

7. Creating community radio

David Hotchkiss

South Africa was preparing for a new democratic order in 1993. Besides some commercial radio stations in two 'homelands' – like Capital Radio in the Transkei, and Radio 702 in Bophuthatswana - radio broadcasting was the fiefdom of the South African government through its control of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Then, word emerged that a one-month temporary radio broadcast licence had been granted to church-based Radio Fish Hoek in Cape Town. This was a demonstration that community radio was possible. Things moved rapidly, and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) was established by the IBA Act in 1993. Building on the experience of Radio Fish Hoek, and a study of the fledgling community stations in the United Kingdom, a community radio initiative was born at African Enterprise in Pietermaritzburg. The station was initially called Radio Peace as its mission was to bring peace, through understanding, to the warring political factions around the city, in the lead-up to the 1994 watershed election. The team in Pietermaritzburg was assisted by a volunteer from the British Broadcasting Corporation to provide training. Following surveys in the community, the name was changed to Radio Maritzburg. The IBA was impressed by the inclusiveness, the community response, and community representation at Radio Maritzburg. The team was awarded the first 'one-year temporary' community radio licence in the country.

Local radio gets licence to transmit

RADIO Maritzburg yesterday became the first community radio station to be granted a one-year broadcasting licence by the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

In a statement, the IBA said the station wishes to broadcast in Zulu and English in the Pietermaritzburg area, "including the battle-scarred areas of Edenvale and the town itself".

Radio Maritzburg is in many ways a model of community radio. It has a strong Christian component, Hindu membership and is open to other religions, the IBA said.

The station is scheduled to go on air in March next year and will broadcast 18 hours a day.

Spokesman David Hotchkiss said the station will cater mainly for the poorer communities in the Pietermaritzburg region.

The IBA said the station will broadcast news, music, education, religious and youth programmes. — Sapa.

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The IBA Act was followed by an updated Broadcasting Act in 1999, and digital challenges and opportunities gave rise to the Electronic Communications Act (ECA) in 2005. But the fundamental division of broadcasting into three tiers remained unchanged. These are public service (SABC), commercial, and community broadcasting. Community broadcasting is local in coverage, non-profit in nature, and, according to the ECA, "encourages members of the community served by it or persons associated with or promoting the interests of such community, to participate in the selection and provision of programmes to be broadcast". Moreover, community "includes a geographically-founded community or any group of persons or sector of the public having a specific, ascertainable common interest".

The initial 20 or so community stations, mostly in urban areas, continued to operate through one-year renewable licences. This became a headache for the authority due to the burdensome administrative tasks, including a public hearing for each renewal. In 1998, the regulations were developed to allow community broadcasters to apply for a "permanent" four-year licence. Licence hearings were held around the country between 1998 and 2002 to ascertain the success or otherwise of applications. Some stations had to adapt in order to keep their broadcast licence, while others, which had been on air for four years or more, were shut down. It was a difficult time in the

build-up to the maturing of the community radio sector.

In 2000, licensing authorities the South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (technical) and the IBA (broadcasting) combined to form the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa). In hindsight, evidence suggests that this was not a good move for the broadcasting industry. The ECA was a complicated piece of legislation that tried to anticipate the effects of the digital communications revolution. It did not really take the broadcast industry into account, as the focus was on technology. For community radio, it simplified the licensing process, and forced Icasa to issue licences in limited time-periods without due regard to the consequences. The result was the granting of about 200 new licences, many competing in the same communities, and some “owned” by ruthless business entrepreneurs. Icasa was overwhelmed, and the reputation of the community radio landscape suffered. A moratorium on the granting of new community radio licences was declared in 2016.

“Community radio best serves democracy when it encourages different viewpoints”

New regulations for community radio were published in 2019, the moratorium was lifted, and an invitation to apply (“pre-register”) for certain FM frequencies was issued. A key component of the new regulations is that applicants must have operated a non-profit organisation for at least two years before submitting the “pre-application”. Only when this is approved by Icasa can the final application be submitted. This will slow the whole radio station application process down to at least three years.

