

**What Is Community Radio?**  
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“I have passion for radio,” is a phrase you often hear when talking with staff at community radio stations in developing countries, or it is self-evident in the conversation. Community radio is often born from a struggle against repression or the strong desire for an alternative to state broadcasting and for-profit stations that give no space to community voices. Passion for community radio is fueled when the producers see positive results in their communities and hear feedback from listeners.

It’s contagious too. I’ve loved my work in public radio in the United States, but it is overseas that I’ve seen radio used to its fullest, from radio soap operas to listeners calling in with news about a herd of sheep and goats in their front yard. I’ve seen radio serve as the most trusted agency in town that brings change. Most of you have had similar experiences and share this passion. The donor community, however, does not recognize the full range of possibilities that community radio can play, for example, in democracy, governance, health, women’s rights, and the environment.

Therefore I begin with these few examples to demonstrate that the power to improve the quality of life for listeners through effective programming is the most important way to highlight the importance of and define community radio.

- In rural Mozambique, a local radio station is leading community health efforts. As a result of radio programs that called attention to the growing AIDS epidemic, a new clinic was established to test residents for HIV, and research shows that men were eight times more likely to get tested after they heard these local radio programs.
- In Sierra Leone, radio is credited with increasing the number of girls attending school from 40 percent to 60 percent in one province.
- In Burundi, Tutsis and Hutus produce radio plays together to create peaceful models of working collaboratively and ending violence.
- In Liberia and Sierra Leone, radio has nurtured a climate of trust between previously fighting factions, promoting inclusion of the whole community in decision making. Public officials are held accountable by appearing on weekly radio programs, and petty corruption has been exposed.
- In West Africa, women have been empowered to speak out about abuse and voted in larger numbers than ever before because of radio campaigns.

In discussions about local radio, we need to always keep in mind the ultimate beneficiaries: people living in developing countries where radio is the most important medium. The listeners care little about the definition or governance structure; they want programming that is trustworthy, accurate, enjoyable, and gives them a voice.

From the first community radio stations started by miners in Bolivia and Colombia in 1947, the intention was to give a voice to people that empowered them to talk among themselves and to share information of value to their families and their work. They were

serving both a community of interest and a geographic community. These are threads that have been woven into community radio ever since.

At the same time, community radio is as diverse as the communities it serves and therefore there is no simple definition that can capture it all. Radio serving nomadic herders in the Mongolian Gobi desert will be very different from one serving a densely populated peri-urban township in South Africa. When I first introduced the idea of community radio in Mongolia in 1998 at a workshop, the translator said, "We don't have a word for 'community' as you are using it." Nonetheless, last year many who were in this workshop formed a Rural Community Radio Association.

This paper will explore some of the characteristics and qualities that have come to identify community radio to give context and examples for our discussion. As journalists, we're taught to show rather than tell, and as I studied the many definitions of community radio and matched these against my experience in the field, I realized that in defining community radio, it is most meaningful to *show* what community radio is like through examples.

The AMARC Web site, <http://www.amarc.org/> lists several definitions of community radio from its members including this:

Community radio, rural radio, cooperative radio, participatory radio, free radio, alternative, popular, educational radio. If the radio stations, networks and production groups that make up the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters refer to themselves by a variety of names, then their practices and profiles are even more varied. Some are musical, some militant and some mix music and militancy. They are located in isolated rural villages and in the heart of the largest cities in the world. Their signals may reach only a kilometer, cover a whole country or be carried via shortwave to other parts of the world.

Some stations are owned by not-for-profit groups or by cooperatives whose members are the listeners themselves. Others are owned by students, universities, municipalities, churches or trade unions. There are stations financed by donations from listeners, by international development agencies, by advertising and by governments.<sup>1</sup>

Community ownership and control of the station are frequently included in the definition. This is how AMARC Africa described community participation:

The requirement of community participation ensures that member of the community are involved in the running of the station, i.e. in the following

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<sup>1</sup> "Waves for Freedom," Report on the Sixth World Conference of Community Radio Broadcasters. Dakar, Senegal, January 23-39, 1995

activities:

- election of leadership (board members or trustees)
- policymaking for the station
- management of the station
- selection and provision of programming
- production of programs
- external representation of the station, etc.<sup>2</sup>

While the board of directors has fiduciary responsibility, sets policy, reviews programming and appoints the manager to run the station, problems can arise if board members are directly involved in programming and production. They lack the expertise and may want to air their own program, which may not meet the needs or standards of the station.

