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TRANSFORMING THE MEDIASCAPE IN SOUTH AFRICA: The Continuing Struggle to Develop Community Radio

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Abstract

As a new democracy, South Africa's adoption of community radio is significant on a global scale. It can be said to have more progressive broadcasting policies than other long established democracies. But the sector, despite its rapid growth, is struggling. This paper considers community radio in South Africa as an example of 'citizens' media' that is transforming the country's mediascape. It draws on interviews undertaken in South Africa during late 2001 to discuss the problems that the sector is facing. The role of legislation and regulation is considered as well as an example of a community radio station that serves a severely disadvantaged community. Social and economic underdevelopment in historically disadvantaged communities is seen as a major problem and an example of an initiative that seeks to develop such communities through community radio is described.

If communities cannot have the houses they were promised and the free education they long for their children, let alone the jobs that they are forever crying for, let them at least have their voices.

Console Tleane 2001:32

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, as apartheid was dismantled and the new Republic of South Africa was formed, the airwaves have been opened up in an unprecedented way. The state owned and controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation's previous monopoly gave way to a diverse broadcasting environment. This paper concentrates on the community radio sector, made possible through the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act, which was passed by Government in 1993 and which established an Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). Included in the Act was a firm commitment to community broadcasting. This paper draws on interviews and meetings carried out in South Africa in late 2001. The paper has four sections. First it places the South African experience in a global context and considers the notion of citizens' media. Next it describes the progress of community radio and the regulatory environment of South Africa. It goes on to look at an example of a station in Alexandra before exploring just one of the ways in which South Africans are seeking to develop the sector through a variety of innovative approaches. This paper is concerned with community radio that serves the historically disadvantaged communities of South Africa.

Citizens' media?

As a new democracy, South Africa's adoption of community radio is significant on a global scale. Democracies that are far older such as India and the UK have yet to introduce a 'third tier' of broadcasting, although the UK is currently piloting 'access' radio (see Price-Davies and Tacchi 2001) and the lobby for community radio in India appears to be making some progress (see www.thehoot.org). South Africa can thus be said to have a more progressive broadcasting policy than other long-established democracies. Yet, like those nations that have long adopted the three-tier model

(Australia and Canada for example) there is a wide diversity of stations and organisations that are incorporated under the term ‘community radio’. And the sector, despite its rapid growth (over 100 licenced Stations in less than a decade), is struggling. There have been problems with implementing legislation for community radio, and for many of the stations this has served to magnify problems linked to the inequalities and social and economic deprivation that historically disadvantaged communities continue to endure. How then might we apply the notion ‘citizens’ media’ to community radio in South Africa?

Rodriguez shows how ‘alternative media function as environments that facilitate the fermentation of identities and power positions... spin transformative processes that alter people’s senses of self, their subjective positionings, and therefore their access to power’ (2001:18). She objects to theorists who approach alternative media with a binary approach to the concept of power – with large mainstream media organisations being seen as powerful and small scale alternative media seen as powerless. This, she feels is to misunderstand lived experiences of ‘power equations’ that are in fact dynamic and shifting (*ibid.*:16). On an everyday level participants in alternative media experience ‘multiple subjectivities’ and various and shifting power equations. She proposes that if we shift from the term ‘alternative media’ to ‘citizens’ media’ we will avoid binary oppositions (such as alternative:mainstream) and see participation as not merely a resistance to the ‘alienating power of mainstream media’ but an enacting of citizenship ‘actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape’ (*ibid.*:20).

Looking at community radio in South Africa as an expression of citizenship is an interesting challenge. On the one hand the developments have been a remarkable exercise in building democracy and civil society. On the other hand there have been serious delays and shortcomings at each stage in the development of the sector. According to the CEO of the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF), despite ensuring that legislation was in place for the establishment of a community radio sector, because of the ways in which the legislation is applied, the government and the regulator are ‘killing community radio’ (interview with Mabalane Mfundisi, October 2001). The NCRF was formed in 1993 in Soweto. It represents around 100 community radio station projects, of which around 50 are on air. The Forum is concerned with representing the interests of stations from historically disadvantaged communities. One of its objectives is to,

Promote the role of community radio in support of democracy, development, the empowerment of communities, freedom of expression, diversity of broadcast ownership and opinion, and the combating of racism, sexism and all forms of discrimination in South Africa.

