeed *should*) be completely free from political influence. Nor is it the media's role to exist in complete isolation from politics (Schudson 2005). Speaking about politicisation as a product means speaking about degrees thereof at a particular time.

I focus on politicisation rather than political or editorial independence for a number of reasons. Of course these two concepts are closely linked, and in many ways one is the negative of the other. At the same time there are subtle differences: *Independence* describes a condition or quality that, it is easily assumed, is either present or not – although there may be degrees of independence in practice. Also, as Ngwenya (2015) argues, notions of independence are socially constructed against a political and macro-economic backdrop. *Politicisation*, on the other hand, refers to a process as well as a product ('The Oxford English Dictionary' n.d.); by definition, it allows for shades of grey, suggests a certain fluidity and leads immediately to questions around process, cause, agency and purpose. Political independence, perhaps because of its constant use in public discourse on media, is a more loaded term, which is underpinned by the rarely questioned assumption in the literature on media transformation that a public broadcaster should be politically independent if it is to function properly (cf. Abboo

2008 for an example). This view is rooted in liberal media theory and Western notions of democracy. It may well be accurate and valuable, but we cannot assume this since we know little about its applicability to, or indeed desirability for, non-Western and transitional contexts.

This thesis does not take a normative approach. It attempts to assess the SABC's politicisation against the broadcaster's own mandate which was initially arrived at through a process of wide consultation and has consistently been formally upheld by all stakeholders, although important structural alterations have taken place (cf. Chapter 3). De-politicisation may be desirable, but as a means of restoring a situation more consistent with the functional principles on which the post-apartheid SABC has been built. Lastly, *independence* necessitates the presence of an Other to be independent of; an Other that has agency, that aims to increase dependency. Ngwenya, despite focussing on the centrality of staff perceptions with regard to notions of independence and the role of the SABC, still assumes that these perceptions are simply consequences of wider political and economic developments where “the SABC and its staff are reduced to the political role of subjects of the state” (Ngwenya 2015, 303). While this is not untrue, such an approach oversimplifies the complex ways in which humans engage with and navigate their social environment, as I intend to show.

Politicisation is a more inclusive concept that allows for agency to be placed not just in the external environment of the organisation, but in various locations within it. As I have argued earlier, there is a clear need to move beyond the formal side of organisations as embodied in formal hierarchies<sup>16</sup>, policy and strategy documents, vision, mission and so

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16 Even Ngwenya (2015) studies staff notions of independence based on their formal position in the

on towards the informal: the unseen power relations, hidden loyalties, informal hierarchies, unofficial newsroom values, unspoken truths, beliefs and assumptions. In order to capture this informal side I employ the concept of organisational culture which allows to link individual actors and institutions in a non-linear and dynamic way.

### **Organisational culture**

As argued earlier, most existing research on the SABC's political independence as well as broadcasting transitions in general has shunned the problem of organisational culture and focussed instead on formal and structural factors, such as governance, the funding model and the broader legal framework. Individual journalists are assumed to act rationally in response to these parameters. But as Douglas (1986) argued the way we think and perceive reality is always shaped by institutions and social relations; subjectivity is fundamentally grounded in the social dimension – something rational choice theory fails to capture. Applying Douglas' cultural theory approach to the analysis of administrative and social systems in public management, Hood (1998, 7) took things further, proposing that the “two fundamental forms of human organization”, 'grid' and 'group', could account for the full variety of organisational life and “pinpoint the social mechanisms which produce those unintended and apparently paradoxical side-effects or reverse effects from institutional designs that may seem unassailably logical to the designers” (ibid., 230). Using Hood's framework here might indeed tell us something about why the SABC does not live up to its potential, but it could not explain how and why any particular style or type of organisation or (sub-)culture comes about, changes

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organisation, seemingly on the assumption that it is formal hierarchy that provides for distinctive difference.

or persists over time, let alone how it could be modified. Grid/group cultural theory also does not account for unconscious dynamics and fails to address the question of agency. For all these reasons, a broader perspective on culture is more helpful.

Of course, structure and culture are always closely linked. By using the concept of culture as the centre of my conceptual framework, I propose a shift in focus for the purpose of shedding light on what is otherwise not easily assessed. I trace the informal in addition and in relation to the formal in order to “analyse (potential) dis-junctures, contradictions, absences [and] differences between public/ private ... explicit/ implicit ... 'objective'/ 'subjective', collective/ individual” and so on (Born, lecture on ethnographic method, Cambridge University, 8 October 2009). Making these dualisms explicit in the context of the SABC will offer, I hope, a valuable way of understanding the politicisation of the organisation and offer new insights on broadcasting transformation in general.

A German political scientist, Max Kaase, once compared efforts to define 'political culture' with the attempt of nailing custard to a wall. 'Organisational culture' is just as difficult to pin down and has long been contested, with two streams of thought having emerged in the literature. The first defines organisational or institutional culture as the deep levels of values, beliefs and meanings: something an institution *is* (Schein 1999; Smircich 1983), i.e. a “socially constructed, unseen, and unobservable force behind organisational activities (Ott 1989). According to the second stream, culture is directly reflected in internal forms or practices. It is something an institution *has* (Hofstede et al. 1990; Chatman and Jehn 1994; Denison 1996). Some authors have attempted to integrate the two traditions which has proven useful with regard to empirical studies

(Beugelsdijk 2004; Hatch and Cunliffe 2013). The assumption is that shared beliefs and values shape behaviour and therefore practices at the organisational level which can in turn create, challenge or perpetuate the former in individuals. An example would be when powerful individuals (e.g. senior editors) display certain values (e.g. a pro-government bias) causing, directly or indirectly, an adjustment of institutional practice (e.g. pro-government reporting) which then works to socialise newcomers (e.g. junior reporters) who internalise such practice, to the values that gave rise to it effectively perpetuating the practice of pro-government reporting that does not rely on further political or editorial intervention.

Building on such an integrative view, I understand organisational culture as encompassing values, beliefs, assumptions and practices that are commonly shared within an organisation. In the case of the SABC values refer to professional values (such as news values) that are held consciously, can be talked about and are reflected in everyday practices as widely accepted norms. Beliefs and assumptions refer to journalists' perceptions of the SABC's political role and purpose and their own role within it. As Born (1995) has shown in other organisational contexts, it is possible for contradicting values and beliefs to co-exist within an organisational culture, and even within an individual. Practices are defined as patterns of behaviour in terms of routine journalistic and editorial decision-making processes, but also encompass the nature and level of internal debate in the newsroom, as well as the way conflict is being managed within the organisation. This is close to what Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) refer to as 'artefacts' of culture. In this thesis I follow, roughly, a trajectory from focussing on observable practices (chapters 4) to values (chapters 4 and 5), to beliefs and

assumptions (chapters 6-8). In other words, I am moving from the more to the less visible and from the more to the less conscious.

Culture might run in line with or (temporarily) contrary to official policy and management strategy, and not necessarily to the detriment of the journalistic product. Whether and in which way an organisation's culture is favourable or destructive depends on one's point of view: managers strive to create one sympathetic to their vision and wish to control and change a culture that is not. A sizeable body of research has been produced to this end within business, management and organisational studies. However, attempts to control or shape culture have proven to present formidable challenges. Organisations are often pluralistic and rife with conflict (Rodrigues 2006) which can make it "difficult to attain a cultural consensus" (Martin 1992, 2002 quoted *ibid.*, 537). An organisation's culture is itself the site of conflict between competing explicit and implicit discourses. As such it is constantly shaped by the members of the organisation while impacting on them in turn. Because of this, "cultural change cannot be attributed to a single agent but rather to the mobilization of different groups within and across organizational levels" (Rodrigues 2006, 538). This ties in with Martin (1992, 2002) who distinguished (1) *integrated* organisational cultures reflecting a broad consensus, (2) *differentiated* cultures that are essentially split into competing subcultures; and (3) *fragmented* cultures which show almost no consensus whatsoever. For her, subcultures provide meaning and identification for groups of actors who have come to question the legitimacy of the official or *corporate culture*. A subculture can further develop into a *counter-culture* that is supported by "significant occupational groups [that] consider a corporate culture to be illegitimate" (Gagliardi 1986, quoted in

Rodrigues 2006, 539).

I propose an alternative approach that distinguishes subcultures more fundamentally in relation to an organisation's main task or purpose, rather than in relation to the management of the day and its frequently temporary attempts to assert a particular official or corporate culture. I will show that this is one reason for the relative stability of subcultures, at least at the SABC: they resemble the deep ocean currents underneath the choppy waters of management. This, however, necessitates a conceptualisation of the reference point that is the 'task'.

Within the study of group relations as it has emerged out of the work of the Tavistock Institute in the 1950s, the concept goes back to A.K. Rice who defined the 'primary task' of a system as "the task which it is created to perform" (Rice 1958) and later as "the task it must perform if it is to survive" (Rice 1963). Around the same time, the psychoanalyst Bion (1961), in his studies of group processes, used the task of a group as a reference point for tracing collective unconscious dynamics. Menzies Lyth (1960; 1988) frequently referred to 'task' or 'primary task' in her work on social defences in organisations, and Obholzer and Roberts (1994) made extensive use of it in their classic edited volume on "The unconscious at work". There is a general consensus amongst these scholars that work on the task inevitably generates anxiety, and more so if this task is perceived to be meaningful, difficult and complex – as is typical of public organisations. Some authors have sought to acknowledge this complexity by preferring to speak of the 'contested primary task' (Obholzer 2003) or of 'purpose' instead of task (Hoggett 2006). The latter writes that in public organisations "it is not organizational survival per se that matters, it

is the survival of the organization's public value that counts" (ibid., 189).

In this thesis, I refer to the purpose or 'task' of the SABC's News and Current Affairs Division as it is laid out in the broadcaster's official mandate which consists of a number of laws, regulations and policies (Chapter 3). This is equivalent to Hoggett's (2006, 190) conception of an essentially fictitious agreement on a necessarily ambiguous purpose, "understood by all parties who subscribe to it". Its function is to help the organisation "traverse the transitional space between the 'what is' and the 'what might be'", to "provide a means of sustaining direction and commitment" (ibid.). While purpose is ambiguous and necessarily open to interpretation, it is possible to observe behaviours that contradict this agreed purpose (ibid). With this proviso, I use purpose and task interchangeably.

Conceptually, I build on Lawrence (1977) who distinguished between the normative or formal task of an organisation, the existential task (which staff believe and say they are doing), and the phenomenal task. The latter is the imaginary or as-if task staff are working on, consciously or unconsciously, that can be inferred from their actual behaviour. An organisation or group can be seen as working more or less on task depending on the degree of congruence or dissonance between the normative, existential and phenomenal task.

Lawrence's phenomenal task takes us directly to the unconscious dimension of groups and organisations. Although Schein (1985) speaks of the important role that assumptions and beliefs play as the deepest level of organisational culture, and others

have stressed that both are usually held unconsciously (Hatch and Cunliffe 2013), research on organisational culture (Martin 1992, 1995, 2002; Putnam 2003; Spreitzer 2003) does, on the whole, not give adequate attention to those layers that are unspoken and unspeak-able precisely because they operate outside of rationality and consciousness. Group relations research, grounded as it is in psychoanalytic theory, is concerned explicitly with this.

In the last section of this chapter I introduce and contextualise the main (group) psychoanalytic theories that I draw on in later chapters: Menzies Lyth's theory of social defences in organisations, Bion's theory of basic assumptions behaviour in groups, and Lacan's theory of the four discourses. None of these were part of my original theoretical framework; I have come to psychoanalysis through the fieldwork and the subsequent process of data analysis. I discuss them here primarily for reference purposes and engage with them in much more depth in Chapters 6-8.

## 2.4 Psychoanalytic Perspectives

### **The study of group relations**

The idea of some sort of homology between individual and collective psychic processes is not one that is widely accepted in organisations, nor has it found great resonance in mainstream social science. Yet it sheds much light on why and how organisations fail to deliver on their task, and on why change aimed at addressing the problem has proved so difficult. After Freud (1920) had suggested a similarity between group and individual psyche, Jaques (1955) first spoke of social defences against individuals' paranoid and depressive anxiety, thereby linking social behaviour to the individual defences of projection and introjective identification as proposed by Klein (1932, 1948). His early work assumed that "individuals ... concoct organizations as a means of defence" (Jaques 1955, 343). Isabel Menzies' (1960) study of social defences within the nursing service in a British hospital then paved the way for further empirical research into organisational psychodynamics. While setting out to support Jaques' theory in many ways, she went beyond it by showing that organisations are more than just containers for individuals' unconscious phantasies: People also hold common unconscious phantasies based on the shared nature of their work in a particular organisation or sector (Hinshelwood 2010).

Jaques later recanted his earlier views and proposed that a psychoanalytic approach to understanding dysfunctional organisations was in itself dysfunctional and that we "have simply not yet learned how to construct adequate organizations" (Jaques 1955). He thus

moved from individual psychology to questions of organisational structure as the main explanatory variable, and this is to some extent reflective of the general trajectory of the field of organisational studies. Jaques and others have rightly criticised the tendency of some psychoanalytically inclined authors to focus exclusively on individual and collective psychopathology in an effort to provide single-factor solutions. Gabriel (1999, 257) cites work on “neurotic” (Kets de Fries and Miller 1984) or “psychotic” (Sievers 1998) organisations as examples of this. Complexity theorists have taken Jaques' argument further suggesting that “organizations are experienced as chaotic either because they operate in a chaotic environment ... or because their internal dynamics are those of complex systems” and that individuals deal with such chaos by reverting, among other things, to “rational procedures, routine ... [and] control”, thereby undermining “creativity and innovation” (Gabriel 1999, 282). The problem, of course, is that social actors are not entirely rational, nor is their behaviour.

It is not my intention to renounce or downplay non-psychoanalytic explanations that stress structure and conscious-actor strategies. But media studies research has focussed on the latter to the near exclusion of organisational culture and unconscious phenomena when, in fact, structural and psychological issues can and often do co-exist. Neither position needs to, or should be argued in a reductionist manner. What Jaques' later critique does not render obsolete is Menzies Lyth's original point that the nature of work itself gives rise to specific anxieties, and in managing these structure and psychic functioning are deeply intertwined. Bain (1998) further suggests that there are social defences specific to professional sectors or system-domains. I discuss this in detail in relation to the SABC in Chapter 6 where I will outline the SABC's social defence system

as embedded in its organisational culture and in relation to politicisation. At that point I engage critically with Menzies Lyth's theory and suggest in particular that her exclusive focus on task-related anxiety needs to be revisited and broadened to a multi-level understanding of anxiety, its sources, and the way it is managed in and by various subcultures.

For my discussion of unconscious dynamics in subcultures and groups I draw on Bion's (1961) classic study, "Experiences in Groups". There he distinguishes between two modes of functioning that operate in groups. On the one hand, work-group (W) mode implies that the group is working productively on task. Basic assumptions (ba) mode, on the other hand, describes a group that, gripped by anxiety, has unconsciously adopted an assumption about what its purpose is – an assumption that usually has little to do with the task, but shapes that group's behaviour in powerful ways. Bion identifies three basic assumptions: dependency, fight/flight, and pairing. Further basic assumptions have later been added by other authors (Turquet 1975; Lawrence, Bain, and Gould 1996).

Both Menzies Lyth and Bion show with convincing clarity the powerful constraints that unconscious collective processes place on individuals in groups and organisations, in addition to the more obvious constraints imposed by structural factors. However, despite all these restrictions, individual actors do, in fact, act. And they do so by using their margin of liberty, no matter how small (Crozier and Friedberg 1980, 17). This is something that early studies of 'news-workers' based on mechanistic models of news production have consistently ignored. It is also something that the group relations tradition has not been able to address convincingly as it "lacks an adequate theorization

... of agency” (Born 1998). Resistance to politicisation requires agency on the individual and collective level. So how do we conceptualise this?

I define agency as the capacity to act within existing constraints, in particular structural constraints and those imposed by individual and collective psychodynamics. On the face of it, agency seems to be based on intentionality, power, and rationality (Hewson 2010). This implies, among other things, that human beings are purposive, coherent, and consistent in their behaviour. However, this has been contested in social theory where the tension between and relative importance of structure and agency has been a long-standing theme. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) offer a comprehensive discussion of several of the more recent conceptualisations of agency criticising 'scholars of practice' such as Bourdieu and Giddens as well as the new institutionalists in social theory for privileging the habitual and iterative aspects of agency and neglecting the transformative ones. While Giddens' 'discursive consciousness' and Bourdieu's 'reflexive sociology' attempt to address this problem to some extent, neither theorist “show[s] us how such schemas [of the habitus] can be challenged, reconsidered, and reformulated” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 983; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Giddens 1979).

The group relations tradition, while providing valuable insights into collective agency and its unconscious restraints, similarly fails to answer the questions so central to the problem of resistance to politicisation: How is it possible for individuals to break out of the routine(s), to stop being complicit, and, perhaps, even to effect change within the social context of their organisation? Group relations takes us as far as the 'depressive position', a state of mind characterised by the ability of the individual to perceive herself

as separate from others and take personal responsibility for her actions (Hinshelwood 1991). While this mitigates against collusion with unconscious collective processes, the depressive position also “lacks all conviction” (Paul Hoggett, personal communication) leading to a passivity perhaps not so different to the 'vita contemplativa' that, in ancient Greek philosophy, implied a form of agency unconcerned with engaging in political action (Hewson 2010).

I address these limitations in the literature by turning to Lacan's theory of the four discourses and link it to the work of Bion in an attempt to connect the collective level to that of the individual and in particular to the question of individual agency-as-resistance to politicisation. Postmodernist thought, drawing on French structuralism, has mounted powerful challenges to the concept of agency on the grounds that “the human subject is *never* a whole” but fragmented and riven with contradictions (Frosh 2007, 638; Hewson 2010), and that, hence, intentionality and coherence is a fiction. Lacanians in particular have been criticised for downplaying agency by failing to “engage with the 'authorship' of the subject and hence to articulate possibilities for people to grasp their futures differently” (Frosh 2007, 639 referencing Benjamin 1998). I read Lacan slightly differently and intend to show that his discourse theory offers us a promising and original way of thinking about resistance to politicisation.

The theory of the four discourses holds a central position in Lacan's work and evolved from his theory of the subject. Most of it is laid out in his 1969-1970 Seminar XVII, “L'Envers de la Psychanalyse” (Lacan 2008) and, to a lesser extent, in “Radiophonie” (Lacan 1970), in Seminar XVIII “D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant (Lacan

2006), and in Seminar XX “Encore” (Lacan 1998). Lacan's discourses are forms of social interaction, of inter-subjective relations. What looks like a theory of communication demonstrates, in fact, the impossibility of all intentional communication, and it shows this in four different constellations that arise on both the psychological and the social level. On the social level Lacan's discourses make sense of major social phenomena, such as governing (the discourse of the master), educating (the discourse of the university), protesting or desiring (the discourse of the hysteric), and transforming, revolutionising or analysing (the discourse of the analyst) (Bracher 1988; Lacan 2008).

How these discourses can be seen to play out at the SABC will be discussed in Chapter 8. There I argue that, compared to the group relations/ object relations tradition, Lacan offers a more dynamic model that links the social with the psychological by going beyond both structure and individual psychology, a model that offers a shift from anxiety to desire and, ultimately, provides us with a better understanding of agency-as-resistance and the potential for de-politicisation.

## Conclusion

This thesis is primarily an empirical one, focussed on the politicisation of a media organisation. I have situated the empirical case of the SABC within the literature on the largely unsuccessful transformations of former state broadcasters into public service broadcasters and add to this a study that focusses in depth on the neglected dimension of organisational culture. My research also stands in the tradition of the sociology of newsrooms, in particular empirical studies on media production and editorial independence. To this I contribute a case outside the realm of mature, liberal democracies: a study that, furthermore, takes a long-term approach covering a period of 20 years.

By using ethnography, in particular long periods of observation, I go beyond Ngwenya's (2015) SABC study that is based on a (much smaller) number of interviews and relies solely on respondents' verbal accounts. Our studies complement each other in that his explanatory framework is Marxist-derived and evolves largely around macro-economic explanations whereas I move from political context to the micro-context of organisational culture and individual subjectivities. Orgeret, who also uses a qualitative approach, conceptualises the SABC newsroom as a "community of interpretation" (Orgeret 2006, 108) with regards to political developments and describes tendencies towards self-censorship, pressure to loyalty and avoidance of disagreement that can be traced in news content. However, her work only covers the first post-apartheid decade of English television news production with a specific focus on 'moments of nationhood' (ibid., 12) and does not focus on politicisation as such. Like both authors, I identify

patterns of change and stability within the organisational culture, but then connect this to an analysis of the culture's internal complexities and unconscious dimensions. I use psychoanalytic theories, specifically the study of collective psychodynamics in the group relations tradition, to look at subcultures that permeate the organisation on all levels as well as groups/ teams and bring a Lacanian understanding to bear on the question of individual agency and resistance to politicisation. This allows me to relativise claims that censorship is the greatest threat to the SABC's political independence (Orgeret 2006), or that the way journalists think about their independence is simply a function of changes in their contemporary politico-economic environment (Ngwenya 2015).

What remains constant in my engaging with a range of theories from various disciplines is the problem of politicisation seen through the lens of organisational culture. All research aims to reduce complexity. My guiding principle throughout was to avoid reductionism, to see the thing as a whole: the entirety of the SABC's political journalism in news and current affairs, in radio and television, at national and provincial level, in different languages and a variety of newsrooms across the nation and over time. My respondents are a cross-section of those involved with the SABC's journalism: from managers to support staff. I am interested in conscious and unconscious determinants to behaviour; in the product and process of politicisation, but also the question of resistance. I concede that adopting an interdisciplinary approach comes with risks and may leave us with some loose ends in the process. I do not claim to offer the final word on the politicisation of the SABC, but I do hope that my approach honours the complexity of the empirical phenomena encountered.

### 3 The Post-Apartheid SABC

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*– As journalist working here, how do you feel about the SABC being called a 'state broadcaster'? –*

*I think it's hyped. The fact that we are a state broadcaster means that... uh... I mean, the fact that we are a public broadcaster...*

*– Freudian slip...? –*

*As a public broadcaster you have to reflect government. That is part of the mandate that the ANC works on... uh... that the SABC is supposed to fulfil.<sup>17</sup>*

Organisations such as public broadcasters do not evolve in isolation; their development is context-dependent and needs to be understood within the parameters of a specific historical situation. In South Africa democracy came about as a result of the anti-apartheid movement, helped by the country's increasing international isolation. The transition took the form of a negotiated settlement between the National Party (NP) and the African National Congress (ANC). Since 1994 the country has been ruled by the ANC in alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and labour federation Cosatu ('Tripartite Alliance')<sup>18</sup>. Formally a multi-party parliamentary democracy based on the Westminster model, South Africa is de facto a one-party dominant system with a

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<sup>17</sup> R84

<sup>18</sup> The existence of the alliance has so far kept the SACP from contesting elections separately from the ANC.

number of marginalised opposition parties.<sup>19</sup> By its very nature this situation puts considerable political pressure on public institutions, such as the police, the military, the judiciary, the intelligence services, and, of course, the public broadcaster.

This chapter locates the SABC in the socio-political context of post-apartheid South Africa by first giving an overview of the main political developments between 1993 and 2013 that will form the backdrop of the more detailed analysis of how politicisation varied over time in Chapters 5/I and 5/II. It then outlines the characteristics of the country's media system with particular attention to the relationship between government/ the ANC and the media, and how this evolved over time. Following this I describe the organisational history of the SABC itself, leading up to the more specific issue of editorial independence and how this has been problematised in public discourse, as well as in empirical research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the gaps in what we know about the SABC's politicisation – gaps that will be addressed in the main part of this dissertation.

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<sup>19</sup> This has recently (after the end of the period covered here) been shifting on the municipal level with major metropolitan areas now governed by the DA.

## **3.1 Political Context and Post-Apartheid History**

As argued in Chapter 2, the South African political environment can, despite a wide range of challenges, nevertheless be regarded as relatively conducive to public service broadcasting within the global context. Since the political transition, the country has had more than two decades of democratic stability based on one of the most liberal constitutions in the world which protects freedom of expression and freedom of the press and other media (RSA 1996). For most of the 1993-2013 period South Africa has seen fairly sound governance, a functioning judiciary and general respect for the rule of law. There has been some (and increasing) political contestation: On the provincial level, the Democratic Alliance (DA) has on several occasions ruled the Western Cape, and the Inkatha Freedom Party has enjoyed strong support in KwaZulu-Natal over much of the period covered here. Elections continue to be peaceful, free and fair (with very few exceptions), but voting patterns are still strongly reflective of racial and ethnic identities, especially in rural areas. The country has so far been led by four Presidents: Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Kgalema Motlanthe and, currently, Jacob Zuma.

Economically, South Africa experienced slow, but fairly steady growth over much of this period. Unemployment, however, remained at around 40 per cent with millions living in poverty, and a gini-coefficient of 0,679 in 2009 (and 0.69 in 2016) makes South Africa the most unequal society in the world (Pressley 2009; Barr 2017). It is also one of the most diverse with more than a dozen ethnic groups and eleven official languages. Racially, the country is still deeply divided with people self-identifying as black/African

(79,3% of the general population), white (9,1%), coloured (9%) and Indian/Asian (2,6%) (Statistics South Africa 2009). Close to five million adult South Africans are functionally illiterate (Shoba 2007) and thus unable to access information from print or online media.

South Africa's democratisation was neither a straightforward nor an easy process. Its very nature and complexities continue to have a profound impact on contemporary politics, e.g. in relation to the economy, social justice, political reconciliation, minority rights, the protection of private property, and race relations.

After the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of the ANC, SACP and other opposition parties in 1990 negotiations between the white minority regime and the liberation movement continued under the threat of ongoing political violence between ANC and IFP in KwaZulu-Natal. The first democratic elections in 1994 resulted in a Government of National Unity<sup>20</sup> headed by Nelson Mandela which set out to rebuild the country politically, socially and economically based on the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The Mandela presidency was characterised by an emphasis on development and reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) falls into this time.

In 1996, government embraced a neo-liberal macro-economic framework and replaced the RDP with the highly controversial Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme. Economic growth, stability, fiscal prudence and privatisation became the order of the day. The left, represented mainly by the SACP and Cosatu, criticised this

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<sup>20</sup> Election results: ANC: 62,7 %, NP 20,4%, IFP 10,5 % (Electoral Commission of South Africa n.d.)

new strategy fiercely, but was effectively silenced by Thabo Mbeki who, after having already run much of the country's affairs as Mandela's deputy, took over as ANC President in 1997 and as President of the country in 1999. He used his presidency to build a chequered legacy which includes his much-criticised inaction on the Aids pandemic (South Africa has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world), 'quiet diplomacy' with regard to Zimbabwe, the ideological project of 'African Renaissance' (and, linked to this, Nepad<sup>21</sup>) as well as Black Economic Empowerment<sup>22</sup> (BEE). Mbeki also systematically centralised power within government further alienating the ANC's alliance partners. During his time, the ANC became more centralised, less open to internal debate, hence arguably more 'Stalinist' and autocratic than it had been under Mandela.

In 2004, after the third national elections, Mbeki started his second term as President of the country. In 2005 he dismissed his deputy, Jacob Zuma, for alleged corruption – a move that catapulted Zuma into a position of leadership with the left wing of the ANC, the SACP and Cosatu, all of whom opposed Mbeki's economic neo-liberalism, his patience with Zimbabwe's dictator Robert Mugabe, and his views on AIDS. The rivalry between Mbeki and Zuma intensified when, in the run-up to the ANC's National Conference in 2007, Mbeki announced that, while he was not constitutionally allowed to serve another term as President of the country, he would stand for another term as President of the ANC. However, a majority of conference delegates voted for Zuma, and in 2008 the party recalled Mbeki as President of the country before he could finish his term. Shortly afterwards, Mbeki loyalists split from the ANC and formed a new political

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21 New Partnership for Africa's Development, the economic development programme of the African Union which Thabo Mbeki actively tried to strengthen and promote during his presidency.

22 An affirmative action programme launched by government to give previously disadvantaged racial groups privileged access to economic resources in an effort to correct historic inequalities.

party, the Congress of the People (Cope), in order to contest the 2009 elections that would deliver the Presidency to Zuma. The formation of Cope led to unprecedented tensions within the ruling party. For the first time a breaking up of the ANC seemed a real possibility as Cope was seen as a potentially viable choice for ANC voters who perceived the official opposition (DA) as white, racist, and therefore unelectable<sup>23</sup>. The significance of this development is not to be underestimated: Given the ANC's persistent dominance, external opposition parties have always posed less of a threat to the ANC's power than tensions within the party and a split of the movement.

The Zuma government initially restored some of the influence of the left-wing. However, this did not result in significant policy shifts. South Africa's most challenging and pressing problem – poverty and economic inequality – persisted and has led to an ever-increasing number of localised, and since 2004 sometimes violent, 'service delivery protests' indicating that those who feel that they have not benefited from democracy are growing increasingly impatient with the slow pace of economic change (Parliament 2009; von Holdt et al. 2011). The authorities' response to these protests has been exceedingly harsh; for instance, in 2011 Andries Tatane, a teacher, was fatally shot by police during a peaceful protest, and in the following year 41 striking mineworkers were killed by police in what became known as the Marikana massacre (Patel 2012; Botiveau 2014). It is safe to say that the ANC has increasingly come under pressure not just from political opponents, but from its own core constituency and internal conflict (cf. Steinberg (2014) for an insightful analysis of the politically induced changes in policing underlying this development).

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<sup>23</sup> Like an earlier break-away party (United Democratic Movement), Cope would ultimately disintegrate into a minor opposition party posing no threat to the ANC.

Given this context and the political dynamics specific to the new South Africa, one can identify a range of topics or issues that have consistently caused considerable public debate, political conflict, and anxiety. For the ANC as a party such issues concern internal cohesion, factionalism, policy conflict, leadership struggles and internal democracy on the one hand and the dynamics within the Tripartite Alliance on the other, but also the rise of electoral support for the DA, the IFP's power base in KwaZulu-Natal, and the emergence of Cope. Political leaders have been particularly sensitive around issues such as HIV/Aids, Zimbabwe's dictator Robert Mugabe, and South Africa's role on the continent (Nepad, African renaissance) in the case of Thabo Mbeki, and corruption and moral conduct in the case of Jacob Zuma, among others. Then there are the long-standing social, governance and policy challenges, the political hot potatoes so characteristic of South Africa: continued racism and the transformation of public institutions, affirmative action and BEE, macro-economic policy, as well as government's commitment to lift people out of poverty and service delivery protest action. These sensitive topics and issues may serve as a useful guide to those areas in South African political discourse where attempts to manipulate journalists (or journalists' self-censoring) are most likely to occur. I will come back to them in later chapters.

## 3.2 The South African Media Environment

Hadland attempted to locate the South African media system in relation to Hallin and Mancini's three-model paradigm (polarised pluralist, democratic corporatist, and liberal) using four dimensions (media markets, political parallelism, professionalism, and the role of the state) and concluded that it does not correspond clearly to any of these models, although it overlaps with all of them (Hadland 2012). The country has a relatively small media market with limited career opportunities and “pockets of journalistic professionalism” (ibid., 105). There is a constant flow of journalists into government communication departments and back into the media sector<sup>24</sup>. The SABC which dominates local broadcasting faces competition from a number of private radio stations, commercial free-to-air broadcaster e.TV (operative since 1999), pay-TV platform m-Net (not allowed to air news) and international satellite TV (both catering for a small, urban, affluent market), and a multitude of local community radio stations. Broadcasting is complemented by a small, but vibrant commercial print media ranging from tabloids with high sales figures, to local papers and a number of national dailies and weeklies that, despite their fairly low circulation figures (SAARF 2013) in a country of over 50 million people, wield considerable influence in the public sphere. Amongst these are the Sunday Times (Times Media Group), City Press (Media24/ Naspers), the Mail&Guardian (independent), the Sunday Independent (INMSA), and The Citizen (Caxton) – all with their respective online platforms.

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<sup>24</sup> Among the most prominent examples are former SABC Head of News, Snuki Zikalala, former Head of Radio News, Pippa Green, and a number of well-known journalists.

Strongly partisan media as found in the UK, US, France or Brazil have not played a major role in South Africa (Hadland 2012) until very recently with the emergence of The New Age newspaper, launched 2010, and 24h news television channel ANN7, launched 2013. Both are propaganda tools owned by the Gupta family currently in the spotlight for having 'captured' much of the South African state, including President Jacob Zuma (Poplak 2016). Some newspapers have known political leanings, e.g. liberal/conservative or leftist/progressive, but are generally careful not to be seen as endorsing specific political parties or factions. A 1996 study by the independent Media Monitoring Project found that the South African media were overwhelmingly neutral or positive in their coverage of government, which substantiated an earlier report (Comtask 1996) that had concluded "that the communication problem rested primarily with government" (quoted in Horwitz 2001, 303). It also indicated that the media had found a reasonable balance in "being a supportive, but vigilant and critical watchdog" (de Beer 2002, 11). This is not to imply that there is no room for criticism, for instance with regard to an urban, middle-class bias (Friedman 2011).

In practice, the ANC's relationship with the media has long been characterised by contradictions and unease. At its beginning stood a clear commitment to media freedom:

"I cannot overemphasise the value we place on a free, independent and outspoken press in the democratic South Africa we hope to build ... A critical independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy. ... [It] will be the vigilant watchdog of the South African public against the temptation to abuse power. ... The [ANC] has nothing to fear from criticism" (Mandela 1992, 1994).

However, once the ANC was in government it did not take long for tensions to arise, and

increasingly, the relationship between the ANC/ government and the media has become marked by mistrust, suspicion, accusations and misunderstandings (Geertsema 2003). Allegations against journalists centre around them failing to 'fulfil their role properly' (Matloff 1996; Tleane and Duncan 2003; Louw 1993), being 'anti-transformation', unprofessional, elitist, racist, and lacking in diversity. Most importantly, they, and private media in particular, are seen as 'anti-ANC' and 'anti-government' (Tleane and Duncan 2003; Arndt 2005; Orgeret 2006; Ngwenya 2015).

Although the ANC has never called for the media to be a pro-government 'lapdog', the idea of a liberal 'watchdog' that is by default suspicious and critical of political power has never sat comfortably with the party who finds "neither dog [to be] particularly desirable", as the Head of the Presidency and Communications once stated (Ngonyama 2001). Instead, what South Africa needed was balanced, informative and fair coverage of government (ibid.). Unsurprisingly, problems have arisen whenever politicians and journalists disagreed on what an 'informative' or 'balanced' story actually was. As Ngwenya (2015) argues, the ANC's understanding of the functions of the media seems to be grounded in its view of a developmental state supported by developmental media. Journalists are supposed to value the national interest over allegedly "Western" notions of independence, freedom of expression and 4<sup>th</sup> estate aspirations; they are expected to not only follow, but to actively support the development agenda of government. Taking a critical stance quickly becomes an indicator for lack of patriotism and commitment to nation-building and transformation (de Beer 2002; Wasserman 2010c).

Journalists have observed a government tendency to "retreat to media bashing when its

failures and mistakes are reported” (Tsedu 2001). Already in the mid-1990s government started to complain “that its message, its perspectives, ... decisions and actions do not receive adequate media coverage” (Comtask 1996, 17). In a 1997 speech Mandela (1997) stated that it “has become perfectly clear that the bulk of the mass media in our country has set itself up as a force opposed to the ANC” and accused the media of pursuing “an agenda predicated on sustained opposition to our movement.” He said the media was taking sides with the “mainly white parties” in opposing government's attempts to overcome racial disparities and went on about “the counter-revolution” that sought to “compromise the democratic system” by weakening the ANC and its allies, subverting the economy [and] eroding national and international confidence in the ANC's ability to develop the country (ibid). In response to this 'hostile' environment, the ANC established its own online publication, ANC Today, in 2001 (de Beer 2002). A year later, an ANC discussion document on the role of the media did not include the watchdog role under “common functions of the media” (ANC 2002).

In 2001 government and editors met to address their broken-down relationship: “the present level of mistrust and animosity [that] has gone beyond a tolerable and acceptable point, and thus damages South Africa's young democracy”, as Mathata Tesdu (2001), then-chair of the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) described it. The summit did not yield the hoped-for results with Sunday Times editor Mondli Makhanya stating afterwards that “the climate of suspicion persists” (Makhanya 2004). Tensions peaked again when, on the basis of a resolution adopted at the ANC's 2007 National Conference, the ANC proposed the establishment of a Media Appeals Tribunal in a 2010 discussion paper (ANC 2010). Although it was abandoned a year later, it caused alarm

amongst journalists who saw it as an attempt to intimidate them by threatening fines and jail terms for journalists reporting 'inaccurate' stories (Berger 2010). Similarly, the Protection of State Information Bill, passed by Parliament in 2013 in an amended version, introduces considerable punishments for accessing, possessing and disclosing classified information – something that would hit investigative journalism hard (C. Sparks 2011). It was never signed into law by the President following COSATU's threat of a general strike.

Although these developments have been strongly resisted by journalists and civil society organisations, the SABC as an organisation has been largely absent from the debates. The reason for this is two-fold. On the one hand, it follows a pattern of the SABC pitching itself increasingly against the rest of the media, seeking what one of my respondents called a “special role outside the general media” (R47). Having been at the receiving end of Sanef criticism around editorial independence for a while, the SABC withdrew from Sanef in 2007 over print media criticism of the then-Minister of Health. No longer did it want to be associated with the private media, “the enemies of our freedom and our people” that were seen to humiliate democratically chosen leaders “for the sole reason of selling newspapers” (Staff reporter 2007a). On the other hand, the SABC is in a league of its own in the minds of many ANC politicians. During a passionate attack on journalists at a press conference, Julius Malema, then-president of the ANCYL, made a point of excluding the SABC from his criticism: “We don't force anybody to come here. We would be worried if the SABC doesn't come, but the rest of you, to be honest, we don't care. SABC is our own” (Marrian 2010). This perception was confirmed by many of the journalists I spoke to. “Senior ANC members of Parliament feel that the SABC is on

their side, that it is safe”, said a member of the SABC team in Parliament. And an investigative journalist complained how ANC politicians seemed to think that they are entitled to special treatment from the SABC:

“They think that you need to agree with them, that you are not quite a proper journalist, that you can't go as far as other journalists can with a story, that you need to take what they are saying and just accept it. Because the SABC is 'supposed to work with government', you know? 'You must help us with the onslaught from the liberal media!’” (R29)

### **3.3 The SABC's Organisational History**

At the time of my fieldwork, the SABC ran three free-to-air TV channels (SABC1, SABC2 and SABC3), two satellite pay-TV channel (SABC Africa, SABC News International), 18 radio stations serving the domestic audience, and the SABC-administered international radio service Channel Africa which is funded by the state. It broadcast domestically in eleven languages with newsrooms at head office in Johannesburg, regional studios in all nine provinces, a parliamentary office and a few foreign news bureaux. In the year 2013, 86.6% of South African adults regularly watched SABC TV, and 73% listened to SABC radio services (SABC 2014). With approximately 3600 employees it was the largest media operation on the African continent (ibid).

Its public broadcasting mandate is enshrined in the South African constitution (RSA

1996) and in its charter as laid down in the amended 1999 Broadcasting Act, and other legislation (RSA 1993; IBA 1995; RSA 1999, 2002b, 2005; SABC 2004b). The Broadcasting Act requires the SABC to offer programming in all of South Africa's official languages that, amongst other things, “reflects South African attitudes, opinions, ideas, values and artistic creativity; offers a plurality of views and a variety of news, information and analysis from a South African point of view; and advances the national and public interest<sup>25</sup>” (RSA 1999). The SABC is expected to inform, educate and entertain a universal audience, to “reflect both the unity and diverse cultural and multilingual nature of South Africa and all of its cultures and regions”, and to strive for high quality in programming and coverage that is unbiased, balanced, impartial and independent (RSA 1999). These provisions are a far cry from the SABC's pre-democratic past. This said, ten of the sixteen objectives in the charter were taken, without any changes, from the BBC's 1997 Charter (Duncan 2008b, 2008a).

The SABC was established in 1936 with the direct assistance of John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC (Teer-Tomaselli and De Villiers 1998). Despite strong formal similarities to the BBC, the SABC soon became the most important propaganda tool of the apartheid regime: effectively a state broadcaster controlled by the National Party government and dominated by white Afrikaner males with black staff employed to translate news into indigenous languages for the indoctrination of black audiences (Currie and Markovitz 1993; Teer-Tomaselli 1995). Aiming to establish a cultural hegemony based on Afrikanerdom<sup>26</sup> it excluded the political, social, economic and cultural reality of the black majority (Teer-Tomaselli 1995). For decades the SABC

<sup>25</sup> Whereas the national interest is defined by government, the public interest requirement implies, as Ngwenya (2015, 303) has noted, that SABC staff act as “trustees of the public interest” by, amongst other things, holding political power to account.

<sup>26</sup> Afrikaner nationalism

provided exclusively radio programmes; TV was only introduced in 1976. Never was the state broadcaster's monopoly in radio or TV contested; it was complemented by largely state-aligned print media that left limited room for dissenting (liberal) voices.

Internally, a governing board stacked with political appointees ensured conformity by filling “all key editorial positions with ideologically reliable apparatchiks” (A. Sparks 2003, 69). The last apartheid-era SABC chairman, Christo Viljoen, was a member of the secret, right-wing Broederbond and admitted later that “the apartheid SABC had refused to cover much of the country's black politics” (Orgeret 2006, 63). Editorial interference by politicians and their proxies within the institution was the norm. The few black staffers were destined to play a subservient role and subject to strict monitoring by white colleagues and superiors (Tomaselli and Tomaselli 1989). Carefully chosen for their political conservatism they were at times subjected to corporal punishment. As an ex-SABC reporter testified before the TRC, “they could choose to be sjambokked [whipped] rather than fired” (quoted in Green 2006). Editorial autonomy, even for white journalists, was severely restricted by the overarching ideological consensus as well as direct political control, often exercised by security personnel present in newsrooms, although some authors have documented limited resistance (Tomaselli and Tomaselli 1989) and unintentional subversion of dominant ideology (Krabill 2010).

During the political negotiations between the white minority regime and the liberation movement it was recognised that a successful political transition would be contingent upon a de-politicised and impartial SABC. In 1992 the ANC resolved that the new public broadcasting service “shall be independent of the ruling party or any other interest

group” (ANC 1992). The SABC's transformation started in the early 1990s and culminated in its de-facto independence from government. 1993 became a watershed year for the SABC, setting it on a path of transformation from a state broadcaster to a fully-fledged public service broadcaster ahead of the first democratic elections in 1994 (Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli 2001). As part of the multi-party negotiations, an extensive public process resulted in a new, inclusive SABC board appointed by the Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting (Tleane and Duncan 2003). Board members were 'eminent people' nominated by civil society and chosen in a two-step process that guaranteed a high degree of board autonomy.<sup>27</sup> At the time, 22 out of 27 senior SABC Managers were white Afrikaner males. Under the office of the CEO a Transformation Unit was established to oversee the process of internal transformation.

Early on conflict ensued about whether editorial independence was to be vested in editorial staff or the board (Teer-Tomaselli 1995). It was finally agreed that the board would determine editorial policy and could hire and fire the Editor-in-chief; that editorial decision-making, however, was vested solely in the editorial staff and that the board as well as its appointed management would respect the principle of editorial independence. The subsequent adoption of the Editorial and Ethical Code in 1994 was a defining moment for the new SABC and a “final symbolic and practical break with the tradition of taking direction from outside the ranks of journalists themselves, whether from the government or the hierarchy of the Corporation” (Baker 1996, 214). Editorial independence, now one of the SABC's core values, explicitly refers to political, commercial and personal influences. The code, reviewed over the years, continues to

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<sup>27</sup> For subsequent boards, the process changed to an interview process run by parliament with candidates nominated by civil society and appointed formally by the President (Berger 1999).

demand of journalists to “evaluate, analyse and critically appraise government policies and programmes” while adhering to high standards of “accuracy, fairness, impartiality and balance” (SABC 2004b). It warns explicitly against “suppressing relevant, available facts, or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis” (ibid.). The SABC's autonomy was further backed up by the Broadcasting Act of 1999 which required it to adhere to “the highest standards of journalism, as well as fair coverage, impartiality, balance and independence from government, commercial and other interests” (RSA 1999; Berger 1999). There is near consensus in the literature that, with regard to the policy environment and legal guarantees given to journalists, little more could have been desired at the time (Fourie 2004; Orgeret 2006).

From the outset the new SABC relied primarily on advertising revenue to fund its operations, including the public service obligations. As early as 1993 a debate unfolded around the conflict between public service ethos and commercial broadcasting which engulfs the SABC to this day. In 1996, following recommendations by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA<sup>28</sup>), Parliament proceeded to sell almost one third of the radio portfolio<sup>29</sup> and restructure TV into three channels: SABC1, SABC2 and SABC3. This was done in an attempt to save the broadcaster from “the brink of bankruptcy” to which it had been driven by ever increasing public service demands not backed up with any serious financial commitment on the part of the state (Orgeret 2006, 76). However, this was done “without sufficient regard to the financial implications” (Duncan 2008b, 1). The old SABC had depended on the revenue generated by commercial radio stations to cross-subsidise part of its operations. With some of the most popular stations gone and

28 At the time the IBA was the regulatory body tasked with licensing of broadcasters in South Africa and the transformation of the SABC. It was in 2000 replaced by the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA).

29 Six commercial stations were sold, 16 remained.

thus no longer providing income for the SABC, financial difficulties soon arose (ibid.).

The 1999 Broadcasting Act also provided for the corporatisation of the SABC (the state being the sole shareholder) with the intention to, once and for all, “free government from the obligation to fund the SABC on an ongoing basis” (Duncan 2008b; RSA 1999; Tleane and Duncan 2003). The organisation was divided into two arms: public commercial broadcasting services (SABC3 and four radio stations) and public broadcasting services (SABC1 and 2, and eleven radio stations). The former were meant to fund the latter, complemented by very limited income from licence fees, government grants, merchandising and so on (Tleane and Duncan 2003). The unbundling ushered in a period of commercialisation and cost-cutting at the expense of the public service mandate (ibid.). Following advice from McKinsey & Co., the broadcaster further set out to merge radio and television into a bi-media system in 1997, thereby centralising editorial control in the Johannesburg head office (ibid.). As with the BBC, bi-media soon proved to be a strategy riddled with difficulties. It resulted not only in a marginalisation of radio, but in growing hostilities between creative staff, who felt they were not sufficiently consulted, and management; morale plummeted, and the SABC's credibility suffered (FXI 1999; Orgeret 2006). At the same time, television faced competition for the first time from a private commercial station: e.TV was granted a license in 1998. Bi-media was eventually scrapped in 2001.

The fallout from the SABC's increased commercialisation – serious doubts about its ability to deliver on public broadcasting obligations and to marginalised audiences – eventually attracted so much public criticism, but also discomfort within the ANC, that a

'reining in of the SABC' seemed necessary. The result was a second major policy shift 'from right to the centre' (Southall, quoted in Duncan 2008b). Politically, this presented an opportunity for tighter control as well. With the Broadcasting Amendment Bill preceding the 2002 Broadcasting Act the Minister of Communications, Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, sought the power to approve internal policy on programme and editorial content. At the time, she complained publicly about "foreign rulers ... given carte blanche access ... to propagate their propaganda when our own leaders cannot enjoy the privilege to air their views" (newspaper report, quoted in Fourie 2004, 14). She also attempted to scrap a clause in the existing Act guaranteeing the SABC's freedom of expression.

This bill was met with strong criticism for being a crude attempt to bring the SABC under direct Ministerial control, thereby undermining its independence and credibility (Fourie 2004). The ANC-controlled [sic] parliament eventually overturned it, government backtracked, and the final version of the Act states that "in terms of this Charter, the Corporation, in pursuit of its objectives and in the exercise of its powers, enjoys freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence" (RSA 2002b Section 6(3)). The Broadcasting Act, along with the Constitutional provisions of freedom of speech and the media, is the SABC's primary defence against external, political interference in the editorial process.

Having failed to secure tighter control over the broadcaster via the legislative process, government changed its strategy towards exercising indirect control through the appointment of board members (Duncan 2008b). A new, highly politicised board was, as

opposition parties complained, “rammed through parliament” by the ANC and appointed by the President in 2003 (ibid.). It immediately embarked on a policy of 'developmental journalism' that is prone to the assumption that 'development' is exclusively defined by the state rather than a contested concept (Duncan 2008b). In 2003<sup>30</sup>, and in partial breach of the Broadcasting Act (ibid.), the SABC board agreed to the Articles of Association presented to it by the Minister. This document, while maintaining that the board has “full and effective control over the SABC”, also effectively granted the Minister to appoint the three executive directors (the Group Chief Executive Officer (GCEO), the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and Chief Operating Officer (COO)).<sup>31</sup> The subsequently adopted new editorial code (SABC 2004b) confers editor-in-chief status to the GCEO creating a direct line for potential political interference in editorial content. As much as this is a key moment for the politicisation of the SABC, it must also be noted that it is not unusual for public broadcasters to experience some measure of government control (the BBC is an example) while still retaining substantial degrees of autonomy.

At the SABC, these developments rang in a period characterised by political controversies around editorial decisions, public allegations of editorial interference, a further loss of credibility, and significant organisational instability (Orgeret 2006). The problems intensified when the ANC's leadership battle between Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma broke out in 2005 and reached a peak in December 2008. Fokane and Duncan (2008, 30) concluded at this point that the SABC had “nominal but not substantial independence”, and that independence had been “eroded in significant ways”. Around

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30 and revised in 2006

31 This was reversed in a 2017 High Court judgement that confirmed that the SABC board is strictly independent and does not report to the Minister but to Parliament, and that Parliament (not the President of the country) is the appointing authority of the three executive directors (the non-executive members of the board) (High Court of South Africa 2017).

the same time, the global financial crisis and the resulting drop in advertising revenue took its toll on the broadcaster. This after the SABC had managed to become financially independent through advertising and increasing commercialisation and had, in 2004, for the first time returned a healthy economic profit (SABC 2004a) – one of few public broadcasters worldwide to do so<sup>32</sup>.

Only a few years later, in 2009, the corporation faltered under the impact of three crises converging: political, managerial and financial. It was torn apart by politically motivated battles between the board and senior management, resulting in a farcical row of suspensions of the Head of News and Current Affairs and the CEO (Basson, Donnelly, and Parker 2009; Grobler 2008). Subsequently, board members started to resign until the entire board was dissolved by Parliament (Staff reporter 2009b, 2009d) and replaced with an interim board. Financially, while unexpectedly caught in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the SABC also, and first and foremost, paid the price for years of fraud, corruption and mismanagement (Graham 2009; Ngwenya 2015) which eventually became public when the corporation reported a loss of R910-million (more than 60 million pound) in the financial year 2008/09 (Staff reporter 2009a). The interim board successfully lobbied government to provide a R1-billion bail-out and conceived a financial plan that would see the SABC get out of debt by 2014 (Staff reporter 2009a). As a consequence of the financial malaise the SABC closed a number of foreign news bureaux which were part of its new satellite channel SABC News International<sup>33</sup>.