Despite the name “community” radio, it is difficult for the community as a whole to make operational decisions, except through a board of directors that reflects the diversity of the community. Participation was carried to an impractical level when in the early days of Bush Radio in Cape Town, the forty volunteers voted on budgetary decisions. When the manager wanted to purchase a new microphone, the volunteers voted to buy a new coffee machine. Little wonder that she left. It can be argued that the staff is part of the community too.

For the purpose of our discussion, I propose the following definition:

Community radio, that serves a geographic group or community of interest, is licensed to a nonprofit organization to serve the public interest by:

- electing a governing board that reflects the diversity of the community, defines the mission, sets policy, is financially responsible and appoints the manager
- creating structures and processes to identify community needs and interests that informs programming decisions and evaluates the effectiveness of the programming
- ensuring broad participation in programming, giving value to communication among the people to facilitate positive change, not simply relaying information to the citizen

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<sup>2</sup> Bonin, Marie-Helene and Aida Opoku-Mensah, eds. *What Is Community Radio? A Resource Guide*, AMARC Africa 1998, p.23.

- ensuring that the service is trustworthy, accurate and independent of outside influences, be they government, special interests or religions

These are the primary colors for community radio. However, at nearly every station I visit, I see more colors added to the palette. Here are few illustrative sketches of different stations, no two alike.

**Radio Cerenja** ('the stars') serves as a voice for the Roma community in Stip, Macedonia, yet has no elected board of directors. As you walk through the Roma community, climbing the hill to the station at the top, you may see a freshly killed sheep being skinned. The broadcasters are clearly from the community, speaking from their experience living there. In addition, the music acts as a bridge to the larger community and listeners drive up the hill to pay for dedications of favorite songs. For many, it is the first time they've entered a Roma village. The station operates from a family home, as do all the Roma stations I've visited in Eastern Europe.

**Breeze-FM** in rural Chipata, Zambia, is a private station that operates with a development mission(<http://www.breezefm.makeni.net>). The programming resembles a community station, but is run on a business model. The staff has no contact with the board. Memory Dulani, the deputy head of the station said, "We would not even recognize a board member who came in the station because we do not know them." Listeners participate in programming on International Women's Day, Children's Day and AIDS Day, among other occasions. The station is always open to the public. Because the station has strong connections to the community, it is attractive to NGOs to sponsor programs on the station. (You can read a case study of Breeze-FM and other effective stations on the Developing Radio Partners Web site: <http://www.developingradiopartners.org/>. Click on 'Guidebook on sustainability.')

**Radio Comunitaria do Dondo** in rural Mozambique, started by a major UNESCO media project for 'strengthening democracy through media', was one of five communities out of eighteen selected to receive support in 2000. The full grant included support for community mobilization, equipment, coaching, training and running costs for five years.

Birgitte Jallof was the UNESCO/UNDP technical adviser from 1998-2004 and led the project. She wrote, "Creating ownership feeling takes time. Therefore, it was decided to plan for a one to two year mobilization and capacitation phase before the arrival of the equipment, which would absorb all interest once in place." As a result of this careful engagement with the community, Radio Dondo is regarded as a valued community resource. With four paid staff and around sixty volunteers, the station is one of the most trusted agencies in town. Volunteers are divided into editorial groups such as agriculture, youth, health, women, and government, and produce weekly 15:00 programs. All programming is in three local languages. There are two radio clubs that meet twice a month as a bridge between the community and the station. Remarkably, nearly 60 percent of the music played is performed by local musicians.

The volunteers regularly survey listeners in their neighborhoods. Surveys have found that

it is regarded as owned by the community and not a UN station; 94 percent of the residents listen to radio; 83 percent listen to Radio Dondo and 80 percent listen daily. (A full case study is found at the DRP Web site, <http://www.developingradiopartners.org/downloads/Lo%20Res%20Guidebook.pdf>.)

### The South African Experience

Because community radio in South Africa grew out of the liberation movement, and therefore had the support of the post-apartheid government, it is instructive to trace the development of the ideas from vision to reality. The South Africa experience influenced community radio in other parts of Africa. AMARC's Global Evaluation of the social impact of community radio cites the lack of enabling legislation as the single principal barrier to the social impact of community radio.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore instructive to see how community radio fares with some of the most favorable national legislation.

