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Zondo Commission – external interference caused ‘serious decay’ at SABC

The editorial integrity of the SABC suffered a knock when a breakdown of governance systems was allowed over a long period, leading to a newsroom that operated on “auto-pilot”. This is according to Phatiswa Magopeni, the public broadcaster’s head of news, who testified before the commission of inquiry into state capture on Tuesday.

“Getting into that environment, I found decay, a serious state of decay,” said Magopeni, explaining that the credibility of managers in the newsroom had been lost in the eyes of the journalists.

“You had people who were supposed to lead the newsroom, who were not trusted by journalists. As a result these managers did not command authority. On the other hand, the commercial value of the SABC’s news products has not been realised over time, therefore instead of making the broadcaster money, its news division is costing it money.”

Magopeni joined the SABC in March last year, only to find a newsroom that she describes as having fallen into serious decay. She told the commission that she could not discount political interference in the operations of the newsroom, as journalists would receive instructions from outside sources, because they were preferred to cover those events or instances. One example of this is a politically-oriented show that was broadcast ahead of the elections, without her knowledge. The show aired weekly, to give status updates on election work.

The cost of external interference was that the SABC was not able to channel individuals to beats based on their skills sets, nor to monitor their performance to ensure proper training efforts and growth. Instead, her team succumbed to pressure from people who did not understand what the journalists’ jobs entail.

One of the results of the disorganised mess that she found was that news packages would be prepared and put together by newsrooms in the provinces, only to go to waste, because they would not be used. The reason for this was the lack of a centralised system that compliments such work. The wastage was not without huge cost implications to the broadcaster. Furthermore, for the large volumes of archived material that exists, in analogue form, there is little prospect of commercialisation.

The cost implications for other areas of news have also been neglected. A case in point, explained Magopeni, was that big news stories were covered by the SABC, with each exercise costing the organisation, but other broadcasters plug into their feed for free.

She told the commission of a strategy that she has implemented within the division, which entails reorganising the skills of those who work there.

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