

Radio Redux: Audience Participation and the Reincarnation of Radio for Development in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Along with the valorization of “beneficiary” participation in development praxis, contemporary communication scholarship has tended toward internet-enabled technologies and applications. This study breaks ranks with the implicit loss of faith in the capacity of the so-called legacy media, and radio in particular. It argues that precisely those advances in new technologies, together with the peculiar media ecology of Ghana and Africa generally, are the bases for prenotions about the enduring relevance of radio. To verify this claim, focus group discussions were conducted among radio audiences in Ghana. The findings suggest three factors for a renaissance of radio as a development communication medium: its contribution to democratic pluralism; the use of local languages that enables social inclusion; its appropriation of new technologies for audience participatory engagement. Radio has thus evolved from the powerful effects notions of a one-way transmitter of information to an increasingly more interactive, audience-centric medium.

Keywords: Radio, new technologies, audience participation, development, Ghana, Africa

Introduction

In *Ake*, the memoir of his childhood years, Wole Soyinka recounts how shortly after radio broadcast service was extended to his home state of

Abeokuta, it was given the Yoruba appellation *As'oromagb'esi*—one who speaks without expecting a reply. Soyinka (1983) recalls that “The News soon became an object of worship to Essay [Soyinka called his father “Essay”, for his initials S. A.] and a number of his friends” who huddled together at set times in the day to “hear the Oracle” (pp. 107, 8). This anecdote resonates with the sense evoked by the Akan metaphor *Akasanoma*—talking (or talkative) bird. *Akasanoma* is the brand name that was given to the locally assembled radio set produced under a 1965 joint Ghana–Japan scheme to make radio receiving devices more widely available for pursuing the national development agenda. The name reflects the idea that the technology of the time made radio literally a chatterbox.

These accounts are important not just because they signpost the teleological foundations of the enduring association of radio with development communication efforts in Africa. They also echo, on the one hand, the centrifugal cadence of the powerful effects notions of media influence of the 1930s–1960s. And they are laden, on the other hand, with counterintuitive cues about the contemporary reification of the audience as active participant in the construction of media messages and meanings.

The ontological shift from what Melkote and Steeves (2015, p. 47) observe to be the “pro-innovation, pro-persuasion, pro-top-down, pro-mass media, and pro-literacy biases” of the immediate post-WWII development model, and toward more participatory processes, has enkindled doubts about the essentiality of the so-called legacy (or traditional, or old) media as development communication tools. Some scholars have, for instance, prophesied, even pronounced, the passing of the mass media era, predicating their foreboding on what they observe to be an inexorable loss of audiences and revenues to the new, more interactive, media platforms and applications (cf. Cassino, 2014; Cavanagh, 2007; Jakubowicz, 2011; Poster, 1995).

In this paper, we assert that such doubts about the utility of radio as a participatory communication medium are at least 30 years out of date, considering the spate and scale of developments that have occurred within the radio industry and ecology in Ghana and Africa generally. To demonstrate this claim, and by way of outline, we first lay out the ontological argument for the incarnation of radio as a participatory medium. We suggest that the contemporary media environment together with the particular resonance of radio with African anthropologies provide justification for prenotions about its enduring relevance. Next, we briefly

describe and justify the research method employed—the steps and rationale for the focus group design as a means of socializing audience. We then present and discuss the findings and reflect on their implications for the appropriation and application of radio to development goals in Ghana and Africa.

Radio as a Participatory Medium

In the specific domain of development communication, Melkote and Steeves (2001, p. 21) seem to suggest a similar ambivalence about the presumed imperative of the traditional mass media when they “agree that old views of the field are no longer appropriate.” Those “old views” relate to the classical modernization paradigm which, in effect, conceived of radio as the metaphorical hypodermic syringe, capable of dispensing a modernization therapy onto the otherwise latently “traditional” (qua underdeveloped) countries of Africa. More directly, Ansu-Kyeremeh (1992, p. 111) argued some two-and-a-half decades ago that “radio, in its linear one-way communication mode, is not an effective medium for rural mass education in Ghana.” Instead, he proposed that the “web of indigenous venue-, or event-, or game-, or performance-oriented communication systems [that] characterised intra-village social relations” were better suited for such purposes.

