

Outside the Box: A New Model for Radio Training in South Africa

By Terry FitzPatrick



Traditional workshops only went so far, so Terry FitzPatrick followed participants to their home stations.

The minidisc recorder normally sat unused in a locked cabinet at Ilitha Community Radio in the rural highlands of Eastern Cape province in South Africa. Producer Mongezi Mbakaza had never learned how to use the machine, nor had he ever really worked as a reporter, going into the field to record interviews and live events for a story. Staffers at Ilitha Radio, as at community stations all over Africa, mostly rewrote stories from the newspaper.

However, on this particular morning, Mbakaza and his colleague, Nandipha Qhingga, recorded local officials as they discussed a plan to reorganize the region's medical clinics. Their next stop was a nearby village where counselors gathered women and men together for an unusual public dialogue about domestic violence, followed by powerful singing. It took all afternoon to write scripts and select sound bites and songs. For once, they avoided the station's rudimentary studio equipment and constructed stories on the portable minidisc machine.

The result was two, in-depth feature stories—more original reporting in one day than their newsroom usually produces in a week.

I could see the sense of accomplishment in Mbakaza's beaming face. As we

copied Qhingga's story onto cassette, the young reporter looked up, tapped her chest with her fist and pointed to the speakers that were booming her voice through the room. "I did this," she declared. "I did this."

"The news here is never going to be the same," said Mbakaza.

South African media training is as much about building self-confidence as it is about sharing skills. The most effective way to do this is to get outside the classroom for one-on-one coaching.

During my seven-month Knight Fellowship, I experimented with a provincial "hub station" training model. We conducted a two-week, on-the-road training program in the Eastern Cape, Free State and Northwest provinces. One station in each province was identified as a hub, and this is where I would team up with Shepi Mati of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa for traditional workshops during the first week of the program. Right away, we sent participants out onto the streets to record voice-of-the-people interviews and visit AIDS clinics or the local mayor's office. Working in a familiar locale clearly helped the participants learn more efficiently. "Individuals tend to open up when they're in their home ground," Mati said.

A favorite exercise was the "newscast scramble." We gave four teams of

reporters the same set of nine, compelling wire service stories, each story on a separate piece of paper, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Each group had to generate a six-story newscast, which forced them to decide the lead, the second story, the discards. There were no "right" answers, and debate among the teams grew intense.

During my second week in each province, I visited all the stations that had sent participants to the earlier workshop. There, we put workshop lessons into practice, on real stories under deadline pressure. At some stations, we built stories with cassette-to-cassette dubs. At others, I showed people how to isolate and move sound bites on minidisc and build an entire "voice-tape-voice" package on a single machine. At one station, we did reel-to-reel multi-tracking. The customized follow-up fueled enthusiasm for original story production and creative newsgathering techniques even among station managers. "It takes a whole organization to produce a good news bulletin," said Gwen Ansell, executive director of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in Johannesburg, "not just a transformed individual who has been to a workshop."



It's been 12 years since Nelson Mandela walked free, but the story of South Africa's liberation struggle is far from over. And it is far more complicated and nuanced a story now than during apartheid. There has been revolutionary political reform but little in the way of fundamental economic change. When walking the malls in Cape Town and Johannesburg, you can easily think you

FitzPatrick coaching reporters at Radio Lethabile, Northwest province, as part of the "hub station" training model he developed during the course of his fellowship.



are in California. Outside the wealthy white suburbs, however, most of South Africa is squalid.

One-third of the population is jobless, and three quarters of all South Africans do not have enough to eat. In some regions, 10 percent of infants starve to death in their first year. Adults are dying of AIDS so quickly that the country is running out of cemetery plots.

Many observers feel that the chasm separating rich and poor is widening rather than closing. Many blacks, though finally free to vote and move about, are still working as domestics or gardeners for whites.

Radio plays a vital role because many people cannot read or afford newspapers. Although radio is popular, the newscasts seem reactive and declarative. Radio re-

porters aren't very enterprising in looking for emerging issues before they break or very imaginative in finding follow-up angles.

South African news presenters have little interest in being as conversational and informal as we are on American radio, but I did find great interest among South Africans in the way U.S. newscasts are constructed. After listening sessions, some journalists immediately began using more tape in their stories, more live reports in their newscasts, more natural sound, more creative story-flow techniques.

Still, the challenges go deeper than pacing, production, packaging and presentation. A recent study by the South African National Editors Forum identified 11 problems needing "critical inter-

ventions" if journalism is to be a respected profession in the country:

- poor reporting skills
- lack of concern with accuracy
- poor writing skills
- lack of life skills
- low level of commitment
- weak interviewing skills
- weak legal knowledge
- lack of sensitivity
- weak knowledge of ethics
- poor general, historical and contextual knowledge
- low level of trainer knowledge

The head of the journalism school at Cape Town's Peninsula Technikon, Eroni Megwa, says the bulk of poor, non-English-speaking residents are not well informed because the media only serve a

Bush Radio breaks barriers

When I arrived at Bush Radio in Cape Town, it was clear that news was not a priority.

