

Surviving in a Risky Operating Environment

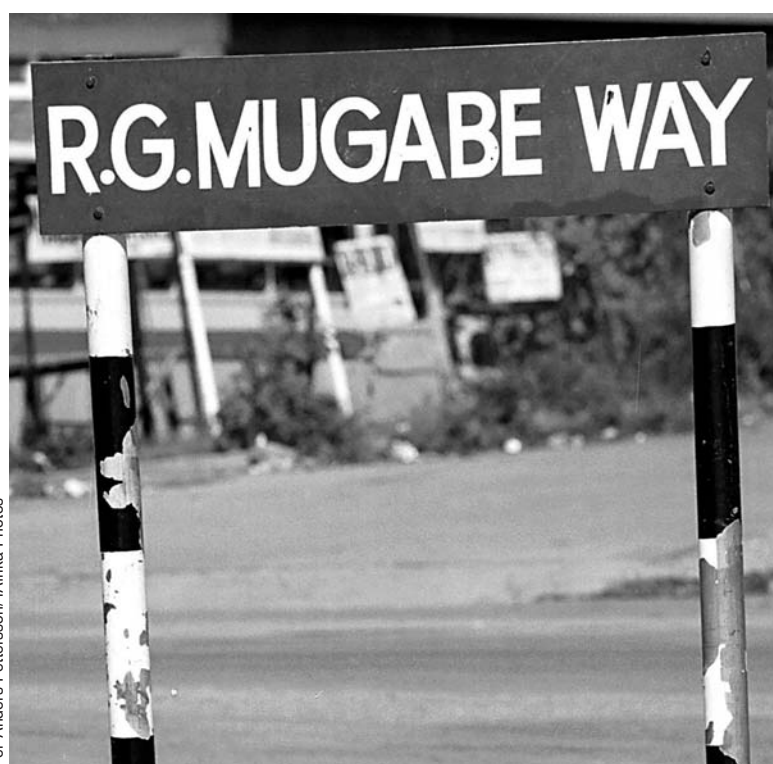
The Radio VOP Story

By John Masuku

It is six years since Zimbabwe's Radio Voice of the People (VOP) was formed. Several things that have happened in this very short space of time, illustrate what an extremely difficult operating environment VOP has endured. Among these: VOP's offices have been bombed, its computer equipment confiscated by the police, and its journalists and trustees arrested on spurious charges of broadcasting without a license (that is granted through a government-appointed regulatory authority).

It seems that the governing authorities are uncomfortable with VOP's unwavering commitment to promoting free expression through the powerful medium of radio, as a voice of the voiceless in a country well-known for its draconian and repressive media laws as well as for selective justice.

Established to lobby and advocate for political, economic, cultural and social development through alternative broadcasting, Radio VOP came into being in mid-June 2000. To put the political landscape in perspective: this was just two weeks ahead of watershed general elections of the new millennium that ushered into parliament members of the then recently established Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC clinched 57 of the 120 seats in the parliament, showing itself to be a formidable opposition party in Zimbabwe's Parliament which, for almost 20 years, had been dominated by the ruling



Per-Anders Pettersson / Afrika Photos

Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) ZANU (PF) party, resulting in a de facto one-party state.

Radio VOP's founding trustees only thought that they were laying the groundwork for the seemingly imminent opening up of the airwaves through a short-term radio project that would provide alternative views largely disregarded by the then monopolistic Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), now Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings (ZBH), which was in the run-up to the polls, unashamedly biased in its news and other programme coverage towards the ruling party and government.

At about the same time, new broadcasting legislation was emerging. It had taken 20 years for the government to amend the outdated Broadcasting Act Chapter 12:01 of 1957. This followed the successful legal challenge launched by the short-lived Capital Radio which ended ZBC's domination of the airwaves, albeit on paper only. It was to be a mere academic victory, since no private radio and television stations were officially licensed to be in competition with the state broadcaster thereafter. On 4 October 2000, after the Capital Radio debacle in which the police had raided a Harare hotel and taken away the station's broadcasting equipment, the government, in an extraordinary gazette, hurriedly put in place Presidential Powers (Temporary Measures) (Broadcasting), Regulations, 2000. These regulations made provision for the establishment of the Broadcasting Authority of

Zimbabwe (BAZ), whose mandate was to license operators in the industry and regulate operations generally. Six years down the line, the regulator has done very little to advance its mandate. The regulations had a life span of six months from the date of promulgation by virtue of the provisions of the enabling legislation. Their expiry was preceded by the enactment of the Broadcasting Services Act Chapter 12:06 of 2001.

Enter the VOP

Despite the existence of the enabling legislation for the liberalisation of the airwaves, BAZ continued to procrastinate on the licensing of new broadcast media Radio (VOP) registered at the High Court Deeds Office as a communications Trust, as this was the only form of legal existence available. However, in order to avoid breaking the law the actual operations on the ground had to be approached strategically by packaging programmes in Shona, Ndebele and English within Zimbabwe, and then broadcasting them on Shortwave 7120KHz and 7190KHz in the 41 meter band through the transmitters of Radio Netherlands with their relay station in Madagascar in the Indian Ocean.

