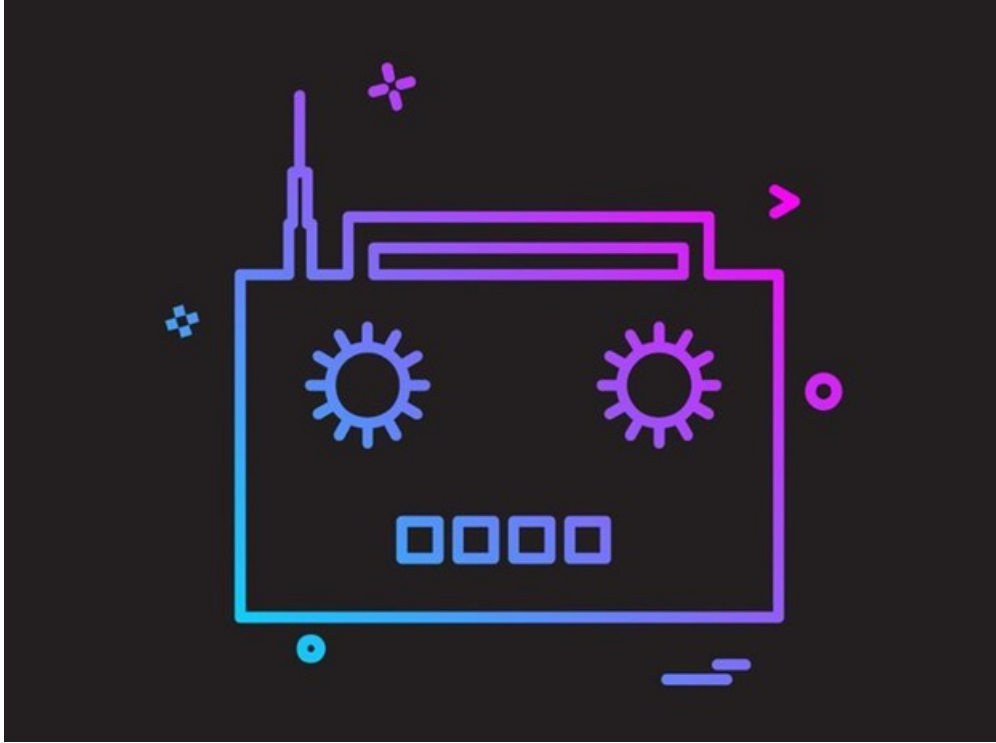


John Maytham on radio's role in 2019

 By Leigh Andrews

13 Feb 2019

On 13 February - World Radio Day - media veteran John Maytham shared memories, insights and impersonations from his radio career in a full-to-the-rafters lunchtime lecture held at Red & Yellow School.



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Red & Yellow School's head of customer, Hélène Lindsay, introduced Maytham by speaking of his acerbic wit, impersonations, intelligence. These three qualities were on full display, with the lecture hall at times stunning in enthralled silence, and at others, echoing with laughs and even blinking back tears at Maytham's time as a field reporter.

Given the reaction to his talk, you'd be surprised to know Maytham began by saying he's sure most of us know what Fomo stands for, but he was having a sense of his own acronym – Raha: Regret At Having Agreed to talk!

But his tale was mesmerising, and before we knew it, Maytham's hour with us was up. I won't share Matham's personal stories, they're his own to tell. But I won't leave you hanging either, as Yolo is just as strong as Fomo. If you missed out, see the main excerpts below...

A question he often gets asked is: “**How does a barefoot boy from rural Eastern Cape get to do talk radio every day?**”

The answer is that it was a winding path, peppered with lifelong learning. Maytham was so bright at school that he matriculated at the age of 15, only to find himself without a further plan.

He was offered a scholarship to study medicine, but says he first got to see a naked woman in his second year of studies – only she was 70 and dead, which is not what he signed up for! It took Maytham a further three years to gain the courage to say this was not for him.

His next study rung saw him studying psychology and English at Rhodes University, with Drama as an additional subject – Maytham’s had a love of being involved in theatre ever since – only to end up with a PhD in psychology and no real desire to be a psychologist.

A passion for people

The reason? He was interested in the people that are far beyond the norm. A good fit for psychology, but he found the conditions they are kept in beyond belief and he lacked the ability to switch off such a tough workday.

Next was a stint in the army, in which he found he could use Shakespearean analogies in almost any situation, and three years as a game ranger.

