

THE ROLE AND RISE

of community radio in the development of democracy in South Africa

Community radio is the first tier of broadcasting (commercial broadcasting and public service broadcasting comprise the other two) that has “opened the airwaves” in South Africa. The shackles of the apartheid-manipulated broadcasting dispensation were unlocked through various structured measures and by several insightful interventions.

By Robin Sewlal



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Recognized largely as the initial impetus for a free broadcasting terrain in the country was the Jabulani! Freedom of the Airwaves conference held in August 1991 in Doorn, Netherlands. In its recommendations, the conference called for the establishment of community broadcasting and stated that the “active development of this sector is a priority”. This sector should not be tainted and trumped by commercial and public broadcasting – its independence is vital. Moreover, “national community broadcasting should be participatory; it should be owned and controlled by the community itself, and the broadcasting content of the station should be determined by the needs of the community as perceived by that community”.

Meanwhile back in South Africa, civil society was by now sufficiently organised and mobilised to ensure the agenda set outside the country was pursued with vigour and rigour. The Campaign for Open Media (COM) was a media policy forum that lobbied for an independent body to regulate broadcasting. Soon thereafter, the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting (CIB) added its voice in no small measure to the groundswell of support for the liberalisation of the airwaves, a public resource that was in ‘illegitimate’ hands since the Broadcasting Act of 1936. The CIB was a coalition of approximately 40 interest groups which were proactive through workshops, debates, telephone and facsimile (fax) transmissions, and protests throughout South Africa. The Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa) was the over-arching forum that paved the way for the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act. It was signed into law in October 1993.

Over-zealousness on the part of activists resulted in two stations in the Western Cape commencing broadcasts without a licence. They were Bush Radio (“mother of community radio in Africa”) which targeted the Cape Flats and an isiXhosa station broadcasting from an old container truck in Khayelitsha called Radio Zibonele (“see for yourself”). The promoters of Bush Radio faced charges which were later withdrawn. The other notable illegal broadcaster in Gauteng was Radio Pretoria which was determined to uphold Afrikaner interests. The three community radio stations were later licensed.

Prior to communities acquiring four-year licences, stations were allowed to be on-air for a temporary period of a year. A one-month ‘special event’ licence was also accommodated. The province of KwaZulu-Natal has the privilege of being the home of the first licensed community radio station in the country. The regulator, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), now known as the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) issued the first licence to Radio Maritzburg. By August 1995, 82 community radio stations could be heard in the country. Over the next two decades, the regulator was to grant well in the excess of a hundred community radio licences to stations dotted throughout South Africa. Licences were either premised on the basis of ‘community of interests’ or were ‘geographically-located’. As it turned out, stations became the pride of the respective communities

especially those which broadcast in a mother-tongue language. An example is Radio Hindvani based in Kharwastan, south of Durban, and whose primary target audience is the Hindi community. The station has been a powerful tool in enhancing the quality of life for the Hindi listener through the airing of lessons, scriptures, religious milestones, news, music and entertainment. Christian (Highway Radio) and Muslim (Radio 786) stations add to diversity on the dial. The vibrancy of this tier of broadcasting is enhanced by Chinese (Arrowline) and Greek (Hellenic Radio) stations over and above those catering for audiences in the 11 official languages.

The constitutional democracy sought in the early 1990s has enjoyed prominence within the ambit of the community radio industry. Citizens in the country have taken ownership of the stations, and rightfully so with their needs, hopes as well as aspirations being realised. Conversations in the community take place through and on the airwaves of the station. Local issues are given exposure through discussions, deliberations and at times, debates – freedom of expression is not only a theoretical concept but is also practically applied with a fair sprinkling of gusto. Community radio has quickly become an important facilitator for nation-building and provides space for democracy to flourish. It unravels complexities for listeners and serves as a catalyst for change, communication and co-operation. This tier of radio is nicely positioned to give meaning and purpose to the development plans for the country and its people. Moutse Community Radio Station (MCRS) in Limpopo is a prime example of upliftment. The station was founded by the Rural Women’s Movement (RWM) to address issues affecting women in the area. Not only have the on-air programmes inspired communities but the activities of stations in the respective community itself (like on Madiba Day) have made a tangible difference. The spirit of *ubuntu* is a prevailing theme for this branch of broadcasting. The attraction and appeal of community radio has generated sizeable audiences for stations. It is estimated that 8.5 million tune into community radio nationwide. Radio Khwezi is but one of the stations which enjoys a strong and loyal following. It is based in Kranskop in KwaZulu-Natal and broadcasts in IsiZulu, English, Afrikaans and German. Since inception, the station has received a multitude of top awards in the various competitions in South Africa. In several instances, the station triumphed over its public service and commercial counterparts.