The origins go to the Jabulani!<sup>4</sup> "Freedom of the Airwaves Conference Recommendations Towards the Future of Broadcasting," held in the Netherlands, August 11-18, 1991.

The conference began with the premise that public broadcasting should form the core of the broadcasting system and set the standard of all broadcasting. It went on to note that there is no community broadcasting sector and that developing one was a priority:

A national community broadcasting should be participatory; it should be owned and controlled by the community itself, and the broadcasting content of the station should be determined by the needs of that community as perceived by the community.

Funding of community broadcasting should come from both the public and private sectors; details of this should be worked out by the communities themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Don Pinnock, at that time a university journalism teacher, concluded his talk at the conference on the *Future of Radio in South Africa* with this vision:

Radio is a way to bring the sounds of all Africa to the south—sounds which apartheid has held back from our ears for so long. It is a way to start building what [former Archbishop Desmond Tutu] calls a 'rainbow culture,' where Marabi music and Mozart jostle for airtime with T.S. Elliot and Mzwakhe Mbuli. Where Tolstoy and Todd Matshikze share the same waveband and where people start to dismantle group areas in their hearts.

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<sup>3</sup> *Community Radio Social Impact Assessment* Removing Barriers, Increasing Effectiveness. AMARC 2007. p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> A Zulu word meaning simple, open happiness.

<sup>5</sup> *South African Media Policy Debates of the 1990's*. P. Eric Louw. 1993. P. 308

We have hardly begun to explore the beauty of our many cultures with the microphone, and we need to make a start now.<sup>6</sup>

Edric Gorfinkel, founder of Bush Radio in Cape Town, gave highest priority to providing a voice to people. Before founding Bush Radio, and because independent radio was not allowed, he made and distributed cassette tapes.

We were also introducing people to radio and training them to produce programmes. We did some *Ghettoblaster Workshops* which involved taking some blank tapes and a double-cassette machine to wherever people were meeting anyway, and doing a three-hour workshop. Recording whatever people wanted to do: songs, stories, interviews, etc. You edit that stuff on a double-deck and produce a programme. Then you make copies. That technique was successful in giving people a feel for participatory community radio. The quality's not great, but people dig just hearing themselves 'play radio.'<sup>7</sup>

Later, when community stations went on the air, they quickly heard from listeners that they expected a certain level of performance; they didn't like hearing people 'play radio.' They critiqued presenters if they were unprepared. This was one of the ways the community had a voice in the stations.

Edric had taken the idea of free speech to the point where he placed a microphone on the street and anyone could say anything.

At a public meeting about community radio I attended in Durban in 1993, a man said, "With community radio, everyone has a right to be on the radio; anyone can be on the radio, even a stutterer."

I maintained that everyone has a right to expect something worthwhile to listen to when they turn on a community radio station. To be on the radio, you should have something worthwhile to say.

When the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) was established by the new government to award licenses in 1994, it only awarded them in the first year to community stations—either geographic communities, such as the townships, or communities of interest, because they believed these stations would best serve the interests of the new democracy. To ensure community control, they required that the board of directors be elected at an Annual General Meeting, and they in turn would appoint the manager.

Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF-SA) was the lead donor for community radio and I worked with them as a consultant from 1994-1998 to establish the guidelines

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<sup>6</sup> "Making Waves with CASET" by Edric Gorfinkel. *A Passion for Radio. Radio Waves and Community*. [www.comunica.org/passion](http://www.comunica.org/passion) Chapter 22, page 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.p.5.

for support and training programs. Grants were awarded for research and development, equipment, training, and program production. Over time, OSF-SA help launch over thirty community radio stations. Jean Fairbairn, the media program officer, worked very closely to develop the sector by responding to their needs, visiting stations and organizing meetings so they could learn from one another. For example, while the initial equipment package included a transmitter, antenna and outfitting for one studio, the stations soon found they needed a production studio as well and the foundation supported grants for this.

In South Africa, there is a political will to support community media through several organizations.

