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Future Community TV: the status quo

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Introduction

Many people pin their hopes on community television. Some see it as an opportunity for people to express themselves. Others as an inexpensive way to deliver education and information to a small community of people who face common problems. Others see it as the effective medium by which communities can pool skills and knowledge to uplift themselves.

Even more are aware it is much easier, in a multi-channel digital TV environment, to identify a niche audience when you are dealing with a region or community.

Regrettably, too many people often see community TV as either a way to make money for themselves, or to gain the power and celebrity status that comes with being "Big Shot" in the media.

It's not a problem – many people see the media that way. The new consumer society that feeds off celebrity (regardless of its worth) perceives the media as access to "Fame and Fortune". It's one of those cultural myths that follow every society – feeding peoples' hopes and aspirations with Never-Never Land.

It's important to start from here, because, in reality, the media offer no fame, nor fortune. It offers unique opportunities beyond the imaginable for communities provided that people are prepared to put in hard work, and accept the responsibilities that go with any form of public broadcasting.

For that is what community television is: public broadcasting.

They must look on community TV as a local enterprise that has to:

- Benefit only people within the community,
- Up-skill creative people within the community with a wide range of creative, technical and managerial skills,
- Showcase the skills and talents of people within the community
- Develop paths of communication over the full spectrum of life in the community
- Take part in the strategies that the community have for their own development
- Be the medium for the community to entertain itself.

There's no fame here, nor any fortune. There's no room for individuals on a profit or ego trip. There's room only for people to do their job, be adequately remunerated for their services, and work hard for specific aims and objectives just like in any NGO.

The current situation

There are currently few community TV stations that can operate. They have been allocated patches of analogue spectrum left over in the over-crowded space.

It's very difficult to find space in the analogue spectrum in a mountainous country like South Africa, where population is unevenly distributed, and the overall population density is low.

But it has been possible to allocate transmitters on the same channel and over a cohesive area in such a way that the people within that footprint can be looked on as a "community".

These stations are:

Cape Town TV	Western Cape
Soweto TV	Gauteng
Tshwane TV	Gauteng
1 KZN	KZN
Bay TV	Eastern Cape

There is possibly spectrum suitable for a community station in Rustenburg, but nowhere else.

And what's the point? Digital is around the corner, and there is no sense in the cost of setting up all the transmission infrastructure on analogue when that same cost will have to be spent again in a year or so in order to go digital.

These stations are all run on different models. They have no government funding, except for what little is available from agencies like the MDDA. Their advertising revenue is minimal, and they must scratch around for money from any source available.

I will deal with the funding issues as we go on.

Audience Research

Audience research is the biggest problem which none of the stations have tried to or managed to solve. The data available from the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (BRCSA) is unreliable as the BRCSA data-gathering is not designed for tiny geographic areas. The data has credibility with the advertisers, but they too are aware of niche area shortcomings.

The advertising agencies also have a mindset that persuades them that communities are poor, and not worth advertising to.

There are many other ways stations can conduct their own credible research. The knowledge and techniques are in the public domain. I don't know why this research is beyond the capabilities of the stations. It may be a lack of skills, lack of confidence, or just fear that the accurate data may reveal uncomfortable results.

The Regulation of these stations

Each of the stations has a license to operate from ICASA, and a license to use a specific frequency issued by SENTECH.

The licenses all have slightly different conditions, but their differences are unimportant. Their similarity is that they are all compliant with the Electronic Communications Act, No 36 of 2005.

Their licenses oblige them to report to ICASA on their compliance with the terms of the license, which, in general state that:

1. They must provide community television services (whatever that may mean) in specified languages (and in specified proportions) over a specific area.

2. They must

a. Hold at least two (2) meetings annually with its community on programming and programme-related matters for the selection and provision of programmes.

b. Furnish ICASA with proof of such meetings as weft as the attendance thereof by members of the community.

c. hold Annual General Meetings (AGM) for the following purposes:

   i. To provide feedback on the Licensee's compliance with licence conditions;

   ii. To provide feedback on the Licensee's operational and financial performance; and

   iii. To elect members of the controlling structure e.g. Board of Directors, Trustees etc, subject to the licensee's founding documents.

