

Local content production support - critical as Zimbabwe gears up for digitisation

 By Koliwe Nyoni Majama

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Currently Zimbabwe is gearing itself up for two significant developments in the broadcasting industry - the announcement of the successful local commercial licence applicants submitted to the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) in 2014 and the digital migration that will see the country move from analogue to digital broadcasting. Both processes offer the opportunity for reflection on the realities of local content production in the country as they directly affect the broadcasting industry.

The country expects an increase in the number of players in radio broadcasting following pronouncements at a Press club discussion held 14 February, 2015 by the Minister of Information, Media and Broadcasting, Professor Jonathan Moyo that authorities will by the end of this month announce nine of the successful applicants. This follows the submission of the results of the vetting process by the BAZ to the ministry. Zimbabweans also expect the licensing of community radio by December this year.

Increase in opportunities

What the coming on-air of more radio stations translates to is more opportunities for the industry, and in this instance independent radio productions and a boom in the music industry. Both these sectors have, over the years, received very little funding support and had very few options for the airing of that content, as the country had very few licensed broadcasters. However, there are other considerations to be made so that the country harnesses fully the 'opening up of the airwaves', and realises professional, diverse and fully -fledged local content in Zimbabwean broadcasts.



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To date, a snap shot of the current broadcasting industry, very few independent productions are aired on Zimbabwean radio and television, a reflection of the challenges shared at the 2014 MISA-Zimbabwe Stakeholders broadcasting conference, by Independent film producer Tapfuma Machakaire. These include among other issues, the stringent commissioning conditions and editorial control and quality of productions, as set by the broadcasting entities.

The import of digitisation in the television industry in Zimbabwe is apparent when one looks at the only television channel in the country - ZTV. Undoubtedly the challenges that ZTV faces in meeting its obligatory quota will definitely filter down to the new television broadcasting players. At this juncture what is required is diversity in television production to include a variation in content for documentaries, diversity in language use in sitcoms, diversity in socio economic and political issues in drama and even exploring reality TV that genuinely reflects Zimbabwean day to day experiences.

More channels possible

Undoubtedly, the digital migration process will bring with it the possibility for more channels for both radio and television, and this is because digital broadcast signals can be compressed and offer more channels for programming in the freed up spectrum that previously was only able to transmit a single analogue channel. With digitisation Zimbabwe's approximated four available television channels will increase five- fold.

It is this reality that makes Minister Moyo's recent announcement on his Twitter account of a local content development fund through the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) and a 'low budget' film fund, a welcome development.

Funding of the sector is provided for in Section 29 of the BSA with the creation of broadcasting fund which inter-alia aims to provide grants to encourage the growth of the Zimbabwean creative industry including film and music industry to meet the local content obligations of broadcasting licensees. However, the administration and procedures of accessing the fund by broadcast stakeholders, let alone local content producers, is not clear.

While already existing efforts are currently underway for a supplementary sustainability fund, there is need for a specific law that provides for funding within the sector and laid out principles relating to the processes of accessing that fund. It is this fund that should adequately cater for the current needs for capacity in particularly the independent production sector, and enable producers to meet the demand. The reality, however, remains that for those that are licensed, there is need to ensure that they still adopt business models to make their channels financially viable.

Another recommendation is one that is advocated by stakeholders who attended the 2014 Stakeholders conference. This relates to the need for a sound local content policy framework be developed for the industry. The Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) outlines specific quotas for local content for various licensees in Section 11(3) and its 6th schedule ranging between 70 & 80 % for most broadcasters of Zimbabwean content, 10% of African content in some instances and around 30% for subscription broadcasters. There, however, needs to be clarity in the definition of what constitutes local content, particularly that, in some sections of the 6th schedule it is referred to as "Zimbabwean content"

Looking into the quotas

Another key consideration relating to the policy includes the review of the existing quota, basing on a regional survey of neighbouring countries and an analysis of the extent to which the current broadcasters are compliant with the quotas. Monitoring of and compliance with quota stipulations is also critical within the policy. While Section 41(a) of the BSA mandates every broadcaster to make and keep a record of every program broadcast and make available for inspection by the Broadcasting Authority at its request, it is not clear how proper monitoring of adherence to local content measures is conducted. Compliance with the payment of royalties to the Zimbabwe Music Rights Association (ZIMURA) by broadcasters, and reliance on them in the process, clearly demonstrates the importance of ensuring that there is a process of monitoring that compliance of broadcasters. Challenges have been faced in the payment and collection of royalties to the point that ZIMURA is putting in place a system to monitor playlists on all radio and television stations in the country. This, the organisation hopes, will ensure transparency in collection of annual airplay royalties for musicians in view of digitisation.

Suffice to say, the current quotas are seemingly high against a local content production system that is barely existent especially for film industry. In South Africa, for instance, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) requires public broadcasters to source 40% of the content from independent producers, with 70% local news and 60% on programmes.

So, as the country approaches the International Telecommunications Union's July 2015 deadline, it is apparent that wholesome support of the production sector is of paramount importance. It is this transition from analogue to digital broadcasting that should harness our diversity as a country. This can only be achieved through a vibrant, sustainable and diverse productions sector which would use minority languages, not usually catered for in the mainstream, and allow for creativity around critical socio, economic and political issues affecting our lives today.

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