

Wendy Willems

Participation – in what? Radio, convergence and the corporate logic of audience input through new media in Zambia

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Willems, Wendy (2013) Participation – in what? Radio, convergence and the corporate logic of audience input through new media in Zambia. [Telematics and Informatics](#), 30 (3). pp. 223-231. ISSN 0736-5853

DOI: [10.1016/j.tele.2012.02.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2012.02.006)

© 2013 [Elsevier](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/49244/>

Available in LSE Research Online: July 2013

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Participation - in what? : radio, convergence and the corporate logic of audience input through new media in Zambia

Wendy Willems

Department of Media Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Original citation:

Willems, W. (2013). Participation - in what?: radio, convergence and the corporate logic of audience input through new media in Zambia. In: *Telematics and Informatics* 30(3): 223-231.

Abstract

Recent literature has pointed to the way in which new media such as the internet and mobile phones have the capacity to enable more participatory and interactive communication, either through user-generated content or through a broader participation of audiences in mainstream media's content production. This potential is celebrated even more in contexts in which there is deemed to be a lack of political accountability or limited consultation of citizens by government. This article investigates the extent to which new technologies have changed the quality of audience participation in radio content production in Zambia. Engaging with literature on participation in media studies as well as development studies and based on interviews with station managers, producers and presenters of six radio stations in Zambia, the article examines both the opportunities and limits of the use of internet and mobile phones in audience participation. It argues that there is a need to situate these practices within a broader corporate logic in which participation is not merely about adding more voices but also feeds into radio stations' commercial strategies of increasing revenue and accessing personal data of listeners through SMS and social media.

Keywords: radio; new media; participation; audiences; Zambia; Africa

Introduction

Ordinary people have increasingly featured as subjects of media content or have been invited to take part in radio or television programmes, for example through their participation in reality television shows (either as subjects of the show or as voters at a distance), television debates (Livingstone and Lunt 1993) or through talk radio shows. The increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person' in today's media has been described as the 'demotic turn' (Turner 2009). Scholars in media studies have, however, raised concern about the quality of audience participation and called for more critical and detailed analysis of the nature and intensity of participation (Carpentier 2001, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Carpentier and De Cleen 2008; Carpentier and Hannot 2009). Similarly, work in development studies has criticised the way in which the concept of participation has reached buzzword status in mainstream development discourse to legitimise the practices of the powerful instead of giving way to more inclusionary forms of politics (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004; White 1996; Cornwall and Brock 2005; Cornwall 2006, 2007; Leal 2007). For example, with regard to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), scholars have pointed out that these have often rubberstamped World Bank and IMF policies instead of really enabling countries to participate in drawing up their economic policy frameworks (Gould 2005). The concept of participation then could be treated as a good example of what Gallie has termed an 'essentially contested concept', i.e. a concept "the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (1955/56: 169).

While ‘old media’ such as radio and television have to a certain extent made attempts to incorporate audience participation into their programming, ‘new media’ such as the internet and mobile phones have more recently been celebrated as ‘technologies of freedom’ that have the ability to contribute to more democratic and participatory modes of governance and citizenship (Sola Pool 1983). New media arguably have made possible new forms of participatory media culture (Jenkins 1992, 2006; Willems 2010), citizen journalism or citizen media (Allan and Thorsen 2009; Rodriguez 2001), grassroots journalism (Gillmor 2004) and blogging (Tremayne 2007). These new developments in our media landscape have led audience scholars to debate the extent to which these changes demand us to rethink our understanding of audiences. While earlier generations of audience scholarship - which primarily investigated television - initiated the notion of the ‘active audience’ and acknowledged the diverse ways in which audience members received and consumed media texts, more recently scholars have pointed to the way in which new media have blurred the distinction between producers and consumers/users (Baym 1999; Nightingale and Ross 2003; Livingstone and Press 2006; van Dijck 2009), leading some to coin the term ‘produser’ to reflect these changes (Bruns 2007). As a result of the internet and mobile phones, citizens, it is argued, are now able to take part in the creation of their own media content, hereby shifting the balance of power between producers and consumers of media

New media have not only offered a broader array of opportunities to audiences and consumers to participate in their own media production but have also changed the production practices of old media such as newspapers, television and radio stations (Paterson and Domingo 2008; Fenton 2009; Domingo and Paterson 2011). The internet plays a crucial role in the preparation of news stories and mobile phones are being used to gather information. This convergence between old and new media has led to a space “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (Jenkins 2006: 2). Furthermore, the rise of the internet and mobile phones has given old media institutions a chance to transform themselves from top-down, one-way media institutions into participatory organizations that more regularly interact with their audience via new media.

Critiquing the techno-utopian optimists, the sceptics have however raised their doubts about the positive impact of technology on audience participation and democratic politics, highlighting the economic and commercial purposes that new media serve (Dean 2002, 2010; Dean and Anderson 2006; Couldry 2010). Dean (2010: 4) describes the way in which new media, politics and capitalism interrelate in the following manner:

Communicative capitalism designates the strange convergence of democracy and capitalism in networked communications and entertainment media. On the one hand, networked communications technologies materialize the values heralded as central to democracy. Democratic ideals of access, inclusion, discussion, and participation are realized in and through expansions and intensifications of global telecommunication networks. On the other hand, the speed, simultaneity, and interconnectivity of electronic communications produce massive distortions and concentrations of wealth as communicative exchanges and their technological preconditions become commodified and capitalized (Dean 2010: 4).

