

2005 Issue No. 10 — Media Communities

Community radio in post-apartheid South Africa: The case of Bush Radio in Cape Town

By Tanja Bosch

Introduction

Community radio station Bush Radio is nestled at the foot of Table Mountain in Cape Town. When a child goes missing, broadcasts are immediately interrupted with urgent calls to the public until the child is found. On Mondays *Positive Living* takes radio into the high schools with its outside broadcast unit, facilitating frank discussions about sex and HIV. The continent's only gay talk show airs on Thursdays, and on Saturdays children as young as 5 years old broadcast from the on-air studio. During the recent war in Iraq, Bush Radio printed several hundred T-shirts sporting the eye-catching slogan "Bush against war", organized anti-war protest marches in the city center, and suspended programming. As station director Zane Ibrahim said

When the war started, Bush Radio had to immediately inform the people of the townships how it would affect them so they could make informed decisions about how they feel about the war. When President Bush gave the world a 48-hour ultimatum we decided to give him an ultimatum for peace, and we suspended all our programming for 48 hours, and played John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance" 576 times, again and again. We had T-Shirts printed "Bush Against War", so this is the kind of thing we do (personal communication, July 2003).

Drawing on participant observation and in-depth and on the job interviews conducted at Bush Radio during June – August 2003, December 2003 and June – August 2004; this paper attempts to deconstruct the community in community radio, using Bush Radio as a case study. In particular, this paper draws on Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas, as well as Deleuze and Guattari's theory of rhizomatics.

A brief history of Bush Radio

During apartheid, television and radio broadcasting was owned and controlled by the state's South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and biased in favor of government. The main newspapers catered largely to the country's white minority and sided with mining capital (Jacobs). SABC television was the forefront of the state's media counter attack against grassroots democracy (Tomaselli). The cultural meanings carried in the texts of radio and television brought social experiences in line with the discourse articulated by the dominant group. As Bush Radio's first employee, Sandile Dikeni, said

My concept of radio was based on public radio, which was basically bad apartheid propaganda kind of radio made for blacks. But because we hated the radio programming we tended to hate radio as well as a concept. For instance there'd be a news program, and at the end of the news they'd have the news analysis, which is

like ten minutes of state propaganda just coming straight at you. How bad terrorists are, how bad the liberation movement was, how we should become scared of them. Really basic bad bad propaganda about how beautiful the South African government is (S. Dikeni, personal communication, 08/30/2003).

However, South Africa has a history of alternative print media, which flourished in the 1980s. Compared to broadcast media, print media was much cheaper to produce. Publications and pamphlets could easily be reproduced using photocopy machines and distributed via existing networks. However, the mass democratic movement ignored broadcasting as a site of struggle. In Cape Town, the Cassette Education Trust (CASET) used broadcasting subversively by producing and distributing cassette tapes containing speeches from banned activists, local music and revolutionary poetry. CASET emerged at the height of increased internal resistance and the defiance campaign against the apartheid regime. During this time librarian and United Democratic Front (UDF) member, Vincent Kolbe, kept a duffel bag under the counter of the Bonteheuwal township library in Cape Town, filled with pamphlets advertising political meetings, strikes or protests. UDF activists would stop by the library to drop off or pick up pamphlets for distribution from Kolbe's under-counter bag.

Being a librarian I was very conscious of banned or suppressed information. We used to smuggle in things, banned stuff. We used to get material from the trade unions. We used to get stuff from overseas, Angela Davis tapes, you name it. And that was a kind of underground information network. In fact we used to call it AIDS – Alternative Information Distribution Service. And that's how CASET came into existence (V. Kolbe, personal communication, 08/21/02).

But Kolbe says it all began with the late Edric Gorfinkel. I found Gorfinkel at the end of a dusty gravel road, on a farm in the middle of the desert in the Karoo, 700 kilometers outside of Cape Town.

I had the idea basically of using audio cassette of a way to play radio, began to train people and I had a hunch that audio cassette could actually be quite a useful mechanism for organizing and education and that kind of stuff within the mass democratic movement. So I registered for an adult education course at UCT [the University of Cape Town], and I did the Talking Newspaper as my student project. It was repression days and as an academic project it wouldn't necessarily attract the same kind of attention from the top people and so on (E. Gorfinkel, personal communication, 08/28/02).

