

Pensioner fed up with inept SABC

By [Megan Power](#)

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Where Arthur Saunders finds injustice and inefficiency, he fights it. So it's little surprise he waged a 16-month battle against the SABC over TV licence fees. Sadly, it was a contest he could not hope to win. In July, the browbeaten 71-year-old finally gave in to the public broadcaster's payment demand. The alternative was blacklisting. Well, at least that is what he was told.



I have learnt since that no credit bureau in SA will list anything related to SABC licences, as it is not credit-related. Therefore, threats by the public broadcaster's debt collectors that non-payment will damage a consumer's credit rating are false.

Even so, Saunders was at a disadvantage from the get go. The SABC, and the Broadcasting Act which governs it, seem to regard customers as guilty until proven innocent.

In April last year, Saunders was told - for the first time, he claims - that he owed nearly R4,000 in arrears and penalties for unpaid licence fees, dating back to 2001. An overdue licence account incurs a penalty of 10% a month to a maximum of 100% a year.

The letter from VVM Attorneys, acting on behalf of the broadcaster, referred to a "once in a lifetime settlement opportunity", if he paid R2,249, the outstanding penalties of R1,666 would be reversed. If not, he would face legal action.

The shocked Randburg resident immediately asked VVM for copies of all related correspondence and documents. As far as he was concerned, he had paid his licence up to 2005 after which his TV broke.

A new one was bought in his wife's name, and licence fees were up to date.

He recalls informing the broadcaster at the time that his TV had broken, as well as a change of address a year earlier.

"I am a pensioner," he replied to VVM's initial demand, "and as such I will not just fork out any monies to anyone without

proper paperwork."

Other than a one-page statement from VVM a month later, he received no further documentation.

Letter of demand

A letter of demand followed, after which he hand delivered an affidavit to the attorneys in June.

Despite the affidavit, repeated e-mails and calls to VVM, at least three more threatening letters of demand arrived, in which Saunders was warned that non-payment "may be reported to the credit bureaus, which can adversely affect your credit rating" and that the sooner he settled the outstanding debt, the sooner his "credit rating at various financial institutions will improve".

In December, an SMS from VVM said a "trace locator" had been activated on his credit profile with a credit bureau - the Consumer Profile Bureau.

After listening to SABC communications and liaison manager for audience services Christelle Keivy on radio in February, he e-mailed her for help.

Two months later, Keivy finally adjusted the debt to reflect his wife's payments since 2005. The broadcaster, however, still wanted the money for the period from 2001 to 2005, and offered to reverse the penalties if he paid the R849 fee balance by the end of July.

An exasperated Saunders reluctantly complied.

Saunders is outraged that he was not told of the alleged arrears for an entire decade.

"If I had, I'd have dealt with it immediately and been in a position to solve the matter sooner," he said.

SABC 'inefficient'?

But Keivy claimed "no less than 24 items of correspondence" - renewal notices, account statements, reminders, final reminders, notices of his account having been handed over for debt collection - had been mailed to Saunders between 2000 and 2012. Overdue accounts were handed over after 60 to 90 days, she said.

Keivy said it was "highly unlikely" that none of these items had reached Saunders unless the SABC did not have a valid address, which would have been the customer's fault.

"Had Mr Saunders responded at the time, the matter would not have taken years to resolve. This delay was due to his failure to do so, not to any 'inefficiency' on the part of the SABC," she said.

Saunders has since asked the SABC to produce the correspondence. He is still waiting.

"All this gives the impression that dealing with the SABC is one-sided. You have to keep it informed of information it requires but when the shoe is on the other foot, it is exempt in some way."

Said Keivy: "Non-receipt of such notices is not an excuse for failure to renew a television licence or to pay the outstanding balance.

"The act states explicitly that, legally, the onus is on a licence holder to pay by the due date without any prompting from the SABC."

According to the public broadcaster, it provided "as much information as possible", but consumers needed to "familiarise themselves with prevailing legislation".

I am not convinced. Saunders' experience is far from unique; countless other frustrated readers will bear this out.

Would it be too much to ask that regular reminders of licence terms - including that they are automatically renewed each year unless cancelled - be provided to consumers? Even if there is no obligation to do so, surely it would be the "right thing to do"?

Better still, why doesn't the SABC consider scrapping the controversial licence altogether? Other than saving on high collection costs for seemingly low returns, it would go some way in renewing trust and goodwill among consumers.

With a host of other messy problems yet to resolve, it could provide the embattled broadcaster with an early, and relatively easy, win.

Source: *Sunday Times* via I-Net Bridge

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