Context is, perhaps, important for understanding the matrix of these doubts. First, from the mid-1950s through to the late 1980s, the modernization-diffusion paradigm dominated development thinking. Radio then became the ideal medium for propagating modernization (read westernization); in that, it enabled prototypes of ideas and resources cultivated and nurtured in the industrialized cultures of the West to be transplanted onto the receiving cultures of the developing Third World. Proponents of the cultural imperialism thesis opposed this ethnocentric remedy. At the same time, disappointment with the empirical outcomes of the transplantationist blueprint was increasing the centripetal appeal of calls for a New World Information and Communications Order and the parallel notion of “development journalism” (Karikari, 2000; Kunczik, 1992, pp. 23–25; Servaes, 2009). The third related point is that there began, within this milieu, a shift in emphasis toward the more interpersonal, “people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented,” (WSIS, 2003) processes of participation and empowerment.

This article pivots from the claim that the contemporary valorization of the participatory communication theory in tandem with advances in

interactive communication technologies suggests radio for development redux. Two interrelated arguments are advanced to conceptualize this claim. First, in an era that has been characterized as the information, and even more lately, interactive (Milne, 2007) age, the media have become an inherent and increasingly indispensable part of human communication. At the same time, the more intimate and interpersonal forms of social organization are yielding way to the exigencies of urbanization and social mobility. Second, while interpersonal approaches are admittedly better suited at summoning audience participation, and at investing development program “beneficiaries” with a sense of ownership and praxis, they are also limited by time and space constraints. At the same time, advances in information and communication technologies are increasingly eroding the exclusivity to interpersonal methods, of the advantages of audience participation.

These points bear illustrating. For several years after its invention, the telephone permitted only turn-taking transactions. The two-way Motorola mobile radio device still works on this principle. A query of impersonality would, therefore, be quite legitimate. Today, the possibilities of video conference calling should mean that the charge is now arguably *passé*. Similarly, it would seem that the charge of noninteractivity of radio is an outdated argument. Today, the possibility to co-opt new technologies and converge with multiple platforms means that the radio medium is increasingly more interactive.

This being the case, radio should be witnessing a renaissance of interest and application from both development communication practitioners and academic research scholars. And yet, the literature does not seem to bear out this expectation. One explanation is that the research agenda has been largely driven by Western experiences and interests, which have moved along with the advances in technology to such fields as mobile devices and online chat sites and applications, such as Facebook, twitter, and websites and blog posts. The point, though, is that while such advanced media devices and technologies are taken for granted in many Western societies, perhaps a reminder, at this point, that the radio is still the latest information technology in many developing communities would be a timely reality check. One of the sobering acknowledgments of the World Summit on the Information Society (2003–2005) was that information technologies were widening, rather than bridging, the asymmetries of communicative power between developed and developing countries of the world; and that the internet in particular was helping to perpetuate

the conditions of cultural hegemony and linguistic ethnocentrism by the US through the California-based Internet Corporation for the Assignment of Names and Numbers (ICANN)—the organization that controls the naming of websites through the internet’s central registry (cf. McPhail, 2006; WSIS, 2004). A 2009 survey of the media preferences, personal communication habits, and ICT use among a national sample of 2,051 Ghanaian adult respondents (15 years and over) showed an 86 percent household ownership of radio—compared to 59 percent television, and 4 percent internet (Bowen, 2010). These figures compare with a more recent national survey of 2,910 adults (18 years and older) in which up to 62.9 percent respondents indicated radio as their primary source of information—compared to 25 percent for television, and only 6.4 percent for internet/social media (and a mere 1.5% for the newspaper) (NCCE, 2015).

The question that is prompted by the twin factors explained above is: What is the nature of radio used within the current milieu of the availability of new and interactive alternatives within the Ghanaian media ecosystem? Furthermore, to what extent is optimism about the development communication potential of radio justified within current theorizing about public sphere participation as the path to sustainable, democratic, and development? In the paragraphs that follow, we briefly explain the methods used to adduce the evidence on these questions.

Methodology

The focus group discussion method was employed to determine the nature and extent of audience engagement and experiences with radio as a participatory medium. This is notwithstanding that the protocols and assumptions that have dominated the literature on audience research have tended to be quantitative, deriving as they are from Western social contexts in which, as Mytton (1999, p. 187) points out, there is a strong emphasis “on individual choice and decision.” The do it yourself culture promoted in many Western societies, notably the US, also illustrates this orientation. Morley (1980), however, identifies focus groups with the reception analysis paradigm; describing it as a method that “treats the audience as a set of cultural groupings rather than as a mass of individuals or as a set of rigid socio-demographic categories” (p. 163). McQuail (1997, p. 19) adds that the method is “effectively the audience research arm of cultural studies.” Michelle (2007, p. 181) takes these observations into account when he notes that audience interpretations are “shaped by

social group memberships, cultural competencies, and discursive affiliations.” But the overarching theoretical consideration was the idea that “everyday media interpretations tend to be ‘collectively constructed’” (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 1999, p. 55).

