



## WARRING IN THE ETHER

*For decades, a fierce war of words has been waged by clandestine radio stations in the ether over southern Africa. Now, at last, the story is being pieced together.*

*This report by* **LEBONA MOSIA, DON PINNOCK** *and* **CHARLES RIDDLE**

**U**NHERALDED and unknown to most South Africans, *Radio Freedom*, the oldest liberation radio station in Africa, slipped off the air last year as its broadcasters joined the queues of exiles on the road back home. The battle of the airwaves, which had its origins in the late 1950s, was publicly ended in August 1991 when Thami Ntteni, director of the African National Congress radio station, announced at the Jabulani Conference in Holland that his transmission had ended.

For almost three decades the two longest-lived liberation stations, *Radio Freedom* and Swapo's *Voice of Namibia*, had attempted to reach supporters through a barrage of State jamming and censorship. The South African

government, in turn, was closely involved not only in clandestine stations such as *Voz de Africa Livre* (the Renamo station broadcast into Mozambique from the Transvaal) and *Radio Truth* (which beamed hostile "news" at Zimbabwe) but more openly in its propagandistic use of public radio in occupied Namibia.

The radio truce ended a chapter of media history which has been almost totally ignored by journalists and historians.

Initially the fight for air-space was fought by the big thunderers such as the *BBC* and *Radio Moscow*. But as African countries gained their independence, they were quick to join the fray. One of the first to do so was newly independent Ghana – under pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah – which, in

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1958, launched a service aimed at "the liberation and unity of the entire African continent". In this, Ghana joined two other independent states, Egypt and Ethiopia, already broadcasting to the colonial south.

The new nations saw a radio transmitter capable of international broadcasting as one of the hallmarks of independence alongside television, international airports and embassies abroad. And the Cold War rivals were usually on hand to help out. Thus Guinea, which gained independence from France in 1958, came to an agreement with the Communist bloc which gave it a 100Kw transmitter in 1961.

The station was baptized *The Voice of the Revolution* and Telecommunications Minister, Alassane Diop dedicated it with the remark that it was a "transmitting center thanks to which the voice of truth will go throughout the world to combat colonialism and neo-colonialism; the voice of rehabilitation will go to the African people and to all oppressed peoples, and the voice of friendship and peace will go to people everywhere".

In 1965, a new transmitter in Mogadishu was handed over by the Soviet ambassador to the Somali Minister of Information, Yusuf Adan Bokah, who noted the station would ensure that the Somali voice "would be heard all over the world". Bokah would find the competition stiff – that year alone Rwanda, Mali and Zaire installed international transmitters and the minister's comments soon became a refrain on the continent. Everyone wanted their version of the truth on the airwaves.

**While independent** states were quick to open radio stations, political groups were not. The popular image of liberation radio – that of a group of people operating a small privately-owned transmitter from a hidden location inside a country – did not seem to apply in Africa. One example of this type of station, however, was the *Voice of Resistance of the Black Cockerel*, the Unita station which operated during the civil war in Angola.

But Unita's use of radio is the exception. More commonly, African liberation stations used Government-owned facilities of host states to broadcast internationally. *The Voice of Free Angola* and *Fighting Angola* were put out by Brazzaville and Kinshasa radios on behalf of resistance groups during Portuguese colonial rule. The practice of piggy-backing a host station became increasingly common as colonialism was rolled back toward South Africa and newly independent nations obtained their own powerful transmitters. By the end of the Zimbabwean war of independence, for example, listeners could tune into Patriotic Front programmes broadcast from Maputo, Addis Ababa, Tanarive, Lusaka, and Luanda.

The main host station was that of newly-independent Tanzania. Julius Nyerere saw the promotion of liberation

movements in southern Africa as one of his foreign policy objectives and he was in the forefront of OAU attempts to organise forces directed against South Africa and its administration in Namibia.

Broadcasts for "the liberation of Africa" were officially started on the Tanganyika Broadcasting Corporation on June 25, 1962 and directed at listeners in present-day Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi. Thus Tanzania gave air-time in the early 1960s to Kenneth Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP), which broadcast to colonial Northern Rhodesia before independence in 1964.

**The use of** the station by liberation movements was boosted in 1968 with the creation of *Radio Tanzania's* External Service. Opening the service, the Minister of Information and Tourism, Mr Makane, said it had been established to assist in "propagating the ideological principles of the liberation movements in Tanzania". The External Service was given the task of supporting the liberation of Africa, African unity, harmonising good neighbourliness and portraying Tanzania's image outside its boundaries".

Broadcasts by liberation movements were intensified and eight liberation movements used *Radio Tanzania* from 1968. They were the Pan African Congress (PAC), African National Congress (ANC), South West African Peoples' Organisation (Swapo), Zimbabwean African National Union (Zanu), Zimbabwean African Peoples' Union (Zapu), The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), The Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo), and the National Liberation Movement of the Comores (Molinaco). The service was also used by the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Front for the Liberation of Zimbabwe (Frolizi).

