

Slow and steady wins on the airwaves

HEADLINES in some South African newspapers this week — “Madiba back from Asia with billions” — reflect the obsession South Africa has with the quick fix. Faced with massive social problems the country longs for a magic formula, or simply a magician, to conjure up instant solutions. The Sultan of Brunei is the richest man in the world ... maybe Mandela can persuade him to give us some. Let's get rid of crime — we'll throw the perpetrators down mineshafts. There is something almost adolescent about such fantasies; a failure to understand the lesson of maturity, that slow and steady wins the race.

It is a principle which is being demonstrated at the moment, although perhaps not appreciated, in the field of broadcasting. The acceptance of the McKinsey recommendations, to slash some 1 400 jobs at the SABC, points to the depths of the

crisis in the public broadcasting service. But while the SABC has reduced itself to a state of near collapse — with a succession of naively ambitious policy decisions, such as the refocusing of SAFM — the Independent Broadcasting Authority has been slowly and steadily reshaping the face of South African broadcasting with what promises to be impressive results.

The achievements of the authority in its three years of existence have been considerable. Creating more than 100 community radio stations, selling off six SABC stations and licensing seven new commercial stations, they have literally opened the airwaves to the people. The diversity of interests for which they promise to cater is staggering: classical music, jazz, youth, Muslims, Christians, conservationists (a dedicated station in the Kruger Park), Chinese, Greek, Portuguese, Arabic (not to mention the 11 national languages), right-

wingers, left-wingers, the residents of Pshabello, Winterveld ...

The 20% local content rules are likely to give a huge boost to the local music industry. And black empowerment has been real — from the R320-million Highveld Stereo, in which the National Union of Miners, the Clothing Workers' Union and the (black) Women's Investment Portfolio have a 51% interest, to Zebra P4, a jazz station in Cape Town owned by a committee of former political prisoners.

The authority's work is far from over. In a fortnight they are due to start hearings on plans for a new commercial TV station which could be the catalyst for a television renaissance in South Africa. But the authority has already done much to demonstrate the capacity of South Africans to create a new society without the need for handouts from such as the moguls of Malaysia and the Sultan of Brunei.