

In your Ear and in your Face

The new commercial radio stations

After a year in the hot seat, Radio Algoa news editor **NICK GRUBB** takes a look at the new dynamic of commercial radio newsrooms.

The first week was the worst. We're dealing with equipment that the suppliers haven't figured out yet. We have the collective experience of one day in a commercial newsroom. Cause for panic? I think so.

Radio Algoa broke from what's fashionably referred to as the "shackles" of the SABC in April last year. A clean break from the hulking monolith that has housed the Eastern Cape's regional station since 1980. What's more, a divorce from the hundreds of journalists and contributors that made up SABC Radio News.

So there we were. Three journalists with an average age of 30 and more confidence than understanding.

This story is not unique. Give or take a few years of age and possibly a Bachelors of 702, or a Masters in Capital Radio, this scene has played itself out in every major city in South Africa. Commercial radio in the true sense of the word is here, and its impact has been significant enough to raise the ire of some journalism traditionalists, and the eyebrows of its audiences.

The profession has often been criticised for the youthful naiveté that jostles for position at news conferences, sticks its bubblegum under Kader Asmal's conference table, and asks questions that dispense with high-brow analysis in favour of clarity and brevity.

Commercial broadcast journalism has nearly come of age, but in the meantime it's one that will look for Caterpillars over Hush Puppies, and Microsoft over a masters degree.

And it's not the newsrooms that are leading the revolution. Media owners have paid a premium to prise audiences away from the national broadcaster, and they want to enter the market with a bang. They want Johannesburg's urgency in Port Elizabeth. They want Cape Town's fashion in East London.

And they want news to sound as if it's new; as if it happened 10 seconds ago, and as if it might change before you've had a chance to read it.

Radio trainers in South Africa have had a

fascination with how slowly a story can be told. Students are told to halve their conversation speed when addressing a microphone, so that people can understand them. Enter, by BMW, the *mense* with the money, and they've halved the age group, and with it the way you have to attract their attention.

So how do this new breed of media moguls ensure that their audience is satisfied with the news, without having to sacrifice the bottom line?

It's no secret that radio has captured the imagination of the technology vendors. Gone are the days when you could start a radio station for a fraction of the start-up costs of a newspaper. International companies are employing their energies in pushing their boffins towards faster, better, and fully-integrated computer software.

Two of the four news staff in the Radio Algoa newsroom haven't ever had to get out the razor and splice ¼-inch tape for an on-air product. We've never needed a production assistant to prepare audio for bulletins. We do the majority of interviews by way of a telephone hybrid patched through to a digital editor.

Our two senior journalists are duty editors. They cover court stories, political stories, business developments, human interest issues, sport and crime. They edit copy. They write copy. They are sound technicians and computer trouble-shooters. They are skilled, motivated, enthusiastic. They epitomise the new profession. They are hard to come by.

One of our greatest challenges over the past 12 months has been recruitment. An obstacle made more daunting by being in a region that young people with skills deliberately avoid. But the real problem has been a lack of awareness by journalism students that the doors are wide open.

The industry has not had any tertiary institution catering for the specific styles and formats of a commercial station. And why should they? Community radio was tipped to herald the dawn of a new era in South African broadcasting not so long ago. It's certainly more in line with addressing the political and social imbalances of the past. Universities and technicians threw their weight behind community programming and left the money-makers to poach from the only stable of experienced commercial radio people – 702, Capital, and the cream of the SABC. Lured by the bucks.

What makes the new radio newsrooms

unique is that the news aspect is merely one division of many. The commercial side of the business isn't formed around the news, but instead around the entire output, of which our efforts comprise only 45 minutes of a daily 1 440.

So take staff out of the old SABC structure, or the print newsrooms, and they find that they're rubbing shoulders with presenters, music compilers, sound technicians and sales teams. They are not the focal point, and they must keep their end of the product at a sufficient standard to earn their keep.

Being commercial doesn't mean you're compromising on editorial content. You're compromising on costs, and so you need people with a maximum of skills. People who are hungry to make a name for themselves.

The editorial driving force in these new newsrooms comes from the journalists themselves. The role of news editors has changed. We no longer direct, we channel and encourage. Radio journalists are intoxicated by the medium. They are in the public ear, and their names are known.

It's no longer a matter of inputting your story and going home – leaving it in the unpredictable hands of a third party. The journalists are the news. They compile it and are accountable for it. They're in a medium that's trying to gain a foothold in a new market, and it's not their jobs on the line, but their reputations.

What's clear is that 10 years from now our particular species of journalist will not be as foreign. Competition is increasing and this will have an impact on the entire profession. The race to shove microphones in faces is already on in Cape Town and Johannesburg, and that will shake up press and television reporters as well.

In the 12 months since our inception Radio Algoa News has managed to make an impact on the media landscape of the Eastern Cape. The challenges we faced included changing the perceptions of our audience who traditionally have contacted the SABC and the press with news leads. They phone us with almost overwhelming regularity now and research shows we've been successful in establishing a credible and reliable regional service.

With other commercial stations waiting in the wings in the Eastern Cape, electronic news is going to get bigger and better, and with it the popularity of the medium. Maybe it's time for the journalists of an older era to reach for that software manual, and rediscover radio.

