In April 1994, nationwide nonracial elections heralded the formal end of apartheid in South Africa, leading to the establishment of a Government of National Unity led by the African National Congress (ANC) but also including representatives from the National Party (NP) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), previously a bastion of the apartheid state and a mouthpiece for the ruling NP, provided extensive coverage of the election campaign that was unprecedented in both its scale and the degree of balance, fairness, and neutrality it displayed (Teer-Tomaselli, 1995). The elections marked only the beginning of the full-scale restructuring of the broadcasting sector in South Africa. This paper discusses the processes of broadcasting reform between 1990 and 1998. In this period the broadcasting environment has been transformed, with changes in programming, diversification of ownership, and expansion of services. Nonetheless, the progress of reform also indicates the extent to which inherited economic, institutional, and cultural conditions continue to impose limitations on the practical implementation of a progressive conceptualisation of the mass media as a vehicle for nation-building and democratic communication.

Radio and television have been ascribed multiple and often contradictory roles in the process of democratic transition and consolidation in South Africa. First, conceptualised as a medium of political communication, the
mass media are given a pivotal role in the democratic information policy enshrined in the ANC’s blueprint for post-apartheid transformation, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The RDP presents a vision of participatory democracy and decision-making that presupposes widespread access to the basic means of communication (African National Congress, 1994:133–135). Second, broadcasting has been identified as a central element of industrial policies directed at boosting economic growth and development by fostering foreign investment and international competitiveness. Third, the electronic media have been presented as a medium of national reconciliation and unification. Radio and television are seen as the important stages for symbolic representations of the “rainbow” concept of “One Nation, Many Cultures.”

Nation-building in the South African context of the 1990s is not officially understood merely as a project of constructing a single, overarching national culture or identity. Policy makers have conceptualised it primarily in terms of facilitating processes of exchange and dialogue between South Africa’s different cultural, regional, and linguistic communities. And official nation-building rhetoric ascribes a central role to radio and television as the media of communication through which such exchange can be facilitated. Nor does nation-building depend simply upon the formal recognition of “cultural diversity.” First, any such recognition is premised upon political equality and undifferentiated rights of equal citizenship. Second, patterns of cultural difference in South Africa remain tightly linked to inherited patterns of economic inequality, and therefore are intimately related to differences in social power. Third, official cultural policies are characterised by a tension between the commitment to recognise and promote cultural diversity on the one hand and a strong commitment by the ANC to depoliticise ethnicity on the other. The tension turns upon the fact that realising the former goal involves the politically contested redistribution of resources between communities, interests, and institutions. Hence, efforts to redress past inequalities in resource allocation tend to exacerbate tendencies towards the politicisation of cultural identities.

Given South Africa’s history of state control and censorship of film, radio and television, literature, and print media, there has been a strong impulse to shift the administration of cultural practices from direct state provision to forms of market provision, with the state’s role redefined as ensuring effective regulation of markets. This shift in cultural policy opens a space for the extended commodification of cultural practices and media services. This is, in turn, associated with a shift in the scales at which cultural practices are effectively governed, from national level to the scale of internationalized markets, and also towards subnational scales of regional and local provision of media services. It is in this context of restructuring that “culture” as an object of policy in South Africa has been reconfigured conceptually and institutionally during the 1990s.
Understandings of culture which privilege ethnicity have been displaced by understandings of culture as “arts” and “popular culture” and of identities as multiple rather than singular. Institutionally, state-controlled cultural institutions have been restructured and a new array of independent public agencies has been established.

Through a process of politically contested policy formulation and implementation, broadcasting has been reconfigured around the normative model of the mass media as a single public sphere at a national scale providing a space for democratic communication and national unification. The ascendancy of this model in South Africa in the 1990s needs to be understood in the context of a society in which the media have previously been used as an ideological and material technology of separation and division. South African media policy in the 1990s is hardly peculiar in the emphasis it places upon trying to ensure collective stability, political order, and national identity through the use of public communication systems (see Samarajiva and Shields, 1990). National unity as the normative ideal of broadcasting and telecommunications policy has, however, come under increasing strain due to a combination of technological change, shifts in regulatory policies, corporate restructuring, and the globalization and deterritorialization of cultural identities (Collins, 1990; Morley and Robins, 1995). In particular, the increasingly commercialized nature of broadcasting systems such as those in South Africa, and the increasing importance of economic policy imperatives relative to those of cultural policy in shaping broadcasting reform, weaken the state’s ability to deploy broadcasting systems as a means of governing cultural practices for purposes of large-scale social integration (see Schlesinger and Doyle, 1994; Shields and Muppidi, 1996).

This paper argues that the limits of conceptualizations of the mass media as a vehicle of national unification are not derived from the inherent difficulties of forging unity in a so-called “deeply divided society.” They are imposed because cultural and linguistic differences are intimately correlated with entrenched patterns of extreme socioeconomic inequality. The limits on using the mass media as instruments of nation-building are derived from the interaction of this pattern of social relations with the institutional configuration of a single national public service broadcaster which remains overwhelmingly dependent on commercial revenue sources. The SABC’s financial dependence on commercial advertising has particular significance in shaping its transformation from a state broadcaster into an independent public service broadcaster that is supposed to serve as the medium for a diversity of opinions and positions. The organisation of commercial communications systems along market-oriented lines prioritises the delivery of audiences constituted as prospective consumers to advertisers. This contrasts with the conventional role ascribed to public service broadcasters, that of delivering diverse quality programming to audiences considered as citizens.
This difference in emphasis is accentuated by the internationalization of communication industries, which is effectively redefining the role of these industries in strategies of national development. Traditional policy scenarios using the broadcast media as instruments of national integration and economic development programmes are increasingly at odds with the economic, political, and cultural forces shaped by media and telecommunications. Increasingly, cultural policies are being deployed as a means of negotiating entry into international markets networks of production and consumption (Bennett et al., 1994).

The formal transition from apartheid to liberal, representative forms of governance requires a different critical vocabulary through which to address the transformation of broadcasting institutions. A wholly oppositional perspective is no longer adequate. Instead, attention is shifted towards evaluation of issues of access, accountability, participation, and political representation (see Chrisman, 1996). Accordingly, the concern in this paper is not primarily with examining representations of diversity in programming. It is rather with the institutional frameworks and social relations that have shaped the terrain for effective decision-making and limited the scope for action in policy-making. The politics of representation in this broader institutional sense directs attention towards questions of how processes of institutional transformation help determine the agendas shaping what gets produced and transmitted through radio and television.

