

Do more. Enjoy more freedom.

young and
MEDIATED

Young people in South Africa, like everyone else, have a constitutional right to public participation and to influence decision making. The concept of media diversity in this country makes it possible for media to play a special role in promoting active citizenry.

By Bongzi Bozo & Aniela Batschari



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There are about 30 community publications and 20 community radio stations in the Eastern Cape, but few of these consider the youth as part of their target group.

Community media contributes to media pluralism by presenting the voices of the voiceless, especially those at grassroots level. They give a platform to present the diverse views and opinions of ordinary citizens on political, social and cultural issues.

Local independent media play a watchdog role, disseminate information, and play an educational and entertaining role. With relevant community media citizens are well informed and able to participate as active citizens in democratic processes of the country. Based on its mandate, community media seem to be the ideal tool to engage with youth in the country. Yet, how does it look on the ground? In what ways are community media contributing to assisting the youth in the country establish their civic identity? There is a gap as young people seem to neither be considered as a relevant target group nor are they adequately represented by community media. Although there are about 30 community publications and 20 community radio stations in the Eastern Cape, few of them consider the youth as part of their target group. Most of the community media available seem to ignore this group although they have a mandate as community based media to present to the entire community they serve.

By working closely with community media in the province, the ECCF¹ has witnessed many concepts being presented to the forum to specifically attract this market. However, only a few manage to stay in the market. The main reason being the lack of entrepreneurial skills and consequently funding constraints. The support of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) is assisting in that domain and makes it possible for some publications to break into the market. For instance, *Imonti Education Express* is a youth publication launched in the province in 2012. With funding from the MDDA, the newspaper manages to cover its printing costs and various start-up costs. However, the newspaper seems to be irrelevant to the market it aims to target. The amount of free copies sitting at WSU's Department of Media Studies speaks for itself. Why is there limited interest from the youth? A group of journalism students, who were asked by the ECCF to give input on the concept of this publication, responded that the name was not appealing to youth. It was too long and not catchy. The same was raised about the layout which was regarded as not appealing.

A similar response is common among the students when engaging in critiquing sessions of other community media publications. Based on these observations, it can be argued that young people find community media irrelevant. It seems that community media are neglecting the youth by neither making an effort to be more appealing to young people nor presenting their voices.

Successful projects

Research conducted by Media Management students from the Sol Plaatje Institute (SPI) in 2009 provides evidence that the youth are attracted by different things in a publication. The research subject was the *Upstart* Newspaper Project, a project founded in 2008, written

for the youth by the youth. The research revealed that young people want a different use of language and not the technical language that journalists normally use in their writing. They also want more colour. Most of the young people who participated in the focus group interview were more attracted to *Upstart* because they could contribute to the content, and they knew someone their age was producing the content. *Upstart* is a successful newspaper that seems to provide a voice for the voiceless youth by giving them a platform to express their views in the form of letters or poetry, an unusual style compared to traditional journalism.

A similar initiative was *Indaba Ziyafika* ("News is coming"), a project implemented by the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies (JMS) and Radio Grahamstown. The project involved learners from 16 schools around Grahamstown. As part of the project, *Y4Y* was a youth radio show produced by the youth for the youth to discuss socio-economic issues. The topics of discussions were usually drawn from national news. The learners would then engage with the topic and share their views and opinions as citizens on the subject. The social network Mxit was used to engage with listeners at home to enable them to contribute to the discussion in studio.

