

# The real 21st century

As the true multi-media medium, radio is perfectly placed to reap huge rewards from the digital media age, and marketers can get in on the action. Head

strategist of digital and internet strategy consultancy Immedia, Anice Hassim explains the new relevance of radio in a connected world.

**W**e have been conditioned by years of "new new" things to believe that the media avalanche generated by technology in the last decade has meant the death of old media, or at the very least, that old media is irrelevant.

Traditional media is, without question, struggling to define its voice in this onslaught.

In an African context, this is made doubly difficult by the generational remove we have from the ubiquitously connected societies in America, Europe and the East.

If the last century was about the First World and the Third World, then this century is clearly about the connected world and the disconnected world. There is a tendency to view our position on the Southern tip as being hopeless, of having nothing of value to contribute to the conversation of media evolution, and that certainly we don't have a literate enough population to be a vital contributor to this debate.

But those who adopt this view could not be more wrong. As the strongest, most developed, advanced economy in Africa, South Africa is in fact a beacon to developing countries. We have world-class talent and resources that allow us to take Western experience and evolve it to deal with our African reality.

South African consumers have also never been shy to adopt technology that makes a difference in their lives. This offers a clear value proposition. It is why Multichoice is the giant it is today, why MTN

strides across Africa like a colossus. Cellular towers are the new railroads. Where they appear, commerce, community and consumption congregate. More than any government policy or UN initiative, the simple rolling out of 'yello' across Africa and the Middle East has created opportunity.

Why do I mention these examples? Because they are proof that South African talent can uniquely identify and explore markets and unlock them. With the new Seacom cable, EASSY and other projects, the penetration of broadband and mobile is about to rocket, and its being driven by our friends at MTN, Vodacom and local ISPs.

The connected consumer, while already a reality in the upper LSMs in South Africa, is about to become a reality for all South Africans. Access to the online world (or what I call the "cloud") is about to become as commonplace as access to utilities like water, electricity and flush toilets.

In this connected world, where will radio fit in?

This single-dimensional, audio-only medium, is in fact, poised to receive the lion's share of benefit from online and mobile media. This is because modern radio is actually far removed from the audio-only construct that most people, both in and out the industry, consumers and advertisers alike, believe it to be.

Today, radio is the glue that binds our real-world interaction with our online world. It is where "cloud" and real-life meet seamlessly, in real time.

Radio, the original mass medium, used to be a prized media diamond. It was however, a fairly simple diamond of few facets. But something strange has happened, especially over the last decade, and

particularly in South Africa - radio has evolved beyond recognition. Today it is still a media diamond, but is composed of many, many more facets - eventing, outside broadcasts, mobile, blogging, online services - and as a result, the medium now has a lot more bling.

As mobile penetration has rocketed and online begins to take a firm hold in South Africa, the changes that are being wrought on the media landscape are profound - and in many areas, radio is leading the charge.

While a reality in South Africa however, this new version of radio is actually quite foreign to American stations and broadcasters, caught up as they are in the rigid, corporatised mentality of homogenous programming and least-cost broadcasting. Too scared to evolve in case they lose what relevance they do have, they view online and mobile as competitors, not as complementary facets of the same core radio brand.

Because in a digital world, those media which can co-exist and respond in real time, will brighten. Radio, as it turns out, is just such a medium, and is a perfect fit with new media.

The development of a "seventh sense"

Consumers in the "connected world" today possess analytical muscle and abilities that did not exist in previous generations. They are able to confront a tidal wave of information and selectively cherry-pick what they wish from the info-stream.

Younger consumers can even do this in parallel. They can watch a TV programme, surf the net, text their friends and chat to their mom - all at the same time. To older people, this behaviour seems

# medium

scattered and unfocused, but to the teenager on the couch, it's as effortless as breathing. This ability to sift relevance from a torrent of simultaneous sources is emerging as a "seventh sense" - building on the physical senses and intuition and creating a new modality completely.

And this is where radio comes in, where it can flex its inherent power. When connected consumers are cut off from online or mobile access, they start to experience a phenomenon called "disconnect anxiety". They lose their seventh sense, feeling that a part of them has been cut off, and it weighs on them heavily enough to cause behavioural changes. It is powerful stuff indeed, and should be factored into our thinking when we're talking to these consumers.

And the medium capable of easing this "disconnect anxiety" is radio.

Stations like East Coast Radio have already travelled a long way down this road. A regional media powerhouse, the station is far more than its roots would suggest. It has been nominated for nine and won six South African Blog Awards over the last two years. Over a million unique visitors per year flock to its online portal for all things KZN. Most recently, ECR has entered the transactional arena by raising over R100 000 online for its CSI drives.

