

The SABC needs to survive... so pay your TV licence

By [Renee Moodie](#)

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South Africans are a lawless bunch - show us a rule and we will find a way to break it. And one of the nation's favourite things is to refuse to pay the TV licence fee to the public broadcaster, the SABC.



Source: www.unsplash.com

The general zeitgeist was well expressed recently in a recent BizCommunity article.

In the article it was stated by the author, "I think we can all agree that TV licenses are dumb. Why should we pay for a license to own a TV? Especially if we're not ever planning to watch any of the SABC channels. Many household televisions these days aren't even hooked up to a TV antenna. Why would they be? This is the age of the internet The SABC must be allowed to sink or swim with its own ability to innovate and actually do a good job, not just leach off a population required by law to feed it cash."



TV is dead but the SABC refuses to die

Nicholas Woode-Smith 27 Feb 2023



Who would be affected if the SABC died?

It's often forgotten that the SABC does not just provide TV channels to affluent (relatively speaking) households.

There are many people who live in areas of South Africa where there is no Internet, no electricity, and pretty much no money at all.

Those people have one thing though – the lifeline that is a portable, battery-powered radio with the entertainment, education and connection to the world that it brings.

[Broadcasting Research Council](#) figures in February 2023 show that “77% of South Africa’s population listened to the radio in the past seven days and the time spent listening is at a whopping five hours and 15 minutes”.

77%! [Stats SA](#) reckons that in 2021, the country had 60,14 million people.

Take away the 17,04 million people under the age of 15 and you have 43,1 million people, of whom 32 million, more or less, listen to the radio for an extended period of time every day.



Radio not left in the dark, despite loadshedding

Wayne Bischoff, Mediamark 1 Feb 2023



And many, many of the radios of those 32 million people are tuned in to SABC stations, providing programming in indigenous languages.

Here’s BRC Rams figures for top radio stations in 2022:

See the full graph [here](#).

I’ve taken the ones that have over a million listeners, and added the indigenous language in brackets, along with (whether it is a SABC station or not):

- Ukhozi FM – 7,715 million (isiZulu, SABC station)
- Metro FM – 4,666 million (English, SABC)
- Umhlobo Wenene FM – 4,274 million (isiXhosa, SABC)
- Lesedi FM – 3,681 million (Sesotho, SABC)
- Motsweding FM – 3,127 million (Tswana, SABC)
- Thobela FM – 2,614 million (Sepedi, SABC)
- Radio 2000 – 1,800 million (English, SABC, does live sport broadcasts)
- Munghana Lonene FM – 1,401 million (Tsonga, SABC)
- Gagasi FM – 1,382 million (Zulu and English, privately owned)
- Ligwalagwala FM – 1,264 million (SiSwati, SABC)
- RSG / Radiosondergrense – 1,212 million (Afrikaans, SABC)
- Ikwekwezi FM – 1 208 million (Southern Ndebele, SABC)
- East Coast Radio (ECR) – 1,191 million (English, privately owned)
- Jacaranda FM – 1,188 million (English, privately owned)
- Phalaphala FM – 1,196 million (Venda, SABC)
- KFM 94.5 – 1,114 million (English, privately owned)
- 947 (94.7 Highveld Stereo) – 1,092 million (English, privately owned)

Of the 17 radio stations that dominate the airwaves in this country, 12 are run by the SABC.

Do we really want this to die?

It's not just the radio

The other group of people that would be hard hit if the SABC died is the journalism fraternity.

The SABC is by far the biggest employer of journalists in South Africa.

Exact figures are hard to find but the company's [2021/2022 annual report](#) indicates a total headcount of 2,117 permanent staff and 1,613 independent contractors.

A fair amount of those will be support staff of various kinds – but if even half of the total of 3,730 people working are in the news-gathering business, the closure of the SABC would be devastating to the industry in this country.

It's possible that people don't care all that much about the journalism profession, but it does have its uses.

For SABC listeners, those uses are often crucial. In an area with no Internet and no newspapers, there may often be no other source of news than the radio.

And yes, I do know the SABC is a state broadcaster. Yes, I do know they probably sway their journalism line toward the ruling party.

But I think that a woman in a deep rural area probably cares less about that than she does about a news broadcast that tells her a big storm is coming, or that the mayor is holding a meeting on Saturday afternoon. (And, actually, I look at all of South Africa's news websites every day of my working life and I am here to tell you that the SABC main news site quite often carries news that is critical of the government.)

All that said

Now, I am not saying that the SABC is well run (though some of the blame at least lies not at its door but with the government).

I am also not saying that the TV licence is a good way to fund a national broadcaster that is mandated to serve a big population of people in a variety of languages, often in situations of extreme poverty.

The licence fees are hard to collect, and the concept itself irritates people. Calling it a licence to own a television set reflects a world that is long gone, and obscures its real purpose, which should be to function as a kind of tax.

It is a simple economic reality that many of the truly essential services that the SABC provides could never be funded commercially. But that does not mean the broadcaster as a whole does not deserve its share of the national fiscus.

Instead...

We need a national realisation that the closure of the SABC would be a tragedy and instead, we need some suggestions about how it might be paid for (perhaps a very small portion of every pay-as-you-go SIM card sold could be used to fund the broadcaster?)

In the meanwhile, those of us with economic means should just pay for our TV licences. It costs R28 a month if you do it as a monthly debit order. You can do this, I promise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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