

Chapter 9

Cultural Pluralism and Democratic Ideation— An African Story: The Case Study of SABC's Three Ethnic Minority Radio Stations

Brilliant Mhlanga
University of Hertfordshire, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the mediation of cultural pluralism by the South African Broadcasting Corporation's three ethnic minority radio stations: Munghana Lonene FM, Phalaphala FM, and X-K FM.¹ By discussing these radio stations as case studies focus will be on their contribution to democratic ideation, and as forms of political disjunctures and continuities in radio broadcasting policy. On disjunctures, the chapter provides a microscopic perspective of the disengagement with the apartheid period as part of a throwback and as a way of charting a new path for a democratic South Africa. Its aim is to show the structural arrangements created and enacted into law by apartheid that had to be repealed and discontinued after 1994. During apartheid, radio broadcasting had been organised along ethnic lines, beginning with two broadcasting schedules in 1937; one for English speakers, known as service A; and service B for Afrikaans speakers. The 1960s in the South African broadcasting landscape marked the establishment of 'Bantu radio stations', which broadcasted mainly in indigenous ethnic languages. This stencil encouraged the creation of more ethnic focused radio stations in the '80s, which were later embraced by the post-apartheid leaders as a way of engendering cultural pluralism aimed at fostering democratic ideation and social transformation.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4197-6.ch009

INTRODUCTION

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated. Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between man and his environment, among men or groups of men within a society, as well as among different societies (Cabral, 1974, p. 13).

This chapter presents the 'residual' and 'incremental policy models' as part of the structural continuities which the new democratic transformation process inherited, and as part of the emancipatory project continued with a view to usher a new era. It also seeks to contribute to a critical argument that has so far been largely ignored; the discourse on South Africa's eleven official languages and how the public radio under the auspices of SABC is offering them space as part of the social transformation's emancipatory project. The focus of this chapter, therefore, is to grapple with the postcolonial logic of continuing with ethnic minority media that had previously been created by apartheid to serve specific regions on ethnic lines. An emerging trend from this practice seems to project towards cultural pluralism and particularity. Further, in view of South Africa's changed political terrain and media landscape, theories of ethnic minority media will be engaged, in particular, Stephen Riggins' (1992) models.

In 1996, ethnic minority radio stations inherited from apartheid were renamed and remodelled, but still allowed to keep their original locations and to continue serving the same ethnic groups. However, this time, the radio stations had a new mandate: to serve as public service broadcasters and with a marked existential ethnic remit as opposed to state broadcasters. This move saw radio stations like *Munghana Lonene FM* and *Phalaphala FM*

gaining in stature and with a new mandate. For instance, Radio Venda, initially established in 1965, was transformed to *Phalaphala FM*. But as in the past, the radio station retained Pietersburg as its original, with Venda as the language of broadcasting. This move followed the 1996 crusade by the new South African government to transform the media; in particular, the broadcast landscape from state broadcasting to public broadcasting as part of its democratic ethos. These state policies began with name changes as seen previously in the case of *Phalaphala FM*, which refers to a traditional horn that was used in the village to announce a meeting, or used whenever there was a very important announcement to make.¹ As for *Munghana Lonene FM*, the station was originally established in 1965 as a station for the Tsonga people, and given the name *Radio Tsonga*. The station was also based in Pietersburg, and its first broadcasts were for less than five hours daily. The target listenership at that time was the rural community of the Tsonga or Shangaan speaking people. This policy by the new South African government to encourage the continuation and rise of ethnic hinged radio stations presents a healthy democratic practice within the communicative sphere. More so, it marks the opening of a democratic space and growth of other indigenous languages in the manner that accords them a linguistic profile that historically had been accorded only to English and Afrikaans.

As stated above, *Munghana Lonene FM* and *Phalaphala FM* continue to broadcast from their original location in Polokwane (formerly Pietersburg), Limpopo Province. And as part of the incrementalist policy model their broadcast spectrums have been expanded to cover Gauteng, North West and Mpumalanga Provinces. Further, they each have a transnational following, with *Phalaphala FM's* coverage stretching into Zimbabwe, while *Munghana Lonene FM's* extends to Mozambique and Swaziland. This move by the post apartheid government will further be presented as the 're-tribalisation' of the state but with a thrust towards a new pluralistic democratic dispensation.

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