



NAB
National Association of Broadcasters

'Beyond the broadcasting industry'.....an article by Prof Franz Krüger

Introduction

In thinking through how best to mark 30 years of the NAB and the BCCSA, we considered whether to develop an internal document on a few broadcasting milestones, or to reach out for an independent view of the sector and the NAB. There was immediate consensus that we engage someone with deep knowledge and experience – and a passion for broadcasting – so we are indeed honoured and delighted that Prof Franz Krüger was available to prepare this article. Prof Krüger takes us on an incredible journey of the sector in looking back, looking in, and looking forward! He reflects on the formative years of policy and regulation, sets out key shifts in the landscape, and considers the impact of digital technologies and global platforms on the sustainability of the sector. He has an interesting perspective on linear broadcasting – and notably, questions the appropriateness of current policy frameworks, and points to trends that make it difficult to even think in terms of a “broadcasting industry” in the future.

Our heartfelt thanks to Prof Krüger for this insightful article, and also for his specific contribution to the broadcasting sector over the last three decades.

Enjoy the read!

**Regards,
Nadia**

(NAB Executive Director)

About Prof Franz Krüger

He has decades of experience in professional journalism, having worked in print and broadcasting in South Africa, Namibia, UK, Canada, Europe, and across Africa. He is a respected commentator on media issues and was part of the first post-apartheid editorial management team at the SABC between 1994 and 1999, where he managed major projects including the coverage of elections, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and helped with resourcing African language stations and overhauled news and current affairs programming. He became director of the Wits Radio Academy in 2009, and in 2016 he became head of Wits Journalism. He has served as Ombud for the Mail & Guardian and spent ten years on the SA Press Appeals Panel. He co-authored The Healthy Community Radio Station (with Romanus Monji and Mike Smurthwaite in 2013, which has been used as the basis for community radio support in Zambia, SA and elsewhere. He has published widely in popular media, in academic journals, and has contributed chapters to various books. Franz also championed Radio Days Africa, where a number of NAB members have participated over the years.

Beyond the broadcasting industry

By Franz Krüger

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) turns 30 this year: for this child of South Africa's broadcasting reform moment in the mid-1990s, there is much to be proud of.

Broadcasting itself goes back to the early 1920s in South Africa, and the 100th birthday is now around the corner. But the arrival of democracy changed the sector dramatically.

Broadcasting reform was central to the democratic project, driven by a strong sense that the new order needed to create many opportunities for citizens to give voice. Changes included the creation of an independent licensing authority as well as an independent signal distributor, a new regime and role for the SABC and provision for independent commercial and community broadcasting.

Three decades later, and with an increasing sense of weariness dominating the national mood, it is sometimes difficult to remember how far-reaching and exciting it all was.

In the midst of all this ferment, the NAB was founded to bring together very disparate groups: the SABC, struggling to adapt to the new era, new commercial players energetically staking out their space, as well as the newest of them all, community broadcasters. Though they had different interests, they found common ground in the idea of creating a new sector on the media landscape.

The NAB quickly became an important voice in policy issues, from local content rules to, later, needletime and digital migration. Strong adherence to the principle of consensus ensured that when the organisation took a position, it included everyone.

Today, the organisation continues to play an important role, acting as parent for the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of SA, representing the interests of members to the Independent Communications Authority of SA and other official bodies, supporting research and playing many other roles. Its [2019 overview of the broadcasting landscape](#) is an essential resource for anyone interested in the media – hopefully the cycle of conducting such a study every five years will continue.

It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt a thorough evaluation of the NAB's role, and a detailed history of the organisation remains to be written. But birthdays are not only about looking back, they are also an opportunity to look forward. And there are some far-reaching shifts in the landscape: increasingly, the dynamics that will shape South African broadcasting are global, making it important for broadcasters to look beyond the country's legal, competitive and technical environment.

Some new trends may make it difficult even to think in terms of a "broadcasting industry" in future.

Is AI coming for your DJ?

In July this year, a company in Cleveland, Ohio, launched [RadioGPT](#), software that is able to create radio using only artificial intelligence (AI). Remarkably, content can be tailored for local markets, including local weather, traffic and news. The company's own software spots local content, the AI text generator ChatGPT writes the text and a bot does the voice. The whole is packaged to be live and local, sounding remarkably like an ordinary radio show.

