

35. Salma Patel

November 1998 was when I bid farewell to a career in print journalism to take up a journey in broadcasting. I started as a radio producer/reporter in the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) newsroom. Back then, we had to multi-skill, i.e. work for all business units in the newsroom, so that the journalist becomes better-equipped, gets an in-depth understanding of the flow of news, and learns to respect each colleague's input at every level. It was fascinating. I flourished not only in current affairs, but also with input, storytelling and fieldwork.

The first few months were the hardest. The shifts were long, the deadlines hourly, and the criticism harsh! The one thing that kept ringing in my head was the advice from my lecturer, Advocate Robin Sewlal, "Grow a thick skin." In fact, all lecturers at the Department of Public Relations and Journalism at ML Sultan Technikon had a common message, "don't take anything personally, criticism helps you grow". And that is what I do up until this day: I'm always learning, always improving. As a young journalist working in an emerging democracy, that advice stood me in good stead with the seniors. I earned plenty of respect.

“the listener enjoys the anchor who listens and then responds, not one who loves listening to her/his own voice”

Growing up, I spent many years puttering around my father's radio repair shop, and, as a result, have a good technical knowledge. When I first started, I was allocated a tape recorder (TDK cassettes because they were the best for broadcast quality), a microphone and (what seemed like) over a hundred cables!

Sound could be transferred to a computer that had the first digital programme called Fast Eddie. Although it was a very basic programme (compared to the more sophisticated types that we now use in radio broadcasting), it did the trick. I was encouraged to record ambient sound from the scene of the story rather than use "canned" sound from the SABC Library. Fast Eddie allowed the mixing and merging of sound which proved an excellent tool at the time. Soon thereafter, came Dalet, a system which we still use up to today. It is a broadcast and editing tool that provides broadcast quality sound. No more would we have

the "tinny" sound that cassettes provided over telephone interviews. And our recording equipment changed too. As with most newsrooms, there is always that one journalist who prefers to do things the old school way. Our newsroom had Kas van Dyk, the Afrikaans specialist journalist, who used his reel-to-reel Nagra recorder up until he retired in mid-2010. When in the studio, we had to use reel-to-reel tapes to edit and broadcast news. This form of editing was tedious, but lots of fun. One could splice edit – place a tape between a built-in splice editing machine on the deck – to cut out a cough or too many "oohms and aahs", and present perfect broadcast copy. I also got to use the Marantz tape recording machine, which had become obsolete and replaced by a newer, better quality recorder, the Sony Mini Disc. This device provided crystal clear sound, but made our mic-work just a trifle more difficult. We had to shield our mics from sounds like wind, rain, chewing sounds by the interviewee, and even simple sounds like a clock ticking. This sensitive device picked up everything.

Radio journalists work alone, sourcing their own interviews and ambient sound to better tell a story. But the best thing in radio journalism is that the interviewee speaks in her/his own voice. In newspapers, readers have to rely on quotes, and the speed at which the journalist takes notes. In radio, it's there for the audience to hear - any thoughts of editing or changing the words of an interviewee are seen as a serious offence in the newsroom. In these formative years, I worked with one of the best newsmen in the broadcast industry, Ashok Ramsarup. He introduced me to the exciting world of radio current affairs that was timely, conversational and social because it got people thinking and talking with us! Wow! The power of radio, and we were setting the agenda on *Newsbreak*, to which I was attached. The morning shift started at 4am, and this was the most difficult for a young journalist who should be out partying, but instead went to bed at the same time as elderly folk at home. Finding one's own style in radio is difficult when there are so many stars around. I had to find myself. Only after training with Noreen Alexander – a former British Broadcasting Corporation presenter – did I learn that being yourself is what radio is all about. I gained confidence, learnt to converse well with the listener, and enjoyed being a presenter, so much so that the awards followed.

With technology going digital, it meant more jobs for multi-skilled journalists, and to the dismay of some seasoned journalists, more employment for youngsters. This 'juniorisation' of newsrooms has been lamented. The youngsters proved themselves by producing the best in journalism. They've grown into brilliant print and broadcast journalists, anchors and radio presenters. Alex Mthiyane, Xolani Gwala, Uveka Rangappa, Sureshnie Rieder, Vanessa Tedder, Monica Laganparsad (all DUT alumni) and Devi-Sankaree Govender are some colleagues who started off in the Durban newsroom.

Being at SABC News meant we would cover national events

for current affairs as well. Teams were often deployed to important government events and elections. It was good meeting people and newsmakers we had only spoken on the phone with or seen on television. But we were always reminded to remain ethical and professional in all our engagements with newsmakers. Ethics and values were drilled into us - we were the watchdogs of society, and we had to maintain the standard of truthful, balanced and accurate journalism. We were taught that journalists are not the news – it's the ordinary South African, and concerned people at non-governmental organisations, who are the focal points.

