

A new agenda for SABC radio news

Franz Kruger

RADIO IS STILL South Africa's Cinderella medium, generally ignored and belittled. But we in the SABC's Radio News department are not waiting for a fairy godmother to wave her magic wand, we'll be earning our place at the ball. Radio News has the potential to become a major force in setting the news agenda for the new South Africa. Consider our size: while newspapers count their audience in the tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands, we have a daily listenership of some 18 million. With a staff of over 400, we produce in the region of 670 news bulletins every day, and current affairs programming two to three times a day.

Overwhelmingly, radio is the major source of information for South Africa's people. It hardly needs to be added that marginalised communities are particularly dependent on radio.

It's about a year since a new leadership took over in Radio News, and the question inevitably arises: how much have we done to earn listeners' respect? I suppose the short answer is: something, but not nearly enough.

The first major area of concern is around questions of resourcing and infrastructure. We inherited an organisation with huge imbalances between the white and the black stations. In Pietersburg, for instance, one person was alone responsible for current affairs programming on three stations, Radio Lcbowa, Venda and Tsonga. By contrast, current affairs programmes on English and Afrikaans services each had a staff of around 12.

There was a desk in Johannesburg called African Language Services (ALS), whose editors were all white and which supplied copy to all the African language stations. (In a magnificent lapse of logic, this desk also wrote bulletins for the English-language station Radio Metro). The copy — in English — was simply translated and put to air by presenters on the various stations. The purpose of ideological control was well served by this arrangement. It also meant that there was very little independent editorial capacity on the various stations: staff were simply translator/presenters.

The other spinoff of this imbalance is that there was only a very inefficient system to distribute news tapes to the regions. It simply didn't matter if the African language services broadcast items that were out of date. And so our current affairs programmes often ran stories that were 18 hours out of date.

So what have we done about all this? I'm happy to report that the ALS desk is now only a memory. Most bulletin desks on the African language stations have been significantly beefed up, so that they can now write their own news. Staffing on current affairs programmes has also been improved: the lone producer in Pietersburg who ran shows on three stations has been joined by 12 others, so that each show has a team of four. Still fewer than on English and Afrikaans, but a substantial improvement.

In addition, transmitter splits have been launched in several provinces. This means that listeners get regional programming for an hour and a half a day.

All of this — the initial upgrading of the African language services, and the first transmitter splits — cost in the region of R24 million. Some 120 new staff were employed by radio news, overwhelmingly for the African language services. This has increased our complement by almost half.

Progress on a better distribution system has been slower. We're hoping that we will have a state-of-the-art digital editing system in place in the new year. The system will be networked, which means reporters will be able to store soundbites and voice reports at any terminal country-wide, and anyone else will be able to access them immediately from any other terminal.

The second major area of concern has been this: we inherited a very antiquated approach to the use of radio. What we had was newspaper-style news, read on air. There was little sound, little live material.

So, for instance, journalists were never expected to be able to broadcast. The work process was strictly divided: reporters gathered the news, writers wrote it, and then broadcasters read it on air. The structure reflected this division. Radio News was divided into three sub-empire: news (also referred to obscurely as output), input (reporting), and

audio news, which included what we now call current affairs programmes.

We have tried to make it clear that on radio, all our news should be audio news. In other words, bulletins should include voice reports and sound bites. This has not yet been a resounding success, for a range of reasons. It is an important priority to get this working, so that our bulletins sound more lively and immediate.

Recently, the first research ever to be focused specifically on radio news revealed a surprisingly high degree of satisfaction with changes being made. Listeners said they found news that was augmented by soundbites and reporters' voices much more credible and interesting.

We have also tried to redefine audio news as current affairs, meaning that these shows need to take the news a little further than the bulletins, giving background and colour where the bulletins concentrate on the hard, breaking stories. Despite all the criticism, I believe that programmes like AM Live have been successful in this regard. They are lively, well presented and much more sharply focused in their journalism than their predecessors. They contain much live material, and some really excellent packaged pieces. Some, but not enough: we still have too many pieces that are simply edited versions of the "minister said" stories.

And there are other success stories: on Radio Zulu, for instance, whose coverage is generally not reflected in the print media, stories are broken daily in their pacy, intelligent current affairs shows.

Much of our energy over the past months went into addressing the structure. We are setting up newsdesks in each region, replacing the old input, output distinction and bringing the reporting and bulletins closer together. Much more needs to be done to make this organisational arrangement a functioning reality.

The last major area of concern is also the most intractable: the culture of journalism. Our news agenda still hasn't changed sufficiently. Our daily diaries are dominated by media conferences, and we're still caught in the attitude that it's only news if it's been said by an official.

Our mission statement commits us to questioning, investigating and challenging. We will tell the story of South Africa and the world in all its richness, it says. There are flashes of real excellence, but they are still too few. Old habits die hard.

Finally, there's the issue of language. We've inherited radio stations for each language, so in some ways it's easier for us than for television, who have to go through all sorts of contortions to accommodate 11 languages on three channels.

But the stations were set up to serve cultural identities defined by apartheid: one homeland, one radio station. We're saying we want to use those languages as vehicles to speak to listeners about the whole country and the world, not to lock them into a particular cultural identity. So Radio Venda needs to redefine its news values radically, to cover Bosnia and the Middle East as well as local issues. It's a shift of considerable subtlety, and radical implications.

Working out ways of serving all these languages equitably is no easy task. Radio News now has a fully multilingual team in Parliament, under political editor Pippa Green. Although every language is represented, we don't want to confine the reporters to little language boxes. Every day, there's a complex balancing act between making sure that each language gets the major stories covered, the desire to cover as many different stories as possible.

In many ways, the political team is a microcosm of Radio News as a whole. It highlights the difficulties of serving the different languages fairly, while resisting a drift into language "ghettoes".

But it also highlights the possibilities.

Radio News has the potential to play a major role in setting the news agenda for the new South Africa. As the African language services are beefed up, we're experiencing a demographic shift unparalleled in the South African media. This has to impact on our news priorities. If we can manage it properly, the language spread will become a rich source of creativity and energy, and will allow us to develop a new news agenda, appropriate to the new South Africa. Then we will be able to fulfil the promise of our mission statement, and earn the respect of our listeners.

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