

DIGITAL NEWS WILL SET JOURNALISTS FREE TO COVER THE LOCAL ANGLE

Modern technology will give small broadcasters a rip - and - read service complete with digitally stored sound-bites

A number of new (i.e. non SABC / Bop / Ciskei / Transkei etc.) community radio stations are already on air, and there are frenzied efforts by various groups around the country to start broadcasting as soon as possible. The big guns, the people who are overtly doing it for money, will follow as soon as the IBA sees fit to grant commercial licences.

While positioning, programming and marketing are all vital parts of the mix which will determine success or otherwise for both commercial and community stations, it is journalists who will make the real difference to most stations.

To understand this we first need to examine the nature of radio: Radio broadcasting at its very best is an intensely personal relationship between the announcer and each and every listener. As a listener you should believe the person on air is speaking to you personally, that you have been invited to join in the live conversation, or that he or she has chosen a particular piece of music just for you.

And every station, be it "commercial", "community" or Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), will have to broadcast what people want to hear in order to stay in business. Because the mass media is all about listeners, viewers or readers. No listeners, no funds, no station. The "off" button is the single most powerful weapon in the hands of the community, be it the folk of Thokoza or Jethro Tull fans in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town.

There is, in fact, no difference in the nature of the stations defined as "community", "PBS" or "Commercial" by the Broadcasting Act. A loyal group of listeners is, by definition, a community. This can range from a community of entrepreneurs to a group of mothers in a squatter settlement. When it is done right radio builds up a tremendous loyalty from the people who identify with that particular station.

Radio is the most powerful tool for the building of communities, because it

is the most accessible of all types of mass communication. Anyone who can use a telephone can go live on air to state their point of view or to debate with another listener. What better way of introducing the people of Thokoza to the residents of neighbouring Kempton Park? For that matter, what better way of debating and solving the burning issues of housing, roads and sanitation within Thokoza than by exposing the politician concerned directly to the people through the medium of radio.

There is a very special place for journalists in a radio station. But, it means redefining just what news is all about and what it is that journalists do. News coverage must not be confined to the spectacular and earth-shattering. The main strength for most of the stations will lie in the identification with, and acceptance by, the target community. One of the main tools will be local news coverage. Listeners need and want to know that the electricity is being cut off, that there are roadworks, that the local high school fete is on Saturday, that the local soccer team is at the top of the log, and a host of other news. This is information that really matters, in that it affects the community — the listeners — directly. The better the station is at keeping them informed, the more they'll stay tuned.

Journalists provide this information by making the right contacts, by actively seeking out news and by becoming visible within the community they are serving. All of which lays the foundation for them to be fully integrated into the broadcast mix, unless the station management has decided to be totally music-based, with short news bulletins on the hour.

It should be the journalists in the field who identify issues and guests for phone-in programmes, who alert management to forthcoming events such as street fairs and sports events. In other words, it should be their task to facilitate the flow of all types of information within the community they are serving.

While interesting and relevant news bulletins are proven generators of both listenership and revenue news departments can be a huge drain on resources.

Here in South Africa the basic source of news for most operations is SAPA, the South African Press Association. SAPA produces as much as 500 000 words on a very busy news day. News desks need one person just sifting through this material. Another is usually needed to help write and to follow-up any urgent stories — if there is time.

Because this input by its very nature covers national and international affairs, the station is going to need at least one more reporter to provide the vital local flavour to the bulletins. All for less than 4 000 words which will actually be broadcast during a 12-hour day.

More investment in both staff and equipment will be needed when stations opt for sound clips in their bulletins. At least one additional person will be needed just to process the tapes. And there will have to be additional equipment in both the news room and studio to play in the 10-second bites.

Clearly it is uneconomical to invest in those resources in terms of people unless the broadcaster wants to run a news-based radio station. For those who see news as an essential part of the mix, but want to make wider use of the information-gathering skills of the journalists, the only option is to make use of an agency service.

Abroad this need has led to the provision of "rip and read" news services. These are ready-to-read bulletins which are taken straight from a telex or fax printout and read by the duty announcer. In this case the agency provides around 500 words of written-for-radio news and the duty DJ or announcer simply selects the 300 or so words for broadcast. This is the cheapest option in that the station needs no news infrastructure. It also means it has no inbuilt ability to gather and broadcast local news because the agency obviously cannot cover news down to that level. It also means effectively ceding editorial policy and control to the news agency.

It also means that there is no provision of sound-bites, an essential element in radio news around the world. Many of the SABC's stations have been slow to follow this format simply because of physical constraints — the newsrooms are too far from the studios, and the old tape-based systems require substantial investment in equipment.

The good news for local broadcasters is that modern technology makes it possible to combine text and sound on the same computer system. SAPA, which has been approached by virtually all the new broadcasters for a rip and read type service, will be using digital storage to incorporate the sound-bites.

The news reader at the sharp end — in the studio — will read the text off the screen and click on an icon to play in the sound. There will be no tape at all. The ready-to-read bulletin, complete with sound-bites, will be downloaded to the radio station a quarter of an hour before broadcast. This gives the news-

room time to edit and adapt it and the reader time to prepare.

With the huge burden of combing through screeds of copy just to find the national and international news lifted off their shoulders the news team will have time to concentrate on the issues which really matter, and with which their audience can identify — burst stormwater drains, stock exchange skinder, the outlook for the forthcoming cattle auction and, of course, weather and roads.

Armed with a telephone a single reporter per shift should be able to provide this full service. With two reporters on duty the news team will really be able to get involved in sourcing and providing information for use far beyond the confines of the actual news bulletins. The technology which makes this possible has been developed locally, but is

based on proven software and hardware. Sound is fed into the system via a standard line-in jack from a field tape recorder or can be recorded directly in the case of a telephone interview. The journalist at the terminal then plays back the piece, selects the bit they want and incorporates it into the bulletin.

Text and sound are then sent through to the studio on a network and the whole package is ready to go on air, with the sound being transferred to the desk via a standard line-out feed.

The digital system offers tremendous cost savings in terms of both equipment and consumables. A fully equipped terminal will be available for considerably less than just one professional reel-to-reel recorder. Because stations will be broadcasting directly off the system they will not need Cart machines or reel-to-reel playback equipment in the studio to broadcast the sound-bites. All editing is also done on the terminal, which saves on the audio tape that, with analogue systems, ends up in the dustbin.

The provision of a cost-effective news service to all radio stations has tremendous implications for the broadcast industry. Everyone, including community radio stations, will be able to afford to have access to local and international news. The competitive edge will lie in the enthusiasm, dedication and professionalism of the news staff who should be the proactive link between the broadcaster and its audience.

Communications consultant Ed Richardson has worked in both the print and electronic media. He is now helping SAPA set up its radio news service.

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