

# DEMOCRATIZING THE MEDIA: THE CHALLENGE FOR RADIO

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## ABSTRACT

Democratic change in South Africa has left the country reeling with exhilaration, but also battling with the difficulties of transformation. The media are no exception. The role of the Independent Broadcasting Authority as regulatory body becomes critical as the electronic media and radio in particular struggle through the transitional pains of deregulation, privatization and liberalization. The author briefly sketches the departure points and background for the IBA action frame, and then posits an implied warning against these objectives by using, *inter alia*, arguments posed in qualitative research by, in particular, Splichal (1992) and Rothenbuhler (1996) as a springboard. Parallels between media democratization in Central-Eastern Europe and South Africa are drawn, and the danger of an overriding commercial motive in radio broadcasting is outlined.



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## INTRODUCTION

Democratic change in South Africa has cut to the quick of the country's economic, social and political fabric, and both print and the electronic media have been drawn into this vortex of transformation. The country shudders as it sheds its apartheid legacy, and, likewise, media across the board feel the tremors of change on their collective Richter scales.

The April 1994 general election has catapulted the country, steeped in a history of oppression as a result of the system of apartheid, on a rocky road to freedom and democracy. As the country reels under the heady

privilege of exercising this new-found freedom after decades of bizarre social engineering, the media are following a parallel course of coming to terms with freedom of speech in a non-restrictive, democratic media environment.

The rebirth of civil society in South Africa is rooted in the so-called radical civil movements mobilized against the state-party system of apartheid and its monopolistic economic and political power. In a traditional "Western" sense, the distinction between the state and civil society is aimed at the restoration and revitalization of an already achieved level of democracy, or, at least, against the erosion of an already existing civil society (Splichal 1992:3).

In South Africa, the so-called struggle was aimed at legalization of democratic grass-roots movements, i.e. at the re(creation) of a democratic civil society largely abolished and outlawed by - at that stage - an omnipotent apartheid state. These efforts may be traced back over decades, and parallel to these, many of the central issues pertained to the media and the transformation of these state-owned institutions.

In one way or another, many questions central to transition have, at their core, the media and media-related issues: the role of the state and civil society *vis-à-vis* the media, the problems of democratization, deregulation and privatization as means of production, the quest for sover-

eignty and, of course, the liberalization of the media systems themselves.

## **SETTING THE BROADCAST MEDIA FREE**

A key factor in this process of liberalizing the media, and in this particular instance the liberalizing and privatization of the broadcast media, is the establishment of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). This body was brought into being on 30 March 1993 by the Act approved in September 1993 by the then Transitional Executive Council.

Before addressing some of the pitfalls of the process of privatization of the broadcast media and of radio in particular, it is of cardinal importance to briefly trace the role of the IBA and in particular its impact *vis-à-vis* radio, as well as its policy and legislative stance regarding the medium.

The challenges facing the IBA are daunting, and these tasks are delineated by the Act itself. The primary object of the Act is to regulate broadcasting in the public interest of the country. In doing so, and in determining how to interpret what constitutes the public interest, the Authority has to take several factors into account. Central amongst these is the recognition that South Africa is a new democracy and in a state of transition.

The IBA has to take into account the fluid nature of this country's fledgling

democracy and constantly review proposals and criteria as the country moves forward toward a stability less tenuous than the present.

The establishment of an independent broadcasting regulatory body does, however, herald an important victory in South Africa. In most other democracies, the broadcast regulator is a mature institution and one of the cornerstones of that country's democratic media system. Probably the best known example that comes to mind is the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) of the United States.

Although broadcast regulation is an old activity in other democracies, regulators are finding it increasingly difficult to do the job because of the rapid rate of technological change and the resulting unpredictability of the industry.

Experienced regulators in Britain, Australia and other countries have made costly mistakes as they tried to balance the interests of the public in listening to and viewing a diversity of content against the need to encourage broadcasters to invest in new enterprises which will create new jobs. These are problem areas acknowledged by the IBA in its Triple Enquiry Report of August 1995.

South Africa has special concerns that, in some instances, overlap with those of other democracies, but which, in many cases, are as unique as the country and its often painful

history. All of civil society previously excluded from full participation of the complete spectrum of life now have to be accommodated, and this includes sharing the media.

A tall order indeed. In South Africa, there is a dire need to provide opportunities for historically disadvantaged people to participate at every level: in ownership, management, on air and support positions. There exists the need for a special type of educational programming appropriate to the backlog created by apartheid strictures.

