

NEWS



# Public Service Media Symposium Report

Reimagining Public Service Media in South  
Africa: Democratic Infrastructure, Funding  
Settlements and Platform Power

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition would like to take this opportunity to express our sincerest gratitude to our phenomenal writer, viola milton, for developing this report. Her dedication in spending countless hours listening to recordings and carefully working through the transcriptions to thoroughly consider and analyse all inputs, made this work possible.

We also extend our heartfelt thanks to our editor, Izak Minnaar. Your oversight and keen attention to detail helped shape this report into the brilliant piece of work it is.

This report would not exist without our exceptional panellists and speakers who generously shared their expertise. Thank you for your valuable participation and contributions to the symposium, you have provided insights that we can draw from and implement going forward.

We further extend our sincere appreciation to our attendees. Thank you for taking the time to engage, reflect, and ask thoughtful questions throughout the symposium.

Lastly, we would like to thank our partner, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Your partnership and support made the symposium and report possible.

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# ABSTRACT

South Africa's public service broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), remains a primary source of news, information and cultural representation for millions, yet it faces an unsustainable funding model, repeated governance crises and growing competition from digital platforms. This report draws on a reflexive thematic analysis of the 2025 Annual Public Service Media (PSM) Symposium, convened by the SOS: Support Public Broadcasting Coalition, and approaches public service media as democratic infrastructure rather than a failing commercial enterprise. It examines how participants – including broadcasters, regulators, activists and policy experts – wrestled with six interconnected themes, with particular attention to debates over the SABC's democratic role, the politics of funding and austerity, and the changing influence of digital and pay-TV platforms. These themes reveal that questions of independence, sustainability and digital transformation are inseparable, coming together most clearly in contested proposals for licence fees, levies and new forms of public subsidy. The report traces patterns across five hours of conversation and debate, then places these symposium insights into dialogue with SOS's earlier work – particularly the 2024 Discussion Document on public service broadcasting remit, funding and governance, alongside the 2023 SOS Vision Document – and wider African and international scholarship. Drawing on this combined evidence base, it outlines design principles for a South African approach that can stabilise public service media while protecting editorial independence. It also considers what civil-society convenings can and cannot achieve as spaces for rethinking media policy in a deeply unequal, platform-dominated democracy.

**Keywords:** South Africa's public service media; SABC funding crisis; public broadcasting levy South Africa; digital platforms and media independence; media policy and democracy

# 1 INTRODUCTION

South Africa's public service broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), is in a difficult place. It is still the main source of news, information and local stories for millions of people, especially poorer and working-class households, but it is under intense financial pressure, facing regular governance crises, and trying to keep up with a media environment that is shifting towards pay-TV, digital platforms and streaming (SOS 2023; Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

This report grows out of the Annual Public Service Media Symposium '25, held on 3 October 2025 in Johannesburg and convened by the SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition (SOS) in partnership with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) (SOS 2025a).

The symposium brought together people from different parts of the media system to think together about the future of PSM in South Africa. The aim of the symposium was “to deepen understanding of the current state of PSM in South Africa along with key defining internal and environmental challenges in a bid to strengthen its role amid the evolving digital media environment” (SOS 2025a).

This report takes that aim seriously. It is not just a record of who said what. The goal is to draw out the main threads that ran across the day, to show how people in the room made sense of the SABC's situation, and to link those threads to wider debates about democracy, digital change and media power. At the same time, the report is not emerging in a vacuum. These conversations are happening at a time when public media are under pressure across the world. As Desilon Daniels, the keynote from the Public Media Alliance (PMA) reminded participants, attacks on public service media, frequently fuelled by imported “culture war” narratives and conspiracy-laden talk of “fake news” or “woke bias”, now stretch from the United States to Europe and beyond (SOS 2025b). Even long-established institutions such as the BBC find themselves at the centre of highly partisan battles over impartiality, “wokeness” and the licence fee, with recent leadership crises described by insiders as a politically driven “coup” that raises fundamental questions about editorial independence (Savage 2025). In that sense, the pressures facing the SABC are not only local: they form part of a wider struggle over who gets to shape the information environment, and whose stories and knowledge systems are treated as legitimate.

# 1.1 AIMS OF THIS REPORT

This report is written first for SOS and its allies: media workers, unions, community organisations, independent producers, policy and legal practitioners, regulators, funders and other civil society groups who are thinking about the future of public service media. It is also meant to be readable for people who may not follow every policy detail, but who care about the SABC and the wider public media system because they rely on it in their everyday lives (SOS 2023).

The report has four main purposes:

- **To document** the key debates and concerns that surfaced in the symposium, with as much of the participants' own language as possible, so their voices remain at the centre.
- **To organise** those debates into a small number of themes that make sense beyond the room, so they can be used in future campaigning, litigation, lobbying, research and public education.
- **To connect** what was said on the day to wider South African, African and global debates about funding models, independence, governance, digital platforms and information integrity.
- **To identify** gaps, by paying attention to the questions that did not get much space, or the voices that were not present, so that SOS and others can plan future work with those absences in mind.

## 1.2. SOURCES

To note, the report is grounded in a specific event, commissioned by SOS as part of its advocacy programme, and intended to be used by the Coalition and its partners in their day-to-day work (SOS 2023, 2025a).

The analysis in this report is based on three main sources:

- **The symposium transcript** – around sixty pages of transcribed material from the full day's proceedings, including the opening, four sessions and closing reflections, along with additional YouTube video transcripts (SOS 2025b).
- **The official programme**, which sets out the theme, session topics, speakers and organisers' stated objectives (included as an annexure) (SOS 2025a).

- **SOS's 2024 Discussion Document and 2023 Vision Document** – which together describe the Coalition's thinking about a three-tier PSM system (public, community and commercial), public service broadcasting remit, funding models and governance arrangements, and what a public service mandate should mean in this country (Milton, Mampa & Markovitz 2024, SOS 2023).

The report works by bringing these sources into conversation: it identifies themes and tensions in the symposium discussion, then examines how these relate to the principles and proposals SOS has developed through its research and advocacy work, as well as to wider African and international scholarship on public service media.

My own position also matters. I have been a member of the SOS Coalition for nearly two decades, and I come to this work with a critical, decolonial, African-centred lens that not only treats public service media as democratic infrastructure, but also as part of a wider struggle over knowledge, culture and power (Milton and Mano 2022; Fuchs 2021).

I was not present in the room on the day. I worked from the symposium transcripts supplied by SOS, the YouTube recordings and transcripts, and SOS's symposium programme and session descriptors provided for context. The SOS documents already reflect the organisers' choices about who was invited and how the conversation was framed (SOS 2025a, 2025b). By its very design therefore, this report is not a neutral account – it is a situated reading that tries to be honest about its standpoint and limits.

## 1.3. **METHODOLOGY: A REFLEXIVE THEMATIC APPROACH**

To make sense of a long, dense conversation, I used a reflexive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2019). In plain language, that means:

- I read through the whole transcript several times, noting what kept coming up: funding and “unfunded mandates”, political interference, the Canal+–MultiChoice deal, digital platforms “sucking out” advertising, the role of the SABC in elections, media capture, and so on (SOS 2025b).

- I tagged pieces of the transcript with short labels (codes) like “existential crisis”, “policy vacuum”, “licence poverty, not apathy”, “foreign ownership”, “information integrity”, “ecosystem, not just SABC”.
- I grouped those codes into broader themes that cut across the four sessions. In the end, six themes felt both manageable and faithful to the day’s discussions.

Across the six themes, the same three concerns kept surfacing: independence, sustainability and funding. Participants linked independence not only to freedom from party-political interference, but also to freedom from commercial pressure and from foreign corporate control. Sustainability was understood as financial, social and institutional, i.e. can public service media survive and serve its mandate over time? Funding was treated not just as “where the money comes from”, but as a set of political choices that shape all of the above (SOS 2023; Milton Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

Funding is a big part of the story, but it is not the whole story. Speakers like Dimitri Martinis repeatedly warned against looking at funding models “in a policy vacuum”, without also asking who sets the rules of the market, how platforms are regulated, what the SABC is actually mandated to do, and how governance structures work in practice (SOS 2025b; Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

The symposium also took place in a rapidly changing digital environment. Speakers and participants came back again and again to the impact of streaming, social media and platform power: on advertising, on audience habits, on local content and sports rights, and on how disinformation circulates. Rather than treating the digital environment as a separate “tech issue”, this report deals with it as a cross-cutting condition that shapes each theme discussed below.

## **1.4. RESEARCH ETHICS AND PARTICIPANT CONSENT**

Ethical safeguards were treated as part of the research design, shaping how transcripts and recordings were accessed, how quotations were selected, and how attribution decisions were made.

Because the symposium was recorded as part of the organisers' routine documentation of a public event, and also identified as a potential source for a research-based report, we implemented a retrospective consent process before finalising publication. Participants were contacted with a clear consent letter and consent options to (A) allow use with anonymisation, (B) allow use with name/role, or (C) decline research use entirely, with the commitment that non-consenting contributions would not be analysed or quoted beyond broad, non-identifying summary patterns.

Transcripts and analytic materials were handled with confidentiality safeguards (restricted access, password-protected storage, and defined retention practices), and any quotations used were either anonymised by default or attributed only with explicit permission.

This approach recognises the practical limits of an already-public recording while prioritising informed choice, minimising harm, and ensuring that participants retain meaningful control over how their words are used in the research report.

## **1.5. STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT**

The rest of the report is organised around six themes that emerged from the symposium discussions. For the purposes of this report, attention is focused on Themes 1-3, because these were especially important to the organisers and speak most directly to the current moment:

1. **A lifeline under strain:** PSM as democratic infrastructure – how participants described the SABC and other PSM as a lifeline for democracy, culture and language, especially for those with the least.
2. **Follow the money:** Funding, austerity and political choices – how people in the room made sense of the funding crisis, and what kinds of funding settlements they felt could (or could not) secure independence and sustainability.
3. **Under platform pressure:** Canal+, MultiChoice and the new media power map – how digital platforms, streaming services and the Canal+–MultiChoice deal reshape the media landscape and SABC’s room for manoeuvre.
4. **Guarding the guardians:** Governance, independence and media capture – how governance arrangements can either protect or undermine editorial freedom.
5. **Fighting information disorder:** Elections, integrity and the role of PSM – the role of public service media in an information environment marked by mis- and disinformation, especially around elections.
6. **From complaint to construction:** Civil society agency and public media futures – how SOS and other civil society actors shift from protest to co-creating future public media settlements in a platform age.

I then pull together these thematic threads across independence, sustainability and funding in a digital era, and sketching possible paths forward for SOS and its allies.







Within the themes, I try to keep participants’ voices as present as possible, especially in Themes 1, 2 and 3. I bring in comparative research and theory where it helps to clarify or deepen a point, but always after, and in relation to, what people in the room actually said.

## 1.6. OVERVIEW OF THEMES AND CODES

To give a clear picture of how the analysis was organised, Table 1 summarises the six themes and the main codes that sit under each of them. The themes emerged from a reflexive thematic analysis of the full symposium transcript, alongside the symposium programme and section outlines. It builds on the flexible code list developed during the familiarisation-phase of the analysis.

This table shows, at a glance, how the detailed codes group into broader stories about the state and future of public service media in South Africa.

### PSM Themes in South Africa

Theme	Brief Description	Main Codes
 <b>Lifeline Under Strain</b>	Essential democratic infrastructure for marginalized communities.	SABC as cornerstone of democracy, unfunded mandate, policy vacuum.
 <b>Follow the Money</b>	Funding crisis due to political choices.	Existential funding crisis, systematic under-funding, austerity as rights erosion.
 <b>Under Platform Pressure</b>	Platformisation reshaping media power landscape.	OTT platforms siphoning revenue, need to regulate platforms, Canal+–MultiChoice consolidation.
 <b>Guarding the Guardians</b>	Governance impacts SABC's independence.	Government reluctance to fund SABC, politicized board appointments, independence by design.
 <b>Fighting Information Disorder</b>	PSM as tool against misinformation.	Misinformation as democracy threat, PSM as bulwark, ACHPR resolutions.
 <b>From Complaint to Construction</b>	Civil society co-creating public media futures.	Civil society as watchdog, need to move beyond complaints, global alliances.

**Table 1.** Themes and codes identified through reflexive thematic analysis of the SOS Annual Public Service Media Symposium 2025

# 2. THE THEMES

## 2.1. THEME 1: A LIFELINE UNDER STRAIN: PSM AS DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE

### 2.1.1. SABC as democratic infrastructure, not “just another broadcaster”

Across the symposium, speakers kept returning to the same point: the SABC is not just another broadcaster. It is part of South Africa’s democratic infrastructure – one of the institutions through which constitutional rights are made real in everyday life. In her welcome, SOS National Coordinator Uyanda Siyotula explicitly tied SOS’s work to that role, reminding the room that SOS was founded on the understanding that the SABC is not a luxury add-on but a core democratic institution:

“

We were founded on the principle that the SABC is a cornerstone of our democracy. It is through the SABC that millions of South Africans are able to realize their right to access information, free universal access to quality local public interest content that informs...educates you know, people - especially the poor and the marginalised - ensuring that they are not excluded from democratic participation. (Uyanda Siyotula, SOS 2025b)

”

This framing echoes SOS's own policy work. The Vision for the SABC and Public Service Media in South Africa defines the SABC's role in constitutional terms: promoting democracy and freedom of expression, giving "a voice to the poor and marginalised," and ensuring that people in South Africa can access news, education and cultural programming in all official languages, free at the point of use (SOS 2023). The 2024 SOS Discussion Document on global PSM trends similarly argues that, in an unequal digital society, public service media should be treated as a public good whose value lies in enabling participation and inclusion, not in delivering profit (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

Panellists made this link between SABC and rights very concrete. Reflecting on research into public trust and media use, one speaker stressed that it is precisely those with the least money and fewest alternatives who would lose most if public service media were to fail:

“

It showed that there, actually there's public trust in the SABC and that's one thing that we should not forget...the majority of South Africans and...when I'm talking about the majority I'm talking about those people who cannot afford subscription for Sunday Times, who can't afford subscription for Netflix, who can't afford the subscription for News24 - they largely depend on SABC as a source of information and it's something that whoever is thinking about funding whoever is thinking about public mandate... You need to really remember that. And it also has proven, it's proven time and again, William [Bird] will tell you time and again during elections that the majority of South Africans still wholly dependent on SABC for information that empower them to make...informed choices. (Moshoeshe Monare, SOS 2025b).