The machinery of the apartheid system began to unravel during the 1980s as a result of rising township activism, the costs of maintaining a huge security apparatus, homeland administrations and multiple bureaucracies for segregated populations; and external pressure and international condemnation of apartheid (Marx). The concept of community radio was still unheard of in South Africa at this time, though it had been around in Latin America for decades, dating back to the miners' stations in Bolivia in the 1950s (O'Connor), and Radio Sutatenza in Colombia in 1947. Gorfinkel said

We had a lot of debate about the word community radio and what we wanted to call it and quite honestly at the time we thought we were inventing the word. We thought we'd invented the concept of community radio! It was only then AMARC got hold of our stuff somehow or other, and we got this thing inviting us to send something to the World Assembly of Community Radio. And we thought whoa hey man there's other people out there doing it. (E. Gorfinkel, personal communication, 08/28/02). [1]

In August 1993, Bush Radio students and volunteers pressured government to free the airwaves and grant Bush Radio a license to broadcast. However, during this period of negotiations the

apartheid government was still in power and two right wing radio stations were given licenses, while two applications by Bush Radio were rejected. Following this, the station had their first illegal broadcast on 25th April 1993. The authorities arrived within a few hours to confiscate their equipment.

There were 20, 30, 40 of them with guns and dogs and patrolling outside, I mean it was a serious military operation, it was hilarious! The people who were there also found it amusing. They were obviously very threatened by it. And in a funny kind of a way it's just confirmation that one's on the right wicket. And to a large extent that's how we treated it. You want to take our equipment away, no problem, we'll see you in court (E. Gorfinkel, personal communication, 08/30/03).

But according to Mtimde, this did not derail the process and in true rhizomatic fashion, the Bush Radio story did not end here. According to Deleuze and Guattari's principle of asignifying rupture, "a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines." (9) In a rhizomatic network, movements and flows can thus be re-routed around disruptions, with the severed section regenerating itself and continuing to grow, forming new lines and pathways.

People were not disappointed. Even after that confiscation we had demonstrations, which were successful, which were supported by a number of people and actually strengthened our campaign to free the airwaves, that very action that the enemy did. So people were not demoralized, instead they began to say we have to fight until we win this battle. And one can say safely we won that battle (Lumko Mtimde, personal communication, August 2003).

After democratic elections in 1994 a regulatory body was set up by government to democratize the airwaves, ensure the reception of broadcasts free of government interference and to encourage ownership and control of broadcasts by previously disadvantaged groups (Mutume; Mtimde). This Independent Broadcast Association (IBA) later made provision for the granting of community radio licenses.

Theorizing Bush Radio/ community radio

There is no shortage of theories on alternative media. Community radio is usually discussed within the context of traditional theoretical approaches, which situate alternative media on the axes of specific communication-oriented debates in the areas of development: modernization and dependency. Modernization was the dominant paradigm in development theory and practice between the 1940's and the 1960's, often still employed today and based on the premise that insufficient knowledge, causes underdevelopment and that interventions should provide people with information to change their behavior.

One of the most influential critiques of modernization came from the dependency paradigm during 1960s to the 1980s. Originally developed in Latin America, dependency was informed by Marxist and critical theories. According to the *dependistas*, it was the dependence of the periphery, the poorer, third world countries, to the center, the dominating Western powers, that constituted the essential problem of the "development of underdevelopment" (Frank).

There have been some theoretical shifts away from more traditional ways of theorizing, toward approaches located within cultural studies. Clemencia Rodriguez has drawn on the theory of radical democracy proposed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernest Laclau whose suggest that attempts by non-mainstream groups to contest legitimate discourses and to redefine their identity in their own terms should be interpreted as political action. Similarly, Chris Atton draws on Foucault's writings on the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges", predicting a situation in which the 'other' is able to represent itself. Radical or alternative media projects view media as a site in

which to contest such social meaning, as it provides an appropriate forum in which to respond to the hegemony of the dominant medium (Downing).

The concept of community

Community can be defined in many ways, from time and space-specific communities of culture and geography, to intentional communities or communities of affinity such as virtual communities or academic communities. The most common definition focuses on community as a group of people sharing a common interest in a particular locality, i.e., territorially based social organizations and social activity (Bender). On the other hand, communities of interest refer to a situation in which members share cultural, social or political interests independent of geographical proximity (Jankowski).

In South Africa the term was originally used as a euphemism for race. After the 1948 victory of the National Party, that instituted the policy of apartheid, government policies were openly based on racial exclusion. Official racial categories were suffixed with the word community: the black community, the Indian community, the coloured (mixed race origin) community and the white community (Crehan). Apartheid was thus legitimized by a rhetoric of ethnically defined cultural communities which defined the life one lived, the language one spoke and officially appropriate practices (Louw & Tomaselli).