The station's two reporters shared one desk, one phone and one broken minidisc recorder held together with a rubber band. They went on the air every hour, without a reliable wire service, so the best they could do on most days was to surf the Internet for second-hand information.

After lengthy consultations at the station, I watched the news format change dramatically.

Bush dropped mid-day newscasts and added early morning news. The reporters now routinely monitor the BBC (they have rebroadcasting rights) and include BBC reports in their newscasts. The station now subscribes to NewsFlash, a wire service that provides South African and international news, so the local staff is free to cover local stories. The station's managers have instituted a daily budget meeting for story planning and persuaded the BBC to donate five minidisc field recording kits. They doubled the size of the news department and remodeled the newsroom. Now the station broadcasts six



Bush Radio team prepares for newscast.

daily newscasts, instead of nine, with better content.

Bush Radio is among the first community radio initiatives in South Africa. Its roots trace back to a group called CASET (Cassette Education Trust), which clandestinely produced audio tapes about social development issues during apartheid. During the years of political change in the early 1990s, the activists sought a broadcast license but were repeatedly denied. The station

went on the air illegally in 1993 and was shut down by authorities. After Nelson Mandela's election, which brought the change to a democratic government, Bush Radio finally received a temporary license to operate in 1995.

Bush Radio leaders say it targets the sprawling townships of the Cape Flats. These communities were created by the forced removal of black and colored (mixed-race) South Africans from central Cape Town during apartheid. This broadcast region is quite diverse—parts of the Flats are middle class, parts are vast seas of shanties. Bush Radio's signal is only 250 watts; in the United States we would call it a micro-broadcaster. The station garners a weekly audience of 69,000 in a metropolitan area of 3.1 million people.

In 2001, Bush Radio established the Broadcast Training Institute, which served as one of my partner organizations and my base during my fellowship. Its director is Shiraj Jamal, a former school principal who has already cobbled together an impressive offering of paid radio courses. During its initial six months, the institute grew so busy that I sometimes had trouble finding an open date to use the seminar room. After seven months, it is clear to me: Community radio journalists are thirsty for knowledge, and for change.



Photo by Terry FitzPatrick



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Working from his base at Bush Radio, which received its first operating license in 1995 following the end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela, FitzPatrick traveled to some of South Africa's most rural areas to share the lessons of his 20 years in radio journalism. Ranging from technical training in the field to newsroom reorganization, to content advice, he was able to enhance the efficiency of stations such as Radio Zibonele and Grahamstown Community Radio, which are often their communities' only source for reliable information.



Terry FitzPatrick started his career in community radio as a student volunteer while studying journalism at the University of Wisconsin. His radio work over the next two decades has involved numerous free-lance assignments for National Public Radio (NPR). He also worked as a staff correspondent and senior editor for NPR's environmental program, "Living on Earth," and was acting news director at NPR's all-news affiliate in Seattle, Wash.

In commercial and public television stations in Amarillo and Dallas, Texas, FitzPatrick worked as an anchor, reporter and assignment editor. He produced numerous reports for the "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" and documentaries for PBS, the Discovery Channel and the History Channel. He also was a stringer for *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Texas Observer*.

FitzPatrick has led training sessions on documentary radio techniques for NPR reporters in the United States and, in 2000, trained reporters during the launch of an Internet-based news agency in Kosovo.

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white and elite upper-income population. I could see this dichotomy as I moved back and forth between commercial and community radio. Many commercial operations produce newscasts that sound as smooth as anything you'd hear in the United States. Community stations, which target a poor audience, are a stark contrast, with their shoestring budgets and amateur staffs.



Whether the hub station model will survive is unclear. Zane Ibrahim, managing director of Bush Radio and creator of the project, visited all nine hubs and isn't optimistic that training will spread to smaller, nearby stations. "It's not going to happen," he told me. "They don't have the capacity. They don't even have a room to

conduct training, in some cases."

But Ibrahim isn't giving up. He has a new idea to get trainers out to places where they rarely go. He calls it "sakaza," a Zulu word that means broadcasting. He hopes to flood each province, one at a time, with international trainers. "The thing will work like a carpet bombing of training in each province," he said.

During my workshops, I often played the movie "Cry Freedom." It's the story of South African black consciousness activist Stephen Biko and white journalist Donald Woods of the *Daily Dispatch*. In one of the film's most poignant moments, Biko tells Woods: "Change the way people think, and things will never be the same."

That's the most important thing to keep in mind here. It's about changing the way journalists think: about the job and about themselves. **xxx**