

You need to review the record of radio in order to fully appreciate the magnitude of the changes, says **ROBIN SEWLAL**.

Radio days

I've had an unwavering interest in radio since primary school days — even though the medium back then in the country was not terribly exciting. The government-controlled SABC was the only game in town, and that irked me mightily. One could not rely on the information disseminated, and its programming was, in general, staid. To satisfy my urge to receive good radio, I simply tuned into some of the international broadcasters. Though reception even at the best of times was not ear-worthy, it was nevertheless more engaging.

Things began to change when the independently-run Capital Radio established itself in December 1979 as an alternative to the string of SABC stations reaching out to just about every corner in the country. The 80's brought about a few more stations, and a bit more diversity. But it is this decade which has spawned a sufficient number with varying styles that gives the listener choice. Progress has been phenomenal with the setting up of the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

The first tier that received attention from the IBA was Community radio and, to date, almost 100 stations have been issued licences for a period of twelve months. The IBA's Position Paper on Community radio, which has been long overdue for release, is to provide for a 'permanent' licence probably up to four years. The authority has performed an enabling function so as to ensure a rich array of norms, values and cultures be reflected.

Community radio has made remarkable strides in providing a platform for the peoples of our land. However, this sector requires support, and plenty of that too. Two vital areas in need of attention are funding and training: Funds to make stations sustainable and training to ensure better skilled personnel for them to be more appealing. Stations that enjoy a community mandate must thrive. It is only then can we say that citizens are truly represented in the mainstream of developments.

The recent sale of six successful stations from the SABC stable, namely East Coast Radio, Oranje, KFM, Algoa, Highveld Stereo and Jacaranda was hailed as the first major act of privatisation and empow-

erment. These stations fetched hefty prices on the market, in some cases, exceeding all expectations. It therefore begs the question whether the new owners — seeking returns on their large investments — are prepared to tamper much with their winning formats. To do so would be running a huge risk. These stations were primarily set up to target white audiences and it will be intriguing to see if and how these new radio bosses are going to satisfy the needs of other groups without losing existing listeners.

It's a belief that programming formats will undergo miniscule changes in the short to medium term. Perhaps we could see greater changes when the owners have had a good run and the financial picture is pretty. In the meantime, though, there is still an opportunity for other would-be broadcasters to come to the fore, and soon.

The IBA has approved the granting of a further eight commercial licences countrywide, three in Cape Town, four in greater Gauteng and one for Durban.

The SABC has, in the meanwhile, been alive to the competitive environment. In September 1996, the corporation re-launched most of its radio services. Some stations underwent changes in name as well as in corporate identities. Programming content continues to develop. The Act stipulates that the SABC ought to, *inter alia*, take cognisance of the needs of language, cultural and religious groups, and to air educational programmes. But a public broadcaster needs funds to meet its public service mandate. SABC Radio advertisers are being lured away by new stations. There can be no dependability on licence fees as figures in this regard are not guaranteed.

The SABC therefore has been lobbying the government for subsidies. A priority is to get the state to part with a sizeable slice of the money acquired from the sale of the six stations. Mechanisms must be thrashed out to ensure editorial independence and integrity should the government see fit to help finance the SABC.

Besides community, commercial and public radio, there are several

CAPITAL assets

Robin Sewlal reflects on the legacy of the late, great Capital Radio.

THE IDEA for Capital was conceived by the then managing director, John Moody in October 1976. With a three-year budget of R6,4-million, the Simon and Garfunkel classic "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" launched the station on the morning of December 26, 1979. Housed in the gracious old port captain's abode with magnificent views in Port St Johns, Capital changed the sound of radio in our country. With music, news, sports and much more, it brought a sparkle to the ear. The station had exclusive rights on the continent for the "Wolfman Jack Radio Show", syndicated around the world.

In double quick time, listeners were turned on and tuned in to the Wild Coast sound that got the old guard at

the state-run SABC to take a long, hard look at what it was doing. Though plagued by technical problems from its inception, Capital Radio became an overnight success. It was not the strength of the signal that mattered but the quality of the programming.

