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Digital Readiness in a Digital Revolution: How is community radio responding to digital transformation in the changing broadcast environment of South Africa?

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Abstract

New media and innovations in digital technologies have fundamentally changed the way people use media, access information and source entertainment. The purpose of this study is to examine the response to digital changes and innovations in the broadcast environment from the vantage point of the Community radio sector in South Africa. Over the past 30 years, Community radio in South Africa has been a growing and established sector, however, today's digital transformation has brought opportunities and disruption to an ever-changing broadcast landscape.

This thesis is broadly located within the discourse and theoretical framework of community, convergence, the public sphere and the political economy. These theories inform the study on how community radio is responding to the bringing together of different media, increasing audience involvement and listener participation and the utilisation of digital resources across urban and rural-based stations.

This study is aligned with the constructivist paradigm, where the researcher sought to engage in selected real-life situations with four (4) community radio stations located in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Limpopo. The basis of this research is derived from fieldwork, interaction with community radio staff, management and engagement with sector stakeholders. The case studies were conducted using a mixed methods approach qualitatively over two years (2018-2019). Methods included face-to-face interviews, questionnaires, direct observation and training workshops. The empirical materials draw upon three interconnected

areas: production and content creation; social media and audience relations; listening patterns and transmission within the sampled community radio stations.

The study shows there have been substantial changes from traditional broadcasting and analogue technology in production, content creation, audience participation, consumption patterns and dissemination of content. The study concludes digital technologies have altered the relationship between on-air presenters and audience members to include immediacy and interactivity, in anytime and anywhere broadcasting. Evidence collected shows social media and audience participation have elevated audiences from passive listeners to active consumers. Changes in On-air Studios and adapting to digital innovations are gaining traction and reach within the community radio broadcast environment. Although radio transmission and programme consumption have been altered by convergence, it seems that terrestrial broadcasts and listening to radio devices remain the preferred choice by broadcasters and audience members respectively.

Keywords: Community radio; digital transformation; convergence; broadcasting; digital innovations

Introduction

In November 2023, South Africa celebrated one hundred years of radio broadcasting. During radio's first One hundred years of existence, the radio medium started from an experimental system of sending Morse code to the present-day innovation of sending “live” broadcasts over the Internet at any time to anywhere in the world. The coming together of the radio medium, the internet, social networking sites and portable devices have steered South Africa’s community radio stations into a process of change (Bosch 2017:125).

The growth of community radio in South Africa has forged an established sector with 284 broadcast licences issued by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA). Its mandate and core qualities enable the support for local democratic processes, participation by providing diverse viewpoints and opinions, community ownership and independence from the state or political interference.

1. Purpose and Overview

The primary research question is: “How is Community Radio responding to digital transformation in the changing broadcast environment of South Africa?”. Secondary questions draw empirical material from three interconnected areas of response:

1. The lens of production tools and content generation

2. The lens of audience participation and social media
3. The lens of consumption patterns and transmission

The research problem is defined by what we know, what we don't know and what to expect. Traditional media such as print, television and radio have gone through technological shifts from analogue to digital formats. New media and innovations in digital technologies have fundamentally changed the way people use media, access information and source entertainment. The research aims to know to what extent community radio remains rooted in a mono-medium or shifted to multimedia. Indicators of their responsiveness include studio technology; podcasts; online streams; interactive websites; dedicated mobile apps; consumption patterns; user participation and social media platforms. The analyses of the material expected should demonstrate the integration of new media, and multimedia and how to remain relevant in a digital era.

The study is qualitative and compares four community radio stations located in two rural and two urban environments in the provinces of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Limpopo, Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Data was collected using mixed methods by interviewing key management and on-air personnel, engagement with sector stakeholders and direct observation through training workshops at sampled stations.

2. Context of the study

Today's media landscape cannot be compared to the one that existed before 1994. After 30 years, media development and diversity have made significant strides towards a democratic and informed society. Changes are the result of historical, legislative and technological shifts within the media landscape. Underpinned by the South African Constitutional provision of freedom of expression (Section 16) and access to information (Section 32) the freedom of the airwaves has led to a three-tier broadcast system made up of public, commercial and community radio. Community broadcasting remains a highly relevant sector in South Africa and contributes to media diversity, pluralism and freedom of expression within South Africa adding to a broader range of voices.