Similarly, van Dijck (2009: 55) points to the commercial context in which new media find their use: “the articulation of user agency as a complex concept involving not only his cultural role as a facilitator of civic engagement and participation, but also his economic meaning as a producer, consumer and data provider, as well as the user’s volatile position in the labour market”. Hence, the role of new media in promoting audience agency should not only be considered in political terms but there is a clear corporate logic to their role in the

sense that audiences' use of the internet and mobile phones leaves behind a trail of personal data that can be deployed in the service of communicative capitalism. The important question that the cybersceptics therefore raise is *what process* audiences actually participate in when they surf the web or send a text message: do they contribute their voice or do they part with marketing data? Should we consider audience participation as a process that enables the audience to impact on the production process or does it actually primarily empower the producer by bringing in revenue through for example premium-rate SMS messages and trails of personal data left on Facebook?

Situating itself within the tensions brought up by these debates, this article examines the role of new media in audience participation in radio content production in Zambia. It is important here to analytically distinguish between what could be referred to as 'unsolicited' and 'solicited' participation. In the first case, listeners take the initiative themselves to offer their contribution to content production. In the second instance, radio stations actively invite listeners to call in, SMS or email their messages or leave their contribution on Facebook. The type of participation discussed in this article mostly refers to the second form of participation, a managed form of participation in which radio producers have the final say on how to involve audiences, when to involve them, who exactly to involve and why to involve them. This does not mean that listeners do not have any agency; there are opportunities for them to participate in ways not necessarily intended by the producers. The key focus of this article, however, is not on the general elements of the participatory process and the power negotiation between producers and audiences but instead on the way in which the quality of this process is being transformed as a result of the use of the internet, mobile phones and social media.

This article primarily discusses the role of new media in audience participation through the perspective of radio producers based in six radio stations in Zambia. It hereby also contributes to shedding further light on processes of media production in Africa, a relatively understudied field in the broader field of African media studies (some exceptions are Ramaprasad 2001; Mwesige 2004; Manzella 2008). I focused on six radio stations in particular: one public broadcaster, the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC - and Radio Two in particular); three commercial radio stations, Radio Phoenix, Q FM and Flava FM; and two community radio stations, Radio Icengelo and Sky FM. A survey carried out in April 2010 among 1,413 weekly radio listeners found that these were the radio stations that were mentioned by listeners as one of the three key stations that they listen to most often (Murthy and Hussain 2010: 31).¹ I carried out around thirteen semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with radio producers, presenters and station managers of these six radio stations in Lusaka and Kitwe in January 2011. All interviews and focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and coded. In addition, I also analysed the websites and Facebook fanpages of the six selected radio stations.

In this article, I aim to offer a critical approach to notions of participation which examines (1) the specific transformative role of new media in processes of participation; (2) the agency of ordinary people in contributing to radio production and; (3) the role and interests of radio producers who are inviting and moderating this participation (Carpentier 2001). As Carpentier and De Cleen (2008: 1) point out, "many of the empowering and transformative opportunities [of participation] cover-up a multitude of restrictions that deal with muting voices, appropriations, techniques of surveillance, inequalities, and exclusions".

¹ ZNBC Radio 1 (48 percent), ZNBC Radio 2 (38 percent), ZNBC Radio 4 (26 percent), Radio Phoenix (16 percent), Q FM (12 percent), Sky FM (12 percent), Radio Icengelo (11 percent), Radio Christian Voice (10 percent), Breeze FM (9 percent) and BBC Radio (8 percent) (Murthy and Hussain 2010: 31).

In line with Foucault's notion of power, I consider both the positive/productive/enabling and negative/repressive/constraining aspects of participation and new media (Willems 2009). Before analysing the use, potential and constraints of new media in audience participation in radio content production in Zambia, I offer some background on the place of old and new media in audience participation in Zambia.

The role of old and new media in audience participation in Zambia

Zambian radio stations have a rich history of involving listeners in their content production. While new media such as the internet and mobile phones have been celebrated as highly interactive media that have enabled audiences to participate in the production of content, this has masked the way in which old media such as radio and television have made efforts to involve their audience in programming (Carpentier 2009). However, we should see practices of audience involvement within the broader limits imposed by Zambia's media history. Zambia has invariably been characterized as a 'media-phobic state' that is not genuinely committed to media freedom (Phiri 2010) and its policies have been described through the term 'reluctant liberalization' (Moyo 2010). Zambia's radio sector was liberalised in December 1993 when the Zambia National Broadcasting (Licensing) Regulations were enacted (Hamasaka 2008: 39-40). The liberalization of broadcasting resulted in a rapid increase in the number of radio stations. While there were only 12 stations in the country in 2000, the number had risen to 26 in 2005 and 48 in 2008 (Banda 2006: 16, Habeenzu 2010: 18). While the liberalization of the airwaves indicated a willingness on the part of government to open up the radio sector, broadcasting licenses were granted to religious, community and commercial stations on the condition that they would not air political broadcasts (Hamasaka 2008: 39-40; Banda 2006). Furthermore, apart from the public broadcaster ZNBC, most stations are only able to broadcast within a limited coverage area (e.g. one or two provinces) and applications for a national broadcasting license have rarely been honoured by government.

