

RADIO, SCHMADIO!

*Conventional wisdom has it that radio is the best medium to reach the majority of South Africans. **CHARLES RIDDLE** and **LARRY STRELITZ**, who have been doing some primary research on television penetration in the Eastern Cape are not so sure*

IT'S time to challenge the conventional wisdom that radio is the peoples' medium.

Recent research into television ownership and viewership in Grahamstown's black townships appear to threaten this basic assumption, for while it is correct that radio reaches "the people", so does television, and especially in urban areas.

In a country that is rapidly urbanising, it might well be that television is the medium to reach the masses.

Grahamstown is a small town in the most economically depressed part of South Africa. Yet, in an area with over 70 percent unemployment, 66 per cent of households have a television set and 67 percent of respondents claimed to watch television "today/yesterday". Just over 96 percent of respondents claimed to watch the news on television regularly.

Most startling of all was that 37 percent of squatter households own a television set.

We should not be surprised by these findings. SABC researcher Francis Chosane, for example, published figures last year which showed a 62 per cent ownership of television in urban townships throughout South Africa in 1991.

Thinking about radio hasn't moved much beyond the 1950's when British colonial authorities in Africa also championed the medium as the best way to reach "the people" and aimed to have a radio in 20 000 villages by 1955.

At that time, of course, television wasn't an option in African countries. But the current penetration of television in South Africa contradicts those who see

it as a "First World" medium. For example, some still argue that the cost of a television set prevents the medium from reaching the broad base of society in developing countries.

The Grahamstown research, for example, showed that 70 percent of the minority who did not have a set in their household, regularly watched with friends or neighbours.

Even appointees to the new SABC Board seem to underrate the penetration of television in this country. Professor Fatima Meer, for example, recently noted that radio, not television, was the medium which reached the people. She may be correct as far as the rural areas go, but the same no longer holds for people living in cities and small towns such as Grahamstown.

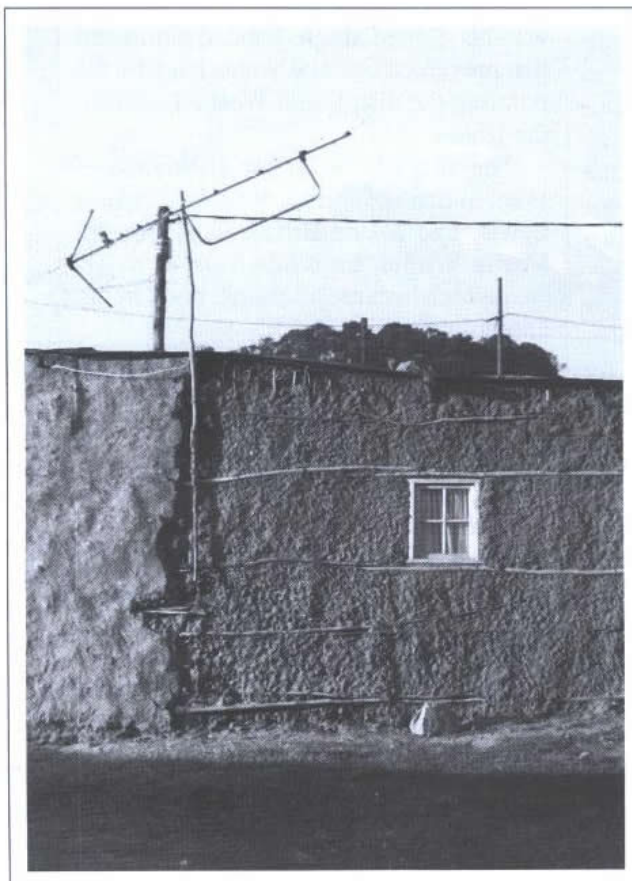
Those who champion radio pay little attention to the way people use different media. Studies suggest that television has a higher credibility than radio, and that audiences get their political information from television rather than other media.

With this country's first democratic elections less than a year away, further thought urgently needs to be given to the efficacy of the different media in communicating information. There may be fewer television sets out there, but television is both an audio and a visual medium and has definite advantages over radio. For example, in terms of voter education, the visual channel of television will

help explain not only what a ballot is, but also what it looks like.

A blind championing of radio simply based on high ownership figures is, in our view, shortsighted. ●

CHARLES RIDDLE and Larry Strelitz are lecturers in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University.



A sign of the times... one of the many switched-on informal settlements around Grahamstown.

Pic: Monty Cooper

In the 1950's the authorities banked on communal listening to radio and felt there was "no doubt" that every set sold meant 10 new listeners. This phenomenon of communal listening now applies to television viewing. Television is, after all, now reasonably accessible to all in an urban environment — even to those who do not own sets.