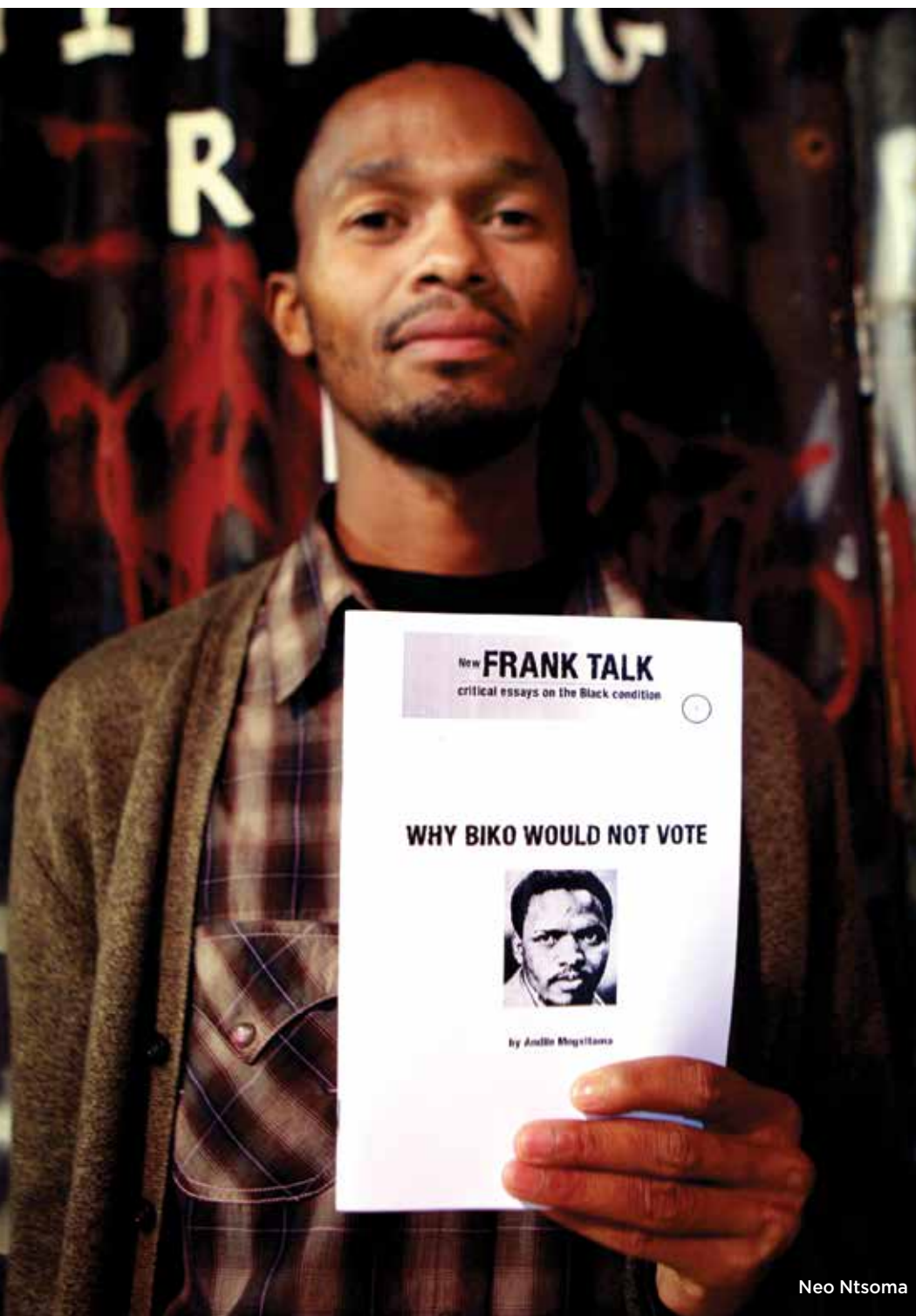
However, it should be noted that the success of both projects relied on adequate funding available, and a support system provided by Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies (JMS). This ranged from provision of office space, journalism student and support staff volunteers, and supervision by lecturers.

Municipal Matters

The ECCF had similar experiences and learnt similar lessons during the implementation of the Municipal Matters project in 2012 and 2013. Municipal Matters is a training and campaigning initiative for small, local, independent media in the Eastern Cape. It aims to improve reporting skills on municipal issues and to challenge local media organisations to move beyond just reporting, but to consider innovative initiatives that engage the community on issues that are relevant to them. The project is all about local media empowering community members to practice their democratic rights. It therefore has the potential to help people establish their civic identity and to become active engaged citizens.

Three small, local newspapers initiated dialogues in their communities – *Skawara News* in Cofimvaba hosted dialogues on xenophobia and littering in the community. *Zithethele*, based in Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality, hosted a dialogue on sanitation in KwaZakhele and on xenophobia in Uitenhage. *Eastern Cape Today*, based in East London, hosted a dialogue on access to public health services in Mdantsane. All dialogues were a success as they brought a new communication platform to communities which had never experienced this kind of exchange before.

In organising the dialogues the ECCF, together with the media organisations, carefully considered who best to invite as panellists to share experiences, provide information and answer questions on a specific topic.



Neo Ntsoma

Panellists were briefed to keep the dialogue interactive and were cautioned not to veer into a monologue. The topics chosen for the dialogues were in response to what the newspapers picked up as relevant issues through their readers.

Ikamva laseGcuwa introduced a page dedicated to municipal matters in their monthly 16-page newspaper. The page is set up as a series to profile the 31 wards of Mnquma local municipality with three wards per edition. The ward profile includes general information (villages, schools, education level and number of residents), snippets of the reviewed Integrated

Development Plan (IDP) budget 2010/2011, as well as a response from the ward councillor, and comments from the community.

Another initiative is a weekly one-hour long programme on municipal matters broadcast on Wild Coast FM, a community radio station in Sunrise-on-Sea, outside of East London. The show consists of pre-recorded interviews, voxpops and information on municipal issues such as audit reports, the IDP, council meetings and ward committees.

Community media – small, local, independent newspapers and community radio stations – are predominantly run by young people. While the management sometimes falls outside the category that defines youth in South Africa, the age group 14 to 35, those involved in developing, producing and presenting programmes almost without exception all belong to youth. Therefore community media is ideally positioned to play a role in making young people more aware of who they are as a young person, and where they fit in society.

All reporters who participated in and benefited from the Municipal Matters project fall in the category of youth. How relevant then are the initiatives that emerged out of the Municipal Matters project to the youth? Interestingly, young people were largely absent from the dialogues. The few that were present all represented organised youth structures. Participants who actively engaged at the community dialogues were mostly older people. Unfortunately, no reliable figures are available in terms of the age groups of the readership of the newspapers or the listenership of Wild Coast FM. According to observations, it can be estimated that the majority of readers and listeners fall into the age group above 30. It seems that the youthfulness of reporters does not necessarily contribute to making community media more relevant to younger people.