3. They must broadcast programmes in of a specific format and genre, and usually within specified day-parts:

   a. Community News Services
   b. Sport
   c. Documentaries ,
   d. Arts
   e. Feature Films
   f. Government
   g. Education
   h. Drama
   i. Children
   j. Youth

4. The ratio of local to national and to foreign content is also specified.

This is quite arduous.

The way the station funds itself is neither specified, nor even mentioned.

Not easy.

This compliance and reporting is not negotiable. How the stations manage to fiddle their compliance reports is up to the imagination. This especially refers to the way the station is governed, managed and run.

The Electronic Communications Act

The Act states clearly, and this is its only reference to community TV:

50. In considering the grant of a new community broadcasting service licence the Authority must, with due regard to the objects and principles enunciated in section 2, among others, take into account whether—

(a) The applicant is fully controlled by a non-profit entity and carried on or is to be carried on for non-profit purposes;

(b) The applicant intends to serve the interests of the relevant community;

(c) as regards the provision of the proposed broadcasting service, the applicant has the support of the relevant community or of those associated with or promoting the

interests of such community, which support must be measured according to such criteria as may be prescribed;

(d) the applicant intends to encourage members of the relevant community or those associated with or promoting the interests of such community to participate in the selection and provision of programmes to be broadcast in the course of such broadcasting service; and

(e) The applicant has never been convicted of an offence in terms of this Act or the related legislation.[1]

And that's it.

Of course, these conditions must be read alongside the relevant parts of the Companies Act, and the following:

- Impact Assessment of the NPO Act January 2005
- Non-Profit Organisations Act 71 of 1997.
- Income Tax Act of 1996.
- Section 21 Companies Act 1973.
- Trust Property Control Act 1957.
- NPO Act section 12
- Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (53/2003).
- Codes of Good Practice on Black Economic 29617 of 9 February 2007
- ICASA Act
- Register of Non-profit Organisations (NPOs)
- South African Revenue Service Tax Exemption Unit
- Companies and Intellectual Property Commission
- SANGOCO Code of Ethics
- Internal documentation relating to media ethics, governance etc
- Developing Good Governance Practices within the South African NPO Sector: Benchmark Study Report. Department of Social Development. 2009
- ICASA License conditions
- SENTECH broadcast conditions.
- PFMA
- Provincial, district and local budgeting
- MDDA Act
- Finally, there are all the principles of media law and ethics, contract defamation and many other aspects of common law.

This is what is stated in terms of the Letter of the Law. What does it imply for the *SPIRIT* of the law?

If you take all the legislation, as well as the statements of policy, the planning commission, and all other statements from whatever source that may be used to vocalise the "public Good", we can reasonably arrive at the following conclusions:

The community TV station must:

Create jobs

Every position in the station, including the positions in management, administration, financial control, revenue, engineering, human resources, production, scheduling,

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[1] No. 28743 GOVERNMENT GAZETTE, 18 APRIL 2006. Act No. 36, 2005 ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS ACT, 2005

audience research, and anything else you may care to think of, should be sources from the community, and the jobs given to people resident within the community.

These people cannot reasonably be expected to have the necessary skills, and so the station must budget for and make arrangements for on-the-job practical (not theoretical) training. It will not be particularly helpful for the training to take place in schools, or within the commercial broadcasters.

Participate in the community

The board must be elected by a fair and extensive representation of the interests of the community. These board members (directors or trustees, whatever you want to call them) must ensure that the non-profit company has a founding document (or constitution) that binds the station to partnering with development interests within the community, and that the station shares the objectives.

The board must hold regular consultative meetings with a fair and reasonable cross-section of the interests of the community on matters like programming, scheduling, local production, aims and imperatives, progress against targets, audience research etc.

Up-skill

The station must bring into the community skills that have not been present, and such skills that will promote other skills.

Participate in social development

The station must play a part in awareness (publicity, information, debates, and discussion – whatever you want to call it) that reinforces the work done to meet the needs of the community. This will include issues of health, community security, schooling, adult education, food security, housing, waste disposal, water management and anything else you want to think of.

