



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 22

Making waves with CASET

Edric Gorfinkel

The Cassette Education Trust (CASET) is a community service project based in the Salt River industrial area of Cape Town, South Africa. The project was established in 1989 to “develop the usefulness of audio-cassette as a medium of communication in the struggle for a sustainable democracy.” Because broadcasting was State-controlled, CASET produced and distributed audio-cassette programmes, which in more open circumstances would be broadcast on radio. Another emphasis was the creation of a training ground for future broadcasters.

By February 1992, as a result of the changing political climate in South Africa and the Conference for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) negotiations, CASET, together with Bush Radio (a broad-based community radio initiative), was on the verge of going on air as part of a legally constituted community broadcasting sector.

The following collage tells the story of CASET and the emerging community radio movement through an assemblage of historical notes, CASET documents, and excerpts from an interview with the project’s founder and coordinator, Edric Gorfinkel, conducted by Diarmuid McLean.

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THE TALKING NEWSPAPER PILOT PROJECT

February 1988: The Talking Newspaper Pilot project (TNPP) is suggested as a testing ground for using audio-cassettes as a mass medium of communication. The TNPP is

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conducted in the midst of a nationwide State of Emergency including a media “blackout. “ It is not an easy time to launch a new media project, so a couple of “smokescreens” are setup to make it appear innocuous. Firstly it is articulated as “providing access to the print media for people with handicaps to independent reading (visual impairment and illiteracy).” Secondly it is made to look like an academic exercise by couching the study in the context of the University of Cape Town’s Community Adult Education Programme (CAEP).

From CAEP Project Outline – February 1988, *Audio-Cassette as an Appropriate Education Medium:*

- Communication (or the lack of it) lies close to the heart of the conflict that is South Africa. As the conflict deepens, communication is stifled. We need to be constantly exploring not only new ways of using media, but also using new media.
- The print media are well used (given government restrictions). Video is becoming increasingly accessible to more sections of the community. On the other hand radio and TV are State controlled.
- Popular video is to television, as the audio-cassette is to radio the appropriate technology equivalent.
- By producing cassette programmes we could open an entirely new area of the media to popular use.
- Everyone has a tape recorder, or easy access to one, but they’re used almost exclusively for listening to music. Blind people use them in more varied ways, to listen to novels, theatre, stories etc.. However, producing material still seems to be in the hands of very few people.
- It can be very easy to produce cassettes. On one level, one person can speak into one microphone, record it and make copies on just about any modern hi-fi equipment. On another level a communal studio could synthesise input from a network of sources and reproduce those programmes for popular distribution.

Edric: I worked with the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) for a few years while I was exiled from South Africa. This experience had a direct influence on what I hoped to accomplish with CASET. Very little had been done there before independence to prepare progressive people to take over the radio and television services. So at the time of independence, and still today in fact, there are die-hard Rhodesians producing radio programmes, doing a lot that is not in the national interest. But they stay there because there’s no one to replace them.

Listeners still have a negative attitude towards the ZBC. The whole issue of control and ownership is fundamental to people’s attitudes towards that radio station.

If you had somebody you wanted to interview for ZBC, the effort to get those people to actually talk when the tape was turning around, my god! They were always so guarded about it because they didn’t trust the ZBC. It was a dreaded thing to go on the air. It wasn’t an exciting thing.

That’s what gave me the idea of saying we have to have people in control.

South Africa is divided up by Group Areas and by apartheid legislation. This separates people out so it is very difficult for us to meet physically. The radio template

could establish links that could get people talking to each other again. That's not happening now.

The neo-Nazi thugs, parading in khaki, fucking up their servants and massacring their families – they need healing. The township *laaitie*¹ who's been shot at by *mabulu*,² has watched a necklace and his dreams are full of broken images – we all need healing in this country. We have to talk to each other. It's not enough that just the leaders are doing it.

I wanted to do radio, but I wanted to do a particular kind of radio.