The paper proceeds from a discussion of the legacy of apartheid broadcasting policy to a consideration of the changing role of regulatory agencies in transforming South African broadcasting. It then relates this to the transformation of the public broadcaster and to broader shifts in the economic policies of the Government of National Unity led by the ANC. The paper concludes with some consideration of how the progress of broadcasting reform points towards broader issues raised by processes of “democratic transition” in South Africa.

### The Legacies of Apartheid Broadcasting

Historically, South African broadcasting has been dominated by the SABC, which was incorporated into the network of cultural, economic, and political institutions through which the Afrikaner nationalism of the NP secured its hegemony from the 1950s onwards (Orlik, 1978). Afrikaans and English were privileged as the national broadcast languages. Apartheid language policy also codified and institutionalised nine African languages, each of which was thought of as corresponding to a distinct ethnic identity. The 1960s saw the full-scale introduction of radio services in African languages. Separate-language radio stations broadcast for separate audiences, in discrete territorial units. With the
introduction of television services from the mid-1970s, programming differentiated sharply between channels on the basis of race, with one channel explicitly directed at white Afrikaans- and English-speaking audiences and another aimed at nonwhite audiences (Tomaselli et al., 1989). The SABC has operated in part as a commercial broadcaster since the 1950s. Given its relation to the institutional frameworks of Afrikaner nationalism and the apartheid state on the one hand and its financial dependence on advertising revenues on the other, the SABC has stood in a highly compromised relationship with respect to the imperatives of both the state and the market. Consequently, it has fallen far short of the principles of public service broadcasting as they have been understood internationally over the last half century (Teer-Tomaselli, 1996; Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1996).

The current technological infrastructure of broadcasting reflects apartheid-era policies of differential investment in infrastructure and services for different groups. In broadcasting, as in other sectors, disproportionate amounts of money were invested during that era in the radio and television services aimed at white audiences. Media audiences in South Africa are highly fragmented in terms both of unequal access to material resources and of different tastes, interests, and capacities which distinguish social groups. While less than 5% of all South Africans read a daily newspaper, 89.5% of households own a radio, and 61.7% a television (South African Advertising Research Foundation, 1997). Radio, rather than television, is the universal mass medium in South Africa. Social groups demonstrate a marked disparity in ownership of televisions. (See Tables 1, 2, and 3.) These differences reflect in large part the highly unequal distribution of income in South Africa.

Access to radio and television signals is also extremely uneven geographically. None of the SABC’s three television stations has a broadcast signal with complete national coverage; nor do any of its radio stations.

### Table 1 Percentage of Households Owning TV Sets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total [Households: 8,478,000]</th>
<th>Blacks [Households: 5,961,000]</th>
<th>Coloureds, Indians, and Whites [Households: 2,517,000]</th>
<th>Whites [Households: 1,668,000]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>96.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>95.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>96.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>96.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>94.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South African Advertising Research Foundation, All Media Products Survey 1997.*
Table 2  Percentage of Households Owning Radios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total [Households: 8,478,000]</th>
<th>Blacks [Households: 5,961,000]</th>
<th>Coloureds, Indians, and Whites [Households: 2,517,000]</th>
<th>Whites [Households: 1,668,000]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
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<td>83.8</td>
<td>94.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>87.2</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3  Percentage of Households with M-Net Subscription

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total [Households: 8,478,000]</th>
<th>Blacks [Households: 5,961,000]</th>
<th>Coloureds, Indians, and Whites [Households: 2,517,000]</th>
<th>Whites [Households: 1,668,000]</th>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Rural areas are particularly poorly served, and to a considerable extent television is an urban media form.

Broadcasting in South Africa has not, then, historically provided a common space of public communication. Rather, it has been used to reproduce notions of separate and distinct populations, cultures, and geographical spaces. In seeking to overcome these legacies of apartheid broadcasting, policy since 1994 has focused upon transforming the SABC into a politically independent and financially viable public service broadcaster, and on developing a more diverse system of regulated competition in both radio and television.

In the South African context, the aim of constituting the media as a public sphere supportive of a diverse, independent civil society and as an instrument of nation-building is faced with the hurdle of extending access to the means of communication in both technological and cultural terms. Infrastructural programs, including electrification and telephone rollout,
have as their object increasing access to basic technologies of communications. The question of access in cultural terms, in the case of radio and television, has centered on issues of language provision. The ambitious but rather vague constitutional principles of language equity have directed policies for extending access to mass mediated information to all South Africans, regardless of the language they speak and the place they live in.

The commercialized nature of broadcasting in South Africa, however, imposes two definite limits upon the extension of access through equitable coverage on a national scale of eleven official languages. First, the extension of competition has led to the increased fragmentation of media audiences as expansion of choice has outstripped growth in overall size of audiences. Second, the classical role of the public service broadcaster in such a scenario is to serve the interests of those groups and audiences who are marginalised or ignored by commercial broadcasters for economic reasons. The SABC has certainly set out to do this in a highly innovative way. In so doing, however, it has found itself caught on the horns of a dilemma. If it is to maintain its financial viability, it must compete with new broadcasters for relatively limited and slow-growing advertising revenue, duplicating programming in trying to attract affluent audiences. On the other hand, targeting wider and more diverse audiences is not cost-effective, because such audiences do not attract the same level of advertising revenue. In what follows, I shall trace the ways in which this contradiction has played itself out since 1993 and indicate how it has been associated with significant shifts of emphasis in state policies towards the broadcasting sector.

Moving Towards “Independent” Broadcasting

During the 1980s, the shift by the NP towards neoliberal free market economic policies led to the commercialisation or privatisation of various “parastatals,” those public corporations which had effective monopoly control over such sectors as telecommunications, energy, and transportation (see Horwitz, 1994). Following this trend, the SABC was reorganised into commercial business units in 1991. These moves were seen by the left as a preemptive attempt to break up the national public broadcaster and shift regulation from the state to the market (Currie and Markovitz, 1993). Given the entrenched patterns of economic ownership and control in South Africa, broadcasting would continue to be effectively shaped in the interests of white minorities. Opposition to this unilateral restructuring process crystallised around the review of broadcasting policy set in motion by the government’s establishment of a “Task Group on Broadcasting in South and Southern Africa.” A series of “civil society” groups more or less closely associated with the mass democratic movement challenged the legitimacy of the Task Group. Despite the dispute
engendered by this challenge, however, there turned out to be a considerable degree of convergence between the policy positions of the civil society groups on the left and the recommendations of the task group. This occurred particularly on the issue of the need to establish an independent regulatory authority to oversee broadcasting reform (Jabulani!, 1991; Republic of South Africa, 1991).