Keeping in mind the educational vacuum, the high degree of illiteracy in the country and the suitability of radio for addressing these problems, it is appropriate that the IBA's first major series of licensing actions was in the field of community radio stations. This is of particular import because of primarily the following three reasons:

- For the first time, all South Africans, from diverse backgrounds, may determine what is to be put on the airwaves for their own communities. This represents a radical break with the past where bush radio illegally had to try to satisfy the needs of its perceived geographic/psychographic audience;
- Priorities may now be set regarding the all-important broadcasting agenda related to education, information, religious and

cultural expression, and the choice of language;

- Whereas South Africa has in the past had a limited number of radio stations as a result of restrictive legislation, the airwaves have been opened up to the extent that community radio stations have more than trebled the number of stations within South Africa.

The specific nature of radio as a medium is implicitly acknowledged by the IBA when it writes in the Triple Enquiry Report of August 1995 (p.11):

*Radio and television will be regulated differently. Radio is accessible to many more people, and is much cheaper to produce for. It is possible to regulate each station more lightly (sic.) on the basis that, overall, the combination of radio stations will provide the listener with an ever widening range of choices.*

The IBA's decisions regarding radio as reflected in this document, touch upon several important points of departure regarding radio policy, inter alia:

- To end the inferior treatment and resourcing of African language radio stations from the public broadcaster that pertained under apartheid. In this way, according to the IBA, speakers of all 11 languages should be able to hear broadcasts in their preferred lan-

guages in most places where that language is spoken;

- To reduce the SABC's overwhelming dominance of radio considerably, by selling off all its regional commercial stations, making them available to new entrants to the radio industry, and opening up new station licenses around the country in a measured way that will ensure a steady expansion of the industry, starting as soon as the regulatory process allows, but without leading to fragmentation of the industry;
- To allow different kinds of radio for different audiences, with relatively light regulation that allows stations to format in a way that caters for a range of tastes on different stations.

The purpose of this paper is not to adjudicate whether the IBA has, up to the present moment, delivered on these goal statements as outlined in the comprehensive Triple Enquiry Report. It will, however, attempt to assess the significant implications that these points of departure might imply.

It is, however, worth mentioning the fact that a plethora of criticisms have been leveled at the IBA, including the accusation that the Authority is little more than yet another gravy train.

Potential commercial broadcasters clamouring to join the broadcasting fray accuse the IBA of dragging its

feet and of creating an imbalance in the envisaged market by allowing the brokering company handling the sale of the commercial regional stations and the SABC to punt for the *highest* bidder and not necessarily for the most *appropriate* bidder from a broadcasting point of view.

Be that as it may, the potential buyers are being screened at this very moment and, for all practical intents and purposes, the IBA seems to be delivering on the sale of the regional commercial stations, albeit beyond the time frame originally envisaged.

The IBA position paper on private sound broadcasting services released on 16 May 1996 outlines (p.1) the primary objectives in terms of Section 2 of the Independent Broadcasting Act by making particular reference to the following aspects:

- The encouragement of ownership and control of broadcasting services by persons from historically disadvantaged groups;
- The encouragement of investment in the broadcasting industry;
- The promotion of the stability of the broadcasting industry;
- The encouragement of a fair and competitive environment;
- The encouragement of South African ownership and control;
- The encouragement of diversity of culture and language;
- The reflection of South African society

One can hardly argue with the intrinsic merits of these objectives, but the process of media liberalization as reflected in the deregulation and privatization of, in this instance, radio stations, demands that similar processes elsewhere be analysed and the dynamics of privatization be questioned.

## **A LESSON FROM CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE**

Before the late 1980's, media policy throughout Eastern Europe was relatively uncomplicated: state responsibility for broadcasting had been legitimized in terms of the political, educational and cultural importance of radio (and TV) to society - and, of course, the state. All forms of control was aimed at maximizing the role of the media in popularizing the ruling ideology and state policy (Splichal 1992:4).

Opinions dissenting from the official attitude were repressed by preventive censorship and repressive penal legislation. Comparisons to the previous South African dispensation's draconian media legislation are inevitable, and should be borne in mind as a parallel to the following brief discussion.

During the 1980's, endeavours aimed at social liberalization in the East bloc countries of Central and Eastern Europe succeeded, and relatively peaceful revolutions introduced radical political, and partly economic,

changes. As in all modern democratic revolutions, the call for freedom of the press was vital.

Most of the debates in Central-Eastern Europe about the reorganization of the communications sphere, particularly broadcasting, are inspired and guided by similar debates in the West (Splichal 1992:5), to the extent that the newest media developments go in the direction of a mere imitation of industrialized countries.

