



Neo Ntsona

*Zane Ibrahim pays tribute to the early grassroots activists who moved community radio out of apartheid control and into community vibrancy.*

In the early 1990s, progressive South African communication activists didn't want the state broadcast propaganda machine to continue to fuel the airwaves and control information. They knew they had to look at other countries to develop the best environment for communication in South Africa. The Jabulani Freedom of the Airwaves Conference, held in Amsterdam in August 1991, laid a foundation for the recognition of three tiers of broadcasting in South Africa, community, commercial and public radio. The conference reinforced the call for an independent authority to regulate broadcasting, and eventually led to the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act of 1993.

In the live audience at a television broadcast about the Jabulani Conference, discussing the future of broadcasting in South Africa, sat a few activists who were to play an important role in the next decade of broadcasting in our country.

Lumko Mtimde was a student at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). He led the student activists at UWC in pressuring the still white-controlled government to commit itself to the development of community radio in the country. After years

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of listening to “his Master’s voice” in a monopolised broadcast environment, the voiceless needed to begin expressing their opinions and having conversations, which had been suppressed under the “divide, rule and ignore” policies of apartheid-generated information. Community radio was seen as a means to provide alternative information for disadvantaged communities. To ensure a people-driven solution became more and more urgent in the times of negotiating a political settlement.

At first, it was hard going for Mtimde and his comrades – until they were approached by a small group of white liberals and conscientious objectors who were dabbling in guerrilla radio. Driven by the desire to circulate alternative opinions and ideas, these people, led by Edric Gorfinkel, Gabriel Urgoiti, Sandile Dikeni, Hein Marais and the indefatigable grassroots radio activist Tracey Naughton, were learning about how to access airwaves. They started by making programmes and circulating cassette tapes to taxis which transported the voiceless.

It’s important to note that at that time, UWC was one of the non-elite universities in the country without their own radio station. As they believed

in a “people’s university” being community-based, they encouraged students to set up their station at an off-campus location. It was the beginning of a new media model for South Africa – a radio station not owned by either the apartheid state or commercial barons. This concept was in line with the UWC’s transformation programme, intended to ensure community participation in university life.

The amalgamation resulted in what is now called Bush Radio, named after the UWC which was lovingly called “bush college” by students who first attended there in the early 1960s. Students from UWC were active participants in the project. Bush radio today still services the broad Cape Flats community, including UWC.

After he graduated from UWC, Mtimde, still at the forefront of the community media movement, was commissioned by the Bush Radio co-ordinating committee to establish an office of the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF), which was later officially launched in Soweto.

The NCRF was set up to mobilise communities for an enabling legislative environment for the community radio sector, and to provide a platform



for co-ordination and networking. It capacitated a number of communities to start community radio stations. The vision was a blooming of community radio stations all over the country and a lobbying mechanism to promote this. Today this has become a reality.

Under Mtimde's leadership, the NCRF won the AMARC International Community Radio Award in 1994. It was also a recognition of the contribution of South African activists to the development of community radio stations worldwide. After a few years of hard work and putting the NCRF on a solid foundation, setting up the AMARC Africa office, and serving as its first president, Mtimde was invited to join the newly formed Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), where he played an important part in the formulation of its community broadcasting policy. He got involved in the merging of the IBA with the telecommunications regulator (SATRA) and joined the Department of Communications (DoC).

His presence in the DoC brought infrastructure and programme production support to over 30 community radio stations in poor rural areas who, until then, had been excluded from the early rush for broadcasting licences from the IBA in 1995/96.

The establishment of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) is another example of the results of successful advocacy work. Many special interest groups applied for geographic licences, because it was difficult to receive special interest licences at first. The NCRF argued that those who had been the most oppressed by apartheid, needed more time and support to take up the available frequencies. The then Minister of Communications Jay Naidoo was concerned that granting broadcasting licences to special interest groups would result in poor communities being, once more, marginalised. In fact today, the faith-based and other special interest stations have the most listeners in the country.

Will this growing trend affect the survival of geographic stations having no particular constituency to turn to for support?

The adage think globally and act locally is useful. But in South Africa we still need to think and talk locally before we can tackle the broader issues. We must remember, the majority of the population is black and historically marginalised. In rural areas they are still enslaved to the same farmer families as their grandparents were. There is much to do for a community communication system, providing real and necessary information. Geographic radio stations serve the majority of community members. The government support through DoC, MDDA and the Government Communications and Information Services (GCIS), is intended to empower these communities in order to encourage economic growth.

Joe Mjwara, who was also present at the TV interviews related to the Jabulani Conference 1991 in the Netherlands, was, and still is, a strong advocate for the rights of poor rural communities and the use of community radio for them. He comes from the ranks of Radio Freedom, the voice of the African National Congress in exile. He was invited by the then Department of Post and Telecommunications to establish the DoC and became its deputy director. Under his guidance, and with the support of Mtimde, the DoC has made it possible for poor communities to express themselves.

The law differentiates between community, commercial and public radio; as a result, for example, application fees and license fees vary between these categories. Community radio stations are subsidised by the government. Mjwara (under the leadership of Andile Ngcaba) made it possible that

community radio stations were allocated funding by the national treasury. Today the DoC supports infrastructure, programme production and capacity building through the National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa (NEMISA).

