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Fine-Tuning Africa's Radio Stations: Connecting Communities and Cultures

A Review Essay

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I. Introduction

For much of the 20th century, the increasing popularity of the radio as a 'hot' medium – to borrow Marshall McLuhan's words as quoted by David Hendy in his *Radio in the Global Age* – stimulated the imaginations of Africa's disparate and diverse communities. It not only kept them informed about their histories and cultures, but it also relayed information about the ongoing developments in and beyond their communities. The radio acted and continues to act as a powerful instrument that connected the pulsating and dynamic African cities with the mild-mannered and placid African villages. It did so by transmitting news broadcasts about events that had taken place on different parts of their imagined continent and by relaying orally narrated stories about their communities' past.

Since the radio has played and continues to play a critical role in transforming the landscapes and soundscapes of communities around the globe, in general, and on the African continent, in particular, *Radio in Africa* by Liz Gunner (Witwatersrand University) and her two co-editors Dina Ligaga (Witwatersrand University) and Dumisani Moyo (Open Society of South Africa)

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should be welcomed. In fact, this text under review along with Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss' co-edited volume *African Broadcast Cultures* as well as Rosalind Hackett and Ben Soares' forthcoming text *New Media and Religious Transformation in Africa* should be considered essential reading in African studies, in general, and media studies in particular. The reason for strongly suggesting this lies in the fact that the text has succeeded in critically interrogating various aspects of this significant broadcast medium – a medium that has generally not been given adequate attention by scholars and researchers in academia.

Most of the chapters that appear in this volume were largely based upon the conference proceedings that took place at Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISER) on the 10th and the 11th of October 2007. Liz Gunner, who was the conference's main organizer (see Muhammed Haron's 'A Report: Radio Colloquium'), brought together a team of scholars who studied the radio's performance and impact in selected parts of the African continent. Although this text at no stage claims to represent all the voices on the African continent, its focus was mainly on those that are located in the Southern and East African region. Put differently, this important text lamentably neglected – with the exception of Ghana and Mali – to include representative 'voices' from (far-flung) West Africa (e.g. Senegal) and North Africa (e.g. Egypt). Both Senegal and Egypt, for example, have rich radio broadcasting traditions that should have been considered alongside this useful collection of seventeen essays. In this regard, J. Brennan's 'Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953-1964' that appeared in C. J. Lee's book *Making a World after Empire* is a case in point. Liz Gunner and her co-editors, in fact, made reference to this particular chapter in their introductory essay titled 'The Soundscapes of Radio in Africa'. In spite of the exclusion of the mentioned countries where radio continues to be employed as a critical broadcasting medium, this work remains a significant compilation.

II. Volume's Chapters

Gunner and her team have brought together an interesting set of scholars who helped to provide an insight into African radio stations' key and crucial role as 'multiple voices' and as 'many-faceted sites of communication.' The volume's variety of chapters seriously looked at aspects that continentally demonstrated the radio's rich history. In their informative introduction, the editors highlighted to what extent it "produce(s) new social meanings, shift(s) subjectivities and (has) affective power" (p. 5), and they expounded upon the pivotal position that it plays in Africa's public sphere as 'a tool of resistance' vis-à-vis the state (p. 8). Since they contextualized the contributions that were accompanied by extensive comments, they slotted each of the chapters into three complementary parts, hence the sub-title *Publics, Cultures, Communities*.