It is apparent from this trajectory that the SABC has time and again, and increasingly in

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32 Another of these rare examples is Polish Television which was 70% advertising-funded in 2002 (Jakubowicz 2004, 70).

33 The channel had been launched in 2007 with a vision of becoming the primary source of news in Africa by providing an 'African voice' and had, since its inception, run continuously over budget.

recent years (Ngwenya 2015; Orgeret 2006; Ciaglia 2016), faced attempts by government to gain more control over editorial content, primarily by means of political appointments on the level of the board and senior management, and through policy changes. How has this impacted on the public broadcaster?

### **3.4 The Problem of Editorial Independence**

Over the years, the SABC has faced a consistent stream of public criticism, mainly voiced in the print media, alleging a lack of political independence, mismanagement, incompetence, corruption, nepotism and low-quality journalism (Green 2006; McLachlan 2007; Mkhwanazi 2007; Perlman 2007; News24 2004 are a few examples). Apart from this perception that has not changed much over the two decades under consideration here, a number of incidents have become public knowledge where the SABC appeared to be shielding politicians from criticism, curtailing public debate, or favouring the ANC or ANC factions (Staff reporter 2003a; News24 2004; Staff reporter 2005a).

Controversies around the canning of an SABC-commissioned documentary on Thabo Mbeki in 2006, the blacklisting of a number of external commentators in the same year (Staff reporter 2006; Blandy 2009), the decision to delay broadcast of a documentary on political satire and Jacob Zuma until after the elections in 2009 (Staff reporter 2009f),

the last-minute cancellation of a current affairs show where journalists were going to discuss the media coverage of an upcoming ANC conference because no ANC-representative had been invited (Serino 2012), a call for “70% happy news” by a senior executive (Underhill and Harris 2013; Bird, Smith, and Dibetso 2013) and others suggest that the broadcaster has at times caved in to political pressure.

After the end of the period covered in this dissertation (1993-2013), the crisis at the SABC intensified with large-scale corruption, blatant disregard for existing policies, internal political pressure, censorship, and the unlawful dismissal of critical journalists (Besent 2016; Grootes 2016) alongside the voluntary departure of many others (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2017). Having attempted to interfere in editorial decisions for years, then COO Hlaudi Motsoeneng issued a ban on the coverage of the destruction of public property during political protests (SABC 2016; Herman 2017) – promptly opposed by ICASA who, citing the Broadcasting Act, threatened to revoke the SABC's broadcasting license should this editorial decision not be revoked (ICASA 2016, 2017). Motsoeneng, a Zuma loyalist, was imposed on the organisation by then Communications Minister Faith Muthambi (Wet 2016; Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2017) and protected by her during a prolonged stand-off between the SABC board/ the Minister of Communications and Parliament (J. Evans 2016; Herman 2016b; Raborife 2016; Muli, Pillay, and Steenkamp 2016; Staff reporter 2016d, 2016c, 2016b; Ferreira 2016b; Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2017). It took a damning report by the Public Protector (Public Protector of South Africa 2014) that labelled him a dishonest employee at the root of corporate governance deficiencies, including irregular and unlawful board decisions; a court ruling that his subsequent permanent appointment as

COO was “irrational” and should be set aside (Pather 2016b); an unsuccessful appeal to this ruling; and eventually a parliamentary enquiry into the fitness of the SABC board to hold office (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2017) resulting in yet another disciplinary hearing to finally get Motsoeneng expelled from the public broadcaster (SABC 2017; Pather 2016b; J. Evans 2016; Herman 2016b, 2017; Editorial 2017; Sigauqwe 2017).

Public scandals around commissioned programmes taken off air or experts blacklisted have reinforced a perception that the SABC is hopelessly politicised, that nothing has ever really changed since the apartheid years. This is misleading as it not only disregards the complexities of politicisation as a social phenomenon within an organisation and tells us little about the process of politicisation itself; it also disregards the very real and often consistent ways the SABC has delivered on its mandate since 1993.

Public opinion data offers a surprisingly different perspective. Despite a highly critical media discourse on the SABC the organisation continues to enjoy remarkable public trust ratings. Between 2003 and 2007 more than 70% of South Africans placed “trust” or “strong trust” in the SABC, putting it into second place after the churches and ahead of government, Parliament, the courts, the police and a range of other public institutions (Ben Roberts 2008; Benjamin Roberts, wa Kivilu, and Davids 2010). Another survey found that 28.5% of South Africans trusted radio and 35.5% trusted television “a lot” as sources of political information and news – as compared to 12.4% for print media and even less for social media and the internet. And the SABC even outperformed its private competitors: 34% of respondents had “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence in the

SABC, as compared to 28.7% for other broadcast media (Potgieter 2017). SABC journalists often experience this when they are out on stories:

“South Africans rely on us. They trust us, that's the biggest thing. People really, really rely on us, you gather this from going out on stories: just because *I* have said something, they believe that this is it!” (R24)

Academic research on the editorial independence of the SABC takes a middle ground between media discourse and public opinion, though it needs to be noted that the vast majority of studies is based on media reports, and where interviews have been used they tend to rely on small number of individuals (including, often, disgruntled ex-employees).

There is, however, a consensus emerging in qualitative studies that the SABC's editorial independence has been compromised in a number of ways over the years. For instance, in focus group interviews with SABC employees, Tleane and Duncan came across perceptions of political suppression, 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 (Tleane and Duncan 2003, 108ff). On the basis of interviews and participant observation, Orgeret suggests that in the 1990s political pressure has resulted in a “conflict between a political ethos and a professional journalistic ethos in the SABC news” which intensified after the 2004 general elections and resulted in “sunshine reporting” (Orgeret 2006, 141). And Ngwenya (2015, 287), based on interviews, describes how “ANC power struggles extend into the politicisation of the SABC.”

However, on the whole, little empirical evidence has been forthcoming that would suggest a consistent or heavy political bias in the organisation's journalistic output for the first two decades. This does not amount to a 'clean bill of health'. Nearly all media monitoring relies on quantitative content analysis of what actually makes it on air, not what doesn't. It cannot address qualitative aspects of output, such as underlying political debates in the newsroom and implicit ideological bias. Media monitoring is also largely limited to English news programming leaving out significant parts of the SABC's journalism. Lastly, the SABC data is usually mapped against e.TV which leaves us with a comparative analysis that only yields information about the SABC's independence relative to e.TV's. Nevertheless, there have been some insightful studies:

For instance, in 2001 *Media Tenor South Africa* (2001) found that, compared to the heads of state in Germany, the US and the UK, then-President Thabo Mbeki was presented in the most favourable light and given a more prominent position in SABC news bulletins than his international colleagues were given by their respective public broadcasters (Media Tenor South Africa 2001). Analysing SABC and e.TV news bulletins ahead of the 2004 national elections, the *Media Monitoring Project* encountered a pro-government bias: 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) (News24 2004). And during the leadership contest between Mbeki and Zuma in 2008/09 *Media Tenor* noted "a marked difference relative to other media ... with Mbeki being covered in a neutral manner, while the coverage of Zuma has been overwhelmingly negative" (quoted in Duncan 2008b). Finally, an

analysis of proceedings by the Broadcasting Complaint Commission of South Africa between 1994 and 2014 shows that, while the SABC triggered the majority of complaints and subsequent inquiries (53%) vis-a-vis rival broadcasters e.TV and M-Net, this difference evaporates when the analysis takes into account the number of channels. Rarely have serious sanctions been imposed by the Commission. The author concludes that “one may argue that the general public appears to believe that the public broadcaster is satisfactorily meeting its mandate and delivering programmes that are deemed to be of a high quality” (Ciaglia 2015, 8).

## **Conclusion**

Where does this mixed picture leave us? Clearly, there is ample empirical evidence that the SABC has been subjected over the years to varying degrees of political pressure, and that it has at times yielded to such pressure. This is reflected in quantitative studies that have occasionally picked up on a lack of balance and impartiality. However, we can not conclude from existing data that the SABC has been consistently politicised to the extent that it does not meet its mandate or could be called a failed public broadcaster like most of its international equivalents in transitional societies. The SABC-critical coverage in the print media does not seem to have had much of an impact on public perceptions and trust ratings.

While some aspects of the problem of politicisation have received adequate scholarly attention, such as the SABC's policy framework and issues of governance, we still know

little about how politicisation works in SABC newsrooms on a day-to-day basis and over long periods of time. In particular, we need a better understanding of how decisions on programme content are made by reporters and editors, and what the actual factors are that impact on the way they do their work; which stories are systematically excluded or included for political reasons, and whether and how content is systematically slanted or framed. I engage with this in Chapter 4, the first of my empirical chapters. We also do not yet have a comprehensive account of how the SABC has been politicised over the long term and how this is reflected in its organisational culture, and what the patterns are of change and continuity. This will be the focus of Chapters 5/I and 5/II. Lastly, we know almost nothing about journalists' part in the processes of politicisation: How and why do individual journalists position themselves with regard to politicisation? How do they differ in their response to political pressure? Why do some resist when other do not? What role to unconscious dynamics play in all of this on an individual and group level? What does this tell us about the organisational culture, its evolution and its future role in ensuring independent public service broadcasting in South Africa? These and similar questions will be addressed in Chapters 6-8 where I explore (sub-)cultural and unconscious dynamics on various levels.

## 4 Indicators and Effects of Politicisation in SABC Newsrooms

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*The product looks propagandistic  
because it is unquestioning,  
but it is not deliberately done.*<sup>34</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 2, the politicisation of public broadcasters is not a new phenomenon or one exclusive to South Africa. It has been found the world over and described in the literature on the sociology of news production with major studies focussed on the BBC (Born 2005; Kung-Shankleman 2000; Schlesinger 1978). Media scholars have pointed to the problems caused by political pressure and to how news coverage tends to reflect the dominant views in society, and the views of those in power (Born 2005; Gans 1979; Glasgow University Media Group. 1976, 1982, 1985; Ngwenya 2015; Orgeret 2006). They identified various structural factors that make media more prone to politicisation, such as editorial hierarchies, management policy and strategy, or certain funding models (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Born 2005; Ngwenya 2015; Schlesinger 1978; Solomon 1995). A host of other factors have been shown to influence news production and limit journalists' autonomy, such as proprietorial pressure, professional values, limited resources, time pressure and technology (Epstein 1973;

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<sup>34</sup> Senior radio reporter, Parliamentary Office, April 2010.

McNair 1998, 2007; Schlesinger 1978; Tuchman 1978; Tunstall 1971). Only very few authors, however, have gone beyond a mere description of such factors into organisational culture (Bantz 1985; Born 2005; Küng-Shankleman 2000; Orgeret 2006). I see my work as standing in the tradition of the latter, but focus explicitly on politicisation in relation to organisation culture.

This first empirical chapter is concerned with how politicisation manifests within SABC News and Current Affairs. As argued in Chapter 3, we are dealing with a statutorily independent, generally functional public broadcaster in a democratic environment where obvious illegitimate violations of journalistic independence, such as open censorship, are very rare and, when they do happen, result in embarrassing media scandals, public criticism and remedial action. Politicisation in the South African context is usually a more subtle affair worthy of closer study. What happens to journalistic practice when a newsroom becomes increasingly politicised? What effects do real or imagined political pressure, interference and power relationships have on journalistic practice? And what are the enduring consequences that shape organisational culture in the longer term?

What I am embarking on here is not a study of a particular newsroom or the SABC as a whole at a particular point in time. Instead, I give a systematic, descriptive account of phenomena I consistently observed throughout the organisation – across geographically dispersed regions, in television and radio, in news and current affairs. Over the years, I triangulated this data in interviews. I came to think of these phenomena as patterns characteristic of the SABC's organisational culture; patterns that, while they may be

caused by a range of factors, were reliably present under circumstances that coincided with a reported, anticipated or directly observed increase in, or high levels of, political pressure or interference. This does not prove causation, of course, but suggests a strong correlation. I interrogate this relationship further in the longitudinal part of the study (Chapters 5).

This chapter serves as an empirical foundation for the rest of the thesis and also illustrates how politicisation manifests in practice at a media organisation. I leave aside for now intra-organisational dynamics not consistent with the phenomena discussed here. This includes individuals and groups within the SABC that resist the dominant culture with regard to politicisation or have otherwise carved out a space, or developed a stance, that can be seen as exceptional. Such exceptions will be covered in Chapters 6 and 7.

I do not define levels of politicisation in absolute terms, for two reasons: Firstly, as will become clear in Chapters 5, levels fluctuate over time relative to external political developments. Secondly, once we have exhausted general indicators of media freedom and independence which are all more or less in place at the SABC (Chapter 2), politicisation that happens *despite* structural provisions designed to prevent it is predominantly a subjective experience based on individual perceptions. Perceptions and behaviour resulting from such perceptions are difficult to measure, especially when it comes to potentially shameful behaviour such as self-censorship. Perceptions are real for the individual even when they are not verbalised or even held consciously. My analysis is based predominantly on such perceptions, held individually or collectively by

journalists. Usually, the patterns I identified were not immediately obvious, often only emerging over time in the dialogical process of data collection and analysis. Those journalists (and they were clearly in the majority) who exhibited them were often unaware of them and would not discuss them in interviews without prompting. Deeply ingrained in the organisational culture they are considered normal professional behaviour, even when they frequently conflicted with the values and beliefs the same journalists defended in interviews and interactions with colleagues. What they all have in common is that they undermine independent, critical, good-quality journalism.

The four most prevalent patterns were an over-reliance on official news sources and uncritical reporting; voluntary upward referral of decisions and self-censorship; structural blurring of accountability; and withdrawal and self-absorption. I will discuss them in sequence starting with a section on politicisation as it manifests on the level of the board and senior management for context.

## 4.1 Context: Board and Senior Management Level

The appointment of SABC board members is a highly politicised process that is well documented (Chapter 3). There is also considerable evidence of politicians having interfered with board matters (including irregular appointments and lack of oversight), such as resignation letters (e.g. Niddrie 2010; Underhill and Makinana 2013) and reports of official enquiries (e.g. Public Protector of South Africa 2014; Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2017). Some respondents with direct involvement on this level confirmed this, e.g. this former board member: “The former Minister [of Communications] was interventionist in a way that no other minister has been. And we fought him, and it was bloody hard, and it destroyed that board” (R37).

Because of the ANC's dominance in Parliament the composition of the board tends to reflect not only the balance of power within the country (as with other public broadcasters), but also the balance of power within the ANC (Ngwenya 2015). The CEO and the Head of News and Current Affairs are widely perceived to be political appointments, and at times this extends to the Heads of TV and Radio News, heads of channels and stations, and regional editors. It is noteworthy in this context that the SABC has long had an exceptionally high number of senior managers in acting positions; in 2011 55% of top and senior management positions were vacant (SABC 2012). The resulting destabilisation facilitates political interference, especially when those in acting positions aim to compensate for their lack of authority by aligning themselves to political factions, and those who attempt to resist interference are weakened by not being able to take up their role fully. Journalists had strong views on the issue. “90% of

people on this board are political appointments”, said a former political editor (R105) matter-of-factly. A former Head of Radio explained recounted his experience with the CEO: “When they are in that position [CEO] you as a politician *tell* them what you want” (R64). And a former Head of News joked that “if you stand on the 29th floor of the SABC [the CEO's office in Johannesburg], you can almost see the Union Buildings [seat of government in Pretoria]” (R26).

Public political alignment of board members and top executives as documented, amongst others, by Ngwenya (2015), is the clearest indicator for politicisation on the highest level. But journalists have also learned to identify a range of more subtle signals, such as increased conflict among board members and top managers. One television journalist who self-identified as an 'ANC cadre', described how a time of intense factional conflict within the ANC was reflected inside the SABC:

“It's like a battle field at the moment. You see it in the appointments being made. Unannounced, shocking appointments. Tomorrow you wake up, you are told, 'we have given him a package'. The next day you wake up being told, 'no, this same person is now your boss'. And that is top management level.” (R71)

Journalists also saw a surge in instructions passed downwards and increased interference with editorial decisions normally taken on lower levels as a sign of increased politicisation on top. Such interference is by no means a daily or frequent occurrence, though I have come across a fair number of first-hand accounts involving board members, CEO's and senior editors, or this former radio executive producer (EP):

"At the last election, board members were up and down our editorial suites! What were they doing there?! They even wanted to suggest story angles!" (R7)

“At one stage board members asked us for the CV's of every single person who was covering the election. I think we refused, but the HR person sort of buckled.” (Former Head of Radio News, R86)

“A minister would phone the CEO who would phone his senior manager for news who would phone his editor-in-chief for TV or radio. And when it comes down that line, there is no way that some EP would have any choice. They simply use you. You know it comes from the top.” (EP television, R42)

Lastly, respondents noted a shift towards more authoritarian leadership styles in highly politicised periods. Heavy-handed use of editorial power creates fear, anger and, often, feelings of resignation among journalists that I found to be lingering in newsrooms long after the manager in question had left. It was not rare that people said they were 'traumatised' by, for instance, a former Head of News who “would instruct, literally: 'this is gonna happen, that's not gonna happen.' Really crude” (television reporter, R36). He was seen as “the kind of boss who would say 'jump!' without saying why. He was like 'I am in charge. Nobody knows except me. And you are going to do as I say” (television editor, R10). Asked whether it was true that he frequently shouted at his subordinates, a radio assignment editor (R53) responded: “He does. There are people so terrified of him they will say yes to whatever he wants.”

As the more high-level manifestations of politicisation find their way into the public domain they contribute to the SABC's image of a broadcaster under siege and in constant turmoil. But this also creates an impression that the problem is located exclusively at the top of the organisation, and that, consequently, it is there that interventions need to happen. This, however, is an assumption that needs to be interrogated. As I show in the rest of this thesis, politicisation at the SABC is a much more complex and multi-layered process, and it would be naive to assume that it can be assessed (let alone addressed or reversed), without a thorough understanding of organisational culture as it permeates newsrooms throughout the country. The four

patterns of behaviour I turn to now are at the centre of this.

## **4.2 Pattern 1: Over-Reliance on Official Sources and Uncritical Reporting**

The first pattern reflects phenomena related to two key stages of news production: story selection and reporting practices. The former refers to making decisions on what information is selected for broadcast; the latter is linked to the ways journalists approach, construct, frame and package a chosen story. With story selection I observed a shift from issue- to event-driven coverage; an over-reliance on official sources along with a decrease in the number of self-generated stories; routine coverage of stories with no or little news value ('non-stories'); and near complete avoidance of so-called 'untouchable topics'.

### **Event-driven news**

Even a cursory study of the SABC's national news diary reveals the high proportion of stories that seemingly owe their news value to the fact that an official event has taken place, such as a press briefing, a conference, a government minister's visit to a village. Pitches of such stories to the national news conference contain little or no information on why this event is worth covering for the main news bulletins; news value is implicitly assumed, and the pitching editor often struggles to give further information when asked,

for instance, what topics are going to be discussed at a press briefing, or why an official's visit to a local hospital is significant. Only in rare cases will a discussion emerge among those present as to what the strategic political intentions may be behind marketing those events to the media and what the SABC's gatekeeping role might be. In a typical example, a regional assignment editor instructed a reporter in the morning: "There is a conference organised by the Health Department. They are going to deliberate on some topics. Just go there and see if there is something, if there are resolutions." At this point the conference had already started. No prior research had been undertaken. I asked the reporter on her way out what she was planning to focus on.

A: "I have no idea, I don't even know what it is about."

Q: So if there is no story there, then there won't be a story tonight?

A: "No, there will be a story. I have to come up with something." (R116)

The fact that a government department had advertised an event became the sole reason for covering it. The actual content of the story was secondary; the editor's habitual behaviour, considered 'normal', remained unchallenged. Covering official events is perceived as safe; an SABC reporter or team is seen to be there, nothing important will be missed, no one is going to complain. For the reporter it is straight-forward and easy (if uninteresting). What it does not involve is a consideration of what other issues may be worth investigating, covering or following up on on this particular day. Instead of wondering what listeners or viewers may be interested in, limited resources are mobilised to avoid missing an issue that could be seen to be important by those in power. By merely following events irrespective of news-value, journalists compromise their agenda-setting and gate-keeping functions (Mccombs 2005; Shoemaker and Vos 2009).

## **Over-reliance on official sources, and 'non-stories'**

“I always have a problem when journalists come and reproduce ministerial diaries. Today we had the Minister of Defence in Soweto to check soldiers. Afterwards he will be flying to Pretoria, something with hospitals. Are we covering the minister, or are we covering the plight of the patients?” (R95)

Closely linked to being event-driven is the tendency to rely on official news sources, often to the exclusion of other sources. Despite an ever-present rhetoric that 'news is about ordinary people' and that 'we should get away from talking heads on the bulletins', the vast majority of stories on the diary originate from government or party press releases. In one of the regions I visited, the news diary of the entire preceding year did not include one vaguely political story that was not based on an official press release or government event.

In most newsrooms journalists are not encouraged let alone expected to come up with own story ideas. They may not be actively discouraged either, but even when ideas are offered, they are often not taken up – especially when the political climate is perceived as tense and editors are eager to minimise the risk of being criticised for missing an 'official' story. One seasoned radio journalist described his experience as such:

“Once I suggest a story with a different approach, they say: 'So are you telling us the Minister is going there? No? We are not interested then.' Because the agenda is determined by the officials. For me to go to a township independently and conceptualise a story idea and then go to the Minister and say, “Minister, please account!” - we hardly do it. And once you try and do it you will not have a story on air. They will say, 'ok, we hear you, but not now. For now what is urgent is this politician visiting that hospital.' ” (R71)

Like many of the phenomena described here this dependence on official sources is not

exceptional and has been criticised, for instance, at the BBC as well (Born 2005, 379). At the SABC, however, we encounter an exceptionally strong reliance on the official news diary, and within the diary a near-exclusive reliance on official sources, combined with a wide-spread unspoken assumption that a story is not a story unless someone 'official' has either introduced it or commented on it. The agenda-setting function is effectively delegated to sources – or to media competitors: “Sometimes we get our own scoops, but we don't broadcast them. Once other media talk about it then we will follow. When it's safe to do so” (R24).

While it is not unusual for radio and television to follow print, one needs to keep in mind that no media organisation in South Africa has a larger footprint, more resources, more staff in remote areas, or better access to government – hence more opportunities to obtain exclusive information than the SABC.

An extreme form of this category are 'non-stories'. They are the face of public broadcasting in much of Africa and Eastern Europe (cf. European Audiovisual Observatory 2007; Fombad 2002; Jakubowicz 2004; Okigbo 1996; Price and Raboy 2003; Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003) – what audiences associate with state media and propaganda. At the SABC they do not define coverage, but 'non-stories' or 'ghost stories' is sufficiently familiar a phenomenon to journalists to be recognised across the board and named as such for their lack of news value. Often they are distinctly political in nature, and reporters usually assume external political pressure to be behind it all – as in this case, related by a reporter in Durban:

“He [provincial politician] would open all these bridges and roads without fail. He would go to a toll plaza drinking tea, and we would go and cover the story. We

would sometimes take a decision here, as editors and journalists, that that is not a story, and we would discuss it with editors in Johannesburg, and we would all agree. And first thing in the morning you would get a phone call, 'Agh, you know, go and do it, for peace's sake!'" (R59)

The frequency of non-stories seemed to be linked to what journalists thought was expected of them by their bosses. For instance, when in early 2011 TV News was taken over by a new team of editors with a reputation for independence, non-stories disappeared from the diary within weeks.

### **Untouchable topics**

A majority of respondents acknowledged that there are unspoken limitations to what they can critically report on or investigate, especially when this would mean breaking a story ahead of other media, and my own observations consistently confirmed this. These 'untouchable topics' fall into two categories: criticism of senior political leaders, and misconduct and corruption above local government level involving the ANC. At times this has extended to specific controversial issues, such as HIV/Aids and Thabo Mbeki's denialism, the political situation in Zimbabwe, and the SABC's own problems around editorial independence.

For much of the time under consideration here, the President was covered by a team of designated correspondents who were widely believed by their colleagues to be too close to their subject of reporting. I came across numerous anecdotes, usually denied by the correspondents themselves and difficult to verify via third-party accounts, that supported this view. What cannot be denied, however, is the fact that, despite the

SABC's unrivalled access to the President, all scandals involving various Presidents were first reported by private, media<sup>35</sup>. The SABC may then pick up the story and begin to cover it alongside the competition. A fair number of journalists claimed to have been privy to news-worthy information on the President which they chose not to act on, in some instances passing the lead to non-SABC colleagues. This is how a senior investigative journalist explained the reasoning involved:

"I have scandals that I know about the President, but somehow there is no active effort to pursue the story, because somehow it's a known thing that we will never get away with it here. Even though we are an investigative programme." (R29)

What is important here is the journalist's perception of what is (not) open to investigation, and why. While some put it down to lack of independence of the SABC as a whole, others assumed the President was being protected for cultural reasons and would argue that it was not the SABC's role to expose the private life of senior leaders, including Zuma's personal financial situation in the light of ongoing allegations of corruption, his promiscuity, views on HIV transmission etc. Proponents of non-confrontational journalism have included senior SABC managers, such as former CEO Dali Mpfu who withdrew the SABC from Sanef in protest against the print media's critical coverage of the Minister of Health.

There is no shortage of stories on corruption and misconduct on SABC programmes. What seems to signal increased levels of politicisation is how these stories are being

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35 For instance, the Sunday Times first published allegations that personally implicated then-President Mbeki in corruption in the context of a major arms deal (SAPA 2008). In 2010 it broke the story of President Zuma having fathered a child out-of-wedlock (SAPA 2010a). At the time this became public SABC presidential correspondents had ready access to Zuma while at an African Union summit in Ethiopia and some respondents have alleged that the correspondents initially refused to even approach Zuma for comment when the news broke. In 2012 it was the Mail&Guardian who first reported on an extensive planned infrastructure development in Zuma's home village to be funded partly by tax money (Erasmus, Letsoalo, and De Wet 2012).

sourced, approached, reported and framed and on which level of government they are found. They are seldom self-generated, except on African-language radio stations, especially current affairs programmes, where listeners phone in to complain about corruption in local government, expecting an investigation. While exposing corruption and mismanagement on local government level is generally considered safe, it is rarely significant enough to make it onto the national news diary. The coverage of such stories on provincial or national level tends to rely on official sources (police, court proceedings, judgements) and is rarely framed as a systemic problem that raises questions beyond a single corrupt official who lost his moral bearings. For instance, the SABC reported regularly on the official corruption charges involving former Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi, but it rarely used this to ask wider-ranging questions about police corruption, organised crime, or the effects of this case on morale and ethical conduct in the public service. The following observation was made in Bloemfontein, a newsroom reputedly highly politicised at the time. The Free State province is firmly in the hand of the ANC, and the relationship between the newsroom and provincial government was generally thought to be close.

The local current affairs newsroom of Lesedi FM, a Sotho-language radio station, produces a popular daily show consisting mainly of live telephonic interviews with news-makers and calls from listeners. Service provision issues and corruption feature prominently in the discussions and are a major draw card for Lesedi's audience. It is not unusual for a senior municipal manager to face live questions from angry listeners. Some presenters even take on an advocacy role and engage with the authorities on behalf of their listeners. But such engagement

hardly ever goes beyond the municipal level and local councillors.

One day when leaving the newsroom, I noticed the Lesedi FM programme being projected via speakers to the outside of the building. A rap song was playing, and the lyrics went like this: “Mr. Politician, how is your taxpayer mansion? Your fancy car? You can't feel the pot holes, you can't feel the heat...” No doubt, Lesedi has no problem confirming what their listeners know: that corruption among politicians is rife. But an investigation into persistent rumours at the time around the local Premier's involvement in the allocation of government tenders was off-limits. As one editor (R107) put it: “We used to do these kind of stories. Then we stopped doing investigations into the ruling party in the province. Now we can't touch them. They are dictating the terms.”

The difficulty with documenting stories that were never reported is that they simply disappear: because of its geographical footprint and resources SABC journalists often have access to information that is out of reach for other media. Consequently, if they bury a story for fear of the risk involved, and do not pass on to other media, it is unlikely to see the light of day.

All patterns described so far refer to story selection. I am now going to turn to reporting practices: a wide-spread reporting stance that I call *spectator journalism*; partisan journalism which is very different in nature; the use of pro-forma balance in the service of risk-avoidance; a reluctance to engage with issues or news-makers critically coupled with an over-reliance on opposition-voices to compensate for this (*criticism by proxy*),

and, linked to this, a general avoidance of news commentary.

### **Spectator journalism**

The SABC's news and current affairs output consists to a significant extent of plain reporting of official news or ordinary peoples' suffering – something that is not congruent with either developmental journalism or liberal journalism. I call this *spectator journalism*.

Liberal journalism draws on utilitarianism and is based on the premise that a free and vigilant press is necessary for good governance. It places the search for truth at the centre and aims to be neutral, objective and uninvolved in the issues covered, but also to engage critically in a watchdog role vis-a-vis government and those in power (Siebert 1956). Liberal journalism has long been the dominant paradigm in the Western world as well as in the post-apartheid private media. Developmental journalism comes out of the Marxist tradition and has increasingly but not consistently been favoured in South Africa by the ANC (Chapter 3). It was proposed by McQuail as a third world alternative (Christians, Glasser, and McQuail 2009) and involves the media aligning with the plight of the poor and disempowered in society rather than aiming for distance and neutrality. Journalists are seen as political activists, fighting the battle of development through mass media. The SABC's political journalism is a qualitatively different phenomenon. It is grounded in a pro-forma allegiance to the liberal journalism paradigm or, at times, other models to be found in democratic environments, such as responsible journalism (Retief 2002). It does not conflict with any of these notions because it is less a normative

model than a reflection of practice.

*Spectator journalism* is characterised by minimal, superficial, often repetitive coverage of important and complex issues that are not interrogated, analysed, questioned or followed up. It is a practice of watching developments from the sidelines: much closer to 'the people', especially poor black people in rural areas, than the liberal private print media, but without taking the next step towards analysis. It covers obvious problems (lack of housing, crime, mine safety etc.) over and over, but fails to contextualise them. This problem is not something experienced editors are unaware of, especially those few who would prefer a more independent and critical journalism at the SABC:

“We [SABC] speak to politicians who sit on podiums, we don't really speak to them so that they account. We become more or less their mouth piece. We need to begin to tell stories not from podiums, but get people to do more one-on-ones. A lot of what we do has no context and meaning. We think we have done enough by just reflecting what the politicians say, and we don't explain what it means. We need more analysis, more depth.” (National News Editor, R81)

“You give a journalist a story and say to him, go speak to that guy about subject A. He will go there and speak to him. In the interview the guy will mention something controversial which needs further investigation, but the instruction was to get that interview, and that's it.” (Acting Regional Editor, R89)

“We have presenters who do their make-up, and that's it. If you tell them to prepare for an interview they will, but even then there is no depth in it.” (TV news producer, R90)

“Our politics reporters just report: so-and-so said, so-and-so said, so-and-so said. No context, nothing. Then you try and motivate them to go out. Don't mention reading! Just go out, interact! They go to press conferences and don't even ask questions afterwards. You ask why and they say, 'we weren't allowed to ask these questions. We were only allowed to ask questions related to this or that.’ (Political Editor, R114)

A further illustration: since 2011 there has been a drive to tell political stories from the perspective of ordinary people in order to make the news more appealing and relevant

to viewers<sup>36</sup>. At the centre of such stories usually stands a suffering person or community affected by political decisions or developments. This is what many journalists associate with their obligation to work and broadcast in the public interest. However, constructing stories in this way also provides a ritualised way of avoiding more risky and demanding forms of reporting that the SABC is also mandated to provide. It is therefore important to note what *spectator journalism* does not include: reporters who engage directly with those in power to hold them to account, who search for answers not readily presented by news-makers, who enquire about issues and question the status quo. I am not talking here of 'watchdog journalism', but of fundamentals that are part of any major model of journalism in a democracy. The following example is drawn from a national news conference in 2011:

The meeting hears the following pitch of a story: The Minister of Housing has decided to slash the housing budgets of two provinces because of massive underspending in the previous year. The surplus funds will be allocated to better-performing provinces. The story, seen to be of national significance, is discussed at length and will be presented from the perspective of a poor person in one of the affected provinces who has no house and is going to suffer because of the decision.

(field notes)

In this instance, no one picked up on the fact that this story was also about the national government holding provincial governments accountable, nor on the fact that underspending on developmental budgets is a massive problem in South Africa, nor did

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<sup>36</sup> This in itself is not SABC-specific, but part of a broader international trend that was also reflected at the BBC from the mid-90s (Born 2005).

anyone ask questions about why there had been such underspending in the first place. All these alternative angles would have had considerable news value, and from a public interest perspective the pursuit of any of them would have been more valuable than the angle that was chosen. However, they all would have called for contextualisation and analysis – a diversion from the unspoken, much simpler template. I also chose these examples to highlight that *spectator journalism* is not a practice intentionally in the service of pro-government reporting: Reverting to it in this case spiked an opportunity to portray national government in a positive light (for holding provinces to account and allocating public funds responsibly). Cases like these are symptomatic of a newsroom culture that is characterised not so much by censorship and propaganda, but by a dearth of thinking and questioning, partially brought about by the SABC's exposure to political pressure repeatedly and over long periods of time (cf. Chapters 5).

### **Partisan journalism**

Politicisation of newsrooms does not need to involve a restriction of professional autonomy and independence. It may also originate within the newsroom and individual journalists. I have not come across many instances of partisan journalism at the SABC. On the contrary: observation of editorial meetings suggest that existing editorial structures and decision-making processes are generally effective at keeping such tendencies at bay. However, at times of increased tensions in the broader political environment and/or in the top echelons of the SABC, spaces for partisan journalism open up. It may then either be openly encouraged and supported by politicised/partisan editors, or it may be possible because journalists with partisan tendencies are

not reined in due to shifting political dynamics within the organisation. Partisan individuals are usually well known amongst their colleagues. I observed many instances where, for instance, the English desk edited blatant bias out of scripts written by certain individuals. One senior political reporter has acquired an SABC-wide reputation for partisan leanings, to the extent that her informal rank in the newsroom is taken by colleagues as an indicator for the political balance of power on top of the organisation:

“She is back, so it means something politically is happening. Because up to now she was marginalised. She wasn't allowed to cover elections. She is now acting political editor again. There is something happening within the ANC, within the SABC. She, for me, is the yardstick.” (R36)

### **Pro-forma balance**

One of the reasons for partisan journalism being relatively rare is that the professional imperative that stories be 'balanced' is widely acknowledged, accepted and adhered to. 'As the public broadcaster we have an obligation to give all sides of the story' is what respondents tend to associate with balance. However, as any working journalist knows, 'balance' is a much more complex concept in practice and can lead to quite paradoxical situations. A story, for instance, can be balanced with no mention being made of the actual problem at its heart. A story can be balanced and have no or little news value. Balance can be used in the interest of balancing one side in a conflict, it can be used to indirectly support the opposing position, or it can be used to disguise the conflict altogether. Much depends on the sound bites or interviewees being used, on the framing, and the structure of the script. What seems to go along with politicisation in SABC newsrooms is an increased *pro-forma* use of balance that avoids and obliterates

conflictual issues or, in some cases, works as a screen for political agendas, as in this case from the Western Cape office:

“During the election campaign we covered [the ANC candidate for the premiership] every day. What the fuck?! You would think he is the President! Apparently that was an instruction from Luthuli house [ANC]. But our Regional Editor knows how to play the game: we push the ANC line, but the DA will also get in with equitable coverage.” (R36)

There is a perception in some quarters that every single story needs to be balanced which is both unrealistic and counter-productive in a news environment. A particularly striking example of this kind of reasoning dates from 2012 when the SABC cancelled at the last minute a radio debate on the expected media coverage of an upcoming ANC Conference. The host had, as customary for that show, invited three independent political journalists. The SABC executive behind the decision justified it by arguing that it was “wrong” not to have invited an ANC representative and that the SABC was to “manage risk before it happened” (Seale 2012). The view expressed here is that, for reasons of balance, nothing concerning the ruling party can be discussed on air without the ANC being part of the discussion. While this decision was widely condemned and eventually reversed, it only reflected an extreme position of what is generally accepted in many newsrooms.

### **Criticism by proxy and avoidance of commentary**

When newsrooms get politicised journalists grow more reluctant to be seen as critical of those in power, and especially more reluctant to share their own views on air. This is quite intriguing as journalists clearly not only have opinions, but many have specialist

expertise which allows for considered and informative news commentary that would be of value to audiences. There is no rule that prohibits commentary that is identified as such. It is the journalists themselves who have little desire to take up this space. This holds even for senior specialist journalists, such as this political editor who responded to my question on the absence of commentary by scratching his head and resorting to sarcasm:

"Eish! It's never been there. We don't have opinions, you know... Our duty is to reflect all sides. We want to please everyone. My editor used to say, 'if you want to say X, then get someone to say it!' So we just end up acting as conveyor belts: 'He says, she says, he says, she says'. That's the kind of journalism that most people are comfortable with at the SABC." (R114)

As with balance, journalists' expertise, skill and capacity to question and analyse are hidden behind safe, ritualised behaviour. Respondents often complained that many journalists simply do not have the knowledge, skills or expertise to form and present considered analysis or opinion; but even those who do rather rely on external analysts and commentators, not all of whom can speak with authority on the subjects they are asked to comment on. Of course, such behaviour is not unique to the SABC; what is noteworthy is that here the practice has become so entrenched that deviations from this unspoken rule have become unthinkable.

## 4.3 Pattern 2: Voluntary Upward Referral and Self-Censorship

Given the way story selection and reporting practices change when newsrooms get politicised, it follows that the final product is affected. In Chapter 3 I have discussed some existing research in this respect, but it is equally interesting to assess the quality of content through the perception of those who create it. It was rare to find respondents that were satisfied with what went on air. Many described news bulletins as boring and complained about 'talking heads': "The news is so dull! It's like... who said what yesterday!" (R37). Most also conceded that SABC stories were uncritical<sup>37</sup>: "Very often I don't feel comfortable with our bulletins, because they sound too official. Almost like the government gazette" (R42). There was, however, also wide-spread agreement that coverage is usually balanced and not obviously biased. As one radio reporter (R20) said: "The product looks propagandistic because it is unquestioning, but it is not deliberately done."

The large number of journalists that believed that the SABC lacked credibility in the eye of the public was surprising, and it suggests that they are influenced by the media discourse rather than public trust ratings (cf. Chapter 3). They either felt that they were being perceived wrongly and misrepresented by the hostile private media; or that the public perception was accurate, and that an urgent and drastic response to remedy the situation was needed. I found much sensitivity towards external criticism, not just from politicians and lobbyists, but from ordinary listeners. In environments perceived to be highly politicised, this tendency was more marked, and it usually co-occurred with a

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<sup>37</sup> They may have gone on to justify or criticise this, but agreed on the general point.

second major pattern that emerged across SABC newsrooms.

This pattern relates to self-censorship and a deeply ingrained practice of excessive and unnecessary upward referral of decisions within the SABC's editorial core, i.e. that part of middle management that constitutes the backbone of newsroom operations. It consists of assignment editors who oversee reporters covering stories, pitch these stories to higher editorial levels and edit the final product; of EPs who run shows, programmes or bulletin desks with considerable autonomy, and of all other editors below the Heads of Radio and Television News and Current Affairs. Because of the so-called juniorisation of newsrooms and relatively low levels of professional skill and experience among SABC reporters (Ngwenya 2015; Orgeret 2006; Duncan 2008b; Wasserman 2010a), it is probable that newsroom staff rely on editorial guidance more heavily than in comparable news organisations in Western societies. This would suggest that the editorial core has an even more central role to play in protecting editorial independence than elsewhere.

As one would expect, on this level of the hierarchy politicisation manifested in increased conflict around editorial decisions on a day-to-day basis, growing numbers of instructions to journalists, and more heavy-handed editing. The following example relayed by a reporter is one of many I came across at a time when the political stakes were high in this particular newsroom:

“We journalists write our story. Our story gets sent to our assignment editors, they check it. Then it goes to Johannesburg. And then, all of a sudden, the whole thing gets changed! I was being balanced, even if it was being negative, if that is what you want to call it. They have tried to make it sound 'nicer'! But that's not how I saw it. And I was there. So there was a political agenda. The story was about the President. I was saying that he had been met here by angry people. Which was a

fact. The visuals proved that. And you have to say that! It's not gonna be smooth wherever he goes! But the viewer ended up having no clue." (R24)

Here the bulletin editors in Johannesburg found themselves in a position of conflicting (explicit or implicit) demands placed on them from two sides: those in positions (in- and outside the SABC) of power wishing to shape coverage, and those among their reporters who, while aware of what is at stake, insist on reporting stories the way they see them and are mindful of their professional reputation. By the nature of their work editors are expected to negotiate such conflicting demands and to make final decisions.

However, this is not what prevailed at the SABC in times of increased politicisation. Instead, I found a withdrawal of the editorial core characterised by indecision and avoidance of conflict. I observed frequently how, when in doubt about anything no matter how minor, editors and EPs went on to consult line managers, to refer authority upwards. The SABC's editorial policies on upward referral were modelled after the BBC's with the stated intention of following international best practice for independent public broadcasters<sup>38</sup>. This means that, while journalists can be instructed by editors, "programme producers and commissioning editors are responsible for either the production of the programme or the editorial control, or both" (SABC 2004, 5). Upward referral is voluntary except for a detailed list of serious matters, most of them with legal implications, such as interviewing criminals, paying for information, or using hidden cameras (ibid.). Journalists are also advised to notify their superiors of potentially "controversial" content or matters with a potential "extraordinary impact" (ibid.). A lack

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38 In 2004 the policy was amended to make the CEO editor-in-chief. This differs from the BBC model in that the BBC's Director General as editor-in-chief is not responsible for revenue generation and is thus problematic with regard to keeping editorial process separate and protected from commercial objectives. The policy also states explicitly that the CEO's "role is not to make day-to-day programming or newsroom decisions" (SABC 2004b, 5).

of definition of these terms leaves room for interpretation (cf. Berger 2005), but the policy also states explicitly that upward referral is “not intended to shift editorial decision-making upwards”, nor to “disallow production and broadcasting of controversial and compelling programmes” (SABC 2004, 5f). The partial autonomy editors are left with is not unusual in media. Every journalist finds herself within a space that allows for agency and has a part in defining the boundaries of her role. Authority is not just given; it also needs to be taken up, and the degree to which it is defended varies greatly – even between and within SABC newsrooms, as I will show in chapters 6 and 7.

In my ethnographic fieldwork I was struck by how frequently editors I observed and spoke to expressed what can only be called a fear of taking up the authority that comes with their professional role. One senior EP (R100) with considerable power in the TV newsroom spoke of the horrors of having had to write a report, many months ago, about not including an info graphic in her bulletin. “You don't have a choice”, said another EP whom I had frequently observed being reluctant to make trivial decisions and voice opinions, “you've got to consult. Otherwise you are likely to burn your fingers” (R97). And yet editors *do* have a choice. The policy states that, should they choose not to refer upward, they would be “held responsible for the editorial decision so made” (SABC 2004b, 6). While this can be read as a deterrent or even intimidation, it does locate authority at the lower level. Taking responsibility for editorial decisions means being prepared to defend them by recourse to the SABC's mandate and editorial policies.

It is not my intention to downplay the very real pressures that bear on editors, especially in middle management. Editorial policies, as discussed in earlier chapters,

have become more restrictive in the course of the period covered here, and a number of individual news executives who exerted excessive control, at times in violation of SABC policies (Haffajee 2006; Public Protector of South Africa 2014), have strengthened the perception that autonomous thinking is discouraged (cf. Chapters 5). However, a significant number of editors have continued to defend their autonomy consistently and, for the large part, successfully and over long periods of time. What distinguishes them from most of their colleagues is that while they, too, sometimes expect (and dread) criticism, they are prepared to argue their case and consider such conflict as an intrinsic part of the editorial role – for instance this radio producer who decided to allow his team to conduct a controversial live interview knowing his bosses would disapprove: “Let them come complain to me if they don't like it. This is my team, and we are running with it” (R87). A colleague argued: “[The editorial policy] doesn't say you need your senior editors to approve. As EP I am ultimately responsible for what goes out. If I am convinced that it's balanced, fair and accurate then that's all that is needed” (R52). However, these individuals were in a small minority. While they evidence the fact that there is considerable space for editorial decision-making, the overall situation at the SABC is very different to, for instance, the BBC where journalists in a similar policy environment defend their authority much more vigorously (Born 2005, 31), suggesting that policy in itself does not explain this phenomenon.

Avoidance of decisions and excessive upward referral have ripple effects that go well beyond specific incidents, shaping an organisational culture that persists even in periods of relatively low politicisation. Throughout the fieldwork period and across all sites journalists complained about waiting for routine decisions to be approved by bosses of

bosses. "You are hired as an editor to make those hard decisions. So if you are not doing it for fear of being held accountable, why are you there as a manager in the first place?!" asked one exasperated reporter (R33). At the same time, some senior editors also spoke about being burdened with minor decisions that have little or no political relevance and should, in their opinion, be made at lower levels (R1, R4, R18, R26, R49, R89, R90, R95)). Lastly, a large number of decisions, especially strategic ones and those dealing with innovation, are not made at all. They are deferred, ignored, 'forgotten'. As a result, reporters' initiative and creativity, their commitment to improving quality and willingness to put in additional efforts are being stifled by an editorial core that has retreated into the safety of paralysis.

The functional equivalent of upward referral among reporters, camera persons and presenters is self-censorship. These groups have comparatively little formal authority vested in them; they are at the bottom of the news hierarchy. As such they are subject to political pressure with little chance of gaining relief by passing it on to lower levels. They rely on their line managers for protection. Yet, paradoxically, they are the ones doing the actual news-gathering and reporting which affords them considerable autonomy, especially outside the office. In many cases they are also the public face of news and current affairs programmes, and any infringement on journalistic ethics has potential implications for their personal reputation and employability elsewhere.

While there have been a number of cases where reporters left the organisation claiming political pressure and interference with their work, and while a number of my respondents asserted that they had been affected by politically motivated editorial

decisions that contradicted their own professional values and beliefs, this was widely seen as exceptional, and my own observations confirm this. Two reasons may serve as an explanation. Firstly, most editors avoid being seen to interfere directly with content. Without fail they would deny any form of censorship (even though their actual behaviour sometimes contradicted them). Being seen as censoring is embarrassing. But it is similarly embarrassing and frustrating for a reporter to have her work openly censored (edited, blocked, or dropped from the bulletin), and one way of dealing with this is to pre-empt it. Thus, the much more common response to what reporters perceive as increased levels of politicisation is a subtle adjustment that takes the form of varying degrees of self-censorship reflected in the way interviews are conducted on and off air, relevant facts are in- or excluded, potential scoops are followed up or not, story ideas are pursued or suppressed, defended or adopted, and of course in the way scripts are written. Across the organisation, the presence of self-censorship in newsrooms was readily acknowledged, though few people admitted to practising it themselves. The following conversation ensued with a camera person.

Q: What does government think of the SABC?

A: "Oh, we are number one! They like the SABC."

Q: Why do they like you so much?

A: "Because number one never reports negatively. We don't go too far. We are not negative towards government. We are not even critical. We are lukewarm."

(R79)

My own observations confirmed that reporters rarely challenge or critically engage politicians even when they have no difficulty expressing strong and critical opinions in informal settings. Some who I accompanied on assignments and confronted with this observation explained to me that they did not 'dare' ask difficult questions. But often they had not even considered them and seemed to be unaware of the motivation or

purpose behind their behaviour which had become habitual and an accepted part of newsroom culture. When I asked a seasoned television reporter (R59) why she didn't challenge a politician who promised to allocate more money to building houses for the poor on his under-spending on the current housing budget, she responded with genuine surprise that this was a "good idea", and that she would send an email to the spokesperson about it. A similarly experienced journalist, upon reflection on why she would not pitch a politically sensitive topic to her editor, remarked after a long pause: "Maybe we just self-censor! Maybe it would be worth trying. ... Because actually, we have done [similar] things, and there was no fall-out from anywhere!" (R29). This raises questions about the intentionality of self-censorship or, put differently, about the presence of conscious self-censorship versus less intentional but equally habitual forms of pre-emptive self-control and acquiescence in the face of power. While the effects are similar, the underlying dynamics are not – something I elaborate in chapters 6-8.

### **4.4 Pattern 3: Structural Blurring of Accountability**

A third pattern, the blurring of formal lines of accountability, is likely the result of a range of causes. At the SABC this can be traced back to repeated structural changes brought about by a succession of news managers that created parallel, even conflicting lines of management, for instance between head office and regional newsrooms, and between regional editors and news/ assignment editors in the provinces. An example:

In 2010 the management of the SABC's office in Parliament was de-facto fused with that of the regional newsroom of the Western Cape (both located in Cape Town, but in different buildings and with different mandates). The then-regional editor with a reputation for being politically biased took charge of the parliamentary team, members of which identified as political specialists rather than general news reporters. They had already been accountable to multiple structures (the English Desk, the National News Editor and the Political Editor); now the situation became even more obscure. Having spent considerable time observing the newsroom before and after this change I noticed a marked dip in morale and initiative. Staff became cynical about their work, informal discussions switched from political to private matters, some admitted openly that they put in less effort than before. "It is supposed to be a temporary situation. It's not conducive to the running of this office", said one journalist (R53). Two years later that 'temporary' arrangement was still in place, and the decline of the newsroom was not just evidenced by a number of resignations, but surfaced in narratives throughout the organisation where parliamentary journalists were either pitied for having lost much of their freedom, or, in some instances, criticised for having become 'lazy' (R49, R114).

Occasionally, unclear accountability structures can help absorb external political pressure: complaints get lost in the system making it difficult to discern after the fact who had been responsible for a controversial decision (argued by R29, R49, R52, R61, and R90). Mostly, however, they create uncertainty and undermine the containing function organisations have for their members – a function vital for journalists who need

to feel and be supported by managers in their encounter with political power. Thus they impact disproportionately those who are willing to take risks, but would like to do so in consultation with their boss so that a potential negative fall-out can be managed jointly.

“Our unit is run like a shebeen [a township tavern]”, said a current affairs producer known for her tenacity and innovative thinking (R87): “People just come and go. I don't even know who my boss is. It's very demoralising, there is no direction, things are not done thoroughly.” She did not know whom to rely on for decisions and constructive feedback and felt unprotected were something to “go wrong”. She was frequently instructed to write reports after the fact to explain herself – sometimes several per month. Like others in similar situations she admitted to passing on controversial topics to other media houses so that they would “at least get aired somewhere”.