Edric Gorfinkel, a strong proponent of community radio, who saw the potential of low power FM as a tool for development, was also among the TV studio audience in the Netherlands and led the group around Mtimde and his students. Gorfinkel and Sandile Dikeni, a well-known poet and writer and now political editor of *ThisDay*, were making recordings of speeches by prominent anti-apartheid leaders and distributing the tapes in the townships. They convinced the students that it needed their co-operation and unity to pressure the government to free the airwaves.

John van Zyl, then a professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, was part of the delegation of South Africans who attended the Jabulani Conference in the Netherlands. He was a special guest at the TV broadcast. At the end of the interview, when asked if he had any dreams, he answered: "Yes, I would like to see the entire broadcasting system of the Netherlands transplanted to South Africa."

Many would have disagreed with this sentiment, then and now, because the contexts were too different to enable a grafting of one system on another. But we know that there were people looking for a shape for South Africa's future broadcasting environment. The Netherlands had everything South Africa did not have: an independent public service instead of a state-monopolised propaganda machine; a commercial sector that offered lifestyle choices and a vibrant independent community broadcasting sector. All this, overseen by an independent regulator.

Fast forwarding to the present day, we witness a much divided sector with those radio stations classified as geographical more likely to have to struggle for survival than those who are servicing an interest group. The broadcasting system, at all levels, relies on good commercial revenue, which broadcasters can only achieve through the wealthiest listeners.

It is also interesting to note that the geographically-based stations are managed by people of an average age of 27, while the average age of the management of the special interest, and mostly faith-based stations, is 40 years. The latter group is usually better educated and more likely to have previous experience in broadcasting, largely as a result of being previously advantaged.

The chasm between these two groups is known to be quite worrisome to many activists who had been fighting hard in the past to rid the country of petty divisions. One remarkable difference is that over 90% of the stations owned by special interest groups have membership in the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), while all the geographically-based stations are members of the NCRF. Sadly, this divide essentially represents a racial divide as well, with some elements of class division. Several attempts to have some co-operative relationship between these two umbrella organisations have not gone beyond unenthusiastic gestures and draft memoranda of understanding.

Change would mean discomfort, hard work on building tolerance, suspending judgement, and serious commitment to sociological bridge-building. People who are in positions of power and comfort have not historically been known to relinquish these.

A scandalous trend has developed in the sector over the past 10 years. Self-serving individuals and groups, some who have worked in and often have only a minimal understanding of the working of

community radios, have emerged as self-appointed saviours of the sector. As an example, we will see individuals, who are involved in environment, primary health care or gender issues, for instance, approach overseas donors or organisations with similar interests and solicit funding to establish a production facility. They will then produce programmes dealing with the respective issues and then distribute the programmes to the community radio stations in the country.

These opportunists convince the often unsuspecting contributor that the stations do not have the capacity or ability to produce programmes and that the community urgently needs the programmes they aim to produce. For obvious reasons, these programmes are seldom of good quality.

One popular way to get the poor rural stations to "buy in", is to transport young station managers to Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town and put them up in a three-star hotel for a week of "workshop". Nothing excites a station manager from a poor rural area more than the prospect of spending a week in comparative luxury – one from a rural Northern Province station once spent six months of the year in Johannesburg, attending workshops.

This is exacerbated by the fact that many of the donors, who support the community radio sector in South Africa, in order to make their work easier, prefer to deal with the umbrella bodies and the many fly-by-night production houses that have sprouted up in the country during the last 10 years. As a result, there are now increasingly more people living off the community radio sector than in it.

The DoC's programme identified this problem and developed a plan to capacitate communities within their stations, drawing participation from surrounding NGOs and CBOs to produce such programmes on their own.

Community radio is 90% community and 10% radio. So why has it been so hard for the geographic stations to sustain themselves? One answer is that there is nothing "African" about the radio stations in question, which is to say, we've inadvertently allowed ourselves to be persuaded into accepting a Eurocentric broadcasting model. We need to trust that our own voices, our own thoughts and our own cultural approaches are the best for us, and not try to emulate sounds from other nations, not even from the city. It will take time to bring forward our own trainers, and to keep them away from what appear to be more attractive, lucrative jobs in the policy sector. While it is important that community radio has been a training ground, it has now to be seen as a place to make a career.

To our north, the Zambians are slowly and methodically establishing stations that are dynamic, relevant and delightfully "African". A small radio station in the rural town of Chipata, an eight-hour drive from Lusaka, has been able to ignite the imagination of the community like few others on the continent. In one of the daily programmes old Gogo Breeze and his granddaughter answer enquiries from listeners. Gogo Breeze receives about 200 letters a week, requesting advice on how to resolve marital problems, about best agricultural practices or problems with civic authorities. Gogo's research team includes community members from all walks of life, who volunteer during a certain time at the radio station. Mike Daka, one of the continent's most respected media veterans, runs Breeze FM, which is an interesting blend of a commercial station with public service values. Perhaps, finally, we are seeing here a station that our economy and donors are able to support, and which acts to support and develop the community it serves.



**Zane Ibrahim** entered an extensive programme in cross cultural conflict resolution after his studies in broadcast communications. From 1970 he has devoted his energies building the micro-broadcasting sector worldwide. After his return from exile in 1994 he's been playing 'midwife' to Bush Radio – "The Mother of Community Radio in Africa".