

MEMORIES OF A BABY UNIVERS

Kwesi Yankah



There are so many celebrations these days, made worse by a social media which invites you to send birthday wishes to people whose birth circumstances are unknown to your diary. Thus when you suspect your birthday has been forgotten, simply begin by wishing yourself a happy birthday with grinning cheeks; the social media allows that. That is often an application for more birthday wishes, since charity has already begun with your front teeth. 'A happy birthday to me,' is now a routine when nobody is watching. You get disappointed, however, when the few well wishes received come without 'momo' wallets, implying you have grinned in vain.

Some anniversaries, however, are worth the smile: Radio Univers @30. The story draws listening ears: an adventure that walks you back to the genesis of democratic radio. I pick on it today because I was a pivotal player who staked it out with student heroes to berth Ghana's 4th Republic. Thanks to the visionary vice chancellors of University of Ghana: George Benneh, followed by Ivan Addae Mensah. We were their foot soldiers: Kwesi Yankah, Legon's ubiquitous dean of students/chair of the foundation management board; and my energetic buddy Alhaji Sidik Ahmed, station manager. Late April was earmarked to celebrate Radio Univers; and we proudly did so at the feet of Ghana's number One Ivory Tower, reminiscing how far interactive FM has come after years of fiddling with studio toys. We were 'school children' in the early 1990s, playing games in the Legon studios, but unwittingly making history. That was the early stirrings of FM broadcasting taking over from short wave radio mustered by GBC 1, and GBC 2. Quietly and gingerly, we hobbled along Ghana's constitutional democracy which was on life support. Almost at the same time, Wereko Brobby's Radio Eye had quietly started but was shut down by Government, and their equipment seized.

For the records, KNUST and UCC students using student-made transmitters were informally operating in their respective neighborhoods.

Friday April 26 provided an opportunity for the lizard to jump down the iroko tree, and sing in self-praise. It was great seeing gracefully aged faces of little heroes: Alhaji Sidik Ahmed himself, Nat Adisi (Bola Ray), Sanjay Michandani, Kwame Baah Nuako, Francis Ankrah, Elvis Lawer, John Doe Samlafo, Ajoa Nyanteng, Osei Bempah, DJ Black, Evelyn Tachi, and several more: faces that in themselves told a story. I missed several faces including Opanyin Kofi Agyekum whom Radio Universe instantly catapulted to fame; Kwasi Aboagye ‘the darling boy;’ Kwasi Tiekue, Felix Odartey Wellington a soothing radio presenter nicknamed ‘Carlo Wang;’ but also our golden voice Aban Koranteng, finest news reader. I remember Aban particularly for his bold critique which finetuned the naming of the station. While the name ‘Radio Universe’ I coined had been unanimously accepted, Aban Koranteng raised a point of order. ‘Sir, the name you have coined for the station is great; but with all due respect, let’s drop the letter ‘e’ at the end of ‘Universe;’ and make it ‘Univers,’ for purposes of unique branding.’ Brilliant! We applauded and submitted to the young brain; the name and spelling soon stuck and sank into history. We dropped our original generic name, ‘Voice of Legon,’ in 1994 after our Vice Chancellor Benneh bought for us a 400 watt radio transmitter.

We are hereby inciting readers to be angry; for the frequency we were originally given by the Frequency Allocation Board, was annoyingly hijacked by JOY FM while we were playing in the sand. FM 99.7 which has since been identified with JOY was the ideal, being centrally positioned on the radio wavelength. But our anger soon dissipated through the airwaves. We ended up with the least favorable frequency FM 105.7, almost at the last end of the dial. The turtle that created the river now lodged at the river’s bank. But we have since allowed bygones to flee, since JOY later atoned by giving big jobs to our little heroes.

A few memorable incidents still linger from our foundation days. First was my early fundraising efforts in buying rudimentary studio equipment ahead of the new set of broadcast equipment. A few months after inception, I had to travel to the US on a short fellowship with Northwestern University. While there, an idea struck me to raise funds for the ongoing radio project, through a Ghana internet page, called ‘Okyeame’ operated by Nana Otuo Acheampong now in Ghana. Ghanaians on the east coast got excited learning of the Legon initiatives, and cooperated. In a matter of three weeks, contributions trickling reached almost \$2000. With this huge goodwill, I bought basic studio equipment, and brought these over as excess luggage. Back to Legon, an enthusiastic body of volunteers warmly received me led by Kwame Baah Nuako who unpacked the load, and quickly assembled the equipment. This was to support a 20 watts mono transmitter gifted by UNESCO.

But our new transmitter almost put us in trouble. Our station had been given license to operate within limits up to Tetteh Quarshie Circle, less than ten kilometers radius. When we got a bigger transmitter however, we got excited and brazenly began broadcasting to areas beyond limits, and we felt proud to be heard in parts of the central and volta regions. One morning, we got unusual visitors from the National Communications Authority, that came and ordered us to stop operations, since we were violating the laid down terms for experimental broadcasting, which also prohibited us from broadcasting beyond 9 pm. The interference inflamed passions among a concerned student body, that was championing the birth of press freedom. Students resolved to resist, and quietly dared anybody to come from Government, and halt the operations of Radio Univers since we were in a constitutional era, where no formal permission was needed to broadcast or start a radio station. The Vandals from Commonwealth Hall led the crusade and

took turns to collectively keep vigil around the Radio station over a week, until the footsteps of NCA receded in the distance.