According to the Tanzanian Minister of Information at the time, *Radio Tanzania's* external services were formed to "promote African liberation movements, report their activities and broadcast correct information to counteract the false and malicious propaganda broadcast by radios in Mozambique, South Africa and South West Africa".

*Radio Tanzania* made its studio facilities available to liberation movements and paid nominal fees to those who participated in the compilation and presentation of programmes. Between 1975 and 1985, about 17 percent (10,5 hours out of a weekly external broadcast time of 60,45 hours) was devoted to programmes by the liberation movements.

The South African authorities were well aware of the potential influence of cross-border radio. During World War II the United Party had been forced to contend with Nazi Germany's *Radio Zeesen* broadcasts to the Union in Afrikaans – a use, somewhat ironically, which made

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Afrikaans the first southern African language to be used on liberation radio. But by 1958 the tables had turned.

That year, Nationalist MP, JC Greyling complained in Parliament that “*Radio Cairo* is at the present time engaged on an anti-European poison campaign through the air over Africa”.

In 1952, the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Albert Hertzog, told Parliament that the cheap radio set being introduced by the British authorities in their African colonies was problematic. The ‘Saucepan Special’ – as the set was known – was a shortwave receiver, and was therefore “definitely not a success, not for the Natives ... Those sets are shortwave sets and it makes it possible for them to listen to the whole world ... take Moscow for instance. If they know those Natives have all those shortwave sets there is nothing to prevent Moscow from giving them all types of information that we do not want the Native to hear about.”

The “Natives” had other plans. In June 1963, with the ANC and PAC banned and freedom of expression under the heel of an increasingly repressive government, Walter Sisulu launched *Radio Freedom's* first broadcast from a small transmitter on the Reef with these words: “I speak to you,” he said, “from somewhere in South Africa. I have not left the country. I do not plan to leave. Many of our leaders of the African National Congress have gone underground. This is to keep the organisation in action; to preserve the leadership; to keep the fight going. Never has the country, and our people, needed leadership as they do now, in this hour of crisis. Our house is on fire.”

**But the smoke** attracted attention and shortly afterwards police raided the Rivonia hideout of Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK) and seized the transmitter, along with Sisulu and many of the MK leadership. The life imprisonment that resulted was a major setback to the ANC and precipitated a mass exodus of disaffected political exiles.

According to Thami Ntteni, “the liberation forces were in retreat – Rivonia had struck a severe blow in terms of organisation. There was a state of apathy, those were the difficult years of the struggle. It took six years for *Radio Freedom* to get back on the air – and it was reborn out of a felt need by ANC exiles to re-establish a voice within South Africa.”

In 1969 the ANC approached the Tanzanian government for air time and was granted 15 minutes a day. Three years later, under the guidance of 1956 Treason Trial lawyer Duma Nokwe, *Radio Freedom* was granted 45 minutes on

*Radio Zambia*. This was followed by air time on *Radio Luanda* (1977), *Radio Madagascar* (1979) and *Radio Ethiopia* (1981).

The South African solution in the war of words was the introduction of tribal stations on a high-frequency, low-range FM system. While FM was technically advanced, it also had the great advantage in that, to quote Hertzog, “the Native ... will not be exposed to these evils (propaganda from abroad) ... If we use (FM), and we give the Natives sets which are adjusted to receive those wavelengths, we shall obviously eliminate the possibility of their being influenced from overseas.”

Hertzog’s ideal model was a “peoples’ set” similar to those issued by the Nazis in the 1930s to prevent Germans from listening to the *BBC*. The strategy tended to white-out the ANC’s shortwave initiative and *Radio Freedom* found itself broadcasting to a target audience which had grown “attuned” to listening to short-range FM stations, even although 53 percent of urban blacks owned radios with shortwave bands.

The South African government strategy was recognised as problematic by *Radio Freedom* broadcaster Everest Siyeka: “The people did not really understand what medium wave was, what they should do, what frequencies were. Hence we tried to use our publications, like *Mayibuye*, *Dawn* and *Sechaba* to inform them. We would write on the back pages the various channels and frequencies of *Radio Freedom* stations.” This was compounded by jamming of *Radio Freedom* broadcasts. Nevertheless, the liberation station continued to battle for space in the airwaves. According to Ntteni it was, however faint, a way of saying to the people of South Africa that the ANC had not died, that it was alive and well... “and to keep your fires burning”.