At times of increased politicisation formal hierarchies become simultaneously more and less important: more important as more instructions are passed downward that, in some cases, could be traced from board members or CEOs to a reporters via SMS trails or phone calls (evidence shared by R28, R33, R50, R53, R61, R81, and R87). In addition, editors are more likely to refer routine decisions upward. At the same time, however, formal hierarchies are increasingly bypassed, undermined and circumvented in the interest of particular political agendas. In a highly politicised society such as South Africa where personal networks of trust, loyalty and patronage run deep, personal links to those in power easily override organisational accountability structures. I came across a number of cases where individuals on any level of the hierarchy suddenly gained

disproportionate power based on their being connected to the “right” people. A striking example here is the rise of Hlaudi Motsoeneng (cf. Chapter 3) who seemingly came from nowhere and, despite the lack of necessary formal qualifications, gained power rapidly and remained unchallenged for years, causing obvious and lasting damage to the organisation.

## **4.5 Pattern 4: Withdrawal and Self-Absorption**

Besides affecting day-to-day journalism and interactions, the politicisation of the SABC also has consequences for the way staff and management relate to the organisation itself.

Moving as an observer between newsrooms in different locations I often noticed a surprising absence of internal debate on political issues and questions of coverage. This did not just apply to informal settings, but also in contexts designed specifically to facilitate discussions, such as editorial meetings and morning conferences. Seeking explanations usually produced little or no meaningful response in interviews. In many cases respondents did not share any sense of something, perhaps, lacking. The common view was that this was simply how things were and had always been. Occasionally respondents referred to a time in the early transformation period that had been different, but showed little desire for the status quo to change. The excruciating boredom and lack of energy and interest that permeates staff meetings in many newsrooms was acutely felt by me, but respondents rarely saw this as something worth

exploring.

In the small number of newsrooms where this was *not* the case, where journalists argued passionately about the news of the day and were able to allow conflicting opinions to emerge and be tolerated, follow-up conversations about this topic took a very different course and usually involved a clear argument around the desirability of such debate, and the acknowledgement that, exceptionally for the SABC, this was possible because this particular newsroom enjoyed more autonomy (for instance because radio was less scrutinised by the bosses than television – cf. Chapter 6). In other words, journalists felt that vigorous debate was possible because their work environment was less politicised than other newsrooms.

Finally there were instances where journalists expressed a view that things were not the way they wanted them to be in their newsroom: that there was insufficient space for internal debate, for diverging political opinions and controversy, that this was problematic but an unfortunate consequence of working in a highly politicised environment. They felt unable to express this discontent openly. In Hirschman's (1970) terminology, the option of 'voice', i.e. of speaking out against an unsatisfactory status quo, was subjectively perceived to be unavailable. Hirschman's 'exit' option, i.e. resigning and leaving the SABC was perceived as costly (cf. 2007 for a more detailed exploration of this) and available at best to the most highly skilled and experienced, some of whom have indeed chosen this option over the years (e.g. SAPA 2010b; da Silva 2010; Mail&Guardian 2013). But what is perhaps more characteristic of the organisational culture is the clearly dominant perception that independent-minded

journalists have no place at the SABC. A Head of Radio once shared his hopes and fears about his new job. Barely appointed he already sought to manage his expectations of agency vis-a-vis an organisation whose culture he knew intimately: "If you are independent, we don't expect you to last. Actually! We are looking forward to your departure because it proves that you can't survive" (R68).

Long-term survival is seen to be impossible. This has given rise to a phenomenon I have previously called *opportunistic loyalty* (Arndt 2007) – as opposed to Hirschman's 'loyalty' that is derived from value-based identification (1970). Ngwenya (2015, 261) frames this phenomenon as a dilemma between accommodation and submission. Opportunistic loyalty is a stance adopted by large numbers of SABC staff who are relating to the organisation as predominantly a provider of goods and services: pay checks, pensions, perks, publicity etc.. I was struck by how many informal newsroom conversations revolved around ensuring one's continuous survival in the SABC system. This observation was echoed by a former Head of Television News who told of the disbelief he faced among his peers when he refused to use his car allowance to upgrade to a better vehicle. "People are mainly interested in the perks their jobs bring. Because if you are a manager at a certain level you get a car allowance, you get parking, you get an office with a fridge" (R49).

Rather than finding purpose in the work of journalism, teams fragment into individuals whose focal point is not the journalistic product or the audience but individual gain, and in some cases plain corruption. I frequently encountered moonlighting among journalists who seemed to spend large parts of their working day running their own

business on the side: from PR agencies to farms to dealing in raw commodities. I found evidence of this on all levels of the news hierarchy, despite public criticism being usually directed towards the upper echelons of the organisation.

In as far as this is a manifestation of politicisation, I suggest that the phenomena thus observed amount to a fourth pattern of behaviour in SABC newsrooms that is characterised by withdrawal and self-absorption. This inward focus goes hand in hand with a view of the SABC as being indispensable to the audience, often equated with the 'poor': a taking for granted of its value to the country regardless of the quality of the news. A former board member proposed that "it is not about quality of output... it's about sustaining the institution. A culture which is inward-looking. They use the phrase 'out there' when referring to audiences... it's an us-and-them concept" (R37).

Many journalists seemed to have not only lost touch with the audience in that way, but also lost interest in the more adversarial aspects of their role, effectively handing those over to a small number of outspoken colleagues (often perceived to make life difficult for everyone) and to the private media whose more confrontational stance was used to justify one's own passive and accommodating approach to those in power. A presidential correspondent with a reputation among colleagues for being in awe of political power explained his uncritical reporting by saying: "We are not in competition with eTV. Our mandates are not the same." (R106). This was echoed by many of his colleagues asserting that, unlike private competition, SABC journalists should not "go overboard and do controversial stuff" (R63), be "anti-government" (R62) or as "loose" or "aggressive" (R57) as colleagues at other media organisations. While the mandates of

private and public broadcasters are indeed different I almost never encountered these kinds of statements from the more proactive, independent-minded and questioning journalists I spoke to.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed four patterns of behaviour that reflect how politicisation manifests in the SABC's journalistic practice. The bulk of newsroom studies discussed in Chapter 2, including those focussed on the SABC, put journalists' behaviour down to rational, conscious decision-making. In contrast to these, the four patterns I identified often operated outside peoples' awareness, and I will come back to this in Chapters 6-8.

At the SABC, politicisation manifests on a continuum starting with the relatively rare instances of direct political pressure that is filtered down the hierarchy through instructions. Most of the phenomena I found, however, do not occur as a result of direct interference. Instead, they appear to be based on individuals' perceptions that may be rooted in objective reality, or not. Moving further down the continuum, perceptions become ingrained in the organisational culture into which new staff members are socialised. As a result, a journalist who has never had direct experience of political pressure may exhibit these patterns, and do so habitually and without being consciously aware of what motivates his behaviour.

Depending on the circumstances, these patterns may be relatively short-lived or longer-lasting. In the case of the latter, the organisational culture becomes altered in a deeper, more fundamental way. Asked during a time of organisational crisis whether he had any hope that things might change with a newly-appointed board widely hailed as independent and professional, a senior TV reporter (R70) responded: “You see, the more we change, the more we remain the same. Or getting worse.”

When the patterns become what is 'normal' the culture of the newsroom works systematically against the very notion of independent journalism that the SABC is mandated to deliver. As discussed in earlier chapters, this mandate is not a normative ideal; it is based on formal legislation and internal SABC policy and includes explicit demands to “evaluate, analyse and critically appraise government policies and programmes”, to report with “accuracy, fairness and impartiality”, to abstain from “suppressing relevant, available facts, or distorting by wrong or improper analysis (SABC 2004b), and to adhere to “the highest standards of journalism, as well as fair coverage, impartiality, balance and independence from government, commercial and other interests” (RSA 1999). However, I also observed how these 'problematic' behaviour patterns allowed the daily work of journalism to continue – if in compromised form – even under difficult conditions. “It absolutely amazes me how we manage to put a news bulletin on air every night, but we do!”, a senior manager (R49) once exclaimed. It may not be a particularly good or interesting bulletin, but something is put on air while deliberation, conflict, and decision-making are minimised and often eliminated altogether. More about this unexpected function in Chapter 6.

Of course, similar patterns can be found in other news organisations, too, and they can be a consequence of phenomena that have nothing to do with politicisation: commercialisation, populist journalism, international trends in the framing of news, and lack of skills, staff or resources. The SABC is subjected to these developments like most media organisation in democratic environments, and I do not suggest that politicisation replaces or overshadows them – they are just not the focus of my study as they have been covered extensively in the existing literature (cf. Chapter 2). When a manifest phenomenon is all we can observe, lines become blurred and relations between these various variables are complex. I have taken great care throughout to keep such complexity and potential multi-causality in mind, mainly by being attentive to the context in which the data has emerged. For instance, a lack of critical questioning or contextualisation with regard to a story involving a government programme may be testament to populist framing, or lack of skills and expertise, or politicisation. It is only when, through ethnographic fieldwork, it becomes clear that this practice is not only normalised but also associated by journalists with politicisation, that it can reasonably be classified as a manifestation of politicisation – and this link has been very strong. It will become even stronger in the following double chapter when I look at politicisation over time and against the backdrop of political developments in the country.

# **5/I A Longitudinal View: Degrees of Politicisation from 1993 – 2004**

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## **Introduction to the Double Chapter**

In Chapter 4 I have discussed the ways politicisation manifests within the SABC and its journalism and identified patterns of perceptions and professional practice linked to the selection and treatment of news and current affairs stories. It emerged that in highly politicised newsrooms story selection is marked by an over-reliance on official sources, coverage is driven by events rather than issues, and the reporting of 'non-stories' with no or little news value becomes accepted practice while other topics are perceived as 'untouchable'. Reporting practice is characterised by 'spectator journalism' and, occasionally, partisan journalism; by a rigid concept of balance and neutrality, and by avoidance of news commentary with a simultaneous reliance on 'criticism by proxy'. I have also drawn attention to the long-term consequences of high levels of politicisation for the organisational culture. Yet these manifestations, or 'symptoms', of politicisation in the newsroom are not universal or permanent characteristics of the SABC's organisational culture; they may be more or less present at different points in time. This double chapter deals with the process of politicisation between 1993 and 2013 and traces how the external political environment influences both the degrees and forms of politicisation. It does so in relation to the organisation-as-a-whole (Chapters 6-8 focus with internal differentiation).

Despite its different position in terms of de-jure editorial independence compared to public broadcasters in other transitional environments (cf. Chapter 3), the post-apartheid SABC has faced consistent accusations of being too close to government and/or the ANC, including claims that the new SABC is merely the old SABC serving new political masters (SAPA 2000; Barron 2004; Khangale and SAPA 2004; Staff reporter 2007b, 2009g, 2013a). This criticism fails to take account of complex internal dynamics that have characterised the broadcaster in the past twenty years. During this time the SABC has undergone changes affecting not only its mandate and organisational structure (cf. Chapter 3), but the composition of its staff, the values and beliefs of its journalists, internal practices and staff morale. At the same time, the South African political environment has changed radically from the apartheid system to an inclusive democracy. Following a temporary power-sharing arrangement with the National Party, the ANC has been governing the country on the back of consistently high majorities of around 2/3 of the votes in national elections resulting in a one-party dominance system. While the political conflict between apartheid-era forces and the ANC virtually disappeared within years of the transition, new fault lines have emerged within the former liberation movement and its political allies (cf. Chapter 3). Chapter 5/I and 5/II attempt to do some justice to this by providing a longitudinal view of the SABC's politicisation, specifically of its News and Current Affairs division, over a 20-year period: from around 1993 to 2013. This chapter (5/I) covers the first half of this period, Chapter 5/II the second. It should be kept in mind that the two chapters are closely linked and form a unit in terms of the overall argument.

As I have noted in Chapter 2, politicisation is not a well-established theoretical concept and has been used mainly in research on international organisations, civil services, and security and intelligence services. In these applied studies authors have focussed on two dimensions of politicisation: top-down (Ransom 1987; Betts 2002; Peters and Pierre 2004; Rovner 2008) and, less often, bottom up (Ransom 1987; Betts 2002; Peters and Pierre 2004; Van der Meer, Steen, and Wille 2007). Within top-down politicisation, Ransom (cited in Riste 2009) distinguishes further between overt and subtle pressure (on intelligence services and analysts, in his case). Rovner (2008) refers to this as direct or indirect pressure, related to either political meddling in professional decision-making processes, or more subtle signals towards desired outcomes. Bottom-up politicisation is seen to be a process by which professional members of the organisation either become politically active within the organisation or take up political activities or office outside (Peters and Pierre 2004). Van der Meer et al. (2007, 41) argue that bottom-up politicisation includes “party-political allegiance and behaviour, a policy-oriented attitude and the awareness of the political context of public service delivery”.

Both dimensions of politicisation, top-down (including overt/direct and subtle/indirect) and bottom-up, occur at the SABC with varying degrees and sometimes simultaneously. I further distinguish between external and internal top-down politicisation, as Gans (1999) has done in his study of CBS and NBC news, though not from a specifically political perspective. External politicisation relates to political pressure (or incentives) originating outside the organisation (e.g. politicians or officials calling editors), internal politicisation originates from within (e.g. board members, managers, senior editors putting pressure on those down the line). It can be argued that the shaping of stories for

political purposes by editors in middle management is a form of bottom-up rather than top-down management, as Betts (2002) has for intelligence services. However, because both are possible, I classify such instances in accordance with the motivations at play in the specific case under discussion.

In the context of EU institutions, De Wilde (2011) has identified three strands in the literature that are largely representative of the wider scholarly research on politicisation. The first strand deals with the politicisation of institutions (Christiansen 1997, Majone 2002, Peters and Pierre 2004 - all cited in De Wilde 2011) and focusses on “the increased relevance of political parties and partisan conflict... within these institutions” (De Wilde 2011, 562). The second strand focusses on decision-making processes (Tallberg and Johansson 2008; Foulleux et al. 2005, Beyers and Kerremans 2004 - all cited in De Wilde 2011): Politicised and professional (or technocratic) decision-making are juxtaposed, particularly in studies of civil services. It is also argued that this is “related to the contentiousness of issues” and “determined by conscious actor strategies” (De Wilde 2011, 562). The third strand looks at the politicisation of issues (Krapels 2012; Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012) – related to the extent to which these issues are contested and relevant to public debate and policy (De Wilde 2011). In practice these three forms of politicisation are far from distinct. For instance, De Wilde (ibid., 563) himself argues that “institutions often involved in decision-making on politicized issues are likely to be increasingly pressured ... and may thus become 'politicized' themselves”. Media organisations that are naturally dealing with contentious political issues are a good example of this. Since my aim is a comprehensive study of the SABC's politicisation, all three forms will be taken into account –

individually and in their interaction. Attention will also be paid to two additional forms that I see as distinct from the three discussed above: the politicisation of *individuals* who have agency in decision-making processes (e.g. partisan journalists or editors), and the politicisation of *discourse* as a system that structures the perception of reality (Foucault 1981) – such as the reality of politicisation (e.g. a (re-)racialisation of discourse in the newsroom, or the cessation of internal debate on contentious political issues among colleagues).

A wide range of authors see politicisation as an organisational defect, something judged to be negative and undesirable (Peters and Pierre 2004; Doli, Korenica, and Rogova 2012 on civil services; Partan 1975; Ghebali 1985 on UN agencies; Rovner 2008 on intelligence services). A similar view is expressed within the liberal media paradigm that advocates values such as neutrality, objectivity and balance. Imber (1989) has rightly pointed out the potential for hypocrisy inherent in this approach – depending on who claims the defect to be a defect. Adopting uncritically the liberal journalism paradigm as a universal standard regardless of the fact that it has emerged in a particular historical context comes with the danger of missing the singularity of each public broadcaster's situation, including its specific historical, political, social and cultural context. While the SABC is meant to enjoy editorial independence from day-to-day politics qua mandate (cf. Chapter 3), no public broadcaster could (or indeed: should) be completely free from political influence. It is not the media's role to exist in isolation from politics, “self-enclosed and separated from outside pressures” (Schudson 2005, 220). In addition, journalists' values may well coincide with government policy; this does not automatically constitute politicisation. My only reference point with regard to the SABC

is whether, and to what extent, politicisation conflicts with the mandate on which the organisation's journalism is founded. Within the confines of de-jure independence, the 'optimal' degree of politicisation, which may involve some responsiveness to political pressure, cannot be predetermined as it is context-dependent, and particularly so in the transitional environment of a young democracy.

This chapter and the following (5/II) are going to address three main questions:

1. How have levels of politicisation as reflected in the SABC's organisational culture changed between 1993 and 2013?
2. How does this process relate to the wider political environment of South Africa?
3. What are the patterns of change and continuity, and how can we explain changing levels of politicisation?

Considering how levels of politicisation have changed between 1993 and 2013, my data suggests that, firstly, the overall process of politicisation has been non-linear: levels of politicisation have neither remained constant, nor have they risen or fallen consistently. Instead, they fluctuated with some politicisation always being present. It is unrealistic in the context of the SABC (and probably public broadcasters in general) to conceive of politicisation as a binary variable which is either present or not, as Krapels (2012) has done. The degree of politicisation at any one moment in time is relative to the degree of politicisation at another. Secondly, the politicisation of the SABC is not a uni-directional development. Reversals of gains in organisational autonomy or editorial independence are frequent. Thus, even though moments or periods of politicisation are often partially

contingent upon a preceding moment or period, there is no reason to assume that the overall process is a teleological one.

In answering the second research question, I suggest that the process can be segmented into five time periods, marked by characteristic “episodes of contention” (Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 36), such as a scandal around the blacklisting of certain commentators. The first three time periods – 'I: New Beginnings', 'II: Disillusionment', and 'III: Attempted professionalisation' – are covered in the present Chapter, 5/I. The subsequent two periods – 'IV: The return of political loyalties, disintegration and crisis', and 'V: Rescue and turn-around' are covered in Chapter 5/II.<sup>39</sup> These five time periods are related to at least three more general phases of politicisation reflective of what I call 'political periods of contention' involving the ANC and the ANC government: A phase of de-politicisation (Period I, although it started even before 1993) was followed by gradual re-politicisation (Periods II and III) and over-identification (Period IV). The period starting around 2010 showed signs of integration. The politicisation of the SABC must thus be understood, at least partially, as a function of its environment<sup>40</sup>.

De-politicisation is linked to the political transition itself and reflects the key contention between ANC and National Party/ IFP. With the country at the brink of civil war the stakes were high. The need for an impartial, independent SABC resulted in legislative guarantees, a representative and independent board, the influx of new staff, professional training and relatively little political pressure. Re-politicisation is linked to the ANC's first years of governing the country on its own following the end of the initial power-

<sup>39</sup> I will follow this analysis with some observations and thoughts about subsequent developments (since 2013), however, these were not covered by my fieldwork.

<sup>40</sup> Wells (1987) has come to a similar conclusion in her study of the UN and UNESCO where she argues that politicisation should be seen as an indicator of external forces bearing upon the organisation.

sharing arrangement. Faced with growing criticism from formerly much more sympathetic civil society organisations, trade unions and journalists, attempts to gain influence within the SABC become apparent. This is, however, met with resistance, and a 'workable equilibrium' is reached. Over-identification is a result of factionalism within the ANC that emerges strongly around 2004 and subsequently leads to the possibility of a split of the former liberation movement. I will trace how the SABC becomes deeply enmeshed in ANC factional dynamics, with little resistance towards this process of rapid politicisation. The phase culminates in an unprecedented financial, governance and (in respondents' perception) credibility crisis. The signs of integration and return of professionalism and stability that we see in the subsequent period can be linked to the ANC having survived the immediate threat of factionalism and re-integrated to some extent with Zuma's rise to the Presidency.

With regard to the third research question, I show that politicisation at the SABC is directly linked to a wide range of factors that I group into three categories: drivers, enablers and inhibitors (of politicisation). For ease of reference, Figure 1 lists a simplified typology of the most important factors encountered over the years in each category. These factors do by not constitute an exhaustive list. As I show later, different factors rise to importance at different times. Enablers and inhibitors may be just as, or more important than, drivers. Indeed, what is key to understanding the process of politicisation as a whole is how drivers, enablers and inhibitors interact with each other.

<b>Drivers</b>	<b>Enablers</b>	<b>Inhibitors</b>
<b>External Top-down Politicisation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pressure originating outside organisation</li> <li>• political appointments</li> </ul>	<b>Political Environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• one-party dominance</li> <li>• political contention</li> <li>• government with formal power to interfere (state as sole shareholder)</li> </ul>	<b>Legal Safeguards</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constitution; (media and broadcasting) legislation</li> <li>• internal (editorial) policies</li> </ul>
<b>Internal Top-down Politicisation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pressure originating inside organisation</li> <li>• incentives originating inside organisation</li> </ul>	<b>Professional Skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of skills among editors</li> <li>• lack of skills among journalists</li> </ul> <b>Organisational Uncertainty</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• blurred lines of authority</li> <li>• excessive bureaucracy</li> <li>• systems of personal loyalties</li> </ul>	<b>Independence and Quality of Leadership</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'strong' board and CEO</li> <li>• non-authoritarian senior managers/editors</li> <li>• independent-minded, professional middle managers/editors</li> </ul> <b>Public Scrutiny</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• competition (private media)</li> <li>• high stakes (e.g. election coverage)</li> <li>• accountability (to Parliament)</li> <li>• economic need for credibility (reliance on advertising revenue)</li> </ul>
<b>Bottom-up Politicisation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• partisan journalism</li> </ul>	<b>Anticipatory Politicisation</b>	<b>Resistance</b>

Fig. 1

The existence of external top-down politicisation has been a challenge for the SABC since the late 1990s and this is probably unlikely to change. Therefore, and given that the SABC enjoys de-jure independence, processes that happen internally are important to understand (and probably more susceptible to intervention). These include internal top-down politicisation, bottom-up politicisation as well as enablers and inhibitors, such as acts of resistance. All these factors are linked closely to organisational culture.

When analysing the process of politicisation over time, patterns of change and continuity can be identified. Patterns of change relate to what drives politicisation in a given time period and are found to be mainly a function of the political environment.

Except for the early 1990s, the main drivers have all been present consistently, albeit with varying intensity. There have been marked changes in the levels of resistance (inhibitors). Patterns of continuity relate mainly to enablers especially as far as these are a function of the organisational culture, and to some structural inhibitors such as legal safeguards and the presence of private media. The variance in degrees of politicisation over time can be explained to a large extent through changing political dynamics within and around the ANC, but only through the interaction of drivers with enablers and inhibitors inside the SABC.

Politicisation at the SABC is far more than the presence of external top-down pressure in the form of, for instance, phone calls by politicians to the CEO. It may sometimes be a bottom-up process; however, as far as it is an internal top-down process it is mostly indirect and subtle involving tacit signals rather than orders. Increasingly, politicisation has been internalised by journalists resulting in an anticipation of what those in power desire – which may be accurate or not. Building on Krapels (2012) who argues that “the possibility of politicisation is a form of politicisation itself”, I add to bottom-up and top-down politicisation a third dimension: *anticipatory politicisation*. This form has grown to be the most pervasive at the SABC (albeit the least visible). It is simultaneously caused by politicisation and enables further politicisation. Anticipatory politicisation is distinct from both top-down and bottom-up politicisation, as well as from the practice of self-censorship. In all these latter cases intent is present. Doli et al. (2012), for instance, write about the 'implementation' of politicisation, thereby betraying an underlying assumption that politicisation is simply the effect of conscious strategy and behaviour. This is not necessarily the case with anticipatory politicisation which is closely linked to

an organisational culture of passivity where not asking questions, not challenging politicians, not making an effort to understand context, not even caring about being used and manipulated has become normal, and where the will or desire to challenge this norm is largely missing. Anticipatory politicisation underlines the centrality of subjectivity in understanding politicisation. Perceptions of reality drive behaviour; subjectivity is immanent in practice. Every time top-down or bottom-up politicisation succeeds, anticipatory politicisation becomes inscribed in the organisational culture. In Krapel's (2012) words, the organisation falls under the "shadow of politicisation", and reversing this then becomes increasingly difficult.

Among the factors that inhibit politicisation, the professionalism of editors in middle and senior management has emerged from my data as a key one. This is generally in line with research on non-media organisations (Dudley 1976; Peters and Pierre 2004; De Wilde 2011; Doli, Korenica, and Rogova 2012). In their study of UN specialised agencies, Lyons et al. suggest that agencies whose members are more professional are less likely to be highly politicised (Lyons et al., cited in Dutt 1995, 22). This has also been argued by those studying civil services and armed forces where professionalism has been associated with greater (relatively speaking) institutional autonomy (Dudley 1976; Peters and Pierre 2004). In her study of the BBC, Born has shown that, despite all attempts to control the broadcaster, "as an institution the BBC has a real autonomy, deepened over the decades by the growth of a powerful and recalcitrant professionalism" (Born 2005, 31). At the SABC, in contrast, this recalcitrant professionalism is present, but fragile and much less wide-spread and consistent (cf. Chapter 7).

## 5.1. Period I: 'New Beginnings' (1993-1997)

As outlined in Chapter 3, the future of the SABC in the new South Africa looked promising in the beginning: A new board which took office in 1993 was roughly balanced between supporters of the ANC and the National Party and thus representative of the main political powers in the country<sup>41</sup>. Chaired by a black woman, Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, it broke with the SABC's past of government control and developed a new Ethical Code (Tleane and Duncan 2003). The code committed journalists to report in an objective, balanced, unbiased, non-discriminatory way, and independently of party-political and personal interests (SABC 1994b). A speedy transformation of the SABC was seen to be crucial for the upcoming democratic elections in 1994 when, for the first time, all South Africans would be allowed to vote. The broadcaster's near-monopoly in informing citizens about political developments, especially the rural poor without access to print media, meant that its conduct prior, during and after the elections was critical for a country at a historical crossroads. The 1993 assassination of Chris Hani, the immensely popular leader of the South African Communist Party and the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), sent shock waves through the country (Beinart 2001). Despite the relative peacefulness of the transition period, the danger of wide-spread political violence or even civil war was very real at the time, and both sides in the political negotiations had an interest in the SABC reporting in an independent, neutral and unbiased way. The broadcaster needed to be shielded from political pressure while being accountable to public.

<sup>41</sup> The selection process of the board was based on extensive public hearings after which new board members were selected by a panel of high judges, magistrates and lawyers. President FW de Klerk's refusal to rubber-stamp their decision (he opposed seven suggestions) led to a public outcry, but eventually a consensus was reached based on the necessity for independence from government (Orgeret 2006, 63f).

Although a number of policy processes were not yet concluded, and the SABC's organisational structure was only changed profoundly in 1996, legally and structurally the stage had been set by 1993 for the broadcaster to transform itself in order to contribute meaningfully to South Africa's transition and the consolidation of its emerging democracy. As I have shown before (Chapters 2 and 3), academic work on the SABC has focussed on these formal aspects of the transition. Changing the organisation's culture, however, proved to be one of the most persistent challenges.

At the time, almost two thirds of SABC staff were white (Martinis 2000). They came with technical skills and ideological baggage, a combination which made their presence simultaneously indispensable and potentially problematic for those wanting to transform the SABC:

“In 1993 we wanted to avoid a situation where an apartheid institution covered the election. Our assumption was that if we could create the structures, the culture would follow. We initiated a network of new people, progressives, probably 2-300 out of 5000 total staff, concentrating on News.” (David Niddrie, then-external consultant)

This new guard of journalists became central to challenging old habits, values and beliefs. They were, for the most part, 'progressive' but independent-minded professionals sympathetic to the anti-apartheid struggle and welcoming of an inclusive democracy. Some had a history in the alternative print media (such as the Rand Daily Mail) or the ANC's 'Radio Freedom' during apartheid, others had worked for Western media or came from a background of political activism. Most were black; few had broadcasting experience. What they shared was the determination to turn News and Current Affairs into something better, more credible, more democratic. While some had a

pro-ANC agenda, almost all of those I interviewed emphasised the issue of party-political independence. Many talked about the “hope and enthusiasm” they felt about “turning the SABC around” and building a “credible public broadcaster” (R2), seeing themselves as “trend setters” (R84) and “agents of change” who “had to fight” (96). They were confronted not only with propagandist mindsets, but also with a “fat, bloated organisation” and “lethargic newsrooms” (R8) that were often still segregated along racial lines. “I came to the national newsroom in Johannesburg and found only white journalists”, one black newcomer told me. “And when you asked, 'sorry, do you have black journalists?' they would say, 'yeah, we have! they are behind that screen' “ (R21).<sup>42</sup>

Clashes between old and new staff marked the difficult process of integrating not just racial and political differences, but also antagonistic approaches to journalism. Apartheid-era authoritarian journalism ('propaganda') was now being constantly and systematically challenged. The new model was heavily influenced by liberal notions of journalism, based on neutrality, independence, balance and objectivity that were later laid down in the new Ethical Code and Editorial Guidelines (SABC 1994b). One journalist who was hired in the early 90s explained how “we always pressurised [the old guard], debated with them, disagreed with things they wanted us to do. It largely centred around content. We would always say, 'this story is biased!'. Then we changed it to something more objective” (R71).

While there had been an independent media tradition in South Africa in the alternative resistance press, such values, let alone adopting a 4th-estate role, were alien to the

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<sup>42</sup> In some South African provinces, such as KwaZulu-Natal, racial segregation was even more entrenched lasting well into the mid-90's (R28, R46, R54).

SABC's organisational culture and were introduced through training by a wide range of mostly international consultants, predominantly from the UK, Canada, and Australia and the respective public broadcasters. But far from being confined to training workshops, the general discourse changed: Debates about news values and the role of the public broadcaster permeated the newsrooms and day-to-day interactions of journalists. Though such debates were often fierce, they did not necessarily happen in an atmosphere of hostility. Many respondents emphasised the constructive role news management played at the time in facilitating this deliberative process:

“It was hard for the old-guard people to watch a pissy little journalist like myself challenging [our joint bosses] on any of their views. And they didn't understand why the bosses weren't disciplining us when they were challenged. And we had I can't remember how many training sessions about what it means to be a radio journalist and how we must love each other and embrace each other.” (R2)

Mutual engagement and hope on the one side – fears and suspicion on the other. An internal transformation paper from 1994 mentions how “paranoia about losing privileged positions prevents [the] appreciation of [the] potential and possibilities that SABC can offer” (SABC 1994a). This was especially true for old-guard white staff who would see their long-held power base eroded in a similar way the National Party was set to lose its dominant position to the ANC in the political sphere. While some of them attempted to resist real transformation (Sparks 2003), there was no question that the SABC staff and its journalism had to become more representative of the population and politics of the country. One editor who was centrally involved with early transformation efforts explained:

“Some of [the white journalists] said they were not going to participate in giving up the powers that they had, that this was 'ridiculous'. They wanted to be excluded. I said: 'You have a choice. You can either be part of the process and have a say in how much power you lose – or exclude yourself, and somebody else will decide your fate.' And all of them agreed. Many cried openly. And then they decided to

participate.” (R6)

Eventually, those old-guard journalists who most identified with apartheid ideology accepted severance packages and left. The ones who remained either moved sideways into less politically charged departments such as Archives and Research, or they stopped resisting the changes. Some did genuinely welcome the new environment and became supportive of transformation, as many respondents pointed out: “To my surprise there were a lot of good people at the SABC who actually embraced a newsroom culture where we could differ on how we saw issues” (R2).

Black journalists who had been employed by the old SABC found themselves in a slightly different position: Faced with new career opportunities on the back of an immanent large-scale racial transformation, most did not have the same journalistic and technical skills as their white colleagues. “I was a reporter”, said one (R10). “But, to be honest, we were merely translators at the time. We all knew: we don't say things without being cleared.” Having been hired largely for their language skills, conservative outlook and acceptance of white supremacy, they now faced the shame of being seen as collaborators of the regime and many, such as this journalist, felt deeply conflicted and anxious about the political changes: “Things were very difficult for most of us. The ANC was unbanned and when they came back [from exile], they brought their people in. It came as a shock” (R88).

Some of the new-comers recognised this and acknowledged the peculiar tension between old-guard black staff and progressive newcomers:

“Those were the people who had the biggest problem with people like myself because they saw us as a threat: We were all broadly black, and we talked too much, and we had too many views, and it made them very uncomfortable and insecure because ... they were just used to being told what to do and getting on with their jobs.” (R2)

In the early 1990s some old-guard black journalists had already been appointed into middle management positions responsible for hiring young reporters. One respondent who had been active in the Communist Party remembered his job interview:

“I had my Communist Party T-shirt on. And the interviewers were still deeply rooted in the past and wondering whether apartheid was really that bad! And I kept raising issues to the point that I felt unwanted by my own people. They felt threatened by us. We were demanding more: more empowerment, more access, more transparency, more what-what!” (R71)

As a result of this initial transformation period, the newsroom culture changed rapidly and it became clear to the wider public that the SABC was indeed transforming itself from a propaganda machine whose sole purpose in the 1980s it was to support the government's “Total Strategy” into an independent public service broadcaster (Teer-Tomaselli 1995, 578; Du Preez 2010, 253). Old newsroom practices, such as taking gifts from sources or participating in government-sponsored travel, were challenged. There was a push for more professionalism, for fairness and balance in the reporting of stories, for political neutrality, for less reliance on official sources, more self-generated stories, and issue- rather than events-driven coverage. One then-editor remembers her daily mantra to reporters:

“I said to them: 'I don't want you to go to a press conference just because it is a press conference. I want the 'why'! I don't want an official, I want the ordinary person! I don't want 'the minister said', I want: 'what does it matter?!' I want to see black people, white people, coloured people!’” (R6)

These changes created excitement and high morale even among some old-guard

journalists – not just about their new-found professional freedom, but about the way the SABC's public image had begun to change. “Now there was a new culture of initiating your own stories. Everybody was motivated!” , one respondent (R10) exclaimed. And another (R39) said: “People started trusting us. We were not a propaganda machinery of the ruling party any more.”

The very concept of public service broadcasting (cf. Chapter 2) was being embraced not just by the new guard of journalists, but by many members of the remaining old guard. This de-politicisation came to be reflected not just in internal documents and editorial guidelines, but started to seep into the organisational culture.

The 1994 elections were to become a litmus test for the organisation. Much has been written about the election coverage and its success (Baker 1996; Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli 2001; Tleane and Duncan 2003; Teer-Tomaselli 2005; Orgeret 2006). It was also characterised by an obvious and successful effort to shift the focus from personalities to issues. For the first time, SABC staff successfully tried to set an agenda rather than just following that of the political elites. The event has been described as the end of an “era of state subservience, and the entry into the international world of professional level broadcasting” (Teer-Tomaselli 1995, 598), as the SABC's “finest hour” and an “enormous boost” to staff morale (ibid.).

In the same year systematic efforts were made to transform television and radio news production with the help of a special transformation unit (FXI 1999) that embarked on a democratic, consultative process with staff in an attempt to alter the newsroom

structure in a way to continue to insure impartial, independent and fair news and current affairs coverage as demanded by the board.<sup>43</sup> As a result, the old input-output structural dichotomy was softened and the hierarchical structure flattened. These changes were adopted by the board and senior management in 1994 and implemented alongside the newly-developed ethical code (SABC 1994b; FXI 1999). Editorial control, heavily centralised at the top in the past, was deliberately and increasingly shifted from desk editors towards journalists and camera people who were encouraged to take ownership of their stories and make use of increased autonomy. This laid the foundation for the long-term de-politicisation of decision-making processes – and this at a time when the SABC dealt with highly politicised issues on a day-to-day basis.

At the same time, debates around the role of the SABC in the new South Africa continued. Morris (cited in Berger 1999) observed that, while many white journalists were arguing in favour of the watchdog role, black journalists increasingly demanded a more “patriotic” approach to news. My own data suggests that the link between ideology and race is much weaker. While it seems to be the case that white journalists tended to favour a more liberal approach to news, almost every white respondent also expressed commitment to nation-building and transformation without being prompted to do so. Similarly, the call for any form of patriotic journalism (cf. Chapter 2.2) was shared by only a small number of black respondents. Many distanced themselves explicitly from what they described as government-friendly journalism. Newsroom debates were thus not confined to old- vs. new-guard or black vs. white. Neither the old nor the new guard

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43 For detailed accounts of the legislative backdrop to the transformation of the broadcasting sector, in the context of the political multi-party negotiations and the role of the 'Campaign for Independent Public Broadcasting' cf. Martinis (2000), Orgeret (2006), Berger (1999), and Teer-Tomaselli/ Tomaselli (2001). Relevant policy documents of the time are the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act (RSA 1993), the Electronic Communications Act (RSA 2005), the Triple Inquiry Report (IBA 1995), the 1999 Broadcasting Act (RSA 1999).

were homogeneous groups, “but there was a sense that the SABC could be a melting pot” (R2).

While the organisation tried to find a new identity, political elites were watchful of the process, but showed a remarkable degree of restraint when it came to interfering with the SABC's newly-granted editorial independence. Respondents were nearly unanimous in asserting that not just internal, but external politicisation had decreased radically. They often compared this period to earlier and later periods, and always in a favourable way. “ANC politicians had the utmost respect for the media”, said one respondent (R21): “We had a healthy relationship, always at arm's length. There was none of this 'you have to do it this or that way'.” And a colleague who had covered Parliament at the time remembered: “There was no political pressure in the parliamentary office. Mandela was not obsessed with controlling the broadcaster. Members of Parliament would talk openly with us” (R62)”

Respondents had two main explanations for the ANC's hands-off approach to the SABC at the time. One was that ANC politicians felt gratitude towards independent media and had come to relate to them as allies in the political struggle – something grounded in historical fact<sup>44</sup>. The other was that trying to influence the media was simply too low a priority for the political elites at the time given the ongoing political negotiations, the ANC preparing to take on government responsibilities and so on.

Whatever pressure was there seems to have been absorbed quite effectively by senior

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<sup>44</sup> For a discussion on South Africa's alternative/ resistance media under apartheid, cf. Tomaselli and Louw (1991) and Switzer and Adhikari (2000).

management, in particular by the first black CEO, Zwelakhe Sisulu, who was both a respected journalist and a close relative of a number of prominent ANC leaders. Respondents repeatedly commented on how it was precisely this combination of attributes that made him a 'strong' CEO who could ensure the SABC's political independence. This illustrates an important point, namely that in a transitional environment close personal relations between journalists and political elites do not necessarily imply corruption or collusion and can indeed be beneficial for journalistic independence at times. Three examples:

“Sisulu was part of what I call ANC royalty, but he was committed to balanced journalism. He was probably the best black journalist in the country.” (R18)

“When the politicians phoned, Sisulu would say, 'yeah, yeah, ok' - and then forget about it.” (R1)

“He had worked for Mandela when he came out of jail. He knew how to handle the politicians. And he never interfered with our journalism. As Head of Radio News I don't recall getting a call from a Minister complaining about something. If they did complain, then it never came to me.” (R26)

Veteran journalist Allister Sparks writes about an incident in which Sisulu was summoned by then-Deputy President Thabo Mbeki and his Parliamentary Counsel, Essop Pahad, who complained that “the news was negative and unfairly critical of government”. Sisulu chose to ignore the complaints (A. Sparks 2003, 111).

This situation of editorial freedom was not experienced as such everywhere, however. Particularly in KwaZulu-Natal local political dynamics were quite different. Here the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party, historically propped up by the apartheid regime, had long controlled the SABC and was still in power in the province, with the ANC in the opposition. Political violence was rife, and external pressure on the

newsroom, death threats to reporters, and partisan journalism would still be common for years. In much of the rest of the SABC, however, journalists enjoyed a degree of editorial freedom and autonomy unprecedented in the history of the organisation, and it is this that has become the dominant narrative of this period.

Of course, this narrative can be questioned. Respondents, when prompted, acknowledged that SABC reporting was largely supportive of the transitional project under way in the political realm. Ideas such as nation-building or the 'Reconstruction and Development Program' (RDP) which aimed at rectifying the socio-economic imbalances created by the apartheid system have also been described in the literature as having guided SABC programming in the early and mid-1990s (cf. Lara Kantor (then Media Monitoring Project), quoted in Lansner 1995, 3). My own respondents frequently referred to the ideas of the ANC's Freedom Charter (ANC 1955) which in turn was to find reflection in South Africa's new constitution (RSA 1996). Such tacit ideological agreements were generally not perceived as problematic by respondents, or even as noteworthy – quite possibly because they did not conflict with the SABC's new mandate and therefore did not constitute politicisation as I am using the term here. The question needs to be asked, however, whether the near-absence of external politicisation could have been a consequence of journalists' identifying with the political project of the time: the new political dispensation, its aims and values and hopes for the future. One camera man recalled an incident that occurred when he was covering a meeting of African leaders in Senegal, just after 1994:

“Because they put the new South African flag up the wrong way I put up a fight at the hotel with the manager until the High Commissioner was fetched. He had to phone South Africa, and then they changed that flag. And I'm just a camera man! What war was I waging there?! But this was my country! My flag!” (R79)

Many journalists saw themselves as a sort of avant-garde in the process of nation-building, very aware of the fact that the public broadcaster was the first public institution to transform itself, and that this would send signals to the rest of the country<sup>45</sup>. Without being pressured to do so, they coalesced around values such as diversity, reconciliation, freedom and non-racialism – values that were also explicitly embraced by the ANC and the new government. “We were talking the same language as the politicians, almost reading from the same book”, said one respondent (R46). And another (R21) added: “It was like something else was driving us. It was bigger than the SABC, bigger than the ANC.”

Did this make journalists less critical than they would otherwise have been? Less neutral than the liberal journalism paradigm would demand of them? Quite possibly so. There was a wide-spread view that the ANC had to be given a chance. This relative lack of critical engagement with the ANC could be seen as a form of bottom-up politicisation, but was really negligible in the larger context of de-politicisation that prevailed in this period following the demise of apartheid. Some new-guard journalists reflected critically on this:

“News-makers were at times uncomfortable with all my probing and the hard questions I posed to them. But ANC politicians were much better because they were new and didn't yet have issues to answer for. With the ANC it was just 'what's your vision for the country?'" (R96)

We were just not very critical in our reporting. That happened only later, when the honeymoon was over, when people started asking critical questions about our economic policies and so on.” (R105)

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45 A similar dynamic has been described for the BBC in its early days under Reith for whom public broadcasting was key to social integration and the “development of an inclusive, participatory and enlightened democracy” (Born 2005, 28).

It was this gradual change towards the late 1990s, coinciding with the rise to the Presidency of Thabo Mbeki, that signalled a new phase in the politicisation of the SABC. Years later, it would cause some journalists to refer to the first period as a 'Prague Spring', a time with an almost mythological quality for the organisation that has been described in similar ways by those who studied post-communist media in Eastern Europe (Jakubowicz 1998, 2002; Price and Raboy 2003; Vartanova and Zassoursky 2003).

There is no other period in the post-apartheid history of the SABC with such a consistent dominant narrative across large parts of the organisation. After the initial transition period an organisational culture emerged that was distinct from anything the SABC had seen before. De-politicisation was radical, brought about mainly through inhibitors such as new legal safeguards, editorial policies, and a strong board and CEO that protected journalists and discouraged external (and internal) top-down politicisation. Politicisation was further inhibited by unprecedented degrees of public scrutiny (political parties, local and international media) due to the high political stakes during the transition period, the professionalisation of the SABC's journalism and a new-guard of independent-minded professionals intent on transforming the organisation from a state broadcaster into an independent public service broadcaster. This change was embraced by many of the remaining old-guard staff and actively supported by the Board and news management who created space for debate on political and journalistic issues. This in turn altered the nature of internal discourse which became more open, inclusive and accepting of difference, less racialised and much more critical (towards authority).

Because discourse wasn't dominated by a particular political agenda (i.e. not narrowly politicised), external political conflict and politicised issues could be 'metabolised' within the organisation – a process not unlike the ongoing inter-party negotiations outside. The government of national unity, just as the post-transition SABC, consisted largely of those broadly committed to change and transformation. Relations between politicians and SABC journalists were characterised largely by mutual respect and the implicit assumption of an 'alliance for nation-building' – a situation reminiscent of the BBC in its early days (cf. Born 2005, 34).

While the ANC had to come to terms with the transition from liberation movement to political party in charge of governing the country, the SABC had to emerge from its state-controlled past and come to terms with its new role as public broadcaster. As both evolved in their own way, they also *co-evolved* to the extent that these developments were contingent upon one another, or at least closely linked. Without political commitments to media freedom and provisions for a statutorily independent SABC, the broadcaster's initial transformation would have been impossible and it would likely have met the same fate as most former state broadcasters in Eastern Europe and Africa (cf. Chapter 2). Simultaneously, the SABC was central to communicating the process and outcomes of the negotiated settlement and this played a significant role in the implementation of democracy – namely around the first democratic elections, the avoidance of a civil war, and the extensive coverage of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings.

Neither the old nor the new political elites were used to a public broadcaster that aimed

to be truly independent, neutral, balanced and potentially critical. While the old apartheid elites lost their disproportionate hold on political power, the ANC government was soon to be faced with, and had to learn to negotiate, a new level of public scrutiny.

## **5.2 Period II: 'Disillusionment' (1997-2000)**

This second period in the SABC's post-apartheid politicisation brought with it the realisation for journalists that the radical de-politicisation following the initial transformation was not going to last. While legal safeguards remained in place, there was a rise in top-down politicisation and a significant shift in the organisational culture that reversed a number of gains made only a few years earlier.

According to most respondents it was around 1997, shortly before and around the second democratic elections in 1999, that the tide turned. Having garnered 66.35% of the votes, the ANC confirmed its overwhelming majority in the elections (Electoral Commission of South Africa n.d.). With the final Constitution adopted in 1996 (RSA 1996), the subsequent end of the Government of National Unity and the marked decline of electoral support for the National Party, the ANC was now firmly established in power with little political opposition to fear in Parliament. Nelson Mandela made way for Thabo Mbeki as President of the country.

For the ANC, being now solely in charge of government came with the responsibility of transforming the country and addressing the political, socio-economic and cultural legacy of apartheid. Its popular support was built on the hopes and expectations of the impoverished black population for a better life: for housing, sanitation, education, health care (Beinart 2001). This population group also forms the majority of the SABC's audience, and the majority of those depending exclusively on the public broadcaster (IBA 1995; SABC 2004a) which puts the SABC in a position of considerable power to influence popular perceptions of government performance and, in turn, a large part of ANC voters (cf. Chapter 3).

In 1996 government adopted a new neo-liberal macro-economic strategy (GEAR) that met with unusually fierce criticism by the ANC's allies in the Tripartite Alliance: the Communist Party and COSATU. What many respondents described as the 'honeymoon period', associated with rainbow nation rhetoric, Mandela's inclusive approach and shared hopes for a swift transformation, was drawing to a close. According to many of those interviewed, journalists, too, become increasingly critical, including SABC journalists.

Government and the ANC, on the other hand, were dissatisfied with the SABC's political coverage (Myburgh 2006). Soon, journalists saw a growing number of directives by managers that they understood to be politically motivated, i.e. internal top-down politicisation. They almost invariably associated this with the rise of Thabo Mbeki to the Presidency, and the rise of a former labour correspondent, Snuki Zikalala, a highly

politicised individual, to the senior editorial ranks of the SABC:

“As the ANC started taking its place in the political landscape, they started dealing with budgets, spending money, wasting money, and journalists became more critical. That's when the pressure started.” (R46)

“From 1999, when Mandela retired to when Mbeki took over, the whole thing changed. Mbeki was a different animal.” (R26)

“Things were heating up. It manifested for us as simply decrees. Like some press release arrived that we did not think was interesting, but we would have to cover it because it was some Minister appearing at some meeting. There was nothing newsworthy about it.” (R35)

In KwaZulu-Natal with its distinct political dynamics between ANC and IFP a veteran editor recounts falling out of favour with the local ANC when, after having initially freed the newsroom from the IFP's stranglehold and introduced fair coverage of all parties, she would not go on to favour the ANC over the IFP:

“I think the ANC had initially felt that I was pro-ANC, but now I was being 'anti-ANC' because I wasn't giving them 'enough' airtime. But I wasn't going to keel over like people had done for the IFP. That's my theory why I was very popular with them in the beginning, but I am not so popular any more.” (R54)

This is not an isolated experience, but one shared by a number of independent-minded or 'progressive' journalists, many of whom had long-standing sympathies for the ANC or had even been actively involved in the liberation struggle or the resistance press. Veteran journalist Allister Sparks falls into the latter category. When taking over as Editor of TV News and Current affairs in 1997, he found the newsroom had retained little of the 1994 election spirit and put this down to growing rivalry between different factions within the SABC who were each trying to please the ruling political elite (A. Sparks 2003), i.e. a form of bottom-up politicisation among some senior editors. This was, however, a gradual process that needs unpacking.

At the time, a number of unrelated factors converged to result in a feeling widely shared among those interviewed that there was a move to “centralise power” (R1) and that the SABC as an organisation was becoming increasingly politicised. One of these factors was the corporatisation of the SABC into a public company with the State as sole shareholder (RSA 1999). Following the lead of the BBC, the broadcaster was restructured into two separate operational entities: public broadcasting service and public commercial broadcasting service (SABC 2001; Born 2005). This restructuring was partially driven by the realization that the broadcaster was caught between its public service mandate and its need for commercial viability. In 1996 external consultants were brought in to suggest ways for cutting costs, such as the introduction of bi-media. It has been argued that “there is clear evidence that [subsequent restructuring] disabled the public mandate in relation to television” (Tleane and Duncan 2003, 61).

I am not going to dwell on these structural changes here as they are well documented elsewhere (e.g. Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli 2001; Tleane and Duncan 2003; Orgeret 2006; Ngwenya 2015). What matters in relation to the SABC's politicisation are their largely unintended consequences. Similarly to what Born (2005) has described for the BBC, one such consequence was the erosion of only recently established relatively flat newsroom hierarchies and democratic decision-making processes and their replacement with a new centralised, hierarchical structure, including some additional layers of editorial control. As a result, lines of authority became blurred (FXI 1999). Both consequences served as enablers for more politicised decision-making processes. Respondents felt that radio especially suffered in the process. Another consequence was the widespread sense of “uncertainty, insecurity and cynicism” that resulted from the

making redundant of 1400 of the 4500 employees (OSF Media Programme 2007). Bi-media became later seen as a failure and was abandoned for much the same reasons that the BBC backtracked on it under Greg Dyke who had realised that moving “away from editorial autonomy towards anxious hierarchies” had resulted in “editorial inhibitions” detrimental to the organisation (Born 2005, 458). However, while at the BBC, bi-media marked a change in structure in order to increase efficiency, at the SABC, bi-media quickly became synonymous with top-down authoritarian management and increased politicisation. This is a typical assessment by a respondent: “There was no consultation process that I recall. The official rhetoric was cost-cutting. But it was a tool for centralising power and control” (R21).

