

Radio in South Africa turns 100 - and collides with podcasting and streaming

By [Sisanda Nkoala](#)

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This year marks 100 years since radio was introduced in South Africa, through "the first experimental broadcast at the Railway Headquarters in Johannesburg" on 18 December 1923.



Source: www.unsplash.com

A century on, up to 94% of South Africans over the age of 15 confirmed in a recent survey that they owned a radio set in one form or another.

Radio remains firmly in place as the country's most loved medium. Millions tune in daily to 40 commercial and public broadcast stations and over 250 community stations. Although other forms, like television, have threatened, as the song goes, to kill "the radio star", the intimacy, immediacy and sociability of radio remain unmatched.

And yet, it's worthwhile looking ahead at digital audio platforms such as online radio and podcasts, to forecast what the next century of audio broadcasting might and should sound like.

More and more South Africans are turning to digital audio formats. This is in part because of an increase in access to smartphones, along with better internet penetration. A 2022 study found that monthly online listening had grown to 61% of

people surveyed – compared with 39% in 2019.

Apart from streaming and internet radio, there is also a growing trend of podcasting. This has arguably cemented audio broadcasting, in its various forms, as a key player in future mass media trends in the country.

Radio's role in history

Online radio and podcasts must be understood within the context of a rich history. Oral media have been central in South Africa for the development of cultural identities and languages. When radio first arrived, it was not meant to include broadcasts to the country's indigenous language speakers.



3 reasons why podcasts are still the boss, despite growth slowdown

Jon Savage 9 Feb 2023



It was only as part of efforts to gain the support of the majority black population during the second world war that black people were even thought of as a possible audience. Radio historian Thokozani Mhlambi explains that Hugh Tracey, then head of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in Durban, got the idea of broadcasting to African audiences in Natal when he discovered that a rumour was spreading among Africans that every Zulu speaker would earn 10 shillings a day when Hitler arrived.

Black South Africans were never really viewed as an audience meant to engage with the platform for entertainment and information. Radio was intended as a tool to shape their perspective based on what served the minority white authorities.

But the first isiZulu broadcast in 1941 at the Durban studios of the SABC changed things. Radio stations were launched in numerous indigenous languages, whose speakers became both listeners and content creators. They found a way to use its qualities to express their voice in a society that otherwise silenced them.

South African academics have argued that despite being designed mainly for propaganda, “radio was always far more multifaceted and slippery than was intended by colonial powers”. Through language and cultural knowledge, it offered the “ability to create new and sometimes unruly publics”.

Fast forward to 2022. A scan of some charts such as Chartable, which claims to rank podcasts based on popularity, shows that the most widely heard podcasts in South Africa are not, in fact, produced by South Africans. And all top 10 podcasts are in English. These trends run counter to what one observes in the radio landscape, where indigenous language radio stations attract more listeners than English ones.

The future of radio

The date of birth of online radio in South Africa is difficult to determine. No doubt the introduction of the internet in the early 1990s meant that those with access and means experimented with various forms of self-expression using the technology. As did the amateurs who first played around with radio in the 1920s.

Podcasting in South Africa is said to have taken off in 2015 or 2016. Listenership figures are hard to come by, but advertising spend indicates a growing appetite. A 2022 report found that podcast advertising revenue grew by 30.4% in 2020.

But queries have been raised around the figures that online radio stations report in South Africa, which some claim have been inflated. Another issue is access to expensive data. New online stations will struggle to attract listeners who are not wealthier South Africans.

Despite these challenges, some studies predict that the monthly listenership of podcasts in South Africa could rise to 19 million by 2024. Some reports put current podcast listenership at around 10% of the population. This is roughly six million people.

While available statistics are not definitive, speculation is that podcasts are where audience growth lies.



Radio not left in the dark, despite loadshedding

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Indigenous language podcasts

The development of indigenous language podcasts, such as Epokothweni (“in the pocket” in isiXhosa) and iLukuluku (roughly translated as “curiosity” in isiZulu) marks a significant milestone in the South African media landscape. Speakers of these languages have previously had limited power in the sector. Through digital platforms, they have been able to tap into audiences not prioritised by a market dominated by English.

These productions deal with topics such as personal finance, science, technology and the arts. They also serve as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems, drawing on folklore, proverbs and idioms to articulate key messages. They do all this from the vantage point of relatively young black people negotiating their and their fellow South Africans’ identities in a post-apartheid era.

According to a 2021 Africa Podfest report:

Podcasting has afforded many (Africans) the space to tell stories that have been otherwise neglected and/or marginalised, allowing them to articulate the world and their experiences.

South Africa’s indigenous language communities were censored or silenced for decades during apartheid, preventing this.

Digital platforms are often viewed as more accessible and inclusive. But the stark realities of the digital divide in African contexts mean that citizens do not benefit equally from the technology.

Despite the possibilities they present, their uptake in South Africa will continue to trail behind that of radio.

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