

33. Formation of the National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa

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Media played an important part in consolidating the changes in South Africa at the end of the apartheid rule, but, in the early days, there were not enough well-trained staff to enable the expansion of media in the priority areas required by the democratic government.

In 1997, discussions between the South African and Australian governments identified the need for a modern-style media training institution to rectify the problem. They looked towards Australia's national media university, the Australian Film, Television & Radio School (AFTRS) as a model. I was one of AFTRS' senior staff at the time. As part of an aid programme through the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAid), AFTRS was asked to assist with the formation of the National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa (Nemisa), and I was sent to consult to the Department of Communications, and its director-general Andile Ngcaba, to set up the organisation. In 1998, I travelled to South Africa several times, working mostly in Johannesburg and Pretoria on the formation of Nemisa.



The ANC-led government recognised the importance of radio to facilitate the transformational changes of the “rainbow nation” and licensed about 70 community stations to give voice to the voiceless citizens, and to break the propaganda stranglehold the previous government had on the state broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).

In television, new programmes were prioritised with new presenters and new topics. News was no longer to contain only pro-government propaganda, but aspired to achieve a standard of balanced honest reporting similar to other respected independent international media outlets. Another aspect of the evolution of media at the time was the advent of computer-based production methods, websites and the coming of the internet. The convergence of social and technological change required new models of production for both traditional broadcasting outlets and new emerging platforms on the internet, which were not being taught in traditional broadcast training institutions.

In my early visits, the first task was to scope the mood for new types of training. The government and the minister wanted something different, but the media sector was not so sure. Most media companies had in-house training departments, and there were a plethora of universities teaching film and journalism

courses. Challenging the old models of training was a threat to jobs and prevailing philosophies, so my first meetings were often treated with suspicion, and, in some cases, were openly hostile. The ministry was determined to cut through, recognising that technological convergence and the rebalancing of power in society were happening simultaneously, making this the moment to seize the opportunity for significant structural change in the communications portfolio.

Australia also played its part by helping the new government in its aspirations for change in the media sector with two other aid projects: journalism training from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and a consultancy to assist the regulator to develop new methods of licensing and content regulation. The three projects together were a result of international visits by South African officials tasked to find good models for the changes they wanted to make in the communications industry.

Once the imperative for the new training institute was established and the government publicly committed to it, the next step was to determine the best way to form the institute. The first question was the name. When AFTRS was formed three decades earlier, there was only film, radio and television, but in a time of emerging media the institute had to aspire beyond the existing business models based on established transmission methods, and embrace the, as yet unknown, implications of digital media and the internet. So we decided to use the word ‘media’ in the name. This simple positioning statement in the name allowed the institute to nimbly embrace training in many new electronic skills, with offerings such as graphics, website design - app development is now being introduced as part of the wide brief of the organisation. The name embodied the philosophy, to embrace change and train people who would use whatever production methods were needed to develop media content that would enable and support the positive changes happening in the country. This is still the underlying philosophy of the institute today, to help South Africans tell their own stories through media.

Looking back at my first consultant's report from March 1998, I examined the structure, staffing and niche for the institute. I canvassed the types of entity that could be used and finally recommended the formation of a Section 21 (not-for-profit) company which allowed the government to appoint the board and ensure the transformational objectives were met, while keeping the business entity focused on its mission, and at arm's length from government. In my report I wrote, “If the board is full of bureaucrats who have no knowledge of broadcasting or no connection to the industry, then it is unlikely to be a success, but if the board comprises strong representation from industry bodies, then it is highly likely to succeed.”

Another element that made Nemisa different from other

universities and training institutions was the educational philosophy behind it. Where other training organisations were teaching established methods from outdated text books, or philosophical but not practical courses, the institute had to be open to evolution in its training philosophy, as well as its content. It was decided that all courses would contain at least 50% of practical exercises, and that discovery methods of learning would be embraced, because there were no ‘masters’ anymore, everyone was learning how to work the new technology together. Established picture techniques, known structures of storytelling, and established ways to delight the audience were retained, but they were combined with new thinking about changing audience consumption habits and faster ways of capturing, editing and transmitting content. An underlying aim in all of this was also to be a change agent that would help other training institutions to evolve by challenging established academic power structures, disrupting old pedagogies and setting an example of the ways things could be done differently in the modern era.

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Nemisa adopted a value-neutral approach that did not try to impart established philosophies or ways of thinking to students, rather the aim was to bring out of them the ways they viewed the world, and empower them to articulate their thoughts on the manner they could help develop the new society through their media art. Students were selected with regard to their past practical achievements, such as amateur videos, community radio programmes or blogs, not just academic qualifications. The hiring philosophy for teaching staff was that they should be current media practitioners, and that administrative and support staff should be formed in small teams with lines of accountability

that made it clear their role was to support the content output of the organisation. Initially, three main full-time courses were developed: radio, television and new media, which were supplemented by shorter developmental courses aimed to upgrade existing practitioners to learn the new technologies. One-off workshops, lunchtime open lectures and conferences were also part of the planned training activities. This course approach was aimed to break the typical university faculty structure, so that cross disciplinary teaching practices could be developed and supported by curriculum advisory committees made up of current practitioners. I embedded media business training in the curriculum, ensuring that students could understand practical business mathematics, legal and compliance requirements, and could market and communicate their business ideas successfully to stakeholders.

As the structure of the organisation developed and premises were obtained in Parktown, the first two staff were brought on, Thandi Bengu-Towo, who went on to become the first chief executive officer, and Ria Greyling, an experienced administrator with media experience. Together, we designed the premises, and had many industry meetings to identify the skills that the developing media industry sectors would need from future staff. Many graduates of Nemisa are now media industry leaders, thanks to the training they received during their courses.

One of the underlying philosophies in all the work I have done in media development, before and since Nemisa, is to tell trainees what an amazing opportunity they have to gain skills in an industry that has so much influence in society. I then ask them the question, “What are you going to do with these skills that will make your country better?” Until you ask a question like this, trainees usually focus on their own career development. There is nothing wrong with that, but, in my opinion, those of us who work in media have a higher calling, to make the world better by using our skills in whatever way we can. Thandi and Ria agreed with this philosophy, and it underpinned the early thinking about courses and the way they were taught.

It has been a long while since I visited Nemisa, so I no longer know the key people involved or the latest training methods used, but I have heard that it still has a philosophy that recognises the higher calling, that media can change society for the better, and that Nemisa graduates are still leading the evolution of South Africa’s media industry today.



Steve Ahern is an Australian broadcaster, trainer and thought leader in media. At the time of the International Radiocracy Conference and when he consulted to the National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa, he was Head of Radio at the elite government media training university, Australian Film, Television and Radio School. Steve is now the Head of the Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union’s Media Academy. His company publishes two radio industry trade journals, radioinfo.com.au and asiaradiotoday.com, and he is the author of the text book *Making Radio*, published by Allen & Unwin. In 2009, Steve was awarded an Order of Australia (OAM) in the Queen’s Birthday Honours, for services to media and education.