

Islamic Identity as perceived by Community Media: A study of the Voice of the Cape

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Community Radio

Before I explain the way Islamic identity crystallises in community radio, I must define the terrain of community radio. While this type of media was better known as protest or propaganda radio elsewhere, here it was established less than a decade ago as a means to enhance diversity. At the dawn of democracy in South Africa, the broadcasting authority saw fit to allow the many diverse communities in this country access to their own media, to meet a need the national broadcasters could not serve. Hence, the establishment of a number of community radio stations, the most influential in terms of their listenership in the Muslim community being in the Cape.

VOC Listener Profile

In an informal survey done last September from a sample group that represented 0,3% of the estimated VOC listenership, we learnt that:

- 56% were over 40; 42% were under 40.
- 26% were skilled labour, 24% were professionals with academic backgrounds.
- 33% were employed, 25% were unemployed, and 20% were self-employed.
- 50% had at least a high school education and 28% attended a tertiary institution.

Muslim Identity: The history

Our average listeners can be described as a simple people - most of them have no more than high school education. In most instances, their sphere of interest is very narrow – their Creator, family, community, the Muslim world and if you're lucky, two centimetres beyond that.

In the Cape, they get most of their exposure to what goes on in their community and the world beyond it from community radio. SAARF statistics puts listenership for the Cape's Muslim radio stations at between 120,000 and 140,000. Even split in two, the listenership still rivals commercial stations like Cape Talk, which has a more affluent audience of 60,000 – 70,000.

Before one criticises what might be perceived as narrow-mindedness or ignorance on the part of these listeners on issues beyond their own community, one must consider history.

In the early days of Islam in the Cape, Muslims were prohibited from practising their religion freely. That is like society putting them into a cage and pushing from the outside to keep the door closed. At the same time, because they needed to protect their faith and culture from corrupting outside influences, they stayed in that room and pushed from within to keep the forces outside.

With the mutual pressure from inside and outside the door, that gateway managed to stay largely closed from 1694 until 1994 when Muslims were suddenly exposed to a free society. This may explain why Islam was never propagated as freely among other communities; why despite a common faith, there was still broad distinctions made between cultures and schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*) – all practises that to a more or lesser degree continue to this day.

Global Muslims Issues

However, with the birth of the now clichéd New South Africa, the rules changed. Suddenly it was okay to marry whom you pleased and live where you wanted. This meant that the door between the Muslim community and the rest of society was wide open. This openness has brought bigger challenges than ever before in recent history.

It was one thing to protect yourself in that laager, but the more important question was – has this community been equipped enough to become a part of the wider society outside the laager without losing its Islamic identity? And it is here that community radio has a vital role to play.

VOC was the first Muslim community radio to be given a broadcasting license. Since the inception, we have been able to view the way in which our community's interests have gradually broadened. It started with own interest but it is gradually opening its eyes to the world beyond it.

In 1995, we flexed our muscles for the first time and called for a public show of support for an issue that affected this community directly - the need for its own community radio station. Once a licence was obtained for two community radio stations, the support for local matters remained constant – more than 60,000 people annually at the VOC Spring Festival; 30,000 – 40,000 people per weekend at festivals in the Boland areas like the Kramat, Paarl, for example.

At the same time, increased coverage on global issues gradually started to broaden the minds of many in our community. Left to themselves, or to the mainstream media, they would hardly bother about what is happening in places like Chechnya, Bosnia, or Kashmir.

However, with community radio, many in this community – with very little academic knowledge on global matters - are able to not only gain a good grasp of what is happening in the main flashpoints of the Muslim world, but increasingly express themselves about it. The Palestinian *intifada*, as well as the US-led aggression on Afghanistan and now Iraq, has had a powerful impact on this community. It is only too

evident at public demonstrations, and even more so when they have the chance to express themselves on air.

Simply put, the community feels the plight of Iraq, Palestine and before it, Afghanistan, very passionately. Even a 90-year old would attend a mass protest to show his support because he cannot go to Iraq himself. When you open the lines to them, the anger at the anti-Muslim forces, the frustration with the Muslim world leaders, and the agony on behalf of those suffering now in especially Iraq and Palestine pours out of these listeners.

While some of the details escape them, the continuous coverage from a Muslim perspective does enlighten them. For example, eighteen months ago we did not dare open the lines to discuss so-called suicide bombings. Too many among our listeners simply did not understand the concept. But because of informed debates with experts and constant coverage on this subject, people learnt and understood a little bit better, as was reflected by their contributions on air. That is a sign of progress.

Beyond the Muslim World

But mobilising people on Iraq and Palestine is easy, because it remains in the headlines, thanks to the media. Our listeners care about it because it affects other Muslims. However, when it affects Muslims in lesser known parts of the world or non-Muslims, the interest dwindles.