The ANC government's political trajectory and the SABC's organisational restructuring provided the context for a shift in the level of the SABC's politicisation. The SABC's second board, appointed in 1996, had much less media experience among its members than the previous one (A. Sparks 2003). In 1998 Zwelakhe Sisulu resigned as CEO and Snuki Zikalala, described as an ANC loyalist and former commander of MK (Du Preez 2010), was appointed as Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Radio News (*ibid.*) and put in charge of bi-media, a post which afforded him the opportunity to assign both television and radio reporters to cover specific stories. This is how his (black, progressive) then-line manager explained this development:

“Snuki was basically playing the race card. He alleged that Sisulu had been bringing in all these white people. Snuki was just a labour reporter at the time and was then appointed as deputy to myself. He was not very senior in the ANC<sup>46</sup>, but he is very talkative and insistent, and he had a line to Mbeki.” (R26)

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<sup>46</sup> Zikalala was at the time a member of the ANC, but denied being a political appointee (Wanneburg 2005). It needs to be noted, however, that, given South Africa's history, mere ANC membership of journalists is much more widespread and acceptable than in established democracies such as the UK or Germany and not necessarily an indicator of partisan journalism.

This incident signalled a re-emergence of race in the internal discourse as something that carried political bargaining power. Instead of Sisulu's well-respected and competent deputy (Govan Reddy), a member of the old black guard (Rev. Hawu Mbatha), perceived by many respondents as 'weak', passive and incompetent, was appointed as new CEO. It is widely understood that Reddy was bypassed because he is an Indian South African, not black. This came at a time when President Thabo Mbeki actively pushed for his brand of 'black consciousness' called "African Renaissance" as well as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and Affirmative Action; concepts that to some extent eclipsed Mandela's inclusive rhetoric of racial reconciliation (Chan 2011). The SABC adopted these ideas enthusiastically in its annual report: "As an African broadcaster, the SABC is committed to the concept of an African Renaissance ... [the SABC] has thrown the considerable weight of its programmes and infrastructure into developing this African dream" (SABC 2001).

While racial transformation can be justified as historically necessary and appropriate, many of those interviewed felt it was used at the time as a way to silence critical voices – black and white alike – by appointing loyal old-guard (rather than new-guard) black journalists to middle management who were less likely to resist top-down politicisation and would stifle open debate and the creativity of subordinates. The lack of experience and professionalism apparent on the level of the board and the CEO was thus replicated within the 'editorial core'. As a consequence of these enabling factors, the SABC, according to many respondents, became increasingly susceptible to external and internal politicisation.

“Mbatha didn't have political clout, so he had to prove himself to the ANC in a way Zwelakhe Sisulu didn't have to. He was getting a lot of pressure from government. This is how political interference was allowed to creep in.” (R105)

The following years saw a dramatic rise in internal conflicts at senior management level that signalled, for all its destructiveness, also the presence of considerable resistance towards re-politicisation of News and Current Affairs. “Management was changing quite radically”, explained one respondent (R8). “People were shafting each other. It was as if there was no radar on the ship. The whole organisation was in a sort of a turmoil.”

Staff morale declined, and eventually a number of respected and independent-minded 'new-guard' journalists left the organisation, among them (black) Head of Radio News, Barney Mthombothi, and (white, former anti-apartheid) investigative journalist Max du Preez. The latter's dismissal sparked a public outcry because of its “racial and political overtones” (A. Sparks 2003, 121). Du Preez himself claims that Zikalala had pushed for his dismissal on racial grounds telling senior black journalists “that it was 'symbolically important' for the 'Africanisation of the SABC' to 'crush' the most senior white journalist at the corporation 'as an example' to other whites” (Du Preez 2010, 256f). While this was perhaps the most well-documented case, respondents felt that racial transformation was being used as a pretext for the authoritarian management style used by Zikalala to drive forward Mbeki's political agenda. “I have seen him destroy the careers of black people as well, anyone, if you are a threat”, said one respondent (R1) echoing the views of many others.

Increasingly, journalists felt intimidated. Not only did Zikalala openly adopt and promote Mbeki's Africanist agenda, it appears he also mimicked to some extent the

President's Stalinist and paranoid tendencies (Gevisser 2007).

“Mbeki's entire ideological approach lent itself to the re-establishment of highly hierarchical and, crucially, non-accountable institutions. You could argue that Snuki's initiative was to turn the SABC into a presidential broadcaster rather than a state broadcaster.” (interview David Niddrie, former consultant, SACP)

In their empirical study of this period, Tleane and Duncan (2003, 108) concluded that at the time “[m]any journalists were scared to raise critical questions... They feared political suppression”. Staff became increasingly divided, and a culture of suspicion and distrust took hold. One respondent was struck by how the language in the newsroom changed, with some journalists referring to each other as 'chief' and 'comrade' (R21) to signal a (real or fabricated) historic association with the liberation movement. Many commented that Zikalala proceeded to built a power base secured by a system of personal loyalties that further eroded professional relationships and trust:

“There were people who phoned him at night to tell him what was happening at our office. And if you didn't do that, then you didn't belong to his camp.”

Q: Are you saying that people were spying on their colleagues?

“Yeah. [Imitating Zikalala's voice:] 'You must tell me what is happening because I am right up there, I can't see everything that is happening! You!! Must tell me! Why don't you phone me?’” (R10)

A number of respondents alleged that information of this nature was not only collected, but also used against individuals who were perceived to be unreliable or disloyal:

“He used to say [imitating Zikalala's voice]: 'We have intelligence! We have intelligence!' - which was basically people reporting on you. So people would start asking themselves who else was listening and who was gonna tell what. It was like East Germany in the old days! It's how people made careers. You got rewarded for these things” (R1).

Rewards for those who provided “intelligence” allegedly included privileges such as journalists being sent on trips to foreign countries to cover news stories, or a car

allowance (R49, R10). Along with threats and pressure, this is a form of internal top-down politicisation.

External top-down politicisation also became a concern. Interviewees made frequent reference to the ANC's practice of 'cadre-deployment' (Chipkin 2012) and suspected that Zikalala himself, as well as some of those associated with him, were, in fact, deployed ANC cadres sent to implement the ANC's, government's, or even Mbeki's political agenda. This is worth discussing in some more detail, especially as Ngwenya's recent SABC study claims cadre deployment under Mbeki as being causal to fundamentally altering the "SABC's operating environment by creating a trend of censorship" (Ngwenya 2015, 257). I am not convinced by the evidence presented (respondents' perception and a union official's opinion) and think that this view oversimplifies the politicisation process at the time by, at best, taking developments on senior-management level to be representative of the whole organisation, and by underestimating individual agency on all levels. What can we say about cadre deployment in this era?

Firstly, the ANC did not at the time have a formal policy of cadre-deployment (Chipkin 2012), although this has been a long-standing and widely accepted practice and one of the ways the ANC has historically chosen to address the challenges of transformation and advance its agenda (cf., for instance, ANC 1985). There is nothing illegal about it, even though it has been widely criticised for its potential to be abused for personal political or economic gain. Secondly, when asked directly in 2011, then ANC spokesperson Jessie Duarte denied that any cadre deployment had ever taken place at

the SABC (interview 2011). Yet thirdly, there was certainly a widespread *perception* among my respondents as well that cadre deployment was a reality. A small number of journalists even referred to themselves as 'deployed cadres', while generally insisting this be kept off the record. What can be firmly established, then, is this: According to an ANC Strategies and Tactics document adopted by the party's 50<sup>th</sup> National Conference in 1997, cadre-deployment was seen as something that is both desirable and necessary to advance the political transformation of the country. Specifically, delegates called for “a cadre policy ensuring that the ANC plays a leading role in all centres of power” (ANC 1997), which includes the media as one of the “primary centres of power in any social formation” (ibid.). There was therefore a clear *intent* on the part of the ANC to influence media organisations in this way – whether formal cadre-deployment to the SABC did, in fact, happen or not. With intention so clearly stated and politicised individuals in positions of power at the SABC who openly displayed their loyalty to the ANC government, the vast majority of respondents attributed much of what was going on in this period to political interference from outside. In this, I agree with Ngwenya (2015).

Importantly, however, journalists reacted to this situation in different ways. As mentioned earlier, a number of senior, respected and independent-minded journalists, black and white, left after an initial period of conflictual engagement, i.e. resistance towards politicisation – among them Joe Thloloe, Allister Sparks, Max du Preez, Sarah Crowe and Barney Mthomboti.

“Then a lot of people from the old SABC were appointed who didn't have any news experience. Some were managers of the so-called Bantu radio stations and benefited from Affirmative Action. And that's the crowd that has prevailed.” (R20)

The remaining, now increasingly promoted, black old-guard (as well as the white old-

guard) generally fell into line with the new authoritarian culture familiar to them from the apartheid SABC, and not for ideological reasons, as many respondents alleged: “They are essentially unemployable elsewhere. So they needed to stay in the system! And they will! They will retire there. They know the game, and they can play it really, really well” (R2).

It is this partial regression to an apartheid-era organisational culture of quiescence in the face of power that laid the foundation for the rise in anticipatory politicisation and falling levels of resistance that would mark later periods. Berger argues that at the time “the critical role of the public broadcaster qua institution became not just subordinated to its other roles, but increasingly defunct” (Berger 1999, 20). The SABC had passed the “point of optimum transformation of the corporation’s journalistic role... [and had moved] into terrain which narrowed its potential democratic functions” (ibid.). Power battles among managers had largely replaced the constructive debates around news values and the SABC's role in society, and management was perceived to be interfering unduly with news operations. This was in direct contradiction to at least the spirit of the editorial code, as reaffirmed by the board and management towards the end of this period, which stipulated that editorial decisions rest with editorial staff (SABC 2001, 47). According to many respondents, morale suffered and quality standards dropped – a claim which can not easily be validated because no relevant data is available. However, staying with the main method of this study which aims to understand dynamics at the SABC through the subjective experience of respondents, it is safe to say that in the eyes of SABC journalists themselves, the broadcaster's credibility, painfully built up in the early 1990s, was now seriously tainted.

Compared to the previous 1993-1997 period, the period of “Disillusionment” was therefore marked by a growing degree of politicisation against the backdrop of a system of one-party dominance with the ANC firmly in charge of government, but increasingly criticised, especially around economic policy. This marked both a shift in the political environment and in the nature of politicised issues. Editorial space and journalists' autonomy started shrinking in the face of increased internal and external top-down politicisation. Increased political pressure was generally passed on, and sometimes directly brought about, by some senior editors who either lacked the professional skill, political clout, or willingness to protect the SABC's editorial independence and instead actively tried to build their own power base in the organisation (politicisation of individuals). In a general climate of uncertainty caused by structural changes such as the move to bi-media, as well as the pressures of commercialisation, an increasingly authoritarian management culture was able to take root, albeit to a much lesser degree than pre-1993 (politicisation of decision-making processes).

The effect on journalistic practice and output included a rise in the coverage of non-stories, frequent interference by senior news management in day-to-day news decisions and a toleration of partisan journalism where this was seen as politically convenient. Discourse became increasingly politicised, firstly by its re-racialisation shrouded in Thabo Mbeki's Africanist rhetoric, secondly by the diminished space for open debate around journalistic values and the role of the SABC in the new South Africa. Newsrooms were now less democratic, more authoritarian, more centralised, more paranoid, and consequently less resilient in the face of growing political pressure.

Following the de-politicisation of the early 1990s, the re-politicisation of this period was driven by a number of politicised individual (chiefly Zikalala), enabled by a relatively weak Board and CEO, and by organisational restructuring that was largely following international trends. In terms of the classification outlined in Fig.1, the dominant driver was internal top-down politicisation paired with organisational uncertainty as the main enabler. It must be stressed, however, that the level of politicisation came nowhere near that of the apartheid-era SABC. The structural inhibitors put in place during the transition period were still in place: Media freedom was enshrined in the constitution and editorial independence protected by SABC policies and national law. To the extent that some editors (mostly new-guard) resisted politicisation, coverage remained reasonably independent. Yet while there were no raids on newsrooms, open censorship by politicians, or death threats, the political climate had changed and the shift in the level of politicisation was experienced as significant throughout the organisation.

Simultaneously, this development, perhaps because of its at times crude manifestations, was met with strong criticism from outside the SABC (Tleane and Duncan 2003). South African society as well as parts within the ruling party were not yet prepared to give up on the idea of a viable public broadcaster – and neither was Parliament.

## **5.3 Period III: 'Attempted Professionalisation' (2000-2004)**

When in 1999 the term of the second board neared its end, Parliamentarians opted for radical change by deciding to keep only two serving board members on the new board (SABC 2001). A consultancy report commissioned by the new chair person, Vincent Maphai, heavily criticised the existing top management for recruiting practices based on patronage and nepotism (Gemini Consulting 2000). Maphai himself later pointed out that the board took over at a time when top executives had resigned amid high-profile corruption cases, senior management was "under siege and insecure", morale was "tremendously low" and there was "an avalanche of negative media coverage" (Staff reporter 2000).

In order to reverse this, the board attempted to professionalise the SABC's journalism. Once again, journalists saw their management change drastically. In March 2000 former editor Barney Mthombathi rejoined the SABC as Head of News (at the time the most senior editorial position in the News and Current Affairs Division), brought back by Maphai against the explicit wishes of government (interview with Mthombathi). Then, in 2001, a new CEO was appointed: Peter Matlare, a business man with an extensive broadcasting background but, in the view of the majority of respondents, little political clout with the ANC. Shortly afterwards, three of the most senior editors – Snuki Zikalala, Phil Molefe and Themba Mthembu – were sidelined (Petros, Molebeledi, and Mvoko 2001). One editor remembers a meeting in which the new CEO confronted Zikalala about the state of the SABC:

“Matlare said to him: 'You were supposed to improve the quality of news and cut costs. Costs have gone up, quality has gone down. How do you explain it?' And we were all sitting there thinking, 'yeah, how do you explain that!'" (R54)

Eventually, Zikalala left to become the spokesperson of the Minister of Labour. Internal top-down politicisation reduced considerably, but it also became apparent that it would take time for the organisational culture to recover. Replacing senior editors was in itself no guarantee for substantial change of attitudes, beliefs, or newsroom practices. Respondents remember that there was still a widespread perception among staff that the SABC was editorially close to government, a view reinforced by the loss of independent-minded journalists in the previous phase. And this perception was not entirely inaccurate as external politicisation persisted:

The 2002 elections in neighbouring Zimbabwe – a highly politicised issue in South African politics because of Mbeki's role as a mediator there – were to become the test for the new leadership's editorial independence. Public scrutiny was set to work as an inhibitor to politicisation: Since 1998 the SABC English evening news had been facing competition from free-to-air private television station e.TV, and many viewers, particularly those in urban areas, were able to compare the quality of SABC's and e.TV's election coverage (City Press 2012). Inside the SABC fierce debate erupted between those in favour of portraying the Zimbabwean elections in a positive and peaceful light, as was in the interest of the South African government, and those who considered themselves independent observers mindful of a possible migration of viewers to e.TV. Many respondents suspected that Matlare himself was deeply conflicted about this – and yet the outcome was unambiguous:

“The elections were just so appallingly covered. There were rallies, election violence, things happened – none of this was covered! All we had was the South African election monitors telling us that the private media was biased against them. We had Ministers. We had nothing. Every night: nothing. There was terrible violence on both sides – we had one picture of a bloke with a flag walking down the streets. On his own. We lost a quarter of a million viewers. It is just a disgrace.”  
(R1)

As for this respondent, managerial interference in the coverage caused considerable frustration among reporters and editors in general and at the English bulletin desk in particular. After the elections, a delegation from the security cluster of government, including the Ministers of Intelligence and Safety and Security, praised SABC management and staff (especially Deputy Head of News, Mathatha Tsedu) for having covered the Zimbabwean elections in a “sensitive” way – as was asked of them (Kadalie 2003). A television editor remembered:

“And no one said a word. Not a word. ... And if you think you can treat journalists like that, you can tell them to their faces that 'we took one of your people [Tsedu] and we told them to be a good boy and sit in the corner and he did' – what is that?!”  
(R1)

It was a serious set-back for the attempts to building credibility by giving power to independent professionals. Because of the persistent internal politicisation, Mthombothi resigned shortly after the elections as Head of News. He was quoted in the media saying that “I discovered what they were looking for was a poodle. I am not four-legged” (Bloom 2005). Mathatha Tsedu, too, resigned soon after (Banda and Michaels 2002; Staff reporter 2002, 2003b). In hindsight, Mthombothi identified a range of highly politicised issues (cf. 'untouchable topics' discussed in Chapter 4) that he felt he was pressurised to not cover professionally at the time. However, unlike in the case of the Zimbabwean elections, there was space for (successful) resistance:

“The first issue we fought about was the Arms Deal<sup>47</sup>. Matlare said to me, 'why do you call it a R50 billion deal when the Minister says it's R30 billion? Sometimes he would call and say, 'why are you guys running opposition leader Tony Leon?' - 'Why not?', I said? 'It's a story!' Then we had a fight about the extension of Chris Bishop's contract [an outspoken editor at the English Desk] because there were lots of people in government who didn't like him because he was all about quality and not politically convenient stories. He had been fired from the public broadcaster in Botswana because of political interference, and I thought that was the right guy to have!” (Mthombothi)

Another sensitive issues was an alleged conspiracy/ coup plot against Mbeki that Mthombothi refused to cover because it was based on unproven allegations by an anonymous source he could not verify:

“Matlare said to me that government is complaining about me because of that. I said, 'that's nonsense! It's not a story, it's just hearsay!' We eventually had to run it when [Safety and Security Minister] Steve Tshwete named people in our studio, on air. Then it became a political hot potato and everybody went for cover.” (Mthombothi)<sup>48</sup>

A similarly highly politicised issue linked to Mbeki's public and widely criticised AIDS denialism (Gevisser 2007) was the link between HIV and AIDS. However, despite external pressure, SABC journalists did not keep quiet on this:

“I said to our political reporters: 'When you get a Minister at a press conference, ask them one simple question: Does HIV cause AIDS? Yes or no?' None of the Ministers wanted to respond to that question. But we had good people, journalists who tried and who were really keen to be seen doing the right thing.” (Mthombothi)

The point here is two-fold: Firstly, the external top-down pressure that had crept in in the late 1990s persisted. But secondly, and more importantly, SABC journalists felt safe

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47 The South African Arms Deal refers to the ANC government procuring military equipment at an estimated cost of R47.4bn (though this figure is disputed) – a deal that has haunted South African politics ever since because of repeated and substantial allegations of the involvement of senior politicians in corruption (Holden and Van Vuuren 2011).

48 These coup allegations turned out to have no merit. For a detailed discussion cf. Gevisser (2007) and Plaut/ Holden (2012).

enough now and were able to mount successfully some resistance to this in an attempt to keep interrogating issues they perceived to be in the public interest.

After Mthombothi's departure, perhaps the most dramatic act of resistance at the time, his position remained vacant for almost two years. This meant that the two editors immediately accountable to him – the newly appointed Head of TV News, Jimi Matthews, and Head of Radio News, Pippa Green – were going to be in the exceptional position of enjoying a high degree of independence while having to report only to the CEO who originally hired them (Matlare). But it also meant they would rely on him alone for warding off political pressure from outside the organisation. According to one respondent, on taking up the position, Jimi Matthews was promised by the CEO that he would be “protected from any political interference”, that Matlare would not “prescribe” to him and that his task was “to turn the place around in an editorial sense” because it was “in a mess.” (R49)

The first challenge was a serious shortage of professional skills, already admitted before Parliament by the chair person of the SABC's Board in 2000 ('SABC Board Six Months Review' 2000). Matthews also found that, at television in particular, a non-questioning culture still persisted within the newsroom, authoritarian and intolerant of opposing views.

“I arrived in an organisation where the boss's word was not challenged – and that went at every level. If you reported to a junior manager you would never challenge the junior manager. And the junior manager would never challenge the one he reports to.” (R49)

While this seems to have been the dominant attitude<sup>49</sup> there were still exceptions. In

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49 This was also observed by myself as an intern at SABC TV News in Johannesburg in December 2004.

general, internal debate was more common in radio than in television newsrooms. In TV, the English bulletin desk (the output desk in charge of the national English TV news) was singled out by a number of respondents for being either fiercely independent and professional, or racist and anti-transformation (and sometimes even both). Indeed it seems that the English desk became the centre of a storm of conflicting ideologies and, at times, mutually exclusive approaches to news, journalism and the SABC's role in general.

In the perception of most respondents, both the Head of TV News and bulletin editors were determined to regain credibility, compete successfully against e.TV news and produce a professional bulletin that was now centred more around liberal news values, rather than developmental journalism (cf. Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion). This strategy proved to be commercially successful with the SABC managing to even generate a profit (SABC 2004a). Most respondents remembered this as a dynamic period with increased editorial freedom:

“It was a period of vibrancy. That was quite a free period with a lot of space to do stuff.” (R81)

“Jimi Matthews and Pippa Green were probably the best team of editors we have ever had; it was one of the few times when we were setting the agenda, and not just through some of our current affairs programmes.” (R47)

In the newsroom, so-called 'developmental stories' (often centred around government initiatives and social upliftment and previously promoted by Zikalala) would only be aired if they were seen to be relevant and appealing to a national audience, if they were well packaged and presented – not for the sake of being developmental stories. Reporters were encouraged to critically question the statements of politicians and

public officials. And parliamentary committee meetings or ANC press conferences would only be the focus of news stories if whatever was discussed there was indeed newsworthy (i.e. “just because the ANC calls a press conference that does not mean it is news” (R49)). In other words, the editorial attempted to reclaim the power of defining the news agenda – and was given sufficient freedom to do so by top management. Controversial as it was, this turn of events unleashed unused energy and led to a more dynamic newsroom culture.

“We changed the bulletin, redesigned stuff, put in graphics and different ways of explaining stories to people. It was more professional [than in previous years]. People used to work hard on good stories because they knew they would get on air.” (R1)

However, not everybody shared this enthusiasm. It emerged from the interviews that two groups of staff began to feel alienated during this period: (1) those who lacked professional skills to tell and produce stories that met the new quality standards; (2) black journalists with Africanist views and, to a lesser extent, some old-guard white journalists who similarly did not share common ideological ground with the English desk and news management at the time. Those who preferred a more harmonious relationship between the public broadcaster and government – either for reasons of professional 'habit' linked to the old SABC culture, or for reasons linked to ideological agreement with the Africanist project of the Mbeki government, were estranged by the emergence of a more liberal news culture which they perceived as centred around “government-bashing”, disrespectful towards authority, perhaps even 'un-African', and generally destructive. One old-guard black reporter explains:

“My problem has always been with the English desk: ... Whatever was done by the new government, there was nothing good in it. And I didn't want to assist people who wanted to break down government! At times, I would feel strongly about a story involving the President, that we should be leading the bulletin with it. But the

English desk would see it as 'one of those government stories' they were not interested in. They'd drop it down to the second slot. And this became increasingly so when Jimi Matthews came in because he wanted to regain credibility. But will treating the President with disrespect, or the ruling party, or government, make them regain credibility? In the eyes of whom? The opposition?!" (R10)

What underlies these opposing news values are indeed different approaches to journalism in terms of the media's engagement with government: The English desk and news management at the time prioritised quality and newsworthiness. Its critics tended to subscribe to developmental journalism putting more weight on factors such as respect for political leaders and positive stories, especially around development issues. It must, however, be noted that I have encountered extremely few, if any, journalists at the SABC who would align themselves purely with the values of liberal journalism. Not one of those interviewed argued against covering developmental issues in a country with such an obvious history of oppression and inequality; or against the importance of the SABC's role in nation-building, or against non-racialism; similarly, even those critical of, or openly opposed to, liberal journalism kept stressing the importance of independent reporting (though their professional practice may not reflect this). These value conflicts therefore boiled down to the *quality* of developmental stories, the *way* interviews were being conducted, the *degree* of importance given to officials or events as opposed to issues, as well as to the *extent* to which SABC journalists would define the news agenda as opposed to taking their cue from public figures. In contrast to the early 1990s when such conflicting views discussed openly and vigorously, and with a view to re-defining the SABC's organisational culture, the space for constructive and inclusive debate, though slowly opening up again, was still quite diminished.

In the wider political environment, this was paralleled by a shift of political discourse: issues such as integration, reconciliation, diversity and non-racialism lost prominence in the post-Mandela, post-Truth Commission era and gave way to the kind of politicised issues mentioned earlier. Interestingly, despite this apparent lack of debate on the ideological level, respondents from various backgrounds conceded that debate among editors and reporters was once again quite vigorous when it came to day-to-day news decisions. After years of uncertainty, there were now clear expectations and standards which journalists were expected to meet – and which they were allowed to question. This was conceded even by those with different ideological viewpoints:

“That English desk wouldn't take any nonsense. If you came up with a story you had to convince them why you thought this was a great story. But I could also fight with them and say: “This is my script, and what you have put in here is not acceptable!” (R10)

Whether this open engagement would last, however, was yet to be seen. Cynicism had started to set in which proved to be an additional obstacle for those attempting to address the legacy of the previous period of “Disillusionment”<sup>50</sup>. One anecdote, related by three different respondents (R1, R10, R49), illustrates this: When Green and Matthews visited the SABC's bureaus in the provinces they reportedly told journalists that they were now “free”, that their stories would be “based purely on editorial criteria” and that they were “not beholden to any political party”. After having listened to this “grand speech about journalism and democracy” one journalist apparently stood up and said:

“Why should we listen to you? In two or three years time you will be gone and we will still be here. We've heard these speeches before. Every time there is a new person in your position you come with new ideas of how we are going to change the SABC and two or three years later you are gone!” (R49)

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<sup>50</sup> This growing cynicism and change fatigue is another factor that prepared the ground for increased levels of anticipatory politicisation in later periods.

Asked about political pressure at the time, respondents' accounts showed a pattern: Reporters and editors at the lower levels of the hierarchy generally did not feel that their work was being unduly interfered with, or that there was a lot of pressure on the SABC. Editors on the influential English bulletin desk and in senior news management, however, recounted a number of such instances with one senior editor described the level of political pressure as "incredible" (R49). It is evident that in some instances, attempts at political interference succeeded and political pressure would be passed on to newsrooms. But the overwhelming perception was that

"Matthews was pretty low-key, never really got in anybody's way. ... But at the end of the day there was always this perception that he can expect a call from government at any time." (R1)

In 2004, a new editorial policy came into effect (SABC 2004b, the revised code of 1993) and established the principle of "voluntary upward referral" in an attempt to control decision-making processes around politicised issues. Many respondents voiced concern over the potential misuse of this policy for the purpose of politicisation. They felt that this clause in particular impacted negatively on journalists' autonomy:

"Even when specific editorial advice is not asked for, programmes or news items that are controversial, or likely to have an extraordinary impact, should be reported in advance to the senior news and programming executives. They, in turn, may decide to notify top management. Should a programme producer or editor not refer an issue upward to their supervisor next in the line function, that programme producer or commissioning editor would be held responsible for the editorial decision so made." (SABC 2004b, 6)

Simultaneously, the new policy conferred editor-in-chief status on the CEO of the corporation, thus allowing the CEO the final say in potentially all editorial decisions and holding the CEO ultimately responsible for what goes on air. Advocates of the new policy

argued that what was standard practice at the BBC where the Director General was also editor-in-chief would be similarly appropriate at the SABC. Indeed it may be no coincidence that the SABC adopted this provision in the same year BBC Director-General Greg Dyke was forced to resign over the Kelly Affair which was seen as an editor-in-chief taking responsibility for the protection of journalists down the line (Born 2005). Whatever the true motivation for this move, there is an important difference between the two broadcasters: The SABC, as Berger has argued, has a commercial funding model which causes an inherent conflict of interest for a CEO who is now, qua job description, simultaneously responsible for the commercial viability of the broadcaster as well as for implementing the public broadcasting mandate (Berger 2005). Many subsequent CEOs have had little or no journalistic experience which raises additional problems when having (or being allowed) to decide on editorial matters.

The policy came on the back of the SABC being established as a public company in 2003 (RSA 2002b), with a subsequent Memorandum and Articles of Association defining the relationship between the corporation and the Minister of Communications as the sole shareholder (SOS Coalition 2009). This document effectively gave the minister the right to veto the appointment of the three top executives (GCEO, CFO, COO) by the board, thus establishing a direct line between government's political interest and the SABC's editorial.

However, the ANC itself was everything but united on the the question of the SABC's role and independence. This had become clear only shortly before when, in 2002, the then Minister of Communication introduced the Broadcasting Amendment Bill to

Parliament (Banda and Michaels 2002) – an extraordinary attempt to bring the broadcaster under government control (external politicisation). It proposed to scrap a clause in the Broadcasting Act (RSA 1999) that guaranteed the SABC's freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence; tried to force the board to ensure “accurate, fair and accountable reporting ... in order to advance the national and public interest” and demanded that internal SABC policies be sent to the Minister for approval (cf. SABC 2002 for the SABC's submission to parliament in response to the bill). In the end, that bill was overturned by Parliament (RSA 2002a, 2002b) with its broad ANC majority and is a good example of the fact that the ANC has always contained a range of views on the supposed role of the SABC (cf. Chapter 3).

Overall, and compared to the years before and after, the period of 'Attempted Professionalisation' stands out in a number of ways that respondents tended to agree on: From the board to the CEO to senior news managers and some influential editors there was a fairly consistent emphasis on professional journalism, editorial independence, liberal news values and a culture in which all these could be nurtured. While news management clearly caved in with regard to the coverage of some political issues that President Mbeki and his government felt strongly about, the relationship between the SABC and the ANC government was much less harmonious and predictable than in the late 1990s when Snuki Zikalala was seen to be in charge of the SABC's journalism. The Communication Minister's attempt to curtail the SABC editorial independence may be indicative of this.

My analysis of this period stands in contrast to Ngwenya's (2015, 184) claim that commercialisation served merely as a front for politicisation and that senior news management deliberately failed to recognise this in interviews. The fact that the vast majority of my respondents remember this time as one of the most free, independent and professional periods in the SABC's post-apartheid history suggests that much of the external and internal top-down pressure was absorbed by senior editors who generally succeeded in preserving their newsrooms' autonomy to a degree that took into account both the realities of the political environment at the time and the values and aspirations of the SABC's mandate. With regard to politicisation, the result was a compromise, a sort of 'workable equilibrium', that may not have consistently met Western standards of journalistic independence and liberal journalism, but that seemed to be acceptable as 'work-in-progress' to even the most independent-minded SABC journalists. As such it did not negatively affect morale, or interfere with journalists' enthusiasm and creativity; on the contrary, it attracted a growing number of young, mostly black, journalists with a reputation for professionalism and independence. By the end of this period, SABC news had managed to win back a substantial number of viewers that it had previously lost to rival private television channel e.TV (R1). Respondents generally assumed that this was due to the SABC having regained credibility lost during the previous period.

## Conclusion

The first three periods of the SABC's post-apartheid politicisation discussed in this chapter suggest that radical de-politicisation (period I) was followed by a gradual re-politicisation. The re-politicisation process itself was not simply a linear development, but breaks into two distinct phases (periods II and III) suggestive of a corrective dynamic that found its origin in public criticism, a decisive move by Parliament, and finally by efforts from within the SABC itself to restore independence and rebuild professionalism. This resulted in what most respondents felt was a workable compromise mindful both of the SABC's mandate and the realities of its transitional and non-Western political environment. As the country prepared for the third national elections (with a predictable victory for the ANC), the SABC seemed to have stabilised its position vis-a-vis government and the ruling party.

As I hope to have shown, the SABC levels of politicisation fluctuate within the confines of its mandate and de-jure independence. These changes are contingent upon a number of factors that go well beyond broadcasting and media policies that have been documented extensively (Berger 1999, 2005; Martinis 2000; Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli 2001; Orgeret 2006; OSF Media Programme 2007). Legal safeguards are but one inhibitor to politicisation, albeit an important and fairly stable one. Other important inhibitors are found in the independence of the SABC board and CEO, in the professionalism of editors and various forms of public scrutiny. When, in the II. Period, politicisation was high and driven by external or internal top-down pressure it was accompanied by an

organisational culture characterised by authoritarian management, quiescence in the face of power, and internal discourse marked by a lack of debate on the role of the SABC, news values and approaches to journalism, and by the re-emergence of race as a political tool.

I have also shown that the variance in the levels of politicisation over time is closely linked to changing political dynamics involving South Africa's powerful ruling party. Yet this is not a straight-forward causal relationship based on dependency; much depends on the SABC's internal dynamics, i.e. factors closely associated with the organisational culture that inhibit or enable politicisation. Chapter 5/II is going to focus on the next decade of the SABC's post-apartheid politicisation which saw a dramatic intensification of the dynamics described so far.

## **5/II A Longitudinal View: Degrees of Politicisation from 2004 – 2013**

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In the previous chapter I have outlined some of the key dynamics of the politicisation of the SABC over the first decade of its post-apartheid existence as a public broadcaster. The present chapter focusses on the second decade in the post-apartheid evolution of the SABC which saw a noticeable intensification of the various dynamics described so far. The fragile equilibrium with regard to politicisation, the outcome of the first three periods, was upset rather violently around 2004. The fourth period (The Return of Political Loyalties, Disintegration and Crisis) illustrates the damaging consequences that followed a much more decisive process of top-down politicisation in combination with unprecedented bottom-up politicisation and growing anticipatory politicisation, was going to have. This intensification needs to be understood against the backdrop of unprecedented factional tensions within the ANC, epitomised in the leadership contest between President Thabo Mbeki and his eventual successor, Jacob Zuma. The ethnographic data suggests that there was a deliberate attempt by senior news management and the board to utilise the public broadcaster in support of Mbeki and those loyal to him. At the height of this political period of contention, politicised individuals, issues, discourse, and decision-making processes within the SABC left the broadcaster so highly politicised and divided along factional lines that one can speak of a period of over-identification with external political dynamics. Importantly, however, this

cannot be explained solely by looking at the drivers of politicisation, strong as they were. Compared to earlier periods, most of the factors that had hitherto inhibited politicisation were either scarce (resistance) or absent (independent board and CEO), rapidly eroded (professionalism), or directly violated (editorial policies and mandate). The end of this period saw the SABC embroiled in the deepest corporate crisis since the end of apartheid. However, because of its severity, this crisis (and much of it had little to do with politicisation) also provided a window of opportunity for decisive interventions and change efforts that were at least partially successful with some organisational learning taking place (Period V: 'Rescue and Turn-around').

It becomes clear that organisational culture as linked to the drivers, enablers and inhibitors of politicisation is a crucial factor in understanding the transformation of the SABC beyond the initial transition period in the early 1990s. Changing the legal framework, organisational structure and (possibly) the funding model, does not necessarily change the organisational culture, even though this is widely assumed in the literature on media transformation (for exceptions cf. Lee 1997; Park, Kim, and Sohn 2000; Price and Raboy 2003; Jakubowicz 2004). Organisational culture, I am going to show, acts as a powerful mediator to politicisation, especially at the interface between the classic forms of top-down and bottom-up politicisation seen as sufficient by most authors in that field (Peters and Pierre 2004; Van der Meer, Steen, and Wille 2007; De Wilde 2011; Betts 2002 for an exception). The second post-apartheid decade in particular illustrates the effect of anticipatory politicisation as it gets cumulatively inscribed into the organisational culture as a consequence of repeated 'waves' of politicisation.

## **5.5 Period IV: 'Return of Political Loyalties, Disintegration and Crisis' (2004-2010)**

In 2004, after the third national elections, Mbeki started his second term as President of the country. Around this time a profound rivalry developed between him and Jacob Zuma whom he dismissed as Deputy President in 2005 for alleged corruption. This move catapulted Zuma into a position of leadership with the left wing of the ANC and the tripartite alliance that had grown increasingly dissatisfied with Mbeki's economic neo-liberalism (Bond 1998), his stance taken towards Zimbabwe's dictator Robert Mugabe, and his views on AIDS (Marais 2011; Plaut and Holden 2012). The leadership battle between Mbeki and Zuma intensified dramatically before and during the ANC's National Conference in 2007 and saw Zuma emerge as victor and likely future President of the country. Months later Mbeki was 'recalled' by the now Zuma-dominated ANC and replaced by an interim President. Mbeki loyalists then formed a new party leading to unprecedented tensions within the ANC linked to the threat of a possible split. The significance of this for South Africa's emerging democracy should not be underestimated: Given the ANC's consistent majorities around 2/3 of the votes (Electoral Commission of South Africa n.d.) and, consequently, the persistent relative weakness of opposition parties, external opposition has, up until very recently, posed less of an immediate threat to the ANC's power than factionalism within the party and the risk of a break-up (cf. Gumede 2005). With this in mind, the period discussed here may reflect the closest the new South Africa has come so far to the 'change of power' that democratic theorists see as an indicator for the consolidation of democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996).

In late 2003 Parliament recommended a controversial list of candidates for a new SABC board to be appointed by the President (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2003). The board took office in early 2004, ahead of upcoming national elections. Opposition members of Parliament claimed at the time that their ANC colleagues were “under orders” to vote for candidates they themselves were not convinced of and that therefore the “legislative arm of state” had been “firmly twisted behind its own back” by the executive (Hansard records 2003). This external politicisation soon had internal consequences for SABC decision-making processes: In the run-up to the elections TV news management decided to cover the ANC's election manifesto launch live – a privilege not extended to opposition parties (Khangale and SAPA 2004). Later-on reports surfaced that a board member had planned “to conduct a political 'loyalty audit' amongst the news staff” (Fourie 2004, 15; Khangale and SAPA 2004; Media Institute of Southern Africa 2004). My own respondents also relayed experiences of interference by board members (top-down politicisation), for instance this editor: “They were up and down our editorial suites. What were they doing there?! In some instances they even wanted to make suggestions for story angles! They were breathing down our necks!” (R7).

This led to grapevine talk about “people meeting in the presidency” and a “planned take-over with political objectives” that would result in Zikalala coming back “because the SABC is too far away from government” (R6, R7). When Zikalala was indeed appointed shortly after as Managing Director of News, staff believed that CEO Peter Matlare had been instructed by the board to re-employ him (R6, R7), and that he “came back with a

mandate, not from the board, but from government” (R26). Most staff still remembered Zikalala's previous stint at the SABC (Period III), but, unlike five years earlier, he now had the full backing of the board to implement his vision of developmental journalism at the SABC. Within weeks Matlare, who stood for a more liberal model, resigned (Staff reporter 2005a).

This change in the upper echelons of the organisation was reflected with unusual immediacy on the newsroom level, driven initially by top-down pressure originating from Zikalala himself. “Jimi Matthews never got into anybody's way. It got decidedly worse when Snuki came in”, said one respondent (R11) echoing many others. Or: “We used to have the freedom to experiment and to do stuff that we cared about. That gap was closed. For lots of people who were just prepared to think a little bit, the Snuki period was very tough” (R81).

Significantly, such concerns were soon shared even by those respondents who had been critical of prevailing liberal news values of the preceding period, suggesting once more that the discourse around models of journalism at the SABC is largely a smokescreen for much more narrow political agendas: “Things changed for the worse. I would have loved to work with Snuki, but, while I'm not anti-government, I don't want to be pro-government either!” (R10)

News values were by re-defined by management, ostensibly in line with 'developmental journalism' (cf. Chapter 2). What is of interest with regard to politicisation, however, is less the theoretical concept behind this rhetoric, but the way it was interpreted by

Zikalala and those accountable to him. Asked to define the concept, Zikalala elaborated: "People should live in hope! ... You have to transform the South African society. You have to have South Africans believing in themselves. ... Positive stories are important. But critical, rigorous journalism" (Interview, 2005).

While positive stories and rigorous journalism are not mutually exclusive in theory, they quickly became so in practice. This was partially due to explicit demands made by Zikalala and partially due to journalists' perceptions of what may be demanded of them. Adopting a position long held in ANC quarters (Interview with Jessie Duarte), senior news management argued that the SABC had to provide a counter-weight to the government-critical private media. Typical statements by respondents were:

"[Zikalala] drilled it into people that the print media doesn't reflect the government's position, so that is why the SABC needs to be there, to reflect the government position"<sup>51</sup> (R2).

"Snuki always used to tell us that people want feel-good stories, not devastation and despair – that's what e.tv does. That's why we are doing 'good news' all the time: how departments are working hard and providing for people." (R12).

In the newsrooms, developmental journalism had long become synonymous with positive stories that are supportive of government. Many respondents spoke about this period with sarcastic resignation. There was a strong sense of being imposed on, of disempowerment and sometimes shame at having become mere tools in the hand of news management. Editors felt that their own sense of judgement was no longer required, their assessment not trusted, their experience not valued. In other words: professionalism, one of the most important inhibitors of politicisation, was being systematically undermined. Reporters, too, complained about having lost ownership of

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51 The then spokesperson of the SABC, Paul Setsetse, also made this point in a radio debate (Staff reporter 2005b). In the interview with me Zikalala denied ever having made a similar statement himself.

their stories and being forced to cover 'non-stories'; news coverage shifted from issues to events (cf. Chapter 4). "I want to decide whether a story is a story. But as long as government is involved, in Snuki's eyes, there has to be a story. We've got to make it a story", explained one journalist (R10). And a colleague added: "You ask yourself, are you here to tell the stories of people, or are you just an extension of the communications department? Rather say: 'We are the state broadcaster'. It would make everything much easier" (R12).

This perceived bias towards government and its achievements had a more specific dimension: that of President Mbeki. Reminiscent of the 2000-2004 period, but with more vigour, the new board and Zikalala adopted Mbeki's ideological project of African Renaissance and set out to make the SABC an integral part of it by establishing an international TV service, 'SABC News International', that was to tell the African story to the world (SABC 2008; Mbeki 2007). 13 foreign news bureaux were created at a cost the SABC could ill afford at the time<sup>52</sup> (Davie 2009). Inside the organisation, 'SABC News International' was widely perceived as a 'Mbeki project', even by those in favour of it, such as this former correspondent:

"It was obviously linked with the Mbeki project of African Renaissance. And I believed in it. The BBC is part of the UK's hegemonic foreign policy, just like Deutsche Welle, France 24 – so what's wrong with us doing it?" (R36)

Again, this does not constitute politicisation in the problematic sense of an 'organisational defect' (Partan 1975; Ghebali 1985; Peters and Pierre 2004; Rovner 2008; Doli, Korenica, and Rogova 2012) as it was not in conflict with the SABC's mandate. Nevertheless, it was perceived by staff as symptomatic of increased

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<sup>52</sup> The project faltered soon after Mbeki lost power and contributed significantly to the broadcaster's financial crisis towards the end of this period (Davie 2009; SABC 2009).

politicisation. Around the same time, a new reporting structure was introduced: the 'Presidential Corps', a group of dedicated reporters who (alone) were to cover the President exclusively and have extensive access to him that was not enjoyed by other media. It soon emerged that in practice this structure had the effect of eroding questioning journalism by eliminating healthy competition between colleagues and by reducing the professional distance between the specialised correspondents and the Presidency. In other words, the structure facilitated both top-down and bottom-up politicisation. Many respondents commented on this:

"There is nothing wrong with the concept. It became a problem when that journalist became an extension of the President. When there were critical, burning issues, [TV Presidential Reporter] Miranda Strydom avoided them. And people noticed. You have this one-on-one opportunity with the President, and you don't even ask him?! What kind of media are you?!" (R105)<sup>53</sup>

"Anything the President did had news value for Snuki<sup>54</sup>. The instruction was very clear that there was no grounds for criticism, let alone rejection of, a statement by the President's office." (R49)

This uncritical coverage of the President was also afforded to other senior politicians. Respondents described numerous instances where 'rules' were laid out before them in workshops and editorial meetings, for instance: "Snuki used to talk about 'his' government: 'I will not have my government' or 'my minister' 'criticised on my television!'" (R49, similarly R1, R2).

Statements like this clearly go against the letter and spirit of the SABC's mandate,

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53 This particular example was referred to by many respondents and has acquired the status of a reference point for the co-optation of a political journalist in the SABC's internal discourse around editorial independence. Miranda Strydom declined to be interviewed for this study.

54 In the interview, Zikalala responded to the following question:

CA: "You are reported having said that anything the President does needs to be covered. Is this true?"

SZ: "*You look at CNN...*"

CA: "Is something newsworthy just because the President does it or because he is somewhere or does something?"

SZ: "*It's newsworthy! It's newsworthy!*"

especially against the call for balance and critical appraisal of government (RSA 1993, 1999, 2002b; SABC 2004a cf. also Chapter 3). With internal top-down politicisation being so strong at the time, internal discourse also came increasingly under the influence of political dynamics: discussing competing political agendas and covering opposition parties, unless in order to criticise them, became something high-risk, to be avoided:

“People felt ashamed to cover the opposition because there was such an obvious ANC bias, and it came from such senior places. Whenever the DA was discussed it would be prefaced by laughing and cajoling. Everybody wanted to be up the arse of the ANC.” (R7)

Self-censorship became normal and widely-accepted and expected practice. In 2006, however, in a rare and public act of resistance, one of the SABC's most popular and seasoned radio presenters, John Perlman, confronted the SABC spokesperson live on air about the existence of a blacklist of commentators thought to be critical of the ruling party. Perlman, who later faced disciplinary action for his whistle-blowing and eventually left the broadcaster, explained later that his move had been well considered and emerged out of “intensive discussions with colleagues about what was the right thing to do.... I measured what I did against the editorial charter of the SABC” (Maughan 2007) His allegations were subsequently vindicated by a Commission of Inquiry headed by former CEO Zwelakhe Sisulu (Haffajee 2006), and in 2012 the SABC was finally forced to admit by the High Court that the blacklisting practice was “not in compliance with its charter, editorial policies, licence conditions or the code of conduct for broadcasters” (Limpitlaw and Skinner 2012). The blacklisting scandal is significant in two ways: it demonstrates that legal processes ultimately worked to protect professionalism when the journalists were vindicated. At the same time it marked the first major direct attack

on SABC policies – policies meant to be key inhibitors of politicisation. While the organisational defect view of politicisation discussed in Chapter 5/I is potentially problematic for its potential for hypocrisy (Imber 1989), the SABC's mandate was violated explicitly. Equally significant, however, is the fact that the surprise and outrage on the part of the public was not widely shared among SABC staff, many of whom had long learned to live with the blacklist:

“We all knew about it. Long before! And it frustrated me in particular because I was involved in programmes where you depend on analysts.” (R42)

After a decade of relatively successful re-negotiation of its role in a democratic society (Periods I, II and III) it took the return of one highly politicised individual (Zikalala) to the ranks of senior news management to make dominant news values, perceptions around the role of the public broadcaster, and reporting practices change rapidly. Or so it seemed: Initially, direct top-down politicisation conflicted with professionalism on a daily basis. “It's authoritarian, simply authoritarian. There is one authority. If you question it you are 'dead'”, said one journalist (R49). Editors had a similar experience: “Snuki would frequently override me. And he used to tell the whole newsroom: 'I report directly to the board and directly to the President’” (R86).

Soon, however, the conflict between politicisation and professionalism made way to a “climate of fear” as a response to Zikalala's “iron-fist rule” and “downward micro-management” (Blacklist Report, cited in Haffajee 2006 as leaked to the Mail&Guardian). Some journalists returned to a habit that had first surfaced in the late 1990s of addressing Zikalala in his former capacity as an MK commander (R39). News values that undermined sections of the SABC's mandate were readily adopted, even internalised by

many. It was, one could say, as if the organisation had been waiting for this, ready to fall back in line.

Compared to the III. Period ('Attempted professionalisation'), the speed at which dissenting voices fell silent and the organisational culture shifted towards compliance was remarkable. How can it be explained? Answers offered by respondents fell into two categories: The first referred to an organisational memory (and many intensely personal ones) of Zikalala as a senior editor in the past being evoked by his return, coupled with the awareness that he now had a much stronger power base in the organisation than previously. The second alleged a collective falling back onto old habits from the apartheid era, as if the structural and staff changes in the transition period had not really taken place. Somehow, the shadow of politicisation, to use Krapels' (2012) phrase, was a familiar one. Politicisation did not just happen for all to see, it was *anticipated* given Zikalala's return, and particularly so by the black old-guard that now occupied many editorial positions and had long felt threatened by the critical attitude of the (mostly new-guard) independent-minded professionals. Anticipatory politicisation (cf. Chapter 5/1) became an increasingly powerful enabler of further, more direct forms of politicisation – such as external pressure and interference by politicians.

A number of such incidents have leaked into the public domain, e.g. the Minister of Health allegedly *ordering* the SABC to send reporters to cover one of her press conferences (SAPA 2005a; Derby 2005). This sense of entitlement was not exceptional. One respondent remembered how a Director General at the Department of Labour expressed surprise at her refusal to let him check her scripts during an international

summit:

“He asked me: “When will you be ready to give us your scripts?’ - And I’m like, ‘no?! You are not going to see my scripts!’. And they were so hostile afterwards, for two weeks! I had said something that they certainly weren’t used to.” (R29)

Another episode of contention, well-reported at the time and seen by many respondents as indicative of the state of the SABC, took place in KwaZulu-Natal:

On June 16 2005, SABC3 English News carried a story on Premier S’bu Ndebele, a close Mbeki ally, being pelted with stones by Zuma supporters at a political (Youth Day) rally. Despite clear footage, the Premier denied he was ever attacked.

Respondents described the event as follows:

"Ndebele stormed into the SABC with his body guards demanding that we retract the story, apologise on air and basically say that we had our wires crossed"(R11).

“The story was pulled off. I am sure the journalist on the scene was right, but he wasn’t trusted because S’bu Ndebele is the Premier” (R15).

Respondents also commented that the journalist in question subsequently came under intense political pressure which caused him to resign despite the fact that his career prospects at the SABC had been promising (R12, also (Naidu 2005).

Two things are worth noting here with regard to the political context: Firstly, the public humiliation the KZN Premier suffered was unusual in that it was caused by ANC supporters. The incident spoke to the gravity of the internal tensions within the ruling party and the depth of the schism that had developed between the Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma factions. Just two days before the rally Mbeki had dismissed Zuma as Deputy President of the country on the grounds of alleged corruption, and (coverage of) any

event suggesting that significant parts of the ANC were continuing to be supportive of Zuma, would have been highly unwelcome by the Mbeki camp. Secondly, the resignation of the journalist signalled the departure of a significant number of other highly-respected and independent-minded journalists: the political editor Vuyo Mvoko, senior political reporters Kalay Maistry and Clayson Monyela, Mandla Zembe, Mahlatse Gallens and others (Derby 2005). Most importantly, Head of TV News, Jimi Matthews, routinely credited with having acted as a buffer between Zikalala's political demands and the newsroom, left his position following disagreements with Zikalala about editorial autonomy (R49). He had refused to dictate to producers which guests to invite on a political talk show, something Zikalala viewed as “abdication of editorial responsibility” (R49). While Matthews clearly attempted to resist, he also failed – and publicly so. Those left behind now had even less reason to defend their professional autonomy. The general mood was one of resignation. “If you look at the decision-makers, there are now very few, if any, independent-minded people who would challenge Snuki or anyone else”, said one respondent (R2). And another (R12): “When Jimi Matthews left there was no one who would stick up for us. He had been our last hope.”

