

23. A perspective on Greater Durban Television

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The television monitors went dark. The room erupted in sadness and joy, tears flowed, much vigorous hugging, heartfelt congratulations and promises to keep connected forever. It was midnight on 11 July 1995. Greater Durban Television (GDTV) was off the air. The broadcast of Africa's first community access television station had ended. I switched off the lights in the 'Growth Laboratory' studio, shut the door, and with mixed emotions found my way down the long flight of stairs into the air.

As the originator of the GDTV project, I strongly recall the powerful impact of the liberation chants on the wider community rising from alternative media organisations agitating against the strict controls over public communications in apartheid-era South Africa: Freedom of the Media! Freedom of the Airwaves! Jabulani! Restrictions on television were particularly harsh, presumably linked to the rousing emotional potential of moving images and the power of pictures to affect behaviour. Radio and television broadcasting were largely government-owned, controlled and financed under the auspices of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). In contrast, the mission statement of GDTV included the following pointers to:

- Foster the democratisation of the airwaves;
- Provide a platform for citizen access to the film and television sector;
- Establish the GDTV Film and Television School;
- Build community capacity to broadcast and provide access to production technology.

A passion for community television harks back to my early fascination with filmmaking. In the late 1980s, I started the Free Film School in Central Durban. The school welcomed a diversity of community participants, and was at the forefront of progressive media practice in Durban linked to aspects of the moving image. Production equipment was becoming less expensive, lighter, easier to use, and the quality was advancing rapidly. The times were right to support 'self-generative' indigenous filmmaking based on storytelling by ordinary citizens that might eventually end up on the small screen. The school evolved into the Visual Voice, a grouping of alternative practitioners offering training for stage, television, scriptwriting and video production linked to cultural dialogue and the oral tradition. Multicultural video production, originated by community members, was a relatively new process to Durban. Visual Voice became the vehicle that activated my long-held vision of a citywide community television station in Durban. The station would provide a platform for ordinary citizens to 'get their message out' and to deliver their

stories to an audience that had rarely seen their neighbourhood represented in visual media. Television could be there for 'our' use and cover 'our' news, whilst providing a tool for social change and citizen cohesion. The formation of the community news gatherers (CNG) within the GDTV structure, that included novice video trainees from the townships around Durban, highlighted the possibility that the news could indeed become 'our' news.

“Community television provides for social change and citizen cohesion”

The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 ushered in the “rainbow nation” and encouraged me on the relentless path towards community television. I enrolled as a master's student at the then University of Natal to research aspects of visual anthropology, ethnographic filmmaking and community media. I anticipated that the insights gained would contribute towards widening the scope and deepening the level of citizen involvement in documentary production. I felt the university environment might provide the catalyst to speed up the application process for a community television station. Freedom was in the air. The Independent Broadcasting Act of 1993 was an astonishing and unexpected media achievement. The Act provided for an Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) that would champion the democratisation of the airwaves, and contained a section that permitted and encouraged community television. The establishment of the IBA was the impetus that led to the Visual Voice conference in 1994. The theme for the conference was *Visual Anthropology, Community Communication and Social Change*. Fortunately, the University of Natal was supportive of the conference, and offered the use of Studio 5, a raked venue in the speech and drama department. An additional aspect that widened the scope of the Visual Voice conference was that it coincided with 100 years of world cinema in 1995. The conference occurred at the time when the Film and Allied Workers Organisation (FAWO), a key role player, was transforming into the Open Window Network (OWN) and that went on to provide invaluable guidance in the development of community media across South Africa. Dumi Ngubane, the community television coordinator of

OWN, arranged ongoing meetings linked to encouraging discussion and support around the benefits of community media and access television.