The relevance of the study is to consolidate the gains made by community radio in its pursuit of digital broadcasting. It is meant to benefit managers, consultants, policymakers, media institutes and organisations with a resource where they can draw insights to enrich their discourse and analysis of digitalisation.

3. Literature Review

This thesis is located within the discourse and theoretical framework of community, convergence, the public sphere and the political economy. These theories inform the study on how community radio is responding to the bringing together of different media, increasing audience involvement and listener participation and the utilisation of digital resources across urban and rural-based stations.

3.1 Convergence

The theory of convergence helps the study to understand how community radio is responding to the bringing together of new and different media. New digital media are the central drivers of the digital creative economy. It brings together new and old media (Bosch 2017:125). What approach is community radio utilising to embrace convergence at the sampled community stations? In what way does convergence impact production tools, audience participation and the transmission of content? This study also seeks to understand how convergence impacts the advancement of democratic ideals and community empowerment.

3.2 Local Public Sphere

The theory of the public sphere informs the research on audience involvement and listener participation in the shaping of public opinion. In new democracies like South Africa, the notion of the public sphere is a space within social life where public opinion is shaped, formed and accessible to all. How are the sampled radio stations creating spaces for development, diversity and deliberative democracy? What programmes and platforms are utilised to secure a space for local cultural expression and participatory democracy? Do radio callers have the space to set the agenda with their on-air interactions? What use of mobiles, text messages (SMS) and voice notes add to on-air discussions? Is there a threat to the local public sphere by the state, political interference and commercial interests? The democratic role of the media in the public sphere is a space where access to information affecting public good is widely available, where discussion is free of domination and where all those participating in the public debate do so on equal footing (James Curran 2002:233).

3.3 Political Economy

The theory of political economy provides insight into digital resources across urban and rural-based stations. Political economy is mainly concerned with social relations and power relations that constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources (Mosco

1996:25). In unequal societies like South Africa, there is fierce competition for available frequencies and limited spaces for a suitable studio broadcast site. The business model for community radio is non-profit and registered as such. This has a direct bearing on sustainability and operational and transmission costs. The economic, social and power challenges of community radio vary from early fundraising and organising difficulties to protracted licensing procedures (Howley 2005:1).

4. Research Methodology

This study is qualitative and aligned with the constructivist paradigm. Of the nine provinces which make up South Africa, fieldwork was conducted in four provinces with a single station in each province. The limitation of this study is, that from 284 community licences issued by ICASA, only four stations were sampled. The sample is not big enough to conclude the broad umbrella of South Africa's Community Radio, however, the research across provinces, station types, and socio-economic communities makes the research viable and analysis possible.

The sampled radio stations were selected based on a mix of urban and rural contexts. The research aims to make a comparison between community stations in affluent and less-affluent communities. Other criteria for selection were a mix of licence conditions, on-air for a minimum of two years and broadcast infrastructure fully operational. The research sample is made of three geographic community radio stations and one community station of interest. The comparative case studies are appropriate since the aim is to see the responses to digital changes within different licence conditions and societal contexts. This study draws from ideas, patterns, themes, responses and conclusions constructed by the participants interviewed within the sampled community radio stations.

Using face-to-face interviews, a questionnaire, direct observation and training workshops, the study explores on-the-ground realities with four (4) community radio stations located in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Limpopo during 2018 and 2019. Table 1 shows the four sampled stations under province, licence condition and society contexts.

Station Participation	Urban / Rural	Province	Licence
Station 1	Rural	Limpopo	Geographical
Station 2	Rural	Western Cape	Geographical
Station 3	Peri-urban	Eastern Cape	Geographical
Station 4	Urban	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Community of Interest

Table 1 Summary table showing four-case-study-stations

Respondents entered the process voluntarily. The questionnaire was given ahead of the oral interview, striving to construct real-life responses, experiences and explanations. The primary sources are face-to-face interviews conducted with individuals at various levels of leadership or on-air services. Information was discovered by asking a range of questions which emphasise how the digital era has affected production, distribution, audience participation and radio listening habits. Table 2 describes the respondents from a cross-section of management and on-air staff.