The authorities were irked by something else. In 1995, when the University of Ghana was seeking a permanent license to operate the station, an inspection team from Government expressed worry about the absence of security on the station's premises. It was indeed feared that, any adventurer could burst into the studio and announce a coup d'état whether real or otherwise. The inspection team appeared worried when we said, the University was unlikely to go beyond the routine campus security apparatus, to protect the radio station. If the Rawlings Government just emerging from a revolution was jittery, it was perhaps because, the nation had gotten used to a single state-owned radio station, GBC, which could be whimsically taken over by any adventurer, to announce a military take-over. Legon stuck to its guns and refused to turn the station into a security zone.

One major problem was the know-how to handle our new technical equipment. When we had the least technical hitch, the most we could do was to pick up the phone, and place a long distance call to Mr. Roy Parson the manufacturer in London; Roy would give us word for word instructions on how to fix the problem. Sometimes, a break in transmission was from a mere volume control switch. Fact is the brand of transmitter was so uncommon local technical hands could not cope. When the going was tough, and there was nowhere to turn, the manufacturer would send down his assistant by the next available flight. His assistant called Tony, was an 18 year old polytechnic student. Tony would fix the issue in 15 minutes and depart by the next available plane!

That was Baby Univers being celebrated as a pioneer of official FM broadcast.

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Distinguished guests including Past VCs, Addae-Mensah, and Cliff Tagoe



Dr Kwame Baah-Nuako in handshake with another pioneer



With Chairman, National Media Commission



Osei Bempah, veteran broadcaster



Justice Henrietta Mensah-Bonsu, former Chair Radio Univers



Bola Ray with colleague pioneers



A seprewa interlude



Prof Audrey Gadzekpo, a great resource to Univers



Legendary Dr Sidik Ahmed





Provost College of Education, Prof Sam Codjoe representing the VC



John Dumelo was there

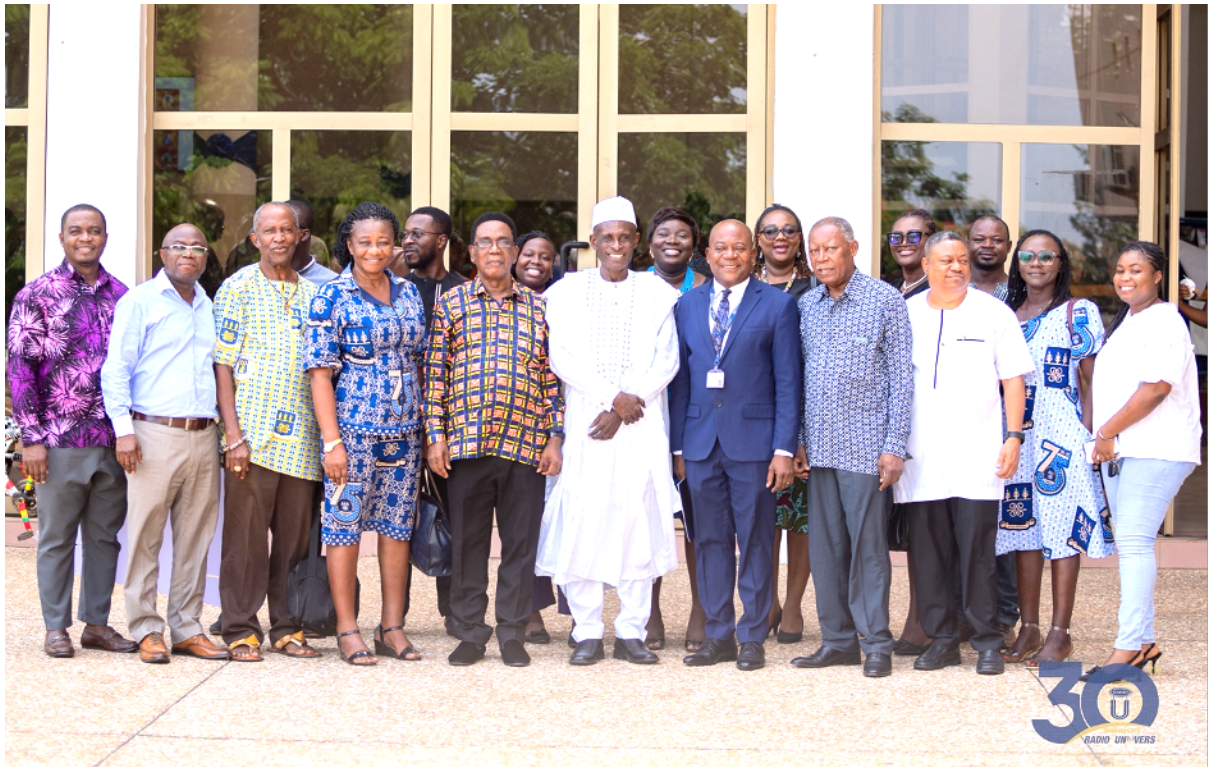


The President, Ghana Journalists Association



Foundation Members





A collective celebration of Radio Unvers



Alhaji poses with the new generation