A. Radio, Popular Democracy and New Publics

The volume's first four essays were slotted under the theme 'Radio, Popular Democracy and New Publics.' Wisdom J. Tettey's opening chapter deals with the nature of 'Talk Radio and Politics in Ghana,' and this is done by 'Exploring Civic and (Un)Civil Discourse in the Public Sphere.' Tettey points out that radio talk shows have been used by some politicians to occasionally denigrate and vilify their opponents, yet they generally enriched public political discourse. Apart from giving the reader a fair insight into the way radio has been employed, Tettey does not say anything about radio policies towards abusive speech on air nor does he give an example of the repercussions of such broadcasts. Christopher Joseph Odhiambo's essay assesses the role of three 'FM Radio Stations in Kenya.' He looked at special shows of *Kiss FM*, *Easy FM*, and *Citizen FM* to illustrate how they shifted 'From Diffusion to Dialogic Space.' Odhiambo mentions the innovative strategies that the presenters employed to make these radio stations exciting and interactive media platforms. He, for example, informs the reader how the

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presenters literally left their studios to speak to passers-by as a method of reinventing a new style of communication. This, according to Odhiambo, was a refreshing method of connecting with their listeners. One would like Odhiambo to have undertaken a brief comparative study of the three stations in order to show to what extent they differed from each other in terms of the strategies that they adopted to make their radio stations meaningful and sought after platforms.

Dumisani Moyo, who evaluates the notions of 'Contesting Mainstream Media Power: Mediating the Zimbabwe Crisis through Clandestine Radio,' seems to have done this when he reflected upon how the London-based Short Wave Radio Africa's (SWRA) presenters inventively tried to lure listeners in Zimbabwe to tune in to their station. Most of these presenters were, as a matter of information, former Capital Radio staff members who challenged the government's monopoly of broadcasting in court. However, after their unsuccessful challenge they decided to set up SWRA as another way of competing with the state's radio stations. Besides having discussed how the station secretly broadcast and reached out to its target audience in Zimbabwe, Moyo avoided talking about why SWRA failed in attracting a wide spectrum of listeners compared to the state radio stations. Moreover, Moyo did not give any indication as to whether a RAMP survey had been undertaken to measure the numbers who tune in on a daily/weekly/monthly basis.

Dorothea E. Schulz presents a fascinating chapter that investigates 'Equivocal Resonances: Islamic Revival and Female Radio 'Preachers' in Urban Mali.' Her chapter forms part of larger research project that she titled *Muslims and New Media in West Africa: Pathways to God* (See Haron's 2012 Review). Schulz examines, amidst the growth of broadcasting technologies and the growth of auto-recordings, the status and impact of female 'private radio' preachers popularly referred to as *hajjas* (i.e. someone who performed the pilgrimage to Mecca and is somewhat

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knowledgeable about Islam). These *hajjas* generally downplay their position as *bona fide* teachers in the light of the criticisms raised by Mali's predominantly traditional male preachers against them and the challenge by the talented younger professional female 'state radio' preachers that had their schooling in the *Salafi* conservative tradition in places such as Saudi Arabia (pp. 66-67). However, despite the copious challenges these *hajjas*, who are a respected group for imparting moral guidance, continue to influence their audience/listeners. As a consequence of their standing as 'public preachers' on private radio stations, they have been viewed as individuals who possess some sort of 'religious authority,' an issue that Schulz further addresses in her essay. Schulz's essay reminded this reviewer of similar *hajjas* (e.g. Hajja Galiema Ajouhaar [d. 2013]) who regularly preached on ethical issues and moral matters on the two Cape Town radio stations, namely *The Voice of the Cape* (VOC) and *Radio 786* (see Muhammed Haron's 'South Africa: Women Religious Teachers, Preachers, Reciters and Scholars' in *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Culture* and his 'The South African Muslims Making (Air)Waves during the Period of Transformation' in *Religion, Politics, and Identity in a Changing South Africa*).