Within the constraints of this political context, it could be argued that Zambian radio listeners have always been actively interacting with the stations they have tuned into as Spitulnik's (1998, 2002, 2009) work has so vividly demonstrated. First of all, Zambians have participated "not only by listening but also by speaking with the radio and by speaking like the radio" (Spitulnik 2002: 343). Numerous phrases frequently coined by radio presenters have been incorporated into everyday language. Secondly, since the very inception of radio in Zambia, listeners have offered feedback on radio stations through letters such as the early comments that Zambian listeners gave to the colonial radio station Central African Broadcasting Station (CABS) (Spitulnik 1998: 67). Thirdly, radio listeners have been invited to participate in the production of content. For example, ZNBC offered listeners the opportunity to broadcast a personal message on some of its programmes such as news on a forthcoming funeral (Spitulnik 2009). Given Zambia's long history of widespread labour migration and extensive urbanization associated with the copper mining industry, this enabled Zambians to communicate messages to family and friends relatively quickly, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s when mobile phones were not yet widely available. Furthermore, like anywhere else in the world, Zambian radio stations regularly invite listeners to request particular songs that they would like to have played in a music show.

Another popular way in which listeners have been involved in radio content production is through the so-called 'phone-in programmes', a hugely popular genre in Zambia. Most radio stations – whether public, private or community-run – broadcast a current affairs programme that usually features an interview with a studio guest (a politician, business man or other prominent Zambian) and at some point invites the audience to phone in

and ask questions to or comment on the studio guest. Examples of phone-in programmes include Radio Phoenix's 'Let the People Talk', ZNBC Radio Two's 'Government Forum', Radio Icengelo's 'Face to Face with the Community', Q FM's 'Monday Night Live' and 'Public's Last Say', Sky FM's 'Sky Forum' and 'Face the Media'. Zambian radio therefore has quite a lively history of audience involvement and participation in programmes.

New media are increasingly being deployed by Zambian radio stations to step up audience participation. Most Zambian radio stations regularly invite listeners to call in, SMS their messages, email their contributions or post their comments on Facebook fanpages. Phone lines that the stations use to receive calls are usually ordinary landlines rather than premium rate numbers. To receive SMS messages, stations either use ordinary phones or an internet-based system which allows stations to use a premium-rate short code to receive text messages. Both the national broadcaster ZNBC and some of the privately-run stations also have websites but these generally lack interactive features and are mainly used to convey information on the mission of the station, news stories and details on the schedule.

Websites are more and more being replaced with Facebook profiles or fanpages which function as more manageable and cheaper alternatives to costly, high-maintenance websites. Because several mobile phone companies offer their customers free or very cheap access to Facebook in particular (and not to general websites), social media also become attractive channels for radio stations to advertise themselves. The commercial radio stations, in particular, increasingly interact with their audience via Facebook fanpages (see Table 2). They regularly post issues on their page and invite both listeners and non-listeners to comment. Not all posts directly engage with radio programmes and many simply refer to items in the news, football games or other current issues. While Facebook fanpages of major television stations such as BBC and Al Jazeera strictly manage audience participation by only allowing visitors to comment directly on their own posts, most Zambian radio stations allow Facebook users to create their own posts on the fanpages, hereby resulting in a relatively 'unmediated' space.

Table 2: Use of social media by radio stations²

Name radio station	Website	Facebook group or profile
ZNBC Radio 2	http://www.znbc.co.zm/	No Facebook fanpage; ZNBC Radio 4 has Facebook group (https://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=119704964713714&v=info) but only has 287 members
Radio Phoenix	Website not active	Facebook fanpage (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Radio-Phoenix/134430768747) – 10,620 likes
Q FM, Lusaka	http://qfmzambia.com/	Facebook fanpage (https://www.facebook.com/qfmzambia) – 47,978 likes
Flava FM, Kitwe	http://www.flavafm.co.zm/	Facebook fanpage (https://www.facebook.com/flavafm) – 3,548 likes
Sky FM	No website	No Facebook fanpage
Radio Icengelo	Website not active	Facebook fanpage (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Radio-Icengelo/112651658848065) – 15 likes

Q FM, in particular, has jumped on the social media bandwagon quite effectively through a successful fanpage that had almost 48,000 members in February 2012. Flava FM has also made attempts to incorporate new media by introducing an SMS-based social network called Flava Buddies (<http://www.flavabuddies.com>) which enables mobile phone users to chat in

² All websites accessed and data retrieved on 5 February 2012.

groups or to update their Facebook status via SMS. Both Q FM and Flava FM are commercial stations which target a relatively youthful audience. In Zambia, social media are mostly associated with young, middle class listeners who increasingly have access to the internet through their mobile phones. In contrast to Q FM and Flava FM, community stations like Radio Icengelo believe that social media do not quite tally with their particular target audience and hence, they have not incorporated it into their strategy. They arguably target a less wealthy listenership which does not have access to internet-enabled phones. Other stations such as ZNBC and Radio Phoenix consider social media to be relevant in order to solicit participation for some programmes targeting a young audience such as music broadcasts but the medium is not extensively used to encourage participation in the popular current affairs phone-in programme. New media have thus gained a significant presence in Zambian radio stations and particularly in the commercial stations which tend to have the best equipment, fastest internet access and have exploited new media to their full potential, including social media. However, all radio stations use new media in one form or another to encourage audience participation through text messages, either via internet-based SMS platforms or ordinary phones.

