

# It's the community in community radio

*The value and purpose of community broadcasting, says Mbuyisi Mgibisa, is located within its founding philosophy – 'to give a voice to the voiceless'.*

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Community radio stations in South Africa are mandated by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) to provide members of the community access to the airwaves and to offer them diversified programming that reflects their interests and needs. According to Icasa's regulations, members of the community have to participate at all levels of the community broadcast entity.

But, it is community participation in the selection and provision of programming that underpins the democratic values of community radio. This aspect of participation is not just through letters, phone-ins, musical requests, on-air competitions, greetings and dedications and simple conversations, but the involvement and participation of community members in the actual design, implementation and evaluation of stations' programming schedules.

It is the participation of community members in programming decisions that upholds community radio as a locus of a truly democratic media.

In their written proposals applying to obtain licenses, most stations promise to facilitate methods that ensure that community members participate in the selection and provision of programmes.

They promise to establish programming committees consisting of members of the community. The ideal is that members of the community will be afforded an opportunity to critique the stations' programming and suggest new programming ideas.

ABC Ulwazi, a Johannesburg-based training and production house for educational radio programming, launched a "listener's association" early this year – a unique model developed by community stakeholders and stations.

According to ABC Ulwazi, the short-term goal of the association is to encourage local experts and opinion formers to participate in community radio programming. Adele Mostert, ABC Ulwazi's productions and marketing manager, points out that the long-term objective, however, is "content generation by the community, which is specific to their needs and context".

"We don't believe that radio consumption should be a passive process, that's not the type of radio we're about," she says.

## The essential question

The essential question for community radio stations today is not whether community members are able to control the medium technically, culturally and politically, but rather to what extent they are involved in programming decisions at their stations.

Community radio stations, punted as the solution to the problem of reaching and representing communities who are geographically distant, poor and therefore not attractive to advertisers, or which carry content not driven by the primary purpose of

providing audiences for advertisers, often struggle to collaborate effectively with community members in the creation of programming that both reflects their interests and development needs.

I spoke to various people working in the community radio sector to gauge what type of barriers stations encounter in their quest to ensure community participation in programming decisions.

I asked four stations the following questions:

- What mechanisms do stations have to ensure access of community members to programmes?
- Do community members have any say in what types of programmes go on air?
- Does the station change and adapt its programmes in response to feedback from the listeners?

Modise Lobelo, station manager at Vryburg Community Radio in North West Province, says the station invites members of the community into meetings where programming issues are to be discussed. According to him, there is low turnout in those meetings despite the fact that the meetings are well publicised.

"There's too much apathy among community members. They show less interest in programming issues. Maybe they don't understand that programming content affects their own lives. This is very regrettable," he says.

The station decided to review its programmes every six months by offering listeners an opportunity to phone-in on-air and voice their opinions about programmes and presenters.

"This had a positive impact on our programming content and quality of our presenters. We had to respond to the issues raised by our listeners and adapt our programmes according to their needs and wants."

Programme producer at Eastern Cape-based Vukani Community Radio, Siyanda Mdzeke, says the station's programme team, which is made up of staff and volunteers, does programme planning, action timetable creation, and brainstorming and goal-setting sessions every month.

In short, the programming staff and volunteers are the driving force behind the programming decisions of the station. His case, however, shows that the station finds it difficult to involve rural communities in programming decisions.

"The problem is that many people that the station serves are mostly rural and face severe economic and resource limitations. These people have much to do responding to their hardship rather than waste their time on programming issues, which may not affect their lives directly," he says.

Many people, he says, including staff and volunteers, believe that programming should be the sole responsibility of those who've been around the station for many years.

"People are not necessarily interested in the selection and provision of programmes. Therefore, the main challenge for us is to go directly to the communities and ask them about their communication needs."

Happy Bongoza, a programme manager at Unitra Community Radio, points out that the sole reason for the existence of the station is its listeners. But he agrees that the station, which has 406 000 listeners according to the latest Radio Audience Measurement Survey figures, has paid lip service to the importance of involving community members in the selection and provision of programmes.

"We have not set our priorities right. We fail to initiate mechanisms that would initiate and encourage this form of participation. We need to address the issue because it is critically important.

"We thought that people wouldn't be interested in programming issues, but we now realise that it is a very important legislative requirement," he says.

## Crafting rights

Many people, in his opinion, are not aware of their rights to participate in the process of crafting and designing programmes. "It's very important that the station should tell people about their right to participate in programming decisions. The station must deliver a product that meets listener's expectations, needs and wants."

He says the station is involved in a process to gauge the needs and interests of its listeners through a community-mapping exercise and has received practical support from the Department of Communications.

Station manager at Botlokwa Community Radio in Northern Province, Mpho Raphahlelo, says research into the needs and wants of listeners is vitally important, but this usually involves a lot of money which the station doesn't have.

"It is a big challenge to involve members of the community in important issues of the station. People believe that as staff and presenters possess the essential knowledge to craft the programming according to people's interests and needs. We want people to come in and participate, but people generally won't come," he says.

He feels that people's participation in the station is still in traditional form. "People see their role in terms of participation through phone-ins or talk programmes, dedications and greetings, and music requests."

Community participation in the selection and provision of programming is the most distinguishing characteristic of community radio. Community stations can contribute to programme diversity with real alternatives of scope and genre only if members of the community directly influence the programming content. ■