The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) was established in 2000 in a merger of two regulatory agencies. It serves the function of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, and more. The mission is “to assist in the overall economic growth and social development of the country.” Unlike the FCC, the ICASA “has a mandate to promote and encourage the ownership and control of telecommunications and broadcasting services to people from disadvantaged groups.” In addition to setting policy and awarding licenses, it hears and settles disputes and complaints brought by industry and the public against licensees. For example, if a religious or other special interest group takes control of a community radio station in the Annual General Meeting and shifts the programming, the community can complain to the ICASA. (You may want to contrast their mission statement to the FCC under ‘About ICASA’: <http://www.icasa.org.za/Default.aspx?Page=2> )

The National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) was created “to build an enabling environment and a coherent sector identity ensuring continued healthy growth of community radio in South Africa” by lobbying, coordinating capacity building and forging strategic alliances. NCRF presently has seventy-five members and provides support to 120 community radio projects. (Community radio stations in South Africa are estimated to number more than one hundred.) <http://www.ncrf.org.za/>

In 2002, The Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) was established by an act of Parliament to enable “historically disadvantaged communities and persons not adequately served by the media to gain access to the media. The beneficiaries are community media and small commercial media. Funds come from profits of commercial media and the government. They support the NCRF and assist newly established radio stations in areas where other donors are not supporting. (Lumko Mtinde, the CEO, was the first director of the NCRF and also served on the licensing authority.) <http://www.mdda.org.za/>

So with this supportive legislative support, initial strong donor support and a national sector association, what is the state of community radio in South Africa today?

Libby Lloyd, who was both a councilor with the licensing authority (ICASA) and the first CEO of the MDDA) wrote October 3, 2007:

October 8, 2007

There is very favourable support for community radio comparatively. And I think there are now over 100 stations licensed. The focus most recently has been licensing in rural areas identified as nodal development points by government in order to ensure access to broadcast services.

From latest statistics community radio collectively as the second highest listenership (i.e. the national SABC is zulu language service has the highest listenership, and community radio collectively the second highest). Listenership has grown annually.

Many stations though are struggling - both to provide meaningful programming and in terms of funding. The MDDA has to support print and radio and much of the focus has been on print as it has been neglected by other funders lately.

The National Community Radio Forum is also battling to define itself and this creates problems for stations as there is no cohesive lobbying on the sector's behalf.

Some stations are of course doing some outstanding work and programming but not the majority.

Several have become more commercial—particularly those in urban areas—neglecting the most marginalised members of their communities in order to be financially sustainable.

Those that are the strongest are those with very strong ties into community organisations.

I asked Libby the reasons or barriers that prevented stations from doing more development programming and why the urban stations were becoming more commercial.

The issue of volunteers wanting to be DJs is a very real one—related to a disjuncture between the original goals of the station and an understanding of this mission by those working on a day to day basis at the station. This emphasizes the real need to focus on ensuring awareness and participation of community in the establishment and development of the station. Too often I think it is driven by individuals.

Training is also important. Although there has been considerable training not sure if it has all been need driven or that the right people have attended. In a way this is also related to the challenges of having volunteers in communities where people have no income. The volunteer station manager therefore is someone who has free time and resources to take the job and given financial issues will of course opt to personally attend a training course—particularly if a per diem is being paid.



Similarly there are opportunities for popular deejays to make an income through providing music at weddings, parties etc. and not similar opportunities for those doing information programming. So people with no income try to become DJs—and of course cling to the programmes that have built their profiles.

This is not true in all stations but essentially means have to find a way to pay people doing development programming and can't expect them to volunteer. One way would be to have organisations or interest groups doing this but there are problems with this approach too. Interestingly of course those stations that are more advocacy based do not find same problems. So the station set up for the right wing Afrikaners does not face this problem nor does one focused on providing an Islamic alternative perspective.

Increasing advertising revenue is the stated reason behind these stations in urban areas and it does mean that it is hard to distinguish between them and commercial stations. There should be more awareness that actually what distinguishes them is that they can target a specific community directly and they should find creative ways of sponsorship and advertising to "sell" their development focus rather than try to compete with the commercial stations that inevitably do music programming better.

To conclude this section on South Africa, here is one more case study of an effective station.

### **Radio Zibonele**

Radio Zibonele was housed in a truck container among sandy flats near the Cape Town airport, in the township of Khayelitsha. The station is fulfilling its role as the voice of the local community, while at the same time actively involved in achieving broader development goals in the areas of health, environment, education, culture, and community

participation. In Xhosa, the local language, “Zibonele” means “we did it together.”



Radio Zibonele began transmitting in 1993, when the state still controlled all broadcasting, and was among the first community stations in South Africa. Initial broadcasts were assisted by Gabriel Urgoti, an Argentinean physician and a respected figure in Khayelitsha who years earlier was involved in community radio in Latin America.