The broadening of participation

As indicated in the beginning of this article, new media have been attributed with the capacity to transform the power relationship between radio producers and audiences in favour of the latter. While previously, audiences primarily participated through letter writing, landline phone calls or visits to the studio, the presence of the internet and mobile phones has arguably offered a larger number of Zambians a wider variety of opportunities to participate in content production. In general terms, most radio producers interviewed as part of this project indeed agreed that mobile phones in particular have offered a greater proportion of Zambians the opportunity to participate in radio content production, including those moving around or on the road:

The internet and cellphones, it has enhanced people's participation in airing their views, passing their comments and even making their input generally to these programmes. For instance, initially, we were using a landline here. And a lot of people, you hear them calling and they tell you: 'Look, I have been holding on for a long time and I'm using a mobile phone. Do you hear that? I'm using a mobile phone. I'm driving between Kapiri and Kabwe, or Kapiri and Ndola. I just found the discussion interesting so I stopped and said: Let me call in'. Can you imagine?"³

Mobile phones have assisted radio producers to get audience feedback from listeners that they would not normally engage with. While most commercial radio stations in Zambia only broadcast in restricted areas (usually along the Chililabombwe to Livingstone railway line), ZNBC Radio Two has a wide coverage and new media has enabled its producers to be in touch with listeners from remote areas. As the ZNBC Radio Two organiser commented:

Also the SMS line, it is very easy to interact with people out there. It does not cost a lot. It's minimal, at a minimal fee. And you are able to interact with people in the remotest areas. And I feel that new technology has been an inclusive kind of radio and more interactive. Because before it was only concentrating on landline, it was only concentrating on the elite. But now even the poorest of the poor. I get this from the SMS line. They will tell you: 'Oh, I am so and so from Kalabo district', which is the remotest part of Zambia. And it gives us an idea to know how far and how clear our signals are as radio. We easily get feedback to say: 'Oh, you mean, even people this far can hear us'. Like Radio Two, outside the boundaries of Zambia, you can

³ Interview with John Chola, Presenter 'Let the People Talk', Radio Phoenix, 18 January 2011.

catch it. So we get even SMSs, ‘Oh, I’m listening to you, I’m calling from South Africa. I’m following your programme’, which is very, very exciting. I think it has broadened the listenership and participation particularly of people.⁴

In 2010, out of every 1,000 Zambians, 420 had a cellphone line whereas only 7 had access to a landline.⁵ Mobile phones have therefore quite radically expanded the number of potential listeners that are able to call into a programme. Listeners enthusiastically participate in a range of radio programmes: from current affairs to social issues and music programmes. Flava FM has seen audiences most actively participating in a late-night social issue programme: “it’s called the Slowdown Zone where one of our lady presenters, it’s about love, and life and all these topics about relationships, what not. That seems to be as far as participation probably the most participated programme. We get a lot of SMS messages. Facebook as well”.⁶

The mobile phone has also given listeners the flexibility to call from any location instead of being forced to call from their home or office. Radio listening has arguably always been a mobile affair as Spitulnik (2002) has demonstrated in a chapter in which she highlights the way in which battery-operated radio sets move within Zambian households and among listeners in particularly rural (unelectrified) areas. Because the majority of low-end mobile phone handsets on the market in Zambia incorporate a radio functionality, a growing number of Zambians is now also listening to radio on their mobile phones. A survey carried out in April 2010 among 1,413 respondents found that around 20% of weekly radio listeners in Central Province, Lusaka, Copperbelt Province listened to the radio via their mobile phone (Murthy and Hussain 2010: 14). According to one radio producer, this has enabled a convergence between mobile listening and phoning practices:

Traditionally, in Zambia, you know, usually, it was a passive way of listening. People would sit and say, ok, now we are listening to this programme. They would stop whatever they were doing, whether they were washing dishes or what. At the moment, we know people can still do other things while listening to radio. We do bear that in mind even as we go on radio. We realise others might be travelling. One might be sweeping or might be walking and still listening to radio. Five years ago, I think it was a different story. If one moves from home, then, well that’s it. Unless they would be at some place where there is a radio. Today, I think, it’s quite dynamic [...]. We have participation from people on the move. They’d say: ‘I’m in a bus actually and I’m listening to this. Or I’m at the office. I’m home. We’re at the field’.⁷

Apart from the incorporation of live phone calls or the reading out of SMS messages during programmes, input from listeners occasionally also feeds into decisions radio producers make with regard to content, hereby suggesting that audiences are contributing to content production. For example, a presenter on Radio Phoenix’s popular phone-in programme ‘Let the People Talk’ indicated that a significant number of his interview questions to invited studio guests would be formulated by listeners rather than by himself:

Almost ninety percent of the questions that I had did not come from me; they came from the people. From different places. Others called in, others brought on the internet because I floated this. I reached as far as UK, asking ‘What do you think about?’. I went as far as Facebook:

⁴ Interview with Rosina Mbewe, Programme Organiser, Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) Radio Two, 12 January 2011.

⁵ ICT statistics database of International Telecommunications Union (ITU), <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#> (accessed: 11 February 2012).

⁶ Interview with Pius Maambo, Operations Director, Flava FM, 21 January 2011.

⁷ Interview with Brian Malambo, ICT Officer, Sky FM, 17 January 2011.