Although the present Eastern European governments are not seeking full-scale privatization at once, privatization *per se* is considered a necessary and essential condition to inter alia increase the level of productivity and the amount of surplus, to attract foreign capital and to decentralize and diversify the economy (Bajt in Splichal 1992:7). Private property is considered a pivotal factor in production.

These arguments are uncannily similar to the discourse put forward by President Mandela on his state visit to Germany in May 1996, and his assurances that South Africa will unequivocally follow the road of privatization.

It is patently clear to see that the Eastern European discussion follows a close arc to contemporary and current South African history, an argument borne out by Manaev (1991:72-91) in writing on the influence of Western radio on the democratization of Soviet youth.

Perhaps it would not be out of place to question the mode of privatization in South Africa in much the same way that privatization in Eastern Europe has been questioned. It must be borne in mind that this critique holds true for the entire media sphere as well.

Contemporary attempts of privatization in former socialist countries may be challenged from three main perspectives (Splichal 1992:7):

- The nature of privatization with the dominant role of the state contradicts the proclaimed quest for democratization of society and the state;
- Privatization forced by the state is primarily aimed at redistribution of wealth rather than a more effective economy;
- The succeeding of transplantation of Western capitalism and private ownership (or in South Africa the mixed economic approach advocated by a substantial portion of the present government) is limited by the indigenous social structures of these societies.

The revitalization of civil society in Central-Eastern Europe has been blocked by the absence of corresponding reforms of the state. The access of oppositional parties, and particularly autonomous groups from civil society to the national broadcast media, including radio, is being limited. Similarly to the old power structures, new authorities are not willing

to surrender any part of broadcasting to groups they consider "oppositional", "leftist" or "communist" (Splichal 1992:6).

South Africa approaches liberalization and privatization from a different politico-ideological paradigm (this country's media have to contend with an apartheid past, and not a communist past. Indeed, the socialist/communist ideology is not seen as a negative -ism by the current dispensation). The parallels to privatization in Central-Eastern Europe are, however, too clear to ignore.

In those countries, privatization is often used as a metaphor to indicate (or to conceal) some dimensions of much more complex socio-political realities; contemporary privatization policies in Eastern Europe are mainly related to the question of the redistribution of political power and control.

While in Western countries private ownership is the most prominent characteristic of civil society, privatization of property in post-socialist - could we construe post-apartheid? - countries is a political feature, "designed by the political will of the revolutionary avant garde in order to materialize its 'historical project'" (Splichal 1992:9). In this respect, no fundamental difference exists between the former socialist and the new post-socialist ruling elites.

Bearing the earlier outline of IBA policy and especially radio privatization in mind, the parallels between

South Africa's fledgling media deregulation/privatization and recent East European media history sound a clear note of concern, if not outright warning:

*Although privatization is firmly against the former authoritarian or paternalistic (state) control, it cannot genuinely democratize communication processes because it retains the control in the hands of a minority rather than the "people", and reduces "public interest" to the interest in the maximization of profit (Splichal 1992: 9).*

In summary, commercialized "public service" broadcasting in Central-Eastern Europe is unanimously advocated by the new power elites for very pragmatic political and economic reasons: to maximize their power and to make the "public service" profitable. The South African deregulation and privatization discourse and process seems to operate uncomfortably close to its Eastern-European counterpart, and should take cognizance of the fact that privatization for profitability does not always guarantee true media democracy and free-flow of information.

There seems to be a conflict between the profit motive and the communication motive in the privatization and deregulation debate, and this apparent anomaly should be addressed.

## DOES PRIVATIZATION MEAN BETTER COMMUNICATION?

Privatization implies *commercial* radio broadcasting more often than not, but whether it refers to pure commercial profit broadcasting or to economically viable hybrid formats, the economic realities of broadcasting - and therefore radio as well - cannot be ignored.

The disadvantage of privatization and the implied commercialization is that the commercial motive that drives culture - and radio forms part of modern culture - is fundamentally different from culture produced for other motives (Crane in Rothenbuhler 1996:126). A "production of culture" perspective posits that audiences enter into consideration not as individuals with specific communication needs, but as markets, that is, conceived in business terms for business purposes (Cantor in Rothenbuhler 1996:126).