While the focus group is admittedly not peculiar to Africa, we note its particular epistemological resonance with the communally oriented norms and value systems that characterize traditional African social organization, discussion, and decision. Social anthropologist Awedoba (2007) expresses this point in his explanation of the concepts of kinship and lineage in African societies, and of the communal contexts in which decisions and responsibilities on issues of marriage, child care, funerals, and inheritance are taken and exercised. Explaining the preferential option of focus groups for socializing audience data, Amoakohene (2004) cites its “unique potential” for researching “the interface between audiences and the media, particularly radio, in a liberalised pluralistic electronic media environment such as Ghana” (p. 37). She attributes this to both the “strong narrative and oral traditions” (p. 36) that define African local languages and the “collective discussion that characterises audience reactions and responses to media messages” (p. 28) among African communities and people.

A total of four focus group sessions were conducted: two each for the Greater Accra and Upper West regions of Ghana. Participants in each group were purposively composed to generally reflect common social–demographic attributes—except that all four groups also had to collectively reflect the diversity of audiences in the population. The composition of each of the four groups also generally took account of participants’ level of education and preferred language of discussion. Of the two groups in each region, one panel was composed of middle-class participants; the other panel was composed of working-class participants. Belongingness to either of these two broad socioeconomic status groupings was determined primarily on the bases of the education, occupation, and geographical location/residence of each participant. These considerations were important because as Strelitz (2008, p. 65) found about South African media audiences socioeconomic variables, educational backgrounds, and “material-existential experiences of routine life” all play a role in how audiences perceive and consume media messages.

To account for these elaborate considerations in panel composition the “extended focus group” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 134) procedure was employed. Specifically, participants were recruited and composed

based on their responses to questions on a simple, screener questionnaire, which also explained the purpose of the study and, broadly, areas to be discussed. The questionnaire administration and recruitment was done one week prior to the scheduled dates for each focus group discussion. The extended focus group approach also provided an opportunity to remind participants to feel at liberty to discuss their views with others if they wished to—consultation is a normative attribute of opinion formation and decision making within the Ghanaian and African domestic and communal social setting.

Each panel comprised between six and ten persons. The discussions were tape recorded—upon negotiating the necessary consents and guarantees of anonymity where desired. Each session lasted a maximum of two hours. The recordings were then transcribed and analyzed according to an inductively established taxonomy that produced the three thematic clusters of findings reported below. This is the approach recommended by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). Briefly, it involved a sequence of four steps. First, the transcripts were read through thematically, i.e., each of the responses to a particular issue or question was read through—for all four focus groups. Second, an open-coding process was done for each of the responses, i.e., each response to a particular question was read through, line-by-line, to take note of any emergent ideas, themes, and issues. Words, phrases, or concepts that described the general tenor of a particular response were noted for subsequent collation and interpretation. The third step was to perform an axial coding process in which the responses from one focus group were compared to the others. Finally, the emergent issues, themes, and concepts were selectively coded, i.e., they were sorted and catalogued for the purpose of focusing on and delineating emergent responses as were considered relevant to the purpose of the study.

Findings

The findings on participant experiences and expectations of radio as a participatory medium suggest three factors for a renaissance of radio as a development communication medium. These are: its contribution to democratic pluralism, its inclusiveness due to the use of local languages, and its appropriation of new information and communication technologies for audience engagement. These findings are drawn from data of a larger fieldwork undertaken between October 2013 and February 2014.

The neo-liberal regime of broadcast pluralism in Ghana has provided listeners with choice, leading also to competition for audiences through diverse and improved programming. Participants noted that pluralism had decentralized news and announcements and put radio at the service of the public. As Thomas (businessman, focus group IV) put it, “People can now listen to any station of their choice; which is making the stations compete for listeners’ attention.”