”

SABC's public value is therefore inseparable from who it serves: poor and working-class households, rural communities, non-English speakers, people without regular data or subscription budgets. If the SABC falters, the rights most immediately eroded are those of people already structurally marginalised.

Comparative research supports this intuition. Cross-national survey work shows that strong public service broadcasting systems enhance people's ability to learn about politics from both mass media and social media, especially when combined with robust press freedom (Park and Gil de Zúñiga 2021). Public service media, in this sense, function as political learning infrastructure: a system that makes it easier for people to acquire the knowledge they need to participate in democratic life.

SOS's own positionality is part of this story. The coalition has long argued that the SABC is not a failing business but an overstretched public utility – one that people rely on even when they cannot pay the licence fee – and that policy debates must start from a rights-based rather than purely commercial understanding of public media (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition 2023).

Seen from this angle, public service media is not only about “content” or “channels.” It is about whether constitutional rights to freedom of expression and access to information – and the broader promise of meaningful participation in public life – can be exercised in practice by everyone, not just by those who can pay (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; milton and Mano 2022). In this report, we use “decolonial” to signal media policy that is responsive and accountable to the needs and lived realities of those it is meant to serve.

## **2.1.2 Whose public? Unequal access, languages and old/new exclusions**

The symposium also underscored how the universal ideals associated with public service media collide with deep structural inequalities. Nowhere was this clearer than in the discussion of language, schedule and who is effectively “news-dark.” Drawing on her leadership experience inside SABC News, Dr Phathiswa Magopeni, a former Group Executive for News & Current Affairs at the SABC from 2018-2022, and current member of the SABC Board of Directors who chairs the Public Broadcasting Service Committee and the Audit and Risk Committee for the SABC Board, described the persistence of apartheid-era patterns in how African language bulletins are scheduled:

“

And talking about post-apartheid actually...it's not even post there are still structural issues that emanate from apartheid that remain with SABC so it's not post as in post... if you look at the provisioning of the African languages news services um you have news services for specific linguistic communities that only run five days a week so where do you think they get news from Saturday and Sunday...So, where do they go for their news content? You have Swati, Ndebele, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, that only get news Monday to Friday and they alternate slots. It means that in that 5 days you are likely to have two days of Tshivenda and three days of the other language and the following week it's going to be the other way around. It's hugely problematic that we still have such... things that come from what was then, but still playing out today... (Dr Phathiswa Magopeni)

”

Dr Magopeni, a symposium panelist acting in her capacity as Executive Director of the Press Council of South Africa at this occasion, further argued that for these linguistic communities, “universal access” is more theory than reality: on weekends and outside alternating slots, they simply disappear from the schedule. This is not a minor programming detail but a structural continuation of past exclusions.

The language conversation went deeper than scheduling. Reflecting on newsroom practice and broader educational trends, another speaker and SABC-insider, Moshoeshe Monare, who was, until 31 December 2024 Group Executive and Editor-in-Chief of SABC News, warned that African language journalism itself is under threat:

“

I realised that actually if we don't do something intentionally, ten years down the line there won't be any African languages reporting at SABC... It's something that we need to take seriously. (Moshoeshe Monare, SOS 2025b)

”

Others pointed to how SABC radio bulletins had historically worked with university language departments to develop terminology in African languages for concepts like “constitutional negotiations” and “HIV/AIDS” – a dimension of the SABC’s mandate to preserve and develop languages that is easily forgotten (SOS 2025).

What emerges is a picture of a PSM-ideal that is ambitious and inclusive in principle, but constrained in practice by budgets, legacies and broader social inequalities. SOS’s vision and Discussion Documents insist that any credible defence of public service media in South Africa must confront these structural exclusions head-on, rather than papering them over with generic references to “the public” (SOS 2023; milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024). Afrokological work on communication rights pushes in the same direction, arguing that relational accountability to historically marginalised communities and languages must be a test of whether media systems are truly decolonising (milton and Mano 2022).

### 2.1.3 How people actually use SABC – radio, TV and everyday life

Alongside these structural critiques, the symposium offered glimpses of how the SABC still functions as a lifeline in everyday life, especially through radio. Looking back to the mid-1990s, Pippa Green, former SABC head of radio news and current editor of Econ3x3, described both the scale and integrative power of SABC radio:

“ It was one of the few golden ages of the SABC... I want to speak about radio where I l'd worked... then as political editor and later as head of radio news where most people got their news from and still do get their news from – some 26 million. I think it’s the first source of news... The biggest radio stations, the SABC radio stations, are among the top ten biggest in the country... and just to talk about the cultural change what we did... we were able to structure one unified newsroom... so that you could actually make editorial decisions on both a national and a local basis... (Pippa Green, SOS 2025b)

”

She later, during a question-and-answer session, described how current affairs and news on radio in the 1990s and early 2000s operated as a nation-building tool: travelling to towns and villages to tell stories about land, water, labour and everyday struggles, then feeding those stories into national bulletins so that “the country could hear the country.” Over time, she argued, political interference, commercial pressures and austerity – including the removal of half-hourly bulletins on SAfm – have eroded this role:

“

... SABC radio, also TV, but I think particularly radio was in the early days in the '90s and early 2000s a nation-building vehicle. I mean we could go to the Free State and do a story on Excelsior today the book that Zakes Mda had written about. We could go to Limpopo and do a story on water shortages there. We could start XKFM, this the...station in the Northern Cape which has two San-languages from people who'd come down from northern Namibia and southern Angola and settled in the most barren shacks in the Northern Cape...But we started a radio station and a current affairs show and we were able to get some of the stories from there onto English or isiZulu or isiXhosa or whatever so the “country could hear the country” and I think that that with the diminution of current affairs and the absolute - you know they don't even have a half-hourly news bulletin on SAFM anymore - we have lost that ability to use the SABC as a nation-building tool (Pippa Green, SOS 2025c)

”

Thandeka Gqubule-Mbeki's PhD-research, referenced throughout the funding session, adds a further layer: TV-licence payment patterns map onto poverty rather than disengagement, suggesting that many non-paying households still consume SABC content but simply cannot afford the fees. Using the SABC's own evasion data together with national household survey data, she tested a common assumption that non-payment reflects disengagement or "disenchantment" with the SABC. As we will explore in more detail in Theme 2, her analysis tells a very different story. Thandeka, one of the invited panellists for Session 1, currently lectures at Rhodes University while finalising her PhD. She received accolades in South Africa as one of the so-called SABC8 – i.e. one of eight journalists who in 2016 stood up to the public broadcaster against the censorship imposed by then Chief Operating Officer of the SABC, Hlaudi Motsoeneng, and the capture of the newsroom.

In light of Thandeka's research, and Pippa's unpacking of the then-SABC as a nation-builder, the Corporation appears less as a failing "business" and more as an overstretched public utility – one that people rely on even when they are unable to pay.

Cross-national evidence again supports this view of PSM as democratic infrastructure rather than discretionary luxury. Park and Gil de Zúñiga (2021) show that strong public service broadcasting amplifies the positive relationship between news use (including social media news use) and political knowledge across 11 countries, while Holtz-Bacha (2021) documents how right-wing populist actors in Europe have targeted the financial basis of PSM precisely because it underpins pluralism and media freedom. These studies underscore a point implicit throughout the symposium: weakening public service media weakens citizens' capacity to learn about and contest politics.

The symposium accounts support SOS's long-standing claim that the SABC remains the first or only source of news, information and local storytelling for millions, particularly outside metropolitan centres and in lower-income households (SOS 2023; Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024). That reliance makes the question of PSM's future a question about the future of democracy itself.

## 2.1.4 Reframing SABC as democratic infrastructure and information commons

Bringing these strands together, the symposium and SOS research invite us to think of the SABC as democratic infrastructure: part of the basic scaffolding that allows a constitutional democracy to function, alongside schools, clinics, courts, libraries and public transport.

The 2024 discussion document explicitly locates public service media within a “networked media ecology” and argues that participation, i.e. people’s ability to meaningfully take part in public life, is the ultimate test of whether PSM is doing its job (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024). Examples from the BBC, Yle, ARD/ZDF and CBC, along with the 11-country study by Park and Gil de Zúñiga (2021), treat PSM not as legacy institutions but as democratic infrastructure in digital societies where platform companies play increasingly powerful gatekeeping roles (Meese and Bannerman 2022; Fuchs 2021).

Thandeka’s concluding remarks in Session 1 pushed this further by explicitly invoking the language of the commons:

“ There is a group of journalists and scholars... mounting campaigns called Return to the Commons, meaning that we need to return to acting collectively... whether those commons are libraries... community schools... or public broadcasting, which has come back to the fore as part of this resistance against this disembowelling of the institutions of democracy by rampant market ideology and individualism (Thandeka Gqubule-Mbeki, SOS 2025b).

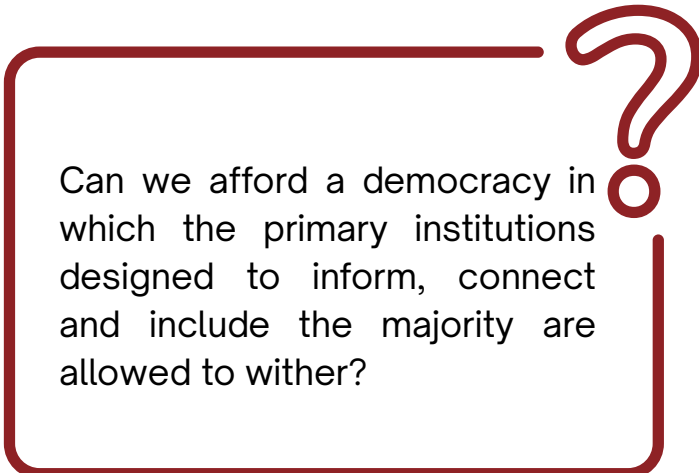
”

Read through this lens, SABC/PSM appears as an information commons: a shared, collectively funded resource that underpins access to news, language, culture and education, particularly for those whom the market underserves. Where commercial logic pulls media systems towards affluent, urban, majority-language audiences, the SABC's remit pulls towards universality and inclusion (milton and Mano 2022; Fuchs 2021).

Work on the digital commons and digital public sphere reinforces this point. Fuchs (2021) argues that digital capitalism systematically colonises and commodifies communication infrastructures, concentrating power in a handful of transnational platforms, and calls for strong public service and civil-society media to anchor digital democracy. Meese and Bannerman (2022) show how platforms like Facebook and Google have become critical gatekeepers whose opaque algorithms shape which news people see and when. In such a context, public service media – including their digital and on-demand services – form part of the counter-infrastructure that can secure diversity, accountability and access amidst platform dominance.

The stakes, then, are high. If public service media is treated as just another line item in a tight budget, or as “legacy” institutions to be slimmed down and commercialised, the risk is not only institutional collapse. It is the hollowing out of constitutional rights: the right to freedom of expression and to receive information; the right to education in one's own language; and the broader promise that all who live in South Africa should be able to see and hear themselves in public life (SOS 2023; milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; Park and Gil de Zúñiga 2021).

Framing SABC/PSM as democratic infrastructure therefore does more than provide a neat metaphor. It forces a shift in the questions we ask. Instead of “Can we afford public service media?”, the question becomes:



Can we afford a democracy in which the primary institutions designed to inform, connect and include the majority are allowed to wither?

The picture that emerges – of the SABC as a lifeline for those with the fewest options – both sits within and stretches existing theories of media and democracy.

Comparative work shows that strong PSM systems do more than add one more channel to a crowded media market: they amplify people’s ability to learn about and participate in politics. Park and Gil de Zúñiga (2021) find that in countries with robust PSB, both mass media and social media news use are more strongly associated with political knowledge. In other words, PSM operates as political learning infrastructure, especially for those who may not have other routes into public life.

The democratic infrastructure metaphor echoes public sphere theory. Habermas (1991) and Dahlgren (2009) argue that democratic publics depend on institutions and spaces that support inclusive, reasoned communication, not just on formal rights. Fuchs (2021) updates this for the digital age, showing how commercial platforms colonise communicative spaces and arguing for strong public service and civil-society media as counter-infrastructure. Meese and Bannerman (2022) similarly show that as platforms become gatekeepers, public service media become part of the basic infrastructure that can still prioritise diversity, accountability and public value in what people see.

Afrokological work adds a Southern and decolonial inflection. Milton and Mano (2022) argue that the right to communicate in Africa cannot be reduced to access to content; it has to be understood in terms of relational accountability to those who have historically been excluded from media policy, production and representation. Public communication institutions are decolonising when they are attentive to local language, conviviality and the lived experience of communities, not only to formal policy texts. Seen through this lens, the SABC appears not just as a “big broadcaster,” but as one of the few pieces of communication infrastructure explicitly tasked with holding together a multilingual, deeply unequal society on convivial terms.

Framing SABC/PSM as democratic infrastructure and information commons, then, is not simply a metaphor; it brings into focus what is at stake in decisions about funding, governance and regulation. It aligns the institution with theory that treats communication as a precondition for democracy, and with decolonial approaches that ask whether media systems are accountable to those they claim to serve.

A review of the full YouTube recording of the symposium sharpened an additional nuance within this theme: public service media was often discussed not only as an institution (the SABC), but as a wider public service content ecosystem. In Sessions 3 and 4 in particular, speakers and participants returned to the idea that democratic communication infrastructure is made through a chain of actors including independent producers, small production companies, freelancers, community media and creators whose work circulates through, alongside and sometimes in partnership with the SABC. Read through this lens, the “lifeline” under strain is not only the broadcaster’s governance and balance sheet, but also the precarious conditions under which public-interest content is actually made and sustained. This ecosystem dimension also anticipates the later discussion of platform power and market structure: when rights, distribution and advertising value shift towards dominant digital and pay-TV players, the fragility of public service media is felt across the whole production ecology, not only within the SABC itself.