Within months of the Youth Day controversy, a similar incident took place, again in KwaZulu-Natal. This time it was the new Deputy President, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Zuma's successor and close Mbeki ally, who was disrupted and booed by Zuma supporters during a Woman's Day Rally. This time SABC TV ignored the incident. After much public criticism, various contradictory explanations (Staff reporter 2005c; SAPA 2005b) and the airing of footage by rival broadcaster e.TV showing an SABC camera man filming the incident, the SABC commissioned an internal investigation. The resulting

report established that the freelance cameraman who had been covering the story on his own had *chosen* not to send the footage to his editors, and that this may be indicative of a pattern:

"SABC needs to deal with the possibility that some producers may well believe that they will please the SABC leadership by downplaying incidents that could be embarrassing to the government, or at least that they should not be in the business of looking out for such." (Mkhwanazi and Berger 2005; also Berger 2005)

This is in line with my own empirical data and illustrates how censorship morphs into self-censorship during periods of political contention. In other words: the structure holds, but the culture gives. "Maybe when it started we were forced to. ... But [now] some editors do what they think [sic] Snuki wants. It's very hard to draw that line now" (R12).

What we find in this period, therefore, is a transition from relatively high professional standards to mediocrity, from top-down politicisation to pre-emptive action and self-censorship, from ideology imposed on staff to an obedience-based newsroom culture<sup>55</sup> that has absorbed it, from discourse marked by open debate over editorial choices to the virtual cessation of such debates – all sustained by low morale and loss of hope for this ever to change (R10; also Jane Duncan quoted in (Naidu 2005)). These are the hallmarks of anticipatory politicisation. The situation was aggravated by a drop in the number of viewers for the SABC's flagship news bulletins<sup>56</sup>. Two examples of respondents' views on this:

"You just don't want to come to work any more. It's like, 'which minister are we covering today?'" (R12)

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55 There were exceptional newsrooms, and I discuss these internal variations in Chapter 6. What is important here is that those were "pockets, isolated individuals. There was not enough critical mass to actually influence how things are done." (R7)

56 By the end of 2005, viewer-ship figures for the flagship English evening news had fallen behind those of the much smaller and less well resourced private rival broadcaster e.TV (Naidu 2005).

“Our quality is going down. I don't initiate anything any more. I don't contribute in the meetings. You do what you are told and nobody is prepared to go the extra mile.” (R10)

It was in this organisational climate that the political tensions within the ANC increased in the run-up to the party's 52<sup>th</sup> National Conference in Polokwane in 2007. Thabo Mbeki had reached his maximum number of terms in office as President of the country, but decided to stand for re-election as President of the ANC against Zuma. The political battle that ensued within the ruling party came to be mirrored inside the SABC. The Johannesburg television newsroom especially became rapidly politicised – 'split down the middle', as a number of respondents put it:

“Snuki was trying to give Mbeki an advantage. The newsroom ended up being divided with people being seen as either pro-Mbeki or pro-Zuma.” (R95)

“Polokwane impacted a big deal on the newsroom. Hugely! You had individuals who preferred one candidate and tried to use their position to advance him. It was the first time it happened here to that extent.” (R74)

So contentious were the political issues covered that top-down politicisation was being supplemented by bottom-up politicisation in the form of partisan journalism on the part of a number of reporters. The most prominent examples, criticised and ridiculed in the private media, were political reporter Sophie Mokoena and Presidential reporter Miranda Strydom (Staff reporter 2007c; Makhafola and Seleka 2007). Asked about this, Mokoena stressed that she was never pressured to slant her stories in any way:

“At no stage have I ever had a meeting with the ANC or Thabo Mbeki where I was asked to do things in a certain way. And there was no policy at the SABC, no directive from the board or from senior news management or from editors. Where people saw my stories as biased it was not intentional. When I look back I say: I was right.” (Interview, 2011)

As much as those who reported in a partisan way may have done so for their own

reasons, senior management was certainly seen to be condoning the practice: “If Snuki had seen things different from Sophie Mokoena, then she would not have been that powerful. He gave her free reign”, said one respondent (R28).

And yet, despite the SABC's efforts, Mbeki lost the election at the ANC conference. Newspapers reported at the time that then-CEO Dali Mpofu (an official ANC delegate at the conference), Snuki Zikalala and senior political reporters were shocked and visibly upset upon receiving the news (Makhafola and Seleka 2007; Harper 2007). The political dynamics within the ANC changed radically: Zuma, now President of the ANC, was likely to be the next President of the country after the general elections in 2009.

Mbeki had lost power in the party, but was still President. In this capacity he appointed a new SABC board: a board so blatantly biased towards him that COSATU threatened court action and the ANC parliamentary caucus called for the suspension of four board members and later-on passed a motion of no-confidence in the board (Brown and Musgrave 2008; Ngalwa 2008). In a similar reflection of opposing political agendas, Snuki Zikalala was suspended, but reinstated a few months later (Staff reporter 2008). Eventually, in September 2008, Mbeki was forced by the new ANC leadership to resign from office before the end of his term. In response, Mbeki loyalists set out to establish a new political party, the Congress of the People (COPE) in order to contest the upcoming general elections. The remaining pro-Mbeki partisan energies at the SABC were now directed towards this new party.

“That was the peak of our problems because there was this contestation for the SABC within the ANC itself [sic]. Once COPE was formed it got worse because then you had board members that were sympathetic to COPE and wanted you to push a specific line. That was the most difficult time for me at the SABC.” (R105)

It was unclear at the time how much electoral support COPE, co-led by a former ANC chairperson, was likely to get and whether its formation would result in a 'split' of the ANC caused by the defection of a significant number of senior leaders within the ANC and COSATU alongside ordinary members (Nglangisa 2008). Such a split of the ANC is a highly emotionally charged scenario in South African political culture. For the ANC it entails the dangerous prospect of losing its overwhelming hold on political power, and it puts into question the party's long-held ideological claim to speak for the majority of the people, in particular those who had been formerly oppressed. From a theoretical point of view it can be argued that therefore the prospect of a split of the ANC comes as close to a change-over of government – the classic indicator for democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan 1996) – as historical conditions in South Africa permit at this point in time. This may go some way in explaining the gravity of the situation as perceived by those involved, both within the ANC and within the SABC. There was too much at stake politically, in the minds of the leadership of the SABC and some individual journalists, to stay within the public broadcaster's mandate and the confines of professional values such as balance and neutrality. The result was a period of over-identification with the political where boundaries were not just shifted temporarily, but sometimes lost completely.

While these factionalist/ party-political dynamics played out openly in the newsroom, the political reality of Zuma consolidating his position within the ANC was reflected at the SABC by a sudden reluctance to criticise him, and general confusion around how to navigate the new balance of power. One incident that illustrates this involves a 'Special Assignment' documentary on political satire featuring South Africa's most popular

cartoonist, Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro). Zapiro had by then drawn a number of controversial cartoons of Zuma related, amongst other things, to his rape trial and allegations of corruption; he was being sued by Zuma in response (Daniels 2012). The documentary, commissioned and produced in-house, was barred from being aired (Burbidge 2009; SAPA-AFP and M&G Online 2009). Those involved with the project were convinced in the interviews that this hesitance had political reasons. Around the same time, several respondents claimed, there was an informal ban on footage showing Zuma dancing (an activity he indulges in regularly at political gatherings), in order to portray him as a more respectable political figure.

Once the ANC had won the 2009 elections and Zuma was firmly installed as President of the party and the country, Zikalala's contract was not renewed. The Mbeki period at the SABC was over.

At the same time, however, the SABC found itself in a financial and governance crisis of unprecedented proportions. This crisis was partly due to the international financial crisis, but also widely attributed to mismanagement and corruption (SASFED 2009), the extent of which would take months and years to surface. It left the broadcaster indebted and in need of a government guarantee of R1,47-billion to meet the corporations financial exigencies (Staff reporter 2009c, 2009a; Davie 2009; Karrim 2009). After a row of suspensions and counter-suspensions of senior news executives, Parliament dissolved the board and installed an interim board tasked with developing a turn-around strategy (Staff reporter 2009b; Boyle 2009).

At the end of this period stood a public broadcaster that had lost many of the gains made since 1993: Financially bankrupt, highly politicised, its board collapsed, and senior management in a state of turmoil – and an organisational culture in which journalists had largely succumbed to self-censorship (or stopped caring altogether) and where internal debate was stifled. Morale, according to respondents' perceptions, stood at its lowest point in two decades, and it was obvious that audience ratings for the flagship English news, but even the large African-language radio stations, had dropped significantly:

“I was shocked when I saw how much we had lost [in radio], not just SAfm [English], across the board. Lesedi fm [seSotho] lost something like 400.000 listeners in their current affairs show over two years. Almost every single station had lost. Lesedi and Ukhozi [Zulu] substantially.” (R86)

“I think it's about quality... People used to trust us, they believed what we said, you know? Why do they now switch off? It's reflected in the ARs of our flagship news bulletins!” (R31)

The crisis itself, although it had multiple causes unrelated to the topic of this thesis, was also partially seen by respondents as an outcome of the SABC's politicisation during the preceding period. One of the later Heads of Radio (R68), was one of many to make this link: ““If you bring someone in who is a political appointment the economic situation goes through the floor. You end up going around with a begging bowl asking for money.”

57

The SABC's corporate crisis sent shock-waves through an organisation that had just gone through an intense period of politicisation. Not only had the attempt to use the public broadcaster for factional interests failed to deliver (political) results, the SABC

57 There are some interesting parallels here with the politicisation of policing during and after the Mbeki Presidency which, as Steinberg (2014) argues, was quite deliberately re-oriented in its purpose towards managing internal conflict within the ANC, with serious consequences for its organisational capacity to investigate crime.

was now in need of rescue from a government headed by Jacob Zuma. Many of those interviewed felt a personal sense of humiliation and shame at the state of their organisation as well as regret for how much they and/or their colleagues had let themselves be compromised as professionals. There was little triumph even among those who had been critical of, or opposed to, the SABC's factional bias. Instead, what emerged was anger, despair, a feeling of loss, resignation and cynicism. There was a profound sense that the public broadcaster had failed, and that this failure was a historic one.

## **5.6 Period V: 'Rescue and 'turn-around' (2010-2013)**

The last period covered here, is named “rescue and 'turn-around’”. This is not to suggest that anything like a turn-around has actually taken place, but we certainly saw genuine efforts and indications that past problems were being addressed and lessons learned, even as direct politicisation intensified towards the end. Developing and implementing a turn-around strategy for the SABC's finances became the main priority once the extent of the crisis had come to light. However, the SABC's finances are not the main focus here, but rather the organisational culture and the degree of politicisation it reflects. In this respect the main challenge was to de-politicise and re-establish a degree of editorial

independence that does not compromise the SABC's mandate, to reclaim credibility, and to reverse what respondents almost uniformly identified as a drop in the quality of news and current affairs output. As much as the corporate crisis came as a blow to the organisation (instability, budget cuts, public humiliation etc.), its depth also held the potential for decisive intervention and organisational learning. In early 2010, a new permanent board was recommended by Parliament and appointed by the President. It was widely lauded for the social representativeness, independence and professional expertise of its members (interview with Kate Skinner, 'Save our SABC' campaign, 2011). One of the new board members explained:

“We had the benefit, quite frankly, of a complete disaster at the SABC: massive bankruptcy, crookery, all sorts of things. So there was a lot of pressure on us that made it easy to push people in who knew what they were doing.” (R86)

A new Head of News, Phil Molefe, had taken over from Zikalala the previous year and was confirmed in his position – not without controversy and allegations of political pressure, but the general perception within the SABC was that Molefe was a seasoned, fairly respected journalist. His arrival generated hope in the newsrooms:

“Phil told our editors that they must not be intimidated by politicians who threaten them with a direct call to him. He said we must not listen to people who try to use his name and that he trusts us to do our jobs. We know now that, going forward, we will fight. We are okay.” (R24)

In early 2011 Molefe filled senior news editor posts in radio and television with experienced journalists who had reputations for independence, credibility and professionalism (a fair number of them had left the SABC after Zikalala's return in 2004). They knew the SABC and its organisational culture intimately and set out to change it. This is how the incoming (and former) Head of TV, assessed the situation:

"I was shocked by the quality of the journalism. The newsroom is compartmentalised, people don't speak to each other. We have no political editor and what must be the weakest parliamentary team and assignment desks in the history of the SABC. The quality of reporting of the presidential team is horrible – no analysis, no contextualisation. They wait for the President to give them a media hand-out because they think that's what's expected of them. The Presidency itself is unhappy about this! Nobody cares." (Jimi Matthews)

The incoming Head of Radio made similar observations:

"Peoples' self-confidence, the fire, is gone. They are looking over their shoulders when they have to make decisions and wonder about political repercussions because the SABC has been criticised so much. People sub-consciously try to avoid risks, they don't want to deal with anything remotely controversial. I am detecting it across the board." (Mike Siluma)

And the new National News Editor described his mission as follows:

"I just want to free people. And it will take time for them to accept that this is a genuine, honest attempt to make them part of the process rather than recipients of instructions all the time." (Nyana Molete)

All three statements identify the problem of an organisational culture in which anticipatory politicisation is rife. As damaging as top-down and bottom-up politicisation are, they tend to be driven by conscious intention, and can be addressed relatively easily by removing or side-lining the individuals concerned. Anticipatory politicisation, grown as it has over a long time and deeply entrenched in the organisational culture, presents a much more difficult challenge. And yet, perceptions did begin to change once there seemed to be a real prospect of professionalisation. The effect on journalists' morale of the new board and the new editorial team was considerable. Not only were the people now in charge of news respected professionals, they were seen as politically progressive, i.e. sympathetic to the ANC and the political transformation of the country, yet independent. They had professional track records and a history within the SABC, and they started to bring back other independent-minded professionals who had left the

SABC under Zikalala. A sense of relief, hope, and cautious optimism permeated the newsrooms. A few examples from interviews with respondents:

“I'm putting a lot of hope in the new board because there are some experienced news people on it. I think a lesson has been learned.” (R20)

“People who know what news is have come back: Jimi Matthews, Phil Molefe, Nyana Molete. Those people couldn't take the nonsense that took place when Snuki Zikalala was in charge. (R39)

“Those guys are veterans. We know what they can do. They are here because of experience.” (R78)

Quite a few journalists reflected on the damage the previous over-identification with political leaders and factions had caused. Even some of those directly involved now saw it as something to be avoided: for the sake of the SABC's credibility, but also in the interest of one's own long-term survival as a professional. As those seen to be loyal to Zikalala or directly implicated in partisan journalism were sidelined by Molefe (R53, R36, R64), some of their colleagues acknowledged that building one's career on political loyalties was a risky strategy in the long term. This points to the importance of public scrutiny in relation to individuals' professional reputation as an important inhibitor of politicisation. “You don't want presidential correspondents to get discredited by their proximity”, said the new political editor: “There used to be a lot of negative media coverage with the previous team. I haven't seen that since.” And one of the incoming presidential correspondents reflected:

“I think we have learned a lesson. You hear people say, 'guys, the Polokwane situation must never be repeated in the newsroom'. We are news people. We should never be loyal to individuals.” (R74)

With regard to the presidential team that had so clearly lost its independence, structural changes were made that opened up presidential coverage to a wider pool of reporters.

Soon, first successes were acknowledged by staff: morale was improving along with audience ratings (R49, R95, R68), the level of politicisation decreased markedly, and journalism critical of government became possible once again. SABC TV was the first media outlet to break a controversial story on police brutality (the killing of Andries Tatane in Ficksburg during a political protest), a problem that has been making headlines ever since (SAPA 2011). Radio kept running with the story continuously even though editors anticipated a political fall-out. The Head of Radio told me at the time that “it's important for the journalists to know that when the heat is on the leadership will stand behind them. These decisions have to be made in the newsroom, not anywhere else. Otherwise we will lose credibility.”

His statement also illustrates a more general attempt to re-establish a practice of the SABC's post-transition period that located editorial power at the lowest possible level and encouraged internal debate in the newsroom. Internal discourse changed to allow for constructive criticism and quality feedback among colleagues. This in turn gave journalists a new sense of autonomy and ownership of their stories:

“We started having morning news conferences again. We are being held accountable now, in front of our peers. It makes you up your game. There is more of a focus on human interest stories and less focus on government.” (R31, TV reporter)

“Jimi has brought in a new culture. I didn't even use to watch our news any more because they were boring. But now I do, and there is improvement.” (R79, camera man)

“Already there is more discussion and thinking going on. We try to give people space and confidence to engage, to show them that you can agree and disagree. And we have done some interesting stories that came from the journalists themselves.” (National News Editor)

This is not to say that top-down politicisation, including external interference,

disappeared. For instance, a number of respondents mentioned that they had experienced internal pressure to cover the Minister of Communications resulting in a number of 'non-stories'. They put this down to the SABC's acute dependence on the Minister (as the sole shareholder) for its organisational survival following the crisis (R39, R59). On the whole, however, there were very few reports of either top-down or bottom-up politicisation during the first years of this period. In order to avoid another scandal around the blacklisting of commentators a set of formal guidelines was adopted in line with the editorial policy. As a result journalists grew bolder in their relating to politicians who tried to influence them. Acts of resistance now became a matter of pride:

“We have had instances of journalists refusing point blank to do stories that politicians tried to pressure them to do telling them that 'this is ridiculous. It is electioneering, not 'development.'” (R46)

“The other day some Department phoned to complain about us running a story about how the government's winter school programme had failed and that we should rather encourage kids to join it. Our editors directed the person to us. I told him that it is not our job to recruit kids for them when they are spending public money on a programme and no one is coming.” (R61)

While change started to happen in the newsrooms, the new board struggled to find its feet. Although Zuma's power base was now secure within the ANC and government and the tensions within the ruling party (though not the tripartite alliance) had begun to ease, this period was characterised by extreme instability on board level attributed consistently to the attempts by government, in particular the Minister(s) of Communication, to interfere with board decisions. It is unclear whether the level of interference was unusual as compared to earlier periods; certainly, it became better documented than ever before with board members speaking openly<sup>58</sup>, resignation

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58 As with editors and journalists, board members whose reputation is built on professionalism seem to be more prepared to resist politicisation.

letters being made publicly available or leaked to the media, and statements being made in Parliament. (cf. Chapter 3) This may be partially to do with the fact that the 2010 board was so independent in the first place and in fact tried very hard to preserve its autonomy. Almost all conflict within the board was caused by tensions between the board and its chairman, Ben Ngubane, who, on multiple occasions, acted unilaterally, at times even in defiance of board decisions – but always in the (perceived) interest of government and/or Zuma (Makinana and Underhill 2013b; SAPA 2013a, 2013b; Staff reporter 2013b). Eventually all board members resigned from their posts. David Niddrie who had been involved with the SABC during its initial transition, gave as his reason “a comprehensive and sustained failure of oversight... specifically by the... Minister of Communications” (Niddrie 2010). Noting that he was the fourth board member to resign who was also a member of the ANC, he stressed that the resignations were not a result of “attempts by the Minister to establish ANC control over the SABC”, but rather of a lack of support, especially with regard to “the multiple breaches of law by the chief executive officer and the chairperson” (ibid.).

This points to a continuation of a politicisation of the SABC along ANC factional lines rather than an attempt by the ANC as a whole to take control of the public broadcaster. Another former board member gave “intolerable interference from the Ministry [of Communications] in the affairs of the board” as cause for his resignation (Harris 2011; similarly Peyper 2013). Similar concerns were voiced by the majority of the remaining board members, almost all of whom resigned in 2013, shortly after the chairman and his deputy had resigned after a protracted public tussle between them and the rest of the board (SAPA 2013a). The last board member to resign, former Head of Radio Pippa

Green, criticised “insufficient oversight, coupled with an almost abusive political interference”, especially with regard to the appointment of senior executives (Makinana and Underhill 2013b).

Although the years 2012 and 2013 were not covered by my fieldwork, it is clear from interviews and media reports that much of the conflict on board level had at its centre the appointment/ removal/ reinstatement of two senior executives: Head of News Phil Molefe, and Hlaudi Motsoeneng who made a rapid career culminating in his appointment as acting Chief Operating Officer in 2012. Both men were at the time perceived by respondents to be sympathetic to Zuma (something that has later been confirmed for Motsoeneng, cf. Chapter 3). However, there is evidence such as that discussed earlier that Molefe made a genuine attempt to restore credibility and editorial independence. Motsoeneng, on the other hand, who routinely and publicly claimed close ties with the President (Makhudu 2008; Staff reporter 2009e; Makinana and Underhill 2013a), was in an almost irrational way, feared by many within the organisation (cf. Chapter 8) and made increasingly bold attempts to influence journalistic practice.

Leaving aside the particular individuals involved, the pattern here is a familiar one: appointments to senior executive positions have an undeniably political dimension – even a board whose vast majority of members were aware of this and tried to work against it by asserting their own authority failed to resist that pressure while staying in office. In the end, the relatively independent-minded Molefe was forced out while Motsoeneng survived the dissolution of a board that had unanimously tried to remove him from his post against the wishes of the chairperson (Underhill and Harris 2013); he

was to continue making his presence felt at the SABC for years to come.

In the run-up to the ANC's 2012 National Conference in Mangaung, a new political dynamic emerged within the ANC. Increasingly, Jacob Zuma was being publicly challenged by the controversial leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema. This was reflected inside the SABC when, months before the conference, Zuma loyalist Motsoeneng was given control over News and Current Affairs by the board, normally the prerogative of the CEO. Molefe, on the other hand, had been on 'special leave' since early 2012 after Motsoeneng and CEO Lulama Mokhobo demanded less coverage of Julius Malema, and Molefe resisted attempts to curtail his autonomy as Head of News citing the importance of editorial independence (Dawes 2012). Motsoeneng then proceeded to take a number of highly controversial decisions ahead of the ANC Conference. He cancelled a radio talk show in which editors of various newspapers were to discuss the media coverage of the upcoming conference on the grounds of no ANC representative being invited to the discussion (F. Parker 2012). Following a similar rationale he decreed that a pre-recorded TV interview with political cartoonist Zapiro that included images of Zuma not be aired because the interview was "not balanced" and "insulting" to the President (Underhill 2012). In defending his decisions, Motsoeneng referred to the SABC's editorial policy and effectively extended the imperative of fairness and balance to each and every story rather than coverage over time, as well as to all political analysis undertaken by journalists which would necessitate the opportunity for immediate right to reply at all times. Both were not just distortions of the SABC's editorial policies; they were incompatible with the day-to-day running of a newsroom and aimed at deterring coverage critical of the ANC. In 2013 Motsoeneng called for a 70% 'positive news' quota

arguing that positive stories help build the nation (Underhill and Harris 2013). Initially, this idea caused hilarity among journalists rather than concern, with the Head of News publicly defending the principles of balance and fairness, challenging “anyone to say where [his] newsroom has deliberately suppressed stories of corruption” and stating that “Hlaudi has yet to walk into this newsroom and tell us what to do” (Underhill 2013). This suggests that internal top-down politicisation was at that time still largely off-set by professionalism and resistance in the newsroom.

Compared to the IV. (2004-2010) Period, the level of politicisation as reflected in the organisational culture decreased markedly, and news coverage critical of the SABC's journalism subsided considerably (albeit temporarily). There was, however, a high degree of politicisation on the level of the board, mainly related to the appointment of chief executives. The latter was not new phenomenon and can be described as a constant of much of the post-apartheid SABC's trajectory. However, what this period suggests is that we cannot infer from this similarly high levels of politicisation in the newsroom.

Whereas before the ANC's Polokwane conference in 2007 the newsroom was 'split' between different ANC factions, it was now the board itself that was divided between what appears to be a highly politicised chairman and the rest of the members, most of whom were also members of or sympathetic to the ANC but nevertheless objected to attempts at political interference. This points once again to the heterogeneity of the ruling party itself with regard to its relation to the public broadcaster (similar to the beginning of the 2000-2004 period). It also suggests that even with a board that has

“lurched on from one crisis to another” (Masekela 2010) it is possible at the SABC to practice journalism that is generally independent and based on the SABC's editorial values if there are credible, independent-minded professionals in senior editorial positions. This is not to say that tendencies in the organisational culture subsided, such as those of complacency and subservience to those in power, of those of anticipatory politicisation that were carried over from the apartheid-era SABC, then re-emerged in the late 1990s and systematically fostered under Zikalala after 2004. It does, however, show the critical role that senior editors and those in middle management play in guarding editorial independence.

## **Conclusion**

In this and the previous Chapter (5/I) I have traced the process of politicisation of the SABC's News and Current Affairs division since the end of apartheid, assessed through the lens of organisational culture. Five time periods have been identified: I. New Beginnings (1993-1997), II. Disillusionment (1997-2000), III. Attempted Professionalisation (2000-2004), IV. The Return of Political Loyalties, Disintegration and Crisis (2004-2010), and V. Rescue and Turn-around (2010-2013). It has shown that, in an environment of de-jure independence, levels of politicisation have fluctuated throughout this time suggesting a non-linear development that is neither unidirectional nor teleological. Politicisation at the SABC is to a large extent (though not exclusively) a

function of the political environment. In this respect, the SABC seems to have traversed at least three phases of politicisation that are closely linked to significant political developments in post-apartheid South Africa involving the ANC in particular. Figure 2 illustrates this process over time, based on the shared dominant narrative that has emerged from the oral history and ethnographic data.

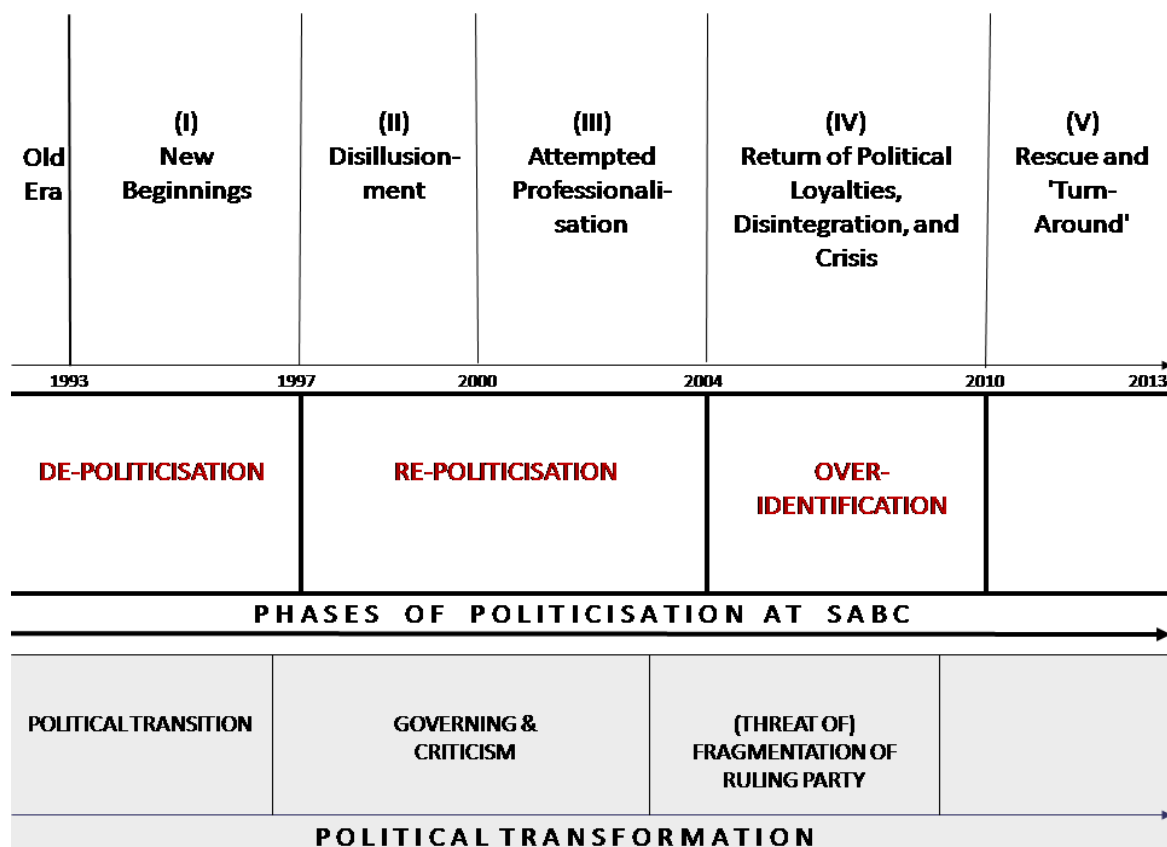


Fig. 2

The SABC's de-politicisation phase (1993-1997, Period I) ran more or less concurrently with the initial period in South African politics in which the former liberation movement assumed government responsibilities as a result of the political transition from an authoritarian apartheid state to an inclusive democracy. The re-politicisation phase (1997-2004, Periods II and III) centred around negotiating relations with the new

political establishment and resulted in a workable equilibrium between politicisation and professionalism. The third phase, over-identification (2004-2010, Period IV), was characterised by the SABC's attempt to navigate unprecedented factionalism within the ANC that threatened to split the former liberation movement. Journalists over-identified with these external political developments, thereby compromising the SABC's independence and credibility. Respondents felt that this over-identification helped cause, or, at the very least, compound, the 2009 corporate crisis.

Following this, there were indications of the SABC integrating this experience in some way, paralleled by the ANC surviving the threat of a split and the faction around Zuma assuming government responsibilities following a democratic process which in turn can be seen as a sign of democratic consolidation in an dominant-party environment such as the South African one (cf. Linz and Stepan 1996). The SABC went on to re-develop a more professional organisational culture despite continuing high levels of politicisation on board and senior executive level and some internal top-down politicisation, at least while the senior editorial in both radio and television was able to retain its autonomy. This suggests that politicisation at the top of the organisation – which can be considered a permanent feature of public broadcasters in a transitional environment – does not necessarily or automatically result in highly politicised newsrooms.

At the same time, this period needs to be seen in the context of developments that occurred after the end of my fieldwork, i.e. since 2013. I refrain from a detailed analysis here as I would be forced to rely on secondary sources for my analysis which would reduce the quality of findings in comparison to the rest of the thesis. I do, however, wish

to share some thoughts and observations that deserve more in-depth study.

In Chapter 3 I have provided an overview of some important developments since 2013 that show a dramatic increase in the abuse of editorial power and political pressure linked primarily to one SABC executive, Zuma loyalist Hlaudi Motsoeneng. We also have some evidence, such as public allegations by journalists and resignation letters, that intensified direct politicisation was increasingly accompanied by a remarkable and unprecedented cooption of senior editors, including some of those with long-standing reputations for independence that were spear-heading de-politicisation in previous periods (SAPA 2012; Staff reporter 2016b). However, it was also met with even more remarkable and equally unprecedented resistance by lower-tier editors and journalists. At the end of 2012 journalists sent an anonymous letter to the board and the acting Head of News alleging political interference (SAPA 2012). In 2016 three journalists resisted an order not to cover a protest outside the SABC which resulted in their suspension. Following this, another three highly regarded editors and journalists penned an letter to Motsoeneng in solidarity with their suspended colleagues voicing their “displeasure and increasing concern” about a violation of editorial policies and the SABC's legal mandate (Muli, Pillay, and Steenkamp 2016). This was followed by the public resignation of the head of news (Staff reporter 2016b). Eventually, eight journalists who had openly resisted and, in the words of their lawyer refused to “apply censorship” were fired (Staff reporter 2016d). They became known as the 'SABC 8' and, within days, independent-minded colleagues organised a 'black-out' in solidarity by wearing black clothes on air to protest against censorship (Ferreira 2016b). A campaign with the title “Not in my name” featuring journalists with their lips sealed with masking

tape took to the streets and to social media (Staff reporter 2016a). Newspapers started writing about a “revolt” taking place at the SABC newsrooms (Pather 2016a). The SABC 8 testified before a parliamentary enquiry, challenged their dismissal as unlawful and were eventually vindicated in court (Modise 2017).

Until they finally succeeded in their aim, these acts of resistance continued in the face of serious threats and intimidation. One of the journalists testifying before Parliament received this text message: “Traitors, protecting your white friends in Parliament who started this, telling lies about your comrades. You are warned ... watch the blood flow” (Wet 2016). Barely a year later, Suna Venter, one of the SABC 8, died at the age of 32 following a diagnosis of stress cardiomyopathy widely linked to what seemed like a systematic campaign to silence her. In a media statement, her family described how, “over the course of the past year, she received various threatening SMS messages. Her flat was broken into on numerous occasions, the brake cables of her car were cut and her car’s tyres were slashed. She was shot at and abducted - tied to a tree at Melville Koppies while the grass around her was set alight. On a separate occasion earlier this year, she was shot in the face with an unknown weapon and received surgery to remove the metal pellets from her face. During the past year, she was assaulted on three various occasions.” (The Venter Family 2017).

The developments of recent years occurred against a significantly altered political landscape dominated by what is now known as 'state capture' (Bhorat et al. 2017) aimed at facilitating systematic and large-scale corruption to benefit a small number of individuals linked to President Zuma. At this point, we do have evidence that the SABC

has been an important part of the state capture project (Public Protector of South Africa 2014). A hypothesis worth testing is to what extent this change in the political environment from primarily ideological political conflict towards post-ideological self-enrichment has mobilised resistance at the SABC, and to what extent it was the sheer scale of the abuse and consequent fundamental threats to the SABC's mandate that was instrumental. These questions remain open.

What we can conclude for the time periods covered here is that, throughout all phases, politicisation was driven, enabled and inhibited by a wide variety of factors that rose to prominence at different times and interacted in complex ways. While drivers such as top-down and bottom-up politicisation and some inhibitors such as legal safeguards are central to understanding the overall process and have been studied in other contexts (e.g. Ransom 1987; Betts 2002; Rovner 2008 for intelligence services; Peters and Pierre 2004; Van der Meer, Steen, and Wille 2007 for civil services), they are the factors most obvious to observers. Less obvious, but equally important to understand are those enablers (such as anticipatory politicisation, blurred lines of authority and authoritarian management) and inhibitors (such as resistance and professionalism) that are closely linked to the organisational culture – especially in an environment with favourable structural conditions and de-jure independence, such as the South African one.

Studies on politicisation have tended to focus on either institutions, decision-making processes, or issues (De Wilde 2011). All three are relevant in the context of the SABC. In addition, I have looked at the politicisation of individuals and discourse. It emerged that the SABC becomes increasingly politicised when external, especially partisan and

factional, political dynamics play out inside the organisation, compromising its mandate. The politicisation of decision-making processes in the newsroom stands in contrast to professionalism and is closely linked to the contentiousness of the issues involved (cf. Tallberg and Johansson 2008; De Wilde 2011). As a public broadcaster, the SABC is prone to dealing with politicised issues (cf. Krapels 2012; Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012) that are publicly contested on a daily basis, though the nature of these issues may change. Politicised individuals, especially those with editorial responsibility and power to affect decision-making processes, were central to the broader politicisation of the organisation, and increasingly so in the second half of the period under discussion, but they are only part of the problem. Throughout, internal discourse has been politicised in various ways affecting decision-making processes.

To some extent, the politicisation of the SABC can be seen not just as a function of its political environment, but as a function of its very role as a public broadcaster. As a media organisation it naturally deals with contentious issues, and its broad mandate, compared to private media, suggests a high susceptibility towards politicisation (as Lyons et al. have argued with regard to UN specialised agencies (cited in Dutt 1995, 22)). For these reasons alone, top-down politicisation is likely to continue to be a challenge for the SABC, as it has been an ongoing challenge even for established public broadcasters in mature democracies. As Born has demonstrated for the BBC, however, a high degree of organisational autonomy can be achieved through the presence of a “recalcitrant professionalism” (Born 2005, 31). While the SABC is generally in a favourable position compared to other public broadcasters that have emerged from an authoritarian environment (cf. Chapter 2), its de-facto editorial independence in the

long run is far from guaranteed and, while resistance and professionalism have acted as inhibitors to politicisation, both these factors are present much less consistently than at the BBC. The developments of the two decades covered here suggest that, rather than trying to eliminate external pressure or solve the problem through continuous organisational restructuring, it may be more productive in the long run to also strengthen the organisational culture in a way that politicisation can be more effectively inhibited and resisted. Issues such as resistance in relation to subcultures, group process and individual agency will be explored in detail in the remaining chapters.

## 6 Pockets of Independence and the Psychodynamics of the Organisational Culture

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*There is a need to distinguish among what individuals say they believe, what they honestly think they believe, and what they actually do believe.<sup>59</sup>*

So far the analysis of the SABC's politicisation has concentrated on the organisation as a whole as if it was a unified entity with one monolithic organisational culture. This is echoed by the SABC literature in general, exemplified in sweeping statements about professionalism having been “thrown out the window” (Ngwenya 2015, 243), or about the SABC having become “a propaganda arm of the ANC” characterised by a “master and servant relationship” (ibid., 218). I have already demonstrated in previous chapters that such conclusions do not do justice to empirical reality. In Chapter 4 I have identified and described four recurring patterns of behaviour in the newsroom and conceptualised them as manifestations of politicisation: over-reliance on official sources and uncritical reporting, voluntary upward referral and self-censorship, structural blurring of accountability, and withdrawal and self-absorption. In Chapters 5/I and 5/II I have

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<sup>59</sup> (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993, 24)

traced these patterns as well as politicisation in its various forms (bottom-up, top-down, anticipatory) over time and argued that, while the overall level of politicisation is strongly linked to external political developments, this is not a straight-forward causal relationship; politicisation is not simply driven by politics. Rather, there are a number of drivers, enabling and inhibiting factors, many internal to the SABC, that prevail at different times. This makes the process of politicisation a fluid and multi-layered one with short-and long-term consequences for journalistic practice.

I, too, may have created the impression that levels of politicisation are more or less identical across the organisation at any given point in time. This is not the case. There are notable exceptions of groups and individual journalists who do not follow these patterns. Their mere existence proves that within the limitations imposed by the larger system there exists a space for collective and individual agency, and hence for resistance to depoliticisation. As I am shifting my focus to the internal differentiation of the organisational culture, I develop the argument across various levels of the organisation over the remaining chapters of this thesis. Starting in the present chapter with a newsroom that constituted an exception to the dominant organisational culture, I explore some psycho-dynamics of the organisation as a whole before moving on to four distinct subcultures in Chapter 7. Linking subcultures to unconscious processes in groups of journalists working together, I am then going to show how collective psycho-dynamics on all these levels are closely inter-related and relevant to the problem of resistance to politicisation, leading up to the final question of individual agency-as-resistance (Chapter 8).

The overarching theme of this ethnographic part of the thesis is the problem of agency as it is located at the intersection of individual and social psychodynamics. I proceed from the assumption that, within the confines of externally imposed structural conditions on what can be said and what cannot be said, such as the Constitution and laws of the country, the SABC's public broadcasting mandate, editorial policies, commercial imperatives, or explicit censorship, all journalists find themselves within a space that allows for agency. This space is subjectively determined. Subjectivity, further, includes an unconscious dimension. As Born argued, the notion of self-censorship as an intentional "functional compartmentalization" of different aspects of oneself (I think A, but only say B in order to avoid/ achieve C) does not adequately account for unconscious processes and for "how authentically they are experienced by the individual" (Born 1997, 494). It is precisely this dimension that I shall attempt to explore here.

Immediately, this poses a problem: How does one gain insight into unconscious processes, how does one gather such 'data'? By definition, unconscious processes cannot be directly observed, but only inferred. Historically, their study has been the domain of psychoanalytic enquiry located simultaneously in clinical practice and a system of theories and knowledge. Psychoanalysis, it has been argued, is "in and of itself a form of research, an instrument or methodology for the investigation of the unconscious mind and its ramifications" (Thomas 2016, 17). As a method focussed on the singularity of each case it cannot easily be transferred to the social sciences, and the question to what extent it can inform and extend qualitative methods has been at the heart of the relatively new field of psycho-social studies (Clark and Hoggett 2009; Frosh 2003, 2007;

Hollway and Jefferson 2013).

Ethnography is well-placed to engage with this challenge of studying what is unconscious – by demanding reflexivity and valuing observation in addition to interviews. It was only when I kept encountering contradictions in the field that I became sensitised to the unconscious dimension of the SABC's organisational culture: time and again peoples' actions were incongruent with their stated intentions, explicitly expressed beliefs changed shape radically in the context of group situations, and within journalists' narratives contradictions surfaced that respondents were not conscious of and that triggered defensive reactions when pointed out to them. Much of what went on in newsrooms every day seemed to be out of peoples' awareness, especially those behaviours that had become routine: an unquestioned (and sometimes unquestionable) part of the 'way things are done around here'.

For instance, I noticed that the desire to learn or discover something new, let alone to question apparent truths or challenge authority – professional curiosity and scepticism, if you like, ordinarily a driving force for journalists – seemed to be nearly absent in many staff. Any hint of potential conflict had an air of danger about it, repeatedly eliciting nervous reactions and general signs of anxiety. Initially the temptation was to understand this in relation to individual journalists, and in the early stages of the research I probably colluded with some of the collective projections by locating the problem of political pressure in a handful of senior managers. As time went on it became more clear that there was a social dimension involved and that any analysis that did not account for both groups and individuals would be inadequate.

I also became increasingly aware of how journalists related to me differently based on what they perceived my role to be. Some saw me as a detached outsider, an academic from a prestigious foreign university; others as a trustworthy colleague: a fellow public broadcasting journalist. And yet others spoke to a sympathetic insider, jokingly calling me an 'honorary South African'. Each of these roles came with its own projections of who I really was, assumptions of what I was really thinking, and expectations of what I wanted to hear. In other words, I became alert to what psychoanalysts call transference dynamics and started treating such information as part of my data. The challenge in the field was to not identify with the projections, especially with the presumed position of knowing that I was often placed in. I strove to guard the delicate balance between holding open a space for honest reflection, doubts and vulnerability for my respondents while remaining open myself to being surprised, challenged and contradicted in what I thought I had understood about the SABC's organisational culture at any point in time.

Once we take seriously what is not easily visible, we need a theoretical framework that allows us to conceptualise that which is *not* spoken and powerfully *not* obvious in the greater context of an organisation's politicisation. I am turning to psychoanalytic theory for this which puts the unconscious at the centre of enquiry. Within a field highly fragmented in itself, I decided against both a 'purist' approach, and one aimed at a complete integration of different theories. Instead, in the remaining chapters of this thesis I am going to be led by the ethnographic data and draw on Isabel Menzies Lyth's theory of social defences in organisations and on Wilfried Bion's theory on basic assumption behaviour in groups. Both stand in the tradition of the British object

relations school. I plan to use their combined explanatory power to shed light on the empirically observed phenomenon of politicisation and the difficulties around de-politicisation. I round off the analysis with Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses to explore the position of individual journalists in the final chapter.

In the present chapter, I locate investigative journalism programme 'Special Assignment' as an exceptional space within an organisational culture that is characterised by the patterns of dysfunctional behaviour first identified in Chapter 4. Having observed high levels of anxiety throughout my fieldwork, I now show how these behaviour patterns have an important anxiety-alleviating and stabilising function on the collective level. I find this consistent with Menzies Lyth's concept of social defences, but propose an extension of her focus on anxiety as exclusively generated by the primary task to include a broader range of work-related anxieties linked to the organisation's history and socio-economic environment. I show that, for a number of reasons to be discussed, in newsrooms such as 'Special Assignment' social defences were less prevalent, not least because existing anxiety was managed differently. This opened up a space for agency that helped journalists resist politicisation.

## 6.1 Exceptional Spaces: Newsrooms as Pockets of Independence

### **The Case of Investigative Programme *Special Assignment***

In the months I spent negotiating access to SABC newsrooms I was met with suspicion and apprehension; not hostility, but more or less openly expressed fears about the ramifications of my presence for the manager in charge and the need to somehow control what I could be privy to and how I would interpret what I saw. About to give up hope that management would ever assist me, I contacted the executive producer of investigative television show *Special Assignment* directly. He requested some time to think it over and then extended an invitation for me to come and stay for as long as I liked with his team of six producers. Although well aware that his bosses would be concerned, he decided that it was within his authority to allow me into his newsroom and that there was no need for upward consultation in this matter. On arrival I was given a desk and a staff card that would allow me access to the building. There were no probing questions, no suspicions, no directives, no forbidden spaces. The expectation was that I would get on with whatever I needed to do and that, as a fellow journalist, I would find my way around without much assistance. Over the months that followed that desk became my base in Johannesburg. As I gained access to other newsrooms over time, it was clear that there was something quite unusual about the *Special Assignment* space. Not only was the presence of a researcher met with very little anxiety; trust was similarly present among the journalists, and between them and the EP. I only realised this over time and in comparison with what I would come to realise as 'normal' in most

other parts of the organisation.

The newsroom worked comparatively well and efficiently, morale was high, and journalists produced good-quality work that sometimes pushed boundaries by covering politically sensitive issues in a critical way. There was a vitality about the space. The newsroom was subjected to the same degree of structural dysfunction as the rest of the organisation (although, as a flagship programme, it was slightly better resourced). Yet journalists were keen to expose wrong-doing, the vast majority of story ideas were self-generated, and producers took responsibility for their stories and defended them when challenged. I found few formal newsroom routines, but rather an implicit consensus that decisions were to be taken at the lowest possible level. I also witnessed many instances where journalists argued vociferously with each other, challenged each other, discussed the risks involved in pursuing a specific story, or shared their feelings of anger and shame when they were 'defeated' by one or other senior manager exerting pressure on them to be less controversial.

The team regularly won prestigious awards despite strong competition from private channels. Unsurprisingly, Special Assignment was often at the centre of conflicts around political interference and had seen a number of programmes spiked shortly before broadcast. However, such pressure and conflict had not paralysed the newsroom to the extent that journalists would avoid further conflict. A critical stance towards power was something to aspire to rather than avoid. They very rarely fell back onto the otherwise so widespread patterns of behaviour I first identified in chapter 4. In terms of the SABC's mandate, and certainly in terms of its role as an investigative newsroom, the team was,

overall, working on task (Rice 1963; Obholzer and Roberts 1994; Bion 1961), i.e. attending to the core business of the News and Current Affairs division.

How can we make sense of a space like this amidst an organisation that, on the whole, presents itself so differently? Let us, for a moment, go back to some of the patterns outlined in chapter 4, those I found to be pervasive in most SABC newsrooms and summarise them as follows: (1) dependency on official news sources and uncritical reporting; (2) voluntary upward referral of decisions and self-censorship; (3) structural blurring of accountability; and (4) withdrawal and self-absorption. We also know what the consequences are of these patterns: the every-day work of journalism can be carried out, but only just. Adverse effects include uncritical news and current affairs reporting, the stifling of initiative and creativity, the undermining of editorial staff's professional authority, low-quality coverage and journalists disengaged from their professional roles as well as from their audience. All of these inhibit independent, questioning journalism, the essence of the News and Current Affairs Division's task as set out in the SABC's mandate (cf. chapters 3 and 4).

As I have shown, while such patterns dominated journalistic practice, they were not immediately obvious; some only emerged over time in the dialogical process of data collection and analysis. Significantly, they also went generally unacknowledged by those involved as they had become part of the organisational culture and were considered normal professional behaviour – as if the work environment itself demanded this. The question then arises to what extent, in the face of such high cost to the organisation, these patterns serve a (collective) function that may not be obvious precisely because it

lies outside peoples' awareness.

At this point it is useful to differentiate between what Lawrence (1977) termed the normative (formal) task of an organisation, and the phenomenal task(s) defined as the (often unconscious) imaginary task(s) staff are working on that can be inferred from their behaviour, rather than from their stated intentions (V. Z. Roberts 1994). This chapter is an attempt to make sense of this on the level of the organisation as a whole.

## **6.2 Encountering Anxiety**

A current affairs editor (R95) had in interviews repeatedly expressed his frustration with reporters being overly reliant on government press releases and too focussed on getting quotes from officials. He persistently encouraged them to take initiative and speak to ordinary people and was also scathing about the then-CEO's decision to make government's five priority areas the main focus of the SABC's work, among them rural development. "Why", he asked with indignation in his voice, "should we take this government policy and make it our corporate goal?!" A few weeks later I observed him responding to a journalist pitching a rare self-generated story about forced marriage by suggesting she speak to government about it to "get some balance" as it would fall under "rural development" (field notes).

If the extent to which SABC journalists were at odds with their task was surprising, another phenomenon became apparent as the fieldwork progressed: that of individuals being at odds with themselves. Journalists acted contrary to their stated beliefs, were inconsistent in their narratives, and contradicted themselves. When confronted with and invited to reflect on this, many lapsed into silence, appeared confused, responded by denying or downplaying their actions ('I didn't raise this issue in the script because the camera guy didn't get the right visuals'), rationalised their behaviour ('The minister would have never answered that question', 'It makes no difference – this is what our news is like anyway'), or started speaking about (and projecting onto) other journalist ('Yeah, but did you see what X did? She is in the pockets of the ruling party!'). Sometimes the reaction was no more than an annoyed look, an abrupt end to the conversation, or the obvious attempt to avoid further contact.

Quite frequently, such exchanges also triggered strong emotional responses of shame, guilt, or anger. For instance, one black editor (R97) who I had frequently observed to be reluctant to take decisions, referring even trivial matters upward, initially claimed he had “no choice”. When challenged on this, he launched into a long and seemingly unconnected narrative about the beginning of his career at the apartheid-era SABC and that nothing could compare with how bad and tightly controlled newsrooms were then. Eventually, he spoke about the shame he felt when black friends and family accused him of collaborating with the (white) oppressor:

A: I told them, 'there is nothing I can do!' I didn't produce those news, they were compiled by my bosses, I just translated them and read the bulletin. If you didn't make that clear you were in big shit in the township.

Q: And today?

A: Same thing. People say, 'you had this in your newscast, but we read something else in the papers'. And I say, 'look, it's just a job. I'm just putting on air what I get told.'

I began to understand this and similar responses as indications of high levels of anxiety linked to the work itself and decided to inviting journalists to speak about what caused them stress and also to share their observations of colleagues. Overall, those who, according to my own observations, relied heavily on off-task<sup>60</sup> behaviour were less willing to acknowledge anxiety, although they showed clear signs of it (body language, tone of voice, general avoidance behaviour etc.) when asked to reflect on behaviour. Those few who generally worked on task spoke about feeling paralysed, of finding their work unbearable, of wanting to resign, of the effect it had on their families, of taking extended sick-leave or resorting to narcotics. "So every night I go home and I drink half a bottle of wine. Sometimes more", said a senior television editor (R90) well known for her high professional standards, smiling wryly. "To keep my sanity. The SABC is an extremely difficult place."

Anxiety, it seemed, was managed in different ways. But what caused its wide-spread presence in the first place? At least some of it could be explained by recourse to the usual suspects of life in large organisations, such as management instability, hierarchical structures and economic pressures – both widely studied in the SABC context (Tleane and Duncan 2003; Teer-Tomaselli 2005; Orgeret 2006). Yet this was not what my respondents seemed to struggle with primarily. What caused them stress were things that they found difficult to articulate, things that had to do with the history of the organisation and the people who had worked there, with feelings of inadequacy, with

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<sup>60</sup> When using terms like 'off-task' or 'anti-task' this is meant to be in opposition to the formal task, or normative task (Lawrence 1977).

personal and political loyalties and political pressure, with how they related to conflict and aggression, and with sometimes traumatic exposure to violence and suffering in the course of their work. There was shame attached to much of this – sometimes expressed in body language, sometimes spoken about reluctantly over time – which would be one plausible reason for pushing such thoughts out of awareness.