Similarly, avatars have presented television newscasts.

The technology raises some important questions. For one thing, what are the implications for live DJs? Do they face becoming yet another historic curiosity, like telephone switchboard operators: something that new generations will have difficulty believing ever existed?

There are concerns about AI's tendency to make up facts, and about the copyright implications of large language models being trained on written material without considering the rights of the originators. For now, it is only written text that is being used in this way, but it is not inconceivable that broadcast material may also become raw material for these large language models.

And how may the use of artificial voices impact on trust? Already, as the [Reuters Institute's Digital News Report](#) shows consistently, public trust in the media is in crisis, due to the amount of misinformation available on social media platforms – some of it generated or enabled by AI. An authoritative voice plays an important role in generating trust: audiences "read" the voice of a presenter to discern the

character of the speaker. A newscaster must have the necessary gravitas and authority to be believed.

But what happens if we can no longer be sure a voice is real?

Though there has been considerable interest in Radio GPT from broadcasters in countries like Canada, Germany and the US, it is too early to say whether the initial enthusiasm will turn to extensive adoption. In television, despite some experimentation with avatars, there has not been widespread adoption, though of course that may change.

Spectacular technological advances like these attract considerable attention, but more significant are the steady changes to audience behaviour.

The death of the studio clock?

Live television, including satellite, is having to give substantial ground to on-demand services like Netflix. The launch of the service in South Africa in 2016 led to DSTV losing subscribers, particularly in wealthy markets.

Now a similar trend is beginning to be discernible in audio.

[The Infinite Dial](#), Edison Research's report on South African listening trends, has shown patterns of device ownership roughly in line with US and other wealthy markets, and similar increases of various forms of online listening. Commissioned by the NAB, the study focuses on "commercial" audiences – wealthier audiences in the major metropolitan areas, and it is clear the patterns among poorer audiences will be radically different.

Though the comparison has not yet been made in South Africa, Edison's Share of Ear study in the US compares all "linear" listening – live radio, live streaming and everything else that is heard in the moment it is broadcast – with "on-demand" audio – podcasts, paid streaming, owned music and everything that is consumed at a time of the listener's choosing.

In the most recent set of results, released this August, [total on-demand listening in the US exceeded linear audio for the first time](#): 50.3% of daily audio time of people over 13 is on demand, the balance is linear.

If the trend continues, it means live radio will become less and less important, much as live television has

lost ground to streaming. It is far from certain that the trend will be matched in South Africa: the availability of affordable broadband is just one factor that will influence trends. But it is a significant development, one of many manifestations of the global turn to digital media.

Platform power

With audiences making increasing use of digital technologies to satisfy needs for information, entertainment, social connection, shopping and just about anything else, a handful of global platforms have come to dominate the landscape. Internet giants like Google and Facebook stand between the originators of content and their audiences, who rely on shared links, search results and algorithmic suggestions to find what they need.

The buzzword is "platformisation", and it is having a radical impact on media landscapes in South Africa as much as elsewhere.

The impact on South Africa's print media has been disastrous, with Wits University's [State of the Newsroom report](#) reporting extensive job losses and closures. Though there are also other factors at play in the Independent group, the company has had to reduce staff, withhold salaries and close titles. The nation's capital is now without a newspaper, since the Pretoria News was folded into The Star. Others are not much better off.

Though broadcasters have been less affected, it is important to understand the underlying shifts in media business models which affect them too.

The platforms' economic success and power rests on their ability to Hoover up vast amounts of data on individual users, and serve up advertising that is more precisely targeted than has ever been possible before. They also control the "adtech stack" – the set of apps matching advertisers to audiences in real time.

For users, the services are free - but they pay with their personal information. This data is the new oil, fuelling great wealth.

Meta, owners of Facebook, now have a market cap of around USD770 billion, while Alphabet, owners of Google, are at USD1.745 trillion. That is larger than many countries' GDPs, including that of South Africa.

When industry reports highlight the steady growth in online advertising, it is important to recognise that this is mainly search-linked and programmatic. Though some money can be made by individual media selling space on their websites or similar, the real money is going to the platform giants. The [most recent report by the Interactive Advertising Bureau and PWC](#) highlights that the biggest categories in SA online advertising are search (dominated by Google) and social (dominated by Meta).