Collectively, this theme suggests that treating the SABC as democratic infrastructure and an information common is not just a metaphor but a practical test for policy: whether funding, governance and digital regulation reinforce its role as a lifeline for those with the fewest alternatives, or further erode it. The tensions traced here sit at the heart of the funding reforms proposed in the recommendations section.

The next themes take up these stakes in turn – from the struggle to fund this infrastructure, to the challenges of platform power and information disorder, and then to questions of governance and capture.

## **2.2. THEME 2 - FOLLOW THE MONEY: FUNDING, AUSTERITY AND POLITICAL CHOICES**

The symposium made it clear that arguments about the SABC’s future cannot be separated from arguments about how it is funded. Across the day, participants described a broadcaster caught between an expansive public mandate and a shrinking, unstable income base – a situation many labelled “existential.” The consensus was that the current funding model is not only failing the SABC, but undermining the constitutional vision of public service media as a cornerstone of democracy (SOS 2025).

As Uyanda Siyotula put it in her opening address:

“

There is consensus that the current funding model is not viable for the SABC and that the financial crisis is deepening, as well as the fact that the legislative environment is not fit for purpose in the digital age (Uyanda Siyotula, SOS 2025b).

”

Others pointed to the cumulative effect of year-on-year losses, mounting debt to Sentech and the absence of any sustainable settlement on the public mandate (SOS 2025). Against this backdrop, debates about governance, platform power and information integrity are all haunted by a simple question: **who pays for public service media, and on what terms?**

These discussions landed at a moment when the funding question had shifted from abstract to immediate. In July 2025, the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT) issued tender DCDT/02/2025/26 for the “appointment of a service provider to develop a funding model for the SABC” and, as this report was being finalised, the Minister announced the appointment of BMIT Knowledge Group – a long-standing ICT research and advisory firm – to do this work, billing it as “a major step forward” for the SABC’s long-term financial stability (BroadcastmediaAfrica 2025).

Participants did not treat this as background noise. Uyanda’s opening flagged that “we know that there’s now a new funding model that is being developed and the department has recently appointed a service provider,” and Dimitri was asked specifically to unpack the tender and its implications. His warning was unambiguous: without an updated mandate and policy framework for public service media, “to be developing a funding model in a [policy] vacuum” risks another ad hoc, piecemeal fix – as risky, in its own way, as pushing ahead with the SABC Bill in a policy vacuum (Dimitri Martinis, SOS 2025b).

Comparative work on public media systems underlines that this is not a uniquely South African dilemma. Neff and Pickard’s study of 33 countries finds that high, secure levels of public media funding – combined with strong protections for independence – are consistently and positively correlated with healthier democracies (Neff and Pickard 2021).

From that perspective, South Africa’s reluctance to settle the SABC’s funding is not merely a technical delay but a democratic risk.

### **2.2.1. From tight budgets to an existential crisis**

Several contributors stressed that the SABC’s financial problems cannot be reduced to a single bad year or individual mismanagement. Instead, they described a long-term trend of declining licence contributions, extremely low levels of state contributions over many years and a growing reliance on commercial income. All of these, it was argued, boils down to a failure to resolve the funding model even as the broadcaster’s obligations have expanded (SOS 2025b; Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

Drawing on SOS research, Dr Kate Skinner - who moderated the first session and is in many ways the mother of SOS, having established it in 2008 as Save our SABC (- underlined how little direct public funding the SABC receives. State support she noted, had at one point, fallen “as low as 3.7%, and at one point 0.5%... it becomes a joke to talk about a public service broadcaster” when so little public money flows to the institution meant to serve the public (Dr Kate Skinner, SOS 2025). Meanwhile, board members and civil society representatives alike painted a picture of a broadcaster expected to carry “an extensive mandate” – twelve official languages, multiple platforms, elections, education, public information, children’s content and more – with increasingly fragile resources.

When compared to the willingness of the state to provide repeated bailouts to other entities, such as Eskom or the Post Office, the reluctance to secure the SABC's base funding was read as a political choice, not an accident (SOS 2025). One participant warned that if this continues, the consequences will go far beyond one institution:

“

The SABC... is one of those institutions that are designed in our Constitution to defend and promote, propel democracy and democratic values... Its likely disappearance is going to constitute... a real and deep-seated crisis for liberal democracy as we've known it.

”

SOS's positionality as a coalition long engaged in the detail of policy and governance shapes how we hear this. For SOS, the SABC's balance sheet is not just an internal management issue; it is an indicator of how seriously the state takes its constitutional obligation to ensure the right of everyone to receive information, in all official languages, free at the point of use (SOS 2023; Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

### 2.2.2. Old models in new realities: licence fees, commercial income and an unfunded mandate

The current funding mix is a hybrid of public and commercial income that no longer fits South Africa's social and technological reality. In the last financial year, Dimitri Martinis explained:

“

71% of the SABC's funding came from advertising and sponsorship. Only 14% from licence fees. Essentially an 84% evasion rate... the SABC has an extensive mandate... we have a mandate that is largely unfunded (SOS 2025).<sup>1</sup>

”

Two structural problems emerged clearly:

### **Overreliance on commercial revenue**

Advertising and sponsorship carry most of the load for an explicitly non-commercial mandate. Yet, as the 2024 SOS Discussion Document notes, “not even that primary avenue of funding – i.e. advertising revenue – is secure, as audiences are increasingly opting for new media and digital content” (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024). To paraphrase Thandeka, OTT services and global platforms “suck out” a growing share of ad spend without carrying equivalent public service obligations – a concern echoed in the symposium and the 2024 scoping review (Thandeka, SOS 2025; Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

### **A regressive, failing licence-fee model**

The TV licence was designed for a different era. With high unemployment, deep poverty and multiple recessions, it has become increasingly uncollectable. Collection costs have at times exceeded the amounts collected, and evasion has climbed into the mid-80% range (SOS 2025; Klein 2024).

Thandeka’s PhD research, discussed in the funding session, pushes back against the assumption that non-payment reflects disengagement or “disenchantment” with the SABC. Using SABC evasion data alongside national household surveys, she finds that:

- Evasion is extremely high and has deepened over the last seven years.
- SABC remains widely used and valued across income groups: “universally, across the land, it was SABC.”
- Non-payment tracks poverty, not apathy: a “heat map” of evasion sits almost exactly on top of the national poverty map, with Gauteng as the main outlier.
- The licence is structurally unaffordable for many, particularly women-headed and child-headed households in poorer provinces.

On this evidence, she argues, a simple household levy would only “move the point of payment” while keeping an individualised user-pay logic that will run into the same socio-economic wall and “bring the SABC into social conflict with South African households,” just as utilities struggle to collect in poor areas. Instead, she makes the case for a progressive public media tax collected via SARS from those who are earning, with cross-subsidies that allow poorer households to “enjoy and experience democracy through the communication of democracy” (Thandeka, SOS 2025).

[1] It should be mentioned here that, based on the 2024 SABC annual report, the estimated breakdown of the SABC’s revenue sources are as follows: Advertising and Commercial Activities - 80%; TV Licence Fees - 13%; Government Funding (Transfers) - 3-4% and Other Sources (approx. 3%).

The result is an unfunded mandate in the strictest sense: Parliament and policy documents ask the SABC to act as a universal public service provider, while the funding instruments behave like a commercial model aimed at solvent households in a relatively prosperous society. The 2024 SOS discussion document describes this as a social sustainability problem: if the digital transition and funding reforms are not handled deliberately, “it will be the poor and already disenfranchised who will pay the ultimate price” (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

The symposium brought that warning to life: it reinforced how structurally produced this “funding crisis” is. Participants returned not only to today’s revenue shortfalls, but to the longer arc of policy choices that weakened the SABC’s financial base through restructuring and the stripping away of revenue-generating assets, while leaving the broadcaster carrying an expansive public mandate. At the same time, the discussion made it harder to sustain the popular framing of the TV-licence problem as simple “evasion”: repeated interventions linked non-payment to poverty, inequality and household precarity, including the specific burdens carried by women-headed and child-headed households. Read together, this sharpens the focus of the theme: the SABC’s financial instability is not best understood as “mismanagement plus non-payment,” but as the predictable outcome of an unaffordable user-pay instrument embedded in a highly unequal society, compounded by historic policy decisions about what the state would fund directly, and what it would push onto households and markets.

### **2.2.3. A civilisational choice, not just a budget line**

One of the strongest interventions at the symposium was Thandeka’s insistence that the SABC’s funding crisis must be read as a civilisational choice, not just a technical problem. Drawing on her experience inside the broadcaster and her research, she argued that something “went wrong at a civilisational level, not just in South Africa, but universally,” which “began to erode public broadcasting and turn it into a mere corpse of what it was supposed to be” (Thandeka, SOS 2025b).

She located the SABC within a longer history of public broadcasting shaped by “Reithian principles”: universal access (“everybody, regardless of means, has the right to participate in the SABC system”), treating people as citizens with rights rather than consumers, developmental obligations towards women, children and the weak, non-commercial and egalitarian programming, and “arm’s-length” independence from both state and commercial vested interests. In this vision, public broadcasting is designed as a “big equaliser” – a New York bus that bends down for those who need it most (Thandeka, SOS 2025).

In her telling, the post-1994 settlement for the SABC was heavily influenced by British and donor thinking in the neoliberal era. Public broadcasting ideals were written into law, but the same period saw “state retrenchment,” privatisation and liberalisation. Profitable radio stations were sold off; Sentech, the “moneymaker,” was separated from the SABC without compensation. “Thirty years later,” she noted, the SABC is still expected to “flush its money from the fiscus” to cover costs built on infrastructure it no longer owns - “a case of confiscation of property without compensation” (Thandeka, SOS 2025).

Other voices reinforced the point that funding choices are also constitutional choices. One participant reflected on austerity budgeting more broadly:

“

Something that we've noticed across the board with the...level of austerity budgeting is that they – there tends to be...civic rights or civilian rights or political rights, whatever you call it, are taking more and more of a backseat...when the budget is disseminated, whereby you know things are said but...it goes unfunded so it can't be realized.

”

In that context, she argued, “you can’t, as the SABC, say that the SABC must fulfil XYZ mandate but not allow them the tools to do so.” For her, a progressive levy made sense in principle, but she warned that in “the court of public opinion” any new tax could easily be demonised when people are “struggling just to make ends meet” (SOS 2025).

Comparative research supports the idea that these are not neutral budgetary decisions. Neff and Pickard show that democracies with well-funded, independent public media systems have higher levels of political participation and democratic engagement; conversely, underfunded, politicised systems correlate with weaker democratic indicators (Neff and Pickard 2021). Cañedo and colleagues, reviewing European PSM, similarly argue that reducing PSM to commercial metrics risks eroding their democratic, cultural and social missions (Cañedo et al. 2022). From this perspective, underfunding the SABC is not an accidental outcome of tight budgets; it is, to paraphrase Thandeka, the predictable result of an ideology that treats public goods as expendable and shifts risk from the collective to the individual (Thandeka, SOS2025b). When a constitutional democracy chooses to fund such an institution through an individualised licence fee - one that, as the research shows, maps onto poverty - rather than a progressive, pooled mechanism, it is choosing to redefine citizens as consumers and to accept that those who cannot pay will participate less fully in public life.

#### **2.2.4. Imagining fairer funding: public media, not just one broadcaster**

Despite the severity of the crisis, the symposium did not stop at diagnosis. Participants offered a range of ideas for a fairer and more sustainable funding settlement, many of which build on or extend options mapped in the 2024 SOS Discussion Document (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024). A key question was whether these solutions should focus solely on the SABC, or on a broader public media ecosystem.

In the funding session, Dr Kate Skinner drew on work by Fourie and Boshoff to make the case for thinking in terms of “public service media” rather than a single “public broadcaster”:

“...Fourie...and others are saying that if public media is to survive in the digital era, it must lose its attachment to the exact infrastructure or the apparatus for public media and... we should have that remit of principles and operational beliefs, PSM, public service media, rather than [just] the kind of old industrial apparatuses that we use... even though we should refund it and it shouldn't die. (SOS 2025) ”

Dr Kate was likely referring here to Fourie's proposal for distributed public service broadcasting: a model in which public service obligations and funding are shared across public, private and community tiers, with all broadcasters required to carry a quota of programming that meets public service criteria and funded via a central public broadcasting fund (Fourie 2010). In Fourie's vision, PSB is treated less as an institution and more as a genre or category of content - funded via a central public broadcasting fund and delivered by multiple actors across the system. The symposium did not go as far as endorsing dismantling the SABC, but many contributions echoed Fourie's core insight: in a converged, digital environment, public service obligations and resources need to be distributed across the ecosystem if they are to reach all audiences, while still recognising the SABC as the backbone of South Africa's PSM settlement.

### **2.2.5. Public media levy and public media beyond SABC**

In conversation with Dr Kate, Thandeka set out her idea of a universal public media levy: a prescribed tax, levied across the working population and collected by SARS. But, as she recalled a former finance minister telling her, “National Treasury is neoliberal... they are against prescribed taxes.” For that reason, she argued, any such levy must go through Parliament and be channelled via an Appropriations Committee to an independent body, which would then disburse funds “to various public service media, including the SABC,” on clear criteria (Thandeka, SOS 2025b).

Pressed on what counts as “public media,” Thandeka argued that in the digital era, public media should be defined less by infrastructure and more by principles:

“

We should call a set of principles for the media, regardless of what platform it uses... PSM, public service media, rather than [just] the kind of old industrial apparatuses that we use... even though we should refund it and it shouldn't die. (Thandeka, SOS 2025b)

”

This suggests a funding architecture that centres the SABC but is not confined to it – an approach consistent with wider debates on public interest journalism funds and media ecosystems (Padania and Silvani 2023; SANEF 2021; Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

Dimitri broadly agreed that moving the contribution “away from the household and putting that responsibility on the population that is earning... makes a lot of sense,” and that SARS is “one of the efficient institutions.” However, he stressed the need for ring-fencing so that funds do not “go into the fiscus and potentially disappear like the proceeds of the Sentech separation [and] the regional radio stations... which should have gone to the SABC, ... but didn't”. Politically, he suggested, it may help to frame a levy not as a brand-new tax but as “taking that same right [to levy a licence fee] and changing the method of collection” (Dimitri, SOS 2025b). In other words, the political work is not only to design a fair, progressive instrument, but to ensure that it is not misrecognised as a new SABC tax, but as a modernised way of exercising an existing public obligation.

