

Operation Kindle and the ASA

 By [Ed Herbst](#)

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"And then, I must declare, 'Not in my name!' 'We should never allow expedience to triumph over our history and our values. Too much blood has been spilled and far too much pain endured in the struggle to create the democracy described in our constitution.'" - [Trevor Manuel in a letter to the Cape Times 27 December 2013](#)



Trevor Manuel is right to be perturbed.

"Democracy is fading" read the Sunday Times front-page headline on 16 March, highlighting Trevor Manuel's concern about the increasing attacks by the ANC on Public Protector Thuli Madonsela. He is right to be perturbed.

On Thursday 14 March I was watching the SABC channel 404 7pm TV news bulletin - the flagship news broadcast on the 24-hour news channel - when up popped the weirdest news story I have ever seen and [the Mail & Guardian has provided the insert](#).

The opening shot reveals men dressed in brightly coloured clerical raiment. They seem to be speaking in tongues and one of them looks like he is suffering from a virulent and possibly terminal combination of the ague and St Vitus dance.

All this is happening over the prone body of, I initially thought, Hlaudi Motsoeneng because he was the subject of this surreal performance.

The story was about what our media practitioners called "fringe church leaders" exorcising a host of devilish demons which have apparently taken up residence in the offices of the Public Protector - all this to protect [Motsoeneng](#).

It was only a few seconds later that I realised that what I had initially had assumed was Hlaudi was actually the strikingly beautiful woman wearing a clerical collar in an audience cutaway shot.

The men of the cloth were angry. Madonsela, they said, was possessed by "demonic forces which planned to derail the revolution and the freedom of our people". Furthermore, she was "Poisoning the atmosphere". All this because of her report on Motsoeneng, which merely reiterated what has been [in the public domain](#) for years and at a time when, on his watch, the state broadcaster's [profits](#) have dropped.

Damning findings

Be that as it may, our beloved Thuli is under such sustained and venomous attack from an increasingly jittery governing party that I would advise her not to take any chances and to place her desk on bricks without further ado.

Two days later, on Saturday 15 March, the SABC carried another story of the Hlaudi Motsoeneng group attacking Madonsela. Then on Sunday, 16 March the SABC's lead story on its 7pm channel 404 TV news bulletin was that Tina Joemat-Pettersson would be using taxpayer's money to challenge the Public Protector's damning findings against her.

Both Gwede Mantashe and [Lindiwe Sisulu](#) have also trashed her forthcoming Nkandla report.

But it was what came after the insert on exorcising the satanic forces occupying Public Protector House in Pretoria that had me experiencing an attack of the vapours and reaching for the smelling salts.

Here, in all its glorious eloquence, is the 24-hour news channels latest advertising blurb:

SABC - 'sharing 20 years of inspiration!'

"SABC News plays a critical role in providing unbiased and reliable news..."

"We have a well-established reputation of uncovering, reporting and delivering news..."

"A significant growth in popularity of our news demonstrates the demand for our news content..."

"We continue to provide unrivalled coverage of vital events in and out of the country..."

"Wherever the news is happening, we'll be there to bring them to you at the right time..."

"No one has the news covered like SABC news..."

"We lead and they follow!"

"SABC news: Africa's news leader..."



Lindiwe Sisulu has trashed Madonsela's Nkandla report, due for release today, and appears to have indicated that the ANC will simply ignore its findings.

Operation Kindle



Marian Shinn says the SABC has been aware for many months that the overwhelming majority of South Africans reject the essence of the SABC promotional blurb as an outright lie.

According to a press release by the Democratic Alliance Shadow Minister of Communication, Marian Shinn, the SABC has, for several months now, been aware through its own commissioned market research program, Operation Kindle, that the overwhelming majority of South Africans reject the essence of this promotional blurb. Her summary of the [Operation Kindle findings](#) (below) reflects this public distaste.

- *The majority of respondents feel that the SABC's news is biased towards the ANC;*
- *The perception of political bias and pro-ANC political reporting creates low credibility of political reporting among SABC News viewers;*
- *Most consumers seek other news sources to find balanced political views of events such as Marikana or President Zuma's compound at Nkandla;*
- *SABC1 is believed to be the more biased of the SABC's three free-to-air TV channels; and*
- *There is a perception that politicians make decisions on content rather than the editors.*

Let's analyse each of the above-mentioned claims by the SABC:

"SABC News plays a critical role in providing unbiased and reliable news..."

Snuki Zikalala's "Blacklist"?

Here is the opinion of [Judge Neels Claassen](#) on Zikalala's "[blacklist](#)" which was no different in principle or intent to Matlare's 2002 "upward referral" policy or its current counterpart, Hlaudi Motsoeneng's "70% good news policy".

"Dr Zikalala's blacklisting of commentators perceived to be critical of the government of the day was clearly designed to silence their voices by not allowing them on air."