In other words, individual broadcasters are at a significant disadvantage in this arena.

South Africa's Competition Commission has recently announced a ["Media and digital markets inquiry"](#) that will probe possible anti-competitive patterns in the behaviour of the platform giants. A solution successfully piloted in Australia has been the creation of a bargaining code that forces the giants to agree financial settlements with local publishers to compensate for their use of publishers' material. An attempt in Canada recently to legislate a similar arrangement led to Facebook blocking news from its platform, indicating how the platforms are willing to take on even powerful Global North countries. At the time of writing, the issue has not yet been resolved.

In Australia, benefits from the bargaining code have flowed to a range of local media, including the Australian public broadcaster, which was able to employ some 50 additional reporters in small towns with the money it received. Earlier this year, an international conference hosted by the Gordon Institute of Business Science in Johannesburg adopted a declaration ["Big Tech and Journalism – principles for fair compensation"](#), which set out some guidelines for such bargaining codes.

It is too early to predict what may emerge from the South African inquiry. But one thing is very clear: the country's broadcasters cannot stand aside from this discussion. Their input will be essential to ensure that the outcome creates a more level playing field, in order to benefit them and their audiences.

Engaging with the digital revolution means more than setting up an account on X, formerly Twitter, or making content available on YouTube or Facebook. These platforms are now competitors, and solutions will need to be found at policy level.

Content and its regulation

Then there is the issue of content regulation. Internationally, there is growing concern about the extent to which misinformation, hate speech and other harmful content is allowed to flourish on social media platforms. Under its Internet for Trust project, Unesco recently [developed guidelines for the regulation of platforms](#). Among other principles, the document insists on freedom of speech and other rights and focuses on the platforms' own processes for moderation.

The South African bodies dealing with various kinds of content regulation need to adjust to these developments. The [Film and Publications Board](#) has recently begun styling itself South Africa's "content regulatory authority", claiming a brief much larger than provided for in law, and ignoring other bodies including the BCCSA, the Press Council and the Advertising Regulatory Board.

That said, the separation of the various bodies makes less and less sense as the boundaries that define them become increasingly blurred. It may be premature, or even undesirable, to propose an uber-regulator as the FPB seems to want to be. But certainly areas of co-operation should be explored, as well as ways of making it easier for aggrieved audiences to access the right channel.

Certainly, the distinction between content and technical regulation, and between national and international actors, becomes much more important than traditional distinctions between print and broadcast, for instance.

The impact of these global shifts on particular national media, individual sectors and specific operators is still poorly understood, and is unfolding at such a dizzying pace that it is difficult to keep up. There is sometimes a lazy assumption that media in a country like South Africa simply follow their peers in the US, just a few steps behind. But there are many specific circumstances that need to be taken into account.

The SABC, for instance, has been hard hit by the switch-off of analogue TV signals. Though necessary to free up bandwidth and long overdue, the move to digital terrestrial television has robbed the public broadcaster of large audiences and deepened an already grave financial crisis. The SABC's particular circumstances, including its important focus on

poorer audiences and dependence on commercial income, have created a particular vulnerability to this particular development in the digital revolution. Others will not be affected in the same way.

Community media, too, face their own challenges. Some three decades after the first community broadcasters were licenced, it is time to ask whether the policy framework is still appropriate. Questions need to be asked about the meaning of sustainability, whether the policy framework adequately manages potential conflict and capture, and how well stations are serving their audiences. And it is far from clear how they are affected by the global move to digital media and what should be done to protect poorer audiences.

The global shift to digital media is throwing up a long list of issues that affect broadcasters: the dominance of big platforms over local media; control over data; regulation of harmful online content; copyright in material used by large language models; how to ensure the viability of media serving poorer audiences; and much else. Individuals and groups around the world are looking for solutions.

The NAB played a key role in creating a broadcasting sector that suited the new democratic order. The next phase is no less challenging, and will require intelligent collaboration with other groups in the media and beyond, as well as close monitoring of international developments.

Fortunately, the organisation's founding documents provide a solid base to chart a way forward. The NAB's vision talks of promoting a broadcasting industry that serves audiences, and that is grounded in principles of democracy, diversity and freedom of expression.

Though it may become increasingly difficult to isolate a discrete broadcasting industry as such, those foundational principles will remain valid deep into a digital future.

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