

SHIFTING THE PRIORITY FROM GIVING VOICE TO LISTENING

By Anthea Garman and Vanessa Malila

If, as the critics have argued, the South African media prioritise the voices of elite, middle-class South Africans, then the majority of South Africans are certainly invisible in the mainstream media. Kate Lacey argues that “listening is at the heart of what it means to be in the world, to be active, to be political” (2013: 163), and as such more than just providing a ‘voice’ for citizens, the media needs to be engaged in active listening to allow audiences to feel ‘heard’. Servaes and Malikhao argue that people are ‘voiceless’ not because they have nothing to say, but because “nobody cares to listen to them” (2005: 91).

Active listening for journalists would move beyond simply representing a community of people, or acting as the ‘voice of the voiceless’, but instead providing a space where that community feels listened to. Susan Bickford argues that the process of being listened to is an opportunity to move beyond the stereotypes which are often thrust upon groups. Young people are often stereotyped as the ‘lost generation’, unemployed, unemployable and not looking for employment because they prefer the welfare provided by the state. Without an openness to listen to both individual and group voices, the media will continue to regard the youth as “a stereotyped object [rather than] as a conscious, active subject” (Bickford, 1996: 131). The way in which journalists, ordinary citizens and the youth think about listening and speaking requires a shift in the priority between these two activities.

Media and Citizenship research

Our research investigated the way in which mainstream and community media in the Eastern Cape understand listening as an important part of their role as journalists. In-depth interviews with

senior journalists, editors and station managers were conducted with both mainstream and community media based in the two biggest metropolises in the Eastern Cape – Port Elizabeth (PE) and East London. The Herald (based in Port Elizabeth) is one of the two English-language, mainstream, broadsheet newspapers in the province. Both focus on local and regional news, with specific interest in the cities in which they operate. Algoa FM is the only commercial mainstream radio station which operates in the Eastern Cape and thus provided a key perspective on the commercial radio market. The following community radio stations participated in the research: KQFM is based in Zwide township in Port Elizabeth and is described on its website as “the most listened to community radio station in PE”; Izwi Lethemba (which means ‘voice of hope’) is based in East London and has been operational since 2012; Kumkani FM is situated in Scenery Park township in East London, and is a relatively new radio station, having only been operation since 2013. A huge number of community newspapers operate in the province based in almost every small town, but just three were selected to participate in the research: Zithethele is a Port Elizabeth-based community newspaper which is published in Xhosa (the dominant indigenous language of the Eastern Cape), and has a circulation of 50 000. Township Times operates within the East London metropole and describes itself as a service aimed at “getting the community talking, sharing, growing together” (<https://www.facebook.com/TownshipTimes>). EC Today operates in East London and reports its circulation figures to be 42 000, and was started in 2008. The final participant in the research is the only community television station based in the Eastern Cape, BayTV. This station operates in Port Elizabeth and focuses content on the local community, though it does provide information, news and content from the wider provincial region.

We divided our assessment of whether journalists, editors and media outlets listen to their readers and audiences into three types of approach:



Soweto by Jodi Bieber

“We are trying to have a face so that people can engage and know about our paper and publications” – Sisonke Labase, EC Today

The commercial imperative dominates but the outlet is still audience-minded in a somewhat traditional way even with the advent of social media.

For many of these media organisations the commercial needs of the outlet are the supreme driver of programming and engagements with audiences. Audiences are treated as consumers of media products and not necessarily as citizens. News programming has a very traditional approach: it speaks to and for the audience, the journalists have the voice and set agendas (on behalf of their audiences). As to a concern about young people, one of the station managers said “the youth won’t always be the youth” – in other words they will become adults and acquire a taste for more serious information so journalists don’t have to devise special programmes for them. Events aimed at youth are organised and run by the marketing/advertising arms of the stations and are for the purpose of driving up consumption.

There is a growing awareness that access to social media segments their markets (ie different people use Facebook from those who phone in to programmes and there are also different people operating on Twitter). Nevertheless no serious research into who is using what platform and where young people (particularly those without jobs and steady family income) are placed in relation to this has been done.

There is a strong reliance on traditional media methods to engage audiences – phone-ins for Algoa FM and a hotline for Bay TV. Local people are invited onto programmes – “we make certain the communities see themselves” [on TV].

There is strong commitment to local content and local news information. Bay TV encourages local artists and filmmakers to use them as a platform but they have no budget to commission local work.

Politically there is a strong commitment to help people deal with problems – reporting on broken infrastructure, taking on municipalities to deliver better services. Journalists go out and do their reporting in the communities covered, they don’t just work from their desks.

A stronger commitment to being in and of a community; the commercial imperative recedes somewhat.

“We are trying to have a face so that people can engage and know about our paper and publications”
– Sisonke Labase, EC Today.

The features of this approach are that hyperlocal programming and content is core to the journalism. Journalists and freelancers live in the communities they cover and they and propose story ideas

from their locations. Very often the community newspapers are free because they know hundreds of thousands of people in the areas they cover cannot afford a paper. There is a consciousness that listeners and readers may not have high levels of education and therefore a need to make programming and content very relevant. A high degree of concentration is placed on providing information people cannot easily get their hands on (as they would need an internet connection or access to a library) and often there is a special focus on education.

There is a stronger consciousness about young people in the audience and their lack of education, jobs and opportunities – this permeates particularly radio programming. The Township Times editor considers himself a product of that social environment and focuses his journalistic energies on the development of small businesses. Township Times organises events which involve young township artists. Key to this approach is an awareness that social media reaches young audiences and that older audience members usually phone-in or drop in while the youth are active on Facebook.

