

# 2002, a dull year for Radio Journalism

 By [Benedicta Dube](#)

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2002 was pretty much a flat year for radio journalism. A lot of groundwork was covered during the year to prop up skills in the industry. One can only hope that in 2003, training and mentoring efforts will be accelerated. 2003 will be a challenge for the industry; in that for once, news editors, editors-in-chief and general news management will be expected to be less idealistic and more pragmatic in their approach.

A very fascinating interview happened on 702-talk radio, two years ago. It attracted a lot of controversy and criticism, but it also sparked robust debate over government's HIV/AIDS policy. That interview was between the minister of health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and broadcast veteran John Robbie.

The debate was primarily over whether Robbie had crossed the line. Robbie hung up the phone on Dr Tshabalala-Msimang, a cabinet minister, and also stated that she was talking rubbish. This interview has remained in the minds of industry players ever since. There are many reasons one could find for this, but one that seems inescapable is that it was simply a controversial one. It also made for great radio, figuratively speaking.

That was two years ago, but to this day many radio practitioners, myself included, reflect on this interview. It serves as a fascinating detonator that sets off discussions during radio journalism training sessions. There was widespread consensus as 2000 drew to a close, that the Robbie interview had in fact been the radio journalism highlight for that year.

Dear reader, two years later at the end of 2002, one is battling just to find something that radio journalism contributed to the nation. It could have been anything, a debate or something that improved the state of the industry. So here are the highlights for 2002; after consulting various colleagues in the industry none could come up with one outstanding event for the year! Indeed, it is a tragedy of biblical proportions. The year is drawing to a close, and radio journalists cannot look back at their own industry and point out one significant event that could be billed the highlight of the industry in 2002.

On a broader level, one has to remain positive. We can take comfort in the fact that the SA National Editors Forum Skills Indaba got the wheels in motion for skills development in the industry, through the skills audit and the National Skills Indaba. It was brave a step that for once; the industry acknowledged the prevailing lack of skills in this sector.

Part of the problem with the media is that nobody really watches over the watchdogs. However in the case of the SANEF skills audit, at least the watchdogs voluntarily chose to bring themselves under the microscope. It was a major step forward for journalism. Unfortunately radio journalists shut themselves out, at least in real terms. Various steps to prop skills up in newsrooms, and also improve on the overall quality of journalism are being explored since the skills Indaba took place. Some of these processes are taking place through institutions like the MAPPP-SETA - the Media, Advertising, and

MAPPP-SETA along with SANEF, and others are now working on draft unit standards, which are expected to eventually culminate in modules defining one as competent in a particular field. There are those who believe that these unit standards are idealistic, almost "nice to have", and that somehow the commercial radio news sector needs to go back to the basics. But one remains confident that these standards do provide, at the very least, a good first step for the industry. They should give employers guidelines of what skills to lookout for when recruiting staff. While the public broadcaster might be somewhat involved in this process, commercial radio newsrooms seem to have kept to the peripheries. Some news editors are not even aware that there's such a process taking place. That is definitely sad for radio journalism in South Africa.

On another positive note President Thabo Mbeki finally announced members of the Media Diversity and Development Agency (MDDA) board this year. The MDDA is charged with driving media development and diversity initiatives, particularly in the community and small commercial media sector. There are rumblings over the composition of the board. The concern is whether the MDDA will be able to live up to its media developmental mandate. Nonetheless, the appointment of this board on its own provides some glimmer of hope, as we prepare to usher in 2003.

One hopes that the New Year will bring about more consolidated strategies for implementation aimed at addressing the skills problem. The first steps have already been taken, through SANEF, the MDDA and MAPPP-SETA that could assist in this case. But ultimately, it is up to individual radio newsrooms to move out of the fringes and actively embrace these processes. It is in their interests to do so. After all, more that 80 percent of South Africa relies on radio for political news and information. This is particularly acute, when considering that the 2004 elections are just less than 15 months away. What are radio newsrooms going to feed the public if they do not hit the ground running, and improve on their skills in 2003?

SANEF may be moving a bit too slow in implementing resolutions from its skills indaba, at least as they pertain to radio. In 2003, the industry needs to consolidate and work towards improving their own systems. Otherwise, the radio news industry should resign itself to the prevailing view, that it is mediocre.

So here's the overall scorecard as it seems cliché these days to do so at the end of the year, it's been a very dull year for radio news in 2002. The sad part is that things will probably not change much in 2003, at least not for the better. We should however hope that the radio industry bosses, news editors and journalists in the newsrooms would consolidate in 2003. We can also hope that they will improve on the quality of their products.

Hopefully, come this time in 2004 we'll all look back at that year, and say – what an exciting year it's been for radio journalism. So for now, with all the problems that characterised it, the 2000 Robbie - Tshabalala-Msimang interview remains the not so faint but nonetheless distant radio highlight. It does remain the best thing to have happened in radio news in recent times, in that it brought the sector back into sharp focus as a powerful medium that can inform, emote and stimulate the public. The focus was on radio, and everyone was trying to get an audiotape of that interview. Such is the power of radio; it can send the whole nation into fierce debate.

## ABOUT BENEDICTA DUBE

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