The loose affiliation of independent civil society organisations on the left wielded considerable influence in shaping the agenda of media debates in the early 1990s. These debates focused on resisting the NP’s moves to restructure broadcasting prior to a broader political settlement, and on campaigns for the appointment of a new and independent SABC Board to ensure neutral broadcasting in the run-up to elections (see Louw, 1993). Internal debates within the ANC culminated in the publication of a Media Charter in January 1992 (Teer-Tomaselli, 1993). Reflecting the ascendancy within the ANC of the pluralist position first developed by the civil society organisations over a more centralist, statist position, the Charter recognised the right to receive and disseminate information as a basic requirement of democratic citizenship and participation, and established a commitment to an independent public service broadcaster regulated by an independent body (African National Congress, 1992).

During 1992 and 1993, a process of what might be called negative convergence took place between different political parties on the question of broadcasting reform. The NP did not want the ANC to have unfettered control of the airwaves after the forthcoming elections, and the ANC did not want the NP to maintain control over broadcasting during the elections. In the context of this impasse, the principle of independent broadcasting regulation was established. As a consequence, agreement to the principle of an independent regulatory authority for broadcasting and telecommunications was one of the few concrete issues settled during the political negotiations at the Conference for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) during 1992 (Friedman, 1993:52–54). When multiparty negotiations resumed in 1993 with elections imminent, telecommunications was immediately separated from broadcasting and put to one side by the working party charged with drafting the relevant legislation. This decision was made in the light of “the need to create independent broadcast regulatory mechanisms as a matter of urgency,” although this did not preclude the merging of broadcasting and telecommunications regulatory structures in the future (First Report, 1993:pp. n/a). As a result, in October 1993 the Transitional Executive Authority passed an Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act (Republic of South Africa, 1993a).

The IBA Act was the product of a fragile and contingent consensus that it was imperative to ensure that broadcasting be made independent of direct government interference. The IBA’s mandate might be best characterized as an example of “regulated pluralism”: it was meant to establish an institutional framework to secure a plurality of independent
broadcasters, necessitating both the deconcentration of media industries and the separation of media from the state (Thompson, 1995:240–241; Tomaselli, 1994). The IBA Act recognized that the unfettered operations of the market cannot guarantee, and may indeed run counter to, the maintenance of diversity and pluralism in the media sector. It therefore contained a strong emphasis on regulating the market for broadcasting services in the interest of viable competition and diversity by limiting cross-media ownership and encouraging ownership of broadcasting services by “historically disadvantaged groups.” The IBA was, however, a product of a political compromise concerning state interference in the operations of capital in the postapartheid broadcasting sector. Important, the IBA Act entrenched the rights of existing broadcasters, including those of M-Net. And the IBA is legislatively bound to “protect the integrity and viability of public service broadcasting services” (Republic of South Africa 1993a:2[1d]). This ambiguous clause means that the IBA has been forced to operate as a “captured” agency from its inception, insofar as it is obliged to protect the position of the SABC.

The progress of broadcasting reform since the elections of 1994 under the Government of National Unity needs to be placed in the wider context of the evolving political and economic agenda of the ANC (see Lazar, 1996; Nattrass, 1994). With the end of apartheid, there has been an uneasy realignment between capital, the new political regime, and organized labor (Adam et al., 1997). There has also been a movement away from the original RDP blueprint, which premised economic growth and development on reconstruction and redistribution. In June 1996, a new economic policy framework document, Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), was released, marking a significant shift in emphasis relative to the original blueprint. Prioritizing fiscal prudence, GEAR implies a clear commitment to reducing state involvement in the economy in order to reduce public expenditure (Adelzadeh, 1996). This shift in broad economic policy provides in turn the context for two much-discussed processes of economic transformation: so-called black economic “empowerment,” and the “restructuring of state assets,” or privatization. Both of these processes have been most rapidly advanced in the print and electronic media sectors.

Black economic empowerment refers to the rapid emergence and consolidation since 1994 of a handful of black-owned corporations. This phenomenon is largely the result of the politically inspired unbundling of corporate assets by white-owned companies. It has facilitated the emergence of major black-owned corporations such as New Africa Investments Limited (NAIL), Capital Alliance, Kagiso Investment Trust, and Thebe Investments. Black economic empowerment through unbundling characteristically features the involvement of trade union investment groups, which have been able to leverage the savings and pension funds of their memberships in order to secure strategic equity stakes in companies and
representation on their boards. One significant result of these processes has been the restructuring of ownership of the South African press. Previously dominated by two Afrikaans-language groups, Nasionale Pers and Perskor, and—through the Argus Group and Times Media Limited—by the colossal Anglo-American Corporation, this sector has been altered by the entry of both international capital and domestic black empowerment consortiums.

Privatization, a highly contentious political issue, cuts to the heart of the political alliance between the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the South African Communist Party (SACP). The emergent model adopted by the ANC-led government from 1995–1996 involves the formation of partnerships with private corporations in which the state retains a controlling stake. By reserving a proportion of the shares in any state-owned company for black businesses and employees, this strategy is presented as a means of increasing the opportunities for black South Africans to participate in the economy. Questions have been raised, however, over the extent to which ownership of equity stakes translates into effective control, and over the political implications of the rapid enrichment of a small black elite.

These ongoing processes provide the broader economic and policy context in which the reregulation of broadcasting has been undertaken. The rapid advance of both corporate unbundling and privatization in the media industries pinpoints a central ambivalence over the practical meaning of “independence” of broadcasting organizations and regulators in the changing South African broadcasting environment. “Independence” has referred primarily to freedom from direct state interference, but in practice this has involved a much greater role than before for private capital and market mechanisms. Given highly uneven patterns of ownership and access to capital, the challenge which has faced the IBA in its implementation of broadcasting reform has been that of how to square the aim of independence from the state with independence from the influence that follows from unbridled market power (Melody, 1997).

Reimagining South African Broadcasting

The IBA Act specified that the transformation of broadcasting could not proceed before the completion of inquiries into three issues: the means of protecting the viability of the public broadcaster; limitations on cross-media ownership; and local content quotas on South African radio and television broadcasters. The resulting “Triple Inquiry,” beginning in April 1994, was undertaken in the new spirit of openness, consultation, and participation that has characterized policy formulation in a wide variety of sectors.

The main issues to be resolved by the Triple Inquiry included how much of the broadcasting market the SABC should be allowed to control.
in the future and—following from this—how a restructured SABC should be financed. Most organisations agreed that the SABC should be significantly streamlined in order to open up space for new entrants. Civil society organisations argued that the SABC should reduce its dependence on advertising revenue because this compromised its new public service mandate. Prospective private commercial broadcasters argued that the SABC accounted for too much of the available share of advertising expenditure and therefore threatened the viability of new broadcasters. Despite this apparent convergence, these different groups did not constitute a single, coherent political lobby. The Triple Inquiry revealed significant differences between the various interests over how exactly to conceptualise public service broadcasting (Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1995b:150). Private commercial broadcasters and advertisers sharply differentiated public service broadcasting from commercial broadcasting, arguing that public service broadcasting should be the sole responsibility of a noncommercial broadcaster delivering educational, religious, and cultural programming. Commercial broadcasters would thus be freed from public service obligations to concentrate on the task of delivering audiences to advertisers and profits to shareholders. In contrast, civil society organisations on the left conceptualised public service broadcasting as a set of obligations and responsibilities that extended to all broadcasters, including private commercial broadcasters.

