


Looking back: 20 years of African language radio

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16 Sep 2014

I grew up in the Eastern Cape in the 80s, we used to listen to Radio Xhosa, (now called Umhlobo Wenene) and it was the only radio station we knew. Very few houses in the village had television sets and they were only operated by using old car batteries.

The radio was also played with PM 9 and 10 batteries as there was no electricity then. Radio was our biggest source of entertainment as we would gather around everyday at 20:00 to listen to the drama serial of that moment. Just like soapies these drama serials were educational, always carried a social message and featured a lot in women conversations. Some of the messages in the dramas were consistent with what we read in novels and short story books in primary school.

Important messages

The messages were presented in different angles but were always around humility, preparation on how men and women should carry themselves in adulthood, perseverance in marriage, respect for elders which is also biblical. Religion and culture were like hand and glove which brings me to how Fridays were spent. Friday nights had a slightly different programme, the drama serial were replaced by a gospel music show called "Amasi AbekWelangeni".

Traditional gospel groups and artists particularly those who sang in IsiXhosa were very popular then. Some of the groups that featured regularly were Amadodana Asewisile, Holy Cross Choir, Youth with Mission, Ivangeli Loxolo etc. and people in the village sang their songs in many gatherings like weddings, funerals, prayer sessions for the sick and any event that brought people together.

One of the most popular shows in the station was called Khumbul' ikhaya, loosely translated as "go back home". On this show lines would be opened for listeners to phone and announce the names of their loved ones who had not been home for a while. The people who were announced had left home for job opportunities in other cities particularly those cities that had mines like the Gauteng, Free State, North West and they just never went back home for various reasons. Just like the television show which airs SABC 1 on Wednesdays, most of those who never went back had left kids were with relatives and grandparents.

Radio has always been a powerful medium with its own unique strengths because even though the radio station never helped listeners to physically go and look for the loved ones like the TV programme does, the word would spread and somehow some people would yield to the call and go home. It was an emotional show as the caller would be asked to relay a message and they would in some cases mention on the radio people who had since passed on, how the kids miss the their parents, plead and beg with the loved one to go back home if and give assurance that they would be accepted even if

they came back with nothing.

Station choice

Even though we've always had national radio stations in the country, relevance to our situations were key and in the Eastern Cape, there was no radio station that carried relevant content to the IsiXhosa speakers like Umhlobo Wenene. I only heard about other radio station stations when I came to Johannesburg in 1995 to start with my grade 9. The excitement that there were other radio stations different from what I knew made me abandon the station I grew up listening to for a couple of years. I still listened to other African Language stations, but it was Ukhozi particularly their drama serials which were at 15:00 and very popular in the townships.

Once again the station choice was informed by the environment and relevance. In Johannesburg townships, IsiZulu is the most spoken language. In Kaitshong where I grew up, Sundays were not complete without Lesedi's FM which had Ntate Thuso preaching about various topics from morality, responsibility, the fear of God etc. Almost every second house would have Lesedi FM playing so loud, you could hear from a distance as other people would play the radio in the house and sit outside basking in the sun or doing house chores like cleaning the yard. It did not matter whether people were church-goers or not, religion has always been a big part of black people in South Africa, with the majority supporting Christianity.

The evolution of radio

A lot has since changed in our radio space, African Language stations have mixed line-ups catering for the young and old. Most presenters and producers have qualifications, some in media and have become assets in the stations, unlike the olden days when most presenters were former teachers. With the growth of social media usage, some African language stations have caught up and have started marrying radio with social media platforms which makes it easier for them to understand and interact with their listeners. There are those radio stations that are still lagging behind because they either have no strategy or they have not embraced change and analysed the benefits closely but there's been notable progress.

One of the biggest debates in the advertising industry whenever the public broadcaster (owner on national African Language stations) had road shows to share insights about their audiences, has always been that it seems like African language stations are one big radio station broadcasting in different languages because of the similarities of the audiences, programming line-up etc. Whether that is the case or not, I do not think that is a perception someone should lose sleep over trying to change.

That question perhaps has not been answered satisfactorily because no one has spent time in all South African provinces long enough to thoroughly understand what sets a Zulu speaker, born and bred in Kwazulu-Natal apart from a Sesotho speaker, born and bred in the Free State as an example. Having worked and listened to all African Language stations in the country, I have noticed a lot of similarities which I will not dwell on. A lot of companies have done research, presented their findings as facts but the most factual research remains personal experiences which we don't possess enough of.

Learning from radio

I cannot articulate the impact other African languages has on their respective tribes but can talk about Umhlobo Wenene. The station was an extension of the community I grew up in. It re-enforced the values I was taught as a child, I have not found the same values in any other commercial radio station we have in the country. I have been entertained by music, challenged by political, social, religious debates and have certainly learnt a lot from independent commercial stations, but African language stations have a way of making one feel at home, give a sense of belonging, confirm identity and evoke a sense of pride about our heritage.

The variety of content makes it easy for one to switch between many societal roles. There is no shame in being a business executive who is perceived to fall within the high end of the market, but still be able to adapt and be humble enough that when in the townships or rural areas, you participate with ease in community activities and live the values we were brought up with. I have learnt that constantly striking the environmental balance is key, being born in the rural areas, grown up in a

township and now living the suburbs.

ABOUT NOZIBELE ZONDI

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