

Some thoughts on the role of news and current affairs in public radio

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Introduction

Radio is the most important medium for news in South Africa. Over 26 million people get their news from radio, most of them from the African language stations that fall into the public broadcaster stable.¹

There have been times when even those in senior management at the broadcaster ignore radio, particularly radio in the African languages. Certainly, print media journalists rarely bother to monitor it. The coverage of the broadcaster is extensive but is usually about boardroom and management battles (of which there are plenty), and if they focus on content, it will be on English TV and occasionally the English-language radio station, SAfm.

Yet radio it is the biggest single news medium in SA, and listenership far outstrips newspaper readership.²

History of radio in South Africa

Three years after Nelson Mandela was released from prison, a new Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act was passed in South Africa effectively laying the basis for the transformation of the broadcasting landscape and the transformation of a state broadcaster to a public one. A year before the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa had a new Act, and a new public broadcaster.

In the apartheid era, the SABC was a giant state broadcaster. There was one other subscription TV channel by that time, which was restricted in its license from broadcasting news or current affairs, two commercial radio stations (one operating out

¹ South African Audience Research Foundation(SAARF)/Radio Audience Measurement Survey (RAMS) 2012, 2013

² According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation in South Africa, total daily newspaper circulation in the last quarter of 2012 was about 1.3 million, a drop from 1.6 million in 2008. Weekly newspaper circulation is about 550,000, a slight drop from four years ago (ABC: Q4 Final Report, 2012) Readership, of course, would be more than this.

of the Transkei homeland), and one community radio station called Bush radio that broadcast illegally.

The other important backdrop to the political sea-change in 1990 was that SA had just come out of a stringent State of Emergency that had lasted on and off for the previous six years. Censorship of newspapers was the order of the day, and journalists suffered under severe reporting restrictions.

The liberalization of the airwaves

So media freedom was high on the agenda when 1990 came around and with it the promise of democracy. A strong civil society had survived the years of the repressive State of Emergency in spite of nearly a decade of “preventative detention”. This included an Anti-Censorship coalition made up of trade unions and human rights groups. The African National Congress, unbanned in February 1990, found common cause with many of these groups as they all united against the once-powerful common enemy of apartheid.

Thus broadcasting policy became part of the CODESA negotiations. The ANC called for “the public media” to be put in the hands of an interim independent authority to “ensure fairness, neutrality and impartiality...”³

Over the next three years, the ANC, bolstered by a strong movement known as the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting, pushed for an independent public broadcaster. In 1993, with the first democratic election pending, this became more urgent. The de Klerk government, although it had agreed to open a channel for talks, was slow to move and was finally prompted to do so by threats of mass protests around the broadcaster. A panel of judges was appointed, which included both black and white judges, to appoint a new Board of Directors for the broadcaster.

There were over 700 nominations for the Board, and 86 people were shortlisted. Twenty-five people were finally recommended. But the de Klerk government, in a move that threatened to derail the whole process, decided to replace seven of them including Professor Njabulo Ndebele, who’d been nominated as chair.

Although the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting and the ANC were peeved at the political interference, they agreed to the amended Board. And so in 1993, South Africa saw the first publicly nominated Board of the broadcaster, as well as a new Independent Broadcasting Authority Act and an independent regulatory body.

The legislation compares well with other parts of Africa. Francis Nyamnjoh, the West African media analyst, for instance, describes how in many parts of Africa, post-colonial

³ Quoted in FXI document, op cit.

governments parodied their colonial predecessors who had always maintained tight control over the broadcast media in particular. But the colonial and post-colonial governments held what Nyamnjoh calls “rigid control” over the broadcast media.⁴

But in South Africa, precisely because the process was overtly political and heavily negotiated, the outcomes were different.

The IBA Act and later the Broadcasting Act passed in 1999, among other things, recognized equitable treatment of all of South Africa’s 11 languages as important, and divided the SABC into a public service and commercial service broadcaster. Among the obligations of the public service division, importantly was the following obligation:

“[to] provide significant news and public affairs programming which meets the highest standards of journalism, as well as fair and unbiased coverage, impartiality, balance and independence from government, commercial and other interests”.⁵

The IBA Act also liberalized the airwaves considerably, and today there are more than 200 private, public and community radio stations broadcasting out of SA.

