



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 14

Pluralist Responses for Africa

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An experimental project in participatory radio communication was set up recently in a rural area of Africa. The development project, which used collective radio listening and encouraged active feedback, had succeeded in making the residents of the area aware of the importance of having a voice and of listening to each other, of hearing their neighbours on the radio, and of controlling communication. Perhaps, some might think, it was too successful.

By the time the technicians came from the capital to dismantle and take away the transmitter, the peasants had decided they liked controlling their own communication. Defiant of the authorities who wanted to take this new-found power from them, they had hidden *their* radio station.

Africa is watching the birth of a new movement for change. Some call it democratisation, others, exasperation. People across the continent are reclaiming the right to participate, the right to a decent life, and the right to freedom of expression.

The written media have made a lot of progress and there is now a proliferation of private and opposition periodicals available. Radio, as the most widespread medium in Africa, will have a central role to play in this popular participation. However, totalitarian regimes and monolithic one-party systems are reluctant to loosen their grasp on the medium – which for them remains a privileged means of disseminating propaganda. But their grip is beginning to slacken and the voices demanding more open policies for radio are getting stronger. In Mali, for example, a March, 1991 demonstration against the dictatorship was met with a show of force by the military. Following the conflict, the State radio refused to allow their airwaves to be used to call paramedics to the scene to

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treat the injured. Just under a year later, a free radio station was broadcasting legally in the capital city of Bamako.

According to Samba Touré, director of the Inter-African Centre for Studies in Rural Radio at Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (CIERRO):

The need that's felt for the written press is even stronger when it comes to radio broadcasting, because radio affects the majority of the population. In the coming years radio broadcasting will follow in the footsteps of this unstoppable movement for change in our countries, and will be freed from the shackles of the State. Radio has the ability to address people in the languages they speak every day ... This is a very important factor. (AMARC, 1991)

Rural radio addresses the majority of the population and tends to be more in tune with local realities. The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) first took an active interest in African rural radio in 1989 when it made contact with CIERRO, in order to conduct a survey defining the parameters of participatory radio in Africa.

This study on rural and local radio in Africa was undertaken at a time when powerful movements for democratisation and pluralism were being born. It aimed to fulfil what was at the time just a dream – to learn more about radio in the hands of citizens, radio in the service of local people and communities.

The work was completed in 1990 with a set of recommendations that included proposals to increase popular participation. These and other recommendations covering training, exchanges, research, and the integration of women, are being tackled in a second pan-African project which is, in part, a response to the survey.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS, IN BRIEF

Terms of reference

The survey covered eleven African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Senegal, Chad, Togo, Zaire, and Zimbabwe. They were chosen to represent a cross-section of three variables: historical heritage, geographical location, and the existing radio communication models.

The study examined different radio broadcasting experiences, particularly in rural areas, and touched on the following points: the general environment of radio (legislative, social, economic, cultural and political); the history and objectives of radio; and the organisation, programming, technical and financial situation of rural radio. Popular participation and the situation of women as professionals and as a target audience were a focal point of the survey.

Vertical vs. horizontal communication

Rural radio has existed in Africa since the early 1960s. Generally speaking, its objectives are almost identical from one country to another. Rural radio has a mandate for development, the broadcast of local culture, and conveying government development

policies. It aims to increase production and agricultural productivity by developing knowledge; to organise dialogue between peasants and the authorities, as well as among the peasants themselves; and to further cultural heritage and traditions.

Rural radio is often the offshoot of national development plans. It serves government policies in the area of production, especially industrial agriculture. The experience of Burkina Faso provides a good example of this. It is a desert country with one of the lowest levels of education in Africa. Radio was used by the government as a tool for economic and social development in the early days of the newly created State. When rural radio was initiated in 1969, its purpose was to create the main support, and to be the key element in the mobilisation of any government programme aimed at the welfare of the population.

Today, programmes may cover groundnut production based on segments recorded throughout the year, or how to go about obtaining credit from a financial institution. Educational programming on themes such as fish hatcheries and raising rabbits, emphasises training peasants in specific tasks, allowing them to contribute to the production process.

Another of the research findings was that the efficiency of rural radio is often limited by its structure and a lack of peasant involvement in determining its programming. Programmes are often broadcast on a single radio network that sometimes does not reach the entire country.