The ECCF starts phase two of Municipal Matters in July. The community dialogues hosted by newspapers, the municipal matters page of *Ikamva laseGcuwa* and the community radio show on Wild Coast FM will continue. All these initiatives are powerful tools to potentially reach out to a younger audience and create more awareness around municipal issues. Student reporters will continue to play an integral part of the project. Their ideas and input need to feature more prominently to ensure the project also reaches younger people. A stronger emphasis needs to be put on the relevance of topics to young people and also on marketing these initiatives in a way that young people will pay attention and become interested.

Community radio stations

How do community radio stations in the Eastern Cape generally connect with the youth? Three WSU journalism students who were placed at community radio stations for their internship from July 2012 until February 2013 shared their observations. Khanya FM, Vukani Community Radio (VCR) and Unitra Community Radio (UCR) all offer programmes that either aim at or involve the youth.

Vukani CR, situated in Cala, runs the *Drive Time*

Show, daily from Monday to Friday from 3-6pm. A DJ presenter discusses youth issues and shares information, especially on young achievers ranging from artists to successful bursary applicants. Youth who have achieved something in the Chris Hani district municipality are invited to the show. The show gives young people who are trying to make a difference and to develop their community a chance to share their stories. It also offers slots for organisations such as loveLife to give inspiration.

Khanya FM, based in Butterworth, presents the *Youth Movement* on Saturdays from 6-9pm. A DJ presenter incorporates entertainment with issues that relate to youth such as HIV/Aids, teenage pregnancy and drugs. Previously youth participated in the show to share poems, but due to the late broadcast time there were too many safety concerns and it is no longer taking place in that format. More recently, the show *Ulutsha lwemvaba Ngemvaba* is airing on Tuesdays from 9-12am. It targets the out-of-school youth and follows a Christian format. It motivates young people and encourages them to do things for themselves, such as starting projects to earn their own income and to not only rely on government. Judging from the number of call-ins, the audience has responded very positively to this show.

UCR, based in Mthatha, presents a 30-minute slot on Thursdays during their weekly *Afternoon Drive Show* from Monday to Friday. School-going youth come into the studio and discuss different topics on-air. This kind of format seems to be giving them a better understanding of their surroundings, which makes it easier for them to see where they can fit into their community, and what role they can play in society.

The student reporters, who are still active in the broadcasting sector, all believe more can be done by community radio stations to be more relevant for young people to establish their civic identities and become active and engaged citizens.

One student suggested that there should be more shows/programmes that are made for youth. This should not only feature achievers and go-getters, but also provide advice on how to get a bursary, avoid peer pressure and being around people who take you down.

Another student said it is important for community radio to go out to the community, instead of mainly focusing on producing and broadcasting programmes from the studio.

Furthermore, they should also host dialogues to try to tackle the issues faced by young people. Another student suggested that there should be more programmes that let the youth participate in the programmes to create a platform for themselves.

Snap survey

These recommendations are mirrored by other young people. A snap survey among 26 2nd year journalism students at the Department of Media Studies at WSU revealed that the majority of the students believe that media can do more than it currently does in helping young people establish their civic identity, and become actively engaged citizens. Most of them suggested that media content can become more appealing to youth by producing content that youth can relate to and that directly affects them. Two said that media should engage with the youth and have discussions about the issues that youth face. Other suggestions included that local independent media need to go to the young people and ask them what they want in order to give them what they want; there should be more magazines, more youth shows and even a newspaper for the youth that deals with youth problems; and media should encourage young people to spearhead media itself.

Conclusion

Young people who are part of community media should be given a stronger voice in shaping the content for newspapers and radio programmes. They should enjoy more freedom to share innovative ideas as to what can be done to make the media more attractive to young people. They should be encouraged to think out of the box. They should be allowed to go out onto the streets and conduct surveys to explore what young people would like to hear and read about. The youth themselves are the best advisers as to what kind of format and content would be appealing to them.

One effective way for community media to engage with and be more relevant to the youth is by working closely with schools, youth clubs, civil society groups and non-governmental organisation that represent the youth. This can be easily done by forming linkages between these organisation to ensure they find young voices. One can get learners writing articles or have youth involved in civic organisations producing articles on the challenges they are facing. Similarly, community radio stations can arrange interviews with these young people or even create a regular slot that forms part of their programming. Community media is supposed to be participatory media, therefore communities should be involved in order to provide better and more meaningful media services to those they serves.

South Africa's population is largely – more than 50 million – made up of young people. Of these, 18.5 percent are between the ages of 10-19; and 24 percent are aged 15-24. With 77.6 percent of the total population being below the age of 35 years there should be no excuse to not feature content that is relevant to the youth.



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Endnotes

1. The Eastern Cape Communication Forum (ECCF) is a non-profit organisation based at the Department of Media Studies at Walter Sisulu University (WSU). Its main objective is to strengthen and professionalise the local independent media sector in the province and to assist in building local independent media that is inspiring and creates active citizenship.