This is not a hypothetical concern. Debates inside SOS during the 2009 Public Service Broadcasting Bill process underscore why this framing matters. Jane Duncan’s interventions on the coalition’s email list urged support for an income tax–based mechanism and argued that public broadcasting should be framed as a “merit good” that wealthier taxpayers help fund, just as they help fund public transport and hospitals even if they do not use them (Duncan, quoted in Milton 2016). By contrast, the broadcasting union BEMAWU warned that such a mechanism would be perceived as yet another tax on workers and might even encourage non-payment as a protest tool for those unhappy with SABC content (BEMAWU quoted in Milton 2016).

Read together, these exchanges underline why Dimitri stressed that any new settlement should not be pitched or branded as a new tax, but explicitly as a change in collection method for an established public service media contribution, with strengthened guarantees of independence. They also underline the importance of public communication that speaks directly to middle-class resentment, union concerns about jobs and long-standing fears that “tax money” for the SABC equals funding a propaganda machine unless governance and editorial safeguards are reinforced at the same time (Milton 2016; Dimitri, SOS2025b). At the same time, Dimitri agreed with one participant that the SABC’s constitutional role as a “cornerstone of this democracy” should be recognised as the legal and normative basis for public funding.

### **2.2.6. Who runs the fund? Governance and public goods**

The idea of an independent body to manage levy and clawback funds sparked debate. Thandeka described clawback funds as ring-fenced public monies recovered from dominant platforms (for example, by recouping unpaid or underpaid local tax), which flow into the fiscus and are then channelled through an independent public media funding body for disbursement to public service media. Dr Kate welcomed it in principle but cautioned that “the devil is in the detail... who manages it? Who’s represented on it? How does it work?” and warned that it “mustn’t be yet another bureaucracy that’s going to chow half the money rather than the money going into the media” (Dr Kate Skinner, SOS 2025b). Thandeka responded that such a body would need “very rigid appointment criteria,” similar to those used for positions like the Public Protector:

“

Democratically minded people, non-racialists, no bigots... coming from rural parts of South Africa, urban parts of South Africa and [who] have the skills and the understandings of why the media is such an important democracy propeller

”

She also pushed back against proposals that private, for-profit media could simply self-designate as “public goods” to access funding:

“

They must just get busy with their for-profit things and then we will do iNkonzo zoluntu, which is the conversations of humanity... Public goods are very specific things in economics... non-rivalrous, non-competitive... good for all of society (Thandeka, SOS 2025b).

”

Dimitri agreed with the concern, noting that he had been repeating proposals from elsewhere rather than advocating them, and offered a different analogy:

“

I see the SABC as our cultural heritage... the only other analogy in the country to the SABC as a state-owned asset is South African National Parks... So the board of the SABC are like the custodians of this... that is the progressive tax in some sense (Dimitri, SOS 2025)

”

These exchanges echo wider debates about how to conceptualise the PSM's public value. Cañedo and colleagues note that PSM value is multi-dimensional – democratic, cultural, social, economic – and argue that governance frameworks must be designed to protect that value over time, especially in a multiplatform context where transnational players dominate (Cañedo et al. 2022).

### 2.2.7. Beyond SABC: ecosystem funding, creators and democracy

Participants from the floor pushed the conversation beyond the SABC as a single institution. Xolile Vundla from Animation South Africa asked why, in a creator economy, public funding should be limited to the broadcaster:

“

If you were to go the state route, should it only be [the] SABC? Because I think there are different players in the ecosystem... that would add value to the whole public service media sphere (Xolile Vundla, SOS 2025b).

”

Dimitri later picked up this point, suggesting that a properly designed fund could support “animation [and other] content that is public interest content,” enabling independent producers to access public funding for content that would then air on public service platforms (Dimitri, SOS 2025). Building on Dr Kate's reference to Fourie, this is close to what Fourie envisaged as distributed PSB: a central fund that supports public service content wherever it is made, with quotas across the three-tier system (Fourie 2010). Symposium participants, however, tended to favour evolution rather than dismantling – retaining the SABC as anchor, while extending public service obligations and funding to other actors producing verifiable public interest content.

Dr Phathiswa linked the funding debate to party financing, suggesting that the Multi-Party Democracy Fund should be considered as a source for the SABC, because “the work that goes into protecting democracy and strengthening democracy falls within that space.” If private entities such as political parties are funded from the fiscus “to protect them from being influenced by foreign actors,” she argued, then the SABC, which enables their communication with citizens, should also be supported (Dr Phathiswa, SOS2025). In her closing remarks, Thandeka agreed that channelling “a portion of the political party funding” to a central public media body would make sense and added a cluster of revenue-diversification ideas: listing SABC Enterprises, a public share offer, monetising training through an SABC Academy, and leasing out technical facilities (Thandeka, SOS 2025b).

Finally, Dimitri emphasised that some tools already exist. The Competition Commission’s Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry report has proposed a R500 million fund for journalism and public interest content; in his view, “the SABC should be one of the entities that can draw from that,” and regulators do not need to “wait for [a] policy process to end before we start regulating the OTTs” (Dimitri, SOS 2025b).

2

These exchanges show that participants were not simply debating “how to save SABC,” but grappling with what public media as an institution and ecosystem should look like in a digital, platformised environment: who should pay into it, who should benefit, how it should be governed, and how to prevent it from being hollowed out by either market failure or bureaucratic self-interest.

[2] Indeed, in the MDPMI Provisional Report, the Inquiry framed the problem in terms of a substantial “value deficit” and proposed that Google should “fully compensate the SA news publishers for the value deficit of [R300–R500m]” through search design changes and other monetisation measures; failing that, it recommended a backstop levy whose proceeds “should then be placed in a Media Industry Fund,” with the explicit proviso that “[t]he public broadcaster must be included in the compensation” (Competition Commission South Africa 2025a, 65–67). In the MDPMI Final Report, that earlier “industry fund” framing is effectively replaced by a more specified package of remedial actions and commitments by Google, including a Digital News Transformation Fund (targeted at small independent and community media), an AI Innovation Fund, and the launch of Google News Showcase “for mainstream national media and broadcasters, including the SABC, valued at R71m per year for 5 years” (Competition Commission South Africa 2025b, 46). The accompanying remedial-actions annexure further sets out the total scale and architecture of this support over the five-year term (Competition Commission South Africa 2025c, 4–5).

## 2.2.8. How the funding crisis is framed in public debate

The picture painted inside the symposium is echoed – and sometimes sharpened – in recent newspaper and online coverage of the SABC’s finances. Over the last two years, mainstream outlets have consistently described the broadcaster’s funding model as “broken,” “unsustainable” and a core threat to its survival (News24 2023; TechCentral 2025; Tshikota and Siyotula 2025).

Business and tech reporting has focused heavily on growing losses and licence-fee failure. News24 and TechCentral have highlighted that the SABC continues to post substantial losses – hundreds of millions of rand – even when management narrows the deficit, and that licence-fee revenue accounts for only a small fraction of income, with evasion rates in the mid-80s (News24 2023; TechCentral 2025; Klein 2024). Articles in outlets such as MyBroadband and News24 also note that the SABC itself has publicly admitted its funding model “is no longer sustainable,” pointing to persistent licence evasion and overdependence on advertising in a shrinking market.

A second media thread centres on the SABC Bill and the failure to resolve funding in law. News24’s coverage of the 2023 Bill and its withdrawal in 2024 described it as an “unmitigated disaster” and quoted media analysts warning that it offered “no clear funding model” and did not address key structural problems (News24 2024a). TechCentral’s reporting on Minister Solly Malatsi’s decision to withdraw the Bill emphasised that he did so precisely because it “does not adequately address the public broadcaster’s funding model” (TechCentral 2024a). Subsequent analysis by the Public Media Alliance and others highlighted the resulting “turmoil and uncertainty,” with civil society organisations divided between relief at the withdrawal of a flawed Bill and concern about the legislative vacuum (Public Media Alliance 2024; SOS 2025b).

More recently, Daily Maverick, IOL and TechCentral have used even starker language, warning that the SABC is “on the brink of collapse,” “at risk of collapse” and facing possible “signal blackout” due to outdated infrastructure, legislation and an inadequate funding model (Daily Maverick 2025; IOL 2025; TechCentral 2024b). These narratives reinforce a point made repeatedly at the symposium: without a deliberate funding settlement, the system will drift towards failure by default (SOS 2025b).

## 2.2.9. How this aligns with SOS's 2024 funding proposals

The 2024 SOS discussion document both anticipated and helped shape many of these debates. It argues that the SABC's sustainability crisis is aggravated by "fundamental market structure problems," delayed policy and an outdated Broadcasting Act, and that fixing the funding model must go hand in hand with legislative overhaul (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

On funding, the document is explicit that the mixed model should remain, but with a radically reconfigured public component and better-governed commercial income. SOS's vision affirms:

- A mixed funding model combining advertising and sponsorships, a reformed public levy, access to a local content fund, parliamentary appropriations and other mechanisms such as carriage fees.
- A requirement that the SABC spend the majority of its funds on local public interest content, rather than overheads and administration.

Crucially, the document insists that South Africa must "decisively move away" from any system based on television set ownership, and recommends replacing the TV licence with a technology-neutral Public Media Levy grounded in access to PSM content. This levy would retain the SABC's statutory right to levy a fee, be collected on its behalf by designated operators (and potentially tax and billing systems), and include clear exemptions for indigent households (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

In addition, the Discussion Document calls for:

- **Increased direct state funding** through parliamentary appropriations to cover under-funded aspects of the public mandate, with explicit safeguards to protect editorial and institutional independence (drawing, for example, on proposals from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation).
- Stronger use of **carriage and retransmission fees** as revenue sources, backed by Must Carry regulations and proper enforcement.

- Fair compensation from **Big Tech and platforms** via the Competition Commission’s Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry and, potentially, a National Journalism Fund (Padania and Silvani 2023; milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

Where media narratives focus on dramatic losses and a “broken” model, the discussion document and symposium together insist that:

- The crisis is structural and political, not just managerial.
- Replacing the TV licence with a superficially similar household levy will fail unless the underlying principle (public, progressive, universal) and collection mechanisms are redesigned.
- Any new settlement must combine a reformed levy, increased direct state funding, platform contributions and better-governed commercial revenue, all underpinned by a clear commitment to funding local public interest content (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition 2025).

### **2.2.10. Funding, rights and the future of public service media**

Across the symposium and the 2024 SOS scoping review, one message is consistent: funding is not simply an internal SABC issue. It is the backbone that supports – or undermines – every other dimension of public service media: independence, inclusion, local content, information integrity and digital transformation (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; SOS 2025).

If funding relies primarily on a regressive, failing licence fee and volatile commercial income in a platformised market, then the burdens of austerity will fall on those already least able to bear them. Thandeka’s research shows that licence evasion is a poverty map, not a protest vote; the SOS Discussion Document warns that unmanaged digitisation will leave “the poor and already disenfranchised” paying the price; and speakers like Dr Kate and Dr Phathiswa and others linked funding directly to constitutional rights, party financing and the everyday economics of households (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; SOS 2025).

Global research on PSM in digital environments points in the same direction. Martin's interviews with public media leaders in the UK and US show how reliance on commercial platforms and unstable funding exposes public media to existential threats, even in wealthy democracies, and how survival depends on building new digital infrastructures rooted in public service values – backed by secure funding and supportive regulation (Martin 2021). In that sense, the dilemmas described at the symposium - overdependence on advertising, an unaffordable licence fee and a hesitant state – are not local anomalies but specific expressions of a wider pattern of public media under strain.

Seen this way, debates about whether “we can afford” public service media need to be inverted. The real question is whether South Africa can afford a democratic settlement in which the primary institutions designed to inform, connect and include the majority are left to wither, leaving far better-resourced private and foreign players to shape the media environment in their own interests. Comparative evidence that well-funded, independent public media systems are associated with stronger democratic health sharpens the point: letting the SABC slide into slow collapse is, effectively, a decision to accept a thinner, more unequal democracy (Neff and Pickard 2021; Daily Maverick 2025; TechCentral 2025).

### **2.2.11. Funding as democratic infrastructure**

The funding dilemmas surfaced in this theme echo a growing body of comparative work on public service media. Neff and Pickard's study of 33 countries finds that strong, secure public media funding is positively associated with higher levels of democratic health, including civic engagement and resistance to authoritarian backsliding (Neff and Pickard 2021). In other words, how societies choose to fund public media is not a peripheral policy question. It is a key part of how they choose to organise democracy itself.

Cañedo and colleagues push this further by arguing that the value of PSM is multi-dimensional – democratic, cultural, social and economic – and that funding and governance frameworks must be designed with this layered public value in mind, rather than reducing public media to commercial performance (Cañedo et al. 2022). This aligns with the SOS Discussion Document's insistence that PSM in South Africa be understood as a public good whose primary purpose is to enable participation and inclusion, not to generate profit (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

Work on PSM in a platformised environment adds texture to this picture. Bonini and Mazzoli (2022) argue that public service media cannot simply bolt their content onto commercial platforms and hope for the best: they call for convivial-agonistic public service platforms, designed around openness, independence and democratic contestation. Their warning is that when PSM mimic commercial platforms without the resources or distinct governance to do anything different, they lose both distinctiveness and legitimacy. Sehl and Cornia's (2021) analysis of PSM innovation shows how often this warning is borne out in practice: under pressure, European public broadcasters tend to copy perceived "best practice" and tightly couple their strategies to external models, but this only produces public value when organisations have enough time, autonomy and funding to adapt those models to their own mandates. Raats and Jensen (2021) then show the stakes of getting this wrong: even in small markets, PSM remain central to sustaining local drama and storytelling under conditions of global competition, which means that underfunding them does not just shrink institutions – it shrinks the imaginative and cultural space available to the public. Taken together, these studies suggest that funding is what allows public media to resist becoming poor copies of commercial platforms and instead build digital infrastructures that are recognisably public.