David Masunda the current Chairperson of the Radio VOP Board of Trustees explains: “As the name implies, VOP was formed to give a voice to the voiceless marginalised, the rural and urban communities whose interests are not being catered for by the government media, the voices of opposition political parties, those “banned” from the government-owned media, the civic society and the ordinary Zimbabwean whose story is not being told.”

The founders of Radio VOP had among other ideas, some noble objectives of offering an alternative news outlet to Zimbabweans when they set up the project, including the coverage of pertinent issues ignored by the state media and the encouragement of participatory democracy in areas of governance, parliament, business development, gender and the environment, and health (especially with the advent of the HIV and AIDS pandemic that has wreaked havoc regardless of social differences). These objectives sounded too ambitious – and a tall order – for a small station like Radio VOP which broadcasts for only one-hour between 1900hrs and 2000hrs everyday. But, with the appetite for listening to diverse views that existed among Zimbabweans, long starved of balanced news from different local sources, it became an achievable task.

Be that as it may, the operating environment has not been very rosy for the noble media initiative. Instead of licensing new players and also making the run-down ZBH a true public broadcaster, Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) officials, together with Central

Intelligence Organisation (CIO) operatives and the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) disrupted Radio VOP activities on several occasions. In July 2002, they raided the station’s offices located in a low-density suburb of Harare. They took away recorders, cassettes, mini diskettes, compact discs and some files, only to return them a month later without placing any charges on the Trust. All this followed the station’s successful coverage of the 2000 Parliamentary poll during which the MDC nearly defeated ZANU (PF), and the 2002 presidential elections won by incumbent Robert Mugabe in a controversial contest that saw him beat his closest rival the trade unionist Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC.

By then, the government had started a major onslaught against private media like *The Daily News* and Radio VOP in the belief that such media gave a lot of coverage to the opposition, especially when their coverage exposed instances of violence and alleged vote rigging largely blamed on the state.

A serious clampdown on the operations and activities of independent media institutions was to follow. Draconian anti-free-press laws such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) emerged, as did the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the amendments to the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA). The BSA brought about the establishment of the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), which was to be the regulator of the electronic media, although most of its licensing powers remained with the sitting minister of information and a structure in the ministers office called the Media and Information Commission, MIC. At best, BAZ made sure that it never called for the application for licenses by new players, especially those like Capital Radio, Radio VOP, Munhumutapa African Broadcasting Corporation (MABC) television, among others that had shown determination. The MIC and BAZ, like their hostile parent Ministry of Information and Publicity, viewed Radio VOP as an anti-government station. They denied its journalists accreditation and later also turned down the station’s application for a license to operate a free-to-air FM station in the capital city, Harare.

VOP under fire

On 29 August 2002 the upcoming offices of the resilient Radio VOP were completely destroyed in a powerful bomb blast that left the building in ashes and ruins. The saboteurs circumvented a night security guard before planting explosives that reduced the station to a shell. The blast destroyed a modern digital studio, computers, furniture, project documents, tapes and compact discs worth more than US\$120 000. Almost seven years later, the per-

petrators of the dastardly act have not been apprehended and brought to book.

Said then Radio VOP Chairperson, Dr Faith Ndebele, soon after the devastating bomb blast: “Radio VOP is a legally registered communications trust which strives to give an alternative view in the country and we are saddened at this attempt to silence us.” Brian Kagoro, the former Radio VOP Executive Director was blunter: He charged: “There is a concerted effort by the state and sympathetic parastate groups to make us believe in the futility of the struggle – a desperate attempt to induce us into sub-mission through terror.”

However, the government, through the then minister in charge of information and publicity Jonathan Moyo – who presided over the demise of many progressive media houses in Zimbabwe – reacted arrogantly as expected; “Something went wrong and they bombed themselves so they could blame the government,” he said, describing Radio VOP as a pirate radio station sponsored by western imperialists to cause ethnic divisions and disharmony in the country. He further vowed that stations like Radio VOP which received funding from foreign sources, were going to be licensed “over my dead body.”

With everything in ashes, and also faced with an even riskier and more threatening operating environment, the Radio VOP Board of trustees, management and staff vowed to soldier on but with utmost care, considering the danger to their limb and the likelihood of the station’s permanent closure. Three months after its destruction, the station was quietly rehabilitated and back on air with new programmes, much to the dismay of its detractors and saboteurs.

In June 2003, as the socio-economic situation deteriorated further in Zimbabwe, two Radio VOP journalists Shorai Kariwa and Martin Chimunya were arrested by ZANU (PF) youth militia and so-called war veterans of the liberation war while they were covering what the opposition MDC dubbed “the final push”, during which they demonstrated against Mugabe to force him to accept that his government had failed the country dismally and therefore should go. The two journalists were beaten up

and had their recorders, mobile phones, money and identity particulars taken (never to be returned). Thereafter, Kariwa, who also doubled as a technical operator, was asked to lead state security agents and armed police to my home, as I was Executive Director of the station. Heavily armed police searched the whole house before taking away a personal computer, office files and floppy diskettes, an event which traumatised and still continues to haunt the members of my family and especially our children.

