

MTN Radio Awards? Really?

By [Unathi Kondile](#)

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If Cyndi Lauper were still writing songs she'd have penned "Primedia after Primedia", had she attended this year's [MTN Radio Awards](#). Talk Radio 702, 567 CapeTalk, 94.7 Highveld and 94.5KFM are Primedia's offspring and boy are they overachievers if their 13 MTN Radio awards are anything to go by [they took 17 awards last year]!

Thirty one other radio stations were left to share the leftovers. 'Station', 'Presenter' and 'Other' categories were gobbled up by Primedia.



What I'd like to know is how this happens.

Radio 702 bag Radio Station of the Year [again]? I ask because, with radio, you are not dealing with a clear case of you-crossed-the-finish-line-first-therefore-you-win. MTN could argue that its radio awards are pinned on actual radio stations submitting entries, five-minute demos and 250-word compressed motivations on why they deserve to win before the judges step in.



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Well, it received more than 300 entries and only 31 were chosen. So let's not even attempt the "It depends on whether you submitted an entry" excuse for Primedia's success.

Rooted in extinct/golden era requirements

Furthermore, it would seem the judging of these awards was rooted in extinct/golden era requirements of pace, style, nuance and ease on the ear on radio. Do people still look for that in radio? Nuance perhaps. But the rest? Boils down to personal preference, not set conventions.

Such is living in a diverse community. Else you run the risk of prioritising a single set of standards around what constitutes better style, better pace etc without taking into account what works for that specific radio station's listener beyond the ambit of YOUR standards.

Radio is by far the most subjective medium to ever attempt to rate in terms of quality of on-air presence. You could have the best voice, on-air team bonding and come across as knowledgeable or edutaining; yet you might not appeal to the next listener.

How do listeners choose you? Look into that. You cannot award awards on navel-gazing mechanisms - whereby you only look at the presenters in isolation of their listeners.

Radio and advertising becoming interchangeable

Furthermore, I get the sense that these awards carry an onus around how advertiser-friendly presenters and show packaging is. I mention this because lately radio and advertising are fast becoming interchangeable such that advertisers seem to think they can speak authoritatively over what radio is, should be and can't be. Thus setting an additional judging criterion that isn't even meant to be there.

Fair enough, though; radio stations have to make money or be advertiser-whipped. However, not to this extent where the advertising industry has actually swallowed the radio industry. You go to alleged radio conferences only to find they're more advertising-on-radio conferences.

Focus on the medium, improve the medium and advertisers will follow, surely? Not vice versa. Anyway, that's another gripe for another blog.

Back to the awards: I was on the numbers game which seems to have been intentionally omitted from the judging criteria of these awards - resulting in a stamped "More listeners don't mean good presenters or good radio" feel to the awards. I find this problematic as it suggests listeners do not have a choice in their listening habits.

Switch whenever it pleases you

Unlike attending a philosophy lecture, which could literally bore you to death but is essential to your studies, radio is not that - you can switch whenever it pleases you. Ukhozi does not have six million listeners by Zulu default. Metro FM does not have its five million by whatever-default profiling it attributes to itself.

Yes, there's the music component, but new studies will tell you - music radio isn't actually about the music at all. Fool yourself as you will. We live in times where your listener probably has had the songs you will play, months before they hit your playlist. Plus they actually have control over it, unlike alleged well-researched music rotation schedules.

Your biggest drawcard as a radio station is in actual fact your on-air personalities. So pray do tell how do you assess a personality without taking into account how this personality is received?

The people's medium must be judged by the people. You cannot leave personality assessments into the hands of a few or hands of the following great judges:

Judges

Koos Radebe, Andy Rice, Anthony Duke, Daryl Ilbury, David Mashabela, Donald Liphoko, Gordon Muller, Jeremy Maggs, Treasure Tshabalala, Toby Shapshak, Zandile Nzalo, Tony Lankester, Andrew Human, Lance Rothschild, Lara Kantor, Lawrence Dube, Matona Sakupwanya, Musa Kalenga, Nomahlubi Simamane, Rob McLennan, Franz Kruger, Ryland Fisher, Stan Katz and Stuart Lee.

No doubt, these are respectable experts in their respective fields - the crème de la crème of radio and media in general. A high level delegation, which if I were to profile individually would be: They are so-called discerning radio listeners - not big fans of back-announcing and on-air chatter or content that does not speak to them in the manner in which they would like to be addressed.

They most likely consume more talk radio than music radio [except Matona Sukupwanya who was literally thrown out of Metro FM as manager and coincidentally Metro FM received no awards beyond the Discovery Sports Centre show]. Some of these judges know and probably engage on a personal level with most of these talk radio show hosts. Speculative of me. Yes. Most likely though.

How then are we to expect this calibre of judge to effectively gauge radio stations and personalities they have no listenercentric on-air knowledge of, beyond a 250-word motivation? Judging radio is a very subjective game and as such, if MTN is serious about hosting so-called national radio awards and not just Primedia radio awards, it needs to open up the judging to encompass the actual listener on whose behalf it is judging. Thereafter look at how they involve the listener.

Listener knows best

It is the MTN awards - emphasis on MTN - finding the listeners shouldn't be difficult at all. The listener knows best, as they are, in actual fact, the listener. You cannot prescribe how one can listen or why one can be a better listener than the other when dealing with such a listener-orientated medium.

On the face of it, this might seem very ignorant and a parallel argument to counter this could be drawn along the lines of

advertising or, better yet, television programmes, which are produced to entertain or influence their audience.

Yet, I maintain that radio is none of these. Radio is a medium that is owned by the listener. The clichéd intimate medium. How do you get into the shoes of individual listeners and speak on their behalf? That this is best? When your standards of best are clearly defined and detached from what's best for the intended recipient.

Yes, Talk Radio 702 serves its listenership best, in its way. Similarly, Umhlobo Wenene serves its listenership equally best, in line with its listener profile.

Extra mileage to showcase themselves

My radio training, radio preferences would've probably guided me to lean towards Talk Radio 702 presenters as well. Because they do their jobs well. However, one has to be mindful of the fact that this is talk radio - its personalities and news presenters have extra mileage to showcase themselves, to hone in on their craft (reading news, traffic, sport, etc) without having to be mindful of the 90-second or so constraints other format presenters have to negotiate.

There has to be an element of relativity here. If we do not take into account the format differences, it is inevitable that Talk Radio 702 will take these awards year in and year out. What does that do for radio? I could go on.

* Adapted from [original blog post](#) published on the [University of Cape Town blogging system](#) on 12 April 2011.

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