Only then did Maytham’s ‘media career’ begin. He fell into TV and movies by acting, adding that his was the first character to be killed off in *Egoli*. Through a coincidence involving spilling beer on someone in a pub, Maytham became a journalist.

“ At 11am on 2 February 1990, John Maytham said his first words on the radio – that FW de Klerk had just unbanned the ANC. ”

This was the extraordinary start to his career as Africa correspondent, covering flood and famine with his notebook, for the listeners of Saskatchewan, Canada.

Next, Maytham became part of the team that started SAfm, and in October 1997, he was the first person hired by Mike Mills as news editor for Cape Talk.

Cape Town’s longest-lasting talk radio host

This was a bold move as Cape Town had no medium wave or talk radio until then. Sharing some of his memories of the time, Maytham mentioned that they were allocated R3m for marketing in their first year, which they used up in the first day.

They made a big splash with slogans on outdoor media like billboards and bus shelters, as well as in printing pink slips placed on car windshields, saying: “You’ve been fined for having your radio on FM”. Maytham is the only remaining member of the original Cape Talk team.

The point Maytham wanted to stick with the students attending the talk, because it’s especially true in 2019, if not more so than he left school in 1969, is that no matter how passionate you are, things change. He’s now in his 60s, and still doesn’t know what he wants to do with his life!



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Leigh Andrews 24 Oct 2017



Speaking of how the times have changed, Maytham said that in the early days, an interview was based on attaching your microphone to a reel-to-reel tape, then physically cutting the tape and glueing it together. You'd often have to knock on doors when out in the field and ask if you could call in your story.

Did video kill the radio star? Perhaps...

Maytham also admitted that while it's undoubtedly changed the industry, he's not in love with technology. In fact, it makes him feel less effective as a broadcaster, as presenting his show means he sits in front of three screens in the studio, with an eye glued to newsfeeds, social media alerts and WhatsApps from the audience.

Working "in the news media", you need to share information as quickly as possible, but the fragmented, distracted way that's done today means we don't listen as well as we should. This is a travesty, as Maytham says listening is the most important skills we have.

If you listen beyond the content and focus on the specific words that are used, how they are said, and the pauses in between.



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At the end of the day, the role is still about connecting to individual listeners, even though the channel has changed. So, despite understanding the ubiquity of social media, Maytham is not convinced that the wisdom of the crowd is as some modern commentators would have it be.

“ Maytham says that radio in specific and media, in general, are losing perspective and depth, himself included, at the risk of becoming dangerously superficial and allowing agendas to be driven by the social media echo chamber. ”

Luckily, Maytham remains optimistic for the future.

How we can all make a difference

Maytham concluded with the words that it's just as possible to build a positive scenario as a negative one. In ten years' time, it's set to be a vastly different South Africa to the one we live in today – just how different comes down to individual choice and how you live your life.

In order to still believe in a brighter future, despite the horrors he has reported on himself, Maytham said that even in the darkest days of his reporting there were always a handful of incidents that's reminded him how passionate and resourceful Africans are, and not to give up hope.

Asked by the audience how he sees the broadcast industry changing, Maytham said that he himself hasn't stopped studying, and still does courses online. He recommends this as a way to stay ahead.



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We also talk of multi-platform delivery and doing more than just holding a conversation on the radio but also hosting a text website version of the interview, offering it as a download, and reworking it as a Facebook post.

Maytham only hopes that as things change, we don't lose sight of what gives radio its power – the ability to tell a story one-on-one with the listener, in a direct, immediate, vibrant way.

“ *In awe. One of my heroes - John Maytham- right here, on our campus... being hilarious at a Lunchtime Lecture.*

Thank you [@RedAndYellowEd](https://twitter.com/RedAndYellowEd) pic.twitter.com/UQggVYJVQ4 — Heléne Lindsay (@Helaine_Lindsay) [February 13, 2019](#) ”

To highlight this, Maytham related how in speaking of the impact of his father's death on his life during a broadcast, a newspaper published a photo of cars having pulled off the highway as the men driving and listening in to his show had to pull off the road as they were crying so hard.

Cue tears from the audience. For radio to survive in the midst of all this technological innovation, let it not lose that emotional connection with the listener.

[Click here](#) to listen to a short snippet from Cape Talk's first-ever broadcast by Maytham, and [click here](#) to listen live on [CapeTalk](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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