During the Inquiry process, an equally important division emerged between the SABC’s centralist conceptualisation of public service broadcasting as the responsibility of a single national public broadcaster and the more pluralistic, diversified, and regionally decentralised conceptualisation of public service broadcasting presented by the main civil society organisations (see Horwitz, 1996). The most important of these latter organisations lobbying the IBA during 1994 and 1995, the so-called “Group of Thirteen,” argued for a strong but decentralised public service broadcaster. They also maintained that the SABC should be limited to just two television channels, making it less dependent on advertising expenditure. They proposed that the vacated third channel be relicensed as a publicly regulated commercial network of regional stations (Group of Thirteen, 1994).

During the Triple Inquiry, a number of arguments were aired in favour of developing regional and provincial broadcasting services. Civil society groups favoured decentralisation as a means of democratisation. Commercial interests from the Western Cape argued that it was a means of tapping unrealised advertising markets. And the Bophuthatswana Broadcasting Corporation, based in the former homeland state, argued strongly for a plurality of regional and national public service broadcasting systems as part of its efforts to stave off incorporation into the SABC. Thus a variety of groups believed that the nation-building role of broadcasting, representing and promoting the linguistic and cultural diversity of South
Africa, would be best served by a range of public and commercial broadcasters operating on national and regional scales, rather than by a single centralised national public service broadcaster (Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1995a). Again, however, these different interests did not coalesce into a coherent political lobby in favour of regionally decentralised broadcasting, since they represented markedly divergent social interests and political visions.

Throughout 1994 and 1995, the SABC underwent extensive restructuring. A new statement of “Vision and Values,” produced after the appointment of a new representative Board of Governors in 1993, committed the SABC to providing fair, equitable, and accessible programming to all South Africans and to rectifying past imbalances (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1993:1). The main aim shaping the SABC’s submissions to the Triple Inquiry was the defence of its own financial viability from the competition that would result from the opening of the airwaves to new commercial broadcasters. The most disputed issue proved to be the future of the SABC’s television services. The new management team, appointed after the elections of 1994, abandoned the previous position of preparing to privatize certain services, committing the SABC instead to the retention of the bulk of its existing services in order to deliver an extensive public service programming mandate. The Corporation now proposed retaining all three existing channels, integrating public and commercial functions in different degrees on each. These proposals, along with those for retaining a full complement of radio stations, reflected the centrality accorded to the question of language in the SABC’s submissions to the Triple Inquiry in late 1994 and during 1995.

The Triple Inquiry became a forum in which the practical implications of the new constitutional provisions on language were worked out. The Interim Constitution, a product of political compromise during negotiations of 1993, included language provisions based upon the functional multilingualism of most South Africans (Republic of South Africa, 1993b). This constitutional recognition of eleven official languages was politically ambivalent. It enshrined the status of nine standardised African languages, the precise statuses of which are open to much dispute (Alexander, 1989; Louw, 1992). It also included, however, a clear commitment to upgrading these nine languages from regional to national status. This effectively broke the conceptual triad of language-ethnicity-region upon which apartheid language policies had been based.

The SABC was the first institution to undertake the task of translating these principles into practical measures (Heugh, 1994; South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1994b). In so doing, it has had to balance two apparently contradictory injunctions written into the constitution. On the one hand, there is the commitment to extend and promote the use of previously marginalised African languages. On the other hand, this must be done without contravening the principle of nondiminution of existing
language rights on which the compromise of eleven languages rests (Sachs, 1994). Given the political and economic factors that have strengthened the position of English in broadcasting since 1994, this balancing act has tended to be resolved by increasing the coverage of African languages on television by reducing the proportion of Afrikaans-language programming. This process has prompted protest and legal challenges from Afrikaans culture and language organisations.10

In its most important statement to the IBA’s Triple Inquiry, made in response to the looming threat of losing one of its three television channels, the SABC presented a vision of the national public service broadcaster as central to nation-building (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1994c). This was translated in turn into an argument concerning the SABC’s responsibility to provide equitable broadcasting coverage in all eleven of South Africa’s newly official languages. In its submissions to the IBA, the SABC argued that the task of providing broadcasting coverage in all eleven official languages was its sole responsibility. This contrasted with the position laid down in the IBA Act, which stipulated that “diversity” would be provided across the whole spectrum of the broadcasting system. The language issue therefore provided the basis for the argument that the corporation should retain a much greater share of the available broadcasting spectrum than suggested by the other main interests lobbying the IBA (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1995a). This stood in contrast to the arguments of the main civil society organisations. From their perspective, the SABC was invoking an overly rigid interpretation of its language mandate as part of an expansionary counter-thrust to the argument that it needed to be slimmed down and decentralised. They maintained that the SABC should broadcast only in the four or five main national languages, and that provincial public broadcasters should be set up to broadcast in the main languages of respective regions.

The IBA’s Triple Inquiry Report, finally published in August 1995, compromised in its main recommendations between the position of the SABC and the pluralist position most forcefully articulated by the Group of Thirteen. While largely accepting the SABC’s model of its language mandate, the Report proposed that this could be met with only two television stations. The Report’s most important proposals suggested that the public broadcaster be obliged to sell eight of its commercial regional radio stations and that it be limited to only two television channels after 1998.11 The SABC’s third television channel would be relicensed as a new commercial station with significant public service obligations, and the IBA would also license further private metropolitan radio stations (Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1995b:9–12). These proposals were based on the assumption that the SABC would be less dependent on advertising in the future, and that decreased advertising revenue would be replaced by some form of government funding.
The SABC immediately restated its view that it would not be able to deliver on its public service mandate with only two television stations (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1995b). Authority for approving the IBA’s proposals lay with Parliament, and late 1995 saw extensive lobbying to have the Triple Inquiry Report revised. In response particularly to the SABC’s lobbying, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communications amended the Report in February 1996. The SABC was allowed to retain two of the original eight radio stations earmarked for sale, and all three of its television channels. The amendment also stipulated that a new television service should be licensed by the middle of 1997 and affirmed the proposal that government funding of the SABC on a triennial basis should cover the costs of increased local content and language programming and of regional splits (Government Gazette, 1996). Like the IBA in the Triple Inquiry Report, the Portfolio Committee did not question the SABC’s own interpretation of its responsibilities regarding language, which had been deployed to argue for the retention of three television stations. The amendment of the Triple Inquiry Report represented a significant rebuff for the IBA, and revealed its relative lack of political influence compared to the SABC, which has become clearer as time has passed. This raises serious questions about the extent to which the politically powerful SABC can be made accountable to an independent regulator.