B. The Cultures of Radio: Languages of the Everyday

The second section contains six essays concentrated on 'The Cultures of Radio: Languages of the Everyday.' It opens with Scott Straus' informative essay that was previously published in *Politics and Society*. Herein Straus questions "What is the Relationship between Hate Radio and Violence? Rethinking Rwanda's 'Radio Machete.'" Straus's main argument, based upon empirical data, states that although *Radio-Television libre desMilles Collines* (RTL) – a semi-private radio station that was nick-named 'Radio Machete' by its critics – became "a tool for the mobilisation of genocide" and was "a voice of authority ... that when it (i.e. the state) issued

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orders to kill, Rwandans obeyed," it played second fiddle to the state's unspeakable commands (p. 87). In order to prove his hypothesis as to whether RTLM had a major or marginal effect on the genocide in Rwanda, Straus adopts several approaches such as evaluating the 'timing' of broadcasts and undertaking a qualitative 'content analysis' of RTLM's transcripts. It appears from Strauss' informative essay that he neglected to conduct interviews with radio presenters who had been responsible for the radio broadcasts.

In a similar vein, one may wish to argue that Winston Mano, who interrogated a moderately broadly titled essay, namely 'Why Radio is Africa's Medium in the Global Age,' did not interview the presenters who put together the 'death notices' list for the Zimbabwean listeners. Before zooming in on this particular theme, Mano prefaces his essay by critically discoursing about 'Radio in Africa.' One is, in fact, of the opinion that the essay's title should have reflected its contents. As it appears, it is too broad and provides no insight as to what the author intends to cover. Be that as it may, Mano highlights the fact that communication scholarship should steer clear of viewing radio purely as an instrument that transfers 'imperialistic values,' and he further argues that attempts should be made to research 'national and local contexts of everyday life' (p. 105). Whilst one appreciates the overall argument, one is not totally convinced by it when he uses a specific issue such as 'death notices' as a study to underscore his ideas.

Nonetheless, Mano, who used Radio Zimbabwe as a case study, conducted more than fifty interviews (between 2000 and 2003) with individuals who spoke different languages and who lived in at least six different cities (e.g. Harare) and towns (e.g. Beitbridge) across Zimbabwe. He interviewed them to evaluate the *ZvizivisoZverufuIzazisoZemfa* (death notices) programme that they faithfully listened to on a regular basis and to show how the contents of this programme was received. Whilst Mano's research is quite appealing and affirms the need to take into account the

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contexts within which national and community radio operates, one noted that the essay did not sufficiently explore the tangible impact that these notices had on the listeners apart from knowing who died where and when. Perhaps he should have pursued fieldwork to have reinforced his findings. Related to this and being familiar with Cape Town's *Voice of the Cape* (www.vocfm.co.za) and *Radio 786* (www.radio786.co.za) that also broadcast death notices on a daily basis, one can generalize and concur with Mano's findings that such programmes do play an important role in the lives of families/communities across the country (and via audio-streaming across the globe). However, for one to appreciate the importance and relevance of these broadcasts there is a need for intensive field-work to evaluate how these news reports are viewed by the target audience.

Sekibakiba Peter Lekgoathi captivantly illustrates how Bantustan Identity, Censorship and Subversion in Northern Sotho were constructed under Apartheid, 1960s-1980s. Before Lekgoathi explores how apartheid South Africa's Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) management pre-empted and dealt with announcers and presenters who tried to subvert the programmes, he places Northern Sotho Radio (NSR) in a broader apartheid media context. In addition to describing the environment in which the potential black NSR announcer entered and how he – invariably a male – was handpicked and vetted for the post, Lekgoathi states that radio was seen as another route – apart from training as a teacher, nurse or a preacher - to move up the social ladder. Having based himself on archival sources as well as conducting interviews with announcers during 2006 and 2007, Lekgoathi informs the reader how the black announcers, particularly the newsreaders (who were closely monitored), used idioms and metaphors, that were amusingly discouraged by the apartheid SABC management, as inventive linguistic ways of undermining the authority of the white producers/controllers. Since Lekgoathi only interviewed a selected

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number of former presenters, one would like him to have also inserted their thoughts on the post-1980s era – a period (i.e. the 1990s) when the struggle against the apartheid system became more intense.