### **6.3 Sources of Anxiety**

It is this hidden layer of experience that I am trying to shed some light on – not with the aim of replacing alternative and more tangible explanations, but with the aim of extending our understanding of the less conscious dynamics present in newsrooms. In this section I attempt to systematise what I came to understand to be major sources of anxiety linked directly to covering political news and current affairs for the SABC. These can be grouped into (1) the nature of journalistic work, (2) organisational history, (3) politicisation, and (4) exposure to violence and suffering. While this does not constitute an exhaustive list, they do reflect the themes that emerged most persistently in the comparative analysis of observational and interview data. They have a place alongside other, more easily acknowledged sources of stress and anxiety, such as conflicting task, bureaucratic dysfunctionality, or commercial pressures. I explore these four sources of anxiety in some detail as it will eventually aid our understanding of those exceptions to the dominant organisational culture that, like *Special Assignment*, clearly exist.

A first source of anxiety is related to journalism itself, and in particular public

broadcasting. In my observation of newsrooms, what stood out was what was not being said: controversial questions not being asked, follow-ups not undertaken, doubts not voiced, facts not probed, claims not questioned, newsmakers not challenged, commentary left almost exclusively to external 'experts' – even at times when editors discouraged this. When this was explored in interviews, a picture emerged of a news organisation highly anxious about conflict, confrontation and judgement.

Respondents frequently spoke critically about colleagues who didn't 'live up to professional standards'; yet their own day-to-day behaviour suggested a fair amount of projection of their own anxieties and failings onto others. For instance, one reporter (R71) who consistently refrained from engaging critically with interviewees complained about others working by the book, waiting for instructions, and not applying their critical mind: “They ask themselves, what is my duty: to question this, or just to disseminate it? And they will go for the latter.” Similarly, a television editor (R41), in justification of toning down mildly controversial stories for his news bulletin, claimed that his audience was “basically a sensitive crowd”. Yet he had to concede that this same audience had turned the 'Daily Sun', a tabloid that feeds off controversy, scandal and taboos, into South Africa's most popular newspaper (Wasserman 2010b). So while there was considerable agreement on what SABC journalists were meant to do, usually with reference to the SABC's mandate, translating this task into professional practice was anxiety-provoking. How do we make sense of this?

I propose that the media as a system domain (Bain 1998) perform a specific function within and for society, like the health system does, the education system, organised

religion, the army, or indeed all public sector organisations (Hoggett 2006). In this way, organisations 'carry' something for the overall system, society as a whole; they perform emotional work, what Armstrong (2004) referred to as the 'primary process'. Consequently, they exhibit shared anxiety profiles. Health professionals, as so convincingly argued by Menzies (1960), collectively function to keep death at bay for the rest of us, thus carrying the burden of death-related anxieties. The role of journalists is to ask questions on behalf of, and provide answers for, their audience: to keep the public informed. They carry for us our various states of not-knowing, ignorance, prejudice, and fear and aggression towards public figures, powerful elites, groups and organisations. On behalf of society they routinely engage with the Other: the personalised not-me, the one perceived to be radically different. This Other is a common target for projections ('greedy and powerful' politicians, 'dangerous Muslims', 'arrogant' whites, 'unpredictable' blacks etc.), and contact and engagement with the Other is a precondition for the withdrawal of these projections. Such contact, however, is anxiety-provoking, and arguably less so when it is made indirectly through an intermediary, such as a journalists.

Journalists are expected to a greater or lesser degree to confront this Other, to intrude in people's lives and organisations, to expose problems and wrong-doing, to break news. As the terms suggest, such behaviour requires some measure of aggression, justified generally as being in the public interest: the price to pay for a greater good. However, if we follow Klein's work on the subject, aggression inevitably comes with persecutory anxiety in tow (Hinshelwood 1991), and this is especially apparent at the SABC when paranoid fears of being punished for thinking independently persist even at times of

considerable editorial freedom. “In the early 1990s”, mused one editor (R21), “there was some good journalism at the SABC. People were not scared to ask questions, not scared to raise issues.” A colleague (R29) added how now (in late 2010), “if you start being vigorous and questioning and probing the way that a proper journalist should be then they [bosses and colleagues] will be irritated”.

Apart from being an SABC phenomenon, this points to a particular challenge faced by public service media that, by acting as mediators of different social interests, are meant to contribute to national cohesion, i.e. to unite rather than divide, not last by modelling tolerance and respectful engagement. This is especially true in transitional democracies and divided societies. Being tasked with having to be simultaneously probing/aggressive and respectful/unthreatening generates high levels of anxiety-inducing ambiguity. At the SABC, this often turned into a full-blown fear of external criticism, not least because journalism is a fast-paced environment, and whatever inevitable errors are made can lead to public shaming.

A second source of anxiety lies within the organisation and its particular history. Because of the SABC's notorious and shameful past as a propaganda instrument, those working there are only too aware of being under constant public scrutiny. The public broadcaster makes headlines on a regular basis and is subject to almost constant mistrust, ridicule and criticism. Though ranking among the top three most trusted institutions in the country in 2010 (Benjamin Roberts, wa Kivilu, and Davids 2010), this was not reflected in media discourse and thus of little comfort to those working for the organisation. Respondents expressed feelings of anger and shame when contemplating

their employer's public image. One radio reporter (R57) said with a rare expression of candour: "I feel very much embarrassed. Sometimes I wish people didn't know I work for the SABC. It is degrading."

This particular journalist had joined the newsroom after the end of apartheid. Many of his colleagues, however, were already working there in the 1980s, and their discourse was different. When reflecting on current problems, they would inevitably draw comparisons to the old SABC with its extreme forms of editorial control. Some went to great length to exonerate themselves from their own involvement claiming powerlessness in the face of overwhelming force, but also (in the case of black journalists) defiance and subversion with a frequency and of a scale that was highly improbable given the political realities at the time. One editor (R39), for instance, claimed to have worked underground for the ANC's military wing (MK) while reading news for the SABC, only to admit, when pressed for details, that he was "more of a self-appointed cadre". What shone through these accounts was a fear of being judged negatively for having colluded with the oppressor, for being a coward and sell-out, and, even now, for belonging to a tainted organisation known for producing propaganda both then and now.

Journalists aspired to be professional, a term often associated by them with notions of worthiness in the post-apartheid era where the media enjoy rights people have fought and died for. At the same time, incompetence was a well-known problem on all levels of the organisation, and much of this had to do with the way black staff especially had (not) been trained under the old system. The fear of having one's incompetence exposed

permeated editorial meetings.

A third source of anxiety, perhaps the most fluctuating one over time, is political interference originating from within or outside the organisation. As I have shown in previous chapters, external political developments are closely linked to the drivers of politicisation (top-down and bottom-up), even though levels of political pressure never came anywhere near those of the apartheid days. Immediate effects of political pressure included a (real or perceived) loss of autonomy, for example when producer autonomy was undermined by an instruction to host or not host a particular person on a show. For the majority of respondents this invoked fears about job security and career progression.

But pressure and interference also triggered internal conflicts arising from competing values, multiple group memberships and resulting divergent loyalties, for example with regard to professional values, political values, economic needs, or class aspirations. This was true particularly for those journalists strongly attached to both the ideals of the liberation movement and their professional independence. “Most of the pressure comes from outside”, explained a political editor (R114) with sympathies for the ANC government: “Election time is the worst. My phone won't stop ringing.” Interviews confirmed that senior editors bore the brunt of actual political pressure and experienced most of the stress and anxiety arising from it.

Interestingly, however, anxiety levels did not subside lower down the news hierarchy, despite very few reporters having had direct experience of attempted censorship or

undue interference. I also observed how even minor successful attempt to influence editorial processes confirmed a widely encountered view among staff that the broadcaster was ultimately serving the government of the day rather than the public.

Early in 2010 I arrived at the Johannesburg headquarters which I had visited many times before. The long-standing Head of Television News had just been demoted to the position of Economics Editor. The Political Editor had been fired on flimsy grounds. There were rumours of a politically motivated purge by the then Head of News who was allegedly doing the bidding of the President. Meetings were uneventful, the mood subdued. One editor remarked: "People have families, they try to make an honest living here! You don't do this to them! I also want to go. I am making phone calls every day." And an executive producer (R83) said: "The SABC doesn't know emotion, how to show warmth and affection... you are dealing with peoples' lives here!" The newsroom seemed shaken up, people were anxious and somewhat paranoid. And yet, there was clearly room for agency at that time. A TV bulletin editor (R90), for instance, who frequently shortened or dropped political stories for the evening news explained matter-of-factly: "We do what we want. We see right through these biased stories and cut them down, especially those long stories on the President, just yesterday. And my boss was fine with that." (field notes)

According to both my interview and observational data, however, actual instances of political pressure such as the one described above were far rarer between 1993 and 2013 than anxiety levels suggested. Despite this the perception persisted that, in order

to survive at the SABC, one ought to keep one's head down. An excessive fear of retribution was palpable in interviews, for instance with this editor (R91) who operated in the same environment as the one above, albeit on a different shift: "I suppose we are told... we have been told on occasion that we have to carry a specific story and ... [pauses, clearly uncomfortable]... obviously we don't drop the President's stories... [clears throat]".

Fourthly, SABC journalists are exposed to a wide range of social ills and injustice, such as extreme inequality, poverty, the Aids pandemic, and high levels of crime and violence. This may trigger not only existential anxiety, but also (survivor) guilt for living relatively privileged lives. While none of this is exclusive to journalists, it is a rarely discussed and yet omnipresent aspect of their daily work evidenced by frequent references to "the poor" and "voiceless" that "need to be given a voice", or recurrent yet fleeting editorial initiatives to add a social responsibility component to news stories<sup>61</sup>. There is also the broader context of South African society, of which journalists are a part, where in 2013 63% of the population felt "afraid and alert all the time in case [they] become a victim of crime" (Kuper, Shapiro, and Hoets 2013). This is in addition to being targeted by political violence in the field. One respondent (R21) remembered covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

"The violence was tough... After a few weeks they offered counselling to us journalists. We said, 'we can't, we are working'. There were lots of bomb scares and threats. Then we had one session with a counsellor and stuff came out, and it was quite revealing to see what the colleagues were going through and how they were responding and taking it out on their families. I suppose we drank and smoked too much. Obviously some people slipped off the rails, that's inevitable."

A colleague from KwaZulu-Natal (R46) echoed this saying that almost every journalist in

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61 E.g. so-called "developmental features" in radio and "Touching Lives" stories on TV.

the province had been threatened at some stage: “For years, every time you left the newsroom to cover a story, you were at risk. We used to fear for our lives and cover elections in armoured cars and bullet-proof vests. It was very, very scary.” Violence (in this province because of its specific political dynamics) was seen as part of the job, something to get on with.

I propose that the four sources of anxiety discussed here are often pushed out of awareness because they touch on internal conflicts around a professional ego-ideal that values being independent, incorruptible, knowledgeable, tough, critical and competent, as well as being politically progressive, patriotic, and socially responsible. Respondents who denied being much affected by anxiety tended to be the ones who routinely referred to the predictability of work routines, the unquestioned authority of supervisors, the need to avoid controversy, and the ordinariness of the journalistic profession as a job like any other. These accounts were detached, uninvolved, often cynical and coloured by a sense of resignation. I also found an increased tendency among journalists to adopt this stance at times of intensified political pressure, or after a wave of negative coverage of the SABC in the print media, i.e. at times that were especially anxiety-provoking. What this suggests is a dynamic relationship between general levels of anxiety arising from the four sources discussed here and precisely the kind of behaviour patterns observed earlier.

## 6.4 Social defences in a Media Organisation

How can we make sense of what has emerged so far? On the one hand, we have habitual, pervasive and collectively shared behaviour patterns that seem out of place in newsrooms and even counter-productive (V. Z. Roberts 1994) (anti-task (V. Z. Roberts 1994)). On the other hand, we have high levels of anxiety linked to a number of sources to do not just with politicisation, but with the task of journalism, organisational history, and the broader socio-economic environment.

I propose that both phenomena are linked in the way that the behaviour patterns function as social defences against collectively experienced anxiety, much like those originally described by Menzies (1960, 101) as resulting from “collusive interaction and agreement, often unconscious, between members of the organization”. Of course, not all behaviour that interferes with the task is automatically a social defence, and I do not suggest that the patterns observed have only this function, nor that there may not be other ways of dealing with anxiety. I found no consistent evidence in the data to link anxiety arising from a specific source to one or other corresponding defensive pattern. The fundamental defensive mechanism, however, is apparent with all the patterns.

An over-reliance on official news sources and uncritical reporting (pattern 1) shields journalists from criticism and attack in the context of politicisation. More importantly, it reduces anxiety associated with conflict, confrontation, not knowing, and learning – the hallmarks of questioning and independent journalism. Self-censorship and the frequent

use of upward referral (pattern 2) goes one step further by avoiding the anxiety associated with speaking (one's own?) truth, by passing it on to someone else – imagined or real – who is invested with decision-making power (cf. Menzies 1960). This is particularly evident in the context of politicisation, but it is also a way of avoiding feelings of shame and guilt arising out of the SABC's historical collusion with power as well as persecutory anxiety around being monitored and judged negatively. Blurred lines of accountability (pattern 3) function to spread anxiety associated with decision-making and conflict among an unidentified number of unaccountable others. Withdrawal and self-absorption (pattern 4) perpetuate a fantasy that the SABC works in isolation and is thus not subject to anxiety-provoking external demands. It is a way of denial, of not feeling political pressure by pre-empting it and disengaging from the work. It also reduces existential anxiety by enabling a distancing from the SABC's difficult socio-economic environment.

All four patterns are oriented to helping “the individual avoid the experience of anxiety, guilt, doubt and uncertainty... by eliminating situations, events, tasks, activities and relationships that cause anxiety” – the main characteristic of social defence systems (Menzies 1960). Social defences interact with organisational structure in dynamic ways, in our case with the routines of news production. Some of them, such as the traditional way of breaking up the process into segments – assignment, input, output, editing etc. – that fall under the responsibility of different journalists are not SABC-specific. Others, such as the importance given to the news diary and government press releases go back to the apartheid era. Blurred lines of accountability are partially the result of repeated restructuring and policy changes, and withdrawal and self-absorption are aided by the

SABC's elaborate system of job benefits and material rewards. Importantly, however, this structural dimension is not a sufficient condition for the widespread off-task behaviour as there are examples (one of them discussed in the next section) of individuals and teams that behave differently under the same or very similar conditions.

Menzies Lyth locates social defences in organisations on the level of unconscious mental functioning. Manifestations of unconscious dynamics, such as observable behaviour in newsrooms, may be simultaneously caused by conscious processes; like any psychoanalytic symptom they are likely to be overdetermined. Blurred lines of accountability, for instance, may be caused by an organisational environment that could be described at times as paranoiagenic and untrustworthy for a multitude of reasons present in many large organisations. This is no reason to discard possible unconscious causes in favour of more easily measurable ones. While both the anxiety and the patterns of behaviour can at least partially be located in the conscious and pre-conscious realm, it is the connection between the two, i.e. the defensive function itself, that is (mostly) unconscious. This can be inferred for a number of reasons:

(1) Journalists who habitually fell back on off-task behaviour were usually unaware of it. They often denied feeling much anxiety, describing their work as “clear” or “easy”. (2) When confronted with their observable behaviour they tended to respond defensively with denial, rationalisations, and projections. When this was challenged many became visibly anxious. (3) At times or in places where pressure on journalists increased (political transitions, public criticism, structural changes<sup>62</sup>), off-task behaviour as

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<sup>62</sup> Examples are the national TV newsroom around the ANC leadership transition in 2007, regular criticism by private media and opposition parties in the run-up to elections, and the parliamentary newsroom being brought under the 'control' of the Western Cape's Regional Editor in 2010.

evidenced in the patterns outlined in Chapter 4 became more widespread. (4) However, the behaviour persisted even under decreased pressure, when it was actively discouraged by superiors, or when colleagues demonstrated that risks could be taken without major repercussions. This suggests that the anxiety that is being managed is out of proportion to the actual threat, a key characteristic of social defences (Trevithick 2011). (5) Those who did not habitually employ defensive behaviour usually spoke very quickly about their fears and worries, i.e. they were much more in touch with their anxiety and often found the interviews helpful and cathartic. (6) Many of them seemed to have found other, more or less healthy ways, of managing it, such as depression, substance abuse, confiding in friends and family, painting, or mountaineering. Some also left the organisation.

While my findings are broadly consistent with social defence theory they also diverge from it necessitating in particular a reassessment of the role of anxiety. By behaving the way many SABC journalists do, they lessen the psychic pain that comes with the territory of their work: the anxiety-producing aspects of journalism and public broadcasting in particular; the organisation's shameful history, the realities of the ebb and flow of politicisation, and the consequences of working in a particular socio-economic context. However, only the first source of anxiety is directly related to the (primary) task, for Menzies Lyth a key condition for triggering a social defence. This anxiety arising out of the practice of journalism, and the various ways of managing it that I have described, characterise the media in general as a system domain (Bain 1998) that differs from the health care, social work and educational sectors that the bulk of the social defence literature has focused on. When we adjust our focus to public

broadcasting as a sub-sector of media and a public sector institution, additional shared sources of anxiety enter the picture, in this case around politicisation. The particularities of a social defence system that undermines the task of journalism is an important finding in itself that calls for further study and exploration. But what the SABC data shows is that we need to go beyond this. If we want to understand dysfunctional newsrooms through a psychoanalytic lens while doing justice to the complexities of contemporary media organisations, a narrow focus on anxiety generated by the task is insufficient and needs to be extended to a multi-level analysis of broader work-related anxieties and defences linked to the organisation's history and socio-economic environment.

Such a broadening of the theory is imperative when considering interventions aimed at improving task focus and facilitating sustainable change within the organisational culture. As is well known, social defences become even more pronounced in times of crisis and change, something described by Armstrong as a shift towards an organisation's "pathological version of itself" (Armstrong 2004, 68). In the light of this, the defensive behaviour I have identified can be seen as an effective (if problematic) way of staving off potentially overwhelming anxiety. The persistence of these patterns across the organisation and over time suggests that the SABC's social defence system serves a secondary, unacknowledged and largely unconscious task: that of stabilising a broadcaster in a difficult, complex and conflict-ridden transitional environment.

## 6.5 Explaining Exceptional Spaces in the Context of Social Defences

After this considerable excursion into what seems to be 'the norm' at the SABC, let us get back to the exceptions. What is different there? Why? And what can we learn from them? As I argued earlier, *Special Assignment* journalists rarely fell back onto defensive behaviour patterns. This can be explained largely by two things: a lower prevalence of individually experienced anxiety, and a newsroom culture that facilitates the making-conscious of internal conflicts. I am going to discuss both briefly.

My data from interviews and observations suggests that *Special Assignment* journalists experienced much less anxiety and therefore had less need to be relieved from it, for four reasons: (1) They tended to be inherently comfortable in the role of the questioning, critical, persistent, confrontational, investigative journalist as this was usually what attracted them to the show in the first place. They valued independent work and disliked being micro-managed. (2) Most had joined the SABC after the end of apartheid suggesting lower levels of guilt and shame about their professional past. (3) Because investigative work demands more skills and experience, levels of competency were high and individuals tended to have strong professional values – which put them into a more powerful position when it came to negotiating political pressure. (4) *Special Assignment* had become the target of positive projections in the public domain where it was portrayed as a bastion of resistance within the SABC. This provided a ready source of positive identification for the team not available to most other SABC journalists; it made anxiety easier to bear.

Still, there was self-censorship: topics that just would not “fly at the SABC” (R120), such as critical coverage of the President or of the SABC itself. Yet what was missing was the implicit support and buy-in I had come across elsewhere. Instead of being pushed out of awareness, internal conflicts were more frequently acknowledged in a supportive environment, i.e. experienced consciously. I frequently observed journalists sharing their doubts and worries with colleagues. Self-censoring, when it occurred, was a matter of shame or, sometimes, of practicality: of choosing one's battles – borne collectively and thus de-stigmatised for the individual. In as far as this amounted to making the unconscious conscious it followed the logic of psychoanalysis where the verbalisation of internal conflicts reduces their potency and therefore the subject's need to rely on defence mechanisms.

While there were not many spaces like *Special Assignment* at the SABC, it was certainly not the only exception to the dominant organisational culture. At least three others stood out, and they were not short-term phenomena: the SAfm current affairs newsroom in Johannesburg (output), the parliamentary office (before a new and highly politicised editor took over in 2010), and, to a lesser extent, the current affairs newsrooms of Lesedi FM in Bloemfontein<sup>63</sup>. This contradicts in particular Ngwenya's assertion, based at least partially on him dismissing contradictory accounts (2015, 253), that the SABC's editorial staff as such “has accommodated and submitted to the whims of ANC politics” as those who did not were expelled from the organisation (2015, 261).

Because I do not have the space here to discuss all the exceptions that I found in detail, a

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<sup>63</sup> Lesedi FM is likely to be exemplary for the current affairs newsrooms of other African language radio stations such as Umhlobo Wenene (isiXhosa) in the Eastern Cape and Ukhozi FM (isiZulu) in KwaZulu-Natal that were less scrutinised as they broadcast in local languages and far away from head office. However, I did not observe these directly and therefore disregard them in the analysis here.

brief overview will have to suffice.

The main characteristic that these newsrooms shared was a culture of sometimes fierce debate that allowed people to hold very different opinions within a shared environment. Also, journalists in these newsrooms were more reluctant to self-censor, and troubled by the fact that they sometimes did, because they felt strongly accountable to their audiences. In the case of SAfm this was a well-informed national urban audience, in the case of Lesedi FM a largely poor and rural local audience that relied heavily on radio to hold local elites to account. Parliamentary journalists saw themselves at the centre of national politics and were conscious of having to live up to high expectations. All exceptional newsrooms also shared a certain degree of remoteness from the centres of power at the SABC, although this took different shapes. In the case of Parliament and Lesedi fm it was geographic, literally thousands of kilometres away from Johannesburg. *Special Assignment*, while located at head office, was on a different floor at the end of a long corridor and thus quite isolated from most other newsrooms. With SAfm current affairs this remoteness lay in the fact that many of the journalists who worked there were exceptionally young and inexperienced, and not yet fully socialised into the broader organisational culture, including the prevailing social defences against anxiety. Also, radio and current affairs newsrooms in general were less scrutinised within and outside the SABC as they were assigned less status than television and news respectively. A different form of distance was enjoyed by Lesedi FM (and other African language stations) as many middle and senior managers simply did not understand the languages required, even though the audience share of these stations was enormous (SAARF 2011).

These conditions – audience expectations and remoteness – opened up space for agency in these locations. However, they were true for many newsrooms that nevertheless exhibited all the signs and problems of the dominant organisational culture. While such enabling conditions may increase potential space for agency, it is a different question whether this space is taken up – a question that must be posed on the level of the collective as well as on the level of the individual, if we want to understand resistance to politicisation.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have entered a new dimension of the analysis of politicisation: that of unconscious collective processes deeply embedded in the SABC's organisational culture. I have used Menzies Lyth's concept of social defences to show that observable patterns of behaviour in newsrooms (Chapter 4, 5/I and 5/II), while conflicting with the broadcaster's primary task, also function to manage high levels of anxiety originating from a number of work-related sources. This serves to stabilise the organisation as a whole.

However, as I have shown here, 'pockets of independence' do exist. These anomalies within the dominant culture suggest that there is, in fact, considerable space for agency and thus for resistance to politicisation within the SABC. This raises the question why this space is not used more frequently or extensively. In the following chapters I

approach this question by looking at subcultural dynamics in order to set the scene for a better understanding of unconscious group processes and the problem of individual agency-as-resistance to politicisation.

## 7 Four Subcultures

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Apart from specific newsrooms, such as *Special Assignment*, that constituted an exception to the prevailing use of social defences, I also found a number of subcultures permeating the SABC on all levels. What initially appeared to be a fairly homogeneous organisational culture was, in fact, characterised by a high degree of fragmentation. I noticed this gradually by observing social interactions among journalists, by reflecting on the way they interacted with me (and I with them), by putting peoples' manifest behaviour in the context of information gained in interviews, and by paying attention to how respondents consistently referred to a range of individual or collective 'others'. For instance, there were colleagues who were seen as not being 'real journalists', others credited with 'knowing what news is' or, alternatively, with 'knowing everything about news production'. Some were consistently called 'progressive' and linked to 'those who came in in the early 1990s'. Others were repeatedly and contemptuously described as 'liberals' or 'ANC cadres'. A number of individuals were known throughout the organisation as 'being' DA, COPE, ANC, or IFP. I started to record these descriptions and observations more systematically and followed them up in interviews. This is, of course, a highly subjective business that may yield more information about respondents' projections than other peoples' actual characteristics. However, even projections – when encountered consistently – play a role in defining (sub-)cultural boundaries. I further attempted to verify data gained in this way through my own observation and also used

interviewees' responses to being confronted with thoughts others had about them as an indicator of the validity of my emerging conceptual ideas.

I found that, while journalists tended to explicitly agree on the public broadcaster's role in South African society (usually referencing the mandate), they actually positioned themselves in very different ways towards their task, consciously and unconsciously. This position-taking was congruent with what I came to understand as four main subcultures: 'Partisans' (P), 'Independent-minded Professionals' (IMP), 'Black Old Guard' (OG-B), and 'White Old Guard' (OG-W). While there may be others, these four were the ones that I encountered most consistently. They shared a number of socio-demographic markers and differed in their use of the social defences delineated earlier. Drawing and expanding on Bion's theory on groups, I argue later that subcultures are defined partially by members' shared valency (propensity) for basic assumptions functioning (Bion 1961), with consequences for collective psycho-dynamics in 'culturally mixed' groups throughout the organisation (Chapter 8). Significantly, only one of the four subcultures – and not the dominant one – was centred around a shared *actual* commitment to the SABC's task<sup>64</sup> making it an exception that can be seen as a counter-culture within the context of politicisation.

My approach to internal differentiation contrasts with existing accounts of the SABC that commonly either give little or no consideration to this problem (e.g. Orgeret 2006; Ciaglia 2015), or resort to tiers within the hierarchy (Ngwenya 2015). While the latter is of value, I have found no indication in my ethnographic data that task-orientation as broadly conceptualised above is derived from formal function. There are some

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<sup>64</sup> Leading to a congruence between the normative and phenomenal task (cf. Lawrence 1977).

correlations, such as a prevalence of OG-B in middle management and somewhat higher number of Partisans in senior management that I discuss in the respective sections. Racial divisions, of considerable concern in South Africa's private media and society in general, are much less significant at the SABC than one might perhaps expect. I agree with Ngwenya (2015, 249) that at the public broadcaster, by and large, “ethnicities do not drive [political] loyalties”.

This chapter begins with an exploration of a series of editorial conferences that aims to illustrate and bring alive in the ethnographic material the internal differentiation of the SABC's organisational culture. The four subcultures and their roles vis-a-vis politicisation are then discussed in detail. In Chapter 8, this becomes the point of departure for thinking about group dynamics and the problem of agency-as-resistance.

## **7.1 Subcultural Intersections: 'Line Talks'**

To illustrate some subcultural dynamics, I am going to give a condensed account of what was in reality a series of national television news conferences, so called 'line-talks'. I attended many of these over the years, either in person or remotely via teleconferencing link. Line-talks are held several times a day in Johannesburg and serve to streamline the news production process by coordinating the work between the national television newsroom and regional newsrooms. The meeting is normally chaired by the Head of Television or the National News Editor, and the tone of the conversation can be informal. Editors from around the country and from specialised desks (such as economics,

politics, the Presidential corps) offer stories to the national news diary or share progress made by their reporters; executive producers of the various language news bulletins<sup>65</sup> acting as buyers.

Line-talks are the main forum that regularly brings together television journalists from different geographic, linguistic, cultural, and political backgrounds in order to work on a joint task: negotiating the line-up for the main evening news bulletins in accordance with the SABC's mandate and editorial policies. Being politically contested spaces, their form and ritualistic function also makes them a crystallisation point for wider organisational dynamics. Membership of the group is relatively stable, evidenced by journalists recognising each other quickly by the sound of their voice on what is often a bad audio link. Because most attendees represent newsrooms or teams, interactions have a collective dimension, i.e. the conference has characteristics of an inter-group encounter that brings deeply ingrained conflicts and commonly shared projections to the fore and makes some of the cracks in the organisational culture more easily visible.

During a period of relative political independence ('Rescue and turn-around', cf. chapter 5/II), line-talks were led by senior editors with an explicit commitment to improving the quality of the bulletins, to practising a more independent journalism, and to engaging critically with developments in the country. On one occasion, a pitch from a region about a court building whose roof had collapsed was met with the following response from the national news editor (R81): "Get there before the minister does because the idea is not to follow him around. We could have had that story yesterday! We got a tip-off, but

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<sup>65</sup> At the time of research SABC television bulletins were broadcast in the following languages: isiXhosa and isiZulu (Nguni bulletin desk); English (English desk); Afrikaans (Afrikaans desk); seSotho, sePedi, seTswana (joint desk assuming the name of the language represented on a particular day); Ndebele, siSwati (joint desk), xiTsonga, tshiVenda (joint desk).

because we phoned the ministerial spokesperson and they claimed to know nothing about it, we didn't do it!"

Day after day, senior editors interrogated the content of the stories on offer (newsworthiness, angle, context, impact), encouraged journalists to take a more questioning stance, and stressed the SABC's independence at times of pressure. For instance, they discouraged the prevailing practise of leaving all analysis to 'analysts', evidenced by the widely used phrase "some analysts think that..." to support a pitch. Similarly, the acting parliamentary editor was criticised for the coverage of the SABC board interviews: "Five up-sounds back-to-back in a story is not good. I know you don't want to appear biased, but don't be scared to make decisions" (R81). After discussion the stories on offer would be put to the EP's for a decision on what to include in their bulletins, in what format, and in what position on the line-up. Usually there was consensus on the lead stories of the day. EP's decisions were almost always accepted without further discussion. For instance, one day the English desk (R90) representative refused to lead the bulletin with a story on President Zuma. While the Head of News (R49) cautioned her to "keep in mind that we were the only media there" he respected the decision.

And yet, I consistently noticed how little the (black) EPs heading up African language desks contributed to the discussions even despite constant encouragement. Much of the free-flowing conversation would circle between the senior editors, the EPs of the English and Afrikaans desks, one recalcitrant editor from Parliament, and a small number of individuals with a reputation for strongly partisan views. EPs are semi-autonomous and

expected to commission, choose and prioritise stories, i.e. they enjoy considerable power and authority to the extent that they sometimes rejected story ideas presented by the Head of News. Yet these particular EPs rarely made use of this and instead preferred to follow the lead of the chairperson or their (white) colleagues from the English and Afrikaans bulletins. Informal authority seemed to lie with those who were either thought to have political power (senior editors), to have disproportionate decision-making power within the organisation (the English desk), those who argued their case aggressively (the 'recalcitrant' and partisan individuals), or those who were seen as the custodians of professional competence (Afrikaans editor). The African language EPs, despite their formal power and autonomy, tended to defer to others and generally stayed out of arguments, siding with either party only when pressed and in the very end. They rarely interrogated regional representatives on the stories offered or asked them to pursue a specific story or angle for the benefit of their audience. Outside line-talks, they usually denied this while many of the more active participants, especially black journalists, expressed frustration and puzzlement about the 'silence of the black EPs'. Their perceived incompetence and docile, quiet, and disengaged demeanour was usually followed by some variation of the claim that, really, this was no surprise as they had all been part of the old SABC<sup>66</sup>, that they were therefore not 'real journalists' and did not know much about news. A national news editor (R81) commented at the time how "this place has been such an authoritarian institution for so many years that it is a struggle to liberate people... They are not trained as journalists, and they don't have the confidence to engage." The following example illustrates some of these dynamics:

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<sup>66</sup> It was, in fact, the case at that time that not only the African-language EP's, but *all* bulletin editors had had previous careers at the old SABC.

On offer is a story with an update on the construction of the 'Gautrain', South Africa's first high-speed train to connect the economic hubs of Johannesburg and Pretoria – a service that will be financially prohibitive to the majority of local people. Also on offer is a story about violent protests of poor rail commuters in townships, a regular occurrence given unreliable services and faltering infrastructure. Local government elections are to be held in a few weeks. The chair turns to the representatives of the bulletin desks.

English Desk: "We are going to lead with Gautrain."  
National News Editor (*to himself*): "I did that commute by car for two years..."  
Technical support (*sarcastically*): "Listening to [SABC radio station] SAfm."  
Assignment editor (*sarcastically*): "Yeah, by the time you arrive you are suicidal!"

Laughter ensues; the African language EPs stay silent. The editor from Parliament offers a story based on a statement by the Democratic Alliance that governs the Western Cape:

Parliamentary office: "They have statistics, things are going well in the province."  
National News Editor: "That's not the first time they claim that. Why should we carry this today, and how do you propose to do it?"  
Elections editor: "It's easy to always lambast the ANC. But if the DA praise themselves, we also need to ask questions."

A regional editor offers a corporate PR story (on the SABC providing a meal to old ladies in Soweto) that everyone agrees quickly has little news value.

National News Editor: "We'll take this under protest, guys, it's a tail ender."

English Desk ( <i>with a sigh</i> ):	“Do we have to use it, or is it optional?”
Head of News:	“It's not optional.”
Afrikaans Desk ( <i>sarcastically</i> ):	“If we use it, do we get better coffee?”
Head of News:	“Back to the lead story. We can't really lead with Gautrain because it doesn't cater for the working class. That's the majority in this country.”
English Desk:	“I'm not going to lead with yet another election story. Viewers don't want that political stuff shoved down their throat all the time.”
National News Editor:	“Remember we are the public broadcaster...”
Sotho EP ( <i>cautiously</i> ):	“If we lead with the rail protests we would be leading with elections in a negative way...”
National News Editor ( <i>sharply</i> ):	“We are crafting a watchable bulletin in terms of our mandate.”
Afrikaans Desk:	“This protest story is more than just this event. We are not yet ready to lead with it, we need to unpack the context.”

The Afrikaans EP is challenged by senior editors and defends his position ending with: “There are things to consider, and we will do so.” His decision is respected without agreement having been reached. The African language EPs have stayed silent throughout and eventually look to the senior editors for a final decision.

English Desk ( <i>quietly, to me</i> ):	“We have been cutting down on political stories, especially those long stories on the President. The other day [a Presidential correspondent] did 2'10 on Zuma, and we cut it down to 40 seconds.”
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In this particular meeting, the subculture of Independent-minded Professionals was represented by the two senior editors (Head of News and National Assignment Editor), the Elections Editor, the Afrikaans EP and the English Desk editor present on that day. Most of the discussion took place among this sub-group as journalists grappled with balancing the complex demands of the SABC's task: news values (celebrating a new high-speed train vs. highlighting unaddressed problems of poor rail commuters), audience

expectations (political stories on the English News), the demands of the mandate ('negative news' and fair election coverage; reporting without political bias on Western Cape), and managerial constraints (the corporate PR story). There was an implicit agreement among this group that EPs generally had the authority to make decisions on their bulletins, and this authority was taken up by the English and Afrikaans desks. The Partisan subculture was exemplified by the assignment editor from Parliament who was well known for his pro-DA leanings and by the pro-Zuma Presidential correspondent the English Desk editor referred to. The Black Old-Guard subculture was represented by the Sotho EP's cautionary remarks and in the silence of the other African Language EPs. The White Old-Guard subculture, finally, made a veiled appearance in the sarcastic remarks by the technical support person and assignment editor. I discuss this in more detail later.

To re-iterate, this excerpt from my field notes merely serves as an illustration of some of the subcultural dynamics I identified over long periods of time and in different spaces. Occasionally people from the same subculture clustered in informal spaces (cafeteria, social media, after-work activities). Other clues for subcultural affiliation emerged in interviews, though usually not explicitly. For instance, an individual who would engage in unprompted and extensive political arguments in an interview might have made me wonder about her Partisan leanings and I would follow this up with observing her work and speaking to her colleagues. Someone who would frequently share his frustration about having to negotiate political pressure and expectations, or having to work with editors who refused to make decisions or to take risks would have pointed me to a potential IMP affiliation. An older white journalist who would immediately invite me to join him in his complaining about incompetent black bosses and the SABC's bleak

present and future made me think of OG-W affiliation, and a seasoned black journalist who would avoid all discussion about 'sensitive issues' – especially politics – or personal conflicts and doubts of OG-B affiliation.

Of course these are, above all, ideal types – fairly crude theoretical constructs. In reality subcultural affiliation is not wholly exclusive, may overlap or change, and some individuals may not fall into any of these four categories. The two Old-Guard subcultures are partially defined by ethnicity, and this is a direct consequence of them originating in the apartheid era. However, long-term employees are assumed here to belong to either subculture because of skin colour. Rather, subcultural affiliation resembles a default way of looking at the work and the SABC's role, and one that is fairly stable and independent of changing external circumstances.

## **7.2 Partisans (P)**

A quiet morning in the national television newsroom was interrupted by someone bursting into song: “My mo-o-o-ther was a kitchen girl, my fa-a-a-ther was a garden boy. That's why I'm a communist, I'm a communist, I'm a communist!” (field notes)

The singer was a seasoned political journalists (R96) with a strong reputation for being biased towards the ANC and, more specifically, the Mbeki faction. This had become

obvious in her coverage of the Mbeki-Zuma leadership contest ahead of the ANC's Polokwane conference in 2007 (cf. chapter 5/II), where she would consistently slant stories to support Mbeki. A few years later, she was still working under a new news management that had risen to power after Mbeki was defeated by Zuma, but rarely appeared on air. Many of her colleagues pointed to her as an obvious example of a Partisan journalist:

Political editor: "She is off air now because of her political views, the powers that be don't like her. She is seen as pro-Mbeki." (R114)

English desk editor: "She will always sneak in a shot of Thabo Mbeki! Somehow she will find a way of doing that, or mentioning him." (R90)

Ex-political editor: "She is one of those who see themselves as an extension of the party, deployed in the newsroom. These people won't be objective, they are biased. The party doesn't tell them to do this; it is because they remain politically active and display it openly." (R105)

The Partisan subculture is diverse in terms of ethnicity, age and time of employment at the SABC. It is home to those reporters, editors and managers whose work is driven by a party-political or factional agenda. This may happen overtly or covertly, but usually peoples' reputation precedes them, and colleagues talk about them in these terms. As most other Partisans, the journalist above denied in interviews that she was biased in any way and portrayed herself as a passionate journalist who reports without fear or favour. Politicised in the early 1980s, she became active in the liberation struggle. "People were fighting very hard to bring change, and I saw it all. I experienced more than four massacres, so I got even more politically involved." Shortly after the first democratic elections she joined the SABC as a radio presenter and felt that she had since done her best "to educate and inform the nation."

Q: “Looking back at your reporting during the Mbeki-Zuma leadership battle, this was a time when people started seeing you as...”

A: “Agh! It was a misnomer! At no stage have I ever had a meeting with Thabo Mbeki where he asked me to do things in a certain way. I have had many meetings with Thabo [sic] because I would demand sound bites or answers for a story. Where people saw my stories as biased it was not intentional. But when you look at what's happening now... I say: but I was right! But then the public was not ready for such information. I have no regrets.”

Despite her political loyalties, many colleagues and managers saw her as an asset to the newsroom: someone who worked hard, maintained a large network of contacts and genuinely cared about her work. In other cases, however, especially with less experienced reporters, political bias would grow on the back of personal loyalties and flattery rather than political conviction. “President Zuma is fatherly, actually”, said a Presidential correspondent (R74) whose celebratory stories on the President were regularly cut down by the English desk, and went on to explain how honoured he felt to be given this important job at such a young age and despite his humble background.

Partisans also supported other parties, notably the DA. One such assignment editor (R118) was regularly reined in by his boss in front of newsroom staff. An example: During a morning news conference he assigned a reporter to cover the State of the Province Address to be given by the ANC Premier later that day:

Assignment editor: “The focus will be on housing, health, job creation. Then it's very important for you to ask the opposition, the DA...”

Regional editor: “Remember that *COPE* is the official opposition in our province, remember that.”

Interestingly, this regional editor (R89) would go on to become a spokesperson for the DA years later. It is likely he was similarly sympathetic to the DA at the time, but as opposed to the assignment editor, he did not let this influence his professional judgement.

A more covert example of partisanship was a reporter (R71) who admitted to ghost-writing the very State of the Province address he was going to be covering for the SABC. While he acknowledged that this were likely to be seen as a conflict of interest and therefore refrained from disclosing it to his editors, he claimed steadfastly that he was able to play both roles without compromising either and spoke about it in a succession of interviews hoping that being open about his role would make me understand it better.

This journalist joined the SABC in 1995 as a student and young communist who was close to some senior ANC leaders. In 2005 he resigned to help the party with political communication. Three years later, he claimed, ANC leaders felt that the SABC was now their greatest challenge and meetings were held behind closed doors to bring him back to the SABC to help the ANC ahead of the 2009 national and provincial elections.

A: "I would call myself a deployee [of the ANC], an activist. That personal loyalty to the ANC was always very alive in me. As much as I am a journalist who would work quite objectively, I would phone the ANC and say, 'no, I think here you should comment, or this is what they say about you which you are not aware of.' Even today, when I knock off I still meet with them sometimes and strategise with them and help them. But if a mayor who is a loyal ANC member gets caught because of corruption I am the first to go there and confront him. That's when I change colours completely."

Q: "Has it happened, this kind of thing?"

- A: “Yeah. My relationship with the ANC will not tarnish my work as a professional. I don't play an active public role in the party, I don't go to branch meetings or conferences. So that my image remains that of a very neutral person.”
- Q: “How do you deal with this double role of being a comrade in the newsroom who gets calls from comrades in politics? Where do you draw the line?”
- A: “The temptation is always there. I can't deny that fact. But whether or not [my views] influence how I do things [as a journalist] is another issue.”

I could find no evidence to back up his claims. An analysis of the regional news diary of that year found that he had done the majority of political TV stories. By a wide margin, provincial government was the main newsmaker, with most stories pegged on the visit of some politician or official which was used to highlight a problem (shortage of houses, dirty hospitals etc.). Generally, these stories created the impression that government was aware of these problems and going to solve them. When I put this to one of the editors (R107) , he reluctantly showed me copies of stories critical of the ANC that the newsroom had never taken forward: “We had exclusive information on all of these, but did not act on it, so no other media picked it up either. We haven't been doing critical stories for years. Be careful when speaking to [the journalist above].”

These examples may suffice to illustrate the Partisan subculture at the SABC. In the context of the organisation as a whole, however, it is small. This stands in contradiction to Ngwenya's claim, based on a much smaller number of interviews, that the SABC's culture as a whole is “defined by factions” (2015, 252). I did not come across many journalists at all with strong partisan leanings, although partisanship was more prevalent in the more politicised senior editorial positions. Publicly known examples of the latter include news managers Snuki Zikalala who repeatedly referred to 'his'

minister and government in front of staff (cf. chapter 5/I) and Hlaudi Motsoeneng who openly flaunted his friendship with Jacob Zuma (cf. chapter 5/II). What these individuals shared was a particular perception of their own role and that of the SABC as being subordinate to the field of politics. The Partisan subculture revolves around an unquestioned assumption that political loyalties overrule professional ones, including the demands of the SABC's mandate. Partisans I encountered identified as journalists, but acted as propagandists, at least at times. The audience was equated with the voting public that needed to be educated to make the 'right' choices at the ballot box. The public broadcaster was seen as a legitimate means to this end.

Going back to my analysis of politicisation in Chapters 5/I and 5/II, it becomes clear that the Partisan subculture drives direct (bottom-up and top-down) politicisation by normalising and legitimising a professional stance that is in direct conflict with the SABC's mandate, i.e. off task.

## 7.3 Independent-Minded Professionals (IMP)

“We need to begin to hold politicians to account, we must not treat the SABC as an ANC branch. There will always be people who want to influence and use us as a platform to spread their ideas. And they will find people inside the SABC that will be amenable to listening to them. It is our job to be aware of that and to prevent it. We want to improve the quality of what we do. It's not easy. We are people with histories. I come from a particular background<sup>67</sup>; I feel strongly about certain things, and in the name of being 'progressive' I will probably participate in suppressing other ideas. But if people notice that and challenge me, they will hopefully help me to do better: to stand for my ideas while allowing space for other ideas. It's easy to say this, but I know that in practice... I *will* make these kinds of mistakes. We need to be challenged when we make them, so that we can grow: as people, as a country, as the SABC.” (National News Editor (R81))

Perhaps the most notable feature of interviews with those who I eventually thought of as 'Independent-minded Professionals' was their reflexive depth, the ubiquity of doubt, and the struggle with internal conflicts – verbalised reluctantly, but reliably. The National News Editor quoted here (the same described earlier as chairing the line-talk) exemplifies this as well as the other key characteristic of the IMP subculture: the fact that it constitutes itself in opposition to the Partisan subculture. Whereas Partisans were driven primarily by political loyalties, IMPs gave priority to professional independence. This was born out in their behaviour in the newsroom and could be readily observed. However, most IMPs are anything but apolitical. As the editor above, many had been involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, some were members of the ANC. The resulting conflicting loyalties are typical for this subculture, but, crucially, this is seen as an inevitable part of being a journalist in South Africa, as a conflict that needs to be borne and engaged with on a continuous basis. Journalists had found different ways of managing this. A few examples:

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<sup>67</sup> He supported the liberation movement and joined the SABC in the transitional period. A close colleague described him as “broadly and unapologetically ANC”, but “schooled in the democratic movement, not in any particular ideological school” (R49))

“After the political transition, I was offered a seat in Parliament. But for that I would have had to join the ANC, and I didn't want to join a party, I didn't want to cease being a journalist. Because if you are a member of a political organisation you owe it loyalty, and you can't owe it loyalty and be critical of it at the same time.” (R18)

“For me it was a difficult transition to make from being a political activist to being a journalist. Now, when I come here in the morning and swipe my staff card, I leave my ANC membership card behind. A lot of us struggle with this. We are a nascent democracy, we are still trying to figure things out.” (R19)

“I fully support what government is doing. But I'm saying, let's come up with our own way of reporting: if government is failing, we report on it. If they are succeeding we do, too. And we have a debate in the studio about the challenges, the corruption – you need to questions those things! That's not a contradiction!” (R95)

“Like a typical South African, I was raised to respect authority. And coming out of apartheid, I am all for this government and progressive policies. But I am approaching them as a journalist: I question them and stand my ground, I challenge authority, I want answers – and I get frustrated and fear that I will be spoken badly about because people at the SABC are scared of this.” (R87)

For those IMPs with an activist background some form of personal transition had to occur. They identified as politically progressive (i.e. left-leaning) or liberal, but refused to offer unquestioning loyalty to any party, individual, ideology, or indeed model of journalism. The classic liberal journalism demand of neutrality rarely resonated with them either: journalism was seen as having to play a actively supporting role in the transformation of South African society. But they relied on their own sense of justice, responsibility and integrity for this – the same attributes that had propelled many of them to oppose the apartheid regime. Even younger IMPs who received an academic journalism training<sup>68</sup> in post-apartheid South Africa commonly fitted this profile.

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68 Prompting Hlaudi Motsoeneng to accuse journalism lecturers at universities of poisoning their students' minds and calling for a vetting process for academics (Van Onselen 2016).

The IMP subculture was diverse in terms of ethnicity and age, but characterised by high or at least adequate levels of professional competence. At its centre stood a strong identification with the idea and values of public broadcasting and the normative task. IMPs recognised each other as “real journalists”. Most had joined the SABC in the post-apartheid period. All were acutely aware of its history, and consequently their relationship with the organisation tended to be an extremely ambivalent one, idealising and loathing it at the same time. Crucially, however, both could be held in mind (if not integrated) most of the time without resorting to the splitting so prevalent elsewhere.<sup>69</sup> The SABC was seen as something precious to be either protected or 'turned around'. When one journalist (R21) was offered a retention package by management, she angrily turned it down: “They think I am stupid! They don't understand who I am and why I am here. That you cannot keep me away with a promise of money when, in fact, I want you to fix the fundamentals that are wrong!”

It can be tempting to idealise this subculture, especially within an often dysfunctional professional environment. In reality, it is far less clear-cut, ideal or pure than the label may suggest. Many IMP respondents appeared to be depressed at times, or hinted at struggling with depression, yet pessimism rarely turned into cynicism (arguably a more defensive state that allows for a suppression of difficult feelings). It is a subculture characterised by constant struggle and conflict (internal and external) around what is desirable and what is achievable given the realities of the organisation and its political context. In this way, it embodies the competing values and demands of the SABC's mandate. The line-talk described at the beginning of this section offers many examples

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<sup>69</sup> Within Kleinian psychoanalytic discourse, this could be seen as indicative of a move from paranoid-schizoid functioning to depressive-position functioning (Spillius and Hinshelwood 2011).

of this. It touched on the ambiguous task of catering for the public and its different socio-economic strata (Gautrain and rail commuter strike stories); the demands to be fair, impartial and hold power to account (DA story), the call for context and analysis (rail commuter strike), and the imperative to offer compelling programmes without failing in the duty to inform the public (leading with election stories or not).

Because of a widely shared understanding that the SABC's political role in terms of actual professional practice was still in the process of being defined, it was rare to find IMPs with a hard-line stance towards politicisation. Pragmatism prevailed, and compromises were seen as inevitable. Many respondents said that some battles were not worth fighting, that one needed to give in at times in order not to do so when the stakes were high. The corporate PR story whose inclusion in the bulletin was “non-negotiable” in the line-talk example is a case in point. As various individuals confirmed afterwards, there was an unspoken agreement that it could have been challenged for its lack of news-worthiness, but since it was otherwise an “innocent” story without consequence, an editorial victory here would not justify the cost associated with the conflict. An ironic question (do we get better coffee?) sufficed to lay the matter to rest. At other times, however, the stakes are higher. Speaking from his own experience, the National News Editor (R81) explained:

“Most things are an experiment in this country. In some political quarters you are expected to open up the news to politicians for announcements and not to argue with them. And if you say No, it becomes a problem: 'You have changed! What agenda have you got?' And you can't decide, 'I'm a very principled journalist. I'm not going to engage with these people.' That is nonsense; it creates even more problems because you set yourself apart from whatever the agenda of the country is and become a very easy target. Ideally these people should not deal with us and come to us at all. We need a CEO who will be a buffer and protect the newsroom from these people, but it's unlikely to happen. So you must engage... If I was going to say, look, we are objective and independent and all that bullshit,

that would be dishonest. That's what I want to get to, but I also am a product of this country. It's the reality of where we are at."

