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**Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development
The Director**

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Radio Freedom was the voice of the then-banned African National Congress, the ANC, during the apartheid era in South Africa. It was launched clandestinely in June 1963 at the Johannesburg Lilliesleaf farm which served as a base for the leadership of the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. The station lasted less than a month before the revolutionaries were arrested and sent to prison with life sentences in what became known as the "Rivonia Trial" in which Nelson Mandela was accused Number One. Today, of course, the ANC is the ruling party in South Africa, having won power in 1994.

After its 1963 collapse, it took four years before Radio Freedom could be relaunched in exile, and this time operating on shortwave from Zambia. In the next 15 years, the station also gained a platform in Tanzania, Ethiopia, Madagascar and Angola. At a time when the exiled ANC could not operate legally inside South Africa, Radio Freedom became the primary way for the liberation movement to connect with its mass constituency back home. The connections were not just one way. As Sekibakiba Lekgoathi has described in the Journal of African Media Studies, some Radio Freedom listeners – all of whom faced imprisonment if caught listening – nevertheless wrote letters to the station's programme called "Listeners' corner". They wrote in pseudonyms and addressed the correspondence to the External Services, Radio Zambia, Lusaka. No email or SMS in those days, but Radio Freedom still managed to give voice to some of its listeners. Also interesting about the radio was the experience in many, probably most, cases – in regard to the way that listeners would congregate in small collectives to tune into the station and discuss its message.

In the 1970s, I was one of those bands of ardent listeners, who hung onto every word and were moved by every militant song carried on Radio Freedom. The broadcast, crackly and often jammed on some frequencies, confirmed one thing: the ANC was out there even if less than visible back home, and it was able to give strategic direction and inspiration. Most important, it could provide truth that was absent from most of the legal media in apartheid South Africa.

All this stood in stark contrast to the state-monopoly radio station at time. My teenage years were spent overhearing a programme on the English Service of SABC, sent

out at 5.30pm each day and titled “Music in the blue of evening, by Freddie Carlos”. Who does not remember particular radio programmes from their youth? I remember this one, with its peaceful piano melodies on balmy summer eves, which would precede the white-blinkered news and the subsequent propagandistic editorial comment. There was no television in South Africa at the time. The way the “blue of evening” programme worked was to help lull the white community into tranquillity that all was well with the world, that society was calm and stable, and that the news which would follow was all a confirmation that the order of things was here to stay. It was a very far cry from the realities of mass humiliation and exploitation of resentful black South Africans who, by the way, were served by African language stations that romanticised tribal life, and had no journalists. These SABC stations had translators, who rendered English or Afrikaans news into African languages.

SABC’s English Service and Radio Freedom were effective in their own ways, each adequate to its diametrically opposed purpose. For me, listening to Radio Freedom as a student in 1976, the year of the Soweto massacre of more than 800 school going protestors, Radio Freedom was liberating. It carried strong voices uncowed by the brutality of the apartheid machine and not at all intimidated by white arrogance and power. It showed resistance and defiance. The station was a major factor in me becoming more deeply involved in “the struggle”, unfortunately with two years political imprisonment that later followed in later years.

I tell this personal story because it highlights not only the power of radio, but also the double-edged-sword character of the medium. It shows that there is radio that can insulate and reinforce narrow-mindedness, and conversely that there is radio that can open minds to understand and challenge injustice. There is radio that can divert and distract from toxic realities, and there is radio that can help change such realities.

This spectrum of potentials is one reason that accounts for the successful worldwide spread of radio. Today, more than 75% of households in developing countries have a radio, and for them, this is often their primary or even exclusive link to mass communication. In increasing numbers of countries, radio is also the number one medium for offering a choice of channels and languages and interests – in Uganda, there are over 150 stations today; the same goes for the Democratic Republic of Congo, and even more in Niger – a pioneer of radio pluralism in Africa. Peru has almost 1700 stations; 30% of Pakistani men say they listen to radio using the receivers built into their mobile phones. Radio has extensive roots everywhere.

The digitisation of radio frequencies worldwide is still a distant prospect, but that is no matter for most countries where there is still ample space for more analogue stations. And even as other digital distribution opportunities proliferate, there continues to be an interest in pure audio as a valued form of free speech and mass communication. Radio, in this sense, is not a technology. It is also not even a platform; it is a social institution. Long before social networking became vogue, radio was already a social construction which built identities and communities, and which created conversations around these. The phenomenon of radio has been a vector for exposure to music, and its unique uni-modal character has proved to be a powerful stimulus of the imagination. In short, radio in this holistic sense is a star that – contrary to the song – was never killed by video. Nor by any means is it rendered redundant by IP protocols, in fact it can and does ride upon them. This durability of radio is one reason why UNESCO is currently working with the Swedish Agency for International Development on a programme to support 34 stations in 7 African countries, to build capacity there to harness internet and cellphone facilities and to do more journalism of service to audiences.