(NCRF undated)

Professor John Van Zyl runs an NGO called ABC Ulwazi which provides training and programme production for the sector (see below). In Van Zyl’s opinion, ‘The Government is crazy because on the one hand it does exactly the right thing by providing the licences so freely, but on the other hand, not providing money for training or for sustainability, its criminal’ (interview with John Van Zyl, October 2001). In the next section some of the developments in legislation, regulation and the role of the NCRF will be explored to contextualise the final sections that look at an

example of community radio in South Africa and just one of the initiatives that is attempting to make community radio sustainable.

Community radio and regulation

The IBA Act of 1993 had made provision for the licencing of community radio. The legislation encourages ownership and control by persons from historically disadvantaged groups through community broadcasting services. These services,

- Are fully controlled by a non-profit entity and carried on for non-profitable purposes;
- Serve a particular community;
- Encourage members of the community served, or persons associated with or promoting the interests of such community, to participate in the selection and provision of programmes to be broadcast; and,
- May be funded by donations, grants, sponsorships or advertising or membership fees, or by any combination of these.

The licencing of community radio stations in South Africa is undertaken by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), which was formed by the merging of the IBA and the South African Telecommunications Authority (SATRA) in 2000. Despite the apparent desire on all sides for a rapid introduction of community radio, there have been many delays.

According to the Head of the Licencing Unit of ICASA the merger was just one of the reasons why there have been delays – the problems began much earlier. The IBA Act of 1993 had made provision for permanent four-year licences, but it did not set out the regulatory framework. This had to happen through an inquiry ‘and I think that everyone thought that the inquiry and the formalisation of the regulatory framework [would] only take twelve-months and that soon after we would start issuing the four year licences’ (interview with Pheladi Gwangwa, October 2001). There was a desire to fast track applications so that ‘by the election you have a number of different voices that would be able to report fairly’ (*ibid.*). In order to achieve this, an amendment was put into the Act to allow for temporary twelve-month licences and it was envisaged that by the time those licences came up for renewal the four year licences would be available. However, it took until 1997 for a position paper on four-year community licences to be issued by the IBA (<http://iba.org.za/compos.htm>) who then called for applications. Between 1994 and 1997 the IBA issued 104 twelve-month licences (with 82 stations actually going on air, and some of these renewing their licences each year). When the invitation to apply for four-year licences was issued the IBA received 252 applications. They had been expecting around 100:

The IBA was then overwhelmed... We started hearings in 1998, end of 1998, the closing dates were by province, so it was to give the provinces a chance, so we started with the first province that had to submit which was the Free State. But then what happened was, when we were supposed to go for the hearings it was only then that we realised that in fact in terms of the IBA Act there has to be a quorum of Council at every hearing. [...] It was only when we had to embark on a road show that we realised that if Councillors are out in the Free State for a month then it means the Authority will just grind to a halt and no decisions would be made.

(Interview with Pheladi Gwangwa, October 2001).

Legislative amendments were again required so that the Council could delegate a panel to hold hearings rather than send a quorum. Finally momentum was established, but quickly hampered by budget cuts, a Council restructure and a reduction in numbers of staff. There was then the merger with SATRA which involved a physical relocation. In October 2001 it had been over a year (March 2000) since the last hearings. The three provinces with the largest number of applicants (Gauteng, Western Cape and Kwazulu Natal) were still awaiting hearings, which were due to commence in late October 2001. Prior to those hearings there were 64 four-year licences issued with more than 50 radio stations still operating on twelve-month licences.