YFM by contrast, has dropped the frequency from its brand in its drive to be a cross-media destination, ensuring that it is visible (and interactive) on all major platforms. It was the first radio station to deliver an iPhone experience to its audience, its Facebook app has a strong following, and its listeners are wonderfully vocal in their opinions.

Success in this space comes because stations are taking a radio-centric approach to new media. When a radio station ignores the "radio" part of its offering, it becomes just another online player like every other.

Rather than going willy-nilly into new media, stations like Highveld, ECR, Y, Jacaranda and a couple of others are fleshing out their core radio offering, putting meat on the bones of the traditional radio skeleton. They are creating a vital and rich new experience for their communities that effectively turns traditional "one-way" radio into a dialogue, a conversation with their audience. As a result, these stations are growing up to fulfil the promise that radio could be the "empire of the air" once hinted at before it was superseded by television.

In many ways, it is television that is a hulking dinosaur because its programming, business and talent models just do not allow for TV channels to make the leap into digital in a cohesive way that preserves their identity. In TV, affinity is based on content. If Carte Blanche, the respected news magazine show, switched tomorrow to a different broadcast owner, would viewers care? Probably not. They would just get used to switching to a different channel number.

PVR abstracts the channel identity completely, and consumers make viewing choices based simply

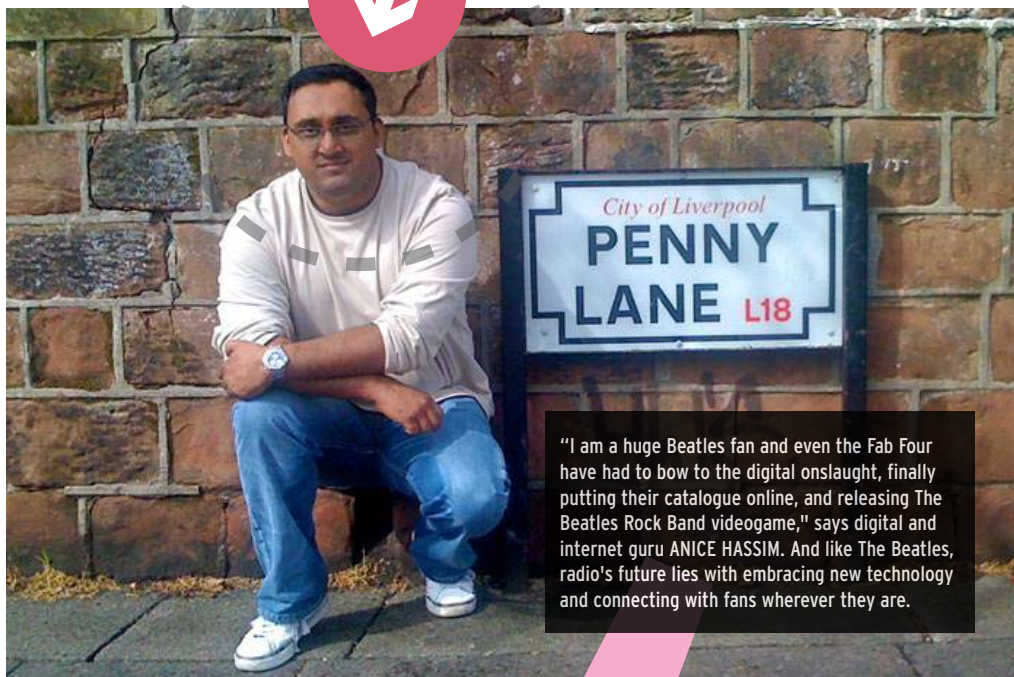
on content and the mood they are in.

In this sense, the radio brand is gold, since audiences are passionate about their radio station of choice. They have no such affinity for their television channel, choosing content over carrier every single time. When they can help it, and they will, they will even bypass the carrier completely to go straight to the content.

Radio is under no such threat since it is rooted in the real-time here and now. It fully engages consumers' "seventh sense" and teleports them daily to new discoveries, conversations and services both around the corner and in the "cloud".

Getting the most out of radio means treating it with respect, taking the time to understand what it has to offer, and how best it can be used to your advantage. Merely chucking a "bucket o' spots" into the media schedule is the lazy way out - radio today can be used far more creatively and sensorially than ever before.

There are admittedly only a few pioneers amongst the major players right now, almost all of them in the private sector, but watch this space, because radio will make the youtube star!



"I am a huge Beatles fan and even the Fab Four have had to bow to the digital onslaught, finally putting their catalogue online, and releasing The Beatles Rock Band videogame," says digital and internet guru ANICE HASSIM. And like The Beatles, radio's future lies with embracing new technology and connecting with fans wherever they are.

Radio is the glue that binds our real-world interaction with our online world. It is where "cloud" and real-life meet seamlessly, in real time.