David B. Coplan's essay provides a broad descriptive outline of the development of 'South African Radio in a Saucepan,' and he directed the reader to his two publications that appeared in 1979 and 2007 respectively (see reference p.289 for the bibliographical information). Though Coplan offers a fair account of radio's progress from the 1920s up until the post-apartheid period that witnessed the mushrooming of (Christian) community radio stations, one missed his input on where South Africa's satellite radio stations such as Channel Africa and Channel Islam International fitted into the general radio landscape. Since Dina Ligaga's – to which this review essay will turn to in a moment – ties in well with Liz Gunner's essay in this section, Coplan's chapter should perhaps have been placed at the end of this section to connect with the third section that concentrates on community radio stations that have been described as 'voices of change.'

That aside and apart from merely placing 'Radio Theatre: The Moral Play' 'in the Historical Context of State Control and Censorship in Kenya,' Dina Ligaga discusses how the Radio Theatre programme was able to create 'spaces for survival' and invent opportunities for 'counter-reading' by focusing on – depending upon one's reading or interpretation – seemingly harmless but 'potent' moral plays during Daniel Arap Moi's reign. Ligaga makes reference to a few plays (e.g. *Jamhuri Day Special*) that were broadcast and that relayed significant lessons for the nation. These were, however, only aired when the media industry was somewhat liberalized. She discusses Kenya's control and censorship of the media and talks about how Radio Theatre operated below the radar screen or outside the state's surveillance cameras and monitors. She

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stresses the fact that when assessing the plays that were aired by *Radio Theatre* one was forced to read between the lines or in her words "pay attention to what is not being said" (p. 160). Whilst one finds Ligaga's discussions informative, and although the questions posed hereafter were not part of her brief, one would still like to know: how did the listeners respond to the plays? To what extent did they "read between the lines" (the way she interpreted and discussed the plays in the essay?) Why were these plays put on air only when the media were liberalized? Would the state have censored some of the plays if the state authorities had paid attention to what was not being said? Though hypothetical questions, they need some answers in another article.

Liz Gunner persuasively surveys 'Zulu Radio Drama and the Modern Subject: Restless Identities in South Africa in the 1970s' – a chapter that should be read together with her earlier published article titled 'Resistant Medium: The Voices of Zulu Radio Drama in the 1970s'. IsiZulu drama is a genre that thrived as it 'grew out of cultural and political duress' from the late 1950s and 1960s onwards. Zulu Radio Drama, according to Gunner, was an emergent genre that involved a triumvirate of stakeholders (i.e. writers, producers and actors) and that created a space for the (re-)invention of new identities (e.g. a modernizing [economically mobile] black population) amidst a period of social control by the apartheid regime in the 1970s. For the purposes of this essay, Gunner tantalizingly analyzes three isiZulu Radio plays to illustrate her point. One of the plays was Abigale Zondi's *Abangane Ababi* (Bad Friends) that explores the ups-and-downs of marriage in both the traditional and modern settings and that subtly brings out the politics of gender. Even though these plays were aired many decades ago, one would like Gunner to have connected them to developments during the current period, thus giving one an idea whether the themes and issues tackled in these plays were and are still relevant.

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C. Radio and Community: Voices of Change

The third part of this text consists of seven contributions under the theme 'Radio and Community: Voices of Change.' Stephanie Wolters, who was the first news editor of 'Radio Okapi – 100% Congolese' and co-director of Okapi Consulting, provides the reader with a report of the station by first placing it within a political and historical context as well within the DRC media scene before sharing specific insights into the station and discussing its legacy. It is assumed that *Radio Okapi* (est. 2002) was more than 8 years old by the time the essay was published. In any case, one glaring shortcoming was that the essay does not contain a single internal reference that offered one an alternative view or reading of the station. Whilst one understands the absence of relevant primary literature, the text, that reads more like a report, could have been beefed up with a set of secondary sources.