Yet, the public broadcaster dominates radio. Of the top ten most popular stations in the country, eight belong to the SABC.⁶ Of those eight, five are African-language public broadcast stations, one is the Afrikaans-language PBS station, RSG, and two are commercial music-format stations owned by the SABC.

One final point is important – a further part of the transformation story is that SABC executive, Govin Reddy brought in a variety of experienced editors from Canada, the United States and Australis to train journalists and develop their professionalism.

The work post-94 would have taken so much longer were it not for the groundwork done mainly between 1990 and 1994 by several SABC editors including Judy Sandison and her Zulu colleagues - Nhlakanipho Zulu and Mtholephi Mthimkulu. Despite death threats and resistance from above, they put in a huge amount of effort and determination into pioneering better journalism within the SABC. SABC Radio news and current affairs on Radio Zulu led the way in particular.

Public Radio today: new challenges

⁴ Nyamnjoh, Francis B: **Africa’s Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging** (Zed Press, 2005), p48

⁵ Broadcasting Act (4 of 1999); the entire Act can be downloaded from <http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=70607>

⁶ SAARF RAMS (op cit) March – October 2012

Although public radio has a wide reach, there are nonetheless serious constraints on the broadcaster, both political and financial.

One is that the public broadcaster has an onerous public mandate, among which is the duty to broadcast in 11 languages in TV and 13 on radio. It also has a set quota of news and current affairs, educational programming, and children's programming. And it has to do all of this with minimal funding from government.

The SABC relies on advertising for about 87% of its revenue. TV licenses make up 11% and the government contributes just 2% of revenue that is earmarked for children's educational programming.

And worse, the lack of government funding does not mean there has been a lack of political interference from the ruling party.

In 2004, when this writer was Head of Radio News, the then Board appointed a new head of News who described himself as a "deployee" of the ruling party. He began, especially in the run-up to the elections in the neighboring country of Zimbabwe, to ban certain commentators from the airwaves. Among those were the brother of the then president, Moeletsi Mbeki, who was sharply critical of the Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. That resulted in a formal inquiry headed by the first post-apartheid CEO, Zwelakhe Sisulu. But its findings were never released by the SABC.⁷

That was the first sign of political faltering. But there were financial mis-steps too and by 2009, the public broadcaster was in R1 billion debt and could barely pay salaries at the end of the month.

When Jacob Zuma became President of the country in 2009, there was a brief Prague Spring at the broadcaster and a new Board was appointed which was diverse in terms of both race and skills, and represented at least a few who had experience in broadcasting.⁸

However, this Prague Spring was either brief or misconceived from the point of view of the new political administration. As early as 2010, the Board experienced political pressure in respect of certain appointments. Most obvious was in the appointment of a Head of News, where political pressure brought to bear was so intense that it caused the interview process to be aborted and an appointment to be made without the approval of the Board. Although the appointment was later ratified by the Board, the process caused such fallout that it resulted in the resignation of four of the 12 non-executive Board members.

During this period, the then then Minister of Communications, changed the Articles of Association governing the SABC's relationship with government in such a way as to

⁷ This writer provided evidence of the "blacklisting" to the Commission, including a letter to the then Head of News, Dr Snuki Zikalala, which was published in full by the Commission. The report was never publicly released but was posted on the website of the South African weekly newspaper, the *Mail&Guardian* at the time.

⁸ This writer was one of those appointed to the Board of the public broadcaster in 2009. It came into operation in January, 2010.

give the Minister (who represents government as the sole shareholder of the broadcaster) direct control over the appointment of the three top executives: the Chief Executive Officer, the Chief Financial Officer and the Chief Operations Officer. This was later overturned by a court in the reign of a new Board, again brought about by a significant political sea-change in the country.

During the Zuma era, the attempts to intervene politically in news and broadcast content were worse than ever before. Shortly before the five-yearly elective conference of the ruling party, the ANC, a senior executive (then the acting COO, Hlaudi Motsoeneng) marched into a studio of one of the SABC's biggest commercial stations, and ordered three journalists, including one from the UK newspaper, the Financial Times, off air. They were about to discuss the way the upcoming elective conference had been covered by the media. But the show's host was told that as there was no representative from the ruling party present, it could not go ahead.

There were other interventions too: banning guests on a TV panel, which included Jonathan Shapiro, the cartoonist who is a caustic satirist of the President, and trying to halt a discussion on another radio station about the ANC's elective conference.

Many members of the then Board (of which this writer was a member) objected to this, describing it as censorship.