"His purpose was obviously to manipulate SABC's news and current affairs programmes by excluding these critical voices ... To suggest that his blacklisting might not have had an effect is quite incorrect ... the truth could only have been established had both sides of the story been aired."

Subsequent to the Claassen judgement the state broadcaster does not appear to have aired the booing of Police Minister Riah Phiyega at the start of the Farlam Commission of Inquiry into what it describes as the "Marikana tragedy" and what everyone else calls the Marikana Massacre; it also does not appear to have aired the booing of Jacob Zuma at the Mandela memorial service in Soweto and does not appear to have aired [Thabo Mbeki](#) when he criticised the Zuma faction in an Oliver Tambo memorial lecture on 19 October 2012 - to cite just a few examples.

Well-established reputation

"We have a well-established reputation of uncovering, reporting and delivering news..."

In fact, it [attempted to interdict](#) the Mail & Guardian to prevent the public from gaining access to the damning report of the Sisulu/Marcus commission of inquiry into the blacklisting scandal.

"A significant growth in popularity of our news demonstrates the demand for our news content..."

eNCA has double the number of viewers for its 7pm TV news bulletin without costing taxpayers a cent and why the Operation Kindie research project found that the majority of South Africans "...feel that the SABC's news is biased towards the ANC; most consumers seek other news sources to find balanced political views of events such as Marikana or President Zuma's compound at Nkandla; there is a perception that (ANC) politicians make decisions on content rather than the editors."

Unrivalled coverage

"We continue to provide unrivalled coverage of vital events in and out of the country..."

Take the SABC's 7pm channel 404 news bulletin on Sunday, 16 March. The Sunday Times front-page lead that morning read: "Zuma Ministers in bitter feud - Sisulu takes Mapisa-Nqakula to Public Protector" and the DA's [David Maynier](#) immediately issued a press release, "Lindiwe Sisulu blew R11m on luxury Gulfstream flights." The SABC appears to have ignored that story, along with one headlined in City Press, "R70m cash crunch over Mandela memorial spend". This story showed that the ANC-controlled [Mpumalanga provincial government](#) is effectively bankrupt and unable to pay salaries. This is because the municipality diverted almost R40m into the account of Carol Bouwer to organise Nelson Mandela memorial events without soliciting quotes from other companies. If the name Carol Bouwer rings a bell it is because her name was linked to the diversion of millions of rands meant for the promotion of the ICT Indaba. In another ANC-linked corruption story, "Sannieshof's cash vanishes in the [bras of workers](#)" City Press revealed that the municipality had effectively ceased to function but that money was being stolen from municipal premises. This, too, does not appear to have been reflected on the SABC bulletin but the lead story on that bulletin was that Tina Joemat-Pettersson was going to use taxpayers' money to challenge the Public Protector's adverse findings against her ...

As far as the SABC's claim in its advertising promotion to give "unrivalled coverage of events outside the country" is concerned, the state broadcaster appears to have virtually ignored the furore over recently promulgated laws in Uganda that actively promote the persecution of gays there because the ANC has not joined worldwide condemnation of this legislation.



Many people feel the claims made by the SABC about its news coverage are not true.

Wherever the news is happening

"Wherever the news is happening, we'll be there to bring them to you at the right time..."

Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa spent millions of rands to prevent the sitting of the [Kate O'Regan/Vusi Pikoli](#) commission of inquiry into the complete breakdown of relations between the Khayelitsha community and the three police stations in the area, but the SABC appears to have effectively given the Commission little day-to-day coverage, especially on its channel 404 7pm TV news bulletin.

Every South African has been affected by the recent rolling blackouts and on Sunday 17 March, Carte Blanche looked at the quality of coal being delivered to our power stations, why [Medupi](#) is years behind its original completion date and billions over budget already and how this affects us as citizens.

Go to the website of the SABC equivalent, Special Assignment and type "Medupi" or "Blackout" or "Load shedding" into the search bar on the site and the response is "No results".

We lead - they follow

"No one has the news covered like SABC news."

Every major news agency in the world that was in South Africa in early December to cover the death of Nelson Mandela and its aftermath reflected the booing of President Jacob Zuma throughout the memorial service at the FNB stadium in Soweto on 10 December but there does not appear to have been any mention of it on the SABC's news bulletins as a [City Press report](#) revealed.

The SABC does not appear to have made an attempt to interview Thamsanqa Jantjie even though every major news agency covering the memorial service headlined the fact that a confirmed schizophrenic had been allowed, without security clearance, within metres of world leaders and interviewed him.

ABOUT ED HERBST

Ed Herbst is an author and a prize-winning reporter. He worked for SABC television news for 28 years but left in 2005 without other employment in prospect because of the pervasive news and other corruption at all levels of the corporation. He is also a fly fishing enthusiast.

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