‘What do you think about?’. It’s all these things. Nowadays with the internet and new media, it is easy to get some of this information .⁸

Similarly, a ZNBC Radio Two’s presenter of ‘Government Forum’ indicated that they often honour requests from listeners to have certain guests featured in the studio: “We do have requests and proposals from members of the public. They actually call in or send in text messages: we would like this particular government official to actually come in, to come on board and explain certain issues [...]. We really take those particular views into account. We actually work onto their proposals. We have tried very hard to bring on those particular government officials that the listeners request to come forward”.⁹ New media have also enabled listeners to phone in or send SMS messages to alert radio producers to news stories in their communities as is evident from the experience of Radio Icengelo: “The way we are utilizing our phones is every listener who is there, as long as they have access to a mobile phone, they can text you. And that provision is in the studio, so that even when something is going on in the community, somebody can text us”.¹⁰ Listeners also actively participate in compiling playlists of radio music shows. For example, Flava FM’s presenters do not tend to compile playlists in advance but are led by input from audiences: “We have got a Zambian music show, or segment should I say, for about 30 minutes during drive time. Very popular. People text in and send in their requests, and what not. The playlist is composed by the people. Even our Zambian music chart show on Saturday mornings as well, they vote for their favourite Zambian songs. That’s very popular as well”.¹¹

Lastly, the internet has also capacitated radio listeners and resulted in a more informed radio listenership and higher quality of participation:

Most of the people in Zambia, a few afford broadband. Most of the people are on dial-up but, you know, easy browsing and stuff like that is readily available so they are able to acquaint themselves with quite a number of issues [...]. The levels of participation are now more informed unlike before. You will be discussing about maybe veterinary services in the Ministry of Agriculture. What does that mean? What are we talking about? At the moment, people are quite informed. Believe me, within an hour we introduce a discussion, people quickly research on that.¹²

The improved accessibility to information via the internet has therefore also put pressure on radio staff to up their game and research news stories well, hereby arguably further shifting the balance of power in favour of the audience. As a ZNBC employee reiterated: “You have to try and use the internet and to try and be updated with what is happening around the world, and sound intelligent like you know what you are talking about. Because people are well-informed today. You are talking about Ouattara, a story in Ivory Coast, and somebody has already heard about it, and they know the details, and you, you think you know about it and yet you’re so shallow about what you talk about”.¹³

⁸ Interview with John Chola, Presenter ‘Let the People Talk’, Radio Phoenix, 18 January 2011.

⁹ Interview with Golden Mukelabai, Presenter of ‘Government Forum’ programme, ZNBC Two, 18 January 2011.

¹⁰ Focus group with staff members of Radio Icengelo: Euphrasia Chalwe, Director of Programmes; Charles Kasanda, Presenter/Producer, Face to the Face with the Community; and Edwards Chibeka, IT Officer, Radio Icengelo, 20 January 2011.

¹¹ Interview with Pius Maambo, Operations Director, Flava FM, 21 January 2011.

¹² Interview with Brian Malambo, ICT Officer, Sky FM, 17 January 2011.

¹³ Interview with Rosina Mbewe, Programme Organiser, Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) Radio Two, 12 January 2011.

The limits to participation

While there is evidence that new media have enabled radio listeners to impact on content production, there are also a number of important constraints to participation that must be taken into account. Apart from the technical challenges in using new media and high costs of mobile phone calls, the specific features of new media impact on the power relation between radio producers and audiences. Furthermore, I argue that there is an important commercial incentive to the use of new media.

The ease of 'silencing' new media participation

If we contrast listener participation via phone calls (whether via mobile phone or landline) and a live studio audience versus interaction via SMS, email, internet and social media, it is clear that these forms of media have different implications for the relationship between producers and audiences. It could be argued that the latter form of participation offers the producer a greater degree of control in terms of managing audience participation. A Radio Icengelo presenter discussed the reading out of SMS messages in radio programmes as follows: "[W]hen you are doing a live programme, [...] you find that there are people that are trying to call and there are people that are sending in their messages. And then, the panel also has to speak and with the limited time that you have, that is extremely difficult. You would only read about 2-3 messages and then that would be all. You accommodate the callers and then the panel as well. So in that instance, it's kind of difficult. *Do you get angry messages from people?* [laughter] It is inevitable!".¹⁴ Other presenters also indicated to prefer participation via SMS messages because these can easily be censored:

We are a national broadcaster. We are not ordinary, we are not just like an ordinary station. Therefore, we need to be more responsible unlike other radio stations; they can broadcast anything. So for us the SMS line, it also adds value and also, it is an advantage to us in the sense that you are able to censor some of the SMSs that are not in good taste for the nation, you know. There are some people who just want to bring anarchy in the country. So there are certain messages, I will just ignore them, if at all they are not good for the nation.¹⁵

In many ways, phone calls constitute a more spontaneous and powerful means of participation than the interaction enabled through new media, particularly also because most Zambian radio stations do not prescreen calls from the public. This adds to an element of spontaneity and 'unmediatedness' that cannot be rivalled by text messages, as confirmed by Sky FM's ICT officer:

The challenge we've had is of course in our mode of broadcast and as in accommodating live calls, we do not have that delay facility. If a person calls, they are immediately live. Almost all the radio stations in Zambia. Some of, you know, I think, the punches we received from government, we're talking about transport in Zambia. And then this person calls and you know, one can just say anything because we have, I think, no immediate control to what they will say, except maybe retract or ask them to retract what they have said.¹⁶

Of course, there are also ways in which presenters are able to manage participation via phone calls. They can decide to simply drop the call, or politely whisk away the caller but this

¹⁴ Focus group with staff members of Radio Icengelo: Euphrasia Chalwe, Director of Programmes; Charles Kasanda, Presenter/Producer, Face to the Face with the Community; and Edwards Chibeka, IT Officer, Radio Icengelo, 20 January 2011.

¹⁵ Interview with Rosina Mbewe, Programme Organiser, Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) Radio Two, 12 January 2011.

