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African-developed radio is Zimbabweans 'subversive' newswire

Posted on June 22nd, 2008 by marcashton

An African-developed product, designed specifically with the continent's rugged conditions in mind, has been a lifeline for Zimbabweans craving news from the outside world. Less than 30 seconds of 'personal power' on the winding handle of a Freeplay wind-up radio delivers an hour of medium-volume broadcast.

So successful has the radio been in delivering external news broadcasts from stations using AM and FM radio frequencies that the Zimbabwean government has banned them. The Zimbabwean government vigorously controls its citizens' access to news from independent sources.

The Freeplay wind-up radio – dubbed a 'tool of subversion' by the Zimbabwean government - won its South African designers an SABS Design Institute award in 1997.

Roelf Mulder, managing director of ...XYZ Design, is delighted that the radio has helped bring information to a news-starved nation at a time of crisis. "It's a mechanical solution in a technological age."

He and design director Byron Qually were two of the four-strong South African design team that evolved the original Freeplay wind-up radio, making it robust enough for non-governmental organisations to distribute throughout Africa, initially, as part of their communication strategies to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Shortly after its launch in 1997 the radio was used internationally by then, deputy president Thabo Mbeki, to showcase how African ingenuity and technology could be a world beater.

At a speech delivered in Cape Town in January 1998, he hailed the radio as a "technological breakthrough of potentially great importance to the achievement of socially desirable objectives in terms of distance education and the development of democracy in impoverished rural populations of the developing world".

About 850 000 wind-up radios were made and sold.

The Freeplay Radio 2 (FPR2), which was designed in Cape Town by Syzygy – the forerunner to Mulder's ...XYZ Design company - was made with a one-year warranty on the materials.

Mulder says the wind-up radio "was designed from the outset by Africans who understood the challenging conditions under which it would operate. The original model, which was designed in Europe, is unlikely to have survived.

"I find it gratifying that an African designed and developed product is playing such a crucial role in bringing hope and news to communities struggling for freedom and democracy."

The original wind-up radio was conceived by Englishman Trevor Baylis and was brought South Africa where it was not a commercial success, until Mulder's company acquired the rights to redesign and develop the idea into FPR2. Freeplay manufactured the product in South Africa for a few years but was forced to transfer the manufacturing operation to China which could produce the radios at a lower cost.

The product was recently exhibited at Museum of Modern Art in New York for an exhibition called 'Safe: Design Takes On Risks'. Glenn D Lowry, the director of the museum notes that the exhibition acknowledges safety as a basic human need, albeit one that fluctuates in response to an environment and social context.

The South African designed FPR2 radio is also on display in the London Design Museum.

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About:

Dot Dot Dot Ex Why Zed Design (Pty) Ltd is the leading product design company that put South African design talent on the world map with its wind-up radio for the Freeplay Foundation. This product is on permanent display in the London Design Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The company, formed in 2000, is a frequent winner of awards for design excellence, among them SABS DISA awards for domestic, commercial, industrial, ICT and engineering products.

Operating internationally and locally ...XYZ Design is an integrated product design studio that offers end-to-end management from product design and prototype development to manufacture. Its unique approach to solving problems can be applied to industries including medical, telecommunications, high-tech and FMCG products, homeware, furniture, packaging and industrial goods.

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