

What does
'community'
mean for
community
radio?

reality check

Bush Radio's
Zane Ibrahim takes
a ruthless look at
who's wearing
the stamp...



every time I hear that "the community radio sector is in its infancy" I think to myself, "Yeah, right, this sector has yet to get the results of the pregnancy test, let alone be born!" What's the rush? Why do we need a Caesarian?

I've heard of fast-tracking but this is ridiculous – the sector's standards and skills are frighteningly low. We have to think seriously whether we want to make this thing fly or not. If we want it to fly, we have to stop all the crap, right now. We need to do a reality check to see who has been milking this sector for all it's worth, and who has been knocking themselves out trying to define their roles and, more importantly, genuinely trying to ask, "What is community radio?"

It's clear to me that our 'development' is the fastest growing industry. Unless we stand up now and put a stop to this scam, we could find ourselves the laughing stock of the world. As it is we're flooded with unqualified and unctuous 'consultants' falling over each other for the chance to show us, for a fat fee, how to squeeze money out of willing government agencies and naive foreign funders.

(What the foreign funders do not seem to realise is that Tarzan doesn't live here any more. We kicked his bare ass out of here long ago. Last we heard he was living in the South of France off the profits he made from the sale of ivory and rhino horn. Apparently, he's popping lots of Viagra and giving poor Jane a rough time.)

I'm astonished to see that we can expect 200 community radio stations in the near future (to cite Clive Emdon in the March '99 *Review*). I can see it now – 150 altars of the airwaves or government P.A. systems with the rest coming across as cheap jukeboxes (at best).

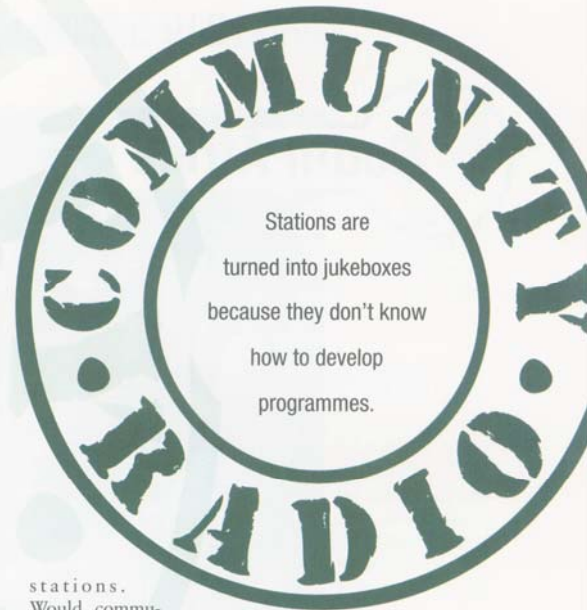
We don't need more stations now. We need more people on the ground who are honest and have half a brain. I am not referring to those former 'media activists' who were just the other day toyi-toying for the right to 'give the community a voice' and are now enriching themselves on the sweat of those very communities. To them I say, SHAME.

Those who have the most to gain from this flurry of stations to be established are the 'consultants' and the many new broadcast equipment supply companies that have suddenly popped up out of nowhere. The people on the ground will be staring blankly at all this new digital technology while the DJs are happily selling the latest Michael Jackson CD, with the consultants and equipment guys laughing all the way to the bank.

The ministry responsible for handing out contracts for the equipment to these new stations should remember companies like Globecom in the Western Cape. Globecom grew out of the community radio sector and probably knows more about its technological needs than all those other fly-by-night companies, who think that giving their companies African-sounding names will get them access to the trough filled with Danish taxpayers' sweat. Do I hear the word 'kickbacks' in the background?

If I sound skeptical and disappointed it's because I am.

I'm skeptical, for example, about the state getting directly involved with the funding of certain community radio



stations.

Would communities not overly friendly with the ruling party of the day be granted a station? Would the ruling party of the day expect the station to be its mouthpiece?

I'm skeptical of the dream of having 200 stations in the country. What percentage would be religious? What percentage would operate under the guise of a community radio station but, in fact, simply be a pulpit or mimbar on the air? How many of the different religious denominations are going to be granted a licence, and who decides on which denomination gets licenced?

Stations such as Bush Radio or Soweto Community Radio should be able to accommodate all the various interest groups in the community they serve. There is no need for every special interest group in the community to have a station. This will only lead to a sort of broadcasting apartheid. We are, in fact, going back to the situation we fought so hard to escape.

I'm skeptical about the incredible amount of money many of these 'community' stations are making. Most of them have simply received a licence to run a commercial venture on an inexpensive community radio licence. If they want to make that kind of money, let them apply for commercial licences.

I'm skeptical about the development of the sector when we don't have a single institution where a potential broadcaster can complete a full programme that will prepare them to enter the broadcast industry. Institutions like the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) and Ulwazi/Classic Fm are doing a great job with their short intensive courses, but it's not enough. What happens is that stations are turned into jukeboxes because they don't know how to develop programmes.

I've always been a skeptic. When I smell roses, I look for a coffin.

I'm disappointed because we have a 'can do' nation which deserves better as far as community radio is concerned. As practitioners in this field, we have a golden opportunity to truly give our people a voice. A voice filled with vibrancy and hope. A voice that, for too long, has been crying to be heard.

I would like to suggest that everyone involved in community radio ask themselves at the start of each day, "What can I do to make my community's life just a little better than it was yesterday?"

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