

# Opening windows

Community television activist **KAREN THORNE** signals the arrival of a new factor in the broadcast landscape.

**C**OMMUNITY television has been waiting patiently at the back of the queue of South African broadcasting policy reform. At last, the Independent Broadcast Authority (IBA) has completed its "Triple Inquiry" research, issued licences to over 80 community radio stations, presided over privatising others and is about to issue more commercial radio licenses plus a national free-to-air private television licence.

Now, the IBA must confront the issue of community television. Key questions which remain unanswered relate to financial viability and the related issues of the structure and nature of community television.

Community television in South Africa has emerged, over the past few years, as a motley collection of evangelical christian broadcasters left out in the cold with the transformation of the SABC, historically advantaged ethnic groups looking for an opportunity to import foreign language programming to meet the needs of minority communities and commercial operators using the loophole of short term licences to equip their would-be regional commercial stations. What characterises these groups, in a way that clearly reflects the imbalances of the past, is their access to resources and skills.

But by far the most organised, yet characteristically under-resourced, component of the community TV sector is a national network of audio-visual media training and development NGO's, loosely organised around the Open Window Network (OWN). Projects such as the KwaZulu Natal Video Access Centre, the Community Video Education Trust, the Media Training and Development Trust, the Newtown Film and Television School as well as new initiatives such as the Eastern Cape Video Access Centre, have been quietly paving the way for a viable, sustainable and above all community-driven community television movement. These projects are working within historically disadvantaged communities to build production capacity through skills development and production support, thus building community television from the bottom up.

One of the major challenges facing the community television movement has been how to take a model of community television, which is relevant for developed countries and translate it to the context of the developing world. The fundamental difference is that developed countries can afford to support community television (not that they do) and that "ordinary people" seeking access to community television in developing countries are doing it because they want a job and not only because they want to "exercise their first amendment right to freedom of expression".

How then does community television meet

**COMMUNITY TELEVISION**, as widely understood, is, in principle, a particular form of media which is owned and controlled by communities through its representatives. It represents clearly defined interest groups or operates within geographical boundaries. It also differs from other forms of media in that it is non-profit or independent of corporate ownership. Community media is participatory, premised on the belief that the airwaves and the printing presses are a public resource and that all citizens have the right to freedom of expression. Community media has therefore risen to the fore as an invaluable tool to develop and socially empower previously marginalised people.

the needs of skills development and job creation on the one hand (and should this be one of its objectives?), and of preserving community television as an access point for non-professionals on the other? Within the South African context some believe that community television can and has to do both but that policies must be in place to ensure that this is properly managed. Within this debate, these policies must also address the question of ensuring community ownership and control. Intrinsicly linked with this debate is the BIG question: "Where is the money going to come from?". There are no easy, glib answers to this question. But providing that there is the political will to do so, a solution can be found.

The audio-visual medium is expensive and this is often given as the reason why it is not earmarked for support as a viable medium for development at a community level, as is community radio. However, the audio-visual medium also happens to have great potential for income generation.

The IBA makes allowances for income generation through advertising. For community television, a range of market place activities could bring income to the sector including the sales of programmes, offering of services, advertising and securing of sponsorship, commissions and contracts.

To facilitate the opening up of potential in these areas, OWN is hoping to sign a Record of Understanding with the SABC which will cement the "Natural Partnership" between community media and the public broadcaster referred to by the SABC in their submission to the Triple Enquiry.

This partnership is likely to include cooperation agreements around programming, access to airtime, training and facilities. In return the SABC will be accessing community originated, diverse language programming, helping to build the public broadcaster's beleaguered regional services. Similar partnerships, aimed at unlocking production contracts need to be struck with other emerging broadcasters as well as all levels of government and the NGO sector.

However, if international experience is anything to go by, then community television will need to be funded from a range of sources.

One reason for this is the danger of community television becoming market driven. Purely commercially driven community television would place it in the same position in which the SABC has found itself with the failure of government to financially support the public broadcaster. The resulting excessive reliance on advertising revenue, means the SABC is unable to fulfil its public service mandate to provide a balance of education, information and entertainment as it is forced to pander to market forces.

In South Africa, with the transformation of government communications, community media stands to play an important role in promoting open governance particularly at a local government level. Community television projects in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town are already forging strong partnerships with local government structures.

The community media sector needs to broaden its lobbying strategy to include some five Government ministries within whose line functions the community media sector falls (local government, education, etc.).

In order to locate possible sources of funding, the IBA also needs to look into the possible regulatory implications of cross subsidisation from, for example, a percentage of licence fees from commercial broadcasters (including satellite operators). Such arrangements will, however, impact on community broadcasters' slice of adspend as they expect to both compete with, and be cross-subsidised by, the commercial sector.

A preferable option may simply be to own part of a private television station. OWN, in conjunction with the National Community Media Forum (NCMF), is exploring the possibility of forming an investment wing, the profits from which could finance community television. OWN is particularly interested in making an investment in the related sphere of private television. This would give the beneficiaries the opportunity to "add value" to their investment through the provision of programming and thus boosting the income generating potential of Video Access Centres and local television stations. This would also help to get

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around the five-year window period during which profits would not necessarily be made on such an investment.

Partnerships with the other broadcasters, important for financial sustainability, does not necessarily mean that community television is destined to be eternally relegated to "public access" time slots on public and/or private broadcasters — a position which many think is the only future for community television. In some areas this may be the short term scenario until such time as community broadcasters build up the capacity to broadcast on their own. For other provinces, with widely dispersed rural populations, high signal distribution costs and a small advertising base, the time slots option may well be the answer in the long term.