Radio also acts as a civic forum to encourage the participation of audiences in conversation on development options and priorities. In this way, radio encourages democracy, by giving voice to citizens to decide who governs them, and to exact accountability from those in whom they have vested the mandate to disburse the public purse. Participants noted, as one of them expressed, that radio pluralism “has given listeners greater choice and increased the opportunities for citizens to challenge their leaders and force them to redeem the promises they make on campaign platforms” (Ben, district assembly member, focus group I). This sentiment is further elaborated in the following explanation by a panelist in another focus group:

I think the pluralisation of radio stations has helped our democracy to progress in fundamental ways: through civic participation in public discourse and governance; information dissemination on various issues of national life — such as information on HIV and AIDS, diabetes and hypertension, environmental pollution, family planning, and so on. The biggest media platform for sending and receiving such information in Ghana is radio. And this is primarily because radio is available and accessible in every community (Brammah, media rights NGO director, focus group III).

These views echo scholarly opinion that the wave of media pluralism across Africa since the early 1990s has created metaphorical market squares for citizen expression, exchange, or engagement in “counter-discourses that challenge the hegemonic viewpoint of the state” (Tettey, 2009, p. 148). There was a curious caveat, however, expressed in the following perspective by another member:

When we had just [the state-owned] GBC, things were much simpler. There was only one news source and we all knew where — and even when — to go for the news. It was nice to feel a collective participation in news consumption. Now sometimes you don’t know where to *tune in* to. Now there are so many

stations that you can't be sure that your friends are on the same wavelength with you. I miss that. ...Of course, the good side of multiple stations is that we have choice; and this generates competition.... Unfortunately, sometimes there is little to choose among the stations because they tend to copy each other too much (Blaise, priest, focus group III).

The essence of opinions, though, was that radio is egalitarian in its capacity to bring members of society into dialogic encounters with each other, and to bridge the distance between citizens and their leaders. It is instrumental in encouraging and enabling audiences to exercise their rights to choice and have a say in the decisions that affect them. Participants noted, in this regard, the audience empowerment role of radio: in creating citizen awareness and advocacy on the development priorities of society; in enabling the public to demand development attention from local assemblies and the government; in dialogue and decision on ways to address their own needs and aspirations. In addition, radio mobilizes people for development and educates them on inimical aspects of their cultures that need to be changed. These views are encapsulated in the following testimonies:

Information is very important for development. It is information that makes us educated; that is why even those who have not been through formal schooling can still be said to be educated when they are well informed. So if we want to develop as a country information is very important; and radio plays a very important role in that ... even better than the NCCE [National Commission for Civic Education] (Lawrence, student, focus group I).

Radio also provides opportunities to unearth local talent—such as artistes who can then be supported to promote their creative works. It can also be used to campaign against all forms of negative cultural practises—such as forced betrothals and discrimination against the girl-child—while at the same time preserving the good ones (Bafiina, student, focus group I).

Finally, participants observed that broadcast pluralism had devolved programming toward engagement with audiences of all social–demographic categories; including through the use of venue-based and event-driven outside broadcast formats. These productions encourage members of the public to express their local needs and, in the case of community radio in particular, mobilize members for communal activities. As Abdul-Aziz (panel beater, focus group II) explained,

The local FMs [community stations] make their reporters visit the community to see things for themselves, and where necessary, galvanise listeners to action. For instance, if a windstorm rips off the roof of a school building, the community station will not just inform the people about the occurrence of the disaster. The news will also contain an appeal for materials and labour support, and a warning against indiscriminate felling of trees, which serve as windbreaks.

Members of another group were more positive about the role of commercial radio stations in community mobilization. They noted, for instance, that “every so often you hear commercial stations mount an appeal for funds for a range of causes; including towards covering the medical bills of a needy child, or organising a blood donation campaign or soup kitchen” (James, foreign news editor, focus group III).

Ama (customs official, focus group III) also explained the egalitarian credentials of radio:

Radio is, in a sense, a lowest-common-denominator medium. It allows all: rich/poor, literate/illiterate, man/woman... to also weigh in with their views on political debates. This is not evident with the press or TV.