Funding for community media has always been a challenge, particularly start-up funding. The SABC is government-funded, and commercial broadcasters receive their initial funding from shareholders. For the first community stations licensed in South Africa, this challenge was acute. Costs had to be paid upfront, and funding came from small individual donations. Some small grants had to be coaxed from local government, non-profits, Telkom, and local business. But it was the operating expenses that proved to be the biggest challenge. In my experience at Radio Maritzburg, there was not the anticipated buy-in from advertisers, and the team was inexperienced in sales and marketing. In the last decade or so, funding has been much easier. The Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), national Department of Communications, and Government Communication & Information System have given significant tranches of funding to community radio. The distribution of this funding has, however, been problematic, with

some stations receiving generous grants, and others nothing. Community media enjoys a broad funding pool – donations, grants, sponsorships, advertising and membership fees, or by any combination of the aforementioned. This is far broader than any of the other media tiers and even broader than the international norm for community radio. Several urban community stations, making use of tax-exempt status as well as good marketing and management, have become exceedingly wealthy in recent years.

Community radio best serves democracy when it encourages different viewpoints in the target audience to be heard and understood by everyone. Listeners grasp the different views on important topics like economics, culture and religion. This does not often happen, as stations can fall under the control of particular language or interest groups. A challenge for community radio, since its inception, has been language. Although stations broadcasting “minority” languages were, seemingly, encouraged, there are still many language groups without a community radio station in South Africa, especially immigrant groups. Multi-language stations struggle to build a core group of listeners as their community is fragmented along the lines of language. There are very few successful multi-language stations. The content at Radio Maritzburg had to be designed to serve three language groups and three major religious groups. This precluded the station from building a consistent listenership base - the station, ultimately, floundered. The station may have survived with more experience, and with the current levels of government funding. However, radio stations that are required to serve everyone in an identified geographic area are going to find it more difficult to be sustainable. It seems that for the sector to develop and grow, stations which are unsustainable after five years should be allowed to transform so that new leadership can emerge. It seems that communities struggle to change ineffective leadership at failing stations.

Much of South Africa is not yet served by community radio. There is still much work to be done, particularly in more rural areas, where initial funding from the MDDA will be critical. The shortage of FM spectrum has been cited as a major limitation to the further development of community radio. However, in the areas where community radio is most needed, spectrum exists. Community stations do not need large expensive transmitters with large coverage areas. FM is cheap and effective, and FM radio receivers are accessible to all. It is the ideal scenario for community radio. In the more affluent urban areas, digital transmission, including internet streaming and formats such as DAB+ have a bright future. Most community radio stations are now using internet audio streams, and social media such as Facebook to enhance listener experience. This is a healthy development as it allows greater community interaction, as long as the purpose and ideals of community radio remain paramount.

Community radio can promote the development of democracy in South Africa by paying constant attention to:

- Clear goals and visionary leadership;
- Responsible management with transparent integrity;

- Clear understanding of the different roles of board and management in community radio;
 - Careful, fair and responsible monitoring by Icasa with a mandate to close stations that do not comply;
 - Diligent community interaction and involvement without control by any one group - this is not easy;
 - Careful research to ensure that the community is being reached. This can help to balance the danger of control by a single community interest-group;
 - Quality content that is of value to the community. Radio awards should focus more on content than technical expertise.
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An electrical engineer by profession, David has worked on the development and design of communication equipment. At the same time, he became involved as a radio programme producer and presenter. David headed the group that was awarded South Africa's first community radio station licence in 1995. He managed the trailblazing Radio Maritzburg for the first few years, and subsequently set-up and played a leadership role in a number of other community radio stations. In 2012, David moved to commercial radio, and contributed to the application process and set-up of Vuma 103 FM – he was the technical manager for the station until 2014. In 2016, he founded a small non-profit consulting company, Sarepta Radio Consulting, to assist mainly Christian radio stations with licencing, set-up and training. This work has continued to grow and expand into the area of content and digital audio. David served on the Advisory Board: Journalism and was a guest speaker at a *Radiocracy Roundtable* at the Durban University of Technology.