Two points are worth noting here, and they have come up in many similar conversations: Firstly, in a transitional context such as the South African one, it can be advantageous if 'independent' journalists have proven political loyalties. The editor here suggested that it gave him bargaining power when dealing with political pressure (direct politicisation). Especially white journalists with no activist background can be quickly dismissed as 'white liberals', a label associated with racist, right-wing and anti-transformation sentiments. It is more difficult to silence black IMPs in this way, although the accusation of having sold out was an ever-present threat loathed by many. Secondly, it would be naive and illusory to believe that the SABC will be de-politicised from either the top or from outside. Political pressure is likely there to stay, boards and senior managers can be expected to be politicised, especially as long as the ANC retains its huge electoral majorities, and real agency to resist this is therefore located on the editorial and middle-management level. This has major implications for the question of individual agency-as-resistance that I shall explore in the next chapter.

It is within the IMP subculture that this was widely recognised. In the attempt to grapple with the competing priorities of the task as well as the political realities that make up the context of public broadcasting in an emerging democracy, journalists self-authorised to engage in conflict with others as part of the work. They were neither in denial nor did they project this responsibility onto others (private media, management). In a sense, IMPs also took on this role on behalf of the rest of the organisation, effectively reducing the pressure on other subcultures to do the same. This work was not always rewarding

or successful. But it did make a difference on a day-to-day basis. Reflecting on the general impact on the news production process of an IMP such as the English Desk editor (R90), the political editor (R114) offered this:

A: The other day the ANC called a press conference to talk about their campaign. So what?! And if we don't do the story we are in trouble! In this case she didn't use it. Because there was nothing [newsworthy]. If it was up to her, we wouldn't have a bulletin full of politicians, with 'minister this, minister that'.

Q: And does she have the influence to stop it from happening?

A: She does, in some instances. She did in this case.

Her bosses were able to defend themselves externally by pointing to the (semi-) autonomy of the English Desk. But the editor's choice to face such conflict and tolerate the anxiety came at a cost:

A: "You will get labelled. I have a reputation of being irritating and asking the nagging questions and challenge things. I sometimes think, I have burned my bridges, so I might just as well continue."

Q: "What do you mean by this?"

A: "I flatter myself by thinking that maybe I should have been promoted to a more senior position. But for me it is also about being a credible journalist, being respected, being honest. I'm not in that job to protect anyone, whether it's the ANC or government or Zuma or Mbeki. It's about getting the best bulletin out for the people. You have to do some gatekeeping and damage control, that is crucial because of the inexperience of reporters, and because of deliberate agendas. But you have to be subtle about it, you have to be careful. You recognize the footprints in the dust from the people who went there before you, and you follow them to not step on a land mine."

There is nothing glamorous about this. The IMP subculture is a minority culture that embodies collective resistance to direct politicisation and its facilitation by the other subcultures and their respective use of social defences.

## 7.4 Black Old Guard (OG-B)

The two subcultures described so far – the off-task culture of the Partisans and task-oriented culture of the Independent-minded Professionals – were fairly easy to spot, and it may be tempting to locate the problem of politicisation entirely in the conflict between them. At the SABC, however, both were small compared to the two Old-Guard subcultures, and in particular the prevalence and impact of the Black Old-Guard<sup>70</sup>. It can be almost invisible to observers, blending into a background of non-decision-making, disengagement, and predictable routine. My attention was drawn to it partially through the ongoing observation of line-talks, and partially by a pattern in the narratives of IMPs who, regardless of their own ethnic background, consistently expressed a frustration about working with certain colleagues. A current affairs producer (119) described them as follows:

“They look at you and don't understand what you are saying. My boss presented the weather on bantu radio and then became a manager. He has nowhere to go, so he will never, ever step on anyone's toes. He is a very nice man, very, very nice. But he just buys a pack of apples, puts them in his office and peels them. Peels the apples. He's got a very neat office. And waits for retirement. So his boss walks all over him and ideas get nowhere.”

Old Black-Guard journalists occupied many positions on the editorial level and in middle-management. This was no coincidence. They had joined the SABC at a time when their employer had very specific expectations of them: The white Afrikaners in charge were not looking for journalists, who would question the status quo, but for reliable, docile staff. Many applicants were trained teachers proficient in Afrikaans and English

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<sup>70</sup> Because this subculture is defined, amongst other things, by “race” (black), I made a consistent effort to gather views on the OG-B from other black, rather than white, journalists. All respondents quoted in this section are black African.

who could be trusted with translating news bulletins into black African (“Bantu”) languages and read them on air. In the eyes of their IMP and Partisan colleagues, this career trajectory still defined them.

“When they recruited Africans, they obviously went for the conservative types. Remember, this was around 1976, when the uprisings happened in Soweto. The SABC was not going to recruit activists, people who were going to stand in the way of propaganda.” (R81)

OG-B interview responses tended to confirm this. A Lesedi radio presenter (R88), for instance, recounted experiences of segregation, humiliation, and control under apartheid, but also an unease with the eventual political change.

A: “The SABC was controlled by government then, almost all senior positions were held by white Afrikaners. We were just working to make a living. It was not about passion or anything, just about routine. You have to work; what else can you do? If you told people you were a journalist they would perceive you as a government token. It was difficult. In our community people knew.”

Q: You left the SABC in 1994, just when it opened up. How come?

A: Things were very hectic during the transition. The new government was coming in. So I felt, instead of being part of the changes, let me try to relax a bit, and maybe things will settle down. At the time it was very difficult for most of us. [Political developments] took a lot of people by surprise, they were not comfortable. They didn't know what was going to happen, where their futures were. Because the ANC people were coming in, and we didn't know them.

In the course of the transitional period, however, when one of the main objectives was to de-racialise the SABC and move black people into editorial positions, they were primed for power. Supposedly carrying institutional knowledge and experience, they moved up the ranks – and became one of the greatest obstacles for the long-term transformation of the SABC's journalism (cf. chapter 5/I). Not interested in discussing politics with the

new independent-minded journalists coming in, they guarded their new-found middle-class status and “were grateful to now be up in the same league with your van der Merwes [white Afrikaners].” (R71) Many had still not received much professional journalistic training, nor had they ever actually worked as reporters. While some black staff from the old SABC later became part of other subcultures, the vast majority seemed to have come to be affiliated with the Old Black Guard.

The composition and dynamics of the line-talks reflected this. In 2010, all EPs of African language TV news bulletins fell into the OG-B subculture. I had observed their lack of engagement in the discussions and their habit of relying on senior editors or fellow EPs from the English and Afrikaans desks for guidance on editorial decisions despite being authorised and actively encouraged to make their own decisions. This was confirmed by many regular attendees of these conferences, amongst them an acting regional editor and a camera man:

“The chair used to say to them: 'Talk! Say something! Don't just sit here!' When we offered stories he would ask them directly, 'Do you want this? Why or why not?' – and get no answer. Or some wishy-washy response that made no sense. It is a problem.” (R28)

“Do these EPs know why they are there?! Yesterday [the chair] even said, 'guys, are you here, or not?' Do they understand what is going on? They don't comment. They don't have one question on all these stories! There is no contribution.” (R79)

In the hope for an explanation I interviewed four of the African language EPs. Three denied that they participated less actively than others, the fourth replied: “You are right. You are justified to wonder. But I have no understanding with regards to the reasons” (R41). Overall, OG-B journalists were among the most cautious and reluctant respondents, and these EPs were no exception. They were very busy and had little time

to spare, suggested I speak to their colleagues instead, postponed interviews. When I eventually sat down with the Xhosa EP (R66) for a longer conversation, I sensed his discomfort. In an attempt to diffuse the tension I opted for the most unthreatening topic I could think of:

Q: Could we talk a bit about your audience? It seems like you need to cater for everyone.

A: Yes. The President of the country, for instance, forms part of our target audience. You get the [nouveau rich] BEE beneficiaries. The youth. And we also have to cater for those people who don't have money, who live in shacks, in rural areas.

Q: That must be difficult sometimes.

A: Well, it's not. If you really know your target audience, it's not difficult. Not at all.

This took me by surprise. Providing relevant content for a universal audience is a key challenge for any public broadcaster (Price and Raboy 2003; O'Hagan and Jennings 2003), exaggerated in a society as diverse and unequal as South Africa. The African language viewership, while predominantly black, spans a wide socio-economic spectrum in urban, but especially rural areas where the SABC's were often the only free-to-air African-language TV news available. In the line-talks I had noticed that the main criteria African language EPs used to select stories for their bulletin (besides others' opinion) were the reporter's language<sup>71</sup> and the story's geographic location. No other criteria were added in interviews.

Like most of his colleagues, the Zulu EP (R100) expressed a desire for more reporters

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<sup>71</sup> Most SABC reporters are fluent in more than one official language and routinely 'package' the same story in two languages for different bulletin desks.

who spoke isiXhosa or isiZulu. Asked about the fact that Nguni bulletins routinely used English up-sounds without ghost voicing, he explained this by a lack of time. The option of using subtitles as a quicker alternative was met with a genuinely surprised “we haven't actually thought about that”. Yet many journalists at the SABC were acutely aware of the role of language in reaching viewers. The EP of Cutting Edge, for instance, a low-budget investigative programme aimed at relatively poor youth, ascribed the show's success to always interviewing people in their mother tongue (English subtitles were provided throughout), even if the journalist had to ask the questions in a different language. “This is how people express themselves”, she said, “if you ask them to speak in broken English they just give you the surface stuff, the obvious, the boring.” Similarly, reporters throughout the country were aware that the Afrikaans EP insisted that any Afrikaans speaker had to be asked to respond to journalists' questions in Afrikaans (in addition to English) because “why would he give his audience English when he has a choice?” (R28)

Despite claiming the opposite, in practice African language desks did not prioritise their languages in a similar way. Given that the lingua franca of politics in South Africa is English, this may be indicative of both an indifference towards their audiences' needs and thus the task, and of an orientation towards, or even alignment with, political power. The President, perhaps, was seen as a more important part of the target audience than the barely English speaking rural poor. A similar picture emerged with regard to story location. In contrast to other bulletin desks, African language EPs rarely commissioned stories from provincial newsrooms for their largely regional viewership. Journalists there often complained about this.

A: [The Afrikaans EP] would call and say, 'on the south coast there is a story, can you go there and do it for me?' And it's a lovely story, but it's a story for his audience only.

Q: How often do you get calls from the African language desks, commissioning stories?

A: It's very rare. Sometimes you even do stories specifically for them and they don't take them because no one else does. You don't know the kind of frustrations that regions face because of some of these EPs in Joburg. (Regional Editor (R28))

"I once travelled 600 kilometres for a story only to be told afterwards that the Afrikaans desk wants it, but the English desk is not interested, and neither is the Nguni desk. I said, the Nguni desk?! It was about a peoples' parliament in the rural areas that affected people there, mostly black people, and the Nguni bulletin who is supposed to take care of the needs of these people follows the English desk!" (Reporter (R70))

Asked what he would like to improve about the Nguni news, the Xhosa EP (R66) argued that bulletins were too focussed on political and social issues and neglected "the entertainment industry":

Q: Do you feel you depend on input [news gathering] to change this?

A: No, we don't depend on them because we are free to suggest stories.

Q: And do you do this?

A: Yes, we do that a lot.

Q: So if you wanted entertainment stories, they would be just a phone call away?

A: Yes, but... I think, it's bigger than that. It needs to be workshopped. [...]

Again, there were contradictions between stated claims and actual behaviour. In addition, the call for official (“bigger”) sanctioning of actions well within an EP's authority was characteristic of this subculture where journalists defaulted to voluntary upward referral (one of the defensive patterns discussed earlier) for the most trivial matters. What stood behind this could often only be described as fear. One EP (R100) spoke of the horrors of having had to write a report, months ago, about not including a chart in her bulletin. Another (R97) recalled how his (black) boss had once reprimanded him for having accidentally dropped a minor story from the bulletin. “So, you see?”, he said, “it nearly brought me into big, big trouble. So you see, you don't have a choice... You've got to consult. Because otherwise you are likely to burn your fingers”. None of the issues they referred to were even remotely political. Within a subculture so risk-averse, defying politicisation in any way was unthinkable because you would inevitably “get whipped... whipped into line” (R97).

The underlying fear of conflict was projected onto the audience. African language EPs were generally in agreement that their viewers were very sensitive and easily offended; therefore stories had to be toned down. This was seen as a significant part of the editorial task – with the (unconscious) benefit of rationalising precisely the kind of behaviour patterns I have earlier identified as being off-task. “These are the people that will run around for the diaries of ministers”, commented an IMP radio editor (R95). What thus prevailed in the OG-B subculture was not a concern with the demands of the mandate or the needs of the audience (as for IMPs), or with a political agenda (as for Ps).

Instead, journalists were preoccupied with satisfying and not offending those in power, outside and within the SABC, with protecting themselves from criticism and attack.

More than any other group of respondents, they were reluctant to speak about their personal and professional past. I came to link this to feelings of shame and guilt. When I tried to engage them on how they had come to work for SABC and what that had been like under apartheid, they were at pains to portray themselves as *not* what many of their colleagues indeed thought they were: willing collaborators of an oppressive regime, sell-outs to the black liberation struggle, and active participants in their own humiliation. Instead, they presented themselves either as unimportant and helpless, a tiny cog in the wheel of the system, inconsequential – or, sometimes, as secretly resisting power. This is suggestive of a number of defence mechanisms, in particular denial, projection, and splitting (Spillius and Hinshelwood 2011).

The extent to which Old Black-Guard journalists claimed to have used subversion or resistance in their positions suggests denial that they had *also* willingly served their white bosses. Colleagues from the other subcultures often commented ironically on the OG-Bs “suddenly found liberation credentials” (R20). My experience of these resistance narratives in interviews was that they often lacked depth and became vague when I asked for details – which does, of course, not mean that they were not true. Two examples: the first from a radio presenter (R88), the second from an assignment editor (R39):

- (I) A: During that time we were young, we were radical.  
 Q: Radical. In what sense?  
 A: We wanted to go against the authorities, and in many cases we fought and were disciplined. That gave us some credibility. We used to tell the [black] community, 'they did fight [back], but fortunately enough I'm still here!'
- (II) A: I read the news bulletin, but it was more propaganda than anything: calling our freedom fighters 'terrorists', and we were forced to promote the Bantustan system<sup>72</sup>. I joined the SABC because I wanted to be a journalist. And because I wanted to change the organisation.  
 Q: So in 1979 you joined the SABC hoping to change it. Was that possible?  
 A: It was difficult, but possible.  
 Q: Can you give an example?  
 A: We were able to even pass on some messages, in a very, very hidden way
- [...]  
 Q: Were you involved in the underground, is that what you are saying?  
 A: Yes I was.  
 Q: In MK?  
 A: In MK, yeah, working in MK [... but declines to elaborate]  
 Q: I have never met an MK person who worked inside the SABC, so I am wondering whether it was a cover for other political work you were doing, or whether that was actually your mission: to affect change at the SABC, as a newsreader?  
 A: Look... I was not an MK cadre in the SABC. Maybe we can call it self-appointed MK?

It was almost impossible to verify such accounts. When attempting to triangulate the information by running it past other journalists who were familiar with how the SABC worked at the time, the response was usually doubt. Especially black IMPs tended to dismiss these claims as exaggerated, if not fictional.

Another pattern – the helplessness, cog-in-the-wheel theme permeating these narratives – uses projection (Spillius and Hinshelwood 2011) to relocate the individual's own inadequacy, (co-)responsibility and agency entirely in others by blaming them (the white bosses) for the shameful production of propaganda. In a typical account, a Sotho EP (R97) used to explain his apartheid-era job as news reader to his social circle in the

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72 For bantustan or homeland system cf. Beinart (2001, 161).

township by saying that there was nothing he could do because he didn't produce those news: "There was somebody somewhere [responsible]. I just translated the bulletin." 30 years later, in a semi-autonomous editorial position with authority to guide reporters, the argument had not changed. Critics of his bulletin are told that "'I am at the output desk. If you can just understand. The problem is with the input, not me! What I put out is what they bring in, and that's it."

Torn between competing affiliations – to their employer and fellow black people – most OG-B respondents' persona at work differed sharply from that at home/ in the township. Quiescent in the face of power here – sympathetic to the plight of fellow black people and contemptuous of the regime there. Those two were strictly kept apart, split off from each other in a way that either was denied in the presence of the other. "When you read the news you had to say 'as compiled by head office' because otherwise you were in big shit in the township", said the same journalist. "You had to make people understand that you were just doing your job. It was the way we survived."

But there was more at stake than mere survival: despite the SABC's notorious news coverage, it still was a high-status employer, a "well-oiled machine" (R121) worthy of being preserved as a good object (Spillius and Hinshelwood 2011). Splitting here occurred by keeping apart in journalists' mind the SABC as a government-controlled (read: politicised) entity that functioned as an oppressor, and the SABC as a media organisation that offered security and status, that was spoken about not without admiration for how efficiently it was run. Now, the split was between the former and an SABC that might be less efficient, but much more generous in providing material

benefits. Splitting on both these levels had infused the OG-B subculture.

## **Discussion**

Feelings of shame and guilt that were managed through denial, projection, and splitting were not just linked to having collaborated with the oppressor, but to having put oneself into a humiliating position of dependency – the precise opposite of the courageous stance of the 'freedom fighter'. This dependency, characteristic of any “culture of subordination where authority derives entirely from position in hierarchy, requiring unquestioning obedience” (Obholzer and Roberts 1994, 26) is the foundation of the OG-B subculture to this day, and perhaps the main reason for its survival. More so than any other group of respondents, Black Old-Guard journalists insisted on their powerlessness vis-a-vis a now much more unpredictable employer they felt reliant on. With a sense of exasperation, one EP (R97) said towards the end of an interview: “People have come to realise that if you come here, you better join. Or you leave. So who wants to leave? No one wants to leave!” This is an extraordinary statement in an organisation where thoughts about resigning were common among IMPs. But for this particular group, leaving was not only not an option; they found it difficult to imagine that anyone may even *want* to leave. The SABC was invested with the function of a mother who would provide only as long as she was not displeased. Jung's archetype of the 'devouring mother' comes to mind (Jung 1969; Neumann 1955) – she who swallows her children: their creativity, drive, passion, and eventually their professional reputation at which point loyalty must be absolute because independent life is impossible. The task of journalism as enshrined in the SABC's mandate morphs into an imperative to avoid

conflict at all cost in order to be cared for. Once this as-if task becomes generally accepted, within a subculture in this case, there is no incentive to initiate or support any kind of re-orientation towards the actual task. On the contrary: any change to the status quo becomes a threat that needs to be resisted, if only by inaction.

I need to reiterate that I am still talking about collective psychodynamics. It is impossible to make inferences from this level back to specific individuals, and I have no desire to do so. Not every black journalist who was part of the old SABC also belonged to the OG-B subculture, and not every individual within the subculture dealt with the dynamics described above in precisely the same way<sup>73</sup>. The analytic value lies in the role the subculture played in relation to politicisation. When journalists collude in the denial of having agency, they become identified with being passive conduits, or tools, of those in power. This is a key difference to both the IMP and P subcultures where journalists used, and tried to maximise, their agency, albeit in the service of different goals, independent journalism and partisan journalism respectively.

Within the Old Black-Guard subculture, journalists often had formal authority, but refused to take it up, resulting in them having management authority without leadership authority (Kernberg 1998, 27, 1985, 255). This was often driven by anxiety arising out of their experience of working for the apartheid SABC and by anxiety directly related to the task of journalism, and the SABC's mandate in particular. It led to them making heavy use of defensive (off-task) behaviour patterns, in particular over-reliance on official sources and uncritical reporting, excessive voluntary upward referral, and

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<sup>73</sup> A notable exception was the decision of the Zulu desk to show the actual killing of a peaceful protestor by police in on 13 April 2011. Other desks covered the story, but opted for less disturbing visuals.

withdrawal and self-absorption. These are strongly linked to anticipatory politicisation, a crucial enabler of politicisation in general (cf. chapter 5/I). For the OG-B subculture politicisation did not constitute a concern since it was an unquestioned truth that the SABC had no choice but to submit to political pressure; it was seen as inevitable, inescapable, and fundamentally unproblematic.

I have discussed this subculture in such detail because it is the bedrock of what I have in previous chapters referred to as the 'dominant culture' – the reason why newsrooms like *Special Assignment*, or the IMP subculture warrant the label 'exceptional'. Resistance to politicisation cannot be conceived without an acknowledgement of the power of the OG-B subculture within the organisation, something that has been overlooked in previous analyses of the SABC such as Ngwenya's (2015) study.

## 7.5 White Old Guard (OG-W)

“You know, I have worked for this organisation half of my life, and to watch this now... to have these new guys coming in and just fucking it up...” He shakes his head and chuckles at my objection that, surely, some things have transformed: “Transformation?! Are you sure there was some? As far as I am concerned white bosses were replaced by black bosses, and that's it.” (Current affairs producer (R42))

“The SABC is his master's voice. Nothing has changed since the apartheid days, it just swopped regimes.” (Camera man (R34))

I first became aware of this subculture when I repeatedly found myself being 'recruited' for it by white respondents who had been working for the SABC for many decades, often their entire professional lives. They would take me aside in an attempt to mentor me, to tell me what was really going on, to give me the inside story. Carrying the status of a white German journalist and Oxford student, I was assumed to be someone who shared their view of the world and of the SABC, to be one of them. Initially, I found myself colluding with this, grateful for being taken into confidence, enticed by the 'juicy' material they shared, and culturally comfortable with their direct and sarcastic way of speaking<sup>74</sup>. Soon, however, I felt reminded of interviews I had conducted as a journalist with DA politicians where I had encountered similar unspoken assumptions of racial, cultural and political sameness paired with a thinly veiled racism that I had found disconcerting. I became more cautious and started to recognise this as a pattern in my own emotional response worth following up on.

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<sup>74</sup> This is an oversimplification, of course, as there are also significant cultural differences between English- and Afrikaans speakers.

Contrary to what one might expect of a subculture inhabited by the very people who were in positions of power at the apartheid SABC, I encountered little overt racism and instead an openly stated commitment to the new South Africa, non-racialism, democracy and public broadcasting values. None of these journalists wanted the 'old days' back. This is less surprising given the fact that staff with strong reactionary views had left the organisation in the early 1990s, and those white journalists who had decided to stay did so knowingly and willingly and have since been working in a highly diverse and racially integrated organisation (cf. chapter 5/1). The early transitional process resulted in most of them losing their positions of power, though some retained informal authority based on their technical skills, experience, and organisational memory.

At the time of my fieldwork, the Old White Guard survived mostly in niches such as technical departments, administration, archives, or research. The camera man quoted earlier, the only white member of staff left in his newsroom, spoke about how he had resigned himself to a situation he could not change: "White people just tend to keep quiet. They won't stir. You feel too threatened, I suppose, you are one voice against many." There was a sense of camaraderie that permeated this subculture. While interviewing a research manager in his windowless, nondescript office, his similarly aged colleague (R121), responsible for training, wandered in and, upon hearing I was a researcher, immediately turned to me and said, with disdain in his voice:

"You have *no* idea how dysfunctional that place is. It was bad under apartheid, but in terms of management it was a well-oiled machine. The fact that the SABC is still churning out programmes is the 7<sup>th</sup> world miracle."

While the point had some merit, it was the constant repetition of these kind of statements paired with an abdication of all co-responsibility for current problems (“that” place), that suggested that something was at work that was culturally ingrained. An IMP editor (R49) once conveyed his anger to me about this: “This group of white people think they are apolitical, they are just technical people, so 'all this shit is not us, it's embarrassing. But what can we do!'” Some of this may be related to the White Old Guard carrying much of the collective guilt for the SABC's past – after all, this group was in charge of the old SABC. Perhaps unsurprisingly, mistrust was directed against them, especially by black journalists. An example:

A: Some of them are like chameleons, you see it every day here. They are now the 'liberals', the 'democrats'. Those are the people you can't trust.

Q: Do they have power?

A: No, they haven't got a snowball's chance in hell. But they have power to create uncertainty.

Q: What does this power rest on?

A: On their negativity. They ride on that to say: 'you see, black people can't do this and can't do that. They sometimes set them up for failure, only to stand back and say: see, I told you!' (R44)

Such accusations of sabotage surfaced occasionally, but could never be substantiated. At the same time, even progressive black journalists spoke warmly about some of their OG-W colleagues' dedication to their job.

“Those Afrikaner guys in Parliament, I adore them! They have institutional memory, but they are also being punished for their past. They were literally PW Botha's and De Klerk's camera people. And yet they are so loyal to the SABC, so committed to their jobs! On the last minute you try and edit your story, and they will come and bend over backwards for you.” (R36)

The OG-W subculture was characterised by cynical views about the SABC and its potential as a credible public broadcaster, a dominant discourse around the loss of skills infused with an air of one's own professional superiority, a withdrawal partially linked to having been sidelined within the organisation, and racist undertones. The constant lamenting that I came to associate with this subculture rarely led to open criticism or confrontation. What people said to me was not what they said in front of their bosses in meetings. While the cynicism, nostalgia, hopelessness and withdrawal came with a proclaimed commitment to questioning and independent journalism, the latter hid a fundamental conviction that professional autonomy was not something worth defending because the public broadcaster had been, was, and would always be a tool in the hands of the ruling political elite.

Although desirable in principle, resistance to politicisation was seen as a foolish endeavour. Any change was expected to be driven entirely from elsewhere – after all, the White Old Guard had been pushed out of power and therefore could abdicate all responsibility for the future of the organisation. This was made easier as it carried much of the SABC's long-term organisational memory which kept expectations low and risk-avoidance high. As one senior OG-W editor said about the 1980s: “that was a heavy period politically, with men in dark suits coming around checking what you carried on the bulletins. That was the worst, obviously. There is nothing like that now, nothing can compare to that” (R91).

As with the Black Old Guard, the SABC was seen as 'home', but a home that was alternately tolerated, mourned, retrospectively glorified, and hated. A better metaphor

may be that of a once-idealised-now-resented spouse that will never be left because divorce is far too costly: it would be too disruptive, jeopardise accumulated pension and other benefits, and is unlikely to result in a more convenient (employment) relationship elsewhere.

## Conclusion

Given the presence of the subcultures described here, the idea of a homogeneous organisational culture in respect of the SABC's political role is unsustainable. Instead, this culture is fragmented (cf. Martin 1992, 2002)(cf. Martin 1992, 2002) with at least four subcultures contesting the space: Partisans, Independent-minded Professionals, Black Old Guard, and White Old Guard.

Of these, OG-B was by far more dominant than the others, especially on the editorial level. It is strongly linked to anticipatory politicisation which, as I have argued in Chapter 5/I also acts as a further enabler of politicisation in general. Within this subculture, politicisation is not seen as a concern, but as an unquestioned norm. Partisans drive direct (bottom-up and top-down) politicisation, often in open conflict with the SABC's mandate. However, I found this subculture to be less prevalent than one might expect in a politically contested media organisation; it was probably the smallest of the four. OG-W appears to be confined to organisational niches where little formal power was held and rarely contested for dominance. Here, politicisation is seen as problematic, but resistance perceived to be too costly. IMP, finally, while generally a

minority culture, has at times gained some prominence (for instance in the transitional period of the early 1990s) and also characterised a number of newsrooms, such as *Special Assignment* or SAfm current affairs, for longer periods of time. It is the only subculture de-facto aligned with the SABC's mandate and functions as a counter-culture that allows for collective resistance to politicisation. It plays a critical role not only as an inhibitor (Chapter 5/1) of direct politicisation, but also of anticipatory politicisation.

Differentiating between subcultures introduces an important new perspectives into the study of the SABC's politicisation that allows for a more meaningful analysis of politicisation than, for instance, an approach that focusses on levels within the formal hierarchy (cf. Ngwenya 2015). Blanket claims such as Ngwenya's conclusion that SABC staff on all tiers of the hierarchy strive for autonomy (2015, 309) and that ubiquitous "political control has led to the development of a delimitation of professionalism, such that all tiers now hold an adversarial attitude towards state authorities, which, by and large, are ANC officials" (2015, 307) are not tenable given my ethnographic data which suggests that often the opposite is the case given the dominance of the OG-B subculture.

However, there is a caveat to this analysis: subcultures at the SABC do not interact as such; they do not meet (although some members may frequent the same social spaces), they do not function as a coherent group in the physical sense. The value of studying subcultures lies in understanding their impact on actual groups – such as a team of editors at the line-talk – groups that become spaces contested by various subcultures. In Chapter 8 I attempt to link these different levels of analysis using Bion's theory of basic assumptions in groups. This leaves us with the final, critical question of how to conceive

of the role of individuals caught up in collective unconscious processes around politicisation. I draw on Lacan's theory of the four discourses to approach this problem and offer some concluding thoughts on individual agency-as-resistance.

## 8 The Psychodynamics of Politicisation and Agency-as-Resistance

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*I hope I didn't say stuff that will get me fired.  
But, to be honest, I am beyond caring.  
I can go sell potatoes in a township.  
It's not worth being in a place  
where you can't speak your mind.<sup>75</sup>*

In Chapter 6 I have, against the backdrop of the SABC's organisational culture and its characteristic social defences and unconscious dynamics, discussed exceptional spaces whose existence indicates that there is considerable room for collective agency-as-resistance to politicisation. In Chapter 7 I have shown that such exceptions also exist on a subcultural level and that, moreover, the idea of a homogeneous organisational culture is a myth. How do we work with this increasing complexity, trying to make sense of politicisation and resistance in newsrooms on a day-to-day basis? By adding two additional layers of complexity in this chapter – those of groups and individuals – , with the intention of documenting and analysing the interconnectedness of cultural, group and individual psychodynamics. All three are inextricably linked in the empirical data,

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75 R53

and my point is precisely that neither can be left out when approaching the question of de-politicisation and individual agency-as-resistance.

Without attempting a full theoretical integration this chapter builds a bridge from Menzies Lyth to Bion and finally to Lacan. Drawing on Bion's theory of groups it focusses on the task perceptions and basic assumptions that distinguish subcultures from one another and determine their role in the process of politicisation. This sheds light on the problem of collective agency-as-resistance in the context of subcultural dynamics. Moving on to actual group dynamics I propose an extension to Bion's framework by introducing a cultural dimension to unconscious group processes. This will be followed by a discussion of the problem of leadership in this context.

Finally, I approach the issue of agency-as-resistance on the individual level from a Lacanian perspective. Faced with politicisation in its various shapes and shapings over time, wedged between the obvious and the hidden, and caught in the currents of collective unconscious processes on multiple levels: What does the individual (journalist) do? Is resistance even possible, and how could it be thought about in a way that acknowledges both social and psychological constraints, the collective and the subjective?

## 8.1 Subcultures: Task Perceptions and Basic Assumptions

As argued previously, all four subcultures identified earlier share an explicit commitment to the SABC's mandate and editorial policies, i.e. to the task of the News and Current Affairs division.<sup>76</sup> Being complex and ambiguous this mandate requires some interpretation and negotiation of values. This is evidenced by the Independent-minded Professionals' persistent struggle with this, a struggle present to a much lesser degree in the other subcultures where the (normative) task is unconsciously replaced by various phenomenal 'as-if' tasks. Partisans act as if their purpose<sup>77</sup> was to fight political opponents. Black Old-Guard journalists act as if it was to avoid all conflict with power in order to be cared for, and their White Old-Guard colleagues as if their task was to be a (reluctant) instrument of political power in order to be tolerated by the organisation (Fig. 3).

This is strongly reminiscent of the tendencies Wilfried Bion found in groups in his classic study on the subject (Bion 1961). He proposes that, at any given moment, groups function in one of two modes: work-group mode, which means they work productively on task, and basic assumption (ba) mode, which refers to them behaving as if they were instead responding to some "unexplained impulse" (Bion 1961, 188), or "as if [the group] had certain basic assumptions about its aims" that are not held consciously (Bion

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<sup>76</sup> In Lawrence's terms, this expressed identification with the normative task refers to the existential task (Lawrence 1977), and my data suggests that the two are largely congruent at the SABC across the various subcultures.

<sup>77</sup> I use task and purpose interchangeably following French/Simpson's (2014, 2010) argument that the focus on '(primary) task' in the group relations tradition has become more restrictive than perhaps intended by Bion's original conception of the importance of a group's common purpose.

1961, 94, 188) and have little to do with the actual task. I suggest that the IMP subculture can be associated with work-group mode and the other three subcultures with basic-assumption functioning. According to Bion, there are (at least) three basic assumptions commonly encountered in groups: the basic assumption of dependency (baD), that of fight/flight (baF), and that of pairing (baP). It is the first two that are particularly relevant here as they are linked to the phenomenal tasks characteristic of the Partisan and Old-Guard subcultures (French and Simpson 2010, 2014).

<b>Subculture</b>	<b>Task perception (phenomenal task)</b>	<b>Group mode (Bion)</b>	<b>Role in process of politicisation</b>
Independent-minded Professionals (IMP)	Congruent with normative task/ public broadcasting mandate	work group	Resisting (inhibitor)
Partisans (P)	Fighting political opponents	baF (fight/flight)	Direct bottom-up/ top-down politicisation (driver)
Black Old Guard (OG-B)	Avoiding conflict in order to be cared for	baD (dependency)	Anticipatory politicisation (enabler)
White Old Guard (OG-W)	Being an instrument of political power in order to be tolerated	baD (dependency)	Anticipatory politicisation (enabler)

Fig.3

A group in baD mode behaves as if its aim was “to be sustained by a leader on whom it depends for nourishment, material and spiritual, and protection” (Bion 1961, 147). Members adopt a passive attitude and lose their sense of agency in the face of a leader or entity perceived as omnipotent and omniscient. The payoff is a feeling of emotional security “indissolubly linked with feelings of inadequacy and frustration” (ibid., 94). “[F]earfulness becomes the supreme virtue of the individual ... Participation in this emotional field means a heightened capacity, as soon as any member of the group experiences fear, for instantaneous flight” (ibid., 81). Unsurprisingly, dependent groups are inherently risk-averse fearing all key activities associated with the work group, especially the ideas of development, rational thinking and learning (ibid., 99).

Having shown earlier how Black Old-Guard journalists behaved as if they were to avoid conflict in order to be cared for by the organisation, and OG-W members acted as if they were instruments of political power in order to be tolerated, what both subcultures share is a valency<sup>78</sup> for baD functioning. The dependency is primarily on the SABC as an organisation, or rather on a certain *idea* of the public broadcaster as an instrument of political power, or an omnipotent and omniscient entity. This may at times be personified in a leader: a senior editor or manager, or simply the immediate boss – the person to whom authority is referred. I was once struck to find prominently displayed on the desk of a OG-B journalist an SABC Pension Fund Calendar that marked not only staff and pensioner paydays, “Secretary's Day” and “Boss's Day”, but also featured a photograph of Cliff Saunders, one of the most notorious presenters of the apartheid SABC, for the month of October 2011. Noticing my puzzled look, the journalist (R58)

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<sup>78</sup> Bion (1961, 153) defines valency as the “capacity for instantaneous involuntary combination of one individual with another for sharing and acting on a basic assumption”.

leaned over and explained: “He was a real propagandist for the National Party.” Yet the two men were more united in their belonging to the SABC than divided by their history.

The effect of baD functioning is the kind of behaviour I have previously associated with spectator journalism: a passive stance towards the work with a reluctance to think (for oneself and about the task). It is primarily because of their shared valency for baD functioning that the Old-Guard subcultures provide the ideal environment for anticipatory politicisation (cf. chapters 5) and thus act as an enabler (cf. chapter 5/1).

The Partisan subculture, on the other hand, is associated with a shared valency for the basic assumption of fight/flight. A baF group behaves as if it existed to either attack a supposed enemy or flee from it in panic (Bion 1961, 152, 163). At the SABC, Partisans acted as if they were in constant fight/flight mode vis-a-vis political opponents which makes this subculture the driver of direct (bottom-up and top-down) politicisation (cf. chapters 5). Journalists saw themselves as political warriors, and the enemy included those who opposed the politicisation of the news that Partisans sought: external critics as well as the IMP subculture.

Like Menzies Lyth's, Bion's work on groups takes us beyond rational behaviour and conscious intention (Betts 2002) to unconscious collective dynamics that underlie a fundamentally different perception of what the SABC and its journalists are meant to be and do. Hence, within the OG-B, OG-W and P subcultures, journalists do not feel particularly conflicted about their daily work. In contrast to work group activity, participation in basic assumption functioning “requires no training, experience, or

mental development. It is instantaneous, inevitable, and instinctive ... [and it] makes no demands on the individual for a capacity to co-operate" (Bion 1961, 153). It reflects the "absence of any process of development"; in fact, "stimuli to development meet with a hostile response" (ibid., 159). "The group, as a group," Bion writes further, "is quite opposed to the idea that they are met for the purpose of doing [task-related] work" (ibid., 84).

## **8.2 Counter-Culture and Collective Agency-as-Resistance**

To the extent that the IMP subculture challenges the basic assumption functioning essential to the psychic economy of the other three subcultures, it takes on the role of a counter-culture and is resisted by all of them. This may explain its fragility over time (cf. chapters 5/I and 5/II), which makes for a different situation to that described by Born (2005, 31) in the context of the BBC where she found a strong undercurrent of a recalcitrant professionalism that originated in Reithian ideals. This professionalism may have evolved over time and taken different forms in different genres, but it can nevertheless be seen as a reliable part of that organisation's fabric.

This also sheds some light on why effective resistance to politicisation on the collective level has been so difficult to sustain (chapters 5/I and 5/II). Figure 4 illustrates the

cultural dynamic that arises at this point: IMP (linked to work group functioning), engaged in perpetual though relatively low-scale conflict with Partisans (baF valency) with regard to direct politicisation, comes up against a barrier of baD valency that is the result of an unlikely alliance between the Black and White Old Guard whose unconscious orientation is away from the task and, particularly, away from conflict. In the resulting confrontation, anxiety that has so far been contained by the very basic assumptions that are now challenged, finds its way back into the system increasing the need for a renewed withdrawal into ba functioning, the mode of which may change, but not its orientation (Bion 1961).

## Subcultural Dynamics

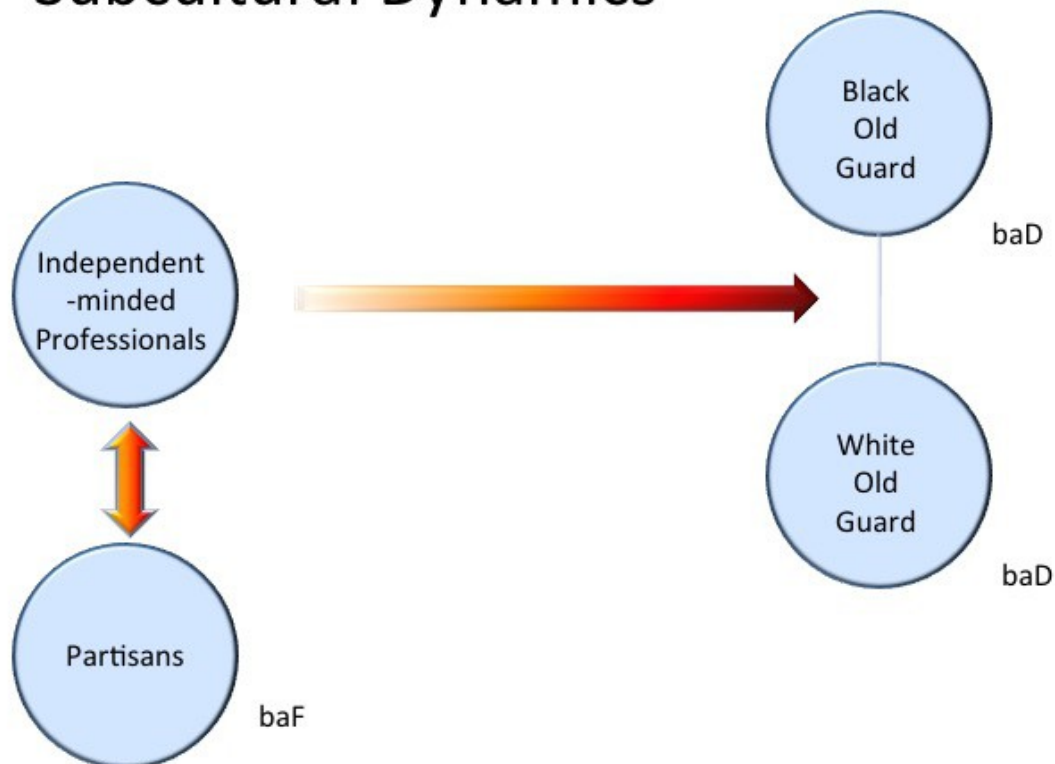


Fig. 4

A number of senior editors spoke about the unexpected backlash they encountered when attempting to turn around dysfunctional newsrooms, finding themselves confronted with resistance from the very people they sought to free from the bonds of politicisation. When an incoming editor (R18) attempted to depoliticise news operations in the 1990s, the (joint) Old Guard was his biggest obstacle: they had no interest in practising a more independent, questioning journalism and felt threatened rather than liberated:

Q: How did they respond to your attempt to “jack up” the newsroom?

A: Phew.... uhm... you know, it's not so much how they responded... jellyfish don't respond! That's the problem. They don't respond.

Speaking about the same time, another former senior editor (R26) remembered a “mindset that cuts right across colour”, held by those, black and white, “who survived all the revolutions and are still doing the same thing: being obedient to whoever is in power.” For OG-B journalists, being given the freedom to question, probe and so on is not something they long for, but something that unleashes existential anxiety bound up with peoples' histories and futures. At the same time OG-W members oppose anything seen as potentially risky to their continued survival in an organisation where they already feel marginalised and hold little formal authority. IMPs are essentially seen as a threat to an organisation both OG-B and OG-W feel highly dependent on. Under these circumstances, lasting depoliticisation becomes almost impossible, and the SABC's anti-apartheid history bears this out (chapters 5).

## 8.3 From Subcultures to Group Psychodynamics

Going back to my earlier argument about social defences, what we are witnessing here on a subcultural level are different ways of dealing with work-related anxiety that is bound up in the wider system, and the consequences of this for the process of politicisation. But what exactly is the link between culture and politicisation in the day-to-day work of a newsroom? Subcultures as a whole do not interact with one another; they are dispersed throughout the organisation. With few exceptions, journalists work in teams or groups that are not homogeneous, but contested by various subcultures.

Despite Bion's invaluable contribution on group processes, he ultimately attributes the dominance of one or other basic assumption in a group to group members' personal disposition, or valency (Bion 1961), arising out of their personality (ibid, 170), especially the psychotic anxieties of early childhood as proclaimed by Melanie Klein (1932). Whether this is, in fact, their origin is debatable, but also of little consequence for my descriptive account here which deals with collective dynamics. I do propose, however, that those who belong to any of the subcultures either tend towards work group functioning or share a valency for one or other ba functioning, and that they 'take' this to any actual group that meets physically in their day-to-day work. By extending Bion's framework to include this cultural dimension we gain a meaningful tool to understanding unconscious group processes in organisational environments that is independent of individual psychological trajectories.

Bion stressed on multiple occasions (1961, 97, 188) that the modes of functioning in groups are rarely stable for a long time. There is no such thing as a group that is always in work group mode; the attraction of basic assumption is ever present because of the anxiety aroused by the primary task (or, as argued earlier, by the work environment more generally). Groups, such as the line talk, can fluctuate between baD, baF and baP on the one hand and work group mode on the other, quite rapidly. Individual members are pulled into ba dynamics in line with their subcultural affiliation – and sometimes in spite of it. Even those generally committed to working on task may collude with ba dynamics when anxiety levels become temporarily unbearable.<sup>79</sup>

One example of this were the unprecedented levels of direct politicisation seen in the Johannesburg TV newsroom during the Mbeki-Zuma leadership contest in 2007 (Chapter 5/II). Reflecting on this period only a few months later, many journalists were still shaken by the experience. They described the deep split of the newsroom along ANC-factional lines and the strong pull they had felt to side with or against a senior editor (Zikalala) and, by extension, Mbeki. With the temporary ascendancy of the Partisan subculture aided by Zikalala, an otherwise culturally heterogeneous team found itself locked in baF mode for months. While few respondents disagreed that the newsroom had “lost its objectivity” (R71), they struggled to explain how this had happened. Repeated reference was made to strong feelings: “It was an emotional time”, said an IMP reporter (R78), “journalists took things personally. It all kinda got a bit ugly.” Her colleague described how the team only started realising that “perhaps

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<sup>79</sup> Note that this happens in principle independent of external top-down politicisation – although a rise in the latter would certainly raise anxiety levels and therefore intensify ba functioning. Conversely, journalists affiliated to off-task subcultures may temporarily become more task-oriented when the dominant group dynamic is work group mode. In a rare instance of this kind, an OG-B EP described in April 2011 how the return of a group of senior IMP editors to SABC news had affected his sense of agency: “it’s like the planet is [now] five times bigger” (R41).

something was not right, that it actually did happen” when the SABC was continuously criticised in the public domain for being biased (cf. Harper 2007; Maughan 2007; McLachlan 2007; Staff reporter 2007c, 2007b; COSATU 2007): “You may have felt it then, but only now that everything has sobered up, people would tacitly acknowledge that somehow we did take sides, maybe sub-consciously” (R74). A state of 'intoxication' that makes it almost impossible to think and re-focus on the actual task is the hallmark of basic assumption mode, and in particular baF that produces “activity, but without reflexivity”, in other words: “pseudo-action” (French and Simpson 2010, 1868). In this case it was so pronounced that it left even the most well-known partisan journalist (R96) of the team hoping that this situation would not be repeated: “It depends on us! We must learn to ask questions.”

Because of the overall dominance of baD over baF functioning which is reflected in the greater prevalence of the Old-Guard subcultures as compared to the Partisan subculture, the pull away from the task at the SABC tends towards dependency rather than fight/flight. Journalists affiliated to IMP are under constant collective pressure to stop making life difficult for themselves and others by being less ambitious, less questioning, less critical, less concerned about the fate of the public broadcaster. This could be regularly observed in the line talks, a group with a specific task, clear boundaries, and a fairly consistent membership. Often, when IMP editors tried to shift the group towards the task (work group mode), they abandoned their efforts in the face of competing basic assumption dynamics. For instance, they would question the news value of a regional story, fail to get satisfactory answers, and offer it to the bulletin desks anyway. They would regularly insist on wanting to see fewer officials on the news, but not enforce this

consistently. The exhausting nature of working in an environment like this is felt disproportionately by those in leadership positions, and it raises the question of how to conceive of leadership as such in this context – a problem I now want to touch on.

## 8.4 Group Psychodynamics and Leadership

Leaders who are politically biased or otherwise fail to 'protect' the newsroom from pressure are one of the most obvious explanations for the politicisation of an organisation (cf. chapters 5/I and 5/II). I have shown that the phenomenon – especially anticipatory politicisation – is far more complex, diffuse and, to a large extent, independent of the leadership of the day. Leaders themselves can be seen partially as a product of unconscious collective dynamics. One senior editor (R19) expressed this explicitly in an angry reaction to my questions about the role of news management:

Q: Surely, at times people in leadership positions have a profound effect on the organisation?

A: And this is where you are completely wrong. It is the culture that is the problem, it affects everyone, including the bosses.

This is not to say that they are not responsible for their actions, or that it does not matter who they are or how they are chosen. It is to put leadership into the context of

organisational culture. Leaders are recipients of a wide range of expectations, demands and projections, and the more so the more senior they are. This is particularly the case in an environment of collective regression (Kernberg 1985), evidenced by a sliding into basic assumptions functioning, that may cause leaders to behave in increasingly odd and 'irrational' ways, i.e. to regress themselves to a more primitive state of mental functioning (ibid.). Group dynamics, in other words, affect the quality of leadership, although they are not the only factor to do so (Kernberg 1985, 1998). Kernberg argues that this situation is by far the more frequent explanation for problematic leadership than the leaders "character pathology" which is often a symptom rather than a cause (Kernberg 1985, 224, 245, cf. also 1998, 71, 98). Locating all blame in an individual absolves the rest of the group/organisation from taking responsibility and often reinforces an authoritarian structure (Kernberg 1998, 54). Not having the space to develop this in detail, I want to offer a case study from my fieldwork to illustrate this point in relation to the prevailing baD dynamics at the SABC.

In recent years, politicisation at the SABC became largely associated with one senior manager, Hlaudi Motsoeneng (chapter 5/II), a Zuma associate who had risen rapidly in the hierarchy, survived several inquiries and disciplinary procedures, was appointed and re-appointed as COO illegally, fired critical journalist, censored news operations, saw board members resign over him, and caused the Minister of Communications being summonsed to both Parliament and the ANC national executive committee. By October 2016 he had effectively captured the organisation that was now running a R400m loss (Madia 2016). It is now clear that his survival over the years was indeed due to having enjoyed protection from Zuma (Blignaut and Van Rensburg 2016; Tandwa 2016;

Thamm 2016; Serrao and Chabalala 2016), and this process again mirrored broader and ongoing developments in the country around the capture of state institutions by factional and private interests. However, Motsoeneng also rose to power within an existing organisational culture: Invested with near-omnipotence whether idolised or loathed, he became the ultimate dependency leader, more destructive to the organisation and its public broadcasting mandate (task) than any of his post-apartheid predecessors.

Let us return to the lead-up to these dramatic developments that proved so damaging for the organisation, to 2011, when Motsoeneng had just been put in charge of Stakeholder Relations, his first management job at head office. At the time he wielded little formal power and news operations were run by a group of IMP editors – yet he was already regarded by some respondents as the person de-facto in control of the SABC. No one was able to explain why and how he had acquired this power, and whether his own claims of being close to Zuma were true. Depending on subcultural context, I found a situation infused with outrage, fear or messianic hopes. There were hushed rumours everywhere:

“Now he is the nigger in charge. He doesn't even have matric<sup>80</sup>. But he is a whole different story.” (R61, a young black journalist)

“That boy is handling [the CEO]. And he jumps! He must have something on all these managers, they are shit-scared of him! He goes to Nkandla [Zuma's rural home] all the time and comes back saying: this is gonna happen. And it happens. He worked for the apartheid ruler of [the homeland] QwaQwa. He has a way with politicians.” (R64, cf. Serrao and Chabalala 2016 for confirmation of facts)

“[He] is a huge danger, huge. Huge. That's why I spoke to my bosses to say, [he] shouldn't be allowed to talk to the newsroom.” (R81)

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80 Qualification obtained upon leaving high-school in South Africa.

