

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Setting the Context

When the major South African political arena (i.e. the apartheid political establishment) was undergoing a dramatic political transformation immediately after former State President F W de Klerk announced the release of Mr Nelson Mandela from prison, and the unbanning of the ANC and other political organisations in 1990, many things could no longer remain the same in all the major institutions and organisations that were under the control of the government.

Since apartheid had pervaded every aspect of South African life, all the institutions that were linked to the government became the focus of major political change as well. Broadcasting, and the SABC in particular, is one such institution that was targeted for immediate change. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that the electronic media are the most powerful communication tools and can easily lend themselves to abuse by those who control them, especially the government (Hachten et al, 1993).

The precursor of the changes that were to take place later in the broadcasting media was made possible by debates among various political parties and media organisations aimed at restructuring broadcasting in South Africa (Van Zyl, 1994). This kind of debate was unavoidable, given the role that the SABC is alleged to have played in the past as the propaganda tool of previous Nationalist governments.

The Nationalist government exercised virtually complete control of broadcasting in South Africa and had a great influence in determining programme content, especially in as far as news and information were concerned. The outcry from the majority of participants in these debates was against the continued misrepresentation and suppression of political viewpoints of the liberation movements and other political organisations by the SABC and the government. Consequently, the SABC's function as the voice of government was deemed unacceptable. Freedom of expression and promotion of a culture of tolerance were regarded as extremely important for a democratic society by all the parties concerned

(Van Zyl, 1994). Recently, similar accusations were levelled against the present government and the SABC (Crowe, 1999; Sithole, 1999; Tsedu, 1999).

It therefore came as no surprise that the majority of the stakeholders in these discussions agreed that one of the main functions of the broadcasting media in the future would be to help bridge the gap of intolerance that existed between blacks and whites and to assist in nation building. Perhaps the most important outcome of these debates and the deliberations is that they formed the basis for the new broadcasting policy in South Africa.

However, the real and visible change regarding the future of the broadcasting media in South Africa gained impetus after the Independent Broadcasting Act of 1993 was enacted by the Transitional Executive Authority as part of the negotiated settlement that led to the first democratic elections in 1994 (Du Plessis, 1994). This Act led to the creation of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) in the same year. At the time when the IBA was formed, many people were hopeful that this regulatory body would put an end to State or political control of the electronic media in South Africa (Reddy, 1997).

The role of the IBA is to regulate broadcasting in the public interest, as stipulated in the Independent Broadcasting Act of 1993. The primary responsibilities of the IBA are to develop a policy on broadcasting and to issue licences, as well as to regulate such issues as local content, licence conditions, cross-ownership and language policy for broadcasters (Du Plessis, 1994; Department of Communications, 1998; Van Rooyen, 1994). One of the things that the IBA councillors did immediately after taking office was to take steps aimed at re-regulating the electronic media in South Africa. In doing this, the IBA was in fact fulfilling its own mandate of diversifying media ownership and encouraging competition.

As part of the move to break the monopoly that the SABC had over the airwaves, the IBA recommended that six of the SABC's commercial stations be sold. Within just less than five years of its establishment, the IBA had already issued licences to 85 temporary community radio stations and more than 16 licences to private bidders. To date there are 127 radio stations, including 90 community stations and four commercial stations, that are in full operation country wide (Amps Diaries, February/March 1997).

However the granting of licences to the newcomers in broadcasting came with certain preconditions attached (IBA, 1994; Golding-Duffy, 1997). Though different conditions applied to the granting of licences to a public broadcaster such as the SABC, to the community radio stations and to private broadcasters, they are all expected to broadcast programmes that are in the public interest. Public service responsibilities of the private broadcaster are minimal, however, when compared with those of a public broadcaster such as the SABC. The main reason for this is the recognition by the regulators of the South African broadcasting industry that private broadcasters operate in order to generate profit. Unlike the SABC, which receives some funding from the government, private broadcasters rely entirely on their own finances in order to stay in business. For instance, any private station that is devoting more than 15% of its air time to music is required to include a local content quota of 20% (Salgado, 1996). The SABC as a public broadcaster, on the other hand, is required to broadcast in all eleven official languages and to include a proportion of local content that is expected to reach 40% by the year 2000. In addition to broadcasting news and current affairs, the SABC also has the responsibility to broadcast educational programmes that cater for all age groups.

Community broadcasters operate within an identified geographic area in which a specific community lives. Since the primary goal and vision of community broadcasting is to promote a sense of belonging and identification with a community, it is required to provide a distinct broadcasting service that deals specifically with community issues that are not normally dealt with by other broadcasters covering the area in question. In essence, community based radio stations are expected to provide programmes that highlight grass-roots community issues, including developmental issues, health care, basic information and general education, environmental affairs, matters of local interest, and the reflection of local culture.

