

FLAGSHIP RADIO SOUTH AFRICA CHANGES COURSE

Radio South Africa is due for major change and it is clear that management intend to reposition the station — even at the cost of losing many loyal listeners.

Although not much is being said at this stage, what is certain is that the station will move away from its present Eurocentric focus as it faces up to two truths: many of its traditional listeners are old, British in outlook and literally dying on them while, to grow, the majority of its future listeners have to be black and middle-class.

Hints of the changes to come (the station is due to relaunch in March 1995) are to be found in the actuality news programmes Radio Today, Newsbrief and Newswrap. Executive producer Mike Roberts was brought onto Radio Today from Channel Africa two years ago with a simple brief — tighten up the show and Africanise the news side.

"The first thing I introduced was Newswrap, which is African. In general, the idea is that we focus on the Third World aspect, put it more in perspective. Our correspondents have been told when they send something, say from the USA, to bear in mind where they're sending it. Before it was anonymous material, now we want them to put an African face on the news."

In pursuit of this Africanisation some, although at this stage not many, Western correspondents have been

Radio South Africa came in for some devastating criticism recently from one of the many consultants who have visited the SABC. While Radio South Africa has the biggest footprint of all of Auckland Park's stations, its daily audience is relatively small and largely white, English-speaking, male and 50 percent over the age of 50 — in fact, everything you shouldn't be in affirmative action South Africa. The station's content reminded the consultant of something out of the 1940s or 1950s and he dismissed almost out of hand the SABC's claim that RSA was "unashamedly South African", saying it was dominated rather by "English sitting room" programming and was, as a result, most unrepresentative of the population. RSA's flagship programme, Radio Today, also came under fire, being criticised for not being hard-hitting enough in public affairs and below international standards. Charles Riddle reports...

axed from the programme to make room for a shift toward the Third World. "We've tried to get better representation by putting more people in Africa and in the Middle and Far East to balance the equation. For example we always had Peter Allen Frost in Israel and we were getting only that side. We've tried to balance the news as best we can. We've got a Sydney-based correspondent to look at the Pacific Rim and we want to put someone in place in New Delhi to improve on our coverage from India."

African coverage has been boosted by Joe Khamisi in Nairobi who files on Kenya, Somalia and Zaire and correspondents have been located in Mozambique, Angola, Addis Ababa, Nigeria and the Cameroon. Technical problems, however, haven't made for easy planning. The best contact the Radio Today team has had with the Addis Ababa correspondent is by fax — they've never managed to get something on air. And they keep losing the Mozambican. Literally, that is, as programme producers can't find him

whenever a story breaks in his area. The state of telecommunications in Africa doesn't help much either. Terrible line quality has also made contacts with many of the other African correspondents very difficult.

But part of the technical "challenges" will be overcome if a proposed partnership with the BBC to broadcast Focus on Africa at 6.30pm every day goes ahead. The actuality programme has a wide listenership in Africa. The idea is to produce Focus on Africa under a joint editorship. "It will give us access to their correspondents in west Africa. It'll be a good partnership as the BBC have admitted Channel Africa cleans them up in east Africa."

There has been a conscious effort to place black presenters' voices on the programmes. Producers are looking to pair Rodney Trudgeon up with a "black female voice" on Radio Today.

Good radio being all about relationships between presenters and their audiences, it is not so much the change in content on Radio Today that has elicited criticism but rather the accents of new correspondents and presenters. This particularly is the case when a black presenter, using what Roberts refers to as "street English" follows, for example, a programme by Paddy O'Byrne with his "university English".

"The contrast gets to listeners immediately. We got a tremendous

AMPS PASSES ITS MEDICAL

The All Media Products Survey (AMPS), funded and initiated by the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF), has often been referred to as the industry's "currency". AMPS is the one common survey to which advertisers, their agencies and media owners turn, in order to understand their products and the markets into which they sell them.

By Cleo Ehlers

The annual release of AMPS is never without at least some criticism from various sectors within the advertising or media industries. This year however, the release of AMPS created concern as the data reflect fairly widespread drops in the use of newspapers, magazines and radio. Criticism of the survey ranged from allegations that media use should have been high, given that the AMPS fieldwork period coincided with the pre-Election and Election period - to complaints that circulation figures of several newspapers reflected increases during this period.

Piet Smit, Technical Director of SAARF, explained that a drop in radio

media usage had already been noted in May this year, when the first AMPS Diary report was published. When the general AMPS report was released in mid September and further declines in media use were noted, SAARF's various committees undertook a stringent scrutiny of the data. In addition, Nasionale Newspapers initiated an independent investigation through Professor Dawie Stoker (University of Pretoria) and Dr Jackie Galpin (Wits) into the methodology of the survey.