In 2011 Motsoeneng was touring regional offices, building his support base by making bold claims and promises to staff. I observed his visit to the Free State where he had started his career as a junior journalist and risen to become Regional Editor, a position he still held at the time. In order to accommodate the entire staff, the meeting took place at a nearby evangelical church dominated by purple and orange colours with ostentatious looking furniture and a glass table on fake greek columns on stage. Motsoeneng arrived an hour late, sat down at the table and engaged in banter with his entourage, referring to them as “comrades”, while one of the journalists eagerly polished the table with a cloth. Starting his speech, Motsoeneng immediately promised higher salaries for journalists in the regions:

“You know I don't follow procedures, I just implement. I went to exile for those issues. He [points to colleague] will approve [pay rises] in one hour. It will happen to some people here. ... Some managers didn't implement because they were afraid to lose their jobs. As you know I'm not. So if I can do it in the region, can you imagine what I can do at national? ... People at the SABC think only about themselves. If you grow, you need to grow with your own people. I want all of you to be driven by someone.” (applause)

The atmosphere in the room, crackling with anticipation in the beginning, turned to excitement and quasi-religious worship. “I can see, Hlaudi is a celebrity here”, an SABC lawyer remarked at some point. Motsoeneng consistently presented himself as being above all rules, with side sweeps against those who were “educated” and insisted on due process to be followed. Dispensing patronage as if the public broadcaster was his private property he promised the dawn of a new era (“Let us forget history, let's take the SABC somewhere!”) in which he would personally take care of everyone's needs. During question time, a local radio presenter argued for a pay rise saying that it was “demoralising to see your peers

in Johannesburg drive nice cars. We don't get exposure to big projects, it's always [the presidential correspondent] and [political editor] doing this." Motsoeneng promised that he was "gonna take two people from here to head office." Throughout he emphasized the extraordinary power he wielded at the SABC: "I don't know why I'm always connected to these Zulu guys [laughter – everyone knows he is referring to Jacob Zuma] ... but people are very afraid at head office that I am there." (Field notes)

Implicitly and explicitly Motsoeneng offered himself as a leader whose power was so absolute he could do away with thinking (historical memory, education, research). Seen through the lens of basic assumption dynamics, this speaks directly to the unconscious demands of a baD culture (Bion 1961, 85) and may explain why Motsoeneng was able to garner support in newsrooms as long as he could uphold the hope that he was able to take care of his followers (ibid., 121). His unrealistic claims, repeated and proven lies and destructive action that went on for years did little to disrupt this collective dynamic. When left unstructured, Bion argues somewhat provocatively, baD groups in search of a leader will find "a paranoid schizophrenic or malignant hysteric if possible; failing either of these, a psychopathic personality with delinquent trends will do; failing a psychopathic personality it will pick on the verbally facile high-grade defective", a sort of mad genius (ibid., 123). In other words, the charismatic (cf. Weber 2009, 249) baD leader, even in a context where she is imposed on a baD group, has implicit permission to act in an irrational and even destructive way without upsetting in the least the psychodynamics of the group. After all, who would dare to challenge God's wrath? To the contrary: the leader is treated with deference, even flattery (Bion 1961, 123) –

symbolised by the wiping of the table.

The religious or spiritual undertones that characterised the discourse around Motsoeneng as a baD leader were striking and in themselves suggestive of baD dynamics being present (Bion 1961). Even those highly critical of him were drawn into this, wondering aloud whether it was true that Motsoeneng used *muti* [traditional medicine] and witchcraft to make the board and senior managers comply with his wishes. “You know, his mother was a sangoma [traditional healer]”, people would whisper to me. For Bion religious groups are the ones most closely associated with baD. He observes their tendency to “increasingly ... ensure that the leader ... is not a concrete person [but] God, a spirit” (ibid., 122), an omnipotent entity who will provide in return for absolute devotion. “Everywhere I am I do miracles”, Motsoeneng would say years later (Tandwa 2016). Or: “I want to applaud people who recognise this wonderful person called Hlaudi. Because when I came here there was no SABC. ... When I came here, there was just a disaster” (ibid.). “The leader of the work group”, writes Bion, “at least has the merit of possessing contact with external reality, but no such qualification is required of the leader of the basic-assumption group” (Bion 1961, 178).

The case of Hlaudi Motsoeneng is an extreme one deserving of more in-depth study. It is used here to highlight just one aspect, namely how an organisational culture that is in large parts driven by the basic assumption of dependency easily accommodates, even encourages, a certain type of leader that speaks to these collective dynamics – and does so even in the face of extreme behaviour and despite evidence of damage to the organisation, such as financial losses, and its task (direct politicisation). Considering the

SABC's cultural composition it is perhaps not surprising that Motsoeneng has only very recently faced strong, organised and, eventually, public resistance from journalists otherwise associated with the IMP subculture. Years after the end of my fieldwork period this eventually led to open letters, leaks to newspapers, demonstrations of solidarity, resignations and legal challenges (Herman 2016a; Rahlaga 2016; TMG Digital 2016). Journalists felt that they had to stand up lest “those in a position of power would grab more and more of our sacred editorial space until there was nothing left” (Besent 2016); that Motsoeneng's “poisonous tentacles [had] infested the entire public broadcaster” (Ferreira 2016a), and that a “corrosive atmosphere” had affected peoples “moral judgement” (Staff reporter 2016b). At this point, some individuals' long-standing professional reputations had been seriously discredited.

Of course there is much more at play here than unconscious group dynamics, but it is important to recognise the part they play in facilitating what could simply be seen as destructive leadership rooted in the real-politics of South Africa. An “infested” organisation with a “corrosive atmosphere” that impacts negatively on the “moral judgement” of professionals with a life-long track record of independent journalism is an apt description of the effect that group (ba) psychodynamics can have on individuals, including those who normally work reliably on task (in work group mode). Regardless of the presence of an actual leader to occupy the position that a baD culture seeks to be filled, these unconscious collective demands will be there. They can either be met or resisted. This is what Bryant (2009, 8) refers to when he writes that (good) “leadership is about not letting the inevitable happen”. Leadership, on this level, becomes synonymous with resistance to off-task group dynamics.

## 8.5 Individuals and Agency-as-Resistance

Like those in leadership roles, individual journalists on all levels find themselves moved by and caught up in collective psychodynamics when navigating the organisation as a whole, subcultures and groups. If we accept this, the problem of de-politicisation or resistance to politicisation takes on a new level of complexity. It now implies much more than a reduction in, or resistance to, censorship and direct political pressure – a conclusion that could have been drawn from previous chapters. It becomes also about resisting the joint dominance of a number of subcultures firmly committed to phenomenal (as if) tasks that drive or facilitate politicisation in its various forms. It is left to the individual journalist to somehow resist the lure of social defences as well as basic assumption functioning in groups on a daily basis. We have seen how, because of the ever-shifting unconscious grounds, resistance to politicisation cannot be 'guaranteed' by any particular subculture or group. It is fluid and never absolute: less of a formal act of defiance in the face of political pressure or a blanket refusal to self-censor, and more of an ongoing internal as well as external struggle with uncertain outcomes.

This raises the question of agency-as-resistance to politicisation in its individual dimension. While the group relations tradition has demonstrated how unconscious social defences in organisations, through introjection, affect peoples' subjectivities, it falls short on explaining how and why individuals withstand them; in other words, it fails to adequately theorise agency (Born 1997, 1998). Born has argued that personal

psychic history and social positioning are important determinants that “may work to produce a capacity for resistance or change, or they may not” (Born 1997, 497). We also know that in any group the stakes for dissent are high: “[a]nyone who manages to spot the pattern of avoidance, and then dares to challenge the [basic] assumption, is likely either to be attacked or simply ignored” (French and Simpson 2010, 1813). For Lawrence et al. (1996, 30), it therefore takes “people with minds who can transform experiences” to move a group towards work-group behaviour and “insight, understanding, learning, growth and development” (French and Simpson 2010, 1867). Do we understand this to be an innate quality some individuals have and others do not? Would it consequently be a matter of choosing the 'right' people to affect de-politicisation? Or is resistance something everyone is capable of? And following this: whose responsibility is it?

No matter how great or small the space for agency individuals find themselves in, a closer look at any newsroom shows that some journalists are more prone to self-censorship than others; the degree to which editors defend their autonomy varies greatly, and even in totalitarian regimes one reporter may resort to subversion at great personal risk while others become puppets of political power. This observation certainly holds for the SABC. Now, it is quite possible and indeed tempting to make sense of peoples' behaviour by using a range of fairly accessible psychoanalytic concepts, such as splitting, projections, rationalisation, paranoid-schizoid and depressive position functioning (Spillius and Hinshelwood 2011) and so on. Countless potential manifestations of these could be encountered in SABC newsrooms<sup>81</sup>.

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81 A few examples: a journalist who is critical of the ANC privately, but sings its praises at work (splitting), a reporter explaining unquestioning journalism by insisting he has no choice because this is what the SABC is like (rationalisation), an editor de-authorising his producer when angry about being de-authorised by his boss (displacement), journalists endlessly expressing their disgust with the politicised CEO, the (few) “ANC

Yet it also raises a recurring question: where would the use of these concepts leave us when trying to understand individual agency, i.e. the capacity to resist pervasive politicisation? Once we move beyond the collective level they force us to talk about actual people, research subjects about whom we know very little. This carries the risk of psychologising and pathologising, i.e. an epistemic risk: what Freud called 'wild analysis' (Freud 1910; cf. also Frosh 2007; I. Parker 2005). It also keeps us anchored in a theory that revolves around anxiety: what people try to avoid rather than what they may want and strive towards. Further, object relations theory in particular focusses primarily on our internal world. It has limitations when we assume that the socio-political context acts upon individual psyche as much as individual psyche acts upon the socio-political context. Lastly, relying on concepts such as those mentioned above in order to label social and individual phenomena always carries the risk of reductionism: it explains very little and is thus not particularly productive, especially when thinking about resistance, let alone possible interventions that may facilitate de-politicisation. I propose that Lacan's discourse theory offers an alternative that fares better on all these points.

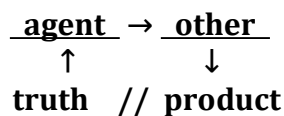
For Lacan, a discourse is a "social bond, founded in language" (D. Evans 1996, 44) that exists before the first word is spoken; in fact, it determines that first word as well as those that follow, alongside behaviour, thoughts, affect, meaning, and identity (Lacan 2008; Verhaeghe 1993; Bracher 1988). It differs from communication theories in that it focusses on the inevitable failure(s) of communication, and from Foucault's (1981)

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hacks" in the newsroom, or the "government-bashing" private media (projection). An editor displaying an almost irrational fear of not meeting the expectations of his bosses thereby justifying self-censorship (paranoid schizoid position); an editor who explains how navigating political pressure is a process of protecting one's integrity that involves questioning one's own assumptions and engaging with politicians rather than defying them (depressive position).

discourse theory in that it is not concerned at all with the content of the communication, i.e. with the “concrete material of the signifier” (Verhaeghe 1993, 4), but only with the “relationships that each discourse draws through the act of speaking” (ibid.). “It locates a moment” (Lacan 2008, 15) and explains how an act of communication “*moves people*” (Bracher 1988, 48).

Lacan's shorthand formula for the structure of a discourse consists of four fixed positions, two visible and obviously present, and two hidden, i.e. repressed.



The agent is the speaker of the discourse who dominates and defines it. The other is the receiver, the one who is spoken to and who is “called into action by the agent” (Bracher 1988, 34) . Importantly, this activation involves a degree of choice and complicity. The product is the outcome of the discourse, that which is produced by the other as a result of being activated by the agent (Bailly 2009). The Freudian twist is in the fourth position: the truth refers to the radically unconscious 'driver' of the discourse, that which can never be fully expressed in language (Lacan 2008). Hence, the agent's attempt to communicate his truth to the other is impossible (disjunction of impossibility), and the product of the discourse has no relation to the agent's truth as the origin of the discourse (disjunction of inability) (Verhaeghe 1993; Lacan 2008, 174).

These four fixed positions are taken up by four elements – S1, S2, \$ and a – that rotate around them forming four distinct discourses as a result. These elements are

condensations of major aspects of Lacan's oeuvre, and it is impossible to do them justice here. Very briefly, S1 stands for the master signifier, that characteristic with which someone is mainly identified by others and (usually) self-identified. S2 refers to the system of knowledge which can take various forms. \$ is Lacan's symbol for the divided subject, attesting to the fact that we humans as speaking beings are essentially alienated from ourselves, that there is a gap between thinking and being. The divided subject is conscious of something lacking and is constantly searching for the object that is the cause of its desire. Object a is this (presumably) lost object, and its function can be filled by almost anything that promises to stop the gap: mother's breast for the baby, the baby for the mother, the beloved for the lover, money for the banker, knowledge for the academic, and so on (cf. Bracher 1988, 38 referring to Lacan's Seminar XVII).

What do we gain by using this complex, unpalatable theory to look at politicisation, agency and resistance in a media organisation? Three things: (1) a more dynamic model that links the social with the psychological by going beyond both structure and individual psychology; (2) a shift from anxiety to desire; (3) a more productive way of thinking about resistance. Let me discuss this in some more detail.

(1) The four discourses tell us something about how the individual in its conscious and unconscious dimensions is located in social interactions. It speaks to the subject matter (or at least fundamental ambition) of psycho-social research to "examine the psychosocial as a seamless entity" (Frosh 2003, 1547). Lacanian discourses unite "psychic structure, the ground of motivation, with semiotic phenomena and discursive structure in a single model" (Bracher 1988, 48). At the same time, they shift the focus

from an actual person to discursive agent (that does not even have to be a person). By using algebraic symbols, “there is an enormous gain in level of abstraction”, which means that the elements of a discourse can represent almost anything, and, because they are stripped of associations, “diminish the possibility of psychologizing” (Verhaeghe 1993, 2). Further, the same person can take up different discourses and positions and frequently does so. This model, then, relocates the problem – for instance, self-censorship – from people thought to be stuck in a defence or a Kleinian position to the formal structure of a social bond that anyone can engage in as both agent and other. This bond can in turn be analysed very productively: what its psychological and socio-political function is, what it produces, what is left out (repressed) by it, in what ways it is dysfunctional, and how it sustains itself.

(2) While the question of anxiety is by no means unimportant in Lacan, it does not take up the same central position as it holds in Object Relations theory. Instead of focussing on what journalists may try to avoid we can also ask what they may try to move towards. The Lacanian divided subject, constituted as split by its social and cultural context, strives to find its place in the face of this. It is operative whenever we fail to identify ourselves or grasp ourselves (usually ego defences kick in when we are confronted with this) (Bracher 1988, 73). It is impossible for us to *really* know what we believe and want. Freud (1917, 143) wrote of the ego not being “master in its own house”. Lacan's corresponding phrase is “there where I am thinking I do not recognize myself” (Lacan 2008, 103), i.e. we are 'being spoken' rather than speaking). This impossibility drives our interaction with the external world, it is the root of desire, and there is nothing pathological about it. It does, however, mean that what takes the place

of the agent in the structure of any discourse is always fake (the agent's position is the position of semblance), propelled by a truth she is not aware of. This has consequences both psychologically and socially as truth and agent take different forms in different discourses.

(3) Thinking about resistance is the main reason for employing discourse theory. Changes on the intra-psychic levels are expected to have repercussion on the social level and vice versa. Analysing the structure of each discourse helps us think about what the impossibilities of the discourse are, and how it could be disrupted.

Turning back to the SABC I am going to illustrate some of the ways discourses work on an unconscious level in relation to politicisation and resistance. This account is by no means a conclusive or even remotely comprehensive analysis of the situation at the SABC. The intention is merely to throw light into some corners that have so far remained largely in the dark.

I suggest that the Discourse of the Master is operative whenever political master signifiers are evoked at the SABC, whenever there is an underlying assumption that a social interaction within the context of journalistic practice is ultimately defined by, say, the ANC, government, or a powerful politician. An example of this is the senior editor discussed earlier who attempts to get journalists to toe a political line supportive of President Jacob Zuma, but without, at this point, making use of explicit pressure, directives, or censorship.

$$\begin{array}{c} \underline{S1} \rightarrow \underline{S2} \\ \$ \quad a \end{array}$$

Here the editor in question is in the place of the agent/semblant of the discourse, implicitly identified with Zuma as the master signifier S1. Starting off his address to staff by joking that “I don't know why I'm always friends with these Zulu guys”, the implication is clear to everyone that the editor is close to, and protected by, the President (a Zulu) himself. The knowledge that allows for this connection to be made, and to understand its implications and gravity (e.g. protection by the President equals being untouchable), is S2. It is a knowledge that goes beyond what even the editor (master) knows of his own desire, and this is precisely what the function of the reporters (slave) is in this discourse (Lacan 2008, 23). The attending staff are called into action in the place of the other of the discourse to use this knowledge and act on it by drawing on their professional skills of producing stories in support of the master signifier, the editor/President. These stories represent object a, the product of the interaction. What is left out of the discourse is the truth that the master/ editor is 'not master in his own house', that, despite his being identified with Zuma this is not all there is to him. Yet the journalists (and possibly he himself) are unaware of this. The Master's discourse, here, is the discourse of the politicised journalist, and it is in particular linked to direct politicisation and partisan journalism.

When analysing the structure of this discourse further, a few things are worth noting. Firstly, the discourse persists as long as S1 is taken for granted by both, agent and other. By this unquestioning acceptance, and by producing news and current affairs stories to support the S1, the reporters actively collude with the discourse. With Hegel (1841), the

slave confirms the position of the master. This masks the very essence (truth) of this social bond, namely that the master is “from the origins, castrated” (Lacan 2008, 101). Secondly, the Master's discourse serves to order and offer meaning in a situation that is confusing, something that is often welcome by the receiver of the discourse. In our example, the editor advertises this function explicitly with frequent statements like “I don't care about procedures, I just implement”. The implication is that he will make peoples' careers easier in exchange for their loyalty. Given the high levels of anxiety at the SABC (cf. Chapter 6), the appeal of getting caught up on the receiving side of the Master's discourse is obvious.

While the discourse itself can take many shapes, it is the authority of the master signifier that is not called into question, that is not being confronted. Regardless of how “the master might impose his will ... consent is necessary” (Lacan 2008, 31) to keep this social interaction alive. To disrupt the discourse one needs to approach the dimension of shame that is associated with “the hole from which the master signifier arises” (ibid., 189): to question whether the emperor is not, in fact, naked, whether the Zuma-identification is actually all there is to this particular editor or whether his behaviour as a manifestation of his desire may not be driven by something else entirely.

The Discourse of the University essentially reflects the relationship between “an institution and someone anxious to attain the status guaranteed by it” (Bailly 2009, 154). It is present at the SABC most notably in the bureaucracy (cf. Bracher 1988) of the news production process that constitutes an impersonal system of knowledge (S2 in the position of the agent) a journalist (a) is inducted into and that relies on him as a 'news

worker' to follow established routines to churn out news. Its function is to erase the individual, manifest in structures such as different journalists or even newsrooms being responsible for the selection (assignment), information-gathering (input) and writing/ presenting/ broadcasting (output) of the same story.<sup>82</sup>

S2 → a  
S1    \$

A reporter who finds himself in the position of the other as object a in the University's Discourse would be one who identifies strongly with the SABC conceiving of his job as nothing more than fitting in with this bureaucratic system. The discourse has as its product a journalist who may rely heavily on the centralised news diary, on official press releases and on assignments given to him by his superiors – in other words, a journalist who has stopped asking his own questions, stopped following his own desire in looking for newsworthy stories, and stopped interrogating critically whatever information he is given. I have given many empirical examples of this in previous chapters and linked it explicitly to 'spectator journalism' in Chapter 4. The truth of the discourse, however, is that this bureaucratic system of news production (S2) is by no means neutral – neutrally bland, so to speak –, but underpins, sanctions and keeps in place unacknowledged (political) master signifiers (S1) (Verhaeghe 1993). These S1 may be more or less desirable from a normative point of view. At the post-apartheid SABC they have historically ranged from 'transformation', 'public interest', 'development' and 'national interest' to 'government', the 'ANC', and "President Zuma" - to name but a few (cf. Chapters 5/I and 5/II).

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<sup>82</sup> The fact that such structures are wide-spread in journalism organisations (though not universal) does not diminish the role they play in this case.

The point here is that the Discourse of the University, the discourse of the bureaucratized journalist, is functional whenever the practice of journalism becomes defined by the bureaucracy – regardless of the specific underlying political master signifier at the time. The fact that the structure of the discourse allows for, or rather: *necessitates* a master signifier at its source/truth explains the susceptibility of spectator journalism to anticipatory politicisation (Chapter 5/I). There is a place in this discourse waiting to be filled by the political master signifier of the day without any mention of anything remotely political needing to be made by journalists going about their day-to-day work. Recurring comments by journalists that 'nothing ever really changes at the SABC' or, more cynically, that 'the SABC always ends up serving whoever is in power' attest to this dynamic despite being factually untrue.

The Discourse of the Hysteric, being the discourse of protest and revolution, captures instances of resistance towards the political master signifier(s) at the SABC. An example would be a confident radio presenter (R122) who I observed doing a live interview with a government minister questioning him critically about a teachers' strike and even sharing her own opinion about it in the end.

$$\begin{array}{l} \underline{\$} \rightarrow \underline{\$1} \\ \text{a} \quad \underline{\$2} \end{array}$$

As a divided subject in the position of the agent, she wants to know something and assumes that the minister (\$1) does indeed have this knowledge. He is therefore put in the position of a master-supposed-to-know and reliably produces some information (\$2). However, this information only invites further probing, and as the

interview goes on the minister is being increasingly questioned and challenged as to the adequacy of his response. The hidden truth of the discourse is the presenter's object a (unrelated to the information she is actually asking for and receiving), which may, for instance, be represented by a wish to be seen and acknowledged as a capable professional or a powerful black woman (in Lacan's terms, a desire for the gaze of the other). In this case, her sharing her own opinion as well as a subsequent outburst in an editorial meeting that she objects to using scripted questions for live interviews because she "has a personality" may point in this direction. However, what is at stake here is not the psychic economy of this individual journalist, but the structure of the discourse it happens to bring into being.

What can we take from this? In some important ways, the discourse of the hysteric is the discourse of independent-minded journalism which thrives on never-ending questions addressed from a position of ignorance (lack) to someone (master) with supposed information (knowledge) whose answers are immediately subjected to critical scrutiny. "[T]he desire to know is not what leads to knowledge", writes Lacan (2008, 23): "What leads to knowledge is ... the hysteric's discourse." Seen like this, questioning journalism is based on a rather peculiar social bond, "what Freud described as the hysterical identification with an unsatisfied desire" (Verhaeghe 1993, 10). Its effect coincides with a central tenet of the mandate of the SABC as a public broadcaster: to report critically, without fear or favour, and to hold powerful elites to account in the public interest. Where it is operative, the Hysteric's Discourse can be linked to de-politicisation and to agency-as-resistance in a highly politicised environment. Structurally, it is different from the discourses of the Master and of the University, though this first impression is

misleading as the agent of the Hysteric's discourse is still looking for a master signifier (Lacan 2008). While the discourse goes some way in capturing resistance to politicisation, its structure also alerts us to the fact that the agent's readiness to question and attack the master (S1) in search of her lost object does not change her inherent desire to install a new master in his place. Seen like this, the Discourse of the Master and of the Hysteric ultimately work in tandem. This is what Lacan meant when he told agitated students who interrupted his seminar during the May revolt of 1986 that “you are looking for a master, you will surely find one” (Verhaeghe 1993, 10). In the context of the SABC, it suggests that the journalism practised by the Independent-minded Professionals as characterised as a subculture in Chapter 7, while effective in many ways, cannot be assumed to lead to lasting change of the organisational culture in the sense of a fundamental de-politicisation of the public broadcaster.

The question that remains is, then, “how to stop this little mechanism” (Bracher 1988, 42 referring to Lacan’s Seminar XVII) that keeps the engine of politicisation running. According to Lacan, the answer lies in the promotion of the only discourse that is structurally opposed to, and therefore functions to subvert, the Master's discourse: the Discourse of the Analyst (Lacan 2008, 99). It is here that psychological and/ or political transformation can be facilitated – by someone prepared to approach “the hole from which the master signifier gushes” (Lacan 2008 as referenced in Bracher 1988, 44).

$$\frac{\mathbf{a}}{\mathbf{S2}} \rightarrow \frac{\mathbf{\$}}{\mathbf{S1}}$$

Could we conceive of this taking place outside a psychoanalytic setting, within a media

organisation? While discourse theory allows for psychoanalytic discovery as much as for a “transformation of the social order” (Bracher 1988, 44), one problem arises immediately: whoever takes up the role of analyst (working in a way that is subject to *object a* as agent) in the position of the agent needs to do so from a position of learned ignorance and with a tolerance for being installed in the role of the master by the other, but without becoming identified with this role. The 'analyst' may well know a few things (S2) about the functioning of the discourse or the other's psychic economy, yet would be unable to do anything with that knowledge and instead have to engage in a continuous flight from knowing, meaning and closure (Lacan 2008). Only in this way one would be able to open up a space for the divided subject (in the position of the other) to emerge, and to emerge precisely in its failure to coincide with itself and to make sense to itself. This failure is usually experienced as shame, anxiety, self-doubt, or meaninglessness (Bracher 1988). It is not a pleasant experience, but a necessary one in order to resist the illusions so readily provided by the Master's and University's Discourse. So much about the theory.

It is almost impossible to conceive of a person who could fill this function and, at the same time, be part of the SABC. One could perhaps think of moments where journalists as (divided) subjects of ethnographic fieldwork have found themselves being the receiver of the Analyst's discourse. For instance, when, invited to speak freely about being a journalist at the SABC, they surprised themselves by their answers, experienced a surge of despair, sadness or sudden agitation, or reacted angrily when confronted with how their behaviour differed from their conscious image of themselves/ their ego-ideal. In the Analyst's discourse, research subjects approach the ethnographer as someone

with supposed knowledge about themselves and their organisation, and they may indeed learn something about themselves – as long as the ethnographer does not collude with this assumption and instead encourages further self-reflection. I have no intention of advocating ethnographic research (or indeed psychoanalysis!) as an intervention for the de-politicisation of the SABC, but it is worth noting that it was this very experience I had repeatedly during my fieldwork, of journalists responding to my invitation to speak in rather surprising and unexpectedly 'emotional' ways, that eventually prompted me to consider psychoanalytic explanations for the phenomenon of politicisation (cf. also Hunt 1989b). Approaching the practical challenge of de-politicisation, it is not inconceivable that this function could be brought into being in other, more deliberate ways.

## **Conclusion**

Let me turn to some concluding thoughts on how the various psychoanalytic concepts used in this and the previous chapters may connect with and complement each other, especially when thinking about resistance and interventions aimed at reducing high levels of politicisation.

If we locate agency at the intersection of collective and individual psychodynamics, then Object Relations theory, and in particular the Group Relations tradition and the work of Menzies Lyth, lends itself to thinking about how politicisation happens and is sustained on the level of the organisation as a whole (Chapter 6). It gives a compelling explanation why journalists may alter their professional practice on a collective scale

in ways that are not only out of tune with the SABC's public broadcasting mandate, but that facilitate the politicisation of the organisation. By conceiving of such behaviour as defences against anxiety, one obvious conclusion to be drawn is that lowering anxiety levels at the SABC by, for instance, better training of journalists, structural changes to protect producer autonomy, or reducing external political pressure will make a difference. Menzies (1960, 63) also lamented the fact that, in the nursing service, “[l]ittle attempt is made positively to help the individual confront the anxiety-provoking experiences”. The ethnographic data discussed in Chapter 6 suggests that (providing) collective spaces where anxiety can be experienced and spoken about rather than repressed may go some way in countering politicisation.

On the level of group dynamics, Bion's work explains collective behaviour driven by the valencies of individuals for basic assumptions subject to a particular (hierarchical) definition of the organisation as a whole, from which the primary task of the work group may be derived. At the SABC these basic assumptions find expression in long-established and pervasive subcultures whose interactions speak of an ongoing battle for 'the soul of the SABC' (Chapter 7). It also sheds light on how individuals or whole newsrooms that are generally independent-minded and working more or less 'on task' can rapidly become politicised by being drawn into basic assumption dynamics, as we saw with the national TV newsroom ahead of the ANC's 2007 Polokwane conference. Bion helps us to account for the fact that processes of politicisation and de-politicisation are, among other things, fuelled and hindered by unconscious group dynamics that are inevitably present wherever people work together collectively. Effective interventions on this level may attempt to build

awareness of the reality of such group dynamics and encourage journalists to explore their individual valency for basic assumption functioning in order to become less susceptible to colluding with unconscious collective demands.<sup>83</sup>

Lacanian discourse theory enables us to think about individual agency and resistance to politicisation in the context of organisational culture and group dynamics. The challenge here becomes to disrupt the dominant discourse (of the Master and the University), first and foremost by not colluding with it unconsciously, and I have sketched some ideas around how this already happens and could be further facilitated. All these ideas have something to do with the provision of a reflective space that would allow individuals to interrogate the master signifiers in the Discourse of the Master, the role of the master signifiers underlying and propping up the Discourse of the University, and, finally, the nature of their own desire in the Discourse of the Hysteric.

Lacan noted that it is the object *a* that animates the psychology of the group (Lacan 2008). Here a connection can be made to valency for basic assumption functioning that is ultimately located in an individual's personal history even if and when it finds a 'home' in a particular subculture. At the same time we can conceive of the broader organisational culture, including social defences and group dynamics, as a factor that impacts on how a journalist positions herself in discourse, *especially* to what extent she becomes activated as the recipient of a discourse. Certainly master signifiers are strengthened the more frequently they are taken for granted and accepted without

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<sup>83</sup> Note that this would still happen within an overarching view of what is the 'authorised' version of the primary task.

question, and the larger the number of people to do so – which increases the agent's potency in pulling journalists into the discourse as other, thus replicating it.

I contend that it is the extent of an individual journalist's susceptibility to being activated as the receiver of the Master's and University's discourse that is most affected by collective dynamics as they play out in an organisation's culture, subcultures and groups. The resulting collusion provides individuals with the ordering and structuring functions of these discourses, but at the cost of repressing what is really at stake: the question(ing) of political truth, the unsettling nature of journalistic work, the inherently ambivalent and anxiety-provoking task of public broadcasting, and the place of individual desire in navigating all of these. The question of one's own desire is fundamental to a Lacanian reading of agency-as-resistance. It goes beyond questioning authority as in the hysteric's discourse, and it provides a route to disentangle oneself from unconscious group process as those described by Bion. It is, finally, also an ethical question.

Let me conclude with the 2016 resignation letter (Staff reporter 2016b) of a long-standing SABC editor, Jimi Matthews. This was a widely respected journalist with a history in the anti-apartheid movement, an 'independent-minded professional' who has, over many years, given support and made valuable contributions to this empirical study. In recent years, and after the end of the fieldwork, he had, by his own and other peoples' account, become complicit in what was perhaps the crudest attempt at direct politicisation the SABC has seen since the end of apartheid.

“It is with great sadness that I tender my immediate resignation. For many months I have compromised the values that I hold dear under the mistaken belief that I could be more effective inside the SABC than outside... In the process the prevailing, corrosive atmosphere has impacted negatively on my moral judgement and has made me complicit in many decisions which I am not proud of. I wish also to apologise to the many people who I've let down by remaining silent when my voice needed to be heard. What is happening at the SABC is wrong and I can no longer be a part of it.”

Lacanian discourse theory reminds us that individuals may be embedded in, but are never entirely determined in their behaviour by either their personal history, socio-political, or indeed (sub-)cultural or group context. It stresses fluidity and choice and shifts emphasis from the inconsistencies between individuals to the inconsistencies within, or rather *of*, individuals. This suggests, for instance, that trying to de-politicise an organisation like the SABC by getting rid of or promoting certain types of people or subcultures may not be the best or only way forward. The task of resistance can no longer be located only in the leadership, or in particular subcultures and groups. Conceptualised as disruption of discourse, resistance becomes a task both possible and impossible, but always the responsibility of the individual – and indeed a task within the capacity of every individual.

## 9 Conclusion

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This dissertation set out to describe and analyse the politicisation of the SABC in post-apartheid South Africa using an interdisciplinary approach and ethnography as a method. Prompted by the empirical problem of failed transitions from state to public broadcasters in Europe and Africa, a phenomenon not sufficiently explained in existing research, it highlights the hitherto neglected dimension of organisational culture and its role in the process of (re-)politicisation. I have discussed in detail how politicisation manifests in SABC newsrooms and how it evolves over time within the wider political context; how it is linked to collective psychodynamics characteristic of the SABC's culture, and how this culture itself fragments into a number of subcultures with consequences for group dynamics. Within this context I have emphasized the problem of collective and individual agency-as-resistance to politicisation as it is here that thinking about de-politicisation can begin.

I have made the following findings:

Throughout the organisation, many SABC journalists habitually and consistently behave in ways that conflict with the professional standards and aspirations enshrined in the SABC's mandate. Four patterns of behaviour that manifest in highly politicised environments have been identified: over-reliance on official sources and uncritical

reporting, excessive upward referral and self-censorship, the structural blurring of accountability, and withdrawal and self-absorption. These patterns were wide-spread but rarely acknowledged by those who exhibited them: they had become an unquestioned part of the organisational culture. In their presence, the every-day work of journalism could be carried out, but only just. Adverse effects included uncritical news and current affairs reporting, the stifling of initiative and creativity, low-quality coverage and journalists disengaged from their professional roles as well as from their audience. (Chapter 4)

Levels of politicisation as reflected in the prevalence of these patterns fluctuate over time, and these intra-organisational phenomena are associated with macro-level political developments in the country. A historical analysis points to five distinct periods between 1993 and 2013 which suggests that politicisation has been a non-linear and neither uni-directional nor teleological process. The process, however, seems to have traversed at least three phases during this time: de-politicisation (linked to the political transition), re-politicisation (associated with the ANC's entrenchment of power and a re-negotiation of relations between journalists and the political establishment), and over-identification (reflecting journalists' attempt to navigate unprecedented factionalism within the ANC). It could also be shown that some integration of experience has taken place subsequently resulting in renewed de-politicisation and the strengthening of professional autonomy despite continued high levels of politicisation on board and senior executive level. This is but one indication that politicisation is far more than a top-down phenomenon. (Chapters 5)

Having identified, traced over time and studied in their interaction drivers, enablers, and inhibitors of politicisation I conclude that factors related to organisational culture affect the SABC's susceptibility to politicisation. It follows that organisational culture must be taken into account when trying to understand and/or influence processes of (de-)politicisation. (Chapters 5)

Seeking an in-depth understanding of the function of patterns of journalistic practice I was able to link them to collective unconscious processes aimed at managing high level of anxiety originating from the nature of journalistic work, the SABC's organisational history, journalists' exposure to violence and suffering, and politicisation itself. In their function as social defences against anxiety (theorised in reference to Menzies Lyth (1960; 1988)) the patterns act as stabilisers of the organisation in a volatile political environment, but at the cost of its journalism. I conclude that unconscious collective processes as inscribed in organisational culture are therefore centrally implicated in the broadcaster's susceptibility and response to politicisation. (Chapter 6)

With regard to politicisation, the SABC's organisational culture is not homogeneous. Journalists behave in varied ways despite sharing the same organisational environment. This can be seen as evidence that there is considerable space for agency, and thus for resistance to politicisation. This space, however, is rarely taken up – certainly much less so than, for instance, at some established public broadcasters such as the BBC. I have argued that much of this seems to have to do with the subcultures present at the SABC and the ways they interact and reinforce each other. Of these subcultures I identify and analyse four: Partisans, Independent-minded Professionals, Black Old Guard, and White

Old Guard. They are distinguished by demographic markers, the use of the patterns identified previously, and by how journalists relate to the task of the SABC. I found only one of these subcultures to be de-facto aligned with the SABC's mandate, which led me to conclude that it constitutes a counter-culture. Subcultures act in various ways to drive, enable, or inhibit politicisation. I have also shown how subcultural alignments can explain why collective resistance to politicisation has been so difficult to sustain. (Chapter 7)

Subcultures were shown to affect group dynamics in daily newsroom interactions. This has consequences for a group's capacity to conform or resist politicisation and can, for instance, result in newsrooms becoming rapidly politicised at times. Extending Bion's (1961) theory I suggest that members of subcultures share valencies for group functioning, in particular for the basic assumptions of fight/ flight and dependency, as well as for work group functioning; valencies that they then 'take' into the various groups they are members of. Group dynamics, in turn, impact on individuals, including those with leadership responsibilities. This goes against the prevailing view in public discourse on the SABC that it is only or predominantly leaders that shape culture, and it has consequences for thinking about de-politicisation. (Chapter 8)

The question of agency-as-resistance to politicisation – left unresolved within the group relations tradition – necessitated a move from collective dynamics on the inter-organisational level to the micro-level of individual actors. Every journalist, within the limitation set by structural factors, cultural dynamics and group processes, 'chooses', for instance, to self-censor or not to self-censor. However, I found this decision-making to

be far from a purely rational process. Having shown how journalists are often at odds with what they are supposed to do (their task), as well as at odds with each other, it appears that they are also at odds with themselves. They are inconsistent in their behaviour, contradict themselves, and often behave differently to their stated beliefs. When confronted with such inconsistencies they tended to respond defensively, with expressions of shame, guilt, anger, or confusion. In order to unpack politicisation, agency and resistance on this individual level I have drawn on Lacan's theory of the Four Discourses and suggested that organisational culture impacts on how a subject positions herself in discourse, especially to what extent she is activated as the recipient of a discourse. I have demonstrated how an analysis of the structure of discourse applied to the ethnographic data exposes the impossibilities of each discourse and suggests ways of disrupting the dominant discourse, or at least ways to not collude with it. Beginning to integrate Lacan with the group relations tradition and Bion moves us from the problem of anxiety to the question of desire and opens up a productive new way of thinking about individual agency that locates both the capability and responsibility to resist in every individual rather than exclusively in leaders, the board, or external entities such as Parliament. (Chapter 8)

This study brings together in a novel way research and concepts from political science, sociology, media studies, organisational studies and psychoanalysis to shed light on the politicisation of a media organisation. By focussing on organisational culture, it links an intra-organisational focus on journalistic practice with the macro-level of the political field and the micro-level of individual actors and, in addition, takes into account the

unconscious psychodynamics that shape groups and individuals. Combined with using ethnography as a method it offers a conceptual framework as well as an approach to studying politicisation that overcomes limitations in, or makes contributions to, a number of existing literatures:

To the literature in political science and media studies on the transformation of former state into public service broadcasters I contribute a case study that draws attention to, offers a way to analyse, and helps us understand better the under-studied aspect of organisational culture in relation to editorial independence and politicisation. My findings challenge conventional explanations that rely either exclusively or predominantly on formal, structural or otherwise more 'obvious' factors such as de-jure independence, funding challenges, or direct political pressure. They suggest that the literature be revised to recognise organisational culture as an important variable, both for explaining failed transitions and predict the success of ongoing or future ones.

To the body of research on the SABC I add the most in-depth and wide-ranging empirical study on politicisation and organisational culture to date. It complements Ngwenya's (2015) dissertation on the SABC's independence which employs a predominantly macro-economic perspective, and it moves beyond Ciaglia's (2015) paper on 'entrenched' politicisation by using ethnography to take the analysis towards internal differentiation of culture, the micro-level of individual actors, and agency on all levels of the editorial hierarchy. I demonstrate that the SABC, far from being a homogeneous organisation, is culturally fragmented in ways that are not obvious, and that this fragmentation has major implications for politicisation as well as de-politicisation

efforts.

Within the sociology of journalism this thesis joins the small number of studies that look at aspects of organisational culture in relation to editorial independence (Born 2005; Schlesinger 1978; Küng-Shankleman 2000). It contributes a rare case not just from the developing world but from a transitional environment, puts organisational culture at the centre and addresses the understudied problem of agency in newsrooms which lies at the intersection of social and individual dynamics. My research strengthens the view that editorial independence is not simply defined by the absence or presence of direct pressure and introduces the concept of 'spectator journalism'. It also refutes the widely-held assumption that journalists strive for a maximum of autonomy (Curran 1990; Tunstall 1971; Waisbord 2000) by showing that voluntary conformity and collusion, indecision, internal conflicts and unconscious motivations are commonplace and influence levels of politicisation in many ways.

My contribution to organisational studies is to use a psychoanalytic/ group relations approach to study not only organisational culture, but subcultures. This allows us to distinguish subcultures more fundamentally in relation to organisational purpose rather than to management objectives. It also helps us to understand better the largely autonomous role subcultures play over long stretches of time, but also the powerful affect they have on leaders attempting to (de-)politicise an organisation.

To the political science literature on the politicisation of organisations I contribute a systematic analysis of factors that drive, enable and inhibit politicisation. It highlights

the multi-causality and multi-directionality of the process and shows that enabling factors can be just as important as the more obvious drivers. This is especially true over long periods of time as it has a cumulative effect with regard to anticipatory politicisation. In addition, I look at the politicisation of individuals and discourse in addition to that of institutions, issues and decision-making processes (cf. De Wilde 2011). The politicisation literature is also heavily reliant on the assumption that individual actors can be trusted to make rational and conscious decisions, which significantly reduces the complexity of the phenomenon. I challenge this by focussing explicitly on both culture and unconscious processes to underline the centrality of subjectivity. In particular, I contribute the concept of 'anticipatory politicisation' that, as opposed to bottom-up and top-down politicisation (Betts 2002; Ransom 1987; Peters and Pierre 2004), goes beyond consciously directed behaviour by leaving open the question of intent (cf. Doli, Korenica, and Rogova 2012).

Finally, I employ psychoanalytic concepts to analyse the unconscious dimensions of the SABC's organisational culture. So far, the psychoanalytic study of organisations has derived most of its empirical data from health care, social work, and education with other sectors, such as the media, receiving limited attention. My contributions in this area consist of a modification of Menzies' (1960) theory of social defences to take into account a wider range of work-related sources of anxiety and identify some that are specific to journalism, and public broadcasting in particular. I also extend Bion's (1961) theory on basic assumptions in groups to subcultures via his concept of valency. This introduces a cultural dimension to unconscious group dynamics that takes us beyond individual psychological dispositions. My main contribution, however, relates to the

question of agency. Psychoanalysis has traditionally focussed on the individual, the group relations tradition on collectives. Studying the interaction and interconnection of both is vital to understanding agency, in this case agency-as-resistance to politicisation. I have attempted in the last part of this dissertation to integrate group relations theories with Bionian and Lacanian concepts to arrive at a better understanding of individual agency in the context of collective processes inscribed in organisational culture.

This study has a number of limitations and weaknesses, many a direct consequence of its methodological approach. Some comparative elements notwithstanding, it is in essence a single case study whose findings cannot necessarily be generalised. However, it also reaches an unprecedented level of depth and suggests a novel way of studying and analysing the politicisation of (media) organisations in transitional environments which, if applied elsewhere, will allow for much more meaningful international comparison.

Data collection would have benefited from me being able to speak more local languages and immerse myself for longer periods of time in regional newsrooms, especially at African language radio stations. The fact that I ended my fieldwork period in 2013 also means that important recent developments are merely alluded to in the analysis, but have not been giving the close attention they deserve.

Despite my best efforts to counter this, my findings will, to some extent, have been affected by researcher bias. I cannot deny some personal investment in the subjects of

my study: I value the idea of public broadcasters highly enough to work for them. I feel so strongly about the provision of quality journalism that I train journalists to improve their practice. And I have an interest in the workings of the unconscious that is deep enough to have led to years of study and clinical training in psychoanalysis. Guided by my data, but no doubt also by my own experiences, I have chosen to put my emphasis on journalists' perceptions, subjectivity and unconscious processes. This is, on one level, an appropriate response to what is missing in much of the existing literature. At another level, it may distort empirical reality in a different way: after all, people do consider objective facts and act rationally, structural factors are fundamental, and culture is just one of many variables linked to politicisation. I do not wish to imply that one set of factors matters more than the other – simply that they all do matter.

Ideally, I would have supported my data more consistently and extensively with document analysis, content analysis, and audience research. Also, the wider systems level, so aptly addressed by Ngwenya's macro-economic analysis, is underemphasised in my work. I only consider the SABC's media environment selectively and could have gone much further in describing the internal differences in perceptions of and approaches towards the SABC and its role within government, Parliament and the ANC.

Lastly, while I thought the problem of agency to be fundamental to understanding politicisation and did therefore not want to leave it out of the analysis, I am aware that this introduced a new level of complexity that needs to be engaged with in more detail. In particular, the integration of psychoanalytic theories is not as far developed as I would have liked. I make some suggestions later as to how this could be taken up in

future research.

In terms of the implications of this research the following can be said:

Going back to the empirical problem of broadcasters transitioning from authoritarian to democratic environments, my findings suggest that organisational culture must be taken seriously, alongside structural factors, if we want to understand better the challenges, failures, and opportunities inherent in these processes. Successful de-politicisation will require not only a careful assessment of the existing culture and context, but the design of intelligent interventions to support sustainable cultural change. This findings will be of interest to media scholars, practitioners involved in transformation processes, and those concerned with strategic media development in emerging democracies.

Although my argument focusses on a public broadcaster, it can likely be extended to public service media more generally, especially in transitional and post-transitional societies, but also in mature democracies. It is less likely to apply in contexts that have very different structural parameters affecting the organisation's mandate, task or purpose on the one hand, and journalist's agency on the other. For instance, strongly partisan commercial media or organisations with fairly narrow tasks/ mandates and high levels of cultural homogeneity probably will not see the same extent of external and internal conflict around editorial independence. Tightly controlled media in non-democratic environments or in democracies with few or no structural and legal safeguards for the media may not afford individual journalists sufficient space for

agency to warrant the emphasis I have chosen here on culture, the unconscious and agency-as-resistance.

Beyond the realm of media, I expect cultural dynamics to constitute an important dimension of the politicisation of organisations in general, in as far as culture appears to influence many of the factors that enable or inhibit politicisation as opposed to those that drive it. The role of subcultures is more likely to matter in internally fragmented organisations situated in divided and volatile political environments. This has implications for researchers of organisations, and in particular those interested in understanding, and possibly addressing, the politicisation of public organisations vital to the functioning of democracy. In both media and non-media cases, my findings suggests that analyses of organisational culture, and in particular of agency, need to take into account unconscious dynamics on the level of organisations, subcultures, groups and individuals. An interdisciplinary focus, then, may be a necessity, not a luxury.

Further, my findings have direct implications for the task of de-politicising the SABC. Following the dramatic events of the past three years, including the collapse of a highly politicised and dysfunctional board, and current efforts to restore the broadcaster's credibility following a parliamentary enquiry, we are yet again at a point that calls for an intervention aimed at de-politicisation. It may well not be the last. I contend that no fundamental change will take place unless the SABC's organisational culture is addressed as a problem in itself. This study, with its comprehensive analysis of the two decades preceding the recent crisis, gives insight into the cultural foundation on which more direct forms of politicisation were able to thrive. If this foundation is not

understood and modified, continuing cycles of ever deepening politicisation can be expected. Any genuine attempt to de-politicise the SABC should address the cultural dynamics outlined in this study, for instance by systematically introducing spaces for reflection on all levels of the organisation that foster awareness of subcultural and unconscious collective dynamics and, by giving a place to the expression of underlying anxiety, internal conflict, and desire, reduce the risk of unintentional collusion with politicisation at the very least.

My longitudinal analysis shows that the politicisation of the SABC is a function of its political environment. But it is also a function of its very role in society, and this is shared by public broadcasters everywhere, including established ones such as the BBC. This is not least a consequence of their broad mandates, something that has also been noted for many EU institutions (De Wilde 2011) and international organisations (Dutt 1995). My research suggests that, as desirable as it is to eliminate undue political pressure, this is unlikely to be achievable to a satisfactory extent. Focussing exclusively on policy frameworks, board and senior management levels, or repeated organisational restructuring is unlikely to be effective without giving equal attention to cultural dynamics and their implications for resistance to politicisation on all levels of the organisation.

There are several avenues for future research that this study opens up. In terms of empirical work on the SABC, one might usefully focus on an analysis of the recent, rapid rise of corruption and nepotism and the question of whether the culture of passivity described here has given way to something even more damaging, perhaps in line with

recent political developments known as 'state capture' (Bhorat et al. 2017). It would also be desirable to have a comprehensive analysis of developments at the SABC since 2013, grounded in more fieldwork and with a particular focus on the unprecedented emergence of resistance amongst journalists in recent years (cf. Chapter 5/II).

Going beyond the SABC, more comparative research is needed on the politicisation of organisations. Firstly, applying the methodological and conceptual approach used here to study politicisation in other broadcasters/ media organisations in transition, or indeed public institutions in emerging democracies more generally, would generate comparative data allowing us to test the generalisability of my findings. I am thinking, for instance, of the patterns of behaviour linked to politicisation in newsrooms, the potential universality of the phases of de-politicisation, re-politicisation and over-identification, or the interactions and effects of subcultures. Secondly, given the prevalence of the old black-guard subculture at the SABC and the way it aligns with old white guard to undermine de-politicisation efforts, it would be worth exploring whether other public institutions in South Africa, for instance in the security and intelligence sector, exhibit similar, under-explored patterns affecting their functioning within the political system.

In terms of theoretical research, the task remains to achieve a more comprehensive and detailed integration of Bion and Lacan on the question of collective and individual agency in organisations.

Let me conclude with some personal reflections. The initial idea for this dissertation was conceived more than a decade ago and has taken shape alongside major life transitions. It has lost neither its fascination nor its relevance. What started with an interest in democratic transitions triggered by an East German upbringing morphed into a desire to study the role of journalism in democracy when I became a journalist myself. I was quite sure of what was going to be my research agenda for decades to come. This was shaken up when I began to engage with psychoanalytic ideas, realising that my fieldwork was opening up questions I struggled to find answers to elsewhere. Being someone who likes to understand and be understood, I never expected to end up with Lacan. Yet I have to give him credit, not just for pointing a way out of the agency conundrum, but for changing my perceptions about what constitutes finished research. In Leonard Cohen's words:

*Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.*

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# Appendix

## **Consent Form for study participants**

**Proposed project:** Ethnographic study of SABC News & Current Affairs

**Researcher:** Corinna Arndt

**Supervisor:** Prof Georgina Born

**Department:** Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge

**Purpose of the research:** The purpose of this research is to trace the institutional culture of SABC News & Current Affairs from 1993 onwards in order to better understand the transformation of public broadcasters that are coming from an authoritarian past and are now important assets of democracy.

**Research methods and your role:** In the interview you might be asked about your work routines, your professional and personal background and general views on and perceptions of the SABC's journalism.

**Withdrawal of consent:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time, place specific information on or off the record or withdraw your consent after the interview/ observation has taken place.

**Confidentiality:** Information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Care will be taken that you cannot be identified by other information either, such as your specific position within the newsroom. Your data will be stored anonymously and safely, and only the researcher will have access to this information. The data provided by you will not be used for any form of journalistic publication.

**Questions about the research?** If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact Ms Corinna Arndt either by telephone at 084-8556554 or by e-mail [ca371@cam.ac.uk](mailto:ca371@cam.ac.uk).

**Approval:** This research has been approved by the Sociology Ethics Committee, University of Cambridge.

### **Statement of Consent:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, consent to participate in the research on the SABC's institutional culture conducted by Ms Corinna Arndt as part of her PhD project. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature / Date