CASET (THE CASSETTE EDUCATION TRUST)

June 1988: With most of the material for the Talking Newspapers being drawn from the independent weekly newspapers, listener feedback immediately prompts an increasing in the amount of "live" sound on the programmes. Community organisations and activists become the primary target audience. Over the next year, with growing support for the project from progressive organisations and a rising tide of defiance against the repressive Botha/Malan regime, it is decided that an audio-cassette service organisation should be set up: the CASsette Education Trust (CASET).

From the CASET Brochure -June 1989, *Audio-Cassette: The Appropriate Technology Equivalent of Radio:*

Everybody knows them, many people own them, most people use them in taxis and cars, in classrooms and factories, at work and at home audio-cassette is already a mass medium mostly for listening to music, but it can be used to popularise a lot more than music: poetry, story-telling and oral histories; speeches, debates, sermons and lectures; interviews, discussions and conferences; drama, children's songs and indigenous music; news analysis, topical issues or a talking newspaper.

The State still controls radio and TV, but it cannot control audio-cassette. Given the legacy of systematic disempowerment through State control of information, we need to use any medium of communication that is accessible to the struggle for a free, united and healthy South Africa.

June 1989: Funding for the first year of CASET is secured from the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF). Premises are chosen, equipment purchased, offices established and work begins. "People's poet" Sandile Dikeni is trained to produce programmes.

The project is guided and supervised by a Board of Trustees. The Trustees are respected members of the community, all of them with an interest in education or media. They include a Muslim theologian and leading figure in the democratic movement, a musician, a librarian, an oral historian, a photo-journalist renowned for his coverage of the struggle against apartheid, and a professor of Afrikaans literature committed to the "People's Education" movement.

¹ laaitie: lighty, youngster.

² mabulu: boers, security police and soldiers.

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October 1989: A mass campaign of defiance is triggered by the so-called “last racist elections” – P.W. Botha’s last ditch attempt to legitimate a racially-based constitution. This Defiance Campaign, the second in the history of the struggle against apartheid, is destined to bring down the Botha/Malan junta and heralds the dawn of de Klerk’s “new” South Africa. It takes another two years before opponents get to the negotiating table. This is the period of CASET’s operation, hitting the streets with the Defiance Campaign.

*Edric: Another tricameral election and massive opposition to it. Obviously there is a story brewing and press from all over the world pulls into town. Peace March in Cape Town, mass rallies in St. George’s Cathedral, organisations unbanning themselves... Hot news for the BBC kinda stuff. This is a big story, so we say let’s go, let’s go pick up this stuff. Getting the speeches, vox popping people, recording the *toyi-toyi*.³*

The response from the activist organisers was, “Great idea, let’s go, this is gonna be an important new medium. We can spread this thing around. People in rural areas can hear what they weren’t able to attend.”

But vox popping was something people on the street were completely unaccustomed to. Nobody had ever asked them their opinions. The foreign journalists filmed them from afar, but they didn’t talk to them that much. Each time we talked to somebody we’d tell them that we were going to produce an audio-cassette for distribution amongst community organizations.

There’d been a tradition of “agents provocateurs,” infiltrating the movement, so it helped that a lot of people knew us. We would not have been able to do the same thing in Port Elizabeth or Durban. Because it was in Cape Town we were able to go ahead. People who were organising the events knew us and that was the reference point for a lot of their involvement.

The programme was a cooperative production with the United Democratic Front (UDF) although they were a restricted organisation. Initially the agreement was that we’d make seven copies, and those seven tapes would go to the seven branches of the UDF in the Western Cape area. On the basis of their feedback we were to decide where the programme would go and how to distribute it.

However, because of the nature of events at that time, those seven tapes went out to the branches but there was never a coordinated meeting to discuss what would happen to the programme after that. So we didn’t distribute any other tapes. There were only those seven tapes, but that programme reached the whole country. People just made copies. Some people arrived here and said to us, “We believe you made this tape,” and put it on. It was something like a 10th generation copy!