As a result of these activities, AMPS has been declared "fit" and given a clean bill of health. Changes in readership, for instance, apply to a variety of publication types. The drops in readership come from a variety of geographical and demographic groups. There is no clear pattern which might point a finger at the work which was done in specific areas or groups. Readership has dropped in both the highest and lowest Living Standards Measure groups. English dailies have lost both Afrikaans and black readers. There is some indication that more male than female readership has been lost, but there are also drops in high and low income groups. The number of read-

ers who claimed to have read or paged through a copy of a title during the six months before the interview, has also dropped.

Piet Smit believes that when trends for the last five years are examined, 1994 figures are not badly out of kilter with all the other years. He claims that decline in various media consumption since the 1993 report are exacerbated by the fact that 1993 reflected "unusually high figures" when comparisons with 1992 and earlier are made. Changes to the procedures from 1993 are minimal. The sample is slightly larger in 1994 and has been based on the nine new provinces. The actual methodology for measuring readership, radio listening, television viewing and cinema attendance, has not changed. The proportion of check-backs on fieldwork is slightly higher than previously.

The number of substitutions which had to be made during fieldwork has increased slightly, but SAARF's analysis shows that the readership which is reported by substitutes is marginally higher than that of ordinarily selected respondents. As a result, SAARF does not believe that substitution can be the

reason for the lower media consumption. To avoid possible unrest problems during the Election period, black fieldwork was speeded up from January to March, with the result that proportionately less black fieldwork took place during April and May.

The function of AMPS is designed to report on actual behaviour and not the reasons which determine that behaviour. Nonetheless, Piet Smit has put forward some comments from all the discussions on AMPS, as to possible reasons for the changes.

- The ruling economic and political climate is a prime suspect. It is possible this led to lower consumption because of less money to spend on media. Subjective factors such as an avoidance to further exposure to violence and propaganda, can only be guessed at.

- The population estimates which are used for AMPS are based on census data which are annually updated on the basis of available information. The proposition has been put forward that these estimates may be lagging behind actual changes, particularly as

amount of flak from listeners at first but we are weathering it. They phone in with comments such as 'Haven't they got their own station?'

But truth be told the grumbles of some of the programme's present listeners do not overly upset the planners at Auckland Park. Audience figures on Radio South Africa are not promising. Radio Metro has double the combined audience for Radio South Africa and Afrikaans Stereo — and yet Radio South Africa is the station with most resources. In some ways Radio South Africa's dilemma is not dissimilar to that of many newspapers in that the solution to its small, and increasingly limited, audience penetration lies in keeping up with the country's changing demographics. "The point is that we have to grow and we won't with the listeners we've got. We've had to accept that there's going to be growing competition and we're repositioning."

"We will probably lose a large percentage of traditional listeners but we're aiming at the black middle class audience and we have to make radio more accessible to them. They're not like the traditional Radio South Africa listener, the old English Service, A-Programme individual who tends to switch in and out for a chuckle over My Word. That's an older generation and we can't grow with them. I think in the changing South Africa we have to be bold and just step forward and leave the listeners who don't want to stay with us."

"If we're totally honest, I'm almost certain that many of the traditional white listeners are going to go to the BBC World Service. The advisors say that is what will happen because in the near future it will be very easy to listen

to the BBC. In any event, I have no doubt there will be a station that will move in to take up the traditionalists and be geared for them only. For instance it is expected the Weekly Mail will go into partnership with the BBC and we know one of the reasons the BBC wants partnerships is so that it can get its foot in South Africa, particularly onto FM. Traditional listeners stay with us at the moment but I'm sure we'll lose them the moment they can switch to a BBC station."

As for the future look of Radio South Africa? Roberts is cautious in

what he'll say but listeners can expect major changes to the line-up and the loss of some of the long-standing programmes. Part of the thinking is to open up the station to the public, bring in talk-radio principles immediately after Radio Today, for example, with an expert in the studio to discuss a topic linked to the major news event of the day. If it works, they should go head-to-head with Radio 702's successful formula.

Mike Roberts...will lose traditional listeners



LOOK ME IN THE EYE
AND TELL ME THE BLACK
PERSPECTIVE ISN'T NORTH
THE PAPER IS WRITTEN ON.

far as urbanisation is concerned. This possibility gets some support from the data.

- The fact that audience reductions were so widespread and apply to such a variety of media, is an indication that the media themselves are unlikely to be the cause for the lower figures, as the losses occur over many publication groups. They are not due to bad editorial content or to the loss of audience to effective competition, but are to be found in the fabric of society.

- The pre-Election period was characterised by tremendous activity in the area of Voter Education. It is possible that large numbers of people were occupied in such activities, rather than consuming their usual media.

- Several newspapers ran large competitions during the fieldwork period, boosting their sales. Some of these competitions resulted in multiple purchases of newspapers, in order to improve the chances of winning prizes. These high sales, which were unusually high in some months, were not due to greater readership, but to greater numbers being purchased by the same people. As such, in certain instances, circulation figures and readership figures would not necessarily tally.

Aggrey Klaaste – Editor



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The soul truth, daily.