The National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) approached the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) in 2000 to set up a Community Media Policy Research Unit (hereafter referred to as the CMPRU) to act as a 'think tank' for the sector. This was in recognition of the need for the sector to more effectively influence policy and legislation. A report was written by the CMPRU about the problems that licencing delays have caused for stations (Community Media Policy Research Unit 2001). In its introduction it sets out the reasons for the establishment of the Unit,

despite the formal process of making submissions on policy and laws, the community media sector has not made the necessary impact nor the gains to ensure its influence in this area... the reality is that the sector tends to 'survive' attending to day-to-day operational issues, leading to policy, lobbying and advocacy efforts being seen as 'external' activities that are not integrated into the day-to-day struggles of the sector.

(Community Media Policy Research Unit 2001:2)

The concern is that such 'deficiencies' impact on the longer term survival of the sector and risk its further marginalisation in public forums. The CEO of the NCRF expressed concerns that the NCRF was seen as 'anti-government', a view that could limit their lobbying ability, 'never has the NCRF been opposed to government, but it is an NGO that represents civil society through radio stations and where we think things are going wrong we will raise those particular issues whether [the Government] like them or they don't, we will continue to do so' (interview with Mabalane Mfundisi, October 2001). The CMPRU, 'backed up by quality research' was set up to help the sector lobby more effectively.

Within the CMPRU report on the impact of the licencing delays a research paper by Console Tleane reports on the views of people working within the sector itself. His research found that the main effects of the delays can be summarised as follows:

- Resources that have been channelled into the sector, such as training and production equipment, are being squandered as off-air stations become increasingly disorganised.
- Numerous stations have run up substantial debts as they are unable to attract ongoing funding and advertising given that they are off-air.
- Advertising and donor confidence has been affected, as ongoing delays have damaged attempts to bring stability to the sector.

- Stations that are on-air with one-year licences have also been affected, as they have to endure annual renewal processes, which are stressful, time-consuming and expensive.
- Stations are also unable to plan properly as their existence is not guaranteed beyond the duration of the one-year licence.
- The delays also made it practically impossible for new community radio stations to establish themselves.

(Tleane 2001:12-13)

In his conclusion, Tleane stated that there is a feeling from within the community radio sector that 'the rhetoric of diversification of the airwaves has remained just that, rhetoric' (*ibid.*: 31).

Additional problems for the sector are no less significant, and can be seen to be made more intense by the delays in licencing. Funding is a clear problem, especially where the stations are serving communities that are unable to support the station because of serious economic underdevelopment. Community participation is another major issue, simply understanding what community radio is and can be for communities, and how they can be managed transparently is recognised as an issue by people on all sides of the community radio debate in South Africa. According to the Head of the Licencing Unit of ICASA,

I think funding is one of the biggest of the challenges that the sector is facing and then its community participation, it could be that we live in an apathetic society or that the stations are not innovative enough in trying to get their communities to participate in their stations in the way that the regulator expects them to... you find that with some stations its only a small group that controls the station to the exclusion of the other groups. Part of it could be that people still need to be schooled into the working of democracy.

(Interview with Pheladi Gwangwa, October 2001).

According to the CEO of the NCRF, in some cases,

community radio is exploitation of the poor, by the poor in this country, that's community radio. ... its because people at station level are volunteers and sometimes they are not appreciated for the amount of time and energy that they put in there. And at the back of each of these people's minds is that things will be better and that stations will be able to pay them. But then you have poor managers that have bad practices that actually create havoc within stations, some of them have actually been booted out by the volunteers ... We have limited influence in terms of the internal operations of the station we can advise if requested to but at the same time we don't want to take the lead because it is not our station it is the station of the community.

(interview with Mabalane Mfundisi, October 2001).

In response to such problems the NCRF, funders and training organisations attempt to improve community understanding, participation and management skills. For example, in April/May 2001 the NCRF hosted a series of workshops for practitioners addressing issues such as community participation, management issues, development issues and simply asking and debating 'what is community radio?' (NCRF 2001).