Station Participation	Urban/Rural	Province	Station Respondents
Station 1	Rural	Limpopo	Programme Manager On Air Presenters
Station 2	Rural	Western Cape	Board Chairperson Programme Manager On Air Presenters
Station 3	Peri Urban	Eastern Cape	Station Manager On Air Presenter
Station 4	Urban	Kwa-Zulu Natal	On Air Presenter

Table 2 Summary table of respondents participating in semi-structured interviews.

The case studies compare responses to digital changes within different licence conditions, societal contexts, and urban and metro environments. The study's data requirements include the use of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are face-to-face interviews conducted with individuals at various levels of leadership or on-air presenters. Information is discovered by asking a range of questions which emphasise how the digital era has affected production, distribution, audience participation and radio listening habits. Secondary data is derived from available documents, reports, articles from newspapers, online publications, government documents and ICASA articles as well as supporting radio station documentation. A template of standardised questions is used to extract experiences and in-depth convictions regarding the topic and digital focus. The answers would provide data which could be categorised for commonalities, repeated themes, contrasts and comparisons.

5. Data Collection and Discussion.

Data collected from the sampled stations demonstrate Community radio continues to shape the way broadcast content is created, distributed and consumed in a changing digital era. In summary, the research concludes digital technologies have altered the relationship between on-air presenters and audience members to include immediacy and interactivity, anytime and anywhere broadcasting. Evidence collected shows social media and audience participation have elevated audiences from passive listeners to active consumers. On-air studios have

shifted away from analogue equipment, adapting to fully digitised studios gaining traction and reach within the broadcast space. Although radio transmission and programme consumption have been altered by convergence, it seems that terrestrial broadcasts and listening to radio devices remain the preferred choice by broadcasters and audience members respectively.

5.1 Integration of studio technologies.

Empirical data show all sample radio stations have shifted away from analogue devices to digitised on-air studios. Studio technologies which once had separate functions have integrated functions and transformed the way persons create and consume content. New production tools and a digital studio infrastructure have played a central role in processing programme delivery, and speedily accessing content and breaking news. Digitised studios enable easier storage, distribution and manipulation of content. In response to the question of digital studio infrastructure, all respondents "agree or strongly agree" that a digitised studio environment has enhanced programme quality and sound strategies. Here are some responses:

Station 2 respondent

"We launched a state-of-the-art ICT Lab..... Its launch and celebrations coincided with Youth Month paying tribute to a youth empowerment agenda....enhancing their standards"

Station 2 respondent

"These on-air presenters have raised their standard with a slick, up-tempo commercial sound, enhancing their professionalism.. the playout system offers an easy-to-read screen with music transitions such as a voice-over or crossfade automatically selected by the push of an on-screen-button"

Station 4 respondent

"I see the new digital tools as a positive force rather than a disruptive intrusion. Time pressures and staff limitations have meant we had to put a hold on podcasting"

Station 1 respondent

"We are often criticised for imitating commercial radio, but it's the technical sophistication which enables on-air presenters to raise their standard"

Station 1 respondent

"These computers are capable of recording, editing, storing and playing audio files in digital formats..... we have adapted to offer a high-quality sound with immediate access to any part of the programme"

Research Discussion: What constraints show an absence of proper production training, new studio maintenance and podcast or multimedia production?

5.2 Interactive and Participatory Media.

New media and audience participation have elevated audience involvement from passive listeners to active consumers. Social media, voice notes and WhatsApp posts encourage user participation and interactivity. In response to the question of audience involvement, all respondents “agree or strongly agree” that modern radio audiences want to contribute in a significant way. Broadcasts use social media platforms, and online forums to share and create content fostering a more engaged and participatory audience. Here are some responses:

Station 4 respondent

"With the advent of convergence and new studio technologies, radio broadcasts are no longer what they used to be... the relationship between the broadcaster and the audience has changed substantially. The audience are co-creators of content".

Station 3 respondent

"We believe, the audience pleasure is derived from constructive conversations regarding entertainment and educational programmes"

Station 1 respondent

"cultural exchange remains an important goal, people of other race groups can hear our stories, songs and issues of importance".

