

Small players threaten commoditised radio



By Gill Moodie: [@grubstreetZA](#)

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Call me nostalgic but South African radio has never topped [Capital Radio 604](#) of the 1980s.

One of the very few cool things about growing up in East London, as I did at this time, is that if you patiently twiddled the dial on the AM frequency, you could listen to 604, which began life as SA's first private radio station in 1979, broadcasting from Port St Johns in the Transkei.

It became quite literally the sound track of my youth, with its intelligent DJs, cutting-edge music and news that gave you the other side of the story of life under apartheid. But because the DJs were mostly British and they played largely US and UK music, I had always assumed that it was young white kids such as myself who tuned in religiously to the station.

Cuts across boundaries

Then last year I read a letter in the East London-based *Daily Dispatch* newspaper in which the black letter writer who grew up in the Transkei waxed lyrical about the station for the same reasons I loved it so much. It almost brought a tear to my eye and it goes to show that truly excellent radio cuts across boundaries - even racial ones in 1980s South Africa!

I mention this because I continue to be amazed that the likes of 5FM and Metro FM, our two big SABC-owned national youth stations, continue to largely define themselves along racial lines. In their choice of music and presenters, both Metro and 5FM are targeted at specific race groups, which surely becomes increasingly irrelevant with every new South African generation - especially today's middle-class kids, who, irrespective of race, seem to dress the same, talk the same and have the same overarching worries and dreams.

But then if you are constricted by play lists, put as little money as possible into news and hire dimwits for presenters, then it's no wonder that you get a rather narrowly defined audience - and that's just fine by the advertisers so the money keeps rolling in. The only problem is that most SA national and regional radio is as dull as ditch water - commoditised crap, which is possibly why radio listenership is showing signs of decline.

Radio listening declined

The recent [RAMS radio listenership figures](#) showed that audience levels remained largely stable over the past year but, looking further back, radio listening declined in both the large urban and small urban/rural sectors from the previous year, that is, RAMS February 2009.

I believe this trend is set to accelerate over the next five to 10 years as Internet radio and devices such as the iPod and iPad means you can seek out your own music from around the world and download it - especially with SA about to truly enter the world of broadband.

Granted, I am no longer in youth radio's target audience so maybe I don't get it anymore but when my five-year-old child demands that the TV channel is changed when the "nappy group" Teletubbies comes on (her term, not mine), I can see the future. Her generation of future media users expect choice, are not prepared to waste time on something that bores them, and mastering new technology comes very easily.

Savvy operations waiting in the wings

There are already savvy operators waiting in the wings, set to change the game and, just as the Internet allowed one-man bandits armed with laptops to slice and dice the audience and advertising of the print industry, so will these guys do the same to radio.

[Seth Rotherham](#), publisher of the popular 2Oceansvibe website, is one such potential player. His website already nets 60 000 unique users a month - 50% of whom comes to him directly thus demonstrating their loyalty - and now he's getting into Internet radio. He's even secured premises in Cape Town's trendy Cape Quarter for just this purpose.

"This is obviously where things are going. I've been testing my show live in my car on my iPod," says Rotherham. "I've [streamed] on my phone through 3G. I want to give people an alternative in the morning. At the moment I'm just doing it for an hour and a half on a Friday ([both live streaming and podcasts](#)) but I want to get different DJs in and shake it up.

"Not to bad mouth regional or national radio - because I'm friends with a lot of the players - but they cater for a certain audience which I don't feel I'm a part of. I can't listen to ads which basically talk to you [like] a child. Maybe there are some people who feel they need to be spoken to as a child but then why can't I have my own radio station where I can go? Why do we have stations that we feel we can't bear to have on for five minutes before we switch stations? It's not normal, you know. It's not like that in the US. It's weird and it's bad."

Cool and relevant

Rotherham aims to have a full-scale Internet radio station up and running soon with a variety of DJs, lekker music, advertising of products and services that Rotherham judges to be cool and news that is relevant to his audience - for example, about "the iPad; not perlemoen poachers" as he puts it.

The real proof that people are tiring of the commoditised offering you get on commercial stations is in the rise of community radio in South Africa, which are flourishing throughout the country though they run on a shoe-string budget and that's because they give people hyper-local information that is relevant to their lives. According to the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), there were 87 community stations on air in SA last year.

Compare, for example, the Eastern Cape regional youth station TruFM - once Radio Ciskei - that had been shedding listeners like confetti while teeny tiny operations such as Unitra Community Radio Station in Mthatha and Alfred Nzo Community Radio in the far-flung Mount Ayliff have very respectable audiences of more than 300 000 each.

Amateur hour

The latest RAMS figures put the SABC-owned TruFM at 383 000 listeners in April this year - down from 411 000 a year earlier - but when you consider that [in July 2005, the station had 714 000 listeners](#), you can see that this is looking rather terminal.

Even for the relaxed and pretty forgiving Eastern Capers, TruFM seems like amateur hour. It has repositioned quite a few times, rebranded twice and is wont to resorting to mass clear-outs of its stations DJs.

So what gives in Mount Ayliff, where the spunky little Alfred Nzo Community Radio has improved its listenership over the past year from 35 000 in April last year to 312 000 in April this year?

Started in 1997 and funded by the MDDA, it broadcasts in isiXhosa, Sesotho and English, with about 40% music and 60% talk. It focuses on the issues that affect its listeners in the broadcast area, which covers the largely rural northern part of the Transkei as far south as Mthatha and Port St Johns.

Which is why the LSM profile of its listeners is exactly what it should be - LSM 1-6 - so I'd say the humble Alfred Nzo Community Radio has an excellent idea of who it is and how to service its audience just right. Which is far more than we can say for TruFm.

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