¹⁶ Interview with Brian Malambo, ICT Officer, Sky FM, 17 January 2011.

process would happen while the listeners are tuning in. SMS messages or emails, on the other hand, can simply be ignored without knowledge of the audience. There are some indications though that some stations have engaged in a sort of ‘pseudo-participation’ where they have pretended to accept calls from listeners. As a Radio Phoenix presenter, who also temporarily presented a series of programmes on the media in Zambia on the public broadcaster, commented as follows on the way ZNBC handled the participation in the programme:

I was so amazed to find that calls were not coming in. You open the lines and calls are not coming. And ZNBC has got a system where they have got about five, six points where they can switch off, you know, disconnect you. They can just remove a cable and you’re not there, you know. And I was like: ‘Oh goodness me’. And I would use the SMSs but after the programme, people would call you: ‘The number you are announcing, we were calling, it was just ringing. We cannot get through so why are you announcing the number when we cannot get through? All these people called the station, that programme you were talking about was good, the topic, but we cannot get through.’¹⁷

In an article on talk radio in Uganda, Mwesige (2009: 233) argued that the spontaneity of talk radio does not enable participants phoning into the studio to engage in sufficient reflection on the issues under discussion and hereby could “undermine the quality of discourse”. However, I would argue that the immediacy of phone-in programmes has empowered audience members quite significantly as they are often able to say things which the presenter did not necessarily want them to say unlike SMS and email messages which can easily be silenced.

The corporate logic of new media input

It is also important to situate the role of new media in radio listener participation within the broader constraints of a changing Zambian radio landscape in which the market increasingly determines the running of the airwaves. When discussing audience participation, a question that is often ignored is: participation in what? Most accounts would argue that by calling or texting their comments, audience members participate in some form of public debate, whether or not in a ‘rational’, Habermasian sense. However, what also needs to be taken into account is the key incentive that makes radio producers decide to involve the audience. In Zambia, a number of factors have contributed to motivating radio stations to invite audience participation via new media such as the need to remain competitive, the converging interests of mobile phone companies and radio stations, the preferences of advertisers and the use of new media for data mining and as a source of revenue.

Zambia’s liberalization of the airwaves in the late 1990s resulted in a competitive radio landscape in which almost 50 public, commercial and community stations compete for listeners. New media are seen by some stations as a means to distinguish oneself from the rest. For example, for Q FM, a commercial station which advertises itself as ‘Africa’s modern radio’, new media are a crucial part of their corporate identity: “What we think we should be doing right now is making sure that we are on top of the game. When we are on top of the game, everyone else will look at what we’re doing and say, if they start doing what we’re doing, then we know we’re doing the correct thing. That’s how it is. When you look at the Facebook page, it’s way ahead. When you look at the SMSs, it’s well ahead.”¹⁸ Within this commercial climate, the public broadcaster ZNBC also feels the pressure to incorporate new media: “You’ve got to be quite creative because now people can easily tune into various radio stations any time. And so yes, there is pressure on us to be more creative because now radio is commercialised and there’s so much happening around and various radio stations,

¹⁷ Interview with John Chola, Presenter ‘Let the People Talk’, Radio Phoenix, 18 January 2011.

¹⁸ Interview with Asan Nyama, Managing Director, Q FM, 14 January 2011.

whether they are small, you find that there's a lot of creativity. And hence, you find that you are affected to an extent where you feel you are not doing much. Therefore you have got to be more creative, to try and use the internet".¹⁹

In their attempt to survive in an increasingly commercialised climate, Zambian radio stations offer airtime to anyone who is willing to pay, resulting in a large number of programmes sponsored by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or corporations. This also means that programme schedules are rare to find because listings are constantly changing. As a ZNBC employee stated:

I don't know if you really noticed but if you move around, it will be difficult for you to pick up a schedule. Because if you went to most of these station managers and ask for what programme they are going to run on the 18th of next month, they will not give you a comprehensive written down document that will show you that that is what they are going to run on that particular night [...]. [M]anagers want to commercialise most of these particular radio stations. You find you have a scheduled programme. Very well educative, very well-entertaining. And the moment you have this particular client who wants to run a commercial [sponsored programme] in that particular time slot, you sort of get displaced.²⁰

Apart from NGOs, mobile phone companies are crucial advertisers on radio which are arguably involved in a true 'battle of the airwaves'. For example, Flava FM reported that the mobile phone provider MTN has attached its name to a popular breakfast show while its main competitor, Airtel, bought up a lunchtime and evening spot. During these shows, the station will run regular adverts and discuss the most recent promotions and competitions of mobile phone companies.²¹ It is also often mobile phone advertisers which are encouraging stations to introduce participation and interaction into programming as it will enable them to draw revenue from SMS traffic. Most radio stations use premium-rated SMS short codes; part of the revenue will then go to the radio station and the other part will be for the mobile phone company. Hence, there is a convergence of interests between mobile phone companies and radio stations which both try to survive in an increasingly competitive and commercialised environment. As a ZNBC employee reiterated: "[M]anagement, you know, half the time, keeps on insisting for us to actually promote the SMSs as another source of revenue".²²

Commercial stations such as Q FM have been particularly successful in capitalizing on new media by integrating it into their revenue base. For example, alongside its advertising income, the station set up an internet-based SMS platform in 2010 which is used by several other radio stations to receive SMS messages. This has not only enabled Q FM to generate income but has also provided the station with access to marketing data on other stations using the platform. Furthermore, Q FM actively uses SMS for data mining purposes. The station is less interested in what the SMS messages say but instead will archive the phone numbers so as to build up a database for outbound SMS adverts: "We archive the numbers; we don't archive the messages so much. We archive the messages only for a month. But the numbers, we archive them forever. We use them for advertising".²³ Similarly, Q FM also makes strategic use of Facebook. At certain times, it actively solicits comments on the Facebook fanpage in order to increase the number of hits as the station would eventually like to attract

¹⁹ Interview with Rosina Mbewe, Programme Organiser, Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) Radio Two, 12 January 2011.