ALX fm

ALX fm was one of the first community radio stations in South Africa, having received its first temporary twelve-month licence in 1995. ALX fm is still broadcasting on a temporary licence. Alexandra is situated to the north of Johannesburg and is made up of some government housing and shacks. There are few pavements in Alexandra as shacks have been built on every spare piece of land. It covers less than 4 square miles and is home to 600,000 people. Unemployment in Alexandra is in the region of 60-65%, and many children are unable to attend school, as their parents simply cannot afford to send them. Most of the amenities in Alexandra are communal, according to Willie Lekoloane, CEO of ALX fm, '[we] still have people who have to walk to fetch water, walk to a toilet, still have toilets that are not flushed, bucket toilets... Like you find in one yard 18 different households sharing a tap, sharing a clothes line, washing facilities' (interview with Willie Lekoloane, October 2001).



The initial funding for ALX fm came from a Dutch development agency. This provided seed funding and funding for training, 'it was a new concept, where were the people going to come from? So I think the first year was specifically used to train community journalists and programme presenters and producers. That money helped ALX fm to run two, two and a half years, but then it just ended, the funding... since then it has been a struggle for ALX fm to get back on its feet' (*ibid.*).

The station is situated within the Alexsan community centre in the heart of Alexandra. There is a clinic in the Centre, a 'tuck shop', and other community services and activities. The Centre is surrounded by barbed wire giving witness to the high crime rate that, according to Willie, is increasingly linked to hard drugs. The reception has no telephone, there is no production studio and the 'newsroom' is a desk in the corner of an open plan office where the administrator and others also work. This is similar to the way in which many community radio stations operate because of lack of funding. However, ALX fm was described to me as a clear example of a station that has been disadvantaged not only by the delays involved in granting a permanent licence, but also by management problems which in turn can be related to the environment in which it operates:

Trouble with ALX... its such a highly politicised and difficult place because you've got the illegal immigrants, you've got the Zulu migrant workers, you've got the river running through it... shack dwellings... there's no coherence, organisations don't work well together... it's a place where civil society does not work.

(interview with John Van Zyl, October 2001).

Willie Lekoloane acknowledged the problems that the station has and still faces,

Just like any organisation, we had our fair share of problems in that you had people who are serving in a board of an organisation and they have no idea in how its supposed to run... However, we have tried as a station to run workshops for those board members and get people with expertise to come in and just show them the light in terms of just what exactly is expected of them. Since then we've seen ALX fm going in a semi right direction, it would have been better even if we had money to run it properly, that at the moment you don't have money and that effects the morale of the volunteers and staff members as well and we need to try and change that.

(interview with Willie Lekoloane, October 2001).

Apart from occasional project grants from overseas development agencies, the main income is derived from sponsorship, advertising and the selling of airtime. The large sign outside the Centre demonstrates a previous sponsorship and advertising deal with Coca Cola that was very lucrative for the station, but short-lived. Their main sponsors are large national or international companies such as the national lottery and pharmaceutical companies. Willie recognises that it would be far better to gain advertising revenue from local community based businesses, but the reality of the situation is clear, 'let me put it this way, the unemployment rate in Alex is estimated at between 60 and 65% of the overall population. What that tells you is that local business is struggling and they would not be able to advertise on a radio station' (*ibid.*), however, reduced rates are available and a few local businesses are taking them up. ALX fm also sells airtime to generate revenue. It is selling one-hour slots to a Government development program and has occasionally sold slots to businesses. Other stations in South Africa have strict rules governing the type of advertising and sponsorship they will take, with Bush Radio in Cape Town refusing to deal with multinationals or the national lottery for ethical reasons, despite the fact that the revenue is desperately needed. Willie does not see this as a viable option for ALX fm.



Willie's vision for the future is a station that serves a community that is able to support it and sees this as achievable only through local social and economic development, the kind of development that the station itself is there to promote, if only it had the resources and expertise. He would like to see a multimedia centre here, delivering community television and a community newspaper, but without the economic development of Alexandra he recognises that this will not occur.