More worrying was the shadow of corruption that dogged the broadcaster.

A case in point was when the then Minister of Communications, Dina Pule, used her powers to veto a particular candidate for Chief Financial Officer and instead to appoint a young woman of her choice. It later emerged this person was a close associate of the Minister's partner. The Board suspended the CFO in 2012 after a forensic audit showed she had "donated" a large amount of SABC money to a conference he had an interest in.

During this period, the then acting COO began to clash frequently with Board members, not only over issues of censorship but also over financial and expenditure issues. For instance, he would continually pressure the Board to raise the salaries of middle-management and when this was resisted, he went ahead and did it anyway. In February 2013, the then Board convened in Cape Town under the chairmanship of the deputy chair, Thami ka Platjje, and resolved to remove him from his acting position and send him back to his official position which was head of regions.

Soon after that the Chair, Ben Ngubane, resigned. The deputy chair then made a statement that he was "rescinding" the Board decision, something he did not have the power to do. He then resigned shortly afterwards.

Those members who had been nominated and supported by the ANC then resigned about three weeks later. The Board was effectively non-quorate and was dissolved by Parliament.

Throughout this period, Motsoeneng called various Board members effectively threatening them that if they did not resign they would never sit on another Board.

In the end, the Board was dissolved, and Motsoeneng was appointed by the next Board into a permanent position.

Although the loan (guaranteed by government) that had been taken out by the interim board of 2009 had been largely repaid by this time, the following years would see the SABC sink quickly into debt again.

Radio's reach

Notwithstanding the political battles around the public broadcaster, its public service radio stations still reach the vast majority of people in South Africa.

This makes the quest for accountability and transparency in the public broadcaster a significant matter, and key to preserving democracy.

The SABC runs 18 radio stations – three are commercial and 15 are known as Public Service Broadcasting (PBS) stations. In terms of the mandate, these stations cover all the official languages in South Africa. Additionally there is a small station in the Northern Cape which services two communities who speak indigenous San (or Bushman) languages.⁹

Ukhozi is the biggest station in the country with over 7 million listeners and XKfm, serving two (non-cognate) San languages in the Northern Cape is the smallest. The question, in terms of the integrity of public broadcasting, is how they serve the public in terms of news coverage.

Radio stations and news and current affairs

In 1994, when a new management took over under the leadership of Zwelakhe Sisulu as CEO, with Govin Reddy as head of radio, the imperative was to dismantle apartheid structures in programming and news.

During the apartheid era, stations themselves controlled the news. On the African-language stations this was usually tightly controlled by white African-language speakers who could monitor the bulletins.¹⁰

⁹ There is some dispute about whether to use the word "San" or "Bushman" to describe the original hunter-gatherers who occupied southern Africa. Many of the community in the Northern Cape say the word "San" originally meant "vagabond" and prefer the word "Bushman". See Hart, Thomas Bongani: **Community Radio: A beat that develops the soul of the people? A case study of XKfm as a SABC owned community radio station and its role as a facilitator of community based development.** Unpublished MA thesis, University of KwaZulu Natal, (2011) for more detail.

¹⁰ See Lekgoathi, Sekibabika Peter *"Bantustan Identity, Censorship and Subversion on Northern Sotho Radio under Apartheid, 1960-80s"* and Gunner, Liz: *"IsiZulu Radio Drama and the Modern Subject: Restless Identities in South Africa in the 1970s"* both in Gunner, Liz, Ligaga, Dina and Moyo Dumisani: **Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities** (Wits University Press, 2011) for insightful analyses about control and resistance in African radio in the apartheid era.

With the dawn of the democratic era, and particularly the new dispensation for the broadcaster, news came under the control of a News Department, run by journalists, who, in theory, could take editorial rather than political decisions about news. In the early days of the democratic-era broadcaster, a flood of journalists who had been in the anti-apartheid media came into it in an attempt to improve its news offering and to make it more credible. Among them were Franz Kruger, as national news editor and Barney Mthombothi, as head of Radio News.

News reporters and current affairs producers reported to the News Division and not to station management. But station management resisted what they saw as an “encroachment” of news into talk and music programming. They argued that current affairs and news reduced their profit margins.

This is doubtful though. Certainly in the case of SAFM, which ran 6 hours of current affairs a day, internal SABC researchers who tracked listenership found that it peaked during current affairs shows.

