

Public is the star of radio, says 702's Chris Gibbons



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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Veteran broadcaster [Chris Gibbons](#) is [leaving Talk Radio 702](#) and [567 CapeTalk's Midday Report](#) at the end of August after eight years of presenting the current-affairs show. He tells Gill Moodie what comes next, how radio has changed since his early 702 days and why he's ready to move on.



Chris Gibbons

Bizcommunity: I know you do consulting, speaking and MC-ing and edit the [SA Institute of Directors'](#) magazine but you've also been writing for [Daily Maverick](#) recently. So will you be doing more writing when you leave 702?

Chris Gibbons: I'm working with [Gibs](#), the business school, to [launch](#) a new quarterly magazine for them (called *Acumen* to come out at the beginning of August), which I will be editing.

Biz: And will that be mostly about Gibs or more broadly business?

Gibbons: Much broader business. We aim to make it the best business read in South Africa.

Biz: That's interesting. I've been thinking lately about why no one's done a [Fortune](#)-style magazine in South Africa. I wonder if that would fly? Am I on the money here?

Gibbons: Yep, you're spot on.

Biz: Wow. But where will you find the writers because this is high-level journalism?

Gibbons: Well, one of things Gibs is doing is backing the magazine financially. So, for example, in our first edition we're going to have John Carlin, (who wrote the book on which *Invictus* was based) and Richard Dowden, who is the director of the Royal African Society and ex-Africa editor of *The Economist* - writers of that calibre and, of course, the best South Africans that we can afford. We're quite excited about it. It's a really pleasant challenge and a really pleasant change for

me to get out of the daily routine of radio.

Biz: And am I assuming correctly that it'll focus on the people in business and how they make the crucial decision, what was going on at crucial points in a business?

Gibbons: Yes, very much so. It will also have research by Gibs academics and will also interface that with business practitioners and observations about the market. We will be writing about Africa because Africa is the place that we need to know about.

Biz: So how are you finding being in the print world after so many years of radio?

Gibbons: Well, you know radio is a wonderful medium. It gives you a very high public profile but it is a daily grind of note. I call it being on the hamster wheel. I've stepped off the wheel before. My first association with Primedia (the owners of 702) was as a fulltime staff member between 1980 - when 702 started - and 1997, when I took a break for four years and then came back as a freelancer (in 2001 to do the *Midday Report*). It is just time for a break.

Biz: I'm sure. I know a lot of preparation goes into presenting radio shows. Can you take me through your daily routine to give me an idea of what it involves?

Gibbons: Well, I prepare the diary between 7am and 8am and have a first conference call with my producer at 8am. She then goes off and refines the diary and finds out what 702 and Cape Talk news are doing. We have a second conference call at about 9am and then I start putting the show together at about 9.30am or 10am - writing links, doing whatever research is necessary for the stories. Hopefully, by 11.30am, everything is in place. We check the technical set-up as I'm in Knysna and we do the show from 12 o'clock to 1pm.

Biz: Being based in Knysna, you obviously haven't had the problems that ([Moneyweb's](#)) Alec Hogg has had (cable theft forced him to leave his remote radio studio in the KZN midlands recently and move back to Johannesburg).

Gibbons: No, and Alec moved to Nottingham Road several years after I moved to Knysna, once he heard that I'd made Knysna work.

Biz: That's a sad story about the cable theft. There's no reason in the world why a remote radio studio can't work these days. One would not foresee that something like cable theft would make it unworkable.

Gibbons: Ja, it's absolutely tragic. I must say that the much-maligned Telkom were absolutely superb in Knysna. I moved down here in 2006. I had two serious problems in six years and one was solved within hours and the other within days.

Biz: Being out of Joburg, do you find you have to work harder in keeping up with what's happening because you're not in the daily buzz, running into people and chatting to them?

Gibbons: The advantage that I have on the *Midday Report* is that it is broadcast in Cape Town and Johannesburg so I couldn't be too specific to either city. Most stories I did had to play in both cities. But you're absolutely right. I go to either Cape Town or Johannesburg about once a month and if I leave it a bit longer than that, you can almost feel the brain starting to ebb out with the tide through the Knysna heads... It's not the formal stuff (that you miss out on), it's the informal stuff - it's literally the conversations around the water cooler or over a cup of tea. The formal stuff - reading the papers, going on to all the websites - that's all plenty do-able.