ABC Ulwazi and the 12 station project

ABC Ulwazi was set up to provide training to the community radio sector. It later also became a production company, and produces radio programmes for distribution to community stations on topics to do with rebuilding civil society. ABC Ulwazi gets funding from overseas agencies to carry out its activities. ABC Ulwazi has been highly successful in providing training and producing programmes for the sector, but its Director is aware that the sector itself is in danger of dying if it does not learn how to sustain itself:

There's no use us making all these fantastic programmes and its no use our training all these community radio stations if they're not sustainable, if they're going to go to the wall. And we've got more and more evidence that they are in fact not surviving particularly with the economic climate being what it is at the moment. Volunteerism simply doesn't work in a country like South Africa where there's no welfare at all...

(interview with John Van Zyl, October 2001).

Van Zyl developed an initiative to make stations sustainable through local enterprise development. He recognised, like Willie Lekoloane, that the communities must be developed in order to be able to sustain a community radio station. Furthermore, those stations are the perfect conduits to community development.

The Ford Foundation has funded a three-year project to make 12 community radio stations sustainable through local development of basic agriculture and community-based tourism. Motivational programmes will be broadcast in order to get local people interested in and see the possibilities for starting up micro businesses. ABC Ulwazi's partner in the initiative, the Business Consulting Group (BCG) will then deliver courses and intensive workshops for both the community and the radio station. Skills such as marketing, networking, financial planning and knowledge of the tourism industry will help the communities to develop economically, hopefully to such an extent that eventually the initiative will generate enough financial activity in the communities for the radio stations to benefit economically.

Another similar project run by ABC Ulwazi, funded by the Swiss South Africa Cooperation Initiative (SSACI), called Youth Job Creation through Community Tourism has a slightly different focus but similar objectives. This project focuses on developing job opportunities for unemployed youth in community tourism activities. Again, twelve community radio stations have been selected for this year-long project. With two stations selected for intensive on-site training by BCG. The idea is to find 26 instructional or motivational stories about people who have succeeded in community tourism projects, 'to listen to their stories, to dramatise their success and analyse the nature of their success. The 26 ten minute programmes will be distributed to the network of 12 stations and training will be provided. If this first phase is successful it is hoped that the project will continue next year with further SSACI funding' (Van Zyl 2002:1).

According to Van Zyl, developing community-based micro business 'underpins it all'. Initially the 12 Station Project had hoped to incorporate ICTs and create community media learning and business development centres around community stations. The

financial situation of most community stations is currently so harsh that this will not be possible until the stations are more viable.

In order for a community station to become ICT competent they've gotta have regular money every month to pay the telephone bill, to pay the electricity, to pay the subscription to the website... and that's beyond most stations at the moment. They may be able to just afford to pay the telephone and electricity because that's critical, without a telephone a station would die...

(interview John Van Zyl, October 2001).

In Conclusion

From this brief investigation of the situation for community radio in South Africa it can be concluded that, whilst all of the players in the development of the sector can claim to be doing their utmost to promote this new tier of broadcasting, fundamental problems remain. Many stations and aspirants are floundering as delays, funding shortages and poor skills levels fail to make the promise of community radio a reality for their communities. Different stations attempt to deal with problems in different ways. ALX fm is just one example, but it serves to illustrate one of the underlying problems - social and economic underdevelopment in historically disadvantaged communities.

There are many initiatives happening in such communities that aim to improve conditions, such as the Presidential Project in Alexandra, which is acting to improve housing and health. And there are several organisations working to provide training and the production of programmes for the community radio sector. What is interesting and inspired about the 12 Station Project is that it sees the potential in linking the two – using community radio to build the community, which in turn will enable the community to sustain the station.

It is still early days in the development of community radio in South Africa and yet clearly the sector can indeed be viewed as an effort to actively intervene and transform the established mediascape, as Rodrigues suggests citizen's media should do. A closer inspection would certainly serve to illustrate the many and varied power relations that operate at all levels in such an enterprise.

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