Broadcasting was illegal; the station managed to sneak on the air twice a week. Dr. Urgoti hid the radio transmitter under his examining table, and used it to air firsthand reports from health care workers about health problems they found in the community. A

year later, in 1994, Radio Zibonele obtained a license. Today it serves 700,000 residents and remains unwavering in its commitment to the health of the community.

Radio Zibonele has a reputation as one of the most transparent and participatory stations in the country, with a strong record of financial independence. Its mission is clear:

Our concern is to enhance the quality of life through improving the health standards of our people. All those we serve are affected by poor health and poor environmental conditions. Radio Zibonele is committed to sharing skills and information through honest process, thereby empowering the community of Khayelitsha for better life.

Self-help is the underlying theme of the station. Many programs deal with very practical issues: how to care for a child; how to start a small business; and for children, how to speak properly and help their mother when she is sick.

Both the breadth and simplicity of the mission simplifies decision-making. For example, when a cigarette company offered to support the station with more than advertising, the station turned it down: smoking is not good for the health of the community.

Former station manager, Vusi Tshose, sees the station not just as a passive broadcaster but as a respected, independent organization actively engaged in solving the community's problems, both on the air and off. His greatest success was preventing a school strike by bringing the participants together to negotiate an end to their dispute.

### **Mission-driven Programming**

Here are some of the other ways Radio Zibonele's mission has been reflected in its programming and its broader participation in the community:

- Community health workers continue to conduct on-air discussions of health issues they encounter in their home visits.
- High school teachers present on-air course summaries at the end of the year for students studying for final exams. Educators believe the reviews, as well as other tips on how to prepare for exams, have enabled more students to pass.
- When rival taxi groups were in a dispute, they were invited to the station to state their cases and ask the community how they should resolve it.
- Programs help reunite lost children with their families.
- Arts programs include church choirs and local musicians.
- The station organized and broadcast a day-long series of events celebrating Xhosa culture, with food, music, poetry, and clothing.
- The station organized a clean-up campaign with a soft drink company providing a music truck and drinks; the local authority contributed trash bags, gloves and a truck. Thousands of young people showed up to help.

### **Conclusion**

October 8, 2007

Three conclusions:

1. Many community radio stations are producing effective development programming that is improving the quality of life in their communities with limited resources. They are accomplishing much with little.
2. Many stations are vulnerable, in spite of the quality of their service. They operate in politically-charged environments, often post-conflict, in financially poor countries, depending upon volunteers with no experience to produce high quality programs.
3. The donor community, for the most part, does not recognize the full range of possibilities that community radio can play in democracy, governance, health, women's rights, the environment, etc. The leadership of Tia Duer of the World Bank in raising awareness of the larger role of community radio starting with a conference in 2003 is commendable. Now, with the leadership of Marguerite Sullivan and the CIMA staff with this workshop, the work will be advanced further.

Public radio in the United States was also little recognized prior to the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1967. Then known as educational radio, a nationwide survey was conducted to raise awareness. The resulting report, *The Hidden Medium*, documented its problems and promise:

Educational radio remains virtually unknown as a communications force in its own right...it lacks cohesion as a medium, its purposes are often varied and confused. Yet, somehow it manages not only to survive and fill its traditional cultural role, but to move forward, innovate, experiment.<sup>8</sup>

The television broadcasters fought to keep radio out of the Public Broadcasting Act because they thought it was so poor, it would pull them down. "Radio" was literally written into the draft legislations the night before the bill was introduced in Congress. Without the support of the federal government through CPB, public radio and television would not have thrived as they have.

Paul Kaiser, Chairman of the African Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote:

What is not sustainable in the U.S. is indeed expected to be sustainable everywhere else. For any initiative to be sustainable there needs to be a number of shareholders with a stake in the outcome to complement an organizational goal of self-sufficiency. International donors, government, civil society, and the private sector are essential partners here.

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<sup>8</sup> Herman W. Land Associates, "The Hidden Medium: A Status Report on Educational Radio in the United States" prepared for National Educational Radio (New York, 1967), iv, I-1.

Government agencies and donors in developing countries need to recognize that now is the time to document the social impact of community radio and create a plan for support.

I ask donors, what other social investment can have broader reach or affect more people's lives than an effective community radio station?