Biz: Let's go back a bit. You were at 702 on its very first day (as sports editor) but what did you do before that?

Gibbons: I was an actor. Although I studied English at Cambridge (University), I acted right the way through. I came back to South Africa and worked for Pieter Toerien, for Napac and Pact. Then one morning I woke up and realised that I was a good actor and I would make a living out of it but it wouldn't be much more than that. So in 1978, I joined the SABC. In May 1980 I joined 702, which went on air in June 1980.

Biz: Those early days at 702 must have been very exciting?

Gibbons: They were difficult times. They were scary times. We were working with legends like John Berks and Clark McKay was still around. It was really absolutely brilliant for a youngster to work with guys like that... From a news perspective, all you had to do was report accurately, tell the truth and you were filling a role that the State broadcaster had

never done.

Biz: So how does talk radio today compare with 702 of the early years?

Gibbons: I think the format has changed... When we went talk in 1987, we did something that had never been done before: which was to move from a music station to a talk station. The SABC had woken up by then and, in 1985, they put Highveld on the one side of us and Radio 5 on the other side - both with big FM signals. We were going out of business. We had no option but to go talk so we were forced into it. And we then found that in the late '80s and early '90s that we could do things that, for South Africa, were absolutely ground breaking. In 1989 I put Thabo Mbeki on air from Lusaka. We had Mohammed Valli Moosa on the run from security police in our studio. We were constantly being raided by the cops. We were constantly being called through to Pretoria. We were constantly being threatened with the loss of our licence.... Looking back, they were very exciting times... The talk radio that we did was black people talking to white people and white people talking to black people for the first time in South African history. I don't want to overstate it... but I do think that, and we did very well. I don't think there's any question about that. Compared to then, I find talk radio quite banal (today). Those were life-changing, sometime life-threatening issues. Would we come through it? What was on the other side? But, having said that, I think we're in difficult times at the moment. I don't think South Africa is in a good space and you can hear it on the radio. If you listen to (702's) [Redi Tlhabi's](#) show, for instance, there are tough conversations going on. People are worried. So maybe it more fair to say we went through a banal patch.

Biz: Why do you say the format has changed?

Gibbons: There is much more interaction with listeners. In years gone by, we talked exclusively to the newsmakers. We did not talk to the public. Now the public is almost the star of the show... It's a much more Australian format. Some people say it is dumbing down but it certainly works because 702's listenership figures are the highest they've ever been.

Biz: And in today's world, audiences - with online and blogs and social networks - expect a two-way conversation rather than being talked to. They want to be able to phone a journalist or presenter up and say: 'You're talking rubbish'.

Gibbons: Yup, once the genie is out of the bottle it's quite difficult to put it back. I'm not saying it's cast in stone and you have to do it that way. If you go to the UK and you listen to the *Today* programme, they still only talk to the newsmakers. The thing that we sometimes battle with (in SA) is the fact that we're really quite a small country and the pool of newsmakers is quite small. You wind up talking to the same people again and again.

Biz: You may be happy to be free from the daily grind of radio but will you miss it at all?

Gibbons: I will miss the instant access to people in interesting places and situations. But I will not miss the daily grind and I think working with magazines like the *Gibs* magazine and working with the Institute of Directors, I will still be able to enjoy the same level of access but in a different way. Instead of being able to have a four-minute conversation with someone - which is the kind of radio that I do - it will be slightly more thoughtful, more reflective, more in-depth work. That, I'm looking forward to.

For more:

- [Wikipedia entry for 702](#)
- *Bizcommunity*: [Small players threaten commoditised radio.](#)[May 2012
- [Journalism.co.za: \['Investigative journalism on radio: not yet extinct' Investigative journalism on radio: not yet extinct,](#) November 2011.

ABOUT GILL MOODIE: @GRUBSTREETSA

Gill Moodie (@grubstreetSA) is a freelance journalist, media commentator and the publisher of Grubstreet (www.grubstreet.co.za). She worked in the print industry in South Africa for titles such as the *Sunday Times* and *Business Day*, and in the UK for Guinness Publishing, before striking out on her own. Email Gill at gill@grubstreet.co.za and follow her on Twitter at @grubstreetSA.

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