**Redefining “Independent” Broadcasting Regulation**

In South Africa, understandings of democracy have been tied closely to the rhetoric of nation-building. The role of the mass media since 1994 in the democratization process has been seen primarily in symbolic terms, as disseminating appropriate representations of national togetherness which adequately reflect South Africa’s cultural diversity. This notion of nation-building dovetails with an instrumentalist conception of the relationship between the mass media, diversification, and democratization. The ANC has equated democratization with the entry of black empowerment capital into the print and broadcasting media (Tomaselli, 1997). Given the history of the SABC’s monopoly on broadcasting, and given a historically oligopolistic print media, it has easily been assumed that the democratization of the mass media in South Africa in the 1990s can be guaranteed by increasing “competition” and “expanding choice.”

In this context, the question arises of whether, in a society with a highly uneven distribution of income, an overwhelmingly commercialized broadcasting system can deliver on a public service mission of providing access and information to a diversity of audiences. Breaking the SABC’s monopoly over broadcasting has meant the opening up of new opportunities for commodification and for the accumulation of capital. The view
that equates media democratization with the diversification of ownership and increased competition is tempered by the acknowledgment that a diversity of outlets and opinions might be reduced by inherent tendencies within the media industries towards concentration and centralization. This is why the establishment of the IBA gained widespread support in the early 1990s, to ensure the independent regulation of an expanding and increasingly competitive media and communications sector. Acknowledgment of the limits of this economistic model of democratization extend only to placing limits on the negative effects of excessive market power.

Since 1994, the IBA’s performance has been caught up in wider political processes: the SABC’s uneasy relations with government and its ongoing battle with the private subscription channel, M-Net; legal challenges by Afrikaner cultural organizations unhappy with the treatment of the Afrikaans languages in the revamped broadcasting environment; realignments of capital, eager to secure positions in the rapidly expanding and profitable media and communications industries; and the evolution of the ANC’s political and economic agendas for transformation. Capital, national government, and the SABC have increasingly seen the IBA as an encumbrance to their very different interests, with its lengthy procedures for applications, consultations, hearings, recommendations, and appeals, and with a mandate to serve the long-term viability of the broadcasting environment.

The rapid development of systematic opposition to the IBA might be best understood as flowing from the divergence between the IBA’s administrative rationality on the one hand and the political and economic rationalities of capital and government on the other. In line with experience elsewhere, as these forms of rationality diverge, one would expect to witness a growing move to transform the current regulatory arrangements (Horwitz, 1989:19). This is exactly what transpired in the course of 1996 and 1997, as a widespread view emerged that the current regulatory regime needed to be overhauled. This culminated in the establishment of a new year-long broadcasting policy review process, this time much more closely directed by the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications, and Broadcasting. After the publication of policy proposals in autumn 1997 and spring 1998, comprehensive broadcasting legislation was presented to Parliament in August 1998. In line with stated aims of relocating broadcasting policy within the context of economic policies aimed at boosting the international competitiveness of domestic industries, this legislation confirmed the more limited role for regulatory agencies and the further expansion and commercialization of radio and television services.

The policy review of 1997–98 essentially drew a line under the process of broadcasting reform begun in the early 1990s. The original ambiguity about the duration of an independent regulatory body for broadcasting—which was intended to be more than merely transitional for the period
of elections but also to be revamped into a combined broadcasting and telecommunications regulator—was used to justify reducing the degree of independence of any such combined body. In certain respects, the outcomes of the policy review were effectively decided in advance, in contrast to the pattern of policy formulation during 1994 and 1995. This was most evidently the case in the decision to merge the IBA with the recently established South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (SATRA).

The new agenda for broadcasting confirmed in 1998 places the sector squarely within a broader communications policy that aims to boost manufacturing capacity as part of a broader internationalization strategy. This implies that government should take a more interventionist position regarding the setting of media policy than was the case during 1994 and 1995. The justification for the regulation of broadcasting and telecommunications has thus been significantly altered. In place of a political and cultural justification based on a definition of national interest which prioritizes democracy and diversity, the national interest in the communications sector has been redefined in terms of economic growth.

This shift in emphasis in broadcasting policy needs to be seen in the context of telecommunications restructuring. Telecommunications dwarfs broadcasting as an economic sector, and is critical to the infrastructural development program that is pivotal to the ANC’s political program. A new Telecommunications Act was passed in November 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). In March 1997 Jay Naidoo, a former Secretary-General of COSATU and the recently appointed Minister of Posts, Telecommunications, and Broadcasting, secured the agreement of the trade unions to the partial privatization of Telkom, the monopoly telecommunications operator in South Africa. This opened the way for the completion of the sale of a 30% equity stake in Telkom to a consortium of Telekom Malaysia and the U.S. telecommunications corporation, SBC Communications. The deal, heralded as the biggest capital investment in the new South Africa, promised to jumpstart an R53 billion infrastructural development program. The political legitimacy of the deal was secured when, in early April 1997, it was announced that a further 10% of Telkom shares would be sold to black business and labor.

In contrast to the broadcasting sector, telecommunications privatization has not yet been accompanied by significant market liberalization. Telkom’s monopoly position remains protected for an unspecified period. One effect of this difference in market conditions in broadcasting and telecommunications is that SATRA lacks the degree of independence enjoyed by the IBA. SATRA answers directly to the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting, rather than to Parliament as the IBA does. Additionally, rather than operating to open up the telecommunications sector, SATRA has largely functioned to protect Telkom from increased competition. This difference in the extent of the two bodies’ independence
from government has led some to question whether the proposed merger of the IBA into SATRA represents an effort by the ANC to exert more direct control over broadcasting. The persistent criticism that has been directed at the print media by leaders like Nelson Mandela and Deputy President Thabo Mbeki has animated this concern. The ANC has grown increasingly concerned about its ability to manage the flow of communications (Louw, 1995). While the convergence of regulatory agencies might be considered consistent with broader international trends in information and communications sectors, this has been a politically controversial process in South Africa due to the degree of political significance ascribed to the principle of independence of broadcasting organizations and regulators.

