

A REPORT:

Radio Colloquium (10-11 October 2007)

Abstract

Radio as a medium of communication has played a significant role in transforming and educating communities in different locations across the African continent. Since very little research has been undertaken by researchers regarding the importance and impact of the radio in Southern & Eastern Africa, Wits Institute of Social & Economic Research's Professor Elizabeth Gunner organized this gathering at the University of Witwatersrand with the specific purpose of reflecting upon the radio's impact upon its diverse African listeners.

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Introduction

Although the media in Southern Africa has been given attention by the researchers and stakeholders, it has been acknowledged that the radio as one of the most critical medium has been understudied. This has indeed been echoed by the participants at the two days Radio Colloquium that was held at WISER on the 10th and 11th of October. Radio has been identified as a vehicle that played a key role in transformation and edification of the society in the southern African region.

Professor Elizabeth Gunner has been the prime mover behind the three year project that reached its culmination in this particular meeting at WISER where she is a research fellow. This particular colloquium attracted scholars and researchers from a variety of disciplines; however, most of the presenters came from the University of Witwatersrand that houses an important School of Journalism and Media Studies. Since the colloquium was organized over the two days the organizers thus had a jam-packed and indeed an exciting program that began at 9h00 on Wednesday morning - the 10th of October - and ended at 16h30 on Thursday - the 11th of October 2007.

The Colloquium:

Opening Session

On the Tuesday morning at 9h00 the official opening was chaired by the director of WISER, namely Professor Debora Posel, she introduced Professor Gunner who basically outlined the rationale for the colloquium. In her brief remarks she stressed the central position that the radio holds in the media industry as a whole and within society in particular. After her short introduction the colloquium got underway with the presentation of the keynote speaker, Professor Twane Kupe. The professor, who is a specialist in media studies is also currently the dean of the Faculty of Humanities, considers himself to be temporarily suspended from his area of specialization. In his address he zoomed in on 'Talk Radio, the Nation and Making Publics' and raised a number issues pertaining to the nature of talk shows and the impact these have had on a nation-state such as South Africa; for example, the types of debates that it opened up for public consumption. Participants agreed with his observation that these radio programs have to date played a critical role in South Africa's democracy. Unfortunately, the openness and discourses covered in talk shows as experienced in South Africa was not visible nor witnessed in other parts of the continent. Bearing in mind these few points, it raised the question about the relationship

between the radio and the public: Is the relationship an adversarial or a symbiotic one?

The Themes

The question posed in the previous paragraph was answered, to some extent, by some of the panelists who directly addressed the theme of 'Radio and the Public'. Soon after Kupe's keynote address, two late morning panels – the one following the other – tackled this theme. In the afternoon the organizers slotted in a theme on 'Radio and its Histories' before the discussion shifted focus to an exciting open discussion on 'Radio and Modern African Democracy.' On the Thursday the participants tuned in to another keynote speaker; this time it was Fackson Banda, the Zambian scholar who is based at Rhodes University. Banda shared his critical thoughts on *Towards Participatory Radio Broadcasting* and in an illuminating power point presentation defined and discussed what was understood by participatory radio broadcasting. He highlighted the significant role that community radio stations have played in the media environment such as Zambia. Immediately after his very lively and insightful presentation, two panels were scheduled for the morning session; the first focused on 'Radio and Democracy,' and the second by 'Radio and Health.' In the afternoon the one panel discussed 'Radio and Identities' and the other 'Radio and Faith.' Before moving any further, we need to state that it is indeed beyond the scope of this report to mention and review each and every paper that had been presented on the two days. In the light of this comment, only the contributions of certain papers will be briefly discussed.

The Panels

Since Kupe opened the debate about 'Talk Radio and the Publics', the theme was followed through by those who presented their papers in the first panel after his keynote address. The panel kick started with a paper by Dina Ligaga, who is attached to Wits's Department of African Literature and hails from Kenya; she looked at *Radio Drama as an Institutionalized Genre: (in) The State (of Kenya), Voice of Kenya and Kenya Broadcasting Corporation* and demonstrated how this genre has always been caught up in the stringent pro-government policies of state-run broadcasting station. She, of course, contextualized her discussion of this genre within a broad historical framework in Kenya before arguing that *Radio Theatre*, one of Kenya's longest running radio drama programmes, was first produced in a context of censorship that led to self-censorship and which affected the thematic content of the programme's plays.