Turning to Tanja Bosch's 'Talk Radio, Democracy and the Public Sphere: 567MW in Cape Town' in which she argues that the Johannesburg based *Radio 702* (est. 1980) or its sister station, Cape Town based *Cape Talk* (known as 567MW est.1997), provides ample space – along with other open platforms – for the development of a public sphere. She thus examines using more than 50 interviews how the radio station positioned itself via its talk shows in relation to how the audience is constituted and how this process, in turn, creates a democratic public sphere (p. 197). Apart from briefly locating *Talk Radio* within a SA talk show context, she also reviews some of the literature associated with this type of programming and states that her study departs from those that she reviewed by focusing on the consumption of the audiences/listeners (i.e. individuals who call in to respond to issues raised in a particular programme). The mere fact that these individuals call in to air their (well-thought out and not-so-well-thought out) ideas contributes substantially towards the formation of a 'deliberative democracy.' Bosch

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acknowledges that these stations particularly *Cape Talk* play ‘a role in development of a public sphere’ in the Cape metropolis despite the radio’s limitations and relatively small audience size (p. 207). Though ‘Talk shows’ have undoubtedly contributed towards the creation of a dynamic democratic environment, one would like Bosch to have briefly commented in her conclusion on how these shows undermine this type of environment.

Maria Frahm-Arp examines the relationship between ‘Radio and Religion: The Shaping of Religious Discourse.’ She begins her essay by describing her interaction as a guest on Kate Turkington’s popular *Believe it or Not Cape Talk* programme that came to an end during the early part of 2013 after having been on air for more than 10 years! In fact, this interview spurred her on to think more critically about the relationship between ‘Radio and Religion,’ and she thus opted to study *Radio 702* (*Cape Talk*’s sister station), the Catholic *Radio Veritas* and the Jami’at ul-‘Ulama-controlled *Radio Islam*. She explores how radio built religious communities, questions whether radio can transform how religion is experienced and comments on the authority of the new religious leaders who are emerging due to radio. She notes that radio is changing the shape of religion and this is particularly the case with the presence of women as presenters/anchors. Their appearance on these stations forms part of what is considered a new religious leadership, and she devotes a portion of her study to how the issue of gender helps to shape the ‘voice of authority.’ When she compares the three stations, she fails to briefly mention the problem that women had in finding space on *Radio Islam* because of the owners’ influence and control over the station. Frahm-Arp, for some reason, ignores the *Radio Islam* thesis that would have added valuably to her discussion: Romie Murkens’ MA thesis titled *The ‘Special Interest’ and ‘Geographic’ Models of Community Radio: A Study of the Effectiveness of the Two Models in Meeting the Needs of the Community* .

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Stephen R. Davis probes 'Voices from without: The African National Congress, Its Radio, Its Allies and Exile, 1960–1984' to demonstrate to what extent the ANC and SACP viewed radio broadcast as part of the armed struggle and as "a primary means for explaining their anti-apartheid struggle." The idea of the formation of *Radio Freedom* (est. 1963), as it was dubbed, came to be with the Congress Alliance's armed struggle against the apartheid state in 1961. However, it only materialized into a more substantial voice as, to use Mosai et al's (1994) expression 'a piggy-back station on Radio Tanzania's external service.' It was then referred to as 'Voice of Freedom' that, according to Davis, featured news briefs, speeches and documentaries three times a week for 15 minutes. The station was subsequently given more air time on *Radio Zambia*, *Radio Luanda* and *Radio Ethiopia*, where the state broadcasters permitted *Radio Freedom* one hour air-time (p. 230). Even though Davis discusses the radio's survival in exile, he does not mention to what extent the broadcasts influenced listeners within the apartheid borders and those who were in exile. Since it targeted those in exile, one would like to know whether the news reports shaped their ideas about the struggle, an issue that was indirectly mentioned by Mosai et al (1994 pp.8-9).