**The piggy-back** system had its values and its problems. The host governments placed no restrictions on what was said, and provided free air time and studio space during broadcasts. Notes Ntteni: “All you had to do was to see to it that the guys were eating and smoking and that the radio was on the air.” But as the time allowed to *Radio Freedom* grew, it became necessary to have their own studios. According to Ntteni, the ANC did not have the funds to prioritise their need, and a group of sympathetic Dutch broadcasters formed ‘Omroep Voor Radio Freedom’ to raise funds for equipment.

Training was another problem. Most radio trainees were drawn from MK camps and very few had the education necessary to be accepted at formal training facilities. After

PLEASE TURN OVER



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1976, with the opening of three new stations, the need for trained broadcasters was acute. Initially these were found at Nova Katenga, an ANC camp in Angola that was subsequently destroyed by the South African Air Force in 1979. Katenga was more than a military camp, it was also a school of politics. It was there that Professor Jack Simons, once of the University of Cape Town, selected some cadres for further training. From the ‘graduate’ of Nova Katenga emerged the first post-Soweto group of announcers. These went on to the Lenin Party School for further training, a course which announcer Themba Ntshangase subsequently described as lacking in sophistication, “more of a propagandist type of course”.

It was this group which opened up *Radio Freedom* from Luanda in 1977. However, later announcers were offered a wide range of training opportunities. Harare Polytech dropped its entrance requirements to take *Radio Freedom* students while others studied in Zambia, Tanzania, Ghana, East Germany, Cuba, Rumania, the Netherlands and the USSR, and stations in the Soviet Union and East Germany hosted on-the-job training for the South Africans.

*Radio Freedom’s* broadcasts were a mix of news, commentary and music. A typical broadcast lasted 30 minutes, consisting of news (10 minutes), a formal commentary on a current event and then a varied presentation made up of music, drama and short commentaries. *Radio Freedom* had no formal correspondents in South Africa and relied on what it could glean from recent exiles and clandestine correspondents. Sometimes news broadcast would be up to three weeks old.

“We had very limited access and resources of information” recalls Ntteni. “We depended on broadcasts from the *BBC* and later on, we had access to newspapers from South Africa. Some people would hop over the border and post things to us from neighbouring states. We had no formal correspondents.”

**On occasion** broadcasts were hampered by bad communication with ANC structures inside South Africa. In the Silverton bank siege in 1979, for example, *Radio Freedom* was among the last to note ANC involvement – the ANC representative in Dar-Es-Salaam had distanced himself from the action. Communication inside *Radio Freedom* wasn’t that great at times either – they had leadership problems. “In *RF* we never had the correct political leadership in relation to directing the station. This caused obvious difficulties; people on the spot could not relate smoothly with their heads because they were just political not journalists,” remembers Themba Ntshangase.

It is impossible to assess the effectiveness of a liberation station such as *Radio Freedom*. Internationally, it was monitored by the *BBC* which quoted its commentaries as the official ANC position. Internally, most townships had

listening clubs where groups of ANC supporters would gather to listen to and discuss *Radio Freedom* broadcasts. Undeniably, it played a role in influencing some people to become actively involved in politics, in keeping the exiled ANC leadership in touch with supporters inside South Africa and in persuading some to leave the country. It is not uncommon, for example, for exiles to state that they were “recruited by *Radio Freedom*”. Liberation songs played on *Radio Freedom*, but composed in MK camps, became widely known within South Africa. According to Ntteni: “There is no other way people could have got these songs except through *Radio Freedom*”.

**In the nature** of a ‘subversive’ station, listener-ship research is minimal. In a 1989 *BBC*-sponsored survey aimed at establishing *BBC* listenership inside South Africa, respondents were asked about rival stations. The *BBC* gave *Radio Freedom* a total audience among urban blacks in any language of one percent and, among whites, of 0,5 percent. Of course, such figures are of little help in assessing impact as much of a liberation radio’s force is to be found in the way the message is subsequently taken up in the community after it is passed on by small groups of listeners.

Talking to returned announcers doesn’t help much either – one of *Radio Freedom’s* biggest problems was a lack of feedback from its audience. Everest Siyeka, who produced a “listeners’ letters” programme in Lusaka for *Radio Freedom* says that “on average ... in a month we would get something like maybe two or three letters coming in ... which did not give a clear idea of exactly what was happening on the ground.” Justice Maluleka, head of *Radio Freedom* in Madagascar, said people used to write to them but “this ran into problems because the letters were intercepted by the South African government. So we ended up without feedback.”

Whatever its impact in the past, the future of Africa’s longest-lived liberation radio station is now uncertain. “We are going to participate in public broadcasting as well as community broadcasting,” says Ntteni. “*Radio Freedom* may have been bigger, we may have done more, but one must not feel that all the effort was in vain. I think we have gone a long way. You find a lot of people today who say they were introduced to politics by *Radio Freedom*. Even now there are people saying ‘We need *Radio Freedom*’. That gives one a sense of achievement. We are still in the battle for the freedom of the airwaves.” ●

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