Develop skills

The station must publicise and promote the development of skills in the arts, trades, commerce, and social development. As much as it wants to run talent shows, it must also promote the plumbers, bricklayers and dressmakers.

Responsibly manage finances

It must take care of its own sales, funding, donations, and account for expenditure. This is simple accountability and governance, and is the ultimate responsibility of the Board.

Not easy.

We have seen what the situation is under the analogue transmission system. There is no room for any more stations, so they will have to come about under the digital domain.

Then we must look at where stations get money to support television (which is very expensive), especially in communities where there may be no industries, and where the community's need for their own television station is greater than those communities who are in industrial and affluent areas.

Migration to Digital

Digital multi-channel TV

This aspect of broadcasting has become the least understood, and it is difficult to find out why.

As in the past, we are sending an electromagnetic wave from a transmitter to a home aerial that is within line of sight to the transmitter.

However, in digital terrestrial broadcasting, we no longer run an analogue signal which takes up a lot of spectrum.

It is instead a digital signal which, which takes up far less spectrum. In fact, we can fit anywhere from 6-10 digital channels into the same spectrum taken up by just one analogue channel.

However, we do need a digital decoder. We do NOT need a new TV set, just a set top box (STB). Newer TV sets have STB's built in. This changeover from analogue to digital is compulsory. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has said that it will not support analogue transmission after 2015. Thus, there will be no registration or protection against neighbouring interference.

South Africa has missed it, and delayed it until the end of 2018.

There are only two important aspects of DTT:

1. There will be the capacity to have over 20 channels available "over the air", without a satellite dish.
2. The process will free up a lot of spectrum which will make wireless broad more available and much cheaper.

The freed-up spectrum (what the industry jargon calls the "Digital Dividend") will only be available once all the analogue signals have been switched off, which can only happen when the whole country has access to the digital TV signals.

Just because you can fit 8 digital channels into the same space as one analogue channel, it does not mean that you must. Besides, the regulator must license each and every individual channel, regardless of whether they are analogue or digital.

There is a very important aspect of digital TV that most professionals ignore:

- The audience doesn't know what Digital Terrestrial Transmission means. And, they don't care.
- All they know is that they must get a Set Top Box, which they usually resent, and that they will get a much wider choice of channels. They also hope it may make home shopping easier.

Viewers say they want more and better channels. But they don't know what they mean – they can't explain it. As we saw, the more channels they get, the more choice they have. The more choice, then the fewer channels give them exactly what they want.

> *If you just a narrow choice, you will learn to make do with what you have. If you widen that choice, then the audience expects to get exactly what they want, and still they won't get it. Wider choice creates unrealistic expectations.*

They get pickier, in fact so picky, that they'll still not find anything to watch. They are expecting programmes that appeal to them as individuals, not to them as part of a mass audience.

Incentive Channels

People will have to buy their own STBs. There are about 14-million households in South Africa. Over one third of these already subscribe to satellite pay-TV. But they will not be able to receive the channels on the digital network. Satellite and terrestrial are completely different.

To get people to buy these STBs (and we don't yet know what they will cost), the digital regulations allow for "incentive channels". These are envisaged to be compelling viewing so that people cannot resist the sacrifice of buying their own STB.

Originally, the SABC was expected to supply something like 18 of these channels, and M-Net and e.tv about five or six each.

A bouquet of 30 channels would be irresistible; people would rush to but their STB.

That is, IF they are watchable. What incentive is there for the broadcasters to spend vast amounts of money on programming when the growth of viewers will be directly proportionate to the number of families who own their own STB?

Knowing people, the uptake will be extremely small for a year, and only rise when they are threatened with analogue switch-off.

This means that the incentive channels will cost the broadcasters a fortune, with few viewers. These channels could only become viable after two years of costs.

These are issues that haven't been questioned yet.

The SABC is unable to provide any channels yet, and if the other broadcasters have made plans, they are not talking.

Quality

If you ask the audience if they want quality production, they will say, "Yes". Ask them what they mean by quality, and they can't answer. Ask any professional producer what he means by "quality", and he will list the production features that he admires most in the programmes he wished he had made.

