

32. Radiocracy: A pivotal moment for radio, democracy and development

Steve Ahern

Twenty five years ago, South Africa's broadcast landscape was changing rapidly. Radio played a big part in that change.

In the lead up to the release of Nelson Mandela and the end of the apartheid era, pirate radio was used to broadcast freedom songs and inspire nationalism. Mandela and the African National Congress recognised the importance of radio, to facilitate the changes being made to transform South Africa into a new nation, and opened many community radio stations to give voice to the previously voiceless citizens. The propaganda stranglehold the previous government had on the state broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation had to be broken.

It was among these tumultuous changes in the media landscape of the time that the International Radiocracy Conference took place in September 2001 in Durban, under the theme *Predicting Pathways and Pulling Together*. I was there.



Topics on the agenda included the role of radio in peace building, emergence of community radio, and importance of honest journalism in building a free society. Mixed with all that was the rise of everything digital: digital recording and editing, digital radio and of course, the internet and internet radio streaming.

Australia had led the way in community radio since the 1970s and was again leading by developing new regulations for digital radio. It was also a leader in new methods of training. Those were my topics. Community radio in Australia coincided with a revolutionary technology that put production in the hands of ordinary people... the cassette tape recorder. Until that time, the means of production was monopolised by professional broadcasting companies that could afford expensive reel to reel tape recorders and high-end studio equipment. With the advent of the cassette and higher quality mixing equipment, community groups could now afford to buy low-end equipment that could get them to air easily and cheaply. As well as recording technology, FM radio was introduced in Australia, bringing with it more frequencies and cheaper solid-state transmission equipment that was easy to set up and cheaper to run than large

AM installations. Once the barriers to entry came down, community radio was easy to set up, and the traditional gatekeepers in professional companies no longer had a monopoly on what broadcasters should sound like and what they should say. Community radio democratised the airwaves.

It was this model of community radio that interested the new South African government and the media regulator. About 70 community radio licences were granted to community groups so that those who spoke African languages could have their own stations. The aim was empowerment, skills development and the strengthening of regional communities. There were already African language stations on air, but they suffered because in the past they had been the mouthpiece of the old government, and were not trusted. But when local voices went to air on community radio, voices of people you could meet on the street and discuss local issues with, the power balance began to shift.



At the conference, I equated the advent of the cassette recorder and FM transmission to the new democratising technology of the 21st century - digital. Anyone with a computer could record and edit audio. Multitrack digital audio workstations were still expensive at that time, but it was evident that the cost would come down as computers miniaturised and became cheaper. As in 70s Australia, where anyone with a microphone and cassette recorder from the local department store could do an interview, the same phenomenon was taking place again. Anyone with a mic and computer could record interviews, atmosphere and vox pops, then use sophisticated multitrack programs to turn them into documentaries or features about what was happening in their country or local community. It was the beginning of an exciting period. Broadcasters in all those community stations would eventually embrace the new technology to empower themselves and their interview subjects to discuss

the important topics that were part of the changes happening in society. Anyone connected to the emerging phenomenon called the internet could upload and store their audio for others to hear. At this time, files were large, internet was dial-up, and audio was the only thing that could travel on those expensive internet pipes - there was no YouTube and video streaming back then. So being able to access audio files was another technological change that facilitated the evolution of radio broadcasting. I also discussed audio streaming. Up until this time, it was a thrill to tune the shortwave dial and discover a station from another country. For decades, shortwave was the only way to hear radio from elsewhere, but now internet streaming of live radio transmissions was about to bring the world's biggest transmitter to anyone with a connected computer. These days, when we can consume podcasts, catch-up radio and live streams from anywhere, as well as Over the Top (OTT) video content and music streaming services, it is difficult to imagine a time when these internet technologies were just emerging. But there were visionaries on the agenda at the *Radiocracy* conference who were imagining these things and embracing new ideas in their areas of expertise.

“educators discussed the need for robust reporting of all sides of a story”

Hans-Ullrich Muechenfeld from the University of Bremen gave examples of how web radio in Germany was allowing more participation in society, but also raised the emerging legal implications of the new technology. Jo Tacchi from Queensland University spoke about convergence, and related the Australian experience of how converging media technologies were blurring the distinctions between previously distinct media businesses. Eric Nhlapo from the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa also raised the legal and convergence issues, and discussed how the authority was planning to deal with them, eventually adopting a converged regulatory model similar to that used in Australia. The role of the internet in promoting human rights was on the agenda, long before the advent of social media and its use in spreading information and discussion. Jackie Davies from OneWorld London discussed human rights and civil society online and over the airwaves.

With the early enthusiasm for community radio in South Africa being so strong, there were many speakers about this tier of broadcasting, trying to help shape it in the African context. John van Zyl, a strong and forthright broadcaster and university professor, set the scene for this aspect of the conference in a talk titled *Community Radio: The yeast in the bread of civil society*, and was followed by a range of speakers who added to the

debate, including Gilbert Mokwatedi from Technikon Pretoria and Mabalane Mfundisi from the National Community Radio Forum. A member of KwaZulu-Natal's provincial parliament, Mtholephi Mthimkhulu, spoke about the role of radio before and during the transition period in South Africa, and other speakers such as Robert Beverage from Edinburgh University and Madoda Ncayiyana from Vuleka Productions, expanded on the theme by discussing radio's contribution to social change. The reshaping of journalism training was another important topic, with educators discussing the need for robust reporting of all sides of a story, as broadcasters began to hire reporters with wider viewpoints than the previously narrow apartheid-era reporting style. Matt Moge kwu from Mmabatho's North West University discussed how reorientation in journalism training was needed for development, and Kubi Rama from the ML Sultan Technikon (now Durban University of Technology) focused on changes in public service broadcasting as a way to negotiate the challenges facing society.



The chairperson of the 2001 *Radiocracy* conference, Robin Sewlal, associate director and head of the Department of Public Relations and Journalism at the ML Sultan Technikon at the time, played an important role in helping to change the South African media landscape for the better by bringing local and international viewpoints together. The conference allowed the main players, at the heart of the changes taking place in South Africa, to think about their options, hear examples from other countries, and discuss their plans for change. It was a pivotal moment of change in the history of South Africa's media.