The ANC's *Radio Freedom*, which forged a close connection between its powers as a liberation movement and its continuous struggle against a well-oiled apartheid military force that was embedded in racist politics, is the subject of Marissa J. Moorman's essay that is titled 'Airing the Politics of Nation: Radio in Angola, Past and Present.' Moorman shows how Angola's radio broadcasting was closely associated with state power and political force. Apart from providing an overview of the status of radio in Angola from the 1930s up until the mid 1970s, Moorman stresses the role of radio as 'a cultural technology' medium. She further notes to what extent Angolans were dependent upon external radio stations "with which Angolans

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imagined their nation" (p. 242). Among those that were broadcasting from within the African neighbourhood were MPLA's *Angola Combatente* (from Congo-Brazzaville and Tanzania) and FNLA's *Angola Livre* (from Kinshasa). These anti-colonial voices countered the Portuguese colonialist's state run *Voz de Angola*, which regularly played music and constantly spewed out propaganda, by transmitting their broadcasts using short-wave radio. When *Angola Combatente* functioned as the state's station during the post-independence period, it was used as a broadcasting tool against UNITA that challenged MPLA's monopoly. Whilst Moorman's chapter offers interesting glimpses into the radio's history within the pre- and post-colonial settings, one would like her to have expanded on how radio continues to operate since Angola achieved independence so that one might get a sense of how it functions as a contemporary African medium.

David Smith, however, did that when he looked at Somalia, where 'Radio (operates) in Zones of Conflict: Abnormal Measures for Abnormal Circumstances.' Smith, Bar-Kulan Agency's director who was responsible for setting up *Radio Bar-Kulan* (RB-K est. 2010), discusses the station's position within Somalia's media scene. Smith narrates the problems Okapi Consulting encountered as it worked towards RB-K's formation, and he mentioned some of the difficulties such as airing thematic programmes that focus on women and youth and finding qualified women journalists that the agency continuously faces. Besides embarking on a fascinating and challenging media venture, one would like Smith to have given the reader an idea whether the Somalis in exile and those within its borders responded positively or negatively to RB-K.

Monica B. Chibita queries 'Multiple Publics, Multiple Languages: Radio and the Contestations of Broadcasting Language Policy in Uganda' by discussing "the potential of Uganda's indigenous-language radio' and placing it within a socio-historical linguistic context."

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Chibita's chapter reminds one of the South African linguistic scenario and the challenges that the South African communities encounter with democratic South Africa's language policies. In any case, Chibita interviewed among the 26 individuals media managers and language policy advocates between 2005 and 2010. She did so with the intention of putting forward a language policy proposal that would open up opportunities for the pluralistic use of Uganda's languages in the public domain. Even though these interviews affirmed the necessity of indigenous language radio in Uganda where, according to her, less than a quarter speak or understand English, she highlights the fact that there also exists a disjunction between the ordinary Ugandans' desire for this to be realized and the political leaders' agenda. Nonetheless, Chibita's research suggests that Uganda policy makers are not averse to the creation of a dynamic pluralistic radio culture that would contribute towards participatory democracy nationally and by implication regionally.

III. Concluding Remarks

In concluding this review essay, one concurs with the editors when they allude, in their opening chapter, to the fact that even though African radio is embedded in the continent, it effectively managed to reach out through audio-streaming and the use of smart phones to African communities in the diaspora. These (imagined) communities, being part of the transnational 'interactive publics,' conveniently connect with the local 'interactive publics' via the radio phone-ins and other related programmes.

All of these new developments in the media sector, in general, and the radio, in particular, have indeed made African radio visible and accessible. Thus, they have given it a perennial presence not just locally/nationally but also in the international arena, an arena where the Africans of the diaspora desire to be in constant touch with their African home. Since this is undeniably the case, one has to commend the editors for having made available a readable and

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informative work. One wishes to once again strongly suggest that it should be included among the prescribed texts for those pursuing African media studies in particular, and that it should be inserted in the reading list for those concentrating on African studies in general.

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