Generally speaking, rural radio is integrated into the national (state) broadcasting structures. It may consist of local productions linked to national programming, as it does in Mali; it can be a department in itself, as in Senegal; or a State-owned enterprise, as in Zaire.

In Burkina Faso, rural radio was a service of the national broadcasting system until 1981, when it became a separate department. In Benin, rural radio eventually became a specialised division with relative autonomy in management. Today, this service falls under the authority of the Director of Broadcasting and, according to the AMARC/CIERRO research report:

This situation generates many problems. There is often a lack of coordination between similar programming organisations and other national broadcasting structures, as well as overlaps and duplication in programming. As rural stations are not autonomous, they inherit the administrative, structural and financial problems of the structures which oversee them (AMARC, 1990).

For a long time, this situation of dependence and guardianship left its mark on the training of rural radio workers, or the lack thereof. To be a communicator in national languages was not considered important by many people. The creation of CIERRO helped to change this mindset and improve the availability of training, at least in Francophone Africa; however, not enough rural radio workers have access to this training.

While the survey pointed to a low level of listener participation in planning and programming, a few experiences were identified in which rural associations participated at these levels. The experience of Burkina Faso, for example, with half a dozen local

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stations, has been largely positive due to popular involvement in all stages of the creation of the stations and continued participation in their programmes, which are thus truly able to reflect the concerns of local people.

A lack of systematic methods to measure the impact the programmes have on the population makes evaluating their effectiveness difficult. Where they exist, collective listening practices (through radio clubs, for example) provide for regular feedback from rural people. Other direct or indirect methods such as interviews and mail are also used to gather feedback.

It is possible to say that with the emphasis that has been put on national languages and local cultures, the people are more interested in rural radio. But has the objective of “liberating peasant speech,” expressed by the directors, been reached? Far from it – even further when one considers the very limited place of women as both professionals within the stations and as an intended audience for the programming.

NEW RURAL RADIO MODELS

It is true that within the leadership of State radio broadcasting there are a few people who want to give more space to the voice of the people, either by way of new programmes, or by way of promoting local languages. Initiatives are being undertaken for a radio which is closer to the people (Benin and Zaire) and for rural radio independent of State radio broadcasting (Mali). In many countries professional associations and women’s groups are intervening to ensure that local needs are taken into account when programmes are conceived.

Original experiences and actions have been identified – for example, Kayes Rural Radio in Mali, Radio Candip in Zaire, and local stations in Burkina Faso.¹

Kayes Radio was developed as a result of the participation of two Italian NGOs: Terra Nueva and Gao, in the context of a larger development project in the Sahelian region.

The designers of the Kayes radio project recognised the fact that people are more likely to respond positively to development efforts when they feel as though they are a part of the process. The AMARC/CIERRO research report described this project:

In the model adopted for Kayes radio, the rural population is considered the protagonist of development. The specific role of the radio is to reinforce the cultural self-identification of the population, to systematically confront technical and social knowledge, to broadcast the information necessary to support economic development initiatives, and to improve living conditions (AMARC, 1990).

The Kayes radio’s most important programmes deal with socio-cultural and economic sectors, health, and literacy. They are broadcast in local languages, keeping with Mali’s strong oral tradition. The station is managed by the local population, and is currently working with four large villagers’ associations. There are at least 402 villages are involved in the project.

¹ For a fuller description of Radio Candip and the Kayes radio station, see chapters 4 and 12.

Each village chooses a producer, who is provided with portable recording equipment. The producer then decides on a theme for a programme, records the villagers' concerns, and the programme is put together based on villager's feedback (Cavazzani, 1990)

Radio Candip in Bunia, Zaire, was created in 1974. Its programmes encourage popular participation in local development, and offer solutions to the villagers' problems.

Programmes are produced in ten languages, with many segments devoted to women's issues. Major themes are defined for the year, based on villagers' concerns, expressed to the producers during local visits. One producer noted: "Visits (to the villages) allow us access to first-hand sources of information; our 'guide book' is the villager struggling for a better life."

Local rural stations in Burkina Faso have already made a valuable contribution to an overall participatory development project. Local radio, by giving peasants the ability to express themselves, serves as a crucial channel for the promotion of effective popular participation for development.

