

Many models of community radio

BY BILL SIEMERING

WHILE community radio has been on-air in South Africa less than a year, it is part of a larger global movement that goes back to the late 1940's. For-profit stations may often serve community service, but their purpose is to make money. In its broadest role, community radio provides a service that is not commercially viable, meeting needs most commercial broadcasters ignore.

Community radio is a patchwork of different goals. It may:

- affirm a language / cultural or ethnic group
- give voice to people not heard on mainstream media
- present a political point of view
- respond to specific local needs
- provide a mix of local and national programming where there is no other media
- provide educational/ development needs.

While the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) issued 79 licences last year to community stations that include Fine Music Radio in Cape Town and Muslim and Christian stations, I'm referring to stations that are serving disadvantaged geographic communities.

Since by definition a station should reflect its locale and circumstance, there are many community radio species. In South Africa, community radio began with the primary intention of providing access, giving a voice to the voiceless. The Jubaleni-Freedom of the air-waves conference in the Netherlands in August 1991 sparked interest in community radio for many South Africans and the enthusiasm was carried over into a series of conferences with democratic NGO's. The Cassette Education Trust which merged into *Bush Radio* became the locus for the movement and training centre.

The emphasis was upon empowerment of the people and free speech, based upon the assumption that everyone had the right to be on the radio. A man observed at a meeting north of Durban: "With community radio, even a stutterer can be on the air." They taught volunteers how to use a boom box to produce programmes.

I've argued that expecting people to strain

At one community radio station a woman called the station to say she was abused and gave the name of the man who did it; co-workers in a factory heard it and had him arrested. A support group helps another with child and domestic abuse. A call to the station about a murder resulted in an arrest. The station helped avert violence between two rival taxi associations by getting them to discuss their differences on air.

Over 14 000 kilometres away, two murders motivated a community station to bring together police, spiritual leaders, a psychologist, the parents of the victims and perpetrators to help heal the community.

While their goals are similar—both use radio to build their communities—they are on separate continents. The first is *Radio Atlantis* serving the industrial town of Atlantis, 45 minutes north of Cape Town. The second is *WOJB*, located on a reservation in northern Wisconsin in the U.S. mid-west.

Both meet the definition of community radio: community representation in decision making and commitment to meeting local needs. They believe radio must act as a catalyst to improve the community, not simply a passive transmitter to sell advertising.

Each station should sound quite different, reflecting the uniqueness of the people and place it serves.

to hear a programme full of clicks, hum and buzz is a disservice; that listeners have a right to hear programming that is worth their time; programming should be accessible as well as provide access. Programming should reflect the same care and attention to quality that goes into creating the baskets, pottery and music that comes from the community, not sound makeshift. Shabby air sound can keep community radio marginalised in the competitive radio market place. Too narrowly focused special interest programming can sound like a club meeting with more people in the studio than in the audience.

I believe the movement has been hampered by over-emphasis upon this one aspect of access. You have authentic voices and engaging programming. Most of the stations I know in South Africa have quickly developed into vibrant stations with varied programmes providing a genuine community service. They have clear, well-defined missions that recognise

to serve the community, they must reach the community. They are both mission and listener driven. Boom boxes are out; they are now requesting second digital production studios. (Many say that digital produces the best sound and is easiest to operate.) While some believe adverts, if any, should be limited to staple items like mielie-meal, others sell advertising that helps local economic development and keeps them on the air.

Soweto Community Radio, for example, has many ways of keeping in touch with the community: a board of directors meets weekly to evaluate the programming; a management committee meets daily; the staff go to high schools and shopping centres weekly to get feedback on programming; listeners are invited six times a day on-air to comment and periodic call-in programmes continue the dialogue with the listeners. The station is actively engaged in building a bridge between the police and the people and in making Soweto a

better community. The station sponsored a Charity Begins at Home concert with local performers donating their services; admission was food and clothing to be given to a home for the elderly and children with AIDS. They brought in candidates for local elections and talk about tough issues like child abandonment. They record many local musicians and 60% of the music played is African. Advertising has proven effective: a pizza parlour reported a three-fold increase in business after running spots on the station. And after only a couple of months on air, they had an estimated audience of 71 000.

The concern about becoming too commercial-like is real and some community stations are charged with being commercial ones in disguise. Presenters may look to *Metro Radio* for role models rather than developing their own voice. Often with an absence of outside or government support, and with a mission to serve the disadvantaged, it is tempting just to play the most popular music to reach the largest possible audience to get advertising.

In the United States we found success by distinguishing ourselves from commercial media. May 1996 marked the 25th anniversary of the first programming on National Public Radio, the local station controlled national production organisation. As NPR's first programme director, my colleagues and I wanted the voices to reflect the pluralism of America rather than the single white male voice of authority from New York. We wanted the local stations to be the source of programme material, not just passive transmitters. We wanted to capitalise on the imaginative quality of radio, get out of the studio, hear many dialects and accents from people where they live and work and play. In other words, we wanted to give listeners a sense of authenticity, to reflect their lives and give equal weight to artists and writers as to government officials.

