Prospering with BBC Swahili

SOLOMON O MUGERA looks back at 50 years of broadcasting to East Africa and at how today’s BBC Swahili service is attracting – and supporting – bigger audiences than ever before.

Fifty years ago, a Tanzanian student studying in the UK landed a lucrative assignment – to launch the debut BBC broadcast to East Africa in Kiswahili.

“This is London. Today, for the first time ever, BBC London sends greetings to all the residents of East Africa, in their own language. Asalaam Aleikum.”

With a calm and composed baritone voice, Oscar Kambona launched what would later become a voice of authority and dependable news for millions of listeners across East and Central Africa.

The year 1957 brought with it immense political changes across sub-Saharan Africa. It had seen Ghana become the first black African country to attain independence, setting the pace for the rest of the region.

Since its launch, BBC’s Swahili service has covered the liberation struggles and celebrations in then Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi.

The service provided a perfect platform for founding fathers Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenya’s Jomo Kenyatta and Milton Obote from Uganda to discuss their ideologies.

A BRAVE REPUTATION

BBC Swahili has earned a reputation for its brave coverage of major events, including Tanzania’s invasion of Uganda to end Idi Amin’s dictatorship in 1972, a feat that was repeated in 2007 when Rwanda and Uganda combined forces to oust yet another dictator – Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo.

For many years BBC Swahili service dominated airwaves in East and Central Africa as the only alternative source of information to state-owned media.

Opposition voices, banished from state-owned media, turned to the BBC.

As the Swahili service turns 50, it’s beginning to feel the pangs of mid-life blues. Competition from local FM stations is growing. Listener demands and preferences keep changing; fewer and fewer are tuning in to shortwave.

A TIME OF GREAT CHANGE

Kari Blackburn, former Head of BBC Swahili Service, recalls her years there.

“It was a time of great change for radio in East Africa and we were very aware that not even our most committed listeners would tolerate crackly shortwave when they could tune in to crystal clear FM. So we established partnerships with key media groups like Tanzania’s IPP and Radio Free Africa.

“The 40th anniversary party for the BBC Swahili service in Nairobi was the famous occasion when the then president, Daniel arap Moi, granted us FM relays in Nairobi and Mombasa.

“During those years we also undertook a major overhaul of our programmes. And as the first woman head of the service I put a lot of effort into attracting first-class women journalists such as Mariam Omar, Suzanne Mungy and Vicky Ntetema.”

These changes as well as the energy invested by Blackburn’s immediate successor, Tido Mhando (service head from 1999 to 2006), ensured a rise in audience figures from 9m to 25m by the time as head, that Mhando secured interviews with all the presidents of the region. Moi, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa and his successor Jakaya Kikwete, Rwanda’s Paul Kagame, former Mozambican President Joachim Chissano and Joseph Kabila of DRC who took over from his father Laurent Kabila.

In fact Mhando was the last journalist to interview Laurent Kabila days before he was assassinated.

“The fact that most presidents granted us interviews showed that they trusted the BBC.”

CONNECTING WITH NEW AUDIENCES

Mhando considers the changes made, in order to improve the service. “We achieved phenomenal things. We opened bureaux in our region and ensured our reporters were adequately equipped.

“Swahili was the first BBC World Service language service to broadcast the English Premiership football to our target audience in Kiswahili.

“Perhaps the biggest leap was to relocate our breakfast show, Amka na BBC, to Nairobi. We wanted to be closer to our audience.”

And that desire continues to burn. The era of broadcasting is fast being squeezed out by on-demand casting via personalised platforms such as mobile phones and iPods. Our listeners no longer simply listen. They want to participate actively and to set the agenda.

Mark the 50th anniversary; we’re investing especially in our young listeners. The Prosper With The BBC competition for 16- to 24-year-olds, launched in April, was a search for an innovative or unique business idea that could help improve the life of a young listener and that of his or her community.

With a prize of US$2,000 and a laptop for the best idea, the competition attracted more than 5,000 applications.

Prosper With The BBC

President Benjamien Mkapa and his successor Jakaya Kikwete, Rwanda’s Paul Kagame, former Mozambican President Joachim Chissano and Joseph Kabila of DRC who took over from his father Laurent Kabila.

In fact Mhando was the last journalist to interview Laurent Kabila days before he was assassinated.

“The fact that most presidents granted us interviews showed that they trusted the BBC.”

CONNECTING WITH NEW AUDIENCES

Mhando considers the changes made, in order to improve the service. “We achieved phenomenal things. We opened bureaux in our region and ensured our reporters were adequately equipped.

“Swahili was the first BBC World Service language service to broadcast the English Premiership football to our target audience in Kiswahili.

“Perhaps the biggest leap was to relocate our breakfast show, Amka na BBC, to Nairobi. We wanted to be closer to our audience.”

And that desire continues to burn. The era of broadcasting is fast being squeezed out by on-demand casting via personalised platforms such as mobile phones and iPods. Our listeners no longer simply listen. They want to participate actively and to set the agenda.

Mark the 50th anniversary; we’re investing especially in our young listeners. The Prosper With The BBC competition for 16- to 24-year-olds, launched in April, was a search for an innovative or unique business idea that could help improve the life of a young listener and that of his or her community.

With a prize of US$2,000 and a laptop for the best idea, the competition attracted more than 5,000 applications.

The top four finalists are battling it out for the top prize during our Golden Jubilee celebrations – broadcast live on radio and television on 27 June 2007. It will be the first event by a BBC World Service language service to broadcast live on television and in more than one country.

The winner will have the rare opportunity to present their idea to the youths forum during the Commonwealth Heads of State Summit to be held in November in Uganda’s capital, Kampala. And Uganda’s renowned Makerere University Business School has offered to mentor the winner during his or her business start-up stages.

Thousands of young East Africans graduate from school, college and university every year. Only a handful are guaranteed jobs. A majority are left to engage in small-scale businesses or simply waste their skills on the streets and in villages. Prosper With The BBC is sending a message to young people that their ideas can be turned into reality. It’s a sign that the BBC cares for them and their future.

Prosper With The BBC competition.

The competition attracted more than 5,000 applications.