In the South African context, Fourie's notion of distributed public service broadcasting anticipated many of these concerns more than a decade ago. He argued that PSB should be reconceived as a shared obligation and a genre of programming funded through a central fund and carried by all tiers of broadcasting, rather than being confined to a single embattled institution (Fourie 2010). Dr Kate's invocation of Fourie during the symposium shows how this idea has travelled: designing a levy and fund for "public media" is not only about rescuing the SABC, but about building an ecosystem in which public service obligations and resources are distributed, while still recognising the SABC as backbone.

Seen through Afrokological work on communication rights, these debates take on a further layer. Milton and Mano (2022) argue that communication rights in Africa are realised when institutions are relationally accountable to those whose communicative rights are most precarious – poor and working-class households, rural communities, African-language speakers – rather than to markets or donors. From this angle, South Africa's choice between an unaffordable, individualised licence fee and a progressive, pooled public media levy is not simply technical. It is a choice between treating SABC/PSM as democratic infrastructure and commons or treating it as a semi-commercial service for those who can pay (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024).

Collectively, these threads make clear that funding is not just about keeping the lights on. It is part of the basic scaffolding of the democratic communication order. The recommendations section returns to these dilemmas in detail. For now, we turn to information disorder and platform power - asking how governance and funding choices play out in the everyday circulation of news and public debate.

## **2.3. THEME 3 – UNDER PLATFORM PRESSURE: CANAL+, MULTICHOICE AND THE NEW MEDIA POWER MAP**

The symposium repeatedly returned to a simple but uncomfortable reality: the battles over SABC’s funding and mandate are happening in a media economy that has already been reshaped by platforms, pay-TV operators and global streaming services. Participants described a “stacked deck” in which over-the-top (OTT) operators and large pay-TV players command attention and advertising, while public service media are left to survive on what remains (SOS 2025).

This concern echoes the analysis in SOS’s 2024 Discussion Document, which identifies “digital transformation, technological disruption and the increasingly dominant role played by global streaming companies” as one of the core pressures on PSM sustainability (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 5). The document underlines that these market shifts are not neutral: they interact with governance failures and a drawn-out policy vacuum to create “fundamental market structure problems” that threaten public interest content (ibid, 7–9).

At the symposium, Thandeka summed up the current landscape starkly: OTT operators have “sucked out not only the oxygen from the market, but 50% of all advertising revenue,” yet “are not in a regulated space,” and recent draft policy proposals are largely silent on public broadcasting (SOS 2025). As the SOS Discussion Document also notes, “not even that primary avenue of funding – i.e. advertising revenue – is secure, as audiences are increasingly opting for new media and digital content” (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 18).

### **2.3.1. Policy lag in a platformised market**

Participants were clear that SABC is being asked to compete in a platformised market with analogue tools. OTT and streaming services, from DStv Stream and Showmax to SABC+ itself, are part of a wider shift towards non-linear “pull” media and personalised viewing. The 2024 Discussion Document describes how non-linear streaming “allows for schedule-free and advertising-free engagement with content as and when one wants” and notes that OTT “allows for a great degree of user individualisation and customisation” (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 13–14).

The problem, as both the symposium and the 2024 scoping review emphasise, is that this shift is happening inside a deeply unequal society. Data costs, device affordability and geography limit who can benefit from personalised streaming, while the same digital turn erodes the advertising base of legacy broadcasters (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; SOS 2025). In the Discussion Document, this is framed as a social sustainability problem: if the digital transition is not managed deliberately, “it will be the poor and already disenfranchised who will pay the ultimate price” (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 19).

The symposium brought that warning to life, particularly through Thandeka’s detailed research into licence evasion.

### Box 1 – Licence evasion as a poverty map, not a protest vote

Thandeka's PhD research used SABC's own evasion data together with national household survey data to test a common assumption: that non-payment of TV licences reflects disengagement or "disenchantment" with the SABC. Her analysis tells a very different story:

- **Evasion is extremely high – and growing.** The SABC's evasion rate stands at around 87%, and has deepened over the last seven years, a period marked by multiple recessions.
- **SABC remains widely used and valued.** Household survey data show that across income groups, SABC remains the most engaged-with medium. She expected the middle class to have deserted to DStv, but "universally, across the land, it was SABC" – including soap operas and other programming across channels.
- **Non-payment tracks poverty, not apathy.** When she mapped evasion rates against national poverty data, the correlation was clear: "the household survey says that it's not a disengagement from the SABC. It is a poverty matrix... I generated a heat map of the evasion rate against the poverty map, and bingo, there it was," with Gauteng as the main outlier.
- **The TV licence is structurally unaffordable for many.** On this evidence, the current licence fee is simply beyond reach for millions of households whose incomes have "plunged" over the democratic period. Women-headed and child-headed households in poorer provinces are particularly unlikely to pay.
- **A household levy repeats the same injustice.** In her view, a household levy would only "move the point of payment" while keeping an individualised user-pay logic that will run into the same socio-economic wall and "bring the SABC into social conflict with South African households," just as utilities struggle to collect in poor areas.
- On this evidence, she argues for a **progressive, general public media tax** collected via SARS from those who are earning, with cross-subsidies that allow poorer households to "enjoy and experience democracy through the communication of democracy."

**In other words, evasion is not a sign that people do not value SABC; it is a sign that the current funding model is misaligned with the economic realities of the society it is meant to serve.**

In this context, the symposium treated the absence of a coherent, updated audiovisual policy as a structural risk for PSM. The earlier SOS document had already argued that government’s “complete failure... to finalise a drawn-out audiovisual policy process” has left SABC in a “policy vacuum,” particularly on sustainable funding and digital strategy (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 7–9). Symposium participants added lived-experience detail: stalled white papers, outdated legislative definitions and a lack of clear rules for streaming and OTT services has had detrimental impacts on workers and viewers alike (SOS 2025).

Analytically, this links South Africa’s experience to global research on platformisation and algorithmic distribution: gatekeeping power has migrated from national institutions to transnational platforms and intermediaries, with news and entertainment distribution increasingly governed by opaque recommender systems rather than by domestic policy (Lordache and Raats 2023; Meese and Bannerman 2022). The SOS Discussion Document warns that “choice is now in the hands of tech giants whose main concern is maximising profits,” and the symposium repeatedly pointed out that South Africa’s public-interest framework has not caught up with this reality (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 22).

### 2.3.2. Canal+–MultiChoice: two stories about power

Against this backdrop, the Canal+ acquisition of MultiChoice was framed as a defining moment for South Africa’s media environment (Competition Commission South Africa 2025a; Reuters 2025a, 2025b; SOS 2025b). For many in the room, the deal crystallised broader anxieties about concentration, foreign ownership and the future of local content. William Bird from Moxii Africa (rebranding from Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)) opened the session with a broad claim about the positioning of MultiChoice in South Africa’s media ecology:

“

So we are talking about the Canal Plus takeover of MultiChoice. So for those of us in the room, MultiChoice has historically been our gorilla in our broadcast sector, the de facto monopoly. Some will dispute that ..., but that's okay. And they've also been one of the organizations that has been at the forefront of innovation. They've supported local content at times when few others would. And when the SABC's finances went to hell, in the end, I think, had it not been for MultiChoice, our local content sector would have been a complete and utter disaster. So like many things in South Africa, it's kind of a nuanced sort of picture or at least something that's got both positive and extremely negative kinds of sides and consequences.

”

This was an important point that panellists and participants in the room kept emphasising: nuance is important when discussing “the media” in South Africa as not all experiences are purely bad or even purely altruistic. William then went on to contextualise the deal and frame the discussions that followed. He reminded the room that Canal+ had tried to acquire MultiChoice before. The first approach, which he described as effectively hostile, was resisted, but a later, higher offer became attractive to shareholders, even though significant regulatory hurdles remained. He said the session would not focus on those procedural hurdles, but on the deal’s likely implications for three areas: news, sport, and local content.

For many participants, the deal gave weight to wider anxieties about concentration, foreign ownership and the future of local content (Competition Commission South Africa 2025a; SOS 2025b).

The corporate narrative, presented by Steven Budlender, the Group General Counsel for MultiChoice, stressed continuity and local commitment. He described “LicenseCo” – the South African licences vehicle – as locally owned, with its own board and CEO, and promised that news would never be procured from Canal+ or any other external provider. Budlender insisted that local content was “not going anywhere” and pointed to co-productions such as Spinners as proof that the merger would create more opportunities for African stories to travel globally. His narrative invoked a belief in “Africans telling their own stories” as a guiding principle for the merger (Steven Budlender, SOS 2025b).

Civil-society and producer voices offered a very different story. Drawing on a long history of complaints and regulatory cases, one speaker characterised MultiChoice and Canal+ as “abusers of dominance,” citing “anti-competitive contracts,” “exclusionary actions” and “predatory pricing” that had pushed local competitors out of business in various African markets (SOS 2025). For them, the merger risks entrenching a foreign-controlled group at the apex of South Africa’s television ecosystem, with outsized power over commissioning budgets, sports rights and distribution. Thandeka, this time speaking as an audience member from the floor, labelled both companies abusers of dominance, citing exclusive contracts, exclusionary practices and the shutting down of local competitors in countries such as Tanzania and Namibia. Panellist Thinus Ferreira, an independent TV critic, writer and journalist warned that while corporate structures may be reconfigured on paper, control follows money:

“

LicenseCo had to be carved out because it would have violated the regulations, but who pays LicenseCo? Canal+... Canal+ is the client. (Thinus Ferreira, SOS 2025b)

”

For these participants, the merger risks entrenching a foreign-controlled group at the apex of South Africa’s television ecosystem, with outsized power over commissioning budgets, sports rights and distribution.

The 2024 SOS discussion document situates this concern in comparative perspective, noting that globally, PSM and public-interest media face “competition from private media” that complain about “market distortion” while simultaneously benefitting from structural advantages in the digital economy. It also foregrounds the “growing dominance of big technology companies like Meta and Google” as another axis of concentration that squeezes news and public media (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 15–16). Seen together, the Canal+–MultiChoice deal, and the rise of global platforms mark a broader reconfiguration of the media power map in which SABC must find its place.

### 2.3.3. Local content, sport and public access

Nowhere did these tensions feel more concrete than in talk about local content and sport.

Producers in the room spoke about a “very precarious position” for local content creators, in a market where the middle class that once sustained pay-TV subscriptions has shrunk, and even big media companies are struggling. The concern is that when cost-cutting and consolidation kick in, local drama and factual programmes are first in line, even though they carry language, humour, history and everyday life in ways global platforms rarely can (SOS 2025b). One participant, Paul, did however push back on this narrative, noting that MultiChoice in fact helped South African culture travel the continent. This intervention aligns with MultiChoice’s own understanding of their role as promoters of local stories.

That said, sport emerged as another flashpoint. One participant noted that his son is asking questions about sports events not being available on the free-to-air (FTA) channels and wondered if it is a licencing issue. MultiChoice pointed out that indeed it is, but that the licence condition does require them to sub-licence some of the games to FTA, that is why you can see some games and not others. To this Thinus Ferreira, responded that “the games you really want to see” are deliberately kept behind paywalls, while less attractive fixtures are offered free-to-air as a form of marketing. From a public-interest perspective, this undermines universal access to “national moments” – big matches, tournaments and events that should be shared across the whole country, not only those who can afford subscriptions (SOS 2025b).

For the SABC, these trends leave it squeezed from both sides: losing audience share and ad revenue to platforms and pay-TV, while still being expected to carry key events and tell local stories without the resources or rights it needs. The SOS discussion document’s media-ecosystem framing helps make sense of this. It advocates a “media ecosystem approach” in which public and private media are seen as “mutually interdependent,” with public broadcasters valued not only for their remit but also for sustaining broader creative industries. Yet it warns that in a digitised environment, “the gatekeeping power of digital platforms can prove disastrous for broadcasters who misread audience behaviour and preferences,” especially in contexts like South Africa where large parts of the audience are poor and have limited connectivity choices (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 20–22). In other words, to paraphrase Dimitri Martinis, the struggle over local content and sports rights is not just about contracts; it is about who sets the terms of access to culture, identity and civic life in a platform-dominated system (SOS 2025b).

#### **2.3.4. What this power shift means for PSM**

Three key implications of platformisation and consolidation for public service media emerge when we bring the 2024 discussion document and symposium into conversation.

First, a deepening regulatory asymmetry. SABC and other licensees operate under detailed public-interest and universal-access obligations, while global platforms and some pay-TV operations have enjoyed lighter oversight despite their growing dominance.

The Discussion Document notes that licensing and regulatory frameworks now need to consider “the increasing number of platforms available in South Africa and the implications thereof for public service and public interest content delivery,” including how algorithms shape choice and participation (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 22). Symposium participants treated the Canal+–MultiChoice merger as a concrete test of whether regulators will close or widen that asymmetry (SOS 2025).

The Competition Commission’s MDPMI Final Report, referenced by Dimitri in the previous theme, is also relevant here because it translates the “platform power” diagnosis into concrete remedial actions that directly name the SABC. The Inquiry finds that YouTube’s Partner Sales option (which allows eligible partners to sell in-video advertising directly and retain 100%) is set at criteria that “effectively exclude” South African broadcasters, and that even where the criteria appear neutral, they require sales capacity, inventory thresholds and ad-tech capabilities that most broadcasters do not have in place (Competition Commission South Africa 2025a, paras. 195–196). The Inquiry also notes that the revenue currently earned on YouTube is often insubstantial relative to views and the costs of news production, reinforcing the broader point that platform distribution does not automatically translate into sustainable public-interest journalism or public service content (Competition Commission South Africa 2025a, para. 196).