5.3 Cross-platform availability.

The linear relationship of traditional radio has been broken by the Internet. In response to the question “Does radio remain traditionally a mono-medium (sound only) or does your station demonstrate a multimedia identity?” All respondents agree they are no longer a mono medium. All sampled stations affirm a multimedia identity. To some degree, all sampled stations offer online streaming, podcasting, social media interaction, a mobile app, visual content and interactive websites. They indicate that the station’s website and social media sites allow for co-creation of content, audience participation, programme transmission and consumption of content. The Internet has created an instant form of communication which allows both audience and broadcaster to not only send information in one direction but also in many directions and receive an immediate response. Here are some responses:

Station 1 respondent

Local content produced at our community radio station not only serves as a routine function but also enables social cohesion.

Station 4 respondent

"As a faith-based station, we gauge from the phone-in calls and social media, the station's audience... we have a small number of listeners from other religions".

Station 2 respondent

".. the variety of digital tools enables listener access, audience measurement, and the potential of advertising".

Research Discussion: To what extent do community radio stations upskill their staff to create multimedia content?

5.4 Digitising content.

Digitising content enables easier production, editing, storage, re-packaging, podcasting and distribution. In response to the statements "Digital technologies contradict democratic participation of community radio ideals" and "Digital technologies contradict the low-cost intentions of community radio ideals", respondents "Disagree" with the notion of digital technologies contradicting the democratisation of communication. Respondents view new technology in the studio and digitised consumer access as a speedier and more interactive means to democratise communication and public policy.

Station 1 respondent

"..we link up with GCIS to broadcast messages of public policy.... local content produced at community radio stations not only serves as a routine function but enables social cohesion.

Station 2 respondent

"..the values of democracy are actualised by facilitating freedom of expression. Local content produced at community radio stations not only serves as a routine function but enables social cohesion.

Station 1 respondent

"The community announcements of local events and the reading of funeral notices keep the community informed".

Station 3 respondent

"Past community notices referred to water and power cuts, community meetings, local municipality initiatives and more recently the prayer services for the Gender-Based Violence epidemic in the country. A weekly programme provides information about jobs, goods and services".

Research Discussion: Do the roadshows, and outside broadcasts (OBs) enable social and political discussion exposing issues and discussing options and actions with key community stakeholders?

5.5 Audience Empowerment and user participation

Audiences have a vast selection of content choices across different platforms. The interactive relationship between the community radio station and its audience is a significant departure from the traditional one-way communication model. In participatory communication what matters most is the voice. Radio by its nature gives us the ability to hear content, context, passion and pain. (Dagron 2001:4). In response to the question “What actions have your station to include new media and voice notes?” “What actions have your station taken to ensure social media activity as a means to connect with listeners? The response shows new forms of listener participation allow community voices a variety of ways to get involved with freedom of expression and co-creation of broadcast content. Here are some responses which detail social media as a value add:

Station 1 respondent

“..we have a link "how to find us on Google Maps?" “Our website is a place where anyone can access information on our programmes or complete a listener survey”

Station 4 respondent

“..our challenges amount to time and limited staff.. the website is used as a marketing tool and is strictly managed for station publicity”.

Station 2 respondent

“...phone-in programmes are the norm for all presenters, but Facebook and WhatsApp are the preferred choices of the audiences”...It's also cost-effective for our communities”.

Station 3 respondent

“...all stations use Facebook as the platform of choice. They use it to connect and interact with their audience and to share content in a way that encourages their audience to share as well. Counting the number of “likes” and “shares” of their posts, helps the stations to understand their social media reach and what content and music is relevant to their target market”.

Research Discussion: How does Community Radio use its websites and social media for citizen journalism? Social media posts on station pages show participation in the co-creation of content. This suggests a discussion is necessary on how to capitalise on the potential and capacity of the Internet for the co-creation of content like citizen journalism.

5.6 New Listening Patterns and Consumption Habits

Digitalisation and the internet are fundamentally changing media markets, particularly radio. The indicators of consumption patterns and listening habits refer to the use of portable devices,

internet usage, access to podcasts and various places of listening. Data collected show, audiences have more choice in the way they listen to radio. Here are some responses:

Station 3 respondent

"...social media posts are more than social media posts, it has the potential to tell us who is listening, where they are listening and sometimes why they are listening. We learn that a lot of our audience are students and they listen off their phones".

Station 4 respondent

"...we use a streaming service 24/7. Our listeners don't always listen in real-time. They listen at their convenience.."