And in spite of egregious interference in the “Hlaudi” era, as well as foolhardy commercial decisions based on no evidence that decreed that all stations should play a 90% quota of local music in their music shows, many radio journalists continued as faithfully as they could to do their jobs, reporting from courts, from Parliament and its committees, from the Constitutional Court, and from the far-flung rural areas where the SABC is still the only news organization with a significant presence.

Because SAFM had a good chunk of the day assigned to current affairs, many other stations, such as Ukhozi, managed to get more than the ICASA-denoted quota of 2 hours a day.

Language has always been a challenge in the newsroom and by force of circumstance, stories around the country were produced in English and at least one other language. They were then translated by news producers for the current affairs programmes across the country.

This meant that a listener, say, to Phalaphala, the TshiVenda station in Limpopo, could listen as easily to reports from the Parliamentary committees as a listener on SAfm or RSG. (The exception was XKFM, where the common language is Afrikaans)

Current affairs also played a critical role in building social cohesion in the country. Since 1996, when radio broadcast the first hearing of the Human Rights Violations commission hearing of the TRC, the wail of grief from Nomonde Calata, widow of the brutally assassinated Fort Calata, one of the Cradock Four, was covered by the multi-lingual political news team of radio and carried by every current affairs show on every station in the country.

Likewise, with the setting up of XKFM in the Northern Cape, the whole country got to hear of the struggles of this marginalized group of people – effectively refugees from Namibia and Angola – who had lived in a tented camp called Schmidtsdrift about 100km west of Kimberley.

When this writer was head of radio news, we established a news and current affairs show on the station, in line with the public broadcast mandate. Not only were local listeners suddenly brought into the country and the world, but it had a palpable effect on education, and was also able to hold local leaders to account.

For instance, when the then Premier of the province, Manne Dipico, went on air at the first current affairs broadcast, the presenters were blunt: “Tell us,” they said in Afrikaans. “When are we going to move to Platfontein?” (Platfontein is on the outskirts of Kimberley. For years, the community had been promised proper housing there)

After years of government inertia, the fact that a locally based news show could hold it to account, had a remarkable effect. Two years after the news broadcasts began, most of the community moved into brick houses in Platfontein. A clinic was built. Because they were nearer to Kimberley, many of them got jobs at the local army base (their skills really restricted them to the tourist trade as trackers, or to the army).

Education improved because general knowledge had improved.¹¹ This is a case where public service broadcasting has integrated a forgotten and marginalized community into the mainstream of South Africa; it has improved educational outcomes, and it has built of a community.

The situation today

The public broadcaster is in an unenviable financial position. Not only have bad commercial decisions (such as the 90% quota) cost it advertising revenue (one station, Lotus, in Durban which has a mainly Indian audience and plays Indian music lost substantially in listenership and revenue), but an unsustainable wage bill and apparent looting over the past five years has effectively bankrupted the broadcaster.

In the case of SAFM, which caters mainly to listeners in the higher LSMs, it lost listeners because, I would venture, of a distaste for the corruption and political interference that stamped the Motsoeneng era. Those listeners, particularly in the big cities, had other choices.

But the decisions the new management has taken to remedy this situation amounts to a major undermining of the public broadcast mandate and has in fact taken us back to the era we found ourselves in at the end of apartheid.

Basically, on SAfm, news and current affairs have been forced to give up four of their six hours to the station management who has turned the entire day (apart from two ‘ghetto-ized’ hours – 5-6am and noon-1pm) into talk shows.

At prime time between 6-9am and 4-6pm, listeners can no longer get the basic news of what is happening in Parliamentary committees, in courts, in rural areas, or international news. All of it is mediated through presenters, some of whom are good and trained journalists, but others of whom are clearly not news people. The point though is not so

¹¹ Manne Dipico, interview, XKFM, 2002

much the qualities of the presenters (although this does make a difference) but the format, which discourages news and journalism.

SAFM's "mediated conversation", which is built on its predecessors, the After-8 debate and Forum at 8, which were part of news, is the nearest equivalent to news programming and is usually informative and balanced. But previous versions relied on the newsroom for extra information. Now that relationship is weak, at best.

The entire uprising in the North-West, for instance, went almost uncovered on prime-time radio apart from tweets and "talking heads". Although the SABC has an office in Mahikeng, I heard no reports compiled by reporters, which gave the protestors, let alone the provincial government or businesses any voice. Likewise, a recent protest in Kimberley became an item on the talk show not through the efforts of reporters but through the tweets of listeners. This despite the fact that the SABC has an office in Kimberley, which was once one of the most productive and lively of the newsrooms.