However, the community radio sector has endured difficulties – not all of its own doing. The lack of adequate funding, insufficient numbers of trained personnel and the demonstration of poor leadership are but some of the factors which have stunted a greater level of growth of community radio. By and large, stations are staffed by volunteers – this practice comes with its own plethora of problems. Stations are forced to inculcate a spirit of volunteerism in those who donate their time and talent to the station. Inasmuch as the stations do so, volunteers are often distracted by other priorities in their lives. Moreover, the turnover rate of volunteers at some stations in the country is frighteningly high. The meagre funds of the station

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have to be channelled to areas that ensure it stays 'on-air'. Operating expenses like rent, water, light, telephone, transmission and maintenance gnaw heavily into the funding that trickles into the station. Community radio through the years has been dependent on grants, donations, sponsorships and advertisements. However, as economic conditions in the country slide so does the health of the sector. In a sad turn of events, Karabo FM in the Free State was recently burnt by a group, an act that can only be described as downright thuggery. This case of criminality is a hammer blow for freedom of expression.

The National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) has made valiant attempts over the years to assist stations but capacity has proved to be a major stumbling block. Some community radio stations are members of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) and the Department of Communications (DoC) have provided support to a string of stations by virtue of equipment grants. This assistance has contributed in keeping the affected stations on-air. Even the signal distributor Sentech has of late reduced costs of transmission so as to afford struggling stations an opportunity to direct funds saved to other key performance areas. Stations have experienced severe hardship by the shortage of people with skills in areas such as management, programming, finance, sales, marketing and technical. The goodwill displayed by organisations and individuals in assisting stations has reaped rewards but it's far too little. Training has become somewhat of a thorny issue for community radio stations. International and local bodies have trained hundreds of individuals in various aspects relating to broadcasting. The risk attached to properly-trained employees is that they are easily lured and poached by either the commercial

industry or the public service broadcaster. Unfortunately, there have been stations which have suffered by falling under the unrelenting pressure and spell of unsuitable leaders. Such individuals have done more harm than good and, in some instances, brought stations as well as the community radio sector as a whole into disrepute. Board members are known to have, inter alia, interfered in operational matters and have used stations as their fiefdom.

Notwithstanding these low points, this sector of broadcasting holds huge hope for the health of the nation. Community radio has a big role to play in areas such as small business development, gender equity, consumerism, minor sport, youth, local music, and climate change. Further, it is soon to be invigorated by the recently-released Corporate Governance Toolkit which is to be activated through and under the auspices of the MDDA. The toolkit provides a wonderful opportunity for all stakeholders to help re-shape the sector and raise it to greater heights through sound principles of corporate governance. Stations which embrace and engage the toolkit will enhance its effectiveness and efficiency thereby entrenching freedom and democracy for at least another couple of decades in South Africa.

Six strands can be identified to sustain stations and propel them to prosperity. They are strategy, systems, surrounding, stakeholders, service providers and software (i.e. programming). It is imperative that a station plans ahead and should at all times remind itself of its vision, mission and values. Being a community radio player, it cannot be a top-down approach. It has to engage with all concerned parties. Protocols, procedures, rules and regulations must be clearly and unambiguously documented. To this end, the station should have Codes of Practices that provide for corrective action in sticky situations. Community radio cannot

survive without scanning the environment and constantly involving the community it broadcasts for. Bottom-up communication must be continually encouraged to stay 'in touch'. The station is not an island – it has to involve all key players in decision-making. They include volunteers, listeners, funders and advertisers. Inclusivity is the buzzword. Stakeholder relations cannot be downplayed. The station ought to develop and maintain cordial interaction with those who provide essential services. The risk of not doing so is one of 'dead-air'. A good rapport with the likes of the signal distributor, supplier of equipment, municipality and the telecommunications company is also pivotal. Digital migration takes place in June 2015. The sector must position itself to take maximum advantage of the benefits offered by the new format. One advantage would be the accessibility and availability of at least one radio station in each and every community in South Africa.

Community radio has arguably played a massive role over the past twenty years in shaping the democratic pathway of the country. It's little doubt that the sector has much more to offer. Shown the right direction and accompanied by adequate, ongoing support, this tier of broadcasting will be sure to empower and enrich the lives of millions more.

Freedom and democracy in the country cannot be taken for granted. It is incumbent on all citizens to protect, defend, nurture and promote these trademark ideals. Community radio is a worthy and wonderful platform to play such an enabling role. Accordingly, being an engine for growth and development in South Africa, the community radio sector has to craft a roadmap for its journey, jump into the driver's seat, engage top gear and accelerate on a pothole-free highway at full speed. Anything less will be profoundly perfunctory!

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