5.7 FM terrestrial broadcasts remain the preferred choice.

FM (Frequency Modulation) remains the main distribution platform. Sampled stations demonstrate a foothold in terrestrial broadcasting. In response to the question of signal distribution "What means of distribution do you use at your station? Respondents indicated FM terrestrial broadcasts remain the main priority. Three (3) of the sampled stations pay Sentech transmission costs for its signal distribution. One sampled station conducts its signal distribution. Even though radio distribution is available both in analogue and digital platforms, all stations in the study prioritise FM towers as the most effective distribution for their broadcasts. All sampled stations have a live streaming button on their website, but respondents "agree or strongly agree" that FM terrestrial broadcasting is their stations' main priority. They identify FM towers as their primary source of transmission. Here are some responses:

Station 1 respondent

"Our engineers manage their own transmission for terrestrial broadcasts and are not dependent on Sentech. We are powered by a 240-watt transmitter".

Station 3 respondent

"Our station is powered by Sentech transmitters, this enables us to currently be the number 1 station in the Eastern Cape"

Research Discussion: Is the reliance on Sentech, FM towers and analogue transmission at risk in a digital future? At the time of conducting this study, Sentech, the primary Signal Distributor, switched off 17 community radio transmitters for failure to pay service fees. According to press reports the switch-off was due to lack of payment from signal distribution fees. Financial sustainability and technical capacity are the main challenges facing signal distribution for the community broadcast sector (City Press, 15 April 2018). The issue of

signal distribution fees has been controversial with Sentech claiming its tariffs are fair, whilst the community radio sector is seeking more affordable costs.

5.8 A word on training, capacity building and skills development.

The primary training service providers offering training to the community radio sector include Wits Radio Academy; the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) and the National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa (NEMISA). After this study, NEMISA teamed up with MDDA and the National Association of Broadcasters (NABSA) to conduct provincial cluster workshops, titled “Future Proofing Community Radio” across the country. Delegates explored the possibilities and constraints in a changing digital landscape.

A second series of provincial cluster workshops hosted by NEMISA, MDDA and consultant Dr Harlan Cloete offered a framework for Board Governance and Leadership Training. Titled “5iQ Governance” Dr Harlan Cloete addressed five questions for Community Radio Boards: Why do we do what we do? (Our Vision); How is it being done? (Our Mission); How will we know at any given moment we are on track? (Monitoring and Evaluation); How do we lead and learn? (Knowledge Management).

Conclusions

So where does community radio fit in the digital puzzle? Convergence is a game changer for media and communication activities. It alters the public and private definitions of communication activities.

In summary, the research concludes digital technologies have altered the relationship between on-air presenters and audience members to include immediacy and interactivity, anytime and anywhere broadcasting. Evidence collected shows social media and audience participation have elevated audiences from passive listeners to active consumers. On-air studios have shifted away from analogue equipment, adapting to fully digitised studios gaining traction and reach within the broadcast space. Although radio transmission and programme consumption have been altered by convergence, it seems that terrestrial broadcasts and listening to radio devices remain the preferred choice by broadcasters and audience members respectively.

The main benefits of digital opportunities include:

- + New production tools and a digital studio infrastructure have played a central role in processing programme delivery, and speedily accessing content and breaking news.

- + New media and audience participation have elevated audience involvement from passive listeners to active consumers.
- + The linear relationship of traditional radio has been broken by the Internet.
- + To some degree all sampled stations offer online streaming, podcasting, social media platforms, a mobile app, visual content and interactive websites.
- + Audiences have a vast selection of content choices across different platforms. Audiences have more choices in the way they listen to the radio.
- + FM (Frequency Modulation) remains the main distribution platform. Sampled stations demonstrate a foothold in terrestrial broadcasting.

The main challenges prompt the following questions:

How can community radio's content be compelling, relevant and attractive in a saturated market?

How can community radios' pluralistic function be recognized?

How can community radios' social, economic and distribution sustainability be assured?

How can community radios' contribution to public good be further demonstrated?

The Internet has changed most of the paradigms that help us describe and perceive the community radio ecosystem. Sampled stations affirm the Internet has enabled broadcasters and audience members with the ability to seek, receive and impart information and ideas continuously and instantly. The relevance of the study is to consolidate the gains made by community radio in its pursuit of digital broadcasting. It is meant to benefit managers, consultants, policymakers, media institutes and organisations with a resource where they can draw insights to enrich their discourse and analysis of digitalisation.

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