Since rural radio began in Burkina Faso, people have been better able to discuss their ideas and objectives. Rural populations have built radio stations for themselves. Radio productions have to be created by the population. Producers have to be recruited from inside the population.

WHEN POLITICS GET MIXED IN

Popular movements demanding democratisation and the demands of professional groups and development organisations have contributed to dramatic changes in the African media landscape in the past two years. Changes in the broadcast media have been slower and more difficult than in the printed press, since control over broadcasting ultimately rests in the hands of powers who continue to resist pluralism and the idea of popular participation. Nevertheless, there are a number of changes taking place.

Some national radio broadcasting structures have already allowed the inauguration of new stations. In Mali, Radio Bamakan began broadcasting in the capital in late 1991, as the second community station in Mali. It joined Kayes Rural Radio, which has existed independently for four years.

Mali's interim government tried to silence the new radio station in the early stages of its existence, but popular protests resulted in the granting of a temporary license to Radio Bamakan. A decree was passed legalising the private media in early 1992; Radio Bamakan is now authorised to broadcast to the entire city, as is a new commercial station.

The station transmits 12 hours daily of volunteer-produced, educational and cultural programming in several national languages: Bambara, Peul, Solinké, Sarakolé, and French. Their purpose is to reflect the needs and concerns of the city's population.

Canal Arc-en-ciel, in Burkina Faso, has been broadcasting music and participatory programmes since December 31, 1991. One year earlier, Burkina Faso saw the emergence of a private station, Horizon FM. This was the first experience of its type in Francophone Africa. Decidedly commercial, the owners of Horizon are planning on

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starting a second station in the second largest city, in 1992. The creation of this last station is perhaps not as innocent as it seems.

A debate is beginning to take place around the issue of participatory radio vs. commercial radio. Democratising the airwaves remains the task at hand – but what type of democratisation, of liberalisation? Is it enough to put the medium in the hands of groups with the means to establish commercial stations, or is it necessary to take steps to actively promote the participation of the entire population?

It seems that in light of the actual state of things, there is no room to oppose either of these experiences. Participatory radio has no choice but to think about more commercial concerns which will ensure its relative financial autonomy. As for commercial radio, one cannot forget that its survival depends on a political atmosphere which recognises pluralism and promotes democracy. Thus, it has a vested interest in working toward upholding the structures which will promote these elements, and which must have a strong participatory component.

Another issue which warrants consideration is popular participation. Africans have expressed the need to clarify this concept on many levels. While many agree that rural radio can no longer be merely “radio for the people,” but rather, “radio by and for the people,” the practices that will ensure this must be defined by Africans, and not by exterior forces.

Various alternatives maybe looked at with respect to participatory radio: the creation of tape libraries and listening clubs, and initiatives which will seek out the participation of grassroots organisations. Some priorities have already been established. Training and research, for example, are essential to the implementation of popular participation, and the integration of women as programme producers, and as a target audience, is imperative.

AN AFRICAN NETWORK

It seems essential for people involved in rural radio production to create a continuous current of information which can be done, in part through the exchange of experiences – both on a continent-wide level and with other southern regions such as Latin America and Asia.

This exchange could permit all of Africa to benefit from a range of experiences – for example, that of a project created by the Tanzanian Media Women’s Association (TAMWA). This project involves a radio unit which uses participatory methodology to improve the condition of women. According to one organiser:

One of TAMWA’s aspirations is to produce news concerning women from their perspective, and to quantitatively and qualitatively accelerate our professional excellence ... The alternative media and theatre for development – these are what TAMWA wishes to use, as its members have discovered that they are traditional, pertinent, and involve rural people.

These reflections, combined with recommendations from the survey, have led CIERRO and AMARC to initiate a second project: the establishment of a pan-African network of participatory radio producers.

The project will constitute an active forum where people involved in rural or community radio will be called upon to exchange ideas and experiences and to work in a coherent, complementary manner on issues of popular participation, research and training. Another of its basic tasks will be to develop models for legislation that would permit different types of radio to function in the new space being offered for communications in Africa today.

Democratisation goes far beyond the adoption of multi-party systems. True democratisation is that which allows people to determine their future and the type of development best-suited to them. Participatory radio is certainly one tool that is well-suited to implement this vision in Africa.

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DOCUMENTARY SOURCE MATERIAL

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