

5. Helping community radio

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In the spring of 1993, I travelled to South Africa as a visiting specialist of the US State Department and met with two groups: one which wanted to reform the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) before the elections, and the other believing that community radio was part of the liberation struggle. The SABC reformers wanted to have an election of the board of directors that would reflect the population of South Africa. The group was keen on the journalism and programming being professional and free of government influence, as was the case with National Public Radio in the United States.

The advocates for community radio believed that giving voice to the people would best serve the new democracy. I attended a public forum where the virtues were described. One speaker said, "With community radio, everyone has the right to be on the radio, even a stutterer." I thought to myself that not everyone has a right to be on the radio; everyone has the right to expect something worthwhile to listen to on the radio. Bush Radio, the first pirate community radio station, demonstrated the 'everyone has a right to be on the radio' idea by placing a microphone on the street so anyone could talk. Radio frequencies are limited so the programming must be intentional and serve community needs, not just provide a soap box for anyone who wants to talk.

Lobbyists for community radio often use the phrase, "giving a voice to the voiceless". Rather, the people already have a voice, radio amplifies voices. The National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) had been established in 1993 in Orlando, Soweto "to lobby for the diversification of the airwaves in South Africa, and to foster a dynamic broadcasting environment in the country through the establishment of community radio stations". The initial support for community radio was formalised when the regulator, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, in 1994 granted radio licences only to community stations in the belief they would best serve the interests of the new democracy. I was inspired by this dedication to radio and the creation of a democratic dispensation. When I returned home, I told my wife that I didn't fall in love with another woman, I fell in love with another country. Nonetheless, there didn't seem to be any way I could return.

In 1994, the Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF-SA) opened an office in Cape Town, and when I asked if community radio was part of their programme, Michael Savage, the director replied "yes". My offer to consult was accepted. On my return to Cape Town, I established guidelines for the foundation to award grants and what the foundation would support, including planning and development, equipment, training and programming. We provided regional training workshops on management and programming. I organised a trip for leaders of NCRF and some station managers to attend the annual meeting of the National

Federation of Community Broadcasters, held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This was the most similar organisation to community radio in South Africa. We also visited a station in an Indian reservation which is equivalent to a township.

Here is the origin story of one of the first community radio stations in South Africa: Radio Zibonele was housed in a truck container among sandy flats nearby the Cape Town airport, in the township of Khayelitsha. The station still fulfils its role as the voice of the local community, while at the same time is actively involved in achieving broader development goals in the areas of health, environment, education, culture, and community participation. In Xhosa, "Zibonele" means "we did it together".



The station took to air in 1993 when the state still controlled all broadcasting. It was among the first community stations in South Africa. Initial broadcasts were assisted by Gabrielle Uggoti, an Argentinean physician and a respected figure in Khayelitsha who, years earlier, was involved in community radio in Latin America. Broadcasting was illegal - the station managed to sneak on air twice a week. Dr Uggoti hid the radio transmitter under his examining table and used it to air first-hand reports from health care workers about health problems they found in the community. Radio Zibonele obtained a licence in 1995. Today, it serves about 700 000 residents and remains unwavering in its commitment to the health of the community. Radio Zibonele has a reputation as one of the most transparent and participatory stations in the country, with a strong record of financial independence. Its mission is clear: "Our concern is to enhance the quality of life through improving the health standards of our people. All those we serve are affected by poor health and poor environmental conditions. Radio Zibonele is committed to sharing skills and information through honest process, thereby empowering the community of Khayelitsha for better life". Self-help is the underlying theme of the station. Many programmes deal with very practical issues: how to care for a child, how to start a small business, and for children, how to speak properly and help their mother when she is sick. Both the breadth and simplicity of the mission simplifies decision-making. For example, when a

cigarette company offered to support the station with more than advertising, the station turned it down: smoking is not good for the health of the community. Former station manager, Vusi Tshose sees the station not just as a passive broadcaster, but as a respected, independent institution actively engaged in solving the community's problems, both on and off-air. His greatest success was preventing a school strike by bringing the participants together to negotiate an end to their dispute. This had nothing to do with a programme - it was about the trust the station enjoys in the community.

“Community radio amplifies the voice of the people”

The lessons learnt from Zibonele FM (which it is now called) are:

- A clear mission statement is like a guiding star: it gives

direction and purpose to every aspect of the station's operation including decisions about advertisers;

- Both the community and its board of directors are actively involved in the welfare of the station;
- The station is not simply a passive transmitter of data and music, but a catalyst for community improvement and problem-solving;
- A station can have a far-reaching effect in a community even if its facilities are very limited;
- Good management gives a strong sense of direction and motivates a large number of volunteers necessary to provide a full-service.

Community radio in South Africa began with a strong sense of purpose to be an essential player in creating the new democracy. The good stations are of the community and create community. The OSF-SA was a leader in developing the sector and helped launch over 30 community stations. Its contribution to the lives of countless listeners over the years is immeasurable.

Bill Siemering is a senior fellow at the Wyncote Foundation. As a founding member of the National Public Radio (NPR) Board of Directors, he wrote the original mission and goals, and was then hired to implement it as the first director of programming. Bill began working overseas in 1993 as a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and worked with the Open Society Foundation (Soros) for 10 years, focusing on Eastern Europe, Africa and Mongolia. In 2004, he founded Developing Radio Partners to enrich the programming of local stations in Africa on climate change and health for women and youth. Bill received a Lifetime Achievement Award from NPR and an honorary doctorate from State University of New York at Buffalo and from Arcadia University, Glenside, Pennsylvania. In 2019, he received the George Polk Career Award. Bill was a speaker at a community radio seminar at the ML Sultan Technikon in the 1990s.