³ toyi-toyi: a protest rally incorporating dancing and singing

July 1989: The recording of conferences, which become a feature of the “new” South Africa, is one of the primary income generating services of CASET. Most conference recordings are archived as an accurate record of proceedings, transcribed for print publications, or copied in full for wider listenership. Some, like the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (IDASA)/ANC Writers’ Conference at the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, result in the production of audio programmes.

Edric: The Defiance Campaign was just beginning to brew. The ANC was still a banned organisation. There were a lot of ANC safaris organised by IDASA and a lot of government harassment of people when they returned to the country. The Victoria Falls conference organisers wanted to have the proceedings recorded and transcribed for a book. We said to them, “We’re not going to charge you for this. You just pay for our transport, and we’ll produce programmes from it.”

For three hours, the poetry evening brought together one of the most representative and exciting groups of South African poets. It was incredible. People like Willie Kgositsile and Breyten Breytenbach, Antjie Krog, Wally Serote, Ingrid de Kock, Hein Willems (who’s also a CASET Trustee now)... really amazing people.

So we produced one tape of poetry – *Musi oa Tunye*:⁴ Poetry that Thunders; another one of prose and story telling, with Vernie Februarie and Albie Sachs, and then another one which included some of the conference itself – Breyten Breytenbach’s *Is my writing part of South African literature?*, (speaking mainly to the Afrikaners), and then Willie Kgositsile’s talk about *The role of the exiled writer in the struggle for national liberation*. They’re good friends, they’ve got a similar style of speaking, story-telling, and there’s lots of resonant themes in what they talk about. So we put that and their poetry on two sides of a tape.

The Defiance Campaign and similar material was far more politically agitational, whereas the *Musi oa Tunye* tapes were more culturally reflective.

At the same time as this was going on, Sandile was producing a whole lot of other things: *Stop the Hangings*, about capital punishment; *On Local Government*, about the role of local government in negotiations; *Unban SANSCO* (South African National Students Organisation), produced for and with the organisation, using their people and their material.

We were also introducing people to radio and training them to produce programmes. We did some *Ghettoblaster Workshops* which involved taking some blank tapes and a double-cassette machine to wherever people were meeting anyway, and doing a three hour workshop. Recording whatever people wanted to do: songs, stories, interviews etc. You edit that stuff on a double-deck and produce a programme. Then you can make copies. That technique was successful in giving people a feel for participatory community radio. The quality’s not that great, but people dig just hearing themselves “play radio.”

⁴ Musi oa Tunye: “the smoke that thunders,” the indigenous Zimbabwean name for the Victoria Falls.

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Three ways of distributing tapes developed because of different situations. Sometimes people made lots and lots of copies. That was exciting, when it just ran away with itself. Secondly, we sold tapes, like *ANC Speaks* and *Mandela Speaks*, which were also copied. Thirdly, we would produce a programme with a particular organisation and they would handle their own distribution. There's no doubt that informal copying by organizations and individuals reached far more people than selling tapes did.

In South Africa, if people spend money to buy a tape, they're really committed. The people who were the most committed were the people who were most politically active, so as a result the most political tapes sold best. We did a whole series of tapes which were political education seminars on various issues. Those are programmes we constantly have a call for.

But without a doubt, the most popular programmes are the music tapes, *Chorimba* and *Freedom Sings*.

AN OPENING FOR COMMUNITY RADIO

February 1990: A dramatic about face on the part of the new de Klerk administration, unbanning liberation movements and releasing Nelson Mandela from thirty years in prison, sets a new context for the agendas of democratic organizations. CASET is catapulted into addressing its long-term objective: the transformation of broadcasting in South Africa.

