

Viva la radio!



Today Radio Havana Cuba joins the celebration of World Radio Day, proclaimed four years ago by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which on this occasion is dedicated to the youth of the world.

The initiative to proclaim World Radio Day surfaced seven years ago at Madrid's Spanish Radio Academy, but it wasn't until the Sixth UNESCO Conference, led by its Director General, Irina Bokova, that it was approved.

Since then, World Radio Day is feted each 13 February to coincide with the date of the creation of UN Radio, in 1946, one year after the foundation of the United Nations itself. For many countries in the world, specially in Africa, radio remains of paramount importance.

"Ten million people live in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and most of them love radio.

There are more than 200 radio stations in the country, that's more than all the television channels and newspapers put together. Radio Digital Congo has a daily audience of in the millions.

Most Congolese listen to the radio. Radio is still the dominant medium in the country. Radios are portable and as they run on batteries, they still work when there is a power cut. In DR Congo where the majority of people can neither read nor write, nor afford a television set, radio is the gateway to the wider world and to their own country as well.

At the start of the millennium, DR Congo was a fractured, conflict-ridden country. Each of those parts of the country had their own radio services and what they ended up broadcasting was, according to radio coach and consultant David Smith, hate radio "They told rumors about what the other side was doing and not doing. There was very little truth circulating in the DRC."

That was why the Canadians decided to start Radio Okapi - under United Nations protection - in a barracks in Kinshasa. The Okapi is a mammal related to the giraffe which is found in the Ituri region of DR Congo. It is classified as an endangered species. Opaki - the radio station - was equally as exotic when it went on the air on February 25, 2002. Its mission was to disseminate independent, credible news and information, the very opposite of propaganda. The staff were mostly Congolese journalists reporting in the five main languages from studios in Goma, Bukavu and Kisangani as well as in Kinshasa.

David Smith, who was involved in the project, looks back on what they accomplished in those days with some pride. "Shortly after the station went on the air, the head of the UN mission at the time, Amos Namanga Ngongi, went to the UN Security Council and said - and I am very happy to quote him - 'Radio Okapi has helped electronically to destroy the front line in the Congolese war.'"

That same year the warring parties agreed to a peace deal, an interim government was formed under the leadership of Joseph Kabila. Radio Okapi is now one of the most popular radio stations in the country and it is flanked by an equally popular website. Its output consists of music, sport, culture and politics - ranging from the big government scandals to affairs of lesser stature in the provinces.

David Smith is no longer with Radio Okapi; he has moved on to other projects elsewhere in Africa. In northern Nigeria, he is helping to start up a station that will deliver security advice to people exposed to Boko Haram's terrorist attacks - not just in Nigeria but also in Niger, Cameroon and Chad.

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Radio Habana Cuba