I'm particularly saddened by the silencing of the station that churned out 'all the hits and more on 604'. My relationship with Capital commenced during the test transmission days in 1979. It was a pleasure to visit the crazy team in that idyllic environment. The road from Umtata to Port St Johns is enough to give one nightmares but entering the 'Garden of Eden' quickly settles one's nerves. There's plenty of fond memories of those early days. The late Jim Ellery played host to me on my first visit and what a fabulous one it was too. Oysters were 20c a dozen and crayfish sold for 50c each. I did not need to go on a buying spree — "The Wiz" Oscar Renzi's deep freezer was forever filled to the brim with seafood

easily available from fishing expeditions. The golden sands of Second Beach was ideal for all night raving parties. I was amazed to see how jocks living on the other side of the Umzimvubu River got to the studios. You either got across by pont, ferry or tightrope walking a metal tube above shark-invested waters. Steve Crozier fell into the river and became the first to present a show naked from the waist down. The "Welsh Twit" Alan Mann was thrilled with his beach buggy while John Berks, the country's top jock, was being his usual self. If it was not the station playing great music, it was thumping out of "Gentle Giant" Treasure Tshabalala's (now with Radio Metro) home. Content with his lifestyle was Allan Pierce. On the other hand, Meshack Mokwena, the youngest at 19, was fitness conscious. It was certainly a small paradise. I started my on air work with Capital after the station moved its operations to Johannesburg. By then, I already had developed a strong friendship with Oscar as I was managing his activities. It was a hoot working closely with the other guys, not to mention the difficulty in keeping Jeremy Mansfield, currently on 702,

away from his mischief.

Let it be said that the station launched many a successful broadcasting career — Lee Downs (Goodhope FM), Tony Blewitt (SFM), Dave Guselli (East Coast Radio), Kevin Savage (KFM), Darren Scott (M-Net), Chris Prior (SAfm). The list is endless. Yet it was, without doubt, the station's news broadcasts that earned the station global repute. From day one with Gary Edwards (702) at the helm of the news department, Capital Radio gave its listeners only the facts, accurately and speedily. In the dark days of our precarious past, the station was unwavering in exposing the government of the day. This rich tradition of 'telling it like it is' continued with people like Mike Hanna (CNN), Julian Potter (BBC), Zahed Cachalia (Australia), James Lorimer (Network Radio News), Manu Padayachee (M-Net) and David O' Sullivan (702).

It's hard to come to terms to hear nothing from a station that gave so much. But the Capital memorabilia is there to treasure for a lifetime while the beautiful memories of this innovative station will linger on forever.

other forces on the radio landscape. Special licences have been granted in the past. These stations are set up for a specific event and stay on air for a maximum of thirty days. Moreover, radio networks can be picked up through Multichoice, the satellite subscriber service. These are currently beyond the control of the IBA. In-between all this, pirate radio operators have surfaced. Fortunately for the credibility of the industry, the authorities have dealt with them in the appropriate manner.

The IBA, in its Position Paper on Private Sound Broadcasting Services, calls for the establishment of a Broadcasting Industry Forum. The idea is to promote a culture of responsible self regulation by getting members to participate in developing industry standards. Pencilled in for immediate discussion are a language development fund, advertising and sponsorship guidelines, and a revised Code of Conduct. It's a fine thought but I would imagine that it will be far better for such an association to emanate from a relationship that evolves naturally between the community, commercial and public service sectors. Each of these tiers has its own stance on policy matters so finding common ground will be a near impossibility. Only when the industry as a whole is ready, should it move in the direction of forming a forum. Personally, I'd love to see a complimentary connection between all three categories of broadcasters.

All in all, the radio industry has experienced tremendous growth. But what does it mean for the practice of journalism? Commercial radio is duty-bound to daily provide 30 minutes of news. There are many tales to be told and, all things being equal, news closer to home deserves prominence.

Radio news networks serving community radio have emerged in this era of station-proliferation. Therefore, a conscious attempt must be made by those heading up news teams to provide items of relevance to the wide range of localised stations. The human element of gathering news cannot be stressed sufficiently even though marvellous pieces of equipment are available for purposes of processing.

As the industry moves in leaps and bounds, radio pundits have to be proactive in tailoring their programming to the discerning ear. Stations can't be all things to all people. Content has to be carefully crafted in order to instil a sense of listener addiction. Audiences are becoming more sophisticated

and, accordingly, unforgiving. Even though an abundance of stations exists, further diversity on the dial is necessary, more so in rural regions. The IBA is committed to re-writing the frequency plan thereby creating space for other players. The industry requires the involvement of people with a passion for broadcasting

as opposed to those who merely use the facility as a means to an end.

The day of the radio has only just begun.

Robin Sewlal is Programme Co-ordinator: Journalism ML Sultan Technikon

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