

Going live with the editors

by **NIGEL MURPHY**

THE IDEA for *The Editors* (Radio South Africa Sundays 12.00 - 12.30) came from colleague John Richards who spent a couple of years in Australia. We launched in January 1991 by pre-recording the programme late Friday afternoon for broadcast Sunday lunchtime. We went 'live' after the third programme...events in the Gulf War were changing too quickly. We were then shifted to a Sunday evening as that gave all concerned more time to absorb the weekly and weekend papers, many of which were not available until midday. But we went back to the midday slot for two reasons:

- The 13.00 news bulletin is peak listening on RSA Sunday and although we had boosted the 19.00 listenership figures appreciatively, that total was only a third of the potential midday listenership. But rather more importantly...
- The evening broadcast imposed unacceptable abstinence limits on participants.

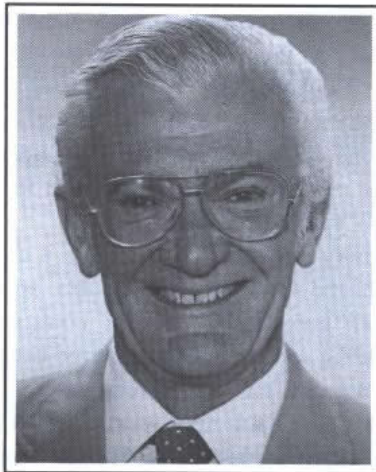
The format for the programme is simplicity itself:

Mix any three established (print or electronic) journo's, local or foreign correspondents, in any SABC studio round the country. Their brief is to list what they would regard as the major news events, here or internationally, during the previous seven days.

That menu is no more than a minute and a half. We then go over some of those events in greater depth, the brief being to emphasise wherever possible the story behind the story. At the end of the programme we look ahead and canvas opinions on what could become their focus of attention in the upcoming week.

Unashamedly we've targetted a specific market: other journo's (lazy sods find the following week's menu helpful); PR & Ad agencies; politicians & diplomats; thinking South Africans.

Being a 'live' broadcast, how well do print journo's fare? Almost invariably much better than they presuppose. And because there's no agonising over re-writes (and often an element of appreciative feedback



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from significant sources) they're receptive to subsequent invitations. No panel is ever the same.

But is there a downside? Yes.

● Black journalists. This has been a mystifying experience. On 5/12/93 I went on air and having introduced the first two participants went on to say:

"...And I had hoped I would also introduce (...) who had accepted our invitation to join us today. But it's not to be. If you're a regular listener you'll understand why I'm now a little twitchy about 'no shows' by black journalists, so we phone on Fridays to confirm appointments. (...) told our office that he wasn't going to be in (...) but in Durban. When I was told this we hastily re-booked lines/studios/controller and phoned him back to say all was well...that we'd been able to re-jig bookings and to confirm details. Well I won't bore you with details: suffice to say he declined to accept our call, nor would he offer any explanation whatever. He still hasn't made any contact with us. For a senior representative of the South African media to behave this way, and at a time when windows of communication are sorely needed, I must confess I'm a little disappointed. I'm not sure whether I'm being unfair by spilling the beans, but I'm afraid I'm old fashioned enough to regard an appointment - especially for a 'live' broadcast - as something I ought to be able to rely on. So I'm doubly grateful to

our third guest who has stepped into the breach..."

From early on in the life of the programme I made it a rule to give a white journalist one chance of a no show without apology, and blacks two. I usually phoned on the following Monday or Tuesday to check all was well, but they're seldom there and have never once returned my call. I'm not just referring to youngsters but some of the most pre-eminent names in the journalistic field. Invariably I give all participants my home number in case of last minute emergencies. Unfortunately like a 3-legged pot, the loss of one leg is more than just tiresome...it unbalances the composition of the panel and adds a measure of strain to the others. With great reluctance I've ceased to invite these colleagues whose input I really miss.

● There are journo's in many parts of the country I can't include without prevailing on them to travel to the nearest SABC studio, and we just don't have the budget for this. One day perhaps the SABC will emulate the idea of the BBC 'self op' studios. These are literally tiny, unmanned studios dotted round the remotest reaches of Britain. They could be rooms at the back of the local greengrocer or postmistress, spare rooms in people's homes, unrentable sized broom cupboards in office blocks, you name it. They cost zilch to equip (eggbox lined walls, a table and chair, possibly a tape recorder for feeding a contribution). The victim collects the key from whoever, lets themselves in, switches on the light (which activates all the other electrics), puts on the headphones, and the guy in main control in London says "hi!" and plugs them through to the appropriate studio. Simple.

Very clearly the future for the printed daily newspaper delivered to your door is limited. Radio, in particular, is coming back with a bang. In the meantime it would seem that the overwhelming majority of print journo's are adjusting to the radio ad-libbed chatshow with relish and aplomb.

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