It is also for these reasons regarding radio that UNESCO's 195 member states decided last November to support a Spanish proposal for a special day on the international calendar to pay attention to the medium. What is the purpose of such a day, you may ask? The answer is: what you want to make of it. For many, it is a time to celebrate the positives around radio. For others it can be a marvellous occasion for advocacy – to foster reform in recalcitrant governments, such as Zimbabwe which still drags its feet on freeing the airwaves for non-governmental radio. It can also be a time to secure more support from public subsidy, advertisers and/or communities in many other countries.

Not surprisingly, World Radio Day is catching on in many places. There are events taking place on this very day in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Uzbekistan, Nepal, Palestine, Mongolia and Australia amongst other places, including here at SOAS. But let us not assume that this important day will continue to snowball or even that it will survive. The experience of World Television Day, which continues to have limited profile and visibility after many years, is salutary. The question we can profitably ask is: how does a special "day" come into being organically and in a sustained way?

Some lessons may be drawn from World Press Freedom Day, 3 May. Last year, 100 countries marked World Press Freedom Day; this year – where UNESCO will host a major conference in a free Tunisia – is likely to have even more. But it has taken a long

time to reach this point – it was the 1991 Windhoek Conference convened by UNESCO which made the original call for such a date to become internationally observed. The momentum then had to be maintained in order for the proposal to be put forwards to, and agreed to by, UNESCO member states, and subsequently the UN General Assembly. Then, the media industry itself as well as media NGOs and universities with journalism departments, needed to take ownership of the occasion and organise their own commemorations.

So, sustainability can happen, as has been the case with World Press Freedom Day on 3 May. It's not likely that World Radio Day would become as well known as many of the world's religious days, but it certainly has potential to become a self-reproducing and multiplying occasion in the years ahead. For its part, UNESCO will continue, despite very limited budgets, to do what it can to promote this Day. Since the November conference that gave rise to the occasion, we have now written to the UN Secretary General to convey the request of the UNESCO member states that the day now be put on the agenda of the UN General Assembly. Passing this hurdle is essential if the date is to become "official" internationally. If the momentum of this year continues to build, it will become easier to persuade the international community at the UN – which is sceptical of adding yet more days to the global calendar – that radio indeed deserves its special moment.

Let me conclude with an anecdote. Until I joined UNESCO last November, I spent 18 years in the small South African city of Grahamstown. This settlement has one of the oldest community radio initiatives in South Africa – and yet Radio Grahamstown has had a shaky existence, often wrought by politics, always lacking in resources, occasionally off air.

I arrived in the city in 1994, the year of South Africa's first democratic elections, and was invited to a meeting to advance the agenda of setting up the station. As had been my instinctive habit, borne of natural experience, I cast my suspicious eye around the attendees in an effort to identify the police spy amongst them. My focus alighted on one individual, and I waited with interest as the meeting asked each participant to identify him- or herself. Lo, when it came to my suspect, he openly disclosed that he was from the police. Times were changing.

Today, Radio Grahamstown owes its recent survival to a community member who chairs the board – who happens to be a policeman in his day job. Other local people who volunteer their time for the station are a preacher who drums up attendance at her church – using the station is part of her business model. There are

also young men who want to be US-style DJs; there are do-gooders wanting to spread health messages and musicians wanting exposure. And there are wanna-be journalists who seek to conduct hard-hitting interviews with local officials.

It is a vibrant, even if not inherently sustainable, group. But its functions and services are put on air. Amongst the audience are local teenagers who – despite high poverty and unemployment – send in instant messages, and listen attentively to programmes such as Y2Y – “Youth to Youth”. Radio Grahamstown is a station that Radio Freedom – which closed in 1991 – would have been pleased to see.

At UNESCO, we're also pleased that stations like Radio G have the opportunity to exist as part of the materialisation of freedom of expression, especially in a small town in a developing country. On World Radio Day, we should not forget experiences like SABC English Service radio, nor of course the Rwandan genocidal Radio Mille Collines. But such racist services are not about free speech. So, on the particular occasion of this day today, let us celebrate the positives – in other words, how radio provides audiences with information and cultural access and choice, and how audiences themselves are also increasingly participating in the medium as well. This focus on the positive is why I can happily say to you: “Happy World Radio Day, and wishing you many returns”