²⁰ Interview with Golden Mukelabai, Presenter of 'Government Forum' programme, ZNBC Two, 18 January 2011.

²¹ Interview with Pius Maambo, Operations Director, Flava FM, 21 January 2011.

²² Interview with Golden Mukelabai, Presenter of 'Government Forum' programme, ZNBC Two, 18 January 2011.

²³ Interview with Asan Nyama, Managing Director, Q FM, 14 January 2011.

advertising on its page. As Dean (2009: 26) has argued, messages are therefore not always actions to elicit responses but merely contributions to circulating content: “[T]he exchange value of messages overtakes their use value. So, a message is no longer primarily a message from a sender to a receiver. Uncoupled from contexts of action and application – as on the Web or in print and broadcast media – the message is simply part of a circulating data stream. Its particular content is irrelevant”. Hence, it is important to situate the soliciting of audience participation within a broader corporate context in which listener input via new media is not always encouraged in order to gain access to the ‘voice’ of the audience but instead feeds into a commercial strategy in which radio stations both aim to access personal data of their listeners as well to attract revenue through premium-rated SMS messages and Facebook fanpage advertising.

Conclusion

A crucial question that this article sought to answer is in what sort of processes audiences participate when they call in, send a text message, or leave a comment on a radio station’s Facebook fanpage. While the cyberoptimists argue that new media have radically expanded the opportunities of audience members to participate in the production of media content, I have argued that there is another corporate logic to the rising popularity of the use of new media in audience participation in Zambia. Within an increasingly more competitive and commercialised media landscape in which radio airtime is constantly up for grabs, Zambian radio stations have enthusiastically incorporated new media into their marketing and income generating strategies. SMS income plays an important role in the economic survival of radio stations. Hence, when listeners participate in the production of radio content by texting in or leaving a comment on Facebook, they do not merely contribute their ‘voice’ to a programme but at the same time, they part with their personal data and income which eventually contributes to a healthier revenue base of the radio station.

However, in my attempt to understand the key incentives behind Zambian radio stations’ decision to introduce participation, I do not want to go as far as arguing that what “contemporary techno-utopians theorize as the very form of freedom is actually a mechanism of the generation of extreme inequality and capture” (Dean 2010: 30). There is clear evidence that new media have shifted the balance of power between radio producers and audiences in favour of the listeners. The internet has made it easier for listeners to quickly inform themselves about certain issues which has put pressure on radio producers to research their stories more thoroughly and has improved the quality of listener participation. Furthermore, because of the greater accessibility of mobile phones as compared to landlines, a greater proportion of Zambians is now able to contribute to content production, either by texting information on a news story, by contributing their perspective in a live discussion programme or by leaving their request for a particular song on Facebook.

While new media are considered to be interactive, this article has also demonstrated that there is nothing inherently participatory in the use of internet and mobile phones by radio stations because audience input channelled via these media can be as effortlessly censored as old-fashioned letters from listeners. The immediacy and spontaneity of mobile phone calls has arguably empowered listeners more as their contribution to live phone-in programmes cannot be as easily managed by radio producers as SMS messages, email or Facebook posts. New media therefore offer both opportunities and limits to the involvement of audiences in content production. It is crucial to examine how they are put to use in each specific context

and to understand the way in which they unsettle the conventional relationship between producers and audiences.

Bibliography

- Allan, S. and E. Thorsen 2009. *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*. New York, Peter Lang.
- Banda, F. 2006. *African Media Development Initiative: Zambia Research Findings and Conclusions*. London, BBC World Service Trust.
- Baym, N. K. 1999. *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications.
- Bruns, A. 2007. Prodisage: towards a broader framework for user-led content creation, paper presented at Creativity & Cognition conference, Washington D.C., USA, 13-15 June 2007.
- Carpentier, N. 2001. Managing audience participation. *European Journal of Communication* 16(2), 209-232.
- Carpentier, N. 2009. Participation is not enough: the conditions of possibility of mediated participatory practices. *European Journal of Communication* 24(4), 407-420.
- Carpentier, N. 2011a. *Media and Participation: a Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle*. Bristol, Intellect Publishers.
- Carpentier, N. 2011b. New configurations of the audience? The challenges of user-generated content for audience theory and media participation (pp. 190-212). In: Nightingale, V. (ed.), *The Handbook of Media Audiences*. Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Carpentier, N. and B. De Cleen 2008. *Participation and Media Production: Critical Reflections on Content Creation*. Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishers.
- Carpentier, N. and W. Hannot 2009. To be a common hero: The uneasy balance between the ordinary and ordinariness in the subject position of mediated ordinary people in the talk show *Jan Publiek*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12(6), 597-616.
- Cooke, W. N. and U. Kothari 2001. *Participation: the New Tyranny?* London, Zed Books.
- Cornwall, A. 2006. Historical perspectives on participation in development. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 44(1), 49-65.
- Cornwall, A. 2007. Buzzwords and fuzzwords: deconstructing development discourse. *Development in Practice* 17(4/5), 471-484.
- Cornwall, A. and K. Brock 2005. What do buzzwords do for development policy? a critical look at participation, empowerment and poverty reduction. *Third World Quarterly* 26(7), 1043-1060.
- Couldry, N. 2010. *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*. London, Sage Publications.
- Dean, J. 2002. *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.
- Dean, J. 2009. *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Durham, Duke University Press.
- Dean, J. 2011. *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Domingo, D. and C. Paterson 2011. *Making Online News: Newsroom Ethnographies in the Second Decade of Internet Journalism*. New York, Peter Lang.
- Fenton, N. 2009. *New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age*. London, Sage.

