

This is IT?

By Zane Ibrahim

We find that radio request programmes, or “dedications” as they are called in South Africa, decline when the weather is bad. During request programmes community people phone in and ask that we play a song for a loved one, for a wedding, a birthday, or whatever. The reason for a decline on rainy days is that those wanting to make their request to the station’s presenter have to get wet lining up at the call box strapped to a pole in the township.

According to Statistics SA’s October Household Survey for 1999, the number of telephone lines in South Africa rose from 8.31 per 100 inhabitants in 1989 to 12.47 in 1998, while in Malaysia, over the same period, lines rose from 8 per 100 inhabitants to 20.16.

So how do we tackle the scarcity of phones? We simply identify one reliable Bush Radio member of that community and give her or him a phone card. Each day that person makes sure to be at the phone box to activate the card and give the poor, unemployed people of the community, who want to express themselves via the radio, the opportunity to do so.

In a rural community in the Northern Cape, the people received equipment for a community radio station from the Department of Communications (DoC). The station came complete with a couple of computers.

The only problem is, nobody told the person running the telephone service office 200 kilometres away, about the importance of this radio station.

When I first visited the station, three years after they had been broadcasting, they still did not have a phone. In my urgent phone call to the director of the phone company, I had to use all my skills as a communicator and as an African elder to cajole him into getting his people to install a phone at the station.

When that did not work I tried another approach. I made him an offer he could not refuse. The phone was installed the next morning at nine o’clock. Pretending to be a sangoma (medicine man) with strange powers does have its benefits.

These are only two examples of how difficult we have had it on the ground when it comes to making use of information technology.

When a radio station servicing a quarter of a million people cannot have access to a phone and has to use expensive computers as typewriters WITH screens but WITHOUT ribbons, it is time for us to ask ourselves who is going to gain from this hardware dumping that we have been on the receiving end of, and why we are allowing it to continue?

We fully support the efforts of the DoC in their commitment to a strong grassroots media sector but we have very strong suspicions of those umbrella bodies and donor agencies that are always ready to supply stations with state of the art technology and then leave them to find their way without as much as a training leaflet.

The scary part is when these donor agencies or their lap dogs running the local and regional umbrella organisations come to monitor and evaluate us. And they do come... behaving just like weapons inspectors... but friendly.

As mature media activists we have to account for why there are upwards of 100 000 experts from the North running around our continent, trying to develop us, while we see none of our qualified media activists being utilised in that role.

We had to answer this question recently, when Bush Radio hosted an expert from Europe to come and help us sort out a technical problem with our broadcast equipment. After a two-week stay our equipment was in worse shape than ever before.

Soon thereafter we hosted a person from Zambia, Ned Chivube. When Mr. Chivube left, our station was running better than ever, and he trained the young people at the station to do simple repairs to microphones and headsets.

Whereas northern hemisphere experts come in at \$500 a day, plus expenses, Mr. Chivube cost us a return bus ticket from Lusaka. He came because he cares about us. Because he wants a strong Africa in the future, unfettered by the mercenaries we are presently inundated with.

Southern Africa has enough “experts” with varied skills and we have to be extremely cautious when we enter into “partnerships” with those with questionable agendas, hell bent on becoming our saviours. We should learn to turn to our Ned Chivubes more often.

We fully understand that we will have to get a grip on the new technology but understanding how to use this technology is far more important than getting hold of the latest toys.

We must remember: our underdevelopment is a major industry and only 11 cents out of every dollar that is earmarked for our development, really reaches us. And, technology is not the saviour – the great social and economic equaliser. It is a tool. A tool that will help us overcome many difficulties we now face in Africa.

If we can identify scrupulous partners who believe that we should in the future benefit equally from any new technological developments, then we will not have to hang our heads in shame when our children one day, pointing to our diminished natural resources, our barren lands, exclaim in horror: “This is IT?”.

I challenge all senior media practitioners and information technology activists to take some time out from their frantic pursuit of power and self gain and turn their attention to the future of our children by making informed decisions when it comes to how we can best grapple with the issue of technology.

One of the world’s great development activists, the late Prince Claus of the Netherlands, insisted that “one cannot develop a people, they have to develop themselves”.

Let us take up this challenge and take ownership of our own development.

Zane Ibrahim was born on the slopes of Table Mountain in 1941. Driven into exile in 1967 he returned to head Bush Radio in the newly democratic South Africa. He frequently travels throughout Southern Africa assisting in establishing grassroots community radio stations in rural areas.
zibrahim@xs4all.nl



of people’s rights to privacy having been infringed during apartheid, through all kinds of brutality.

He: But now with the new laws it looks like they’re forgetting?

I: Yes. And if we forget these things, we could end up in the same kinds of situations we had been in before.

He looks grave. Thinking again.

He: Now can I read the article you wrote?

I: No.

He: Why not?

I: Because it’s not what I wanted it to be. I wanted to talk about Intellectual Property Rights and the Information Society in relation to stuff like memory, heritage and ownership. And it’s just ended up in a bit of a jumble. Now the thing makes no sense.

He: What’s the Information Society?

I: Just the words they use to define this new society that these laws speak to. In the draft document – that they’re still arguing about (thankfully) – the Information Society is defined as being “characterised by universal access to and use of information for the creation, accumulation and dissemination of knowledge. In this society, new technologies, in particular ICTs, become an essential tool”.

He: Okay, I see.

I don’t know if he’s understood what I meant, but I suppose the conversation has come to a close for now. I wonder if they would mind if I wrote the conversation as my own. I wonder if they would mind if I registered it, copyrighted it, patented it. My invention. My words. For the sake of posterity, the conversation will have been recorded.

Sonja Boezak has worked in varying capacities in communications and media. She now lives in Nieu Bethesda in the Small Karoo in South Africa. sonja@ananzi.co.za