The confiscated items were returned the following day without any charges being laid on Radio VOP Trust, and this incident motivated the station to continue with its work. In December 2003, Chimunya was to face further arrest in the south eastern town of Masvingo when he covered the ZANU (PF) annual conference. He was locked up in deplorable police cells for a week after interviewing an MDC activist who said that it was foolish for President Mugabe to have withdrawn

Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth club of former British colonies. Chimunya, who was later released without charge, learnt that he had been sold out by a journalist from the state media who was assigned to spy on fellow reporters from the private press.

The year 2004 was largely a harassment-free one for the Radio VOP community. It saw the station grow in programme content, personnel development and preparation of listeners for the forthcoming March 2005 Parliamentary elections. Several civic organisations, especially those like the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN), Zimbabwe Civic Education Trust (ZIMCET), National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights and Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, dealing with voter education and analysing the electoral process, participated in several Radio VOP informative and educative news and discussion programmes on issues to do with democracy, good governance and freedom of expression and choice.

Audiences grew to about 600 000 listeners every evening, according to the Zimbabwe All Media Product Survey (ZAMPS) conducted by the Zimbabwe Audience Research Foundation (ZARF). Radio VOP recruited about

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fifteen provincial correspondents to augment the work done by full-time, city-based journalists. Shortwave listenership was promoted through popular quiz shows, which saw a lot of people from all over the country win shortwave radio sets. Several by-elections and the March poll itself were covered without incident.

But Radio VOP's period of relative peace was short-lived. By the end of August 2005, its shortwave signal was being seriously jammed by the state using powerful equipment sourced through the Chinese (forcing it to change from 7120 KHz to a higher frequency, which was about 95 percent audible). This action was condemned by the Reporters Without Borders, who described the jamming as "an illegal action and a Great Wall of the Airwaves" referring to the Chinese involvement in the callous airwave gagging exercise, which has since been extended to other radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe namely, London-based Short Wave Radio Africa and Voice of America's Washington-based Studio 7.

In condemning the jamming exercise, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said: "It is outrageous that Zimbabwean authorities, not content with snuffing out the local media, are cutting off the few outside sources of information still available. The jamming of news broadcasts in Zimbabwe should cease immediately." Radio VOP's operating space was further shrunk when on 15 December 2005, police accompanied by BAZ officials and CIO operatives launched a surprise raid on its offices in central Harare. They took away recording equipment, several computers, and office files before arresting three journalists Maria Nyanyiwa, Nyasha Bhosha and Kundai Mugwanda, and later the author (Executive Director John Masuku), and locked them up for four nights in filthy police prison cells. The journalists were released without charges being preferred against them, but the author was charged with violating the Broadcasting Services Act by running a radio station without a license from BAZ and was released on bail.

A month later six Radio VOP trustees: journalist and newspaper editor David Masunda (Chairperson), human rights lawyer Arnold Tsunga (Deputy Chairperson), journalist and gender activist Isabella Matambanadzo (Secretary), media researcher Nhlanhla Ngwenya (Treasurer), lawyer Lawrence Chibwe and journalist Millie Phiri were similarly charged and released on bail.

In condemning the harassment of VOP personnel, the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights said: "We call upon the ministers of information and home affairs and the Commissioner of Police to immediately and publicly call for an end to such unlawful actions and express their commitment to protecting all human rights defenders adhering

to their obligations under national and international law." The Committee to Protect Journalists added: "We are deeply troubled by Zimbabwe's blatant censorship of Voice of the People, an important news source in a country where independent broadcasters are unable to operate. We call on authorities to release VOP equipment immediately, to drop all criminal proceedings and to cease their campaign of harassment against VOP staff members."

Conclusion

Represented by a well known media defence lawyer, Beatrice Mtetwa, Radio VOP trustees and staff appeared in court, after several postponements on 25 September 2006. The fear was that, if found guilty, they would go to prison for up to two years each. The magistrate dismissed the case as an absolute "circus".

And so now, VOP returns to the drawing board, inspired by the fact that against these odds, there has been a lot to smile about at Radio VOP recently. The station was the proud winner of the prestigious One World Media Awards 2006 – Special Achievement Award for Community Media that promoted human rights and sustainable development in a difficult operating environment. It was chosen ahead of a final shortlist of media from Liberia, Indonesia, Afghanistan and Brazil, and collected its well-deserved prize at a glittering ceremony held at Porchester Hall in London on 8 June 2006. In receiving the prize, Radio VOP said in a statement: "We feel greatly honoured to receive this award and we hope in the not-too-distant future we will have free airwaves in Zimbabwe for us and others to broadcast for the public good."

It is hoped that Radio VOP will live long to realise its vision of a Zimbabwe that respects the right to information, where citizens freely exchange knowledge and ideas and its goal to be the first choice radio station for informed opinion in the country is achieved. 

John Masuku is Executive Director, VOP.

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