South Africa has a complex ethnic composition, roughly divided by the Apartheid state into black (73%), Indian (3%), Colored (8%) and White (16%). In addition there are 11 official languages with 15 others recognized by the constitution (Leicester *et al*). Prior to 1994, the momentum of resistance and struggle camouflaged ethnic and racial differences and substituted them with homogenizing terms such as 'the people', which became fragmented after the 1994 elections (Marais).

Those who mobilized against the apartheid regime also used the term community prolifically. The popularization of community as an oppositional term came out of the Black Consciousness (BC) Movement of the 1970s (Thornton and Ramphela). BC supporters used the term to refer to "wide sociopolitical groups like black community (which included all those classified as African, colored and Indian), or even more loosely, 'the community' to describe residential entities such as the townships" (35).

Bush Radio and community

Speaking before a panel at the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) licensing hearing in June 2001, Ibrahim said

One of our mandates is to demystify radio to the community; for so long we've been spoken at not spoken with; for so long we've had radio thrown at us and it was the worst kind of radio, telling us that we were useless, no good. So now, from the age of four we are teaching children, it's your radio, the airwaves belong to the people.

The community Zane speaks about refers not only to the station's audience, but also to a group of people whose interests they attempt to represent. But many of the Bush Radio staff do not live in the Cape Flats, and many of the volunteers are students or professionals and do not fit the class profile of the original usage of the term "community", as black working class. The presenter of the Sunday night blues program is a surgeon employed at Groote Schuur, the biggest hospital in the city, prestigious as the site of the world's first heart transplant. The presenter of the jazz program is an internationally acclaimed jazz musician and returnee from the United States. A former Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigator hosts a Friday afternoon current affairs program. [2] The principal of an elementary school on the Cape Flats is a volunteer newsreader. Many people from poorer areas on the Cape Flats cannot participate in volunteer programs at Bush Radio because they cannot afford the cost of public transportation to and from the station.

While Bush Radio has always targeted a specific geographic area, after the end of apartheid and abolition of the Group Areas Act, black people are no longer concentrated in those areas. Furthermore, the station's broadcast range extends to areas outside of the Cape Flats, and many listeners call the station from these areas. The audience is no longer a black audience. Some white presenters work at the station, and there are many calls from white South Africans. The station has attempted to redefine its understanding of community as a group of people who are interested in alternative information such as information about global politics such as that provided by the Michael Parenti and Alternative Radio cassette tapes, from the United States. As program integrator Adrian Louw says

One of Bush's aims, which I think it's done very successfully, is also to build bridges between those communities. If there's a more advantaged community listening that's okay, but we're not catering for them. So if our listenership is increasing, they're either listening because they want to find out what's happening or we are actually spreading the message of understanding.

(A. Louw, personal communication, 08/20/2002).

Bush Radio and *communitas*

As described above, Bush Radio emerged in the 1990s out of the Cassette Education Trust (CASET) created during the 1980s. Neither fully part of the mainstream liberation struggle nor of the privileged class of oppressors, the founding members of CASET were in a liminal state. [3] As Turner points out

liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial (68)

The group that started CASET was not completely part of the working class struggle, nor content with the status quo and their relatively privileged status as teachers, artists and students. According to Zane Ibrahim, who took over from Gorfinkel in 1994:

The truth is, on the one side you had a conscientious objector and his friends, white liberals mostly wanting to do something. But it mustn't be too much risk and it mustn't be too hard work. So they put together tapestries of sound of the leaders' speeches on cassettes and distributed it or not. It didn't matter to them whether they distributed it, that wasn't the purpose. If it was they would all have been in jail. They weren't jail material. They were white liberals living very well, all owning their own apartments" (personal communication, August 2002).

Indeed, Turner points out that the values of *communitas* are strikingly present in the literature and behavior of "hippies" who did not have the advantage of national rites of passage. According to Zane, the original founders of CASET were exactly that, a group of liberals, searching for expression of their liberal political views.

The group of people that made up CASET then formed a kind of *communitas* through their creation of an organization that they believed would provide an alternative communications medium in a repressive broadcast environment. Turner privileges the Latin term *communitas* over community, to distinguish it as a "relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals", rather than "community" as defined by overarching structure. In other words, *communitas* is a kind of anti-structure.

Ibrahim took over management of the station in 1994, shortly after they were granted their first broadcast license. When Ibrahim was hired, he started making organic changes.

I look at life in terms of the plant life. And I looked at Bush Radio like that I looked at

the roots and I said okay. It was rooted in the struggle, so some of the roots needed to be cut, trimmed and I cut the political roots off. Then I looked at the stem and it was fine, it comes from a good community it's rooted in the community. So what about nutrients and soil and that's where the funders came in - money, training information. I contacted all the underground structures that I knew in the world and asked them for materials. Michael Parenti and all of that, and they came on board And I was done, I had my nutrients, I had my fertilizer and my soil and that was Bush Radio (personal communication, 02/25/02).

