

1. Pace and tone of commercial radio

Alex Mthiyane

I've been privileged to have graduated from being a die-hard radio fan to eventually moving to the other side, behind the microphone. As a young man growing up in a household without a television set or even a telephone, for that matter, my love for radio grew exponentially to the point of mastering some broadcasters' individual styles. For a while, most presenters used instrumental music to begin their shows. As a listener, one had to guess which presenter would be hosting that particular show. The first song would keep you in suspense for approximately five minutes. Given my close listening ear, I was generally able to correctly fathom the identity of the presenter or stand-in presenter based on the genre of the opening song.

The horrendous system of apartheid created the homeland states of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei (TBVC). It was a façade that they were 'independent' of the illegitimate South African government. Soon after the country became democratic, integration and compromise were not only the order of the day in managing the politics of the new land, the landscape for the powerful communication medium of radio had to be re-shaped as well. The incorporation of several homeland public service stations into the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) had to take place. Commercially-driven stations that operated from the neighbouring states were Capital Radio in the Transkei, and Radio 702 as well as Radio Bop in Bophuthatswana.



Since its start in 1979, Capital Radio became a runaway success. The station was on par with international stations with its rich, compelling content driven by seasoned and sought-after presenters like Alan Mann, Kevin Savage, Treasure Tshabalala and Oscar Renzi. Its trademark news and current affairs shows were a breath of fresh air as they revealed, in no uncertain terms, the propagandist approach of the South African regime. Radio 702 had a lineup of hosts that were unrelenting in expressing their views on the true state of affairs. I remember listening to hosts like David Blood, Dan Moyane, John Berks, John Robbie and Noleen Maholwana-Sangqu. Firebrand Jon Qwelane had a way of dealing with some of the racist and cynical callers on his evening show. This talk radio station tackled issues which the state broadcaster dared not touch.

In my interaction with fellow radio enthusiasts, Radio Bop stood out to be a trendsetter and, arguably, a slick urban radio

station at the time. Its tagline was 'the station with a mind of its own', and popular presenters like Tim Modise, Lawrence Dube, Shado Twala and Bob Mabena were soon poached by the SABC to launch Radio Metro. Songs that were banned from the airwaves of the SABC could be heard on Capital, 702 and Bop. Sadly, Capital Radio and Radio Bop are off the airwaves. One of the biggest threats with regard to radio, news or entertainment is predictability. When I listen to the recordings of past shows, I can't help but marvel at the sound of originality and authenticity. I miss those moments that evoked a range of emotions.

“radio has remained authentic and credible”

With the dawn of democracy, the SABC had to share the 'ear space' with other players in both the commercial and community tiers. The Independent Broadcasting Authority was set up to ensure the airwaves were opened up. One of the major processes that the regulator oversaw in 1996 was the privatisation of six SABC stations, namely, RPN Stereo (East Coast Radio), Radio Highveld (947), Radio Jacaranda (Jacaranda FM), Radio Oranje (OFM), Radio Algoa (Algoa FM), and KFM. Apart from the stations sold by the SABC, the commercial radio environment saw several new entrants in the country. The regulatory authority licensed P4 Durban (Gagazi FM), P4 Cape Town (Heart FM), Kaya FM, Classic FM, YFM, Rise FM, North West FM, Smile FM, Vuma FM, LM Radio and Magic 828. A consortium was granted licences for two regions in respect of Puntgeselsradio. The stations did not take off. Commercial licences in secondary markets were also considered.



Currently, the listener enjoys a diversity of options on the commercial radio band. The choice of formats is wide and varied. In Gauteng, YFM found its niche in the youth market whereas Classic FM is a case study of a station serving a market and leveraging on its loyalty based on exclusive content.

Depending on the province in which the station is based, content is targeted in terms of demographics, cultures and nuances. The increasing number of commercial broadcasters has created opportunities for both fresh talent and advertisers.

Over the years, listening to radio in South Africa has become refreshing for three key reasons. The type of music is one determining factor followed by the presenter and, then, content. Many presenters who have become household names have, over the past 25 years, switched stations. Apart from the attractive incentives, the hope was to take along their legion of fans to the 'new' station. Presenters have been astute enough to play the 'right' music and ensure content remains fresh.

Notwithstanding the challenges the medium had to contend with, radio in South Africa has arguably remained authentic and credible. Competition, especially from television, has been fierce. When South Africa introduced satellite television, radio stations grabbed the opportunity of placing themselves on the audio bouquet of the various players.

One of radio's survival strengths has been its ability to embrace and incorporate digital platforms. Most successful radio stations have complemented their output with podcasts and a social media presence. As social media develops and users stream live content, this has posed no threat to the relationship between the listener and presenter. Instead, users have become influencers by spreading the word about the content being delivered by their favourite station and presenter. Myriad of untapped opportunities in the radio content generation space exist. With astute leadership and management in the commercial radio sector, audiences will continue to find content appealing and relevant to them.

25 years into our fledgling democracy, commercial radio has grown at a healthy pace. Keeping up with global trends and ensuring that content resonates with its audience, commercial broadcasters have prospered. A certainty is that this category of radio in South Africa is in good hands and listeners remain top-of-mind!

Alex Mthiyane is the news manager and public sector liaison officer at Gagazi FM in Durban. He anchors the station's flagship talk programme *Indaba*, and was the host of the station's breakfast show, *Alex and the Crew*. Alex was a presenter on *KZN-2-Nite*, a regional magazine programme on SABC-TV and co-presented the news current affairs programme *Morning Live*. He hosted Ukhozi FM's breakfast show for three years. In 2000, Alex was offered an opportunity by the German Embassy to further his knowledge of the industry in Frankfurt and Berlin. He writes a weekly social column for the *Isolezwe* newspaper, and has served as a member of the Convocation Committee at the Durban University of Technology where he obtained a journalism qualification.