Traditionally monopolised by the State, broadcasting has not been on the agenda of the democratic movement other than Fawn's (The Film and Allied Workers Organisation) work on broadcasting as a constitutional issue, and the work of the ANC's Radio Freedom. Broadcasting from exile in other African countries to a listenership largely denied access to short wave receivers, Radio Freedom's programmes are also known through their distribution on audio-cassettes.

Now the unbanning of liberation movements and the release of political prisoners begins to open up political activity inside the country. The return of exiled broadcasters provides fresh impetus for the emerging debates around the future of radio and TV. A growing body of democratic organizations inside the country begin to look at how they can use the broadcast media, mounting a wave of protest against the government controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). This enables CASET to focus attention on developing its vision for community radio.

Edric: I really did think that audio-cassette could be the appropriate technology equivalent of radio, but it just isn't. Publishing stuff on audio-cassette is more like publishing a book than it is like doing radio. Its greatest potential lies as an aid to formal education, distance learning together with visual packages, maps, comics, readings et cetera. There's still a lot of experimenting to be done with audio-cassette.

There should've been pirate radio in South Africa, and there wasn't! The whole approach we're taking is to say, "let's go the legislative route. Change the whole society and community radio will make sense." In other parts of the world they tried to change

the radio while the society stayed the same, so community radio is marginal in those places. I don't see why community radio should be marginal. Community organisation has been central to the process of social change in South Africa. Community radio must be as central.

Part of the work that CASET has been doing is to make people more aware of the importance of radio. The result (not only of CASET's efforts but a lot of other people's efforts as well), is that broadcasting is on the negotiations agenda. It is now recognised by all political parties that it must come under independent control. I would say that CASET has contributed significantly to making that a priority.

South Africa has twenty-seven radio stations and at least four television channels. It's got one of the best transmitter networks anywhere in the world, let alone Africa, and an external broadcasting capacity that can cover the whole world. I think it is really important who has access to those facilities.

One of CASET's main activities was training and getting people prepared for eventual access to the airwaves. But this creates its own problems. What are you training for? Community radio or audio-cassette? Training revolves around concrete, usable programmes. The people who are producing a *Talking Newsletter* on tape, for example, are constantly learning and growing because they're using their skills all the time. But we said we were using audio-cassette to train for community radio, which still doesn't exist. There's nowhere to plug people in once they've been trained.

November 1990: New CASET staff member Hein Marais, returning from Canada with experience of Community Radio, presents an important paper on Community Radio to a national media conference. This firmly places the issue of community radio on the national agenda. A series of subsequent conferences, workshops and seminars builds wide-ranging support for the idea of a community radio sector understood as being a natural extension of South Africa's powerful democratic community organisations.

From the Conclusion of: *Talking Back – the Case for Community Radio* by Hein Marais – November 1990:

We are entering – and in many respects are already in – a period marked by the constant propagation, in fact the aggressive marketing of a new, normalised South Africa. Few need to be reminded that there is little that is “normal” about South African society, nor are we likely to experience this blessed state of affairs in the foreseeable future.

This “selling of normality” is probably the prime ideological feature of this country today ... It is a dangerous tendency, in the sense that it does not so much challenge or confront reality as it seeks to transcend or leap over reality and replace it with an imagined state of affairs. It is complicit in the strongest degree with this collective amnesia into which so many South Africans are so fast retreating.

The paramount task of progressive media is to rupture this artificial construct of normality; it is to break this imagined consensus about who we are and to what we aspire.

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Needless to say, I believe Community Radio can play a role in helping to accomplish this task.

March 1991: In a public meeting CASET proposes a community radio network to community organizations in Cape Town. The proposal is well received and results in a series of monthly open forums in the name of Bush Radio. The initial idea of locating the radio station at the University of the Western Cape (known as the People's Campus) is gradually overturned by community organizations because of the danger of rarifying community participation.