At the community television forum held as part of Visual Voice, I announced to an astonished and somewhat skeptical audience that a community television station for the City of Durban could be up and running in June 1995. After the conference, the convoluted process began of formulating a grouping to apply for a temporary broadcast licence from the IBA. I gave a positive update on work-in-progress at the Community Access Media conference in Durban on 25 November 1994. The programme ended with a screening of clips from community television stations around the world. The project gained significant momentum when the Durban Arts Association, a city-supported cultural and arts initiative, agreed to assist with logistics, communication, liaison with the IBA, and to provide some kickstart funding. Durban Arts became a nerve centre for the licence application process, ably coordinated by Projects Manager Lindi Gross, with support from fellow staffer Big Boy Patrick Zungu. The chairman of Durban Arts, Mi Hlatshwayo and the director Noel Fairhurst offered the boardroom for GDTV meetings, a gesture that proved invaluable. Additional organisational support was provided by Lou Haysom from Audio Visual Alternatives (AVA), an initiative aimed at empowering women filmmakers. The application process was consolidated when the three organisations – FAWO, AVA and Durban Arts – evolved into a grouping of co-conveners, and were joined by the University of Natal as the fourth player. The licence document from the IBA covering the inaugural GDTV broadcast indicates the following:

TYPE OF LICENCE

Short-Term Temporary Community Broadcasting and Signal Distribution Licence

LICENSEES (Jointly and severally)

FILM & ALLIED WORKERS ORGANISATION – NATAL (FAWO)

DURBAN ARTS ASSOCIATION (DAA)

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL

AUDIO VISUAL ALTERNATIVES (AVA)

(hereafter referred to as the licensee)

STATION IDENTIFICATION

GDTV

A groundswell of support for GDTV included practitioners and volunteers who offered production skills, equipment, training opportunities, and technical facilities. A collective of students at the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies (CCMS), University of Natal and from Technikon Natal provided valuable input on programming that would appeal to a youth audience, and contributed topics and ideas towards outreach programmes. Auditions for presenters, newsreaders and documentary filmmakers were held at the studios of the

Department of Video Technology, Technikon Natal. A major factor in the progression towards a switch-on date for GDTV was that the term 'Video Journalism' was trending in production circles. The 'self-generative' method used hi-tech, small-scale video production tools that allowed for hand-held cameras that were fairly easy to operate and appeared less intrusive than bulky television cameras. Following the unfolding international model, the Daily News set up a video production studio at their premises, and started training their print journalists in video news gathering. Rob Greaves, the Video Journalism coordinator at the newspaper offered to provide GDTV with a daily 15-minute news programme. The project gained additional traction when M-Net agreed to send their new state-of-the-art outdoor broadcast (OB) van to Durban for the duration of the GDTV transmission. Natal Racing Club's Television operated a broadcast centre at the Greyville Racecourse and provided technical assistance when Vince Vesey, the director of their OB facility was assigned to design the transmission system in conjunction with SABC engineers. Vince was a vital contributor to the project as he was registered for a management diploma at Technikon Natal, and his case study revolved around setting up a community television station. Another major step forward was the approval by the University of Natal to use the rooftop laboratory in the engineering building as a transmission facility and studio space. The venue had numerous advantages and provided a clear line of sight across the bay to the Bluff water tower where SABC engineer Siza Mbongwa had set up the microwave link and transmitter. The station waited for his go-ahead that the signal was technically perfect and that a switch-over from the test pattern to scheduled programming could proceed. To much jubilation, the licence finally arrived from the IBA.



Durban Mayor Councillor Siphon Ngwenya

The launch event for GDTV was held at the Durban City Hall. The first black mayor of Durban, Councillor Siphon Ngwenya in the company of Sebiletsa Mokone-Matabane (co-chairperson of the IBA) flipped a switch and GDTV was on-air. The presenters were Thulani Mkhize and Jeffrey Ntuli from the townships of Durban. They introduced the appropriately- selected first item on the programme schedule – a documentary about isicathamiya (to dance like a cat), a traditional dance form with hushed vocals that originated

with hostel dwellers who worked for the mining companies in South Africa.



