

We speak your language

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One of the simple pleasures in life is connecting with someone. Be it a short greeting, an extended conversation or a complex sequence of events, the ability to talk to and understand each other remains central to our being.



Language creates a sense of belonging, pride and identity, and in many instances is also linked to cultural affiliation and nationalism.

South Africa has a unique tapestry of people, language and culture that make up what has affectionately become known as the rainbow nation. Our conviction around association and language is so strong, our rights are entrenched in the South African constitution and other pieces of legislation aimed at promoting the access to information and use of our official languages.

As a medium, radio creates a sense of belonging by connecting on an individual level with the audience, the power of radio lies in the power of language. The SABC, as public broadcaster, is mandated to serve South Africans in all official languages with news, entertainment and information. To achieve this, SABC radio has nineteen stations delivering music and content. These stations provide linear FM but also create for multi-media platforms and technologies. From Ukhozi FM serving just short of six million isiZulu speakers to X-K FM catering to the marginalised !Xhu and Khwe communities of the Northern Cape, South Africa has a dynamic radio landscape catering to the needs of her people.

So why is indigenous language broadcasting important in South Africa?

As a diverse country with a challenged history, it is critical for people to feel valued as citizens. Delivering news and information to people in their home language contributes to nation building, a corner stone of the SABC mandate. Nada Wotshela, SABC Group Executive, Radio, says that in the South African context, broadcasting in the eleven official languages gives people and communities dignity through communication. Providing news and information in all eleven official languages requires a specialised team of broadcasters and Wotshela is openly passionate about creating opportunities for practitioners who want to work and create in their mother tongue. Wotshela adds that in terms of Nation Building, it is essential for all official languages to be given equal opportunity to grow and develop, no one should be left behind.

Radio covers vast geographical areas and speaks to a multitude of people from different backgrounds. With historical challenges around education, mother tongue radio broadcasting is the only way for illiterate citizens to be kept up to date with events in the country. Wotshela says the SABC plays a central role in delivering infotainment to those who are unable to read. A small example would be the simple act of reading a story book live on the air or the sharing of a message in an educational drama. Radio bridges the knowledge gap for those who are unable to read and write by delivering the message to them in a language they understand, radio creates a better lived experience.

Because language lives in people, it is continually evolving. Radio, as the spoken word medium, is a custodian of language and language practice. Radio helps language evolve but it also preserves the history, purity and authenticity of the language it broadcasts in. Wotshela says the SABC is often called out when leaders and communities feel that a local language has been improperly used. Radio not only guides the nuanced changes of language influenced by pop culture, music, technology, and social media, but also in current affairs and sport. Being a former Programme Manager for the isiXhosa station, Umhlobowene FM, Wotshela describes how veteran commentators like Peter Bacela would need to formulate new words based on changes in the game so that the audience could follow the action in mother tongue. It is the work done on radio that has created vivid new words like "qakatha-qakatha!" that describes a cricket ball rolling on the ground.

Creating content in mother tongue also invests into the creative economy. With practitioners conceptualising, creating, and executing in their home language, the entire creative value chain is impacted. Wotshela speaks openly about the need for young people to be able to study home language modules as part of their tertiary education. She says it is unreasonable to ask someone to create content for radio programmes if the last time they used a language in a formal setting was during their high school years. "Young people need to know it is cool to use their home language and that we (the SABC) are keen to hire broadcasters who want to use and contribute to the preservation and use of their home languages. "

With more content being conceptualised in mother tongue, the quality of writing, scripting, voice overs and sound engineering also improves. To deliver a professional product, it is essential to have people who are language proficient working on these projects. Radio dramas often reflect a lived experience of the writer, with this content being directly expressed in their language of choice, there is cultural or lived nuance which often gets lost in translation. The more that is done in mother tongue, the better it becomes. Wotshela agrees and uses another cricket example of audiences watching a game on TV but listening to the commentary on the radio. The total experience is more vivid and personal to the audience when it is in their home language.

Is enough being done to promote mother tongue radio creative? It seems as if there is good momentum with the SABC and the community radio all contributing to pockets of creation and conceptualisation. It is often cheaper and easier to translate existing English scripts and content than to formulate the content from the ground up. One quickly realises the disproportionate effort involved in mother tongue creation (spell check is a small example), but there is no doubt that audiences value the time and effort.

With brands understanding the value of an engaged audience, it almost seems opportune to rethink the mother tongue question. What opportunities are being missed because brands are deaf to the language being used on powerful radio platforms and more importantly, do you speak their language?

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