Raging debates in the Bush Radio Open Forums, together with regular meetings of an elected Coordinating Committee, become watershed work in the emerging community radio movement in South Africa. Other initiatives start up in other parts of the country, notably Durban and Grahamstown. The presence of Radio Freedom, now relocating in Johannesburg, adds fuel to the fire. A group of South Africans on a community radio training programme in Canada adds to the pool of committed community radio activists.

January 1992: As CODESA emerges from its first session, a high-powered conference on Media in Transition is called by COM (Campaign for Open Media) to make resolutions to the relevant CODESA Working Group.

CASET convenes a pre-conference meeting on community radio which drafts a Resolution on Community Radio. The resolution emphasizes the importance of an independent broadcasting authority and of community broadcasting, and calls for an equitable distribution of resources to public, commercial and community radio. The resolution is adopted by the Conference.

February 1992: In addition, the general Resolution on the Electronic Media reserves spectrum space for community-based broadcasting and proposes a Communications Development Fund to finance it. At the time of writing, these resolutions are with the relevant CODESA Working Group. The distinct possibility of community radio licenses being issued within the next six months brings into sharp relief the years of groundwork done by CADET and Bush Radio. Popular pressure to go on the air can be met, but the political expedience of doing so immediately is still a subject of debate.

From Bush Radio Open Forum Minutes – February 1992, *On Air Proposal:*

Most of our difficulties can be put down to having no prior experience of community radio broadcasting. It was therefore proposed that we start broadcasting as soon as possible! We have the means. This would of course mean that we are pirating the airwaves, which is illegal, but it may be the only way to conscientise people about community radio. There is no guarantee we will get a license through CODESA. If we go on air we will be much more difficult to ignore. There are lots of issues to be considered around this proposal and it needs to be discussed by organizations who must decide if they

would support such a move. This could be treated as a training and test phase. If we do get stopped it could become a public issue, and we could spark a campaign of defiance involving other community radio initiatives.

From Bush Radio Open Forum Minutes – March 1992, *On Air Proposal*:

Debate around whether we should go on the air immediately ran along two basic lines. The one was to say: “we’re just about to get licenses anyway so why run the risk of fines, jail and equipment loss at this stage of negotiations?” The other line was: “we’ve been saying that for years. Civics without electricity don’t stop fighting for it because of negotiations....”

It was felt that we should prepare a comprehensive “switch-on campaign” including license applications to both the Minister of Home Affairs and to CODESA/ICA. The Grahamstown Workshop could be used to facilitate a national campaign. If we exhaust all avenues for legal permission to go on the air, we can show that we are being unjustly treated by regulatory authorities, and are confident of broad-based popular support – only then should we consider broadcasting in defiance of legalities. It was however noted that this should not stall efforts to make small, cheap transmitters available for community use.

From the Jabulani! Freedom of the Airwaves conference, *The Future of Radio in South Africa* – Don Pinnock:

By way of conclusion let me say this: Radio is a way to bring the sounds of all Africa to the south – sounds which apartheid has held back from our ears for so long. It is a way to start building what Albie Sachs calls “a rainbow culture,”⁵ where Marabi music and Mozart jostle for airtime with T.S. Elliot and Mzwakhe Mbuli. Where Tolstoy and Todd Matshikize share the same waveband and where people start to dismantle group areas in their hearts.

We have hardly begun to explore the beauty of our many cultures with the microphone, and we need to make a start now.

Edric: Listen, there’s a lot of things CASET didn’t do. And a lot of things we shouldn’t have done, or should have done differently. There’s a hell of a lot more that could still be done with audio-cassettes and I hope other people will pick it up. Little CASET can’t do everything! We set out to get the voice of the people on the air and by the time this lands on the pages of a book we probably will be on the air. CASET has set up a broadcast studio and a whole office infrastructure. Together with the Bush Radio people we’ve got a really interesting, dynamic democratic process going that could be a real case of grassroots development – warts and all!

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⁵ Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu first coined the phrase “rainbow culture”: a culture of all colours.