In response, the remedial-actions package includes SABC-specific measures. Google/YouTube must facilitate direct monetisation for the SABC News YouTube channel by granting access to YouTube Partner Sales within six months (subject to the SABC putting in place the necessary skills, personnel, inventory and technical infrastructure), and Google must contribute up to ZAR 2 million once-off to support that capability-building via an external agency (Competition Commission South Africa 2025b, cl. 5.3.1). Google must also offer the SABC a Google News Showcase (or successor) contract for [sabcnews.com](http://sabcnews.com) (Competition Commission South Africa 2025b, cl. 5.3.2), and support the digitisation of SABC archival content without requiring upload to YouTube or licensing the digitised material to Google (Competition Commission South Africa 2025b, cl. 5.3.3).

Read alongside the Inquiry’s wider account of how global platforms capture advertising value while public broadcasters remain heavily dependent on commercial income, these remedies matter because they create a (limited but real) route for the SABC to recover value from platform distribution rather than simply absorbing the costs of producing public-interest content in a platformised market (Competition Commission South Africa 2025c, paras. 44–46).

Returning now to the key implications, the second is heightened risks for social sustainability and universality for SABC. The 2024 discussion document conceptualises PSM sustainability in terms of social cohesion, inclusion, resilience and “process legitimacy.” From this angle, platform dominance and content concentration are dangerous because they threaten universal access: “everyone, regardless of their location, socio-economic status, or abilities,” should have “equal and unrestricted access to PSM content and services” (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024, 19). The symposium’s concerns about paywalled sport, precarious local production and data-driven exclusion show how far current trends fall short of that standard (SOS2025).

Third, an urgent need for deliberate public-interest design. The discussion document’s comparative work on ex ante public value tests and platform regulation in Europe makes clear that policy can be used to balance “the frequently contrary interests of commerce and culture.” It argues that digitisation will only support public-interest goals if new partnerships are forged with technology companies and if public value tests and participatory processes are used to safeguard the role of PSM (Milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; Meese and Bannerman 2022).

The global framing offered in the symposium keynote by Desilon Daniels from the Public Media Alliance sharpened this point. After stressing that trust and funding depend on visibly serving audiences, Daniels reminded participants that the real asset at stake is not any single app or service, but the public’s ability to reach and be reached by public media:

“We must keep in mind that distribution belongs to the public and not the platform. In your discussions today, question how you can reduce single-platform dependency and diversify routes to audiences... AI must serve public media charters, not the other way around. (Desilon Daniels, SOS 2025b)

Read alongside the SOS Discussion Document’s call for multi-platform distribution and audience-centred policy, this suggests that the real strategic question for South African PSM is not whether to be on platforms, but how – under what terms, with what safeguards, and with what exit options. Platform-prominence deals, smart-TV placements, social-media distribution and AI tools for accessibility and translation can all extend reach, but only if public media retain control over their data, archives and editorial standards (Meese and Bannerman 2022; SOS 2025).

The symposium also underscored that platform pressure is not only financial and structural, but civic and generational. Participants returned to the fact that younger audiences increasingly encounter news and public debate through platform feeds, where visibility is shaped by opaque curation and where moderation can be inconsistent or purely procedural. This places media literacy and youth-facing public-interest design inside the platformisation problem itself, not as a separate “education” add-on: if public media are pushed into platform dependency, then citizen capacity to navigate those environments becomes part of the democratic risk. Theme 5 returns to this in more detail in relation to information disorder and elections.

### **2.3.5. Platformisation, legitimacy and media capture**

The dynamics described in this theme resonate with emerging work on public service media in platformised environments. Lordache and Raats (2023) show how European public broadcasters’ broadcast video on demand (BVOD) services mix differentiation (emphasising local content and public value) with mimicry (adopting platform logics of datafication, personalisation and exclusivity) in an attempt to remain relevant. Their comparative study concludes that platformisation reshapes how PSM’s core remit and values are articulated: some choices strengthen distinctiveness, while others risk making BVODs look and feel like commercial streamers.

Speaking from a media-environment and regulatory lens, Karadimitriou and Papathanassopoulos (2024) compared the BBC, DR and ERT, and showed how PSM strategies in the platform era are conditioned by funding stability, political pressure and national media cultures.

Dragomir, Rodríguez Castro and Aslama Horowitz (2024) adds to this that even in the EU – where PSM are formally recognised as pillars of democracy – instruments such as the Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act and European Media Freedom Act still do not squarely address PSM’s twin vulnerabilities of precarious funding and political pressure in a platformised environment. Stollfuß’s (2024) analysis of Germany’s funk youth network and the new Interstate Media Treaty demonstrates from inside one system how platformisation becomes a structural dimension of PSM strategy: public media are pushed to produce content that fits YouTube and social-platform logics while still meeting public-value obligations, raising questions about data, discoverability and editorial control.

Olsen et al. (2025) tie these strands together by focusing on legitimacy. Analysing annual reports from six PSM organisations across Europe, Australia and Canada, they identify platform paradoxes: public media justify building a strong presence on commercial platforms to maintain reach, while simultaneously presenting themselves as counterweights to the harms and polarisation associated with those same platforms. Over time, these organisations adopt more risk-oriented language, reflecting an uneasy awareness that their legitimacy now depends both on being on platforms and on being visibly different from them.

Meese and Bannerman’s (2022) work on the algorithmic distribution of news complements this by tracing how policy responses have struggled to keep up with the power of a handful of platforms to set the terms of visibility for journalism. Across multiple jurisdictions, they show a pattern in which platforms move from partners to unavoidable gatekeepers, with news organisations – including PSM – becoming dependent on opaque ranking and recommendation systems that they cannot meaningfully influence. Reid (2024), writing from a South African media-diversity perspective, pushes this further by placing algorithmic recommender systems explicitly within exposure-diversity theory. She argues that algorithmic curation can undermine exposure diversity – the range of content people actually encounter – and introduces the notion of the “shrinkage funnel” to describe how recommendation loops can narrow choice over time, reinforcing the “illusory truth effect” and eroding personal autonomy (Reid 2024). Theme 5 returns to these concerns about algorithmic curation and exposure diversity in its discussion of information disorder, information integrity and media literacy, asking how public service media might counter these dynamics in practice during elections and beyond.

The media-capture literature sharpens the stakes. Schiffrin's (2018) introduction to the Journalism special issue on media capture, and the subsequent Media Capture volume (Schiffrin 2021), argue that control over media increasingly takes the form of soft pressure and structural dependence, rather than overt censorship. Bleyer-Simon (2022) highlights how financial vulnerabilities and platform dependence create conditions where powerful actors – states, oligarchs, donors or tech companies – can shape news agendas without formal ownership. Capture, in this sense, occurs when news organisations become so dependent on particular sources of funding, infrastructure or distribution that they cannot afford to alienate them.

South African and African research brings these dynamics into critical contextual perspective. Munoriyarwa, Chiumbu and Motsaathebe's (2023) study of AI in South Africa's mainstream newsrooms finds a slow, uneven but methodical uptake of AI tools, accompanied by deep scepticism about job losses, ethics, bias and "the efficacy [of AI] in the democratic process." Journalists question whether AI can genuinely support a post-apartheid democratic project or whether it will exacerbate existing inequalities and precarious labour (Munoriyarwa et al 2023). Zondi and Muringa (2024) show how digital media are reshaping radio's role as a space for public discourse: platforms expand participation and interactivity, but they also reconfigure who sets the agenda and under what terms, especially in Zulu-language public and commercial radio.

Boshoff and Fafowora's (2024) editorial on digital media literacy in Africa adds another layer. They argue that media literacy must be understood as a situated social practice, shaped by infrastructural limits, inequality and local histories of communication. They warn against "magical" thinking that imagines media literacy as a simple antidote to misinformation and insist that any serious agenda must grapple with the specific ways Africans already use digital media and with the power relations embedded in platforms and infrastructures. In a platformised environment, this implies that PSM cannot simply "educate" audiences about platforms; they must also push for structural changes that make exposure diversity and communicative rights possible in the first place (Boshoff and Fafowora 2024; Milton and Mano 2022).

Read together, these perspectives suggest that SABC’s situation is not only about “competition” with platforms and Canal+–MultiChoice, but about the risk of platform-enabled capture, algorithmic narrowing and legitimacy loss. In a low-resource context, where public funding is fragile and advertising is migrating to global intermediaries, the temptation for PSM to lean heavily on closed, proprietary platforms – for reach, data and monetisation – is strong. Yet the more dependent SABC becomes on those infrastructures, and the more its content circulates through opaque recommender systems, the harder it becomes to uphold universality, independence and exposure diversity, and to claim democratic legitimacy on its own terms (milton, Mampa, and Markovitz 2024; Olsen et al. 2025; Reid 2024).

From a Southern perspective, this intersects with concerns about global media power and the right to communicate. Afrokological work on communication rights foregrounds who benefits and who is left out when media systems are reorganised under digital capitalism (milton and Mano 2022). In a context where connectivity and data are uneven, an SABC that is forced to “go where the money is” – high-end subscription platforms, premium sports, urban data-rich audiences – risks abandoning precisely those publics whose democratic participation is most precarious. In this light, platformisation is not simply a technological transition. It is a new terrain on which questions of capture, legitimacy, exposure diversity and communicative justice are being worked out. The policy choices outlined in this theme – on mergers, content obligations, levies, AI and media literacy – are therefore part of a broader struggle over whether public service media will function as platform-dependent brands, or as democratic infrastructure with their own rule-sets and routes to the public.

Collectively, this theme suggests that any serious attempt to rebuild South Africa’s democratic communication order has to grapple with platform power and consolidation as structural conditions, not as an afterthought. The recommendations chapter returns to these dynamics in detail, translating them into proposals on mergers, content obligations, funding instruments, AI and media literacy.

Before turning to the remaining themes, it is important to remind the reader that this report gives more space to Themes 1, 2 and 3. These are prioritised here because they speak most directly to the questions of funding, independence and digital change that are most urgent in the contemporary South African context. The next three themes – governance (Theme 4), information disorder and elections (Theme 5), and civil society agency (Theme 6) – are therefore treated as shorter snapshots. They are still important parts of the story, and they feed into the later discussion and recommendations, but they are not analysed here in the same depth as Themes 1, 2 and 3.

## **2.4. THEME 4 – GUARDING THE GUARDIANS: GOVERNANCE, INDEPENDENCE AND MEDIA CAPTURE**

Governance did not appear in the symposium as background only. It was talked about as a frontline of democratic struggle. Who sits on the SABC board, how they are appointed, how editorial charters are enforced and how security processes are used all shape what the public ultimately sees and hears (SOS 2025b).

Participants linked this theme directly to South Africa’s history of media capture. Speakers recalled periods where boards and executives were packed with politically loyal appointees, where newsroom decisions were steered from outside, and where formal independence on paper did not translate into real editorial freedom. This led to a central point: it is not enough to hope for “good people” in key positions. As one speaker put it, we need independence by design, not aspiration.

That means, among other things:

- transparent, skills-based board appointment processes with public participation;
- clear conflict-of-interest checks and rules that survive changes in government;

- editorial protections that are enforceable in practice, not just symbolic;
- and a view of the SABC as cultural and democratic heritage, not just another state-owned company to be “managed” (SOS 2023, 2025b).

In short, Theme 4 underlines that even the best funding model will not protect public service media if governance systems leave it vulnerable to party-political interference, commercial capture or new forms of “infrastructural capture” through dependence on powerful platforms.

### **Box 2. Supporting quotes for Theme 4 – Governance and independence**

Independence cannot be an aspiration. It should be designed... insulating governance is key... how do we insulate the governance of public media in terms of board appointments? How do we check for conflicts of interest? ... we need to make sure that there are sunset-proof charters and mechanisms.

(Desilen Daniels, SOS 2025b)

But I do think that the idea that the board is the custodian of the SABC and you trust that it will do good, I do think that we need to look at how that board is appointed. It gives us comfort that it’s sitting in parliament, but the outcome does not serve the SABC ... when you end up with a board based mainly on demographics

(Dr Phathiswa Magopeni, SOS 2025b)

“Political interference... will always be there... the media remember is that contested terrain. The only thing is how strong is your board to protect you?”

“There is this creeping... hidden hand of state security in the newsrooms...”

(Moshoeshoe Monare, SOS 2025b)

As a result of political interference over the years and financial mismanagement... we have gone back to that apartheid system now...”

“It really has been... an undermining of the public broadcast mandate.”

(Pippa Green, SOS 2025b)

## 2.5. THEME 5 – FIGHTING INFORMATION DISORDER: ELECTIONS, INTEGRITY AND THE ROLE OF PSM

Theme 5 placed the SABC and public service media at the centre of rising worries about misinformation and disinformation, especially around elections. Participants framed “information integrity” as a basic democratic condition, not a niche digital issue (SOS 2025b).

The discussion drew directly on the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) Resolutions 630 and 631. Resolution 630 focuses on platform accountability; Resolution 631 focuses on public service content and the role of independent, rights-respecting media. Together, they offer African-generated guidelines for what responsible content governance and public service content should look like in the face of information disorder.

From this vantage point, the key question is not just “how do we clean up social media?” but how do we ensure that people – especially those most at risk – have access to reliable, contextualised, multilingual information that enables them to act as citizens? Speakers highlighted the SABC’s role as trusted infrastructure during the 2024 elections, particularly via radio and language services that reach people who may not be online or able to afford data.

At the same time, people warned that shrinking budgets, staff cuts and platform pressures risk undermining this role just when it is most needed. Policy hooks here included: embedding ACHPR principles into domestic law; ring-fencing funding for impartial, multilingual elections coverage; and treating media literacy and audience capability as core parts of the PSM mandate, not side projects.

**Box 3. Supporting quotes for Theme 5: Fighting information disorder: Elections, integrity and the role of PSM**

So in March this year ... the commission adopted two resolutions. One is resolution 630. The other one is resolution 631. Resolution 630 focuses on platform accountability and it is led by Media Monitoring Africa. Resolution 631 focuses on public service content and it is led by the SOS coalition.