For example, the atrocities in Rwanda and Burundi were about Muslims, as is Chechnya and Kashmir. But for some reason, it did not get the same interest from our listeners, even though it prides itself on being one ummah who hurts when a Muslim brother/sister hurts no matter where in the world they are. Perhaps we in the media do not pay enough attention to it and therefore make it easy for our listeners to ignore it too.

In order to make the community care, we need to show them that here too are Muslims suffering. This community doesn't come out swinging until it believes that Muslims are being threatened. Judging by listener responses on Iraq though, it is clear that 100% of them believe the US-led war is an onslaught against Islam. It compels them to fight back without question, regardless of the fact that Saddam Hussein was no choir boy or warrior for Islam.

While the word Islam means peace, basing itself on the concept of humanism, too many in this community find it very difficult to care about the plight of others simply because they are human; be it Muslim or not. As a result, there is scant interest in what is happening in Zimbabwe for example. It is as if all the passion for Iraq and Palestine leaves no place to care about others, including those who are sidelined in their own community. That has to be an injustice to Islam, as is the issue of inherent racism among members of this community.

Racism

An ugly truth about this community is the fact that despite almost a decade of democracy, apartheid is still alive and kicking among Cape Muslims - the so-called black Muslims who have shamefully been excluded while so-called white Muslims are eagerly embraced, or the xenophobic fears that sees this community sidelining foreigners and refugees because they are perceived as a threat to their income or daughters.

But thankfully, it is not all bad news. The age-old cultural divide between Malays and Indians has narrowed by a significant margin in the Cape and I cannot help but think that the media has a lot to do with it. In the first survey I did for VOC in 1997, respondents were very cagey when asked if they were Indian or Malay. Much of that has changed now.

We have made a concerted effort to speak of Cape Muslims, thus referring to both jointly, almost ignoring any barrier between the two. The tactic seems to have worked so well that when I tried to poll the public less than a year ago on whether that gap had indeed narrowed, I was called a racist for even discussing it. Matters like these were best left untouched, I was told.

Muslims and debate

However, while there may be progress, it has been slow because of an unhealthy aversion to engage in debate or public discourse. In this community the lack of public debate especially among the ordinary people on the street is our biggest challenge. If I have to give a reason for it, I would have to blame it on undivided loyalty to a set of beliefs, practises, history or a person.

If Cape Muslims believe that something is right, then everything else has to be wrong. As a result, the bulk of this community has real trouble tolerating anyone who holds a different opinion. For example, if you are a “moony”, then the “makkatinis” must be wrong, or vice versa and never the twain shall meet. If you support one ulama body, then everyone else is not only wrong, they are also *munafiq* or *kafir*. The lack of tolerance very quickly translates itself into a deplorable tendency to cast people outside the fold of Islam. Cape Muslims have simply never matured enough to differ with dignity.

This non-compromising stance makes it very difficult for Muslims to understand Islam better because it leaves little room to question in order to learn more. A year ago we debated the issue of the two Eids. We tried to take it out of a South African setting by getting both local and international speakers to address the issue rather than the parties that were directly involved locally. For three months after that, I was still fielding calls from both camps who felt that we added to the *khilaf* (dissent) by addressing the issue.

Admirable as it might be to pretend that there are no differences of opinion among Muslims (because Lord knows what the non-Muslims will think of us) it can't be healthy for a community to shy away from public debate. It needs to get beyond shouting slogans

by finding practical solutions to things that affect Muslims and you can only do that when you actually ask probing questions.

Debate is a way of life for academics, but for the people on the street, that is a mind-shift. Our biggest challenge in community radio is to open our community up gradually to the fact that there is nothing wrong in having enquiring minds about our faith if we wish to do know our religion better.

We have major challenges in this modern age which we are far from ready for. But that mind-shift must be fast-tracked if Muslims are to get any kind of grip on it. The community is not ready to deal with homosexuality and Aids, but the Zackie Achmat and Fahmida Miller stories show how it does affect us. We don't want to deal with abortion, but 80% of the abortions done at one city hospital are on Muslim girls. We don't want to deal with organ transplants, but 80% of all hearts being transplanted at Groote Schuur go to Muslim patients.

So confronted by these realities that are thrown at the community by community radio, our Muslim identity is being forced to evolve and mature as our sphere of interest gradually circles wider.

Conclusion

The willingness to engage in debate is the first step. Once the clergy reflects that willingness on all levels, this community will progress. For some reason, the community remains reluctant to do anything unless some alim puts a halal stamp on it. We will find it very difficult to break the shackles that held us captive in that cage for 300 years.

All we at community radio can do is to be the agitator that brings such matters into the public arena for discussion and act as watchdog, observing the evolutionary change of the Muslim identity.