This transition from the earlier laissez-faire environment of Bush Radio where volunteers drifted in and out of the station represented a major shift in the station's history. Ibrahim positioned his desk directly outside the on-air studio and interrogated volunteers about their on-air performances as they left the studio. He instituted strict policies about who was allowed on the premises or even up the stairs to the reception area, and he occasionally searched volunteers' bags, sometimes confiscating stolen goods such as equipment or, more commonly, music CDs and cassette tapes. During this period one would find up to 20 volunteers on the premises, many of them unemployed with nothing to do during the day, hanging around and using the Bush Radio phones or faxes. This stage of Bush Radio represents a normative *communitas*

where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals, the existential *communitas* is organized into a perduring social system (Turner 132).

There is also *communitas* among the people who work at Bush Radio. Staff and volunteers seem to share a certain interpretive schema that provides guidelines of action. As Louw says

Bush Radio's filled with caring individuals and if you don't care you're not going to survive at Bush Radio. If you care about yourself, if you care about your career, you're not going to survive at Bush Radio. I've seen, since my involvement with Bush Radio, those people that are here to be famous, they leave, they don't fit in. If they're here to make big bucks they're going to leave. But if they care about their community and if they care about themselves in terms of their own development, for what their development can do for their community, they survive and prosper and they survive and prosper when they leave Bush Radio...the clichéd saying is that if you want to change the world start with yourself and I think Bush offers that to a lot of young people (Personal communication, 08/20/02).

In this sense, Bush Radio recognizes the problems inherent in traditional apartheid categorizations and definitions of community. Instead of embracing these notions and restricting themselves to essentialist notions of the term, the station acknowledges the limitations of community and attempts instead to bridge the gaps between artificially constructed communities. The station does not attempt to place any specific limitations on its audience. As Louw explains:

Who is it that we're serving and who is actually listening. It's not an easy question to answer because we don't have the resources to do proper audience research. The station is geared towards a younger audience currently. We try and service as many people in the broader community as possibly, community of Cape Town very broadly speaking. We always say if you want to find out about HIV and AIDS, if you want to find out about children, gender issues, then you can listen to Bush. We don't try and entice people with sexy presenters that pose half naked. We're not that kind of radio station. We're not a sexy radio station (A. Louw, personal communication, August 2002).

This *communitas* existed right at the beginning during the formation of CASET. People from

different racial or religious backgrounds made up the organization. When interviewed for this study, many of the founders spoke with nostalgia about their old colleagues and expressed a desire to re-establish contact with their old friends. As Martin Buber (in Bender) said

A real community need not consist of people who are perpetually together; but it must consist of people who, precisely because they are comrades, have mutual access to one another and are ready for one another (8).

Today people often say that once you have worked at Bush Radio you will always return to the organization whether in a direct or indirect way. Most of the staff find it hard to articulate specifically what they mean, but they say that there's something special about the organization which has changed them. Producer Erna Curry says

For the first time I've got to do the kind of work that falls in with basically what I believe my principles are about. So it's very comforting in that respect. Bush Radio is a very progressive organization. So working at Bush I think really changed my life. Bush Radio's got its own politics and its own organizational difficulties as well, but I've just always felt that, I don't know, I just found that there was a place I could really utilize all my skills –and that's not something you can do in a lot of other organizations (personal communication, 08/21/02).

The concept of rhizomatics applied to community radio

A rhizome has no beginning or end;
it is always in the middle, between things,
interbeing, intermezzo (Deleuze & Guattari).

As explicated by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the rhizome generates connections through its characteristics of heterogeneity, disjunction, multiplicity, multiple entry points and routes rather than roots. In a botanical sense, a rhizome is an underground tuber that ramifies and diversifies, producing new buds, opposed to what Deleuze and Guattari call "arboric systems of knowledge" based on the model of a tree. The model of the tree symbolizes linear thinking and hierarchical structures. The rhizome is therefore motional, a network of connections across which things flow and disperse. The rhizome moves between the lines established by the arboric systems, and as such is "fuzzy" rather than aggregated, with both "this" and "not this" co-existing simultaneously (Deleuze and Guattari).

Community radio develops in rhizomatic fashion, growing globally more like the grass than the trees. Community radio is not becoming more powerful than larger forms of media, but it is growing horizontally, creating ripples under the surface. As Alfonso Gumucio Dragon says in *Making Waves*, individually community radio stations may make only small waves, but together they have the effect of a tsunami. Like a rhizome, community stations are a network of connections across which things flow and disperse.