Failure to comply with the conditions set by the regulatory body may lead to the suspension or withdrawal of the broadcasting licence. A case in point is Radio Islam, which has been accused of being male dominated (Ali Dhorat, 1998; Galant, 1998). Radio Islam's exclusion of Muslim women as presenters was at odds with the IBA Act, which is

opposed to any form of discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, or religion (IBA, 1994).

Juxtaposed with the need to diversify media ownership in South Africa, an element believed to be critical for the development of a vibrant democracy, the IBA was also required by law to promote broadcasting at national and regional levels. The main feature that distinguishes regional radio broadcasts is that they are 'monocultural' in the sense that they nurture the language and culture of a specific 'ethnic' or cultural group, such as the Swazis, Zulus or Xhosas.

A number of regional radio stations already exist in South Africa. Some SABC radio stations broadcast from small towns such as Nelspruit and Pietersburg, and others broadcast from big cities such as Durban, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein and Cape Town. Several of these regional stations, such as Yfm and Kaya FM, were never owned by the SABC. However, most if not all the SABC radio stations, including the six radio stations that were sold to private bidders, carried the stigma of being Nationalist government propaganda tools.

This kind of stigmatisation has been associated mainly with the African language stations, the so-called 'ethnic' stations, which were allegedly created to promote the apartheid ideology. The apartheid policy, as far as broadcasting was concerned, was in line with the National Party conception of different 'nations' within South Africa and the notion of 'separate development' (Carver, 1995, p.82). This was also completely at odds with the Reithian BBC model, which rested on the idea of a unified broadcasting service that would 'interlock governor and the governed in a real ensemble' (Carver, 1995). The main problem with National Party policy is that it gave the government the absolute right and power to monitor and control programme content, including news and information, in order to maintain white political and economic control (Hachten et al, 1993).

It is the view of the researcher that this practice might have seriously undermined the development of national identity among South Africans. However, this situation was not unique to South Africa. In Nigeria, for example, the government exercised maximum

political control over its citizens by broadcasting in a multiplicity of languages to ensure service to all, but to the detriment of the development of national consciousness (Ndolo, 1988). Currently, regional radio stations in South Africa are in effect also 'ethnic stations', albeit ones not propagating apartheid.

Having said this, however, one must point out that what was done by the Nigerian government or the National Party government in South Africa had a positive aspect to it as well, particularly regarding the preservation of language and group culture. It is therefore not surprising that these stations continue to enjoy a high level of support from the different cultural groups that they serve (Rams, 1998, 1999). Cultural considerations continue to influence decisions with regard to radio listening.

Complementing the regional, private and community radio broadcasts are national broadcasting services that are targeted at nation-wide audiences. Currently, there are only five such stations in South Africa: Metro FM, Radio 2000, 5FM, SAfm, and Radiosondergrense. These stations are under the direct control of the SABC. SAfm and Radiosondergrense (RSG) are public service radio stations that provide a full spectrum of programmes in English and Afrikaans respectively. Metro FM and 5FM are both music format radio stations whose main role is to generate revenue for the SABC. Metro FM broadcasts to a predominantly black audience and 5FM to a predominantly white audience, especially the young. Plans are currently under way to convert Radio 2000 from a facility station to a radio station for young people.

Perhaps one of the preconditions for successful broadcasting to audiences at the national level is the presence of a shared language (Ndolo, 1988; Van Poecke et al, 1993). The need for a shared or common language is even more compelling in multicultural and multilingual societies where there is a great need to broadcast programmes that are designed to serve a large and diverse audience. In South Africa, English and Afrikaans are the only two languages that are predominantly used by many as a means of communication. Only two national public radio services fulfil this need: Radiosondergrense (RSG) and SAfm. RSG is aimed primarily at serving white Afrikaans-speakers and coloured communities. SAfm, on the other hand, has been tasked by SABC

radio management to serve the broad spectrum of South African audiences that are able to speak and understand English. The dilemma is that English, like Afrikaans, is not the home language of the majority of citizens in the Republic of South Africa.

The problem with the two national radio stations, but particularly SAfm, was that the station was not originally targeted to serve all South Africans, especially those whose mother tongue was not English. The programmes broadcast on the station were made to appeal mostly to middle-aged, white, English-speaking South Africans. Furthermore, SAfm's programmes tended to sound more British than South African. SABC radio management under the leadership of Govin Reddy felt that the national English broadcaster with 126 transmitters could not continue to serve a minority audience that was in decline (Stenhouse, 1995).

