

22. Is it the content or the cash?

Mathumo Manaka

A radio broadcaster's programming policy has always been a chicken and egg situation. The question to be asked: do you deliver to the needs of the advertiser, or do you provide content to the satisfaction of the listener? In short, should the news bulletin (in the interest of the listener) be sponsored, and, if so, does that mean a client can further spend money for a one-hour feature on a platform?

This (behind the scenes) 'war' is quite prevalent in most sales, marketing and programming (SMP) meetings at a broadcast station. For instance, a client may want an opening and closing billboard for the news on the drive time show, and a desperate account executive will sell this to the client just to meet the weekly target, with scant regard given to the station's programming policy. While these boardroom disagreements persist, all the listener wants is favourite songs to be played on the station, and has no concern about the haggling by the SMP people. As a matter of fact, airing spots/advertisements are a big irritant, and, from my perspective, a huge 'tune-out' factor. This leads to the listener's engagement in channel-hopping. However, the generation of revenue is important for purposes of sustainability and competitiveness.



Apart from the hit songs, the listener wants to hear the time the mobile clinic will be in the area to supply medication, arrival of water tanks, and delivery of food parcels, as promised by the local councillor. And they expect the information to be broadcast in their mother tongue. This is the value of radio to the people. Just like in football, particularly in the South African context, the programme manager, like the team manager in the sport, could soon be filling in unemployment forms if he does not deliver on the mandate of increasing the audience figure.

The inauguration of Madiba as president in 1994 brought with it a different pattern of media consumption as socio-economic standards improved for the majority of people. This created a bigger pool of the working group with disposable income. The newly-affluent listener needed broadcasting

content to match this enhanced status. The government's introduction of social grants for the under-privileged brought another dimension into the mix as the poorest of the poor were able to afford some basic needs, including a mobile phone that needs airtime and data for interaction as well as electrification. This meant less reliance on rechargeable batteries to tune into the evening radio drama. These were titled "living standard measures", a technical tool for determining affordability, across the broadcast landscape.

The mid-1990s saw the unbundling of the public service broadcaster whereby six radio stations were snapped up by private investors. The regulator also started to open up the playing fields nationally by issuing greenfield licences to new consortiums. Commercially, the likes of P4 Radio, one in Durban and the other in Cape Town, Kaya FM, North West Radio, YFM, Vuma FM and Rise FM became available to the listener. A boom in community radio, intended for local audiences, made the industry more exciting because, having a national footprint, was no more a guarantee to print money. An advertiser with only a local presence requires a rate card that meets its needs and budget. Traditional public broadcasters like SAfm and Radio 2000 had to evaluate and revisit their relevance and rate cards for competitiveness as new entrants were raking in a fair chunk of the advertising spend. To remain relevant and to pluck a piece of the advertising pie, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) came up with a regional tool that was called "ad split", and, as a presenter with a marketing and advertising background, I knew the idea would never see the light of day. The execution was destined to be tricky and quite technical as both the on-air talent and technician were based at the headquarters in Auckland Park, Johannesburg, while the advertisement itself had to be tailor-made for the client based far away in one of the provinces.

Radio had to stay attractive as social media platforms developed a new type of audience. Anyone with a smart phone became a journalist or an influencer. Online radio has surfaced in recent times, but the cost of data is an inhibiting factor to its higher listenership. Traditional media consumption has become a thing of the past as there is no need to wait for the 7pm news to get the day's happenings - it's all in the palm of your hand every minute of the day. The scramble for the advertising pie became even harder as outdoor, radio, television and print all wanted their share.

The organisation that had been tasked by the broadcasting industry to providing audience research got itself in a tangle. The South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) was accused of inflating audience research numbers in favour of certain media houses. Corruption charges were laid thereby leading to its credibility being dented and deeply compromised.

As a result, the SABC reached a decision to terminate its membership, taking away 18 radio stations and four television channels. This was the death knell for SAARF. This led to the formation of the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (BRC) in 2015 to provide the necessary information to the industry.

“Radio will always be a warm intimate friend to my uncle and aunt”

Digital terrestrial broadcasting was supposed to have been in place and rolled out in the late 1990s to the early 2000s in

South Africa. When I left the employ of the public broadcaster, the digital migration debate was a song on repeat. Our east African counterparts have moved swiftly in this regard, and their speed cannot but be applauded. This hampers development in more ways than one. The data connection fee has been a challenge for the majority of the people. Let’s not forget the #datamustfall movement that swept across the land, especially in most of the institutions of higher learning.

Today, the talk is of social media influencers and the like, who are riding the narrowcasting crest of the wave, but broadcasting still rules. Radio will always be a warm intimate friend to my uncle to catch his latest horse racing results, and my aunt to hear about the increase in her pension grant, all these in their native language.

The regulatory authority plans to licence additional community radio stations nationwide. Greater choice and diversity will not only mean more outlets for advertisers, but also more opportunities for listeners to enjoy. The radio dial continues to enthrall.



Mathumo Manaka is a seasoned broadcaster, radio lecturer, communication specialist, marketer and commentator on African socio-political issues. He has participated at a *Radiocracy Roundtable* at the Durban University of Technology. In the late 1990s, Mathumo was one of presenters when Kaya FM commenced broadcasts. He, thereafter, hosted the afternoon drive show on Gagasi FM. His next port of call was at the public broadcaster’s SAfm where he was also involved in the station’s brand marketing. Mathumo, subsequently, became the communications manager for the South African Broadcasting Corporation in Durban before moving across to Vuma FM. He was then offered the breakfast show on Thobela FM followed by another stint on SAfm.