Although I missed the first general elections in 1994 because I was still at secondary school, I covered every election since being at SABC News. In 1999, I was withdrawn from an orientation course to cover the trip by the KwaZulu-Natal election officer to rural parts of the province for the local government election. It was a real eye-opener for a cloistered Muslim girl that had lived in an urban environment all her life. The rural areas were still waking up to the fact that apartheid was over. Infrastructure and basic services were non-existent, but the locals were happy. I got to speak with mothers, fathers and grandparents who were all happily standing in queues to cast their vote. Young South Africans in tatty uniforms were the most ecstatic: they finally had an identity document to vote. The politician I miss the most is Amichand Rajbansi, the *Bengal Tiger*. He was more like a cat with nine lives, and there was never a dull moment with him. He provided the best radio content to make any broadcast journalist salivate.

After my stint in the radio input business unit, I was absorbed permanently into *Newsbreak* on Lotus FM. The station underwent an image change and the tagline “not everything's black or white” was adopted. The year 2003 was another major highlight in my career at SABC News. The Indian International Film Awards were held in Johannesburg for the first time. Mainstream journalism was still at pains to recognise the clout of Indian cinema that raked in money daily at the box office, thanks to the songs and stories of India. The diaspora has contributed immensely to the demand for Indian content, news about stars and singers, that soon Bollywood – as the term had been coined – was on the news entertainment diary of almost every decent newsroom. The Lotus FM audience lapped up every word, soundbite and informal chat I had with presenters on-air at the time. Even SAfm played a few of my stories, and Ukhozi FM translated copy for their audience too. More people started to take notice of Bollywood and its real place in world cinematography.

By the mid 2000s after getting married, giving birth to two children and finding a home, a new opportunity had arisen at Lotus FM. Radio had morphed and dealt with the challenge of dwindling audiences by introducing producers for all programmes. This was done in the belief that a better-informed presenter would draw in more audiences. Talk radio was all the rage, and, at the time, we lost quite a few colleagues to competitors. To counter this exodus, radio news decided to upgrade those in newsrooms to retain talent. I was requested to apply for the senior producer post at *Newsbreak*, and landed the job.



Salma Patel interviewing actor Amitabh Bachchan

The Throb nightclub tragedy gave me a new insight into court reporting for radio. Radio had more leeway to describe the accused in court and describe what was happening in court. This places a different slant on a radio story, and provides the audience with a little more than they would get from other media. The tragedy had a positive side in that it resulted in the building of the Chatsworth Youth Centre by Nelson Mandela and his foundation. The people of Chatsworth were quite honoured that Mandela cared so much about their community and children. The crush of the crowd was phenomenal. Almost everyone came to see the saviour of South Africa's “rainbow nation” for themselves. Through this simple gesture, Mandela earned the respect and adoration of the Indian-origin community.

Later, I moved from radio news, securing the job as executive producer of Lotus FM programmes. This was a wonderful learning curve into the real world of radio . . . while news danced at the edge of radio in those days, I used the opportunity to break into mainstream radio. Cross-promotion of current affairs programmes was encouraged, and teams were asked to rely on factual information from the news department. But there were also a few rocky years. Some Lotus FM staff embarked on their first strike to remove the station manager. After the “war” between staffers and management, I was the only manager still in employ. The youngest and greenest of the bunch had to run a radio station and a staff of more than 30 on-air presenters. It was tough. I had to earn the respect of seasoned broadcasters, and which I accomplished. Throughout my time in the field and studio, I realised that I honestly *do* love talking with people. Kindness on-air goes a long way. The listener enjoys the honesty of the news reporter in current affairs, and the anchor who listens and then responds, not one who loves listening to her/his own voice. Now, it seems that radio is just talk, talk, talk overpowering the audience. If stations could get this balance right, there would be many more successful radio stations.

Being at the SABC has given me the opportunity to flirt a little with television, one of the most difficult and costly mediums. I was asked to cover an event which I thought went well even though I did bend the rules. I was not chosen for broadcasts thereafter. Admittedly, I relished the adrenaline rush that live television gives you.

Radio today is pretty much stable. Notwithstanding the technological onslaught, radio has stood the test of time. Once media houses really learn to understand the reach and coverage that radio provides, then they will realise the importance of including radio when going multi-platform. It's hard to ignore social media these days, but a podcast is very different from the

live entertainment and companionship that radio can deliver. Is there a future for radio? There sure is.

Oh, and a note to The Buggles: video did *not* kill the radio star - that radio star went on television and Facebook and now draws audiences back to radio!



Salma Patel is executive producer of the radio current affairs programme, *Newsbreak* on Lotus FM, and SABC news editor in the KwaZulu-Natal Region. She has worked for the Natal Witness in 1997 and made the transition to radio in 1998 when offered a position at SABC News in the Durban office. Salma holds a degree in journalism from the Durban University of Technology, a certificate in Media Management from the University of Witwatersrand, a certificate in Radio Station Management from the University of Witwatersrand and has completed the Management Development Programme from the University of Stellenbosch Business School. She has also travelled on international assignments covering President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa's first visit to India in 2019, the Editor's Programme in Turkey in 2012 and the 50th Independence Day Celebrations in Mauritius in 2018. Salma also enjoys comedy and created two online social media characters #ShahRukhJaan, who is her husband, and #KorporateKanmani depicting the transition of culturally-dressed women of Indian-origin to the boardroom.