Commercial radio as a direct result of deregulation/privatization, is evaluated as a business, but, when business criteria are used to evaluate communication and culture-producing institutions, one kind of success - financial - is taken as evidence of a different kind of value, namely the communicational value of that media institution. Applying a business model to a communication institution requires identifying audience members as customers as opposed to individuals with specific communication needs. This premise could and often

does bias the intention of the communicator and the resultant success of the communication, in this case radio communication.

For example, if one purpose of public and community radio is to serve minority tastes, then we should not only expect, but desire that such stations have small, target-specific audiences, but the business model is so prevalent that their small audiences are widely seen as a sign of the failure of these stations (Rothenbuhler 1996:128).

The argument follows that making money is a purpose that is *extrinsic* to communication itself; communicating for money reduces the ends of communication to the status of means - any "message purpose" becomes subordinate to the "money purpose".

Once we imagine a system in which the choice to communicate for money has been institutionalized, Rothenbuhler (1996:133) indicates that three results must follow:

The rules and expectations governing such a system make it inappropriate to communicate for any other purpose. The broadcaster who editorializes, educates or preaches over and beyond what is called for by the profit motive has violated expectations and will lose advertisers, colleagues and audiences.

This argument has vital implications for development radio in a country



such as South Africa: the very motive for creating for example a rural community station with a strong educational mandate undergoes a paradigm shift as it now has to broadcast to stay financially afloat. Whatever the IBA community radio mandate states, economic reality remains an inescapable force.

Communication changes in such a system would be capricious and not predictable by understanding communication *per se*, but rather by understanding business and economics. This has far-reaching implications from a radio managerial point of view: does the station manager take pivotal managerial decisions that will improve the communication of his station, or does he take decisions that make profit?

The innate tension between these two points of departure will surely differ between a purely commercial station and a community station, but management should realize that fulfilling the communication mandate that radio has does not always equate profitability.

The third result, Rothenbuhler (1996:133) points out, is of a different kind. The commercial communicator, in addition to having chosen the medium without regard for any communicative purpose - i.e. to make money rather than for expression - has done so without any act of invention, that is, without having actual

communication content to share in a meaningful way.

Individuals entering the commercial radio business are entering into an already structured "conversation" between radio station (sender) and listener (recipient of the message). They are buying into an existing business because it looks like a good investment. They are after new *money*, not new *messages* and therefore they have no reason to wish to alter the structure of the station: it is that structure which attracted them in the first instance.

Thus: communicative invention has been replaced by a series of business decisions made within the context of a market (Glasser in Rothenbuhler 1996:137). The instrumental orientation of the business person has replaced the normative orientation of the communicator; efficiency rather than expression becomes the governing value. This could have further implications in the field of future sales of stations, as indicated by Bates (1993:21-33) in a succinct analyses of station trafficking in the USA.

The radio scholar, and indeed the radio listener, is left with a feeling of serious concern as the IBA, SABC and potential buyers are - as pointed out earlier - locked in sales negotiations at this very moment. The concern is exacerbated when one is reminded of the fact that financial gain seems to be the prime factor which will swing the decision in favour of one radio station buyer or another.

The IBA has given assurances that other variables in line with their objectives spelt out earlier in this paper shall come into play before a sales decision is taken, but there is no doubt that the SABC, the brokerage firm and the current Minister within whose portfolio the matter resides, Jay Naidoo, are chasing financial gain to compensate for the losses the SABC will experience when the radio station cash cows are sold off.

Bearing the aforementioned in mind, it will benefit the IBA and South African broadcasting in general to heed the FCC's guideline to privatization of especially commercial radio stations:

*The FCC ... which had been given the task of allocating frequencies and licensing stations with discretion to promulgate regulations designed to 'promote maximum diversification of program and service viewpoints and to prevent undue concentration of economic power contrary to the public interest' (own emboldening) (Smith in Wasburn 1995:74).*

## CONCLUSION

The heady ambiance of democracy pervading the country and the media brings with it a tacit yet urgent need to heed the turbulence which inevitably follows in the wake of deregulation and privatization.

Despite approaching the democratization process from the opposite side

of the ideological divide, the media in Central-Eastern Europe and the radio medium in particular have a telling lesson to impart. The nomenclature of the past may become the apparatus of the future if proper care is not taken to prevent state and parastatal authority from usurping the liberalization process for its own means.

These state and parastatal powers may also use the politically correct jargon of democracy to sway media power in their favour. The mere fact that liberalization and privatization is encouraged, does not necessarily mean that grass-roots media users - in this particular case radio listeners - are getting better and more meaningful communication. The commercialism that drives privatization may, after all, not be the panacea for the communication needs that exist in any given society, including that of South Africa.

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