Broadcasting Transformed

The fate of the IBA in the transition period from 1994 to 1999 has been bound up with the twists and turns of the SABC’s dramatic transformation from mouthpiece for apartheid policies to independent public broadcaster. Even before the Triple Inquiry was completed, the SABC was proceeding with plans to relaunch its television portfolio, always assuming that it would retain all three of its stations. The SABC continued with its plans unchanged after the publication of the *Triple Inquiry Report* and before the Portfolio Committee had amended the Report. CCV-TV, previously directed at a mainly black audience, was to be relaunched as SABC 1. TV1, with a predominantly white audience, was to be relaunched as SABC 2. The third, “spare,” channel would be upgraded into SABC 3. With a broadcast footprint covering about half of the country, SABC 1 would focus on programming in the main Nguni languages, Zulu and Xhosa, as well as in English. With the largest footprint, covering about three-quarters of the country, SABC 2 would cover the main Sotho languages of Sepedi, Sesotho, and Setswana, plus Afrikaans. SABC 3 would be a commercially oriented English language channel. Largely restricted to metropolitan areas, it was meant to cross-subsidize the public service programming, which would be mainly concentrated in the other two channels.

The SABC’s high-profile television relaunch went ahead at the beginning of February 1996. The changes were heralded as the end of apartheid television. New channel identities explicitly reflected the ethos of “rainbow” broadcasting. Rather than addressing white and black audiences on separate channels, as in the past, the new television services mixed language groups in different proportions on different channels. The changes marked the ascendancy of English as the dominant broadcasting language. (See Table 4.) In addition to the relative cost advantages of purchasing imported English-language programming, the SABC’s justification during the Triple Inquiry for this focus on English had been based
on SABC-conducted research, which established that viewers much preferred English for programming in a second language (see Thirion and Van Vuuren, 1995).

The television relaunch precipitated a further decline in the size of the SABC’s “CIW” (Coloureds, Indians and Whites) audience. While overall audience figures remained largely unchanged following the relaunch, the relative balance of television audiences shifted significantly, with the proportion of CIW viewers falling and offset by an increase in the proportion of black viewers. This shift highlights the contradiction underlying the SABC’s transformation. In commercial broadcasting in South Africa, as elsewhere, the aim of programming is to construct audiences with specific demographic characteristics for advertisers. In South Africa, the demographic characteristics looked for by advertisers are concentrated in a very narrow segment of society, a historical product of racialized patterns of accumulation and income distribution. Economic understandings of media democratization that focus on “competition” and “choice” tend to finesse this relationship between the financial imperatives of commercial broadcasting and the highly uneven distribution of power in markets for broadcasting services. One consequence is that the existence of more stations does not necessarily result in more listeners or viewers. The expansion of channels and diversification of ownership has led to greater competition for what is still a relatively narrow segment of South African society, the small and affluent minority primarily composed of CIWs that remains the main target audience for advertisers. While the SABC’s new television programming portfolio reflected national population demographics, it did not reflect the optimum commercial demographics for a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>SABC1</th>
<th>SABC2</th>
<th>SABC3</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>22.77</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zulu</td>
<td>17.17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xhosa</td>
<td>17.71</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15.70</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sepedi</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.56</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setswana</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesotho</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xitsonga</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seswati</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshivenda</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SiNdebele</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>28.56</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

broadcaster so heavily dependent on advertising expenditure. For the first time since its introduction in the 1970s, television’s share of advertising expenditure declined relative to other media outlets in 1996, mainly due to a shift to newspapers, especially to the Afrikaans-language press.

In attempting to extend access through equitable language programming while remaining dependent on commercial revenue sources, the SABC seriously jeopardized its financial viability in 1996 and 1997. Increased advertising expenditure did not cover the increased costs of expanding African language programs because most South Africans lacked the effective demand to make them an economically attractive market for advertisers and their clients. More generally, then, broadcasting illustrates the extent to which the interests and tastes of the black majority do not register significantly in the commercial calculations of the advertising/media nexus, because of inherited patterns of income inequality and continued lack of access to funds. As a public service broadcaster with a mandate to reflect and promote cultural diversity, and to provide educational, entertainment, and informational programming in eleven languages on a national scale, the SABC has found itself increasingly reliant upon “a funding source that is under no obligation to ensure its continued existence” (Freedom of Expression Institute, 1996:2).

The end of apartheid and the reregulation of broadcasting are bringing about a proliferation of media outlets at a faster pace than the growth of advertising expenditure. The result is escalating audience fragmentation and increasingly careful targeting of audience segments by advertisers, which contradicts the rhetoric in policy circles of constructing a single national audience through the medium of broadcast radio and television. This trend is most evident in the radio sector, which has undergone much more extensive and rapid transformation than television. The most significant element of radio restructuring was the selling off of six of the SABC’s commercial regional stations during 1996. The SABC, assuming that it would get the proceeds from the sale, preferred selling the stations to the highest bidders, which would have reaped more than R600 million (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1996b). The IBA, however, had a different set of criteria for the reregulation of radio broadcasting, which included limitations on cross-media ownership, a concern to ensure a viable market for diverse radio broadcasting, and diversity of both ownership and programming (Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1996). By stipulating that the successful bidders would have to have significant representation from “historically disadvantaged groups,” the IBA’s regulatory framework obliged white-owned capital to forge partnerships with black empowerment consortia.

In September 1996, all six of the stations were sold to consortia with significant black empowerment representation. This marked an unprecedented restructuring of the ownership of radio broadcasting, breaking the SABC’s sixty-year monopoly in this field. Highveld Stereo, in Gauteng
province, was awarded to the Africa On Air Consortium for the highest sum of R320 million. Other black empowerment groups who successfully bid for radio stations included NAIL and Kagiso Trust Investments. In the cases of three of the six stations, the IBA did not award the licenses to the highest bidders. The sales yielded a combined total of R521 million, compared to the R606 million that would have been raised had the SABC’s favored bidders been successful in each case.

In addition, the proceeds from the sale of the SABC’s radio stations were transferred to the state, not to the SABC as it had assumed (Republic of South Africa, 1997). The SABC had proceeded with various changes in its operations on the assumption that government funding would be forthcoming to offset increased costs and loss of revenues. Its subsequent demands for government funding have been backed by both the IBA and the government-appointed task group on communications, COMTASK (1996), both of which have recommended that the government should provide the general funding required by the Triple Inquiry. The Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications, and Broadcasting, however, has committed funding only for specifically targeted projects. It has thus been able to shape the relations between the SABC and the IBA by determining the financial context in which the SABC has been operating, effectively obliging the SABC to circumvent the IBA’s authority and deepen its own dependence on commercial revenue sources.