More specifically, the internal workings of a community radio station like Bush Radio are particularly rhizomatic. At Bush Radio titles have no real meaning and responsibilities are shared. If you are a producer you may also be expected to present programs or read the news when the regular newsreader is off sick. Everyone is expected to learn how to operate the on-air studio and to know basic editing skills. There are no dedicated studio operators or editors at Bush Radio. Further evidence of this subversion of hierarchical strategies is the manner in which people interact. As program integrator, Adrian Louw, says

At Bush yes I'm the program integrator and I do this that and the other. Basically Adrian is the person that will make the decision, that sort of thing. I take out the garbage every Thursday, you know. Where are you going to find that at a commercial

radio station? Where the executive director buys a parcel of fish and chips and has it with the staff. That's something that somebody told me once. She hasn't been to any place where people are sitting around a table having some fish and chips and you can come and take some out of that person's packet and actually just share. And I didn't realize it until she said it and that's so strange. You don't get that anywhere else. (personal communication, 08/20/02).

Linear thinking and hierarchical structures have thus been subverted rhizomatically to allow for tasks to be completed, while not allowing titles to control individuals. Another example of this is the station's views on HIV/ AIDS or gender issues. Rather than ghettoizing these issues and relegating them to a specific slot, awareness is raised throughout the programming day. Even a music program will have scheduled public service announcements on topics from gay rights to domestic violence. The AIDS producer, is constantly encouraged to produce features on other topics and to invite other presenters on to her program, *Positive Living*. Staff members do have specific responsibilities, but they are encouraged to be flexible in the interpretation of their job descriptions. This different articulation of leadership and authority allows for more participatory democratic practices.

Similarly, Bush Radio's programming is rhizomatic, comprising pockets of information located at various times. Unlike commercial radio, which has a distinctive format, Bush Radio's programming is distinctive for its diversity. You can hear every kind of music from blues and jazz to hip-hip, kwaito or drum 'n bass. Commercial R'nB, rap or even traditional music are also played on the station. Talk programs range from call in programs on African politics to informational programs on AIDS. On Friday evenings you can listen to talks by Michael Parenti and on Sunday afternoons you can hear *Conversations with Writers*. On Saturday afternoon teenagers talk about underage drinking and drugs and on Sunday afternoons *Abantu Abakhulu* broadcasts programs to the elderly. The listeners' ability to choose a program is much like the rhizome where many points are linked together, not necessarily in sequence, allowing one to move from one point to another.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the term community often raises more questions than it answers, and the terms community or grassroots media may conceal more than they reveal. The term community radio is certainly stronger in what it excludes than in what it signifies. While the term community in this context is clearly problematic, it is still useful verbal shorthand to refer to the large spectrum of the relatively dispossessed, and it is hard to think of a replacement. Perhaps it is best thought of as under erasure, in a Derridean sense. In other words, we should use the term community, but remain aware that it is always open to question and deconstruction.

Furthermore, in the case of Bush Radio, a more useful way conceptualization might be through the theoretical lenses of *communitas* and *habitus*, as opposed to "community." While *communitas* implies anti-structure and *habitus* involves some kind of structure, the coexistence of these two concepts in the case of Bush Radio points to its rhizomatic nature of being both this and not this.

Like the rhizome, community radio cuts across borders and builds linkages. Bush Radio uses radio as a medium to assist in the creation of many different communities in post-apartheid South Africa. In particular, Bush Radio is not so much an organization as it is an organism, held together by a complex set of interlinked structures, with the concept of "community" pulsating as its central life-force. A kind of "body without organs" (Haraway *Biopolitics*), Bush Radio has no real essence – it is both the embodiment of community radio at its best - and its antithesis. Bush Radio is not a "bush" radio, geographically or figuratively. It sports state of the art digital equipment and a relatively sophisticated organizational structure, yet it is still deeply connected to the various communities it serves.

Tanja Bosch is a postdoctoral fellow in the Journalism Department of the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. Her recently-completed doctoral dissertation is entitled, "Radio, community and identity in South Africa: A rhizomatic study of Bush Radio in Cape Town."

Endnotes

[1] AMARC is the global World Association for Community Radio Broadcasters with offices in Africa, Latin America and Canada. [\[return\]](#)

[2] The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up by the Government of National Unity to help deal with human rights abuses under apartheid. [\[return\]](#)

[3] While many of the founders were members of the African National Congress (ANC) or United Democratic Front (UDF), their activities within these organizations were limited to support, and perhaps attending the occasional rally or meeting. None of them were ever imprisoned for political activities. [\[return\]](#)

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