Many of the radio stations hire personable presenters who speak directly to their audiences and invite responses. There is a mindset that takes cognisance of the harshness of people’s lives and an emphasis on providing “positive... inspirational stories that speak to the people” (EC Today). Local languages are important (Afrikaans and Xhosa) and invitations are made to officials to come into the studio and answer questions raised by audiences. Some media outlets forge good relationships with local businesses so that they can imbed themselves more deeply in their communities. EC Today has been holding debates in partnership with Fort Hare University so that important issues can be raised in the communities they serve.

Pioneering 'listening journalism' which is attuned to a local context.

Two of the newspapers had a really fascinating approach to their readers: Zithethele and The Herald.

Zithethele community newspaper is edited by Max Matavire who has a great deal of journalistic experience. He has covered local government, the municipality and politics. He worked in Zimbabwe for the Herald and Ziana (the news agency) and for ZBC. He also worked in Johannesburg for The Citizen and as a correspondent for City Press, Sunday World and AFP. Matavire started Zithethele in July of 2014. Eighty percent of Zithethele's readers are Xhosa-speaking and the PE-based paper circulates all the way to East London, King William's Town, down the garden route and throughout the PE metro.

The paper is deeply imbedded in community issues through the dialogues it runs. "We go to communities, sit with them and listen to their problems," says Matavire, adding, "we call in specialists to answer or respond to people's grievances, problems and challenges." He goes on: "Yes people come. These are not political rallies. People are fed up of political rallies because they are told the same thing... somebody is listening to them so they like that, we have good audiences in these community halls." Zithethele invites local councillors and officials to hear these issues which are mediated by community leaders and church leaders. "We try our level best not to bring politicians into this," Matavire says. A major benefit of this process seems to be informing city officials of situations: "After the meeting, they'll come to us and say 'we didn't know about this.'" That is the most important thing this community dialogue does, it directs. Officials explain processes of governance so that people better understand them."

The dialogues also feed the journalism: "Everything is coming from them [the dialogues]", he said. Turning to the issue of young people, he commented: "They have lost the plot; they do not see any future for them[selves]... more so than their parents, [they are] frustrated with lots of things, less trusting that the politicians will do something for them."

The impetus for this approach for Matavire is journalism that tries "to find what is beneath the protest".

The Herald edited by Heather Robertson.

Robertson was deputy editor of the Sunday Times when she was appointed as editor of the Herald in Port Elizabeth by Mondli Makhanya, who had been editor of the Sunday Times and had been promoted

into management for the Times Media group. Makhanya advised Robertson that she would need to work hard to shift the paper from one that served a suburban white audience into one that served the entire, very diverse community of the whole city. He advised her to think about ways of engaging her readership through community dialogues. When Robertson got to Port Elizabeth she discovered that the sister paper in East London, the Daily Dispatch had been running such dialogues for a while, and also she was approached by Allan Zinn, director of the Centre for the Advancement of Non-racialism and Democracy based at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University who was seeking a media partner to engage in community dialogues. Thus began a series of engagements with communities all over the city to air the really hard issues they wanted raised in the public domain (see Robertson's account of these dialogues on page 106).

The important features to note from this engagement are that the editor and newspaper are conscious of the diversity of the community within the location they serve and they wish to play a role that speaks to that diversity.

As a result The Herald reporters make strong use of social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram – Robertson said "we are digital first". On Facebook the Herald has 100 000 followers, when a teacher went missing the number went up to 750 000. Surprisingly, followers are from all race groups and classes as poor black people access the internet through mobile. Editors and journalists are available to readers through numbers and email and they speak and listen to their readers.

When it comes to the actual dialogues, the role of the newspaper is to provide a safe space for discussions to happen. These discussions are often around the issues of post-apartheid SA and inequity. The intention is understanding. Reporters capture the debates and then produce media pieces for the paper and for social media.

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Robertson said: “People are so desperate to have their voices heard, sometimes we can’t steer conversation towards a solution, they need to just vent. We have to have follow-up conversations.” One of them most important ongoing conversation is about education which started with “80 people in a circle” – students, parents and governing bodies. Robertson said of this series: “It has been most constructive in terms of getting towards solutions and seeing schools as community resources – for literacy, after-care, vegetable gardens, etc. By the 10th one they getting used to understanding that they have the capacity to solve these problems.”

One of the key roles the newspaper plays is to “mediate the arrogance of officials and get them to listen to the issues raised.”

Robertson said: “Having these debates has helped us reform the content of the newspaper to adapt and change, we are constantly flexible to actually meet the needs of our readership, our audience.”

Conclusions

The commercial imperative of media operations discourages listening journalism but also makes it difficult for journalists, editors and station managers to conceive of different ways of doing journalism.

Journalists in many newsrooms continue to communicate with their readers and audiences in the same routinised ways of the past despite the radically-altered political and social space in South Africa and despite the upheavals of digital and social media.

Where listening has become imbedded in a journalism operation it is usually driven by one individual who has the power and authority to make it happen.

The impetus for listening is usually driven by a desire to deal with a local situation and the outlet’s particular readership or audience.

The impulse is usually a social justice one – to understand and redress the inequities of the democratic present.

Social media tools are very helpful to enabling listening and they are increasingly used even by very poor people.

The gains of adjusting one’s relationship to audiences and readers is not just an enhanced social space with less frustration between officials and the public, it also cements the relationship between the media outlet and the public and builds trust.

Acknowledgement

This research was undertaken with Azwi Mufamadi, Mvuzo Ponono, Meli Ncube, Welcome Lishivha, Hank Louw, Rod Amner and Chengetai Chikadaya and was supported by a grant from the National Research Foundation.



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