He will mention the camerawork that uses creative angles and camera moves. Lighting that uses shadows, colures and plays with depth of field (deep focus). He will describe sound recording and final mix that took a lot of time and money. He will point to the best and most expensive talent, especially the performers, scriptwriters and editors.

But he's not talking about quality. He's taking about *production values* – those elements that make a production look costly, and gives that "WOW" factor. Production values are physical attributes. They have nothing to do with the programme making an emotional contact with the viewer. They just make the programme easy to market and easy on the eyes and ears.

You can measure production values – there's technical specification for each and every one – usually in terms of money.

But you can't measure or even describe quality. So, all you can do is to focus on where it matters – the audience.

A quality programme is a programme that the audience likes. It can be cheap or expensive. It can feature stars or unknown performers. But it will have that care to audience emotional needs that makes the connection.

That's quality.

Will 30 digital channels ever happen?

Of course not. Who can afford them? Where does the revenue come from? According to the PWC Outlook for 2011-2020 (which is based on trendlines, and takes no new technology or societal changes into account), South African adspend in the media was about R47-bn in 2017. R17.5-bn went to TV. After that came newspapers (R6-bn) and the Internet (R5.5-bn).

PWC thinks this may go up by about 4% a year. This TV revenue currently supports 4 national analogue channels (e.tv and SABC). However, subscription TV at DStv takes hefty chunk as it attracts an audience that advertisers like.

Question: If the total ad revenue at the moment supports three broadcasters (Mnet, e.tv and SABC), and they are all "not doing very well", then what happened if they introduce another 5 – 10 new channels? Ad revenue will still only go up by 4% in total.

So, ad revenue per channel must decrease drastically. It's safe to say that the broadcasters do NOT want DTT.

Question: If broadband data is going to become more available, and prices come down, what will happen to the gross profit of the cellphone and other companies that sell data? We're not talking about volume of data, but profit. We don't actually know, but there is a good chance that the supply may exceed the demand and that prices will fall too fast. It's a fair guess that the cellphone companies also don't want DTT

Funding and Financing

As I said earlier, community and local television are the ideal niche TV in the digital multi-channel environment. The problem is that in South Africa there are only two geographic areas that would attract enough advertising revenue to make a commercially driven community station viable. They are Johannesburg and central Cape Town. However, there are also the areas where DStv has the highest penetration, the audiences here have the most choice, Furthermore the population in these more affluent areas have very little reason to feel a sense of community.

Advertisers want audiences who will buy their products. Corporate CSI is not and never will be charitable. It's a nice way of looking like a generous company, and selling products at the same time. CSI is a marketing exercise – business never has a purely charitable intention.

In other urban and rural areas, there is NO WAY a community television station is viable without public funding. You can come up with any source your imagination thinks of:

Local industry CSI, foreign funders, advertising revenue, sponsorship, membership fees – every one of these has been discussed to death over the past fifteen years, and not one works.

It is said that Soweto TV is self-sufficient just on advertising and sponsorship revenue, but it is the only community station that has footprint with a viable population. It claims millions of viewers, but then is it a community station? Can there be any geographic community of millions of people? This matter is not resolved, and no one knows what a community means outside of the definition in the ECA:

> *"community" includes a geographically founded community or any group of persons or sector of the public having a specific, ascertainable common interest;*

Is it possible that Soweto TV should rather be classified as a commercial regional channel (for which there is no provision in current legislation)?

National TV and Regional/Local TV

National television and commercial television have completely different roles. These roles are dictated by their footprints. National television (SABC and e.tv have nation-wide footprints, and cannot choose which audience will view at any one time. They van only niche an audience according to the day-part.

This day-part depends on who is at home, (or has access to a TV set) at any one time of the day. Most people in South Africa spend between 3 and 4 hours a day travelling, so they cannot view at that time.

This sets our primetime at about 8:30 at night, and with most people watching then, they have less chance to niche their audience. These are simple scheduling principles.

The same will apply to digital television, or all the channels that will one day be on the digital network.

