

WEST MEETS EAST IN GRAHAMSTOWN

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If one was to write about the great potential of community broadcasting in southern Africa, the story would not be complete if one did not tell the story of how one afternoon in 2010, the small city of Grahamstown stood still in order to debate its proposed name change.

Residents from different sections of the city were packed into the tiny studios of Radio Grahamstown behind the *Grocott's Mail* offices to participate in the live debate on the name change.

There were several organisations actively involved in the name change debate such as the name change committee, headed by Julia Wells, who is also a member of the African National Congress (ANC), the Eastern Cape Geographical Names Committee (ECGNC), represented by Advocate Loyiso Mpumlwana and Keep Grahamstown Grahamstown's (KGG), represented by Jock McConnachie and Sigidla Ndumo.

Some of the organisations involved in the name change debate had serious antagonistic relationships and refused to be in the studio at the same time. It took a lot of cajoling and serious negotiation on the part of the producers to convince them to sit across from each other and discuss the issue.

It was also the first time that residents of both Grahamstown east and west converged to discuss a particular issue. The name change debate was very fierce indeed with several parties involved questioning each others' views and claiming that the opposing organisations were trying to hijack the process.

Those who were pro-name change argued that the name was a colonial relic while those who were anti-name change argued that it would be too costly to change, and that there should rather be a focus on service delivery issues which plague the city. Such is the potential of community media – it can create a space for different sections of a town to come together and discuss issues.

Given the social and economic realities of Grahamstown, community media plays a pivotal role in providing for the information needs of the poorer residents of Grahamstown east. The Iindaba Ziyafika project which was launched by Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies in 2009 and sought to impact "the poorer residents of Grahamstown, whose voices and information sources are currently constrained in terms of newspaper and web access" (Berger 2007) managed to rejuvenate community

broadcasting and also give a voice to marginalised communities.

The Iindaba Ziyafika project enabled the training of citizen journalists in different aspects of news production. The citizen journalists work alongside professional journalists in the community radio station, Radio Grahamstown. Professionals and amateurs work together to produce the *Lunch Time Live* and *Drive Time Live* news bulletins.

Community radio enables an interesting symbiotic relationship with professional journalists and amateurs. Citizen journalists and professional journalists bring different dimensions to the relationship. Citizen journalism brings knowledge of Grahamstown and relationships and contacts with residents in the townships while professional journalism brings the expertise and techniques of professional practice, which enables effective engagement with those in power in the city.

An interesting outcome of this relationship is that the citizen journalists see their relationship with professionals as a way to learn and to make possible their own stepping stone into formalised, professional journalism. This relationship comes to bear on information dissemination as professionals and amateurs work together to produce good programmes. This relationship is very beneficial for the poorer residents of Grahamstown who get information from the radio station.

In the case of Radio Grahamstown, radio seems to have a great capacity to draw citizens into debates. This is because the use of voice escapes the formalised conventions of print and it allows citizens and citizen journalists to use their own language, isiXhosa, thus providing an element of familiarity and ease with the medium. Radio Grahamstown has also enlarged a local public sphere and created much excitement and expectation among local residents. This is particularly important as there are high illiteracy levels in Grahamstown so the majority of the people listen to radio rather than buying the local paper, *Grocott's Mail*.

Community media is important in Africa as people tell their stories through

radio and print because the majority of the people do not necessarily have access to the internet. In the case of Radio Grahamstown it enables broadcasting in indigenous languages. This is very empowering as it reduces barriers to entry and creates a platform for cultural expression.

Community media gives an opportunity to citizen journalists to integrate communication brokering as part and parcel of their practice. This is because the citizen journalists based at Radio Grahamstown have made it their mandate to enable the flow of information between the residents and the local government authority, a characteristic which benefits not just their reporting but also is a small step towards enabling active citizenship. This happens in cases where the radio station has facilitated communication between the municipal authority and the local residents over service delivery issues.

Citizen journalists also play a public service role and, in one incident, a citizen journalist helped to raise funds for the burial of a Grahamstown teenager who died in Johannesburg, by getting the community to contribute towards the burial. This illustrates that the citizens see themselves as embedded in their community and feel obligated to use their practice to solve their problems whenever they can. The citizen journalists go beyond just covering stories as they closely identify with the community.

Given that Radio Grahamstown is staffed by individuals who come from the community there is a deliberate stance to include those who are not ordinarily given a voice in the mainstream media. Women and the poor appear frequently in stories as sources and this is a different scenario from mainstream journalism which frequently covers the rich and the powerful. In covering ordinary people, citizen journalists make a deliberate effort to place emphasis on highlighting their plight. Community media in this instance embodies alternative news values as the citizen journalists produce news which seeks to speak directly to the people for whom it is produced, for it is produced by citizen journalists who share the same concerns with the generality of the citizens.

The citizen journalists in the Iindaba Ziyafika project do indeed embody the values of alternative media and they identify with the concerns of the community, as they are also resident there. This characteristic of community media enables a bonded sense of community between the listeners and the journalists while facilitating a practice that is valuable.

It cannot be over emphasised that Radio Grahamstown has provided a space for deliberation between different facets of the community and there is need for support of this endeavour taking into account factors such as language and the use of the most accessible media to the people. The composition and constitution of the public sphere created by *Lunch Time Live* does give the community a means for expression and an opportunity to propagate their ideas and opinions.

The producers at Radio Grahamstown say that they go beyond the ordinary story as they want to affect change in their community. They don't simply cover stories but desire to give people a voice. When a fire destroyed the home of a family in Grahamstown, the station tried to assist the family by giving listeners a mobile phone number that they could contact to offer assistance to the victims.

Community radio also gives amateurs a platform to seek new ways of presenting news bulletins in creative, unconventional formats. The citizen journalists are given a platform for creative expression within the news bulletin that they produce as they use the cultural resources from their communities, in the form of music and language.

Presenters use their clan names during the bulletins and also make use of their totems in introducing themselves. The bulletins produced by the citizen journalists are also populist as popular songs are played between segments in the bulletin. The music is drawn from a variety of artists and is sometimes used for advocacy purposes.

Although citizen journalism in Grahamstown is institutionalised with a newspaper and an online version, it is empowering the local community as Radio Grahamstown now broadcasts news and Grahamstown East can witness itself in the news media. Although an unexpected development, this feature has shown what a blend of professional and amateur journalism, which uses different mediums, treats news as a process as well as a series of events, reaches into communities with a concern to hear their voices and raise their issues, can do.

In conclusion, community radio is important as it gives a voice to poverty stricken communities who cannot afford to buy newspapers. This is especially important at this historical juncture when the public sphere is shrinking, as it provides space for communities to deliberate on issues which are of paramount importance to them.



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