

Revival on the airwaves



Suddenly it seems, everyone with any interest in a product to sell or information to communicate is talking about the potential of radio in South Africa. The Cinderella medium – forgotten in the fuss over the glamorous power of TV – has made it to the ball and there are hundreds of suitors wanting to dance with her...

By SUE VALENTINE

Ask any media specialist what is the most effective means of reaching South Africans on a mass scale and chances are you'll get the same answer. Radio is the new buzz word.

It may not always be for the same reasons, but be it for pure commercial gain or in the interests of people's right to information, of all the media in South Africa, radio is the most affordable, most popular and the one which reaches urban and rural, literate and illiterate South Africans alike.

Besides the two independent commercial stations of Radio 702 and Capital Radio (able to broadcast only on medium wave and with their transmitters based in "independent" homelands), all broadcasting in South Africa is controlled by the state. However, there is a groundswell of interest in access to the airwaves from another, non-commercial sector – community radio.

Although no actual stations exist as yet, plans are most advanced in Cape Town where the Bush Radio initiative (so named for its initial association with the campus radio station at the "bush college" of the University of the Western Cape) plans to begin broadcasting in August.

The concept of community radio has also taken root in Grahamstown where a group meet regularly and are ready to go on air as soon as they can raise the money for a transmitter. In Durban (through the Media Trainers' Forum) and in Johannesburg (under the auspices of *Speak* magazine) others are developing their understanding of how community radio works and how to develop it from the realm of ideas into reality.

There is also talk among civic organisations in Natal of the possibility of starting up community radio stations.

The potential of radio in distance education and literacy training has also come under the spotlight through research commissioned by the National Education Policy Investigation network. In a paper, entitled "The Use of Radio for Adult Education", Julie Frederikse explores the capacity of radio for use in adult basic education as well as the plethora of radio proposals which are mushrooming around the country.

These initiatives include plans (and in some cases they are already being implemented in conjunction with the SABC) by Sached, Cosatu, Nactu, the SA Council of Churches, SA Catholic Bishops Conference and the Matla Trust to use radio as a means of mass communication and informal adult education.

Olset (the Open Learning Systems Education Trust) is another potential broadcaster which claims to represent community interests and is geared towards establishing a national educational radio channel in a bid to address the education crisis in the country.

Most recently, prompted by an offer of European Community funding, the formation of a Broadcasting Development Trust has been mooted. In all probability this trust will become the body to which funding proposals for future non-profit, community radio (and television) stations can be directed.

Skills, initiative and training notwithstanding, the stage is set for South Africans around the country (be they geographical communities or interest groupings) to begin meeting and talking to each other in the modern day village square created by community radio.

Sue Valentine is Media Co-ordinator with Idasa.

the English press has always been *skynheilig*, that they have been critical of apartheid while lustily enjoying its fruits. English whites are putting all the blame for apartheid on Afrikaners, who retort that they have not invented apartheid, they merely perfected it. There I agree with them. Apart from that, in many departments, like hard news gathering or cultural columns or sheer creativity, Afrikaans publications more often than not are superior to English ones.

'Holding up the English press as a model will not work'

So outside organisations would do well to avoid being prescriptive and encourage objective reporting simply by praising it, or by singling out good Afrikaans reporters for special treatment. What Afrikaners also appreciate, like all ethnic groups, is admiration for their culture. In Afrikaans literature there is a strong democratic tradition. Appreciating and encouraging that tradition, and not merely lionising the individuals, would be an important boost for the whole emerging democratic culture in Afrikanerdom.

What about breaking up the monopoly in the Afrikaans press?

That would be counter-productive. The South African press in general needs monopoly conditions to survive, so taking steps against this monopoly could destroy the Afrikaans print media. And the print media are indispensable for any real democratic public debate.

The Afrikaans press is going to be highly critical of a future government – that should be taken for granted. But in order to be taken seriously, it will have to promote democratic values. That, in turn, could be an important means of defusing ethnic Afrikaner terrorism, which quite possibly will be with us in the future. I think the nurturing of Boereglasnost and the alternative press is a far better option. As for expressions of racism, laws already exist against that, and the Afrikaans press takes the findings of institutions like the Media Council very seriously. In future, of course, people and organisations will make use of anti-racist laws to a far greater extent than they do now. And even if racism often is difficult to prove, Afrikaans papers will want to avoid the negative publicity.

Hans Pienaar is a sub-editor with Rapport while pursuing his writing career. His book, Die Derde Oorlog teen Mapech, published by Idasa, has won the 1992 Rapport prize for non-fiction in Afrikaans.