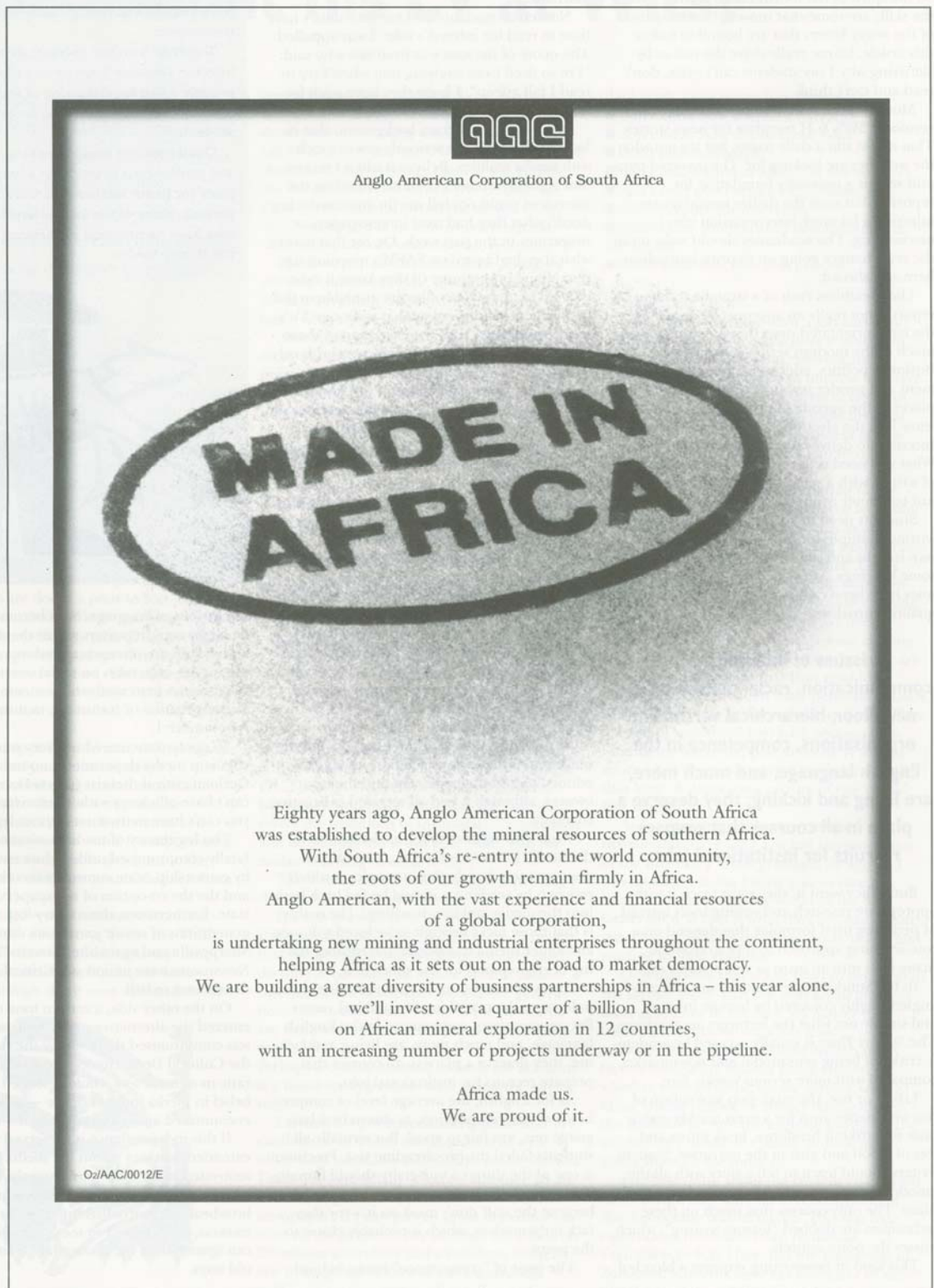
A cursory look at the numbers illustrates that even in areas where community television is viable, the IBA is going to have to rethink its approach to the concept of "multiple micro stations" which may be appropriate for community radio, serving a small local community, but for television is unrealistic. Community television, in order to be viable both financially and in terms of programming capacity, needs a bigger broadcasting radius than the maximum 10 – 15 km presently allowed by the IBA. With the exception of perhaps the Johannesburg inner city, there is not one community which has the programming capacity to broadcast for more than a few hours per day (at the very most). Within a limited broadcast radius it is highly unlikely that sufficient advertising will be raised to cover the costs of running a community television station or that advertisers will find the limited numbers reached a particularly attractive option. Besides the financial arguments, one would imagine that the people living in Khayalisha will be interested to see the programming made by their neighbours in Athlone and vice versa.

The issue of the structure of community television is perhaps the most challenging one. The above scenario implies that a range of stakeholders, from many different constituencies within a greater community, with vastly different resources and skills, will have to come together and cooperate around community television. The Australian experience is useful in showing how limited frequencies have forced a range of stakeholders together in a consortium through which they jointly own the broadcast licence and manage airtime.

The three-pillared challenge of balancing professional service with community access and con-

trol plus the related issues of financial viability and the structure of community television are bound to be the key issues to be addressed at the IBA's Community Television Workshop on 6-7 February 1997. The workshop will bring together an eclectic range of interest groups and community television is bound to emerge as highly contested terrain.

A positive outcome could be the formation of unusual partnerships towards the mutual realisation of a unified vision in which all players have a clearly defined role to play and which recognises that we all ultimately need each other in order to achieve our objectives. *Karen Thorne is co-ordinator of the Open Window Network*



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