Central government would like to have access to the audience at those times. However, its owned broadcaster, the SABC, is a law much to itself, and the only access to the audiences are through SABC News. These do not reach most of the viewers, so the SABC is not an effective way of informing the public of government successes, and to detract from the issues that cause all the social unrest.

Community television on the other hand is only concerned with provincial, local and community issues. It is there to "empower" communities to develop themselves, and motivate them to achieve their aspirations. I put "empower" into inverted commas as it is often used as a euphemism for getting people to receive information and to act on the way the information is directed.

Is this the same as propaganda? I don't know. What's your definition of propaganda?

My view of community television is, as I will explain later, a way of bringing the media industry into under-developed communities to provide jobs, and build up the communities by showcasing themselves to themselves.

Whatever way we put it, community TV becomes very attractive to local and provincial government for funding, and for influence.

In short, central government has very little to tell the nation. The niceties of democracy, human rights, international affairs, and a national transport infrastructure.

None of this is any comfort to an old lady who has raw sewage flowing past her front door. And, I wonder how many hundreds of thousands of those there are? But a

discussion, or report, or reassurance from a local councillor on the sewage system would be a winner with all those old ladies.

Province and municipalities have lots to tell people. These are the levels of government that provide education, security, health, arts and culture, license, libraries, cemeteries, electricity, water, fire services, housing, courts, parks, and sports and recreation.

These are the issues that affect people day to day, in every aspect of their standard of living, their aspirations and prospects for getting out of the level at which they live.

National television has the reach, and can attract media revenue. Community media don't have the reach nor the revenue, but they do have the relevance, meaning, loyalty, and influence.
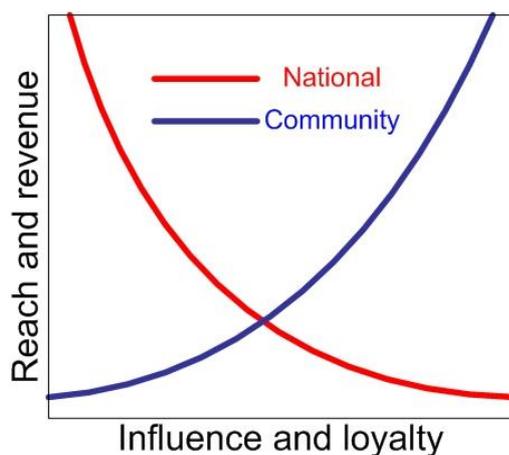
Community TV must play a social role

To earn loyalty, attention and support, community TV it must:

- Fit in with community radio and newspapers.
- Be non-profit (it can make a profit, but it must not be used to enrich only a few individuals – all profits must be ploughed back into the TV station.
- Be controlled by elected representatives of the community
- Be seen to have editorial control

Programming

Community TV has its own identity that is a direct result of the differences between community TV and national TV.

National TV programmes with content that can attract the most people at each time of the day. That is the mandate.

Community TV will cover and contain programmes that national TV cannot and will not even consider. This includes:

- Drama and documentaries made by local aspirant filmmakers
- Local news
- Local talent shows
- Inter-school competitions
- Local music concerts and showcases
- Dancing competitions
- Game shows developed and produced locally
- Local amateur sport
- Local religion
- Funerals, obituaries and memorials
- Local weddings, social and heritage events
- Local stokvel, NGO, and self help matters
- Local advice, education and information

- Local language children's storytelling
- Local government issues, debates, and talk shows.

You will never find these on national TV. Does that not make them legitimate, desirable and compelling television? Think about it from the point of view of audience psychology.

And what about international and African affairs, and top rate entertainment? Community TV has no space for these, nor the money. And they don't WANT these subjects because they are already broadcast on national TV, which is accessible to everyone anyway.

Community TV is NOT in competition with national TV. It is there to give people the programming that they want and need, and that will never be broadcast on national TV.

Funding models

Community television budgets

Community television must be strictly tailored to its budget if it is to survive. The revenue that is sustainably committed decides on:

- Extent to which the station will be equipped

- Salaries payable

- Number of jobs it can create

- Cost of local content

- Style of local content

- Coverage through outside broadcast (OB)

Community television stations must employ local independent production houses to make a large portion of their content. They must comply with the Local Content Regulations.[2] These regulations however do refer to South African, rather than local community broadcasting. These stations may use communal news sources, for examples by setting up their own common bureaux for national community news. However, there is no need for the community television stations to duplicate content that is freely available via the national television stations.