The heart of the matter was that SAfm was not profitable and the station failed to fulfil the public service functions expected of it. The granting of licences to newcomers in broadcasting meant that the SABC, and SAfm in particular, were faced for the first time with the real threat of losing listeners and advertising revenue to competitors (Delivering Value: Part Two, 1994, 1995; Van Heerden, 1997; Cowen, 1997; Reddy, 1997; Grange, 1998). Furthermore, to compound this new challenge, SAfm was also expected to carry out a public service mandate imposed on it by the IBA. This meant that the station had to perform a balancing act to carry out the public service responsibilities while at the same time ensuring that the station generated enough revenue, which was crucial for its survival.

The public service mandate refers to broadcasting in order to reach the widest possible audience, with the sole purpose of 'informing, educating, entertaining, playing the role of cultural intermediary and acting as a social link which enables the general public to be part of the current events and public debates' (Atkinson et al. 1997, p. 21). In addition to all this, calls for nation building as an important goal for the new South African state that were made by various political parties, the media, and others in the months preceding and immediately after the first democratic elections in April 1994 (Pampallis, 1995), had a significant influence regarding the role that SAfm would play in the new democratic society. SAfm was generally regarded by SABC radio management as having a

meaningful part to play in the formation and creation of a new South African identity and culture characterised by racial tolerance.

In order to bring about the desired changes on SAfm that could result in a significant increase in the number of listeners from across the different population groups, SABC radio management's first assignment was to change the name of the station. In fact, this name change initially came about as a direct response to the demand made on the SABC by the IBA to embark on name changes for all its radio and television stations. The station known as Radio South Africa for most of the apartheid years changed its name to SAfm. Renaming of all the radio and television stations also presented the corporation with a unique opportunity to renew and to reposition itself in order to gain wider acceptability in the new South Africa.

Other major changes included the replacement of familiar and well-liked voices of the white presenters by black presenters, new programme formats and revamped programmes (Cowen, 1997; Van Heerden, 1997). Most of the traditional white, English-speaking listeners disliked this and there was a growing sense of alienation from the station. Their complaints, which mainly involved black presenters, ranged from poor use of the English language and accents with mispronunciation to the point of incomprehension, to incompetence (Van Heerden, 1997; Cowen, 1997; Business Day, 1995; Edmunds, 1995; Sunday Tribune, 1995; Fazey, 1995). Many of them saw this as an attempt by SABC radio management to downgrade their English service. As a result, the station lost most of its traditional listenership base. Faced with the prospect of losing more listeners, and the failure of the station to capitalise on its 'national reach' to broaden its listenership base, a solution had to be found that would help bring about an improvement in the station.

A number of attempts have been made that offer a strategic marketing point of view on solving the problem that is facing SAfm. The station has, for instance, tried to come up with a public strategy to promote SAfm through extensive advertising (Edmunds, 1996). New image consultants (e.g. Msomi Hunt Lascaris) were also called in to help the station to improve its image and project it to a 'more sophisticated target audience' (Edmunds, 1996). Unfortunately, these efforts have had little or no success so far. The Australian-

funded report written by Australian media consultant Ann Tonks, which criticised change management of SAfm when the station was relaunched, and the recommendations she made did not do much to help improve the performance of the station (Edmunds, 1995).

It is also the opinion of the researcher that any attempt by SAfm management to introduce new programmes may not work. Many of these programmes would compete for the same time slots where the desired potential audience is available to listen to them. Furthermore, attempts to shorten existing programmes to make room for new programmes could severely compromise the richness of these programmes. However good or interesting these new programmes may be, this could become yet another source of frustration to many listeners. Worse still, there is no guarantee that the new programmes would appeal to either the traditional listeners of SAfm, or the new black élite that the station hopes to attract.

The researcher is also of the opinion that any attempt by SAfm to solve its problem by first identifying the profile of listeners, and then fine-tuning the programmes to fit that profile, would not help much. This could create a situation where innovation and creativity suffer in as far as new programme formats and programme development are concerned. In addition, it could hamper further growth of the station, resulting in its failure to attract listeners. Most probably, the station would end up with the same kind of listeners, either because they like the presenter or are loyal to the programme concerned. Given the likely failure or lack of success of the above suggested strategies that were designed to increase and broaden the listenership base of SAfm, the researcher saw a need to conduct a scientific study that would offer new insight into a number of factors that broadcasters need to take into consideration if they are to succeed in attracting large audiences in a multicultural and multiracial society.

The challenge of the present study is two-fold: (a) to provide a mechanism that could enhance broadcasting in a multicultural environment and result in a significant increase in the number of listeners to SAfm, and (b) to develop a theoretical model for successful broadcasting in a multiracial and culturally diverse society. Though nation building will not be addressed specifically in the present study, it is hoped that this project will yield

useful information in this regard.