The GDTV transmission was a milestone in the democratisation of the airwaves representing the first time a community television station had been on the air in Africa. The feedback from respondents was awe-inspiring and motivational. A follow-up personal communication to me from Ida Jooste, regional editor, SABC-TV, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) (dated 22 August 1997) stated, “I thought you’d like to know that the GDTV example is being used extensively to illustrate the potential of community television and explore ways of co-operation between the SABC and other parties.” Various memoranda of understanding between the SABC and community television bodies indicated that the national broadcaster was fully committed to assisting community television stations by way of training, facilities and transmission expertise. Sentech, the major signal distributor in South Africa, would offer special rates to community television. In the spirit of collaboration, the SABC provided a designated broadcast studio (M2) at its KZN regional headquarters in Durban that allowed GDTV to take to the airwaves for special-event broadcasts – the first in June 2004 was linked to the 10th year of democracy celebrations and 25 years of the Durban International Film Festival (DIFF), and received substantial support from the festival director Peter Rorvik. The second transmission over the festive season (December 2004-January 2005) in Durban celebrated 10 years of GDTV, and strongly focused on road safety and HIV/Aids. A third transmission was scheduled for 18 June to 17 July 2005. The special event highlighted the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Charter, the DIFF, and the inaugural Salt March for Global Peace and Non-Violence. In parallel with the SABC facility, GDTV had a back-up office and production studio based at the BAT Centre, a venue that fortuitously provided access to a wide range of artists and community activists.

Notable highlights from the 2004 and 2005 transmissions:

- The Durban City Council was fully supportive of the GDTV project. Following the momentous 1995 launch of GDTV by Mayor Siphon Ngwenya in the City Hall, the 2004 kickstart event initiating a series of transmissions, was opened by Mayor Obed Mlaba on the grounds of the SABC;
- The Durban Film Office (DFO) played a central role in promoting the efforts towards a permanent station. The DFO secured KPMG to assist with registering GDTV as a non-profit organisation. The DFO chief executive, Mandle Ndimande was

appointed chairman of the GDTV committee.

- The SABC was crucially involved in offering technical advice, transmission facilities and the indispensable studio M2 for the series of three special broadcasts that started in 2004. The SABC offered free use of material from their extensive archive. KZN regional manager Zakes Dube was always available with reassurances during particularly strenuous phases, and when exhaustion seemed insurmountable. The 1996 ‘Declaration of Intent’ (with OWN) recognised the natural partnership in which the SABC committed to joint projects with community groups;
- Sentech assisted with the GDTV transmissions and agreed to look favourably on community television stations regarding fees for transmitter hire and to offer extended services, training and guidance;
- The Centre for Cultural and Media Studies; The head of the centre, Professor Keyan Tomaselli, staff and students provided indispensable academic guidance and practical support in the formation stages of GDTV. Research materials have been generated that articulate the historical significance of the first transmission;
- The then Durban Institute of Technology (DIT); The head of the Department of Journalism, Advocate Robin Sewlal, provided letters of support for GDTV and approved the use of two professional cameras from the department to be used in the studio news set-up. The cameras were operated by DIT Journalism students and by other crew under their guidance. An additional benefit was that I was the lecturer in broadcasting in the department, and was able to draw students into the project.

The following quote by Pallo Jordan highlights the potential of community access television and emphasises the urgency of working towards permanent licences, “The most vital facet of our media could be community television. Rooted in civil society rather than in political parties, community television has the potential of becoming a key player in shaping South African democracy and giving real content to the empowerment of communities (Opening address at the launch of the Cape Film and Video Foundation on 12 January 1995).”

The time is opportune for the introduction of a city television station that covers eThekweni Metro. Students at the Durban University of Technology, other educational centres, and community media groups are well-positioned to start the initiative. A revival of GDTV – ‘The Legend’ - could even become a reality.

A proposed celebratory event is scheduled for 2020. The event will recall the original ‘95 broadcast of GDTV, a momentous and historical precedent.



Mikhail Peppas holds a PhD in Visual Anthropology. He has been a lecturer at DUT Journalism and, thereafter, an honorary research associate in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the Durban University of Technology. A media entrepreneur and film historian, his interests include screenwriting, graphic narratives, comic book production, board games, photography, theatre, streets as living texts, city identity and sustainable living activations. He was awarded the 2017 Simon 'Mabhunu' Sabela Film and Television Award for Lifetime Achievement. Firsts for Africa originated by Mikhail include the Free Film School, and a community station, Greater Durban Television