- Gallie, W.B. 1955/56. Essentially contested concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56, 167-198.
- Gillmor, D. 2004. *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. California, O'Reilly.
- Gould, J. 2005. *The New Conditionality: the Politics of Poverty Reduction Strategies*. London, Zed Books.
- Habeenzu, S. 2010. *Zambia ICT Sector Performance Review, 2009/2010. Towards Evidence-Based ICT Policy and Regulation. Volume Two. Policy Paper 17*. Cape Town, Research ICT, available from: <http://www.researchictafrica.net/new/images/uploads/SPR20092010/Zambia-SPR-layout-final-08112010.pdf> (last accessed: 22 November 2010).
- Hamasaka, C. 2008. *The Impact of the Broadcast Legislative Reforms on the Newsroom Staff's Perceptions of the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC)'s Editorial Operations and News Content*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Grahamstown, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, available from: http://eprints.ru.ac.za/1736/1/Hamasaka_MA_TR09-150.pdf (last accessed: 12 November 2010).
- Hickey, S. and G. Mohan 2004. *Participation, from Tyranny to Transformation?: Exploring New Approaches to Participation in Development*. London, Zed Books.
- Jenkins, H. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, New York University Press.
- Leal, P. A. 2007. Participation: the ascendancy of a buzzword in the neo-liberal era. *Development in Practice* 17(4/5), 539-548.
- Livingstone, S. and A. Press 2006. Taking audience research into the age of new media: Old problems and new challenges. In: White, M. and J. Schwoch (Eds.), *The Question of Method in Cultural Studies*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Livingstone, S. and P. K. Lunt 1993. *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*. London, Routledge.
- Manzella, J. 2008. The Star's first draft: a news organization revises the next narrative of race in post-Apartheid South Africa. *Culture and Organization* 14(3), 261-277.
- Moyo, D. 2010. Musical chairs and reluctant liberalization: broadcasting policy reform trends in Zimbabwe and Zambia. In: Moyo, D. and W. Chuma (Eds.), *Media Policy in a Changing Southern Africa: Critical Reflections on Media Reforms in the Global Age*. Pretoria, UNISA Press.
- Murthy, G. and M.M. Hussain 2010. *Mass Media in Zambia. Demand-Side Measures of Access, Use and Reach*. London and Washington, InterMedia, available from: http://www.audiencescapes.org/sites/default/files/Murthy%2BMuzammil_Mass%20Media.pdf (last accessed: 16 January 2011).
- Mwesige, P.G. 2009. The democratic functions and dysfunctions of political talk radio: the case of Uganda. *Journal of African Media Studies* 1(2), 221-246.
- Mwesige, P.G. 2004. Disseminators, advocates and watchdogs. A profile of Ugandan journalists in the New Millenium. *Journalism* 5(1), 69-96.
- Nightingale, V. and K. Ross 2003. New media, new audience, new research? (pp. 146-163). In: Nightingale, V. and K. Ross (Eds.), *Media and Audiences: New Perspectives*. Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Paterson, C. and D. Domingo 2008. *Making Online News: the Ethnography of New Media Production*. New York, Peter Lang.

- Phiri, I. 2010. Zambia: policies of a media-phobic state (pp. 133-148). In: Moyo, D. and W. Chuma (Eds.), *Media Policy in a Changing Southern Africa: Critical Reflections on Media Reforms in the Global Age*. Pretoria, UNISA Press.
- Ramaprasad, J. 2001. A profile of journalists in post-independence Tanzania. *Gazette* 63(6), 539-555.
- Rodríguez, C. 2001. *Fissures in the Mediascape: an International Study of Citizens' Media*. Cresskill, NJ, Hampton Press.
- Sola Pool, I. De 1983. *Technologies of Freedom*. Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press.
- Spitulnik, D. 1998. Mediated modernities: encounters with the electronic in Zambia. *Visual Anthropology Review* 14(2), 63-84.
- Spitulnik, D. 2002. Mobile machines and fluid audiences: rethinking reception through Zambian radio culture (pp. 337-354). In: Ginsburg, F., L. Abu-Lughod and B. Larkin (Eds.), *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press.
- Spitulnik, D. 2009. Personal news and the price of public service. An ethnographic window into the dynamics of production and reception in Zambian state radio. In: Bird, E. (Ed.), *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives*. Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press.
- Tremayne, M. 2007. *Blogging, Citizenship, and the Future of Media*. London, Routledge.
- Turner, G. 2009. *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. London, Sage.
- van Dijck, J. 2009. Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content. *Media, Culture & Society* 31(1), 41-58.
- White, S. C. 1996. Depoliticising development: the uses and abuses of participation. *Development in Practice* 6(1), 6-15.
- Willems, W. 2009. *Imagining the Power of the Media: Global News, Nationalism and Popular Culture in the Context of the Zimbabwe Crisis (2000-2007)*. Unpublished PhD thesis. London, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- Willems, W. 2010. At the crossroads of the formal and popular: convergence culture and new publics in Zimbabwe. In: Wasserman, H. (Ed.), *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa*. London, Routledge.