

Adaptation and Survival in a Multiplatform World

A case of more and Better of the same.

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Let me first of all express my appreciation to the organizers of this gathering of Public Broadcasters of the Common Wealth for this opportunity to reflect with you on these important matters. I say so having only recently completed my first six months in office. I am reminded that new comers of course have the latitude to bring in new ideas - - to shake the tree so to speak- and at times risk being sniggered at by their new found peers.

More expectedly, new comers typically bring in fresh ideas and sometimes revolutionary solutions from the “outside”. You may therefore find it surprising that my reply to the search the Public service Broadcasters survival in the multiplatform world is “more (and better) of the same “

This is not a call motivated by some conservatism which sneers, often at its own peril, at anything new and different, vowing to carry on regardless and die fighting! It is rather an appeal not to let changes or advances in technology to give us the mistaken impression that the fundamental and core business of Public Service broadcasting necessarily have to undergo a corresponding process of reinvention. On the contrary, what will ensure our survival is to pronounce even more clearly the unique selling points pf PSB.

The challenge therefore is simply to translate the multiplicity of platforms into more and better Public Service Broadcasting. To be honest, the talk of survival is itself problematic and misplaced. The multiplatform world can only promise an abundance of opportunity. Any fear of extinction can only be based on our failure, in the acronym ICT, to distinguish the I from the T. Technology cannot and should not change the essential mission which is the communication of information. What distinguishes Pub’s from our commercial “competitors” is not Technology or the nature or number of platforms, but the nature of the information or content which we provide or communicate. It is in the sphere of content broadly defined to include entertainment, news and current affairs that we have to stake our claim. In other words it is not so much where we broadcast but what we broadcast that will guarantee our survival.

To put this into context let me share with you a true story. Shortly after my appointment last year I hosted the Director General of the National Public Broadcaster of one of the Western African Countries. As soon as I finished rattling on about the SABC's plans to roll out our digital multichannel, multiplatform strategy, he asked me if it would be possible for his country to inherit the analogue equipment we were planning to discard.

This was both a sobering and humbling request. Let us suppose that I were to accede to this request and two years thereafter that broadcaster were to provide culturally and socially relevant content, objective and robust news and current affairs programmes etc and the SABC with all its new platforms bells and whistles were to circumvent itself into a political lapdog, stifling any views which contradict the ruling party- which one of us would be a "better" public service broadcaster? And so, in this new media and multimedia opportunity- rather than gloom- I suggest that if Public Service broadcasters can adapt swiftly and successfully, the potential for significantly enhanced and flourishing public service media is immeasurable.

So what must be done in this competitive environment?

Firstly, we must continue to make the public case for strong, independent and public service focused public broadcasters. The virtue of public service broadcasting is not always self evident. The public, policy and lawmakers, and civil society organizations are essential partners in nurturing and holding public service broadcasters accountable.

Secondly we must seize the opportunities for expanding services on existing and new digitized delivery platforms. We can do so in partnerships and joint ventures with a range of providers-signal distributors, multichannel providers, telecommunications services providers, internet service providers and so on. With increasing differentiation among broadcasters and these service providers, and the capital investments required to build publicly accessible digital platforms I firmly believe that we cannot afford to go it alone. In partnership and joint ventures, I believe that we will have the capacity of universal reach and universal access, especially to poor and disadvantaged communities. I see this perhaps as the most significant adaptation and reinvention challenge facing us today. I believe that for us to be able to achieve this goal we must significantly enhance our business and technology strategy and leadership.

Thirdly, we must rise to the twin challenges of providing quality and diversity of programming as we have done in the analogue era. Keep in mind that innovative programme delivery is what it says- broaden the scope of ideas and enrich the public discourse- it is more than a technological innovation. So far from responding to fragmentation with more fragmentation on these new platforms, public service broadcasting in this era must continue to be about universal reach and access so as to

help citizens find the content that they value so that their minds and lives are enriched. This will require the development with independent producers and within country – to- country co productions, of new and innovative programming formats that go beyond the humbug. Imagine the content requirements of the content hungry new channels, traditionally provided and otherwise- for example, children, youth, learning, society and history, language, and so on, and the innovations to serve disabled communities, and to create better news and sport productions. And, perhaps and apart from television, we can through our efforts see the overdue reinvention and adaptation of radio.

Fourthly, we must mobilize our collective capacities to grow and learn together. In this regard I believe it is now time for the CBA and other regional bodies within the Common Wealth together and to present a plan of action to our leaders to reinvent and reinvest in Public Service broadcasting so that we can respond effectively to the new opportunity. After all this reinvention we will enable our societies to rise even more effectively to the calls of the millennium development goals, and other regional goals such as those embodied in the new partnership for Africa's development (NEPAD) this is so because an effective response by public broadcasters will go well beyond bridging the digital divide.

I conclude by observing that it is possible to be run over by the new tide of skepticism and doubt in this new digital era. In this era of literally hundreds of channels and channels within channels, audiences will seek out programmes and names that they trust; channels and services that they believe in; programmes that enrich their minds and their lives. Let us not fail them. Let us not fail the generations for whom we are helping build a better. Rather let us rise and become swifter, faster, higher and better public service broadcasters.