



# Cinderella television

*Community TV is poised to become a really important media player, says Karen Thorne.*

I wrote an article on community television for the *Rhodes Journalism Review* in December 1996. Written three years after the promulgation of the Independent Broadcasting Act (IBA) of 1993, which first introduced the notion of community television as a broadcasting service owned and controlled by the community it serves, the article was filled with heady optimism and enthusiasm for the challenges ahead.

It soon became clear that struggle for public access to the powerful medium of television was far from over. For a long time it appeared as if the political will to make community TV a reality was lacking as the IBA and then the Independent Communications Authority (Icasa) sent mixed messages to community TV stakeholders eager to get on air.

## Regulatory drags and snags

Rather than developing a holistic broadcasting strategy, taking into account the limited frequencies available and the need to develop a three-tiered broadcasting system, including public, private and community, Icasa adopted a piecemeal approach to broadcasting reform in response to the significant pressures placed on it by powerful interest groups. Very much at the bottom of the pecking order, CTV had to wait patiently at the back of the queue.

Icasa finally released a position paper that enables the establishment of requirements that community-based non-profit groupings will need to meet to get full-time, four-year licences or special-event licences of up to one year in duration. Icasa plans to call for applications sometime in 2005 or 2006.

## So what has community TV been doing?

Despite the absence of support from key decision makers, the community TV sector went about building a base for community TV in different parts of the

country.

Media activists rallied together to form the Open Window Network (Own) in 1995 to represent the interests of community TV stakeholders nationally. Own established its head office at Cosatu House in Johannesburg alongside the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) with whom it work closely for many years.

Recognising that it may take many years for community TV to get on air, and that the community TV sector needed some time to develop production capacity, Own lobbied the SABC to sign a declaration of intent supporting the development of community TV through access to production facilities and "public access time slots" on public television.

The declaration was signed in May 1996 and subsequent community TV special events broadcasts have successfully used this partnership to gain access to SABC resources for broadcasting purposes.

Greater Durban Television (GDTV) has been successful at bringing together a number of stakeholder organisations and a large volunteer base to mount no less than four special events broadcasts over the past 10 years and are aiming at applying for a four-year license as soon as this is possible.

Cape Town has seen two special events broadcasts. The first, in 1995, when the Film and Allied Workers Organisation (Fawo) piggy-backed radical, activist programming on the back of a special events broadcast of the Rugby World Cup in 1995, which made for a very interesting programming mix.

Then again in 1998, the Community Broadcast Channel, dominated largely by black independent film makers and producers, broadcast popular local programming for 15 days.

In response to recent regulatory developments, a group of media NGOs, under the auspices of the Cape Town Community TV Collective are spear-

heading the establishment of a community TV station in Cape Town.

Cue TV, a Rhodes University journalism department media project has successfully broadcast the National Arts Festival via a special events license in 1998.

However, community TV is not only about broadcasting, but is about creating community access to the means to produce and exhibit content by and for the community. Broadcasting will simply add value to these efforts.

The idea of locally based video access centres (VACs) has received much support as a mechanism to promote access to facilities and production-based training to boost the production capacity of community TV.

The Own community video access centre (C-Vac) was piloted in KwaZulu-Natal with great success, including the establishment of a number of community news programming units in and around Durban until its closure in 2001.

Organisations such as the Community Video Education Trust (CVET) in Cape Town and the Newtown Film and Television School (NFTS) in Johannesburg have been around since the 70s and 80s providing entry level training to a generation of emerging filmmakers.

The Film Resource Unit (FRU) may have found the answer to community TV in rural areas through their plan to establish video resource centres in the context of multi-purpose community centres countrywide. The centres would be concerned with both the exhibition of local South African content as well as local production.

In addition to these production, exhibition and broadcasting efforts, much work has been done to research and develop appropriate models for community TV in South Africa.

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The C-Peg model, developed through research commissioned by Own and conducted by Mike Aldridge in 1997, envisaged a partnership between the public, educational institutions and government, with a commercial programming segment. The consortium model, developed by Own-Gauteng and based on Melbourne Community Television brought media NGOs with production capacity and resources into partnership with community groups.

Research by Mikhail Peppas, a key player in Greater Durban TV, proposes among other things the use of cellphone technology to bounce a signal to one's TV.

The Human Sciences Research Council's Social Integration and Identity Unit is currently working with community TV stakeholders groups nationally to develop business models and other national strategies aimed at promoting the sustainable development of community television. Research findings will be presented at a national consultation workshop in Johannesburg in November 2005.

### **The future is now**

I may be forced to eat my words in another 10 years time but when Icasa finally gets around to licensing community television stations, I believe that South Africa will be taken by surprise.

Frustrated by lack of access to other broadcasters, untapped creative talent is gravitating to community TV as a potential outlet. Community television is in a position to bring together this emerging, local talent with NGOs tackling important social issues, community structures, educational institutions, sports organisations and other stakeholders to create a vision for broadcasting that is uniquely in touch with the communities it serves.

Icasa's planning, or lack thereof, may well turn to our advantage as community TV has virtually no competition in the form of regional commercial or public television, notwithstanding the two new SABC "regional" services, if or when they come on stream.

So despite the delays and the regulatory snags the future for community TV looks good. Cinderella has finally arrived at the ball and she is by far the hottest babe in the room. Now would be a jolly good time to notice. ■