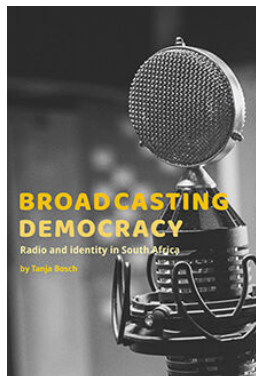


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Broadcasting democracy: Radio and identity in South Africa

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## Radio, like you've never read it before

The story of radio in South Africa is closely intertwined with the country's struggle history, its political transition and its contemporary societal dynamics. Radio remains the most widespread, affordable and available mass medium in the country and is consumed more than any other mass media product by South Africans. Against this backdrop, University of Cape Town media scholar Tanja Bosch provides an engaging and well-researched account of how different radio formats and stations in South Africa emerged and evolved over recent decades. She chronicles in detail how radio has changed since the fragmentation and state control that characterised the apartheid era to the time that the airwaves were liberalised with the advent of democracy and beyond. Overall, the book is a persuasive account of the broad reach of radio, its transformative potential and its role in shaping cultural identities in our democracy.

Following the introductory chapter, the next four chapters are devoted to the histories and current challenges facing public service radio, community radio and commercial talk radio. These are followed by case studies of specific radio stations, exploring how and why specific stations continue to be associated with specific racial identities. The chapter on community radio provides a particularly insightful perspective on the unique potential of community radio as a potential 'voice of the voiceless', but also discusses how this potential continues to be limited by the ongoing challenges of financial and operational sustainability. The penultimate chapter focuses on 'radio convergence and the online environment' and highlights how websites, live streaming and social media platforms are changing the face and nature of radio, including a growing number of radio stations that broadcast exclusively online. In the context of thinking about radio as a tool for public engagement, it is noteworthy to see how social networking sites are increasing opportunities for audience growth and interaction, including the growth of citizen journalism. In the concluding chapter – on the future of radio in South Africa – Bosch reflects once more on the complexity of radio consumption in South African society and audiences' strategic choices of the stations to which they listen and their strong affiliations to particular stations, along with its implications for shaping the identities of South Africans. She concludes that this is significant, as 'the lines of race and class that appear in society are mirrored in radio listening and participation'.

The book was inspired by Bosch's thesis on community radio and public identity, and is largely structured, written and referenced like an academic text. However, in between facts, legal references and theoretical discussions, Bosch weaves the stories of high-profile people and significant events that shaped (and continue to influence) the narrative around radio in South Africa. She provides compelling accounts of controversies, allegations, investigations, corruption and politically motivated editorial decisions. In this way, she brings the history of radio to life and illustrates its ongoing power and centrality in the media landscape. In support of her argument about the central relevance of radio in a democratic society, she provides evidence that radio not only has the widest reach of all mass media channels in South Africa, but that its popularity and penetration continue to grow.

Radio as a tool for democracy and a space for societal engagement is a central theme throughout the book. Bosch argues that radio stations – each with its own unique culture and characteristics – actually represent autonomous systems of cultural activity in our society. Her reflections on radio audiences as active consumers of radio, and people's motivations to tune into (or even call into) a particular radio station, are enlightening. Bosch concludes that 'radio plays a key role in shaping the identities of South Africans, and serves as a vehicle for them to "try on" and "perform" these various identities'.

Reading this book reminds one of how far we have come in terms of transforming mass media in South Africa, but also highlights that we still have much work to do in terms of realising the potential of radio as a collective voice for people who need to be heard and as a space for constructive engagement and identity building.

Tanja Bosch is an associate professor and media studies scholar at the Centre for Film and Media Studies at the University of Cape Town who did her doctoral research on community radio in South Africa. Her in-depth knowledge of the South African mass media environment, as well as her lived experience of radio as a producer, news reader and station manager, are clearly evident in the text. The text is highly accessible and should be a valuable resource for mass media scholars and also appeal to a wider readership.

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