In late 1996, the SABC relaunched its remaining radio stations, breaking the model of radio used since the 1930s with new channel identities that did not refer explicitly to language or ethnicity. In March 1997, the IBA awarded seven new metropolitan radio licenses, four in Johannesburg and three in Cape Town. In its decisions, the IBA again ensured that the successful applicants had strong black empowerment credentials, as well as selecting for programming diversity. The IBA therefore oversaw the successful diversification of radio broadcasting in terms of both ownership and programming. The radio sell-off and the licensing of new stations have been seen by advocates of independent broadcasting as a strong vindication of the IBA’s originally conceived role, that of directing the opening up of the airwaves in the interests of diversity and democracy (Currie, 1996).

The IBA’s transformation of radio contrasts with the slow progress made in television. The licensing of a new privately owned terrestrial television station stalled during the course of 1997 amidst financial scandals that forced the resignation of five of the IBA’s seven councilors and seriously damaged its legitimacy as the independent regulator. Meanwhile, the SABC registered a deficit of more than R60 million in the fiscal year 1995–96, compared to a surplus of R106 million in 1994–95 (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1996a). The many and varied causes of the SABC’s financial crisis of 1996 and 1997 include the effects of the television relaunch and of the radio sell-off. In addition, the SABC’s annual
expenditure has increased to cover a variety of additional costs, including those of expanded local content and African language programming, of introducing regional splits on television, of covering such important events as local elections, the proceedings of Parliament and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and of the integration of the former homeland broadcasters. The SABC’s investment in satellite television, in the form of the analogue AstraSat system, has yet to show any significant return. And the level of nonpayment of license fees has progressively worsened (reaching levels of almost 60% of households by the end of 1996).

Thus, in the continued absence of general government funding, the SABC has become even more dependent on commercial revenue sources in the course of its transformation into a public service broadcaster independent of the state. (See Table 5.) As this dependence increases, so the potential impact of any further increase in competition from new entrants into the television market becomes that much more serious.

With the onset of financial crisis, the SABC began to revise the positions it had held publicly during the Triple Inquiry in 1994 and 1995. In late 1996 the SABC undertook a thorough Resources Review with the aid of an international financial consultancy. In March 1997, the resulting report recommended major cutbacks in programming, in-house production, and staffing levels, arguing that this would cut costs by R450 million and generate R340 million in extra revenue. The report proposed essentially the same sort of pruning suggested by both independent civil society groups and private commercial broadcasters in 1994 and 1995. Implementation of the proposals served as the prelude to the full-scale corporatization of the SABC in 1998, with the national government as sole shareholder and with privatization of further selected services likely. The SABC also began to revise its policies on language and regional broadcasting. The SABC’s new position holds that a “revisit of the constitutional guarantee of languages” is “imperative and urgent” (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1996a:8), reflecting a conviction that a more “practical” approach is required which does not adhere rigidly to eleven official languages on a national scale. The possibility of using regional broadcasting services as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total (Million Rand)</th>
<th>Licenses (Million Rand)</th>
<th>Advertising (Million Rand)</th>
<th>Other (Million Rand)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992–3</td>
<td>1203</td>
<td>276 (23%)</td>
<td>857 (71%)</td>
<td>70 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993–4</td>
<td>1393</td>
<td>281 (20%)</td>
<td>1026 (74%)</td>
<td>86 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994–5</td>
<td>1613</td>
<td>312 (19%)</td>
<td>1193 (74%)</td>
<td>108 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995–6</td>
<td>1652</td>
<td>289 (17%)</td>
<td>1293 (78%)</td>
<td>70 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the means of solving the issue of language diversity, which the SABC explicitly opposed during the Triple Inquiry, is again under consideration (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 1997).

The SABC’s deepening financial crisis also led to an increasingly belligerent approach to other players within the broadcasting sector. In the SABC’s public statements throughout 1996 and 1997, the IBA was consistently blamed for imposing an impractical mandate on the SABC, particularly with respect to language. The SABC repeatedly invoked the IBA Act to argue that the regulatory authority’s primary responsibility was to protect the SABC’s financial viability, a task it accused the IBA of failing to honor. During late 1996 and throughout 1997, the dispute between the SABC and the IBA revolved around the related issues of the SABC’s challenge of M-Net’s license conditions and the process of licensing a new private television station. The ambivalent status of M-Net’s license impacted not only the SABC’s financial standing but also those of prospective new television broadcasters.

Three issues have formed the basis of the SABC’s complaints regarding M-Net: allegations that it has unfairly exceeded its advertising quota; the operation of a second channel without a license; and the broadcasting of live sports events in encoded form. After extensive hearings and submissions, the IBA decided on only minor amendments to M-Net’s license in the summer of 1997 (Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1997b). The decision pleased neither the major interests hoping to license a new private television channel, nor the SABC, nor even M-Net, and only hastened calls for an overhaul of the IBA Act.

The IBA’s handling of television restructuring has further weakened its credibility. Contrary to the commitment to holistic policy implementation by the Triple Inquiry, the IBA’s performance in the area of television has lacked integration. During the deliberation on the new private television license in 1997 and 1998, the IBA received criticism from all sides: from the prospective bidders for the new license for acting too slowly; from the SABC for acting against its own statutory obligation to protect the viability of public broadcasting; and from community broadcasters and the independent production sector for not imposing adequate public service obligations on the new entrants. After much delay and further hearings, the new television license was finally awarded in April 1998. The successful consortium, Midi TV, included two trade union investment companies amongst its shareholders. This factor was critical in the IBA’s decision, given its explicit mandate to encourage ownership of broadcasting services by “historically disadvantaged groups” (Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1998). The licensing of the new station also provided a further opportunity for foreign investment in South African broadcasting, since the successful consortium included a one-fifth stake held by the U.S. media giant Time Warner Communications (see Goldman, 1998).
Conclusion: Ambiguities of Post-apartheid Broadcasting Reform

Since 1993, South African broadcasting has been dramatically transformed, with the proliferation of new radio and television services, diversification of new programming, and restructuring of the South African Broadcasting Corporation. With national elections due in 1999, the SABC remains in a dominant position in South African broadcasting. The strength of private commercial broadcasters, however, has increased significantly. The scope of action of independent regulatory authorities in broadcasting and telecommunications has been restricted to issues of technical regulation and implementation of policies, and the national government has asserted effective authority over the formulation of policy in both sectors. The different interests between whom the IBA was meant to adjudicate have been shown to possess greater political influence than an independent body that remains financially dependent on the government. The possibilities of a regulatory body acting as an agent of democratization have thus been revealed to be structurally limited by the powerful interests of established public and private institutions in the broadcasting sector.