These responses echo the views, articulated in the literature, that a regime of broadcast pluralism more effectively delivers such democratic values as audience engagement and inclusiveness, freedom of expression and contest of opinion, social capital, and political–economic development (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001; Iosofides, 2010; Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

The use of local language programming has created greater propinquities with audience members. It has dramatically expanded the opportunities of access and participation and provided the platform for the public to give voice to the social and economic issues that concerned and affected them, such as water, sanitation, health, agriculture, and the general cost of living. Focus group participants expressed strong support for local language stations for their capacity to directly engage audiences on the issues and developments that reflect and affect local experiences and needs. They were particularly happy with the opportunity to express themselves in their own local languages because, as Ben (assembly member, focus group I) explained, “people communicate better in their own mother tongue.” These views are especially encapsulated in the following testimonies by two participants:

The announcers and guests are known to us; some of them are family members and friends. They know our concerns; they speak our language. When you think back a few years... when all we had was a few minutes of news and announcements in the evening from URA Radio ... it is as if we were in darkness (Adams, farmer, focus group II).

Even the fact that listeners can call into programmes and express their views, make a wish, request a song ... this makes radio a very important part of our lives and our development as one people (Kob, retired police sergeant, focus group II).

Without the option of radio many members of the population, who in the context of the developing countries of Africa are still in the majority, would be disabled from participation in public sphere conversations by virtue of their illiteracy and poverty. Their issues and experiences would consequently remain neglected and unaccounted for in the development process. In this regard, participants noted in particular, the relative lack of restraint among audiences in expressing themselves in their local languages:

You don't feel the same anxieties [as you do with English] about possibly uttering a grammatical gaff or saying something lewd or explicit in Ga. Local language has a way of permitting certain graphic expressions so long as you use the appropriate idioms and make the appropriate disclaimers, such as "taflatse" [I beg your pardon; excuse me]. This I think is liberating. It frees people to say things as they feel; which they may be constrained to say in English (James, foreign news editor, focus group III).

On the question of usage, however, participants were critical that the greater access and permissiveness enabled by the anonymity of radio was also undermining traditional norms and cultural codes on deference and decorum. This concern was expressed by Sergeant Kob who complained that:

They must do something about the foul language on our airwaves. It looks as if some stations deliberately stir up controversy so that people can call in, hide behind pseudonyms, and insult people who are old enough to be their father or mother. Some of them are even well-known 'serial callers'. It looks as if being controversial is their claim to fame... they thrive on negative popularity.

Another respondent concurred with the concern, suggesting that:

The stations themselves should correct that; and if they don't, the government... the regulatory authorities ... they must bring them under check. Radio should be used for more edifying ends: like moral education, social discipline, passing on traditional values (Euphemia, cook, focus group II).

Participants also charged local language stations in particular for what they observed to be a gradual dumbing down of professional journalistic standards; either for direct pecuniary gain or in order to drive up audience ratings. They cited, as examples, the tendencies for local language stations especially to embellish news accounts with proverbs, or hyperbole, or risqué remarks; or to rent airtime to hawkers of herbal preparations and itinerant pastors who make prodigious claims about the effectiveness of their wares and the efficacy of their cures. They were also concerned that local language talk programs and phone-in sessions habitually degenerated into the trading of intemperate allegations. As Thomas (businessman, focus group IV) put it:

The bad thing is that they often misinterpret people when they translate their statements from English to Twi; and they also like embellishing and exaggerating stories; if you don't listen to different stations to discern the truth you might be misled.

We all know that some of these stations belong to politicians; and all they do is incite their supporters to engage in vilification and character assassination in the name of democracy.... This is dangerous; what happened between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda was sparked by radio.

This observation is reinforced by the following view expressed by a participant in another focus group:

Acts of unprofessional conduct are particularly prevalent among those [stations] that broadcast in the local Akan language. They often trivialise their news with exaggerations and vivid embellishments. They get away with content which might not meet decency standards on the English speaking stations (Kofi, communication lecturer, focus group III).

In spite of these challenges, local language stations had been instrumental in expanding the opportunities of access for the majority of Ghanaians; and in preserving and promoting the development of local languages and cultures:

The coming of the local radio stations is very timely. Listeners now understand governance issues better in their mother-tongue and are able to contribute actively to discussions on the social and political issues that affect them. I must also confess they have helped me improve upon my own Twi [language]... (Ewurabena, consultant, focus group III).

Due to the technology of radio, therefore, illiteracy, especially in the English language, no longer poses a barrier to citizen participation in public discourse.