One of its reporters, Mercedes Besent, moved to the Parliamentary office several years ago, making a significant contribution to lively and accurate reporting from the committees which reflected many voices. Today, she is hardly heard on the English station apart from in some of the news bulletins.

The station has also canned the 7.30am news bulletin, which depletes the news offering even further. The only way one can get an overview of what is happening in the country is through the excellent traffic reports which cover everything from cash-in-transit heists to protests. But this is not sufficient to replace the loss of journalism.

Radio, as Charles Jaco, a veteran radio journalist in the United States put it, responds to one of the oldest instincts in humanity: story-telling. It is essentially about narrative.¹²

Good news reporting can become good story-telling, as so many award-winning pieces on current affairs radio, particularly from the provinces, have shown. In 2004, for instance, radio reporters around the country from each regional office were assigned to do 10 stories from their areas in the run-up to the elections to map how things had changed for ordinary people in the decade since democracy. This produced an array of the best journalism one could find anywhere – a story from Mpumalanga on a white community in a holiday resort outside the Kruger Park, which had effectively declared "UDI" from local government; a story from Excelsior in the Free State where the reporter traced the real-life characters in the little town on which Zakes Mda's iconic book, *The Madonnas of Excelsior*, was based, or the struggles in a northern Limpopo rural community to retain access to an ancient spiritual site.

¹² Jaco, C: Address at "What is Radio" conference, Portland, Oregon, 2013

Likewise, eight years earlier, the daily stories from the TRC hearings, scripted by award-winning reporters such as Angie Kapelianis and Antjie Krog or the in-depth reports of the fights in Parliament over the drafting of the final Constitution brought the past and future, with their many voices, to the country.

The other significant contribution made by current affairs on SAfm was to showcase talented young black reporters who otherwise may have been “stuck” in provincial offices. Some of these, such as Mahlatse Mahlase or Thulasizwe Simelane, are among the most respected reporters in the country today.

It is near impossible to tell the stories of the country without reporters. The talk-show format is essentially one of presenter/ interviewee, plus call-ins, all of which are unverified and/or unverifiable.

As Kovach and Rosenstiel say in their incisive little book *The Elements of Journalism*, the “primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” and its “essence is the discipline of verification.”¹³

We live in an era where rumour and fake news, aided by the easy reach of social media, have become real threats to democracy. Talk radio can easily feed into this.

To throw news and current affairs off radio is part of a world-wide trend: in the United States for instance, of the approximately 14000 radio stations, about 60% are music stations and most of the rest are talk stations (a large chunk of those are conservative religious stations). The window for narrative news radio has shrunk to National Public Radio, which is now largely privately funded by donors and foundations.

The scrapping of news and current affairs on SAFM will have severe knock-on effects for all the public broadcast stations in the country.

There have been suggestions that the move is partly financially driven – talk is cheap and news is expensive which is why the non-music commercial stations in the country opt for it, apart from their news bulletins. But they don’t have a public broadcast mandate.

This should in no way be interpreted as a criticism of presenters: some are good, others are mediocre; some are well-informed, others not. But the format of talk goes against the grain of a news service on public service radio. Today the presenters are even reading commercials on air, as they do on commercial stations.

¹³ Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T: “ *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople should know and what the public should expect*”, Penguin Random House, 2001

However, it is a criticism of the new management of the SABC and a radio news management (put in place by Motsoeneng) who relinquished this important vehicle without, it seems, any attempt to stand on principle.

It is also clear that few of the current affairs executive producers were consulted by the new management. This was confirmed in an interview by Eusebius McKaizer of Radio 702 with the new COO Chris Maroleng when he (McKaizer) pointed out that the host of AM Live (the then current affairs programme) had heard of the scrapping of AM Live from him.

It seems a great irony that among those on radio who stood up to Hlaudi Motsoeneng in defense of public-service journalism, have been betrayed by a new management which has replaced news and current affairs with talk.

As noted, there is much sympathy for the SABC's financial predicament. But is this to be resolved by destroying the core of the public broadcast radio service at a time when, more than ever, the country needs accurate reporting, facts as opposed to rumour, and when the public broadcaster is the only news organization that can bring news of every corner of the country to every home?