

Exciting affairs

Thandanani Dlamini relives a 10-year journey of producing current affairs programmes.

When South Africa successfully transformed into a democracy, the media lagged in many aspects. Predominantly remaining white-owned, they continued to reflect white views and white lives; all black lives only as perceived by white society. The public broadcaster was not immune to this, as it had been the mouthpiece of the apartheid machinery. In its attempt at transformation, more black journalists and radio producers were employed. So more of what was unfolding in the country, as it went through its birth pains, was reflected in the media.

As a young, black, inexperienced journalist in 1993, I remember a newsroom where the editor was a white male managing a predominantly white staff. The black reporters generally acted as translators of stories written by their white counterparts.

The only time one would get to have one's own story was when there was turmoil in the townships, hostels or taxi ranks, which was a daily occurrence during those days. Whether done consciously or unconsciously, this reality offered exciting learning opportunities for us black journalists.

As reporters for the public broadcaster, we had to file stories in several languages. White reporters filed mainly for SAfm (then Radio Today). We serviced the African language stations with our translations. As a black reporter, you could only file for Radio Today if you had the right accent. My most memorable moments on being accepted into the English medium reportage was when I covered stories like the Tembisa train crash, taxi violence and hostel clashes. During the 1994 election, I did live crossings for both English and African language stations from polling stations in Soweto.

It was after the 1994 election that I started producing current affairs. Pressure was mounting for transformation at the public broadcaster. Questions were being asked about the absence of black voices on the English flagship station. After a short stint there was additional pressure to uplift the traditional second cousins within radio, the African language stations. I was then transferred to Nelspruit as executive producer of Siswati current affairs. It was not such a pleasant experience. Most of the producers there had worked for the SABC for 10 years or more. They were male and elderly. Their routine was to use stories from Johannesburg and to ask no questions about content, quality or relevance to their audiences.

My challenge was to transform the current affairs production to be in tow with the transforming South Africa – to provide programmes that were



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accessible, relevant and informative to listeners of that particular radio station then in their language (Radio Swazi, now Ligwalagwala).

This was a daunting task for several reasons. The bosses, who thought it a good idea that I go there, did not take cultural considerations into account. Elderly men in my culture (Siswati) do not take kindly to taking instructions from a younger woman. The minute I got there, they were referring to me as *sidzandzane*, "little girl". As one can imagine, little girl and executive producer with a brief to transform current affairs – the work ethic would prove to be a tough endurance test.

It was a challenging, daunting and sometimes extremely frustrating time. Current affairs-wise, there were some blurry lines in terms of definitions. It was not clear whether we were a public broadcaster or a community radio station servicing the interests of a few who had access. There were situations where government officials would simply walk into the building and demand to be put on air. Before I arrived, that had been the culture. As can be expected, there was animosity and bitterness all round when that had to stop. I tried my best to turn the current affairs programmes into credible and informative news programmes.

However there were set habits and audience loyalty – African language stations listeners have been shown to be extremely loyal for various reasons: cultural, language, and simply limited choice. This led to sub-standard service from editors and producers who knew they had a guaranteed audience, no matter how bad the service.

I am not proud to say, when the founder of YFM approached me with a project we had been discussing for several years, I jumped at the idea of leaving my old men to their old ways back in Nelspruit.

YFM was a whole new world, where I was tasked to start a newsroom. This newsroom, it was envisaged, would deliver news to the youth in a way that would make them want to listen and take note of what was happening in the country and the world. Needless to say, studies at the time showed us that the youth used the time during bulletins to go to the bathroom before the next song. The challenge was how to get the young to combine the song and dance with their listening and talking.

After numerous debates, mini current affairs programmes of about 15 minutes each were intro-

duced: one in the morning and one in drive time. The day's top stories would be discussed together with an issue of the day for young people. This proved to be very popular and successful.

Three years later, the fascinating, youthful world of Y-FM radio was not enough for me any more. I was craving involvement with something more intellectual. As is common with most of my radio-crazy colleagues, it was time for me to trek back to the national broadcaster.

I was back at SAfm, working as a current affairs producer again. The place had changed since my last days there. My executive producer was a young woman of Cape Malay descent. Besides BBC producers, with whom we had a collaboration programme, the whole team was black, young and sharp!

Things have been transformed remarkably, although the presence of the BBC meant that more often than not we had to succumb to what they thought was the most important story of the day. I recall having a big argument when they suggested, a coup in some obscure country was a better story than a massacre at an army base in Tempe. Not long after I arrived, the BBC collaboration ended.

Shortly after that I was appointed senior producer. The responsibilities included planning the programme, setting up newsmakers and producing on-air presenters. I simply loved it! Radio being radio, and the world being what it has become, we would sit in our two planning sessions debating what to put on the programme, and how.

The best moments are when the line-up for the programme is finalised, and a dramatic story breaks. What we had spent the day crafting together as a team falls away to make way for something entirely different. 9/11, 2001 was one of those times: as we were about to go on air, the show finalised and guests lined up, everything fell off, including the planning. The beauty of radio is its immediacy; sometimes so immediate, one is allowed to break the rules. On 9/11 we were on air for an hour longer than we were supposed to be.

Now as executive producer of SAfm *PM Live* current affairs, I still find it so challenging. I have been in the radio industry for 10 years now. And these have been fascinating and fruitful years during which I learnt more than I did in the previous 30 years of my life.



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