Together with the contemporary plurality of stations and local languages, advances in mobile—and especially digital—technologies-mediated tools have enabled audiences to exercise greater discretionary power in their radio habits. Listeners feel no bounden loyalties to any particular stations. They tend, rather, to listen to radio serially—moving from channel to channel in search of the next favored program. The following response reflects the radio habits of participants:

I change stations all the time; it depends on what is happening on the other stations. ... Even, I use my mobile phone if there is noise in the area; or people are listening to another programme which I'm not interested in. The mobile phone radio allows you to listen to music or discussion programme even while you're working. If I can't listen to something I've planned for, I feel uncomfortable (Shamima, teacher, focus group I).

The fact that most mobile phones have a radio feature means that audiences have greater access to radio, making it even more essential in the promotion of development communication efforts. These views were largely shared by other participants, such as the following perspectives from focus groups III and IV:

Radio is now a basic feature of all mobile phones...thus it's made radio more mobile. A listener can be listening to a radio discussion, call into the programme with his phone or send a text message or WhatsApp message and make his or her contributions, all through one device; and probably will be sitting in a bus or taking a walk; that's the power of technology (Thomas, businessman, focus group IV).

First, the internet enables more listeners to have access to radio on the go: you can listen on your phone; you can listen on your computer; and you can listen beyond the boundaries of the station's transmitter. Secondly, through the means of podcasting and other tune-in apps you can play back a programme

and listen later if you miss the live broadcast... (Ewurabena, communications consultant, focus group III).

It is clear from these responses that radio has become increasingly less of a one-size-fits-all mass medium. Individuals can literally produce their own program schedules by selecting topics from across the spectrum of podcasts available on the internet. And they can time-shift or swap schedules to suit their personal convenience and routines. This creates, literally, an on-demand service possibility for access to content anytime, anywhere. The conclusion then, as Nene (chief, focus group IV) pointed out, is that the integration of internet and digital technologies “have promoted and deepened participatory communication. It has deepened also the democratic culture in our country.” The rider, though, is that these digital and internet-based technologies “are sophisticated and expensive. You must have a smart phone, and you must be tech savvy; plus, data are still too expensive. This cannot be the mainstream way of listening to radio because the average Ghanaian cannot afford it (James, foreign news editor, focus group III).

Technologies have also been instrumental in the observed shifts in radio content creation and consumption. These are evident in the shift from media-centered productions to the increased use of both in-studio and out-of-studio voices. Participants commonly cited examples of talk/discussion programs, funeral/social announcements, and information/news bulletins in which live telephone interviews, voiceovers, and text messages were routinely integrated into productions. The following response is illustrative:

Most news bulletins include phone interviews, and sometimes even in-studio interviews, with an eyewitness at the scene of an incident... maybe a lorry accident, or fire outbreak; or a government minister or political office holder; or even the person who is the victim or complainant in an incident that is of public interest (Ruth, civil servant, focus group IV).

Public participation is particularly observable in the contemporary practice of traditional, off-line, radio stations setting up also online, social media accounts and web pages. These accounts constitute alternative, multidirectional, pathways to public participation and engagement that were unavailable in the past when radio was characterized as a unidirectional transmitter of messages. Depending on the nature of the program and topic, stations routinely invite political party representatives, or

subject specialists, NGO and civil society members and the public—in to their studio or via phone or advertized social media platforms—for panel discussions and audience feedback:

From time to time, they would announce their social media contacts like WhatsApp, twitter and Facebook... and invite and read out the views and reactions of listeners. Or, they open the phone lines for the public to call in and share their opinions (Regina, public health nurse, focus group I).

They use the phone numbers and social media platforms to draw audiences to their discussions. In fact, topics to be discussed are announced, and also placed on their social media handles for the public to deliberate, discuss, and share their opinions on them even before the programme starts. The only thing is that the ‘serial callers’ tend to hijack the lines and make it difficult for independent voices to be heard. Besides, not all of us can use social media or afford the cost of phone-ins (Evelyn, administrative secretary, focus group I).

In the overall judgment of participants, the possibilities for technology-enabled audience-generated content were particularly instrumental in the promotion of inclusive public engagement and in the advancement of accountable governance. In particular, the internet and social media further serve as the forum for extended debate and discussion on issues originally raised on traditional radio. These views echo both the public sphere thesis adduced by Habermas (2006; cf. also Garnham, 2000) and the ideas and indicators of communication for sustainable development proposed by Lennie and Tacchi (2013; cf. also Servaes 2009), that participation is prerequisite to political efficacy and expansion of the democratic public space. Through expert opinion and panel discussions, a variety of voices and views are heard on all manner of subjects:

Phone-ins, text messaging and the social network platforms ensure that the perspectives of citizen-witnesses—called citizen journalists—are integrated into news bulletins. The way in which such conversations are conducted or moderated is a question of professionalism; but I think essentially, the fact that the public has the opportunity to participate in public discourse through radio is an important milestone in Ghana (Kofi, communication lecturer, focus group III).

