

Beaming local news to the continent



BREAKING STORIES: International broadcasters are devoting more time to Africa as there is an increasing demand for local news. SABC News International is looking at a platform on DStv to extend its reach, while the e-news 24-hour service is proving popular.

Broadcasters are focusing on Africa but SABC has lost the plot, writes JOCELYN NEWMARCH

SAfile / SABC / FIN 113
WHEN SABC News International was launched, it proudly proclaimed itself as SA's first 24-hour news channel. That was in 2007, and since then the news landscape has changed dramatically, with several stations offering an African perspective on news for local audiences.

Local broadcaster e.tv last year expanded its offering with 24-hour news tailored for South Africans. In 2007, CNBC launched a dedicated 24-hour business news service for Africa.

In 2006, Al Jazeera International, the Arab-based TV news station's English language service, promised "unparalleled" reporting from Africa, with five bureaus on the continent and an extensive network of correspondents. Even CNN and the BBC World Service have increased the amount of African news they carry.

And in the meantime, SABC News International has been criticised for spending vast amounts of money with little to show for it.

South African viewers can only receive the channel on Sentech's Vivid platform, an obscure offering with few customers.

SABC spokesman Kaizer Kganyago says negotiations with MultiChoice over providing SABC News International on the DStv platform are continuing.

Tawana Kupe, dean of Humanities at Wits University, says that international broadcasters have started to focus more on Africa in the past four years, and the continent has begun to be part of a

broader news network. He says competition among broadcasters to offer better coverage might improve perspectives on Africa as TV stations offer unique angles for audiences — such as personality profiles or business stories. But the venture into the 24-hour news scene is not an easy one.

"Twenty-four-hour news is based on the formula that there is something new every hour, on the hour," says Kupe.

This works for broadcasters such as CNN and the BBC, which have a network of correspondents across the globe and can offer something fresh for audiences in each time zone, but local broadcasters such as e-news do not have that opportunity and have to repeat news stories for the same local audience, Kupe says.

Patrick Conroy, group news editor for e-news, says it is important to differentiate between global broadcasters such as CNN and "more domestic-focused broadcasters" such as Sky, BBC News24 and e-news.

"Domestic-focused channels have a more niche offering. CNN can tell you about tensions in the Middle East; we're the channel to find out if your rubbish will be collected during the municipal strike," Conroy says.

"If you are worried about the congestion charge in London then Sky is the channel for you."

Repeating the same package throughout the day may also have a certain logic to it, he says, because viewers are constantly

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tuning in and out. "Current ratings prove that it is the most watched news channel on the DStv bouquets. So we must be doing something right."

SABC News International, Kupe says, has shown how not to create a pan-African broadcaster by opening bureaus in places such as Senegal and Jamaica.

Kupe says the SABC should have concentrated on strategic locations — such as Lagos and Nairobi — and based itself in English-speaking rather than French-speaking countries.

This approach would also have ensured reporters were able to gain leverage from the headquarters of international organisations, which tend to be based in regional hubs.

The SABC could also have rented facilities from local broadcasters to save costs, rather than opening its own offices.

Kganyago says to save money, the SABC has decided to close three of the channel's bureaus, in Jamaica, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and New York.

Kupe says the SABC should have approached major African companies such as Vodacom and MTN for advertising.

Wadim Schreiner, CEO of

Media Tenor SA, which researches media trends, describes 24-hour news stations as "very good, very noble, but financially difficult".

Large international broadcasters such as CNN or the BBC broadcast across time zones, allowing them to offer customised advertising, Schreiner says.

This means there is hardly a time of day when viewer numbers would dip, resulting in a dead zone for the broadcaster.

Increased news infrastructure in Africa could translate into increased coverage of African stories in future, says Schreiner.

"In the event of something big happening in Africa, the chances of the story, positive or negative, making it to the front page will be much higher than before.

"The quality of reporting could also be expected to improve, since correspondents would be able to draw on local knowledge and experience. We shouldn't expect to see the full benefit now, but perhaps in five to seven years' time," he says.

Schreiner says the flow of news in the world is starting to change, with a much greater emphasis on south-south news rather than the traditional north-south flow of information.