

Is the SABC still relevant in the digital age?

By  Karabo Ledwaba

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Is the public broadcaster still relevant in the digital age? This question was the main theme of a Loeries Creative Week Masterclass facilitated by DJ Sbu - real name Sbusiso Leope.



DJ Sbu in conversation with SABC's head of content Lala Tuku and head of African Language Station Sbonzi Ngcobo. Source: Karabo Ledwaba.

The Loeries Creative Week is in full swing in the Mother City. This topic was one of several that made up the Loeries Masterclasses that took place on Thursday.

“The SABC is more relevant than it has ever been. From a mandate perspective a national broadcaster is important in any country, we are to inform, educate and entertain,” says Lala Tuku, head of content at SABC.

Commercial needs

But Tuku says they constantly have to fight between the commercial needs of the business with their broader mandate. Recently the SABC reported to Parliament that it saw a net loss of R1.13bn for the fiscal year, marking a significant setback after seven years of progress.

“Over the years we have been under extreme financial pressure, and with the proliferation of streamers and so many

content providers, the choice has become so much harder because people have so many places to get their content. This means we are sitting in a tug of war to be commercially viable and keep the lights on, but we still have to make sure we have enough hours for children and religious content, which does not make money.”

Tuku said 80% of SABC’s budget comes from being commercially viable while only 3% comes from the government.

She said this means they have to try to make content like religious shows more lifestyle-focused to try and attract more advertisers.

Lion's share

Although the national broadcaster faces many hurdles, it still manages to have the most-watched show in South Africa.

“SABC still has the lion's share of audiences. The most watched show sits on SABC 1, that is *Uzalo* with 10 million before loadshedding. At stage six of loadshedding we lose about three million viewers.”



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Impressive as these numbers are, with streaming services like Netflix and Showmax gaining more ground in SA and loadshedding continuing to disrupt TV schedules, the SABC has had to move into the digital age to make sure they are not left behind.

They recently launched SABC+, a free streaming service that allows consumers to watch and listen to the platform's catalogue of content on their own time.

Moving with the times

Sbongi Ngcobo, head of African Language Station and Ukhozi FM's business manager says when it comes to radio the business is doing extremely well.

“While everyone has been worried about print dying, radio remains strong.”

However, Ngcobo says although SABC radio stations are doing well, they have had to be mindful of making sure they do not remain a dinosaur.

“We have had to move into the visual radio space. For example *Ukhozi FM TV* and that was established in 2022 April.”

Ngcobo said the TV channel helped with creating more interaction and also allowed viewers to watch and interact with the content when they wanted to.

“We have had to move with the times and respond to the needs of our viewers,” she said.

She said although there were concerns that lower-income communities would not be able to stream content on their digital platforms because of high data costs, they have been pleasantly surprised to find that people are tuning in.

“At the end of the day people will make a plan for content that is right for them,” concluded Ngcobo.

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