The theme of radio drama was also the main feature of Professor Liz Gunner's, who is a senior research fellow at WISER, paper titled *Radio Drama and the Imagining of Urban and Rural Difference*. Her noteworthy paper focused on how radio as a medium successfully broadcast the 'emergent genre' of Zulu serial radio drama, which is still popular on UkhoziFM and known widely as *imidlalo yomoya* or simply, *amastori*. Gunner indicated that this genre became one of the staple features of Zulu language radio many years before the creation by the apartheid regime of Radio Bantu in 1960; a historical period that was a key move by apartheid's architects to control the airspaces and the minds of its African-language audiences. She argued 'that through the multi-accentual nature of language and the polysemic nature of the plays themselves they could appear to endorse, or at least acquiesce, in the dominant apartheid ideology of the era yet at the same time they perhaps offered alternatives to it.' And the final paper on this panel was delivered by Nhlanhla Dlamini, who is a historian at the University of Swaziland; in his *Radio: Its History and Use in Swaziland, 1945-2007* paper, he explored its history and discussed the use of radio in Swaziland from the post-war period to the present. He noted that during the early years its radio programs were limited and gradual changes were only observed from the 1980s onwards.

The second panel on the first morning also touched upon the same theme. Like the previous panel there were three panelists. The panelist whose papers caught this reporter's eye was that of Tanja Bosch (Centre for Film and Media Studies, UCT); she made her input on *Talk Radio, Democracy and the Public Sphere – a Study of Cape Talk 567MW*. Her paper was of interest because it directly related to the issues that keynote speaker, Kupe, addressed and more importantly it looked at one of the most interesting South African radio stations, namely *Cape Talk 567MW* that only broadcasts to listeners in the Cape Town metropolitan area. Bosch, who used to work as station manager for the Cape Town based Bush Radio station, gave a historical overview of 'talk radio' internationally and in South Africa and then went on to provide a content analysis of broadcasts. She raised significant research questions that assisted her in identifying markers for future research.

An interesting research paper that was presented on the 'Radio and its Histories' panel after lunch was that of Steve Davis (History, University of Florida). This young scholar, who spoke about *The African National Congress, its Radio, its Allies and Exile*, provided interesting examples of radio broadcasting throughout the ANC's three decades of exile; in it he explored the theoretical tools and concluded with an insightful discussion of the radio's role in the context of the Angolan camp mutinies. 'Radio

Freedom' as the ANC's station was known by was an important medium for the liberation movement during these trying times. The final panel was more of a critical discussion around the theme of the 'Radio and Modern African Democracy.' Achille Mbembe (WISER) and Franz Kruger (School of Journalism and Media Studies, Wits University) were the two panelists who briefly addressed the theme and thereafter opened themselves to the audience who commented upon their presentations and posed a number of critical questions pertaining to the role that radio plays in fostering and also hindering the democratic processes in African countries.

On the final day there were four different panels; the first panel, which was staged after the keynote speaker's address listened to four presenters; the two that interested this reporter most was the paper by Martin Jansen who is a member of the Cape Town based Workers World Media Productions; Jansen whose paper was titled *The Africa Labour Radio Project: A Critical Assessment* stressed that there was a need for the voices of workers, which are not well represented in the media, to counter the 'voices of the powerful' that are consistently reproduced in the various media reports across the African continent. He further argued in the paper that the ALRP project sought 'to strengthen the response of the African labour movement and civil society through the training of union and labour reporters in ten African states and a media intervention in the form of participatory regional radio productions and broadcasts'. He, however, acknowledged in his presentation that the project has not been able to make headway as expected. Jansen's fellow panelist was Sethunya T. Mosime who is a member of the Department of Sociology at the University of Botswana; she critically questioned whether *Radio Botswana: (was) a Bureaucratic Mumbo Jumbo or Democratic Asset?* In her paper she illustrated how the birth of radio in Botswana came to shape the larger media environment in Botswana, where a public relations service for government was conflated with public service broadcasting and government was reluctant to let go of national mass media. Towards the concluding part of her paper she indicated that the growth of private radio stations was frustrated and impeded by the government, and that community radio broadcasting was rejected in many parts of the country by the communities as potentially divisive to the nation.