(Thandi Smith, SOS 2025b)

Integrity does drive, it underpins democracy, right? And it's very important for us because when we ensure information integrity, it helps empower citizens, drives democracy, and also supports the development of our continent in general

(Tinotenda Bangajena, SOS 2025b)

But if you look at um various studies especially when coming to public trust I think there was one uh done by um human sciences council and the other one by institute for justice and reconciliations. It showed that there actually there's public trust in the SABC and that's one thing that we do should not forget that the majority of South Africans and the majority when I'm talking about the majority I'm talking about those people who cannot afford subscription for Sunday Times who can't afford subscription for Netflix who can afford the subscription for News24 they largely depend on SABC as a source of information and it's something that whoever is thinking about funding whoever is thinking about public mandate.

(Moshoeshoe Monare, SOS 2025b)

We are trying to help states and civil society understand what information integrity should look like in practice – that means independent fact-checking, public service content, and platforms taking responsibility in all African languages.

(Thandi Smith, SOS 2025b)

So if we look at the fact that there is still so much trust in the public service media and specifically the SABC. Uh this study if you just look at the column under South Africa... the most trusted brands where do people go if they receive a WhatsApp to say you know the sky is green, where do they go and check to see? And SABC is up there as the one of the trusted sources.

## 2.6. THEME 6 – FROM COMPLAINT TO CONSTRUCTION: CIVIL SOCIETY AGENCY AND PUBLIC MEDIA FUTURES

Finally, Theme 6 turned the lens back on SOS and wider civil society. The core point was that we are not standing outside the system, commenting from afar. We are part of the story.

Over roughly two decades, SOS has moved from “Save Our SABC” crisis mode towards a broader agenda: “Support Public Broadcasting,” and now, rethink public media in a platform age. This has meant lobbying, advocacy, litigation, public campaigns, research and convening – including this symposium – to block some of the worst proposals, defend key gains and insert public-interest principles into law and policy (SOS 2023, 2025b).

The programme director framed the day in exactly these terms: the aim was to move beyond complaints to workable solutions, and to create “friction between these ideas” so that there is “heat and light” rather than comfortable consensus. In other words, civil society is not only there to say “no”; it is also there to design alternatives and build coalitions big enough to shift the system.

At the same time, participants were honest about limits. Wins are partial and fragile; donor priorities shift; new crises – such as Canal+–MultiChoice or fresh waves of austerity – can overtake carefully laid plans. Theme 6 therefore points forward rather than pretending to tie up all loose ends. It invites SOS and its partners to keep combining critique and construction: naming the failures of current funding and governance arrangements, while taking seriously the responsibility to propose, test and fight for alternatives.

## Box 4. Supporting quotes for Theme 6 – Civil society and “beyond complaints”

The diversity of perspective matters. We need friction between these ideas to generate heat and light and not just comfortable consensus. Public Service Media must remain in the public agenda. Democratic participation depends on informed citizens. We want to move beyond complaints to workable solutions. Session two marks 75 years of SABC News. This is not nostalgia, it is an opportunity to measure how far we have come and how far we still have to go. - Simon Makwela SOS 2025 (b)

But we know that civil society organisations are always willing to jump in and collaborate, but it's difficult to get the other players on board...as the SOS Coalition, we are coalition of different organisations... we started off as “Save Our SABC” and then our name also evolved to ‘Supporting Public Broadcasting.’ Over the years our work has ranged from lobbying advocacy, legal interventions, campaigning. - Uyanda Siyotula SOS 2025 (b)

# From Complaint to Construction

## Theme 6

SOS and civil society at large are not standing outside the system, commenting from afar. We are part of the story.

It's particularly important that guidelines are developed in collaboration with various state parties, civil society organisations, regulatory bodies and technology companies...This is exactly what we are trying to do. Every opportunity that there is we are holding consultative sessions like this to get as much collaboration and input and participation from people who are able to impact and influence the development of the guidelines. - Thandi Smith SOS 2025 (b)

So what we have been doing over the past few months is conducting consultations on the continent, targeting continental conferences and regional organizations, trying to get their input on what should be contained in the guidelines...to ensure that the guidelines that are being developed are broad enough and also very useful in ensuring that information integrity is advanced in the digital age. Uyanda Siyotula SOS 2025 (b)

# 3. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This discussion returns mainly to Themes 1, 2, and 3, which speak most directly to the current choices facing South African PSM. I draw in governance, information integrity and civil society agency (Themes 4, 5 and 6) where they help clarify what is at stake.

Across these themes, I draw on a few simple but important ideas which emerged from the symposium deliberations. The first is public service media as democratic infrastructure and information commons, rather than as a failing business. The second is media capture—which includes not only direct political interference but also under-funding and structural dependence on a few powerful commercial or platform actors (cf. Stiglitz 2017; Schiffrin 2017; Nechushtai 2018). The third is platformisation and infrastructural power i.e. the way digital and pay-TV platforms quietly set the terms of visibility and viability. Finally, I lean on decolonial and Afrokological communication rights thinking, which insists that communication is a right, that language and culture are central to that right, and that plural knowledges must shape how we imagine public media futures.

Taken together, the themes suggest that the SABC and wider public service media system are caught in a sixty-sixty: on the one hand, they are still treated as essential democratic infrastructure - a lifeline for news, language and culture, especially for people with the fewest alternatives. On the other hand, they are expected to survive on a collapsing TV-licence model and volatile advertising in a market increasingly dominated by platforms and foreign-owned pay-TV. The result is what several speakers described as an “existential” crisis: a public service institution that is still needed, but structurally undercut by the very system it sits in.

# 3.1. PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA AS DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE IN A PLATFORMISED DEMOCRACY

Theme 1 reminded us that the SABC is not just one more media brand competing for clicks. For millions of people who cannot afford subscription services or large data bundles, it remains the primary source of news and information, especially around elections and in times of crisis. It is also one of the few places where people can regularly hear their own languages, accents and local stories reflected back to them.

If we take this seriously, public service media looks less like an optional add-on and more like democratic infrastructure and part of the information commons. It sits alongside schools, clinics, libraries and public transport as one of the basic systems that makes constitutional rights possible in day-to-day life – particularly the rights to freedom of expression, access to information and participation in public affairs.

This infrastructure role becomes even more important in a platformised media environment. As Theme 3 showed, advertising, attention and content are increasingly flowing through global platforms and big pay-TV groups. The Canal+–MultiChoice merger is a local sign of this shift. Control over what is visible, what is promoted and who gets to monetise it is moving towards actors whose algorithms and incentives are not anchored in South Africa's democratic project.

In that context, public service media can multi-task in at least three ways:

- as a baseline of trusted information in a polluted environment;
- as a counterweight to market concentration, making sure that not everything is only available behind paywalls or on extractive platforms;
- and as a space for languages, cultures and regions that the market tends to ignore.

But it can only do this if it is independent, sustainable (socially, financially and culturally) and digitally present – which takes us directly to Themes 2 and 3 and to the funding question.

# 3.2. INDEPENDENCE, SUSTAINABILITY AND FUNDING AS ONE PROBLEM

Across the symposium, independence, sustainability, and funding appeared as both centrifugal and centripetal forces that wove through all the thematic threads. They showed up as different faces of the same problem: how to keep public service media alive, relevant, and free from capture in harsh economic and political conditions.

- Independence is not just about resisting direct interference from ministers or party officials. It also means not being overly dependent on a small number of advertisers, a single pay-TV platform or one global tech company for survival.
- Sustainability is not just about avoiding bankruptcy this year. It is about being able to plan, invest in staff and content, and maintain services in all official languages over many years.
- Funding is not only about “where the money comes from” but about who can turn the tap up or down, on what terms, and with what safeguards.

Theme 2 made this plain. A failing, regressive TV-licence model and heavy reliance on advertising have created an unfunded mandate. The SABC is asked to deliver a broad public service – eleven languages, radio and TV, digital platforms, education, elections, emergency information – without stable, adequate public investment. Licence-fee “evasion” tracks poverty more than apathy. Advertising is sucked towards digital platforms that do not carry equivalent public obligations.

Theme 3 added a third layer. As platforms and a foreign-owned pay-TV group gain more power over distribution and content budgets, dependence on these actors can become another form of capture – not necessarily through overt interference, but through structural dependency and subtle shifts in what is commissioned, promoted or made visible.

At the same time, Theme 4 reminded us that governance design can either hard-wire independence or quietly undermine it. If board appointments are politicised, if editorial protections are weak and if key decisions depend on annual budget battles, then even a generous funding model can be turned into a tool of pressure.

So when Dimitri warned against “developing a funding model in a policy vacuum”, he was pointing to exactly this thorny issue. Funding choices, governance rules and platform regulation are inextricably linked: you cannot fix one without touching the others.

To keep this in view, it is helpful to spell out, in simple terms, why funding model choice matters at all.

### Box 5: Why funding model choice matters

## WHY FUNDING MODEL CHOICE MATTERS

Selecting the right funding model is crucial for the success and sustainability of any organisation or project. The choice impacts various aspects, influencing power dynamics, stability, fairness, independence and accountability. This section outlines key considerations when choosing a funding model.

### 1. Power

- **Influence:** Funding sources can exert influence over decision-making.
- **Control:** The level of control funders have may affect strategic direction.
- **Equity:** Power imbalances can arise if funding is concentrated in a few hands.

### 2. Stability and Fairness

- **Predictability:** Stable funding models enable long-term planning.
- **Sustainability:** Fairness ensures resources are distributed equitably.
- **Resilience:** A diversified funding base provides resilience against shocks.

### 3. Independence and Accountability

- **Autonomy:** Independence from undue influence allows for unbiased decision-making.
- **Transparency:** Clear accountability mechanisms ensure organisations responsible resource management.
- **Integrity:** The funding model should align with the organisations values and mission.

**Bottom line:** The funding model choice has profound implications for an organisation’s governance, sustainability and overall effectiveness.

# 3.3. TOWARDS A NEW SETTLEMENT: DESIGN PRINCIPLES, NOT A SINGLE BLUEPRINT

The symposium did not produce a neat blueprint, and it wasn't meant to. What it did offer were **directional principles** for a different settlement – one that treats public service media as democratic infrastructure inside a platformised economy. Some of these come from global experience; many came directly from people in the room.

Across the themes, at least five principles recur:

## 1. Progressive and realistic funding

Any new model should move away from treating public media as an individual household purchase. It should draw more from those who can afford to pay – for example, through an income-linked public media levy collected via SARS, complemented by increased parliamentary appropriations and contributions from dominant platforms. At the same time, it must be realistic about collection capacity and poverty, avoiding mechanisms that push public media into direct conflict with poor households.

## 2. Independence by design

Funding reform and governance reform have to move together. It is not enough to raise more money; that money must be **ring-fenced and protected** from day-to-day political bargaining, with clear rules about how it is allocated and who can change those rules. Board appointment processes, editorial charters and conflict-of-interest rules need to be tightened so that “independence” is built into the structure, not left to goodwill.

## 3. Digital-first and tech-neutral logic

A future settlement cannot be built around a shrinking universe of TV sets and linear channels. It has to assume that people will access public media on phones, tablets, smart TVs, radios and whatever comes next. That means tech-neutral funding, distribution strategies that reduce dependence on any single platform, and rules that recognise public media as part of the digital commons, not as an analogue relic.

#### 4. Ecosystem thinking, not SABC-only

Several participants, including Xolile Vundla from Animation South Africa, reminded us that the SABC is not the only player in the public media space. The ecosystem includes community media, independent producers, public-interest digital projects, regulators and classification bodies. A credible settlement should therefore support a wider public service media ecosystem, with the SABC as a backbone but not the sole beneficiary.

#### 5. Public legitimacy and clear communication

Another participant stressed, any model that looks like “a new tax” will be vulnerable in the court of public opinion, especially when people are struggling to survive. Funding reform needs to be accompanied by **honest communication** about what people are paying for, how the money will be protected, and what will change in return – in content, languages, accessibility and accountability.

PSM Funding Models Comparison

Characteristic	Examples of Countries	How it Works	Public/Political Response	Relevance for South Africa
Traditional TV Licence Fee	UK (until 2027), Japan, Switzerland, Denmark	Flat annual fee tied to TV	Historically accepted, evasion rising	Uncollectable, regressive, toxic
Household/Device-Neutral Media Levy	Germany, Finland, Sweden	Universal levy linked to income	Broad acceptance when framed well	Potentially viable if ring-fenced
General Tax Appropriation	Canada, Norway, Netherlands, South Korea	Parliamentary allocation from revenue	Stable in high-trust cultures	Appropriate for baseline funding
Earmarked Digital/Advertising Levy	France (on streaming services), UK (consulted), Hungary	Turnover/ad revenue from platforms	Generally popular, industry resistance	Strong candidate, leverages platform income
Mixed Public-Commercial Model	Australia, Ireland, Kenya	Advertising, sponsorship, grants	Common compromise, drifts commercial	SABC's reality, needs rebalancing
Philanthropic/Donor-Supported Funds	US (PBS/NPR), African regional initiatives	Grants and donations supplement core	Works in plural environments, limited	Possible top-up for specific projects

**Table 2:** Funding model comparison, compiled by author drawing on Milton, Mampa and Markovitz (2024), the Public Media Alliance's [PMA] PSM Funding Models (PMA n.d.) as well as the symposium discussions.

These are not small adjustments. They point to a shift from a precarious, ad-dependent, TV-licence-based model towards a rights-based, ecosystem-oriented, platform-aware public media settlement.

Across the themes, participants kept coming back to a simple but powerful idea: public service media is not just another “content provider”; it is part of the democratic infrastructure that underpins people’s communication rights. In African scholarship, this has often been framed in terms of communication as a commons and of public media as one of the institutions that must safeguard that commons in the face of market and state pressures (milton 2018; Mano and milton 2020).

In this reading, the point of public media is not only to “inform, educate and entertain”, but to create the conditions for more equal participation in public life and to offer counter-spaces to commercial and partisan dominance (Fuchs 2018; Saurwein et al. 2019).