I faced an anxious, sceptical and sometimes angry group of managers two weeks after we started to get their feedback. They were uncomfortable because we didn't sound like CBS or NBC, the main commercial networks. They thought women's voices did not transmit well and lacked authority, and we shouldn't use music on an information programme. We believed in the conversational style and while we improved the presentation, we stayed with our vision. Now NPR news is widely regarded as the best on radio and is used by eight out of 10 newspaper editors as an important source; it has replaced CBS and NBC radio in news and information programming.

However, NPR itself has changed. There are fewer sound documentaries, fewer pieces from stations and fewer accents. Some local public stations rely too much on focus groups and eliminate too many records from their playlists resulting in few surprises and a blandness. On these stations, each quarter hour marches by in the same polyester uniform. This is a cautionary tale.

At the same time, some of the most innovative national programmes in the U.S. originate at local stations. The stations closest to their communities still have the most vitality. Here are a few snapshots of stations outside of South Africa:

● **There is a Native American station owned by the Ojibwa tribe to deal with significant issues, affirm the culture and serve as a**

bridge between the Indian and white communities. They broadcast Indian pow wows, involve the community in a dialogue to seek solutions to problems. Music is eclectic: country, rock and roll, world, folk, blues. Since they are in a rural area, the news and information programming from NPR fills a third of their schedule. From a weekly listenership of 10 000, they raise R360 000 for a cash budget of R1 188 000; they have a staff of eight paid employees.

● **The mission of another station far south is to celebrate the cultural heritage of New Orleans with music and information. The station is home to many local musicians who drop by regularly and have benefited from the exposure; an Italian promoter heard one and booked him on a tour of Italy. The station has produced jazz festival items and distributed them to over 100 other stations. All the music—jazz, blues, African, Cajun, swing, gospel—is related to groups within the community. The full time staff of four is supported by 235 volunteers; 98% of the presenters are volunteers. One third of the R1 440 000 annual budget is from listeners; the Jazz and Heritage Foundation is the licensee. The 50 000 weekly listeners are evenly divided between black and white.**

● **Latin America has the largest number of community radio stations—estimated at over 40 000. Some are operated by unions, churches; other production groups buy time on neighbourhood stations. Many present educational content in an appealing Radio Novela format, radio dramas, free from a didactic narrator. There are rebel stations in El Salvador and in some other countries the state provides some support. A women's network is growing strong as gender becomes a more important social issue.**

Community radio as we've been discussing it is unknown in new democracies of the former Communist bloc. There is no culture of it for the most part and broadcasters are more attracted to capitalism than service. Some sound like American rock stations, even using playlists developed in Paris. There are exceptional stations that reflect the daily life and concerns of the community, but they are relatively few. Radio stations are dependent upon the government for their licence and many leaders still can show displeasure at even balanced reporting.

Back in South Africa, the community radio workers are creating radio unique to their communities and country. Language is in the vernacular, and more fluid, than ever heard on SABC. The style is informal and at the same time done with a professional attentiveness; smooth but not commercially slick and hyped. They speak with authority about the community as no one else can. They are trustworthy centres where people call to tell of abused children or tips on finding murderers. They have quickly become places where people turn for solutions, for making better neighbourhoods.

Looking ahead, this bold beginning will be difficult to maintain. The full potential of both service and creativity is still in the future.

Outside funding may be essential, particularly in rural areas with vast poverty. The Danes have committed R3 million for two years to establish a fund to provide support for equipment, training, operations, programme production and audience surveys which will be administered by the Independent Media Diversity Trust. Matching funds may be provided by the government. Public broadcasting in the relatively affluent U.S. would not have been possible without some federal support, which is 16% for the average station, much higher for community stations serving rural and ethnic minorities. The key is building in safeguards from government interference and a fair and equitable way to distribute the support.

The Open Society Foundation for South Africa, with whom I've worked as a consultant, has provided the largest and most comprehensive support of community radio to date for planning, development, training, equipment and programme production.

A national community radio network would give more visibility to community radio, provide stations with high quality material to extend their broadcast hours, help establish a unique, recognisable community radio style, give outstanding local talent a national audience. Live interconnection will capitalise upon the immediacy of radio and make possible news / information programmes and live event concert broadcasts. This raises the question of whether a community network would compete or complement the evolving public service programming on SABC.

Given the Independent Broadcasting Authority's (IBA) requirement for local content and shortage of material, community stations can play a key role in identifying, recording and distributing South African music.

Tony O'Reilly, owner of Independent Newspapers and Chair of H.J. Heinz, has said that this century was dominated by ideological competition and that the 21st will belong to commercial competition with global marketing to the global consumer.

He said: "Television will further homogenise the cultures of the developed world. It will in turn generate the cosmopolitan aspiration best satisfied by global brands....The final step in the process will be mass communication. And the technology of satellite and cable television will make that possible."

Amidst this global homogenisation, community radio can stand for the strong, rich diversity of life and celebrate the importance of place and the individual voice. A woman who told of being forcibly removed from District Six in Cape Town in an oral history programme summed it up well when she said: "We have a voice and we want to be heard. We don't want to do anything violent. We just want someone to listen to us and to make up for the injustices."

Radio is the most democratic, pervasive and imaginative of media. In a short time community radio in South Africa has demonstrated how much can be done with few resources when backed by dedicated volunteers and a commitment to make a long held vision a reality.

Bill Siemering has been a consultant for the Open Society Foundation for South Africa and is now president of the International Center for Journalists in Washington, D.C.