In the second 'Radio and Health' panel the participants geared themselves to listen to two young post-graduate researchers from Wits' School of Journalism; they talked about the same radio station from two different points of view. In their complimentary contributions the two narrated their stories of HIV/Aids pandemic as broadcast on Eastern Cape's Umhlobo Wenene FM. The first panelist, namely Vuvu Vena, directed herself in

addressing *HIV/AIDS Content on Umhlobo weNeneFM*, and the second, namely Phakamisa Ndzamela, passionately debated *A Deathly Silence: HIV/AIDS Content on Umhlobo weNeneFM*. Whilst the latter focused on the implications of the silence on Umhlobo Wenene FM about HIV/AIDS and how it can be employed as a prevention strategy, the former provided an overview of the station's approach to HIV and AIDS and opined that in spite of high HIV infection rates in the mentioned province the radio station did not have a coherent approach to addressing the epidemic. Ndzamela, who closely looked at issues around male circumcision, demonstrated how the radio station engaged with this issue. And in support of his understanding he showed from which sources young Xhosa men received their information about circumcision and how their views about masculinity and sexuality were formed.

The penultimate 'Radio and Identities' panel presented three papers. One of the attention-grabbing papers was Lesley Cowling and Carolyn Hamilton's joint contribution entitled *Thinking Aloud/Allowed: Pursuing the Public Interest in Radio Debate*. In this paper the Wits based researchers examined various notions of the public, public interest, and public accountability; issues which surfaced during the 2006 controversy of the SABC's alleged practice of blacklisting certain commentators from their news programming. They explored the way in which a radio programme – SAFM's AM Live - became the controversy's flashpoint. And they also probed how the particular medium of a radio current affairs show brought into being a certain kind of publicness and discoursed about how such publicness was produced by the exigencies of the medium – the live studio, the verbal engagement of two or three interlocutors, the access of listeners through the talk-show component – and the professional practices associated with journalistic ideologies.

And before the close of the colloquium the participants adjusted themselves and tuned into the 'Radio and Faith' panel. The first panellist was Maria Frahm-Arp (WISER, Wits University) and the second was Muhammed Haron. Frahm-Arp, who acknowledged that she explored an area that she was not highly familiar with, delineated the *Discourses of Faith* and investigated the discourses of faith on three different religious radio stations and programmes. She surveyed 'Radio VERITAS' – a Catholic radio station, 'Radio Islam' – a Fordsburg (Johannesburg) based Muslim station, and Radio 702's 'Believe it or Not' programme – a Johannesburg based talk radio station, which is the sister station of the Cape Town 567MW that Tanja Bosch looked at on the first day of the colloquium. She highlighted the fact that one of the most striking similarities between the programmes on each of these stations was the way they created communities in a virtual, imagined

and sometimes physical sense. Since she briefly conversed about Radio Islam's attempts to shape the listeners' thinking about Islam and themselves as the owners and managers of the station, she complimented a part of the paper that was presented by Muhammed Haron; the latter discoursed about the *Muslim Community Radio Stations: Constructing and Shaping Identities in a Democratic SA*. In addition to dealing with Radio Islam, he zoomed in on the popular Cape Town based Muslim controlled and managed station, Voice of the Cape. It was pointed out to what degree these stations have been responsible for shaping the identities of their listeners and it also highlighted to what extent each of the stations underwent transformations. It was stressed that Radio Islam, which was earlier in its history almost refused a license by the Independent Broadcasting Corporation (now ICASA), had undergone a radical overhaul since the ICASA hearings at the end of the 1990s.

Closing Remarks

The colloquium covered a variety of themes and brought to the fore a number of pertinent issues. Unfortunately, even though it was not possible to discuss all the papers in this report, the gist of what most of the panelists discussed was summarised and alluded to. It is also acknowledged that not everything could be dealt with in the allotted time-slots; however, it would have been practical if all the participants had had the opportunity of reading the draft presentations before hand. Nonetheless, despite these shortcomings the debates were rigorous and incisive, and the panelists made interesting contributions in their respective presentations.

For future colloquiums/conferences/seminars in the southern African region and perhaps beyond, one would like to see a concentrated focus on the state media - particularly the state radio stations – as such and a separate focus on the role and impact of the community radio stations. As already noted at the outset of the colloquium very little research has been pursued in these sectors of media studies. In addition, faculties of humanities and social sciences should also seriously consider creating an interdisciplinary course on the 'Religion and the Media.'