Given the pace of change in contemporary South Africa, discerning general patterns from this period of reform is a hazardous affair. One observable trend involves the ANC government’s growing determination to exert greater direction over broadcasting reform, for both political and economic reasons. This needs to be placed in the wider context of the shifting balance of political power since 1994, which has seen the ANC government growing stronger as it secures effective control of state apparatuses, enabling it to more confidently circumvent the array of power-sharing mechanisms which were negotiated into existence during 1992 and 1993 (Maphai, 1996). The significance of this trend is open to debate, depending on contested conceptualizations of the meaning and practice of democracy in South Africa. One should be wary of an overly mediacentric view of the determinants of the democratization, whether of the media itself or of South Africa in general. Broadcasting in and of itself cannot secure democracy or succeed in the task of nation-building. Nor should the significance of a shared cultural identity as a condition for democracy be overestimated when compared with more immediate issues of ensuring that media institutions can function as effective and accountable means for inclusive political communication. It can certainly be argued that democratization in South Africa rests less on securing identification with symbolic representations of national unity within a plural society and more on programs to alleviate poverty and economic inequality and the extension of democratic decision-making (Cherry, 1994). The reform of broadcasting is significant insofar as it indicates that developmental and redistributive imperatives are being subordinated to the neo-liberal priority of economic growth, and that this has been associated with the attenuation of participatory decision-making in the formulation of media policy.
In contrast, steps towards the practical realization of mass communications as an arena for active citizenship and democratic participation have not been given high priority since 1994. This is connected to the decline in the influence of independent civil society organizations on media policy since 1994. More generally, the role of civil societies in South Africa is in the process of being rethought conceptually and restructured practically (Glaser, 1997; James and Caliguire, 1996). This has been exacerbated by the centralization of decision-making, clearly identifiable in the process of telecommunications reform (Horwitz, 1997). The attenuation of previous forms of extended popular participation must, of course, be understood in the context of the fundamental transformation of the state by a degree of political representation previously unknown in South Africa (Seekings, 1996). In the process, access to policy forums has been altered, with oppositional strategies towards the state being superseded by more corporatist forms of engagement. Broadcasting reform is therefore characterized by a tension between the consolidation of the bureaucratic representative practices of liberal democratic institutions and long-established traditions of mass participation and popular democracy (see Saul, 1997).

The South African case raises important questions regarding the role of media institutions in democratization. It indicates the importance of distinguishing between a narrow sense of linguistic/visual representation and a broader political sense of representation as delegation or “speaking for” in shaping media forms (cf. Murdock, 1995; Spivak, 1988). The institutionalization of particular modalities of representation in this second sense—through markets, public opinion surveys, academic research, voting systems, and constitutions, as well as various forms of institutional accountability and participatory decision-making procedures—shapes the environment in which representations in the narrower sense are produced, transmitted, and consumed. Rather than nation-building being imagined in South Africa as a primarily symbolic, cultural project, it needs to be understood as a project of institutional transformation. The relationship between representations of diversity and the modalities of representation of diverse interests and identities in media institutions and policy needs to be placed at the center of any analysis of the politics of media, culture, and democracy.

Given the present balance of political forces, the agenda of the ANC, and the entrenched position of capital, the decommodification of communication and media systems that some argue is the prerequisite for genuinely pluralistic and democratic media systems cannot be considered likely in South Africa in the foreseeable future (e.g., Keane, 1991). Indeed, evidence suggests that media commodification is likely to deepen. The increasing commodification and internationalization of cultural practices implies that media are no longer available in the ways assumed in the past as means for the suturing of national cultures. Markets facilitate the representation of varied interests, and contribute to a greater mutability of
identities that might help undermine the effects of previous policies aimed at enshrining categorical models of cultural difference in South Africa. Nonetheless, democratic access, participation, and representation in media institutions are not reducible to an individualistic rhetoric of “choice” and “competition.” In assessing patterns of reform, critical attention should be directed towards the structures of communication, forms of representation, and modes of participation that particular media structures facilitate and sustain. Thus, while the development of broadcasting policy in South Africa in the 1990s has been characterized by a strong commitment to open and participatory deliberation over policy options, the social relations of ownership, production, distribution, and consumption forged during the period of apartheid remain largely unchanged after the formal transition to democracy. It is these relations that have continued to exert considerable influence in determining who gets represented, by whom, and for what purposes.

Acknowledgments

Research in South Africa was undertaken with the financial assistance of The University of Reading, and further support for the writing of this paper was provided by the Department of Geography at The Ohio State University. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Boston, March 1998, and to the Department of Communications, The Ohio State University. I would like to thank those who contributed critical suggestions on those occasions, as well as three referees for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Notes

1. In response to the rapid erosion of the print media’s share of advertising expenditures following the introduction of commercial television services in 1978, the major press groups lobbied the apartheid state to set up a pay-TV service. As a result, an encoded subscription television service using the terrestrial frequency spectrum began in 1985, operated by the Electronic Media Network Ltd., or M-Net. M-Net quickly established a subscriber base of 500,000 by 1990 and of one million by 1996. It now operates in more than 30 African countries and has interests in Europe and Asia. The late 1970s and early 1980s also saw the establishment of broadcasting services in the nominally independent homeland states of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Ciskei.

2. The most reliable and detailed statistics available on consumption of media services in South Africa are produced by the South African Advertising Research Foundation, primarily for use by advertisers and media organizations. It retains apartheid-era ethnic and racial classifications in producing its data.

4. An amendment to the IBA Act (Republic of South Africa, 1995) enabled the IBA to grant temporary broadcasting licenses to community radio stations. This sector has grown very quickly, with more than 70 community radio stations on the air by the end of 1996 (Independent Broadcasting Authority 1997a).

5. For a full account of the Triple Inquiry process, see Horwitz (1996). For a critical discussion of the issue of participation during the Triple Inquiry, see Martinis (1996).

6. The Group of Thirteen consisted of an association of media lawyers, academics, churches, and trade unions. Most of the members had been active in media debates in the 1990–1993 period.

7. After much delay, the Bophuthatswana Broadcasting Corporation was finally incorporated into the SABC in early 1998, along with the remaining broadcasting services of other homeland states.

8. As confirmed in the final Constitution in 1996, the eleven official languages are as follows: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu (Republic of South Africa, 1996b).


11. This latter proposal assumed that South Africa could support only three terrestrial television stations, an assumption that the IBA was forced to abandon in the light of subsequent decisions in Parliament.

12. Africa on Air consists of the burgeoning media and entertainment conglomerate Primedia Broadcasting, the investment groups of the National Union of Mineworkers and the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and the Women’s Investment Portfolio.

13. This issue dates back to M-Net’s acquisition in 1995 of exclusive broadcasting rights to provincial and international rugby matches, which the SABC has argued are a national asset that should be broadcast by the public broadcaster.

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