Where does the money come from?

A small community station will probably cost R30-m a year. This includes all costs – setting up, budget studio, budget outside broadcast, staff salaries, local content, and management.

If community TV is of no concern to national government, then it must look to the government that stands to benefit the most: provincial and local government.

Provincial and local government have a lot to tell communities. They can tell them about education, health, rates and taxes, electricity, water, security, culture and heritage, libraries. They especially need to converse publicly about councillors, rumours, accusations of corruption and incompetence.

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[2] ICASA notice 154 of 31 January 2006. Paragraph 6. The DoC published draft local and digital content development strategy on 4 Sept 2009 (GG 32553), also. There are also ICASA regulations on independent production (GG 32767 dated 1 Dec 2009).

I'm saying that provincial and local government NEED community TV. If they want it, then they must pay for it.

They probably waste R30-m a month. The financing of 20 community stations will be about a third of the cost to government of keeping the national broadcaster on its feet.

There are many business plans that involve funding from provincial and local government with minuscule sources in advertising and sponsorship. But if we want to be truthful and realistic, the only model is 100% local; government funding.

How will digital make all this possible?

There is no finality on how the community TV signals will be sources from the digital network. At this moment in time, the Department of Communications, ICASA and SENTECH have not agreed on which Multiplex the community channels will sit.

They haven't decided the distribution system.

For instance, they could take four channels nation-wide and configure the channels in such a way that each province could have four stations – each with a footprint covering the whole province.

They could also use a configuration which allows for a single transmitter to have a limited radius footprint, but each transmitter carries four or more channels.

There in fact other options, but none are yet decided, and only discussed behind closed doors.

The BAD news

The really bad news is that community stations will only benefit those people who have bought a Set Top Box (STB). Because the community channels will be on the digital network, the families within the community will need an STB. There is NO other way they will be able to receive the programming.

We also do not know how much DTT distribution will cost a channel. But we know DTT is NOT cheap, so distribution will NOT be cheap.

The "GOOD?" news

The community stations could become the only effective "incentive channels" for the migration to digital. Earlier I spoke of the need to get people to want to buy their own STBs. And that a bouquet of compelling channels is the only way.

It is doubtful if the other broadcasters will supply anything other than cheap foreign, and repurposed material.

But the community channels will be able to, at low cost, provide their community with compelling programming.

This will literally force the community to buy STBs, and therefore boost the migration to digital.

Now we are talking – about REAL benefits to all three levels of government.

Conclusion

I have no conclusion. Too much is up in the air.

I hope this gives a potted digest of a very complex and dynamic situation.

It's a mess. There are far too many divergent interests that involve lots of money, that have been allowed to go wild. Everyone's now confused – government, the industry and the public. While all this goes on, and the migration to digital drifts further and further into the future, the only people who score are the pay-TV operators.

Government is hostage to its reputation in international arenas, especially the ITU. The manufacturers are at each other's throats. The broadcasters are hiding behind a curtain while the fights go on.

The Department of Communications, ICASA and SENTECH drift from one crisis to another – also sliced and diced into agendas and interests.

Meanwhile, it will happen. If you aspire to be part of a community TV station, start planning now.

The paperwork and planning that must go into it is horrendous.

Budgeting, sourcing committed funding, finding product, conducting audience research. Training the human resources, establishing studios – will all take about over a thousand pages of paperwork, and this cannot be done in less than six months.

And that only gets you to the stage where you can apply for a license.

There still public gearings. If you don't want your application torn to pieces at the hearings, maybe you should spend a year on the planning and paperwork.

You also must enlist a community. That can go horribly wrong when you tread on the toes of self-interest like local community radio stations, other egos, and powerful community lobby groups.

You may find your proposals and plans undermined just when you are ready to apply.

But that the fun – you are dealing with people, not machines. These are REAL people, and if you unleash their fury, you'd better take to the hills.