As the literature on participatory communication suggests, when people are allowed to participate in decisions that tap into development issues, it helps to examine challenges and explore organic solutions, rather than merely convey information and expect compliance. Radio thus

enables conversations on and of development by empowering people to understand themselves and their potential and by enabling freedom of expression and choice.

Conclusion

The policy shift away from the vertical, top-down, model and toward the horizontal, two-way, engagement with and participation of people in discussions and decisions has brought into question the acclaimed instrumentality of radio as a development communication medium. The findings of this study suggest that rather than depose radio, new information and communication technologies have renewed the essentiality of radio for development in Africa. The radio habits of audiences reflect a correspondence with the shift in development communication paradigms from one-way transmission of messages to the prevailing practice of participation and empowerment of “beneficiaries” in the decisions that affect them. They demonstrate a central role of radio in enabling popular participation in public affairs and discursive democracy, in bridging the distance between citizens and public officials, and in expressing choice and demanding accountability from their leaders.

Furthermore, while the contemporary global embrace of social media and the internet as workaday means and modes of communication has seemed to subdue scholarly enthusiasm about the utility of the so-called legacy media, radio has retained a stoic resonance with audience cultures in Ghana. The availability of mobile and internet technologies has created a hybridized media ecosystem in which, paradoxically, radio is witnessing a renaissance of relevance as a tool for development. In Ghana, new media have not, as such, inherited traditional radio. They have given birth to their parent, to use the analogy of Katz, Peters, Liebes, and Orloff (2003).

The opportunity for audiences to express themselves in their own indigenous languages also suggests radio as a preferred medium for exercising affirmativeness in favor of rural locations and poor populations. While recent scholarly accounts have been starry-eyed about the possibilities spawned by new technologies (cf. Aker & Mbiti, 2010; Boateng, Garsombke, Kuofie, & Yellen, 2010; Ohemeng & Ofosu-Adarkwa, 2014; Sey, 2011) they overlook the acute barriers to universal uptake posed by the questions of cost and competence, and by perceptions of relative usefulness and locus of control. In that sense, radio helps account for the social gaps created or characterized by differences in new technology

uptake between men and women, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, and urban and rural audiences. As such, it is relatively better suited for breaking down the social and economic asymmetries that characterize other technology-based communication systems. At the same time, the advantages that have often been attributed to new media technologies—such as interactivity and demassification—are increasingly being appropriated by radio through the means of such accessories as the smart phone and social media, the internet and tune-in apps.

The findings show that audience members listen to radio in a relational way; in that radio listening is integrated into their social routines. In this regard, the new information and communication technologies become accessories with which they are able to check in and out of the virtual market square created by radio; while engaged at the same time in other chores, such as working, or walking, or even talking. This suggests, also, a validation of radio as a medium and means of building social capital, which Putnam (1993, 2000, p. 19) defines as the stock of “civic virtues” that facilitate interaction and reciprocity among members of society; and which enable them to participate and cooperate around shared interests, values, and norms. In turn, this perspective reflects the communal orientation and social essentiality of Ghanaian and African communicative practices (Tietah, 2013, 2015). In effect, radio has become, variously, an interlocutor, a companion, or an instrumental aid for pursuing different hedonic needs and socializations.

In sum, the appropriation and application of digital and internet-enabled technologies and platforms have redefined the concept and constructs of radio; from a unidirectional transmitter of transient messages to an arena for public participation and cocreation of content and meanings. It is also the condition and context for the (re)incarnation of radio as an indicator and instrument of democracy and development. The further possibility to communicate using multiple local languages makes it a particularly egalitarian means of audience engagement and expression. Radio has, consequently, mutated from the powerful effects metaphors of being an *as'oromagb'esi*, or *akasanoma*, which permits only the unidirectional transmission of messages, to the audience-centric notion of an omnidirectional medium for the cocreation and conveyance of content. There is a need, though, for research and policy consideration of ways in which the dividends of radio redux can be repurposed to leverage the opportunities this promises for democratic governance, social capital, and inclusive development.

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