When participants spoke about chronic under-funding, political interference and the use of debt and bail-outs as tools of pressure, they were naming what the media-capture literature has been describing for some time: capture does not only happen when governments or oligarchs buy media outright; it also happens when public media are kept permanently on the brink of crisis and made to depend on political goodwill for survival (Schiffrin 2018, 2021; Lowe and Berg 2013). Comparative work in Europe shows that where public funding is adequate, predictable and insulated from day-to-day political decisions, public service media are more likely to win audience trust and be perceived as independent; where funding is weak or channelled directly through governments, trust and reach tend to suffer (Saurwein et al. 2019; European Parliament 2021). The South African cases and stories in this report make that argument concrete: every time SABC is forced into short-term firefighting, it has less capacity to invest in the public-interest content people say they need.

The symposium also made it clear that we cannot think about public media independence and sustainability without looking at platform capitalism and digital colonialism. Participants were acutely aware that audience attention and advertising revenue have shifted toward global platforms whose business models extract data and value from local markets while paying little back, whether in the form of tax, content investment or support for local public media (Fuchs 2018; Campos Freire et al. 2020). In African debates, this is increasingly described as a new round of media and data colonialism, in which infrastructures, platforms and metrics are designed elsewhere, while local actors remain price-takers rather than rule-setters (milton and Mano 2022).

Against this backdrop, the call for “Afrokological” and decolonial approaches to public media, centred on conviviality, incompleteness and relational accountability rather than on a single universal standard, becomes more than a philosophical preference: it becomes a practical guide to how institutions like SABC and coalitions like SOS might re-imagine their roles (milton and Mano 2022).

The insistence on “plurilogues” rather than a single national conversation resonates with work that argues for more plural, intersectional and contested public spheres, especially in post-colonial societies (Shohat 2001; Rykers 2018). What participants were asking for – in different ways – was a public service media ecosystem that can hold multiple, sometimes conflicting, publics together without forcing them into silence or sameness.

Read this way, the themes in the report are not just a list of complaints. They are a diagnosis of how South Africa’s democratic infrastructure is being hollowed out by under-funding, politicisation and platform power, and a set of grounded proposals for how that infrastructure might be rebuilt in more decolonial, participatory and future-proof ways.

# 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has treated South Africa's public service media – and the SABC in particular – as democratic infrastructure and part of the information commons, rather than as a failing business. Across the symposium, participants spoke about the SABC as a lifeline: for news, for language, for local stories and for basic civic information that helps people survive and participate. That role is especially clear for those with the fewest alternatives – poor and working-class households, rural communities, people who cannot afford subscription media or large data bundles.

At the same time, the symposium showed how this infrastructure is being systematically weakened. A regressive, collapsing TV-licence system, volatile advertising in a platform-dominated market, political reluctance to fund public media, patchy governance and accelerating platformisation have combined to produce what many called an existential crisis. The system still relies on the SABC to “hold” the public sphere for millions, but it does not give it the stable footing to do so.

Three threads ran through all six themes:

- **Independence** – from party-political interference, from commercial pressure and from over-dependence on powerful platforms.
- **Sustainability** – financial, institutional and social: the ability to plan, invest, retain skills and keep serving the whole country over time.
- **Funding** – not just amounts, but models: who pays, on what basis, with what safeguards and who can quietly turn the tap up or down.

In the end, these are not separate problems. They make up a single problem space: the absence of a coherent, rights-based public service media settlement that fits a democratic, highly unequal, platformised South Africa.

The symposium did not deliver a finished blueprint, and it was never meant to. What it did do was to bring to the fore contours and principles for a new settlement and identify gaps – voices and issues that must be brought into the next round of conversations. In this conclusion, I outline some concrete directions

## 4.1. KEY CONCLUSIONS

### **1. Public service media is democratic infrastructure, especially for those with least**

For large parts of the population, the SABC is still the primary or only source of regular news and information. It is also one of the few places where people hear their languages, regions and everyday concerns reflected back to them. When participants spoke about the SABC as “a cornerstone of our democracy” or “that member of the family that remembers our stories,” they were naming this infrastructural role in very human terms. Undermining this infrastructure – by under-funding it, hollowing it out, or allowing it to be captured – is not a neutral budget choice. It is a decision about whose rights and voices matter.

### **2. The funding crisis is political, not just technical**

The current funding mix – collapsing licence fees, heavy reliance on advertising, minimal direct public funding – is the result of decisions, not fate. Licence “evasion” tracks a poverty map, not an apathy map. Advertising is drifting towards platforms and pay-TV that do not carry equivalent public obligations. Successive governments have chosen to bail out other state-owned entities while largely leaving SABC to fend for itself. This is austerity as political project, not just a collection problem.

### **3. Under-funding is a form of media capture**

Capture is not only about blunt interference in content or appointments. It can happen quietly through budgets. An SABC that is perpetually on the brink – cutting local content, freezing posts, deferring maintenance, unable to invest in digital – is easier to intimidate and less able to fulfil its mandate. Under-funding acts as a slow form of control: keeping formal independence on paper while weakening real autonomy and public value.

#### **4. Platformisation and foreign-led consolidation are reshaping media power**

The Canal+–MultiChoice deal and the growth of OTT platforms are not background noise. They reshape who controls sports rights, commissioning budgets, audience data and distribution. Regulatory asymmetry – where SABC and other licensees carry heavy public obligations while platforms and some pay-TV operators enjoy lighter rules – tilts the field against public service content. Leaving SABC and public-interest media to “adapt” alone in this environment, without new rules or resources, looks a lot like managing their decline.

#### **5. Governance remains a weak link**

Board appointments, skills mixes, security processes and editorial protections all matter. Without clear, enforced rules that insulate governance from party-political interference and short-term deals, even a well-funded SABC can be steered off course. Independence has to be designed in, not left to goodwill or culture.

#### **6. Civil society is moving from complaint to construction – but the circle is not yet wide enough**

SOS and partners have played a visible role as watchdogs, litigators, lobbyists and conveners. This symposium is part of that shift towards designing solutions, not just diagnosing problems. But important voices are still missing: audiences themselves, especially poor and rural viewers and listeners; SABC workers and unions; youth; people with disabilities; small community and digital outlets. A truly public settlement cannot be built without them.

## **4.2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

What follows are not detailed policy proposals, but directions and priorities for SOS and its allies to consider in advocacy, litigation, campaigning and future research.

## **A. Reframe public service media as democratic infrastructure**

### **1. Use rights-based language consistently**

In engagements with Parliament, the executive and regulators, keep framing SABC/PSM as infrastructure for constitutional rights – access to information, language rights, cultural rights and participation – rather than as a “struggling SOE” or “market player that needs to be competitive.” This makes under-funding and policy drift legible as rights issues, not just technical failings.

### **2. Name who is most affected**

Make visible, in all advocacy, that it is poor and working-class households, rural communities and those dependent on radio and African-language services who will feel the sharpest impact if PSM erodes. Use audience research, testimonies and everyday examples to keep this concrete.

### **3. Treat language and local content as non-negotiable**

Press for explicit commitments – in law, policy and budgets – that protect African-language services, local newsrooms and community-responsive content as core elements of the mandate, not “nice to have” extras that can be cut first.

## **B. Push for a new funding settlement that is progressive, ring-fenced and tech-neutral**

### **4. Advocate for a progressive public media contribution, not a regressive licence**

Oppose attempts to reheat the old TV-licence model or to introduce a flat household levy that repeats its injustices. Instead, argue for an income-linked public media contribution collected through the tax system, complemented by increased parliamentary appropriations and contributions from dominant platforms.

### **5. Insist on ring-fencing and independent allocation**

Any new public media contribution (levy, tax or hybrid) must be protected from disappearing into the general fiscus. SOS should advocate for an independent public media fund or similar mechanism, with clear criteria, public reporting and meaningful participation in how money is allocated across SABC and the wider PSM ecosystem.

### **6. Use the multi-party democracy fund analogy**

Build on arguments like Dr Phathiswa's: if public money is used to fund political parties in the name of protecting democracy from private influence, then it is consistent – and necessary – to fund the SABC and public media as the infrastructure that allows parties and citizens to communicate in the first place.

### **7. Be strategic about language and public legitimacy**

Take seriously the warning about the “court of public opinion.” Work with allies to test how different framings land – “public media contribution,” “democracy levy,” “communication rights fund” – and link any new contribution to visible, tangible improvements (e.g. more local content, better language coverage, more accessible services).

## **C. Close the governance gap and design independence into the system**

### **8. Strengthen board appointment processes**

Push for reforms that:

- require clear skills matrices and experience criteria;
- build in transparent public participation;
- and minimise opportunities for political gatekeeping.

Board members should be appointed as custodians of a public asset, not as party delegates.

### **9. Reinforce editorial protections and accountability**

Advocate for stronger, enforceable editorial charters and internal processes that protect newsroom independence, prevent political instructions and give staff safe ways to challenge interference. Couple this with robust, public-facing complaints and accountability mechanisms so that audiences can see independence in action.

### **10. Watch the detail in any new legislation**

As Parliament revisits the SABC Bill or related laws, scrutinise the clauses that govern appointments, funding flows, ministerial powers and reporting lines. These are often where independence is either quietly guaranteed or quietly eroded.

## **D. Rebalance the system in a platform age**

### **11. Demand regulatory symmetry for platforms and OTT**

Advocate for rules that bring major platforms and OTT services into a public-interest framework:

- financial contributions to a public media and local content fund.
- obligations around prominence/discoverability for public-interest content.
- data-sharing and transparency requirements that support democratic oversight.

### **12. Protect universal access to national moments**

Campaign for listed-events or must-offer/must-carry rules that keep major sports events and national moments (elections, key ceremonies, disasters) available to all, not just to those behind paywalls.

### **13. Reduce single-platform dependency**

Encourage SABC and other PSM actors to diversify their digital routes to audiences, so they are not overly dependent on any one platform whose algorithms or terms can change overnight. This may include public or non-profit infrastructures and partnerships.

## **E. Embed information integrity in African rights frameworks**

### **14. Localise ACHPR Resolutions 630 and 631**

Work with partners to translate the ACHPR information-integrity resolutions into concrete South African policies and regulations – for platforms, for public media, and for election-period obligations.

### **15. Ring-fence resources for impartial, multilingual elections coverage.**

Argue for specific funding and support measures that allow SABC and other PSM actors to provide robust, language-diverse election coverage, including fact-checking and explanatory journalism, without being forced to choose between this and other parts of the mandate.

### **16. Treat media literacy as part of the mandate.**

Support programmes that build people's capacity to navigate information disorder – especially in schools, community spaces and across languages – and push for these to be recognised as core public media functions, not extras.

## **F. Deepen and broaden civil society coalitions**

### **17. Bring missing voices into the next round.**

In the next symposium and in future research, deliberately centre those who were largely absent this time: SABC audiences (especially poor and rural communities), workers and unions, youth, people with disabilities, and smaller community and digital outlets. Build the next phase of work with, not only about, them. From a personal perspective, this is probably the key take-away for SOS to consider for the next symposium.

### **18. Keep combining critique and design.**

Maintain SOS's dual role as watchdog and problem-solver: exposing harmful policies, laws and deals, while also putting concrete, worked-through alternatives on the table. This includes funding models, governance reforms, and platform rules that can realistically be implemented.

### **19. Build cross-sector alliances.**

Strengthen links with movements working on related issues: digital rights, language rights, disability rights, labour, education, and local government. The fight for sustainable, independent public media overlaps with their struggles in many places; acting together can amplify leverage.

## **4.3. FINAL THOUGHTS**

The annual SOS symposium on public service broadcasting, was convened to deepen understanding of the current state of public service media (PSM) in South Africa, identify the structural pressures reshaping it, and collectively sharpen strategies to strengthen its role in an evolving digital media environment.

Analytically, the report used reflexive thematic analysis: We started with what people said in the room, and worked outward from there: tracing patterns across five hours of debate, then putting these into conversation with SOS's 2023 Vision Document, our 2024 global PSM trends discussion paper and wider African and international scholarship.

At its heart, the analysis was driven by one key question which emerged through the day's discussions and debates:

*How can South Africa's public service media model be reimaged to ensure sustainability, independence and democratic relevance in an era of digital transformation and shifting media ownership?*

But we must be honest about what shaped this question - and what it left out. The symposium's declared objective and the programme design itself shaped what we could see. Four tightly framed sessions - on funding, SABC history, Canal+/MultiChoice and ACHPR information integrity - inevitably foregrounded certain questions and pushed others to the margins. Working "from the people outwards" with the transcripts, it became clear which issues were allowed to take up most of the space in the room (money, governance, mergers, capture) and which surfaced only in fragments, if at all, including inter alia: labour and unions, disability and accessibility, youth and participatory governance, AI and data governance, climate and everyday crises, and the wider ecosystem beyond the SABC.

Notably absent were direct perspectives from SABC audiences themselves - "the millions of people" invoked by the SOS Coordinator, whose daily access to news, culture and language depends on whether public service media survives. This leaves the movement in danger of repeating what the conversations claim the SABC does: consistently centring already-resourced institutions and actors over those whose lives and livelihoods are most affected by public service media decisions. Naming these absences is not an act of blame, but of movement honesty: if, as the keynote suggested, public service media is democratic infrastructure, then those who rely on it most - and those whose work keeps it alive - must be co-authors of the next settlement, not just the objects of policy. These are not side issues. What stayed at the margins of the conversation is as revealing as what came to the surface. Together, they point directly to what the next phase of organising - and the next symposium - must do differently: bring those marginalised questions and constituencies in as co-authors of a new public service media settlement, rather than as afterthoughts to a conversation still centred on the broadcaster alone.

To this end then, this report is not the last word on public service media in South Africa. It is one contribution to an ongoing plurilogue: a many-voiced conversation about what kind of media system a deeply unequal, still-transforming and increasingly platformised democracy needs and deserves.

If there is a single message to carry forward, it might be this: public service media is still wanted and still needed, but it cannot survive on goodwill alone. It needs a new thinking – on remit, on funding, on governance and on its place in a platformised landscape – that treats it as democratic infrastructure, protects its independence, and makes it answerable to the public it serves.

My hope is that SOS and its partners can use this report as both mirror and map: a mirror to see where we are honest and where we are still avoiding hard questions, and a map to help navigate the next phase of advocacy, research and organising towards a public media system that is worthy of the people who rely on it every day.

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