Revisiting Community Radio through A Gender Lens

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Abstract:

Not only have radios been depicted as being the most popular way to communicate with the poor and illiterate, they can also be used for the direct and unabashed "manufacture" of public opinion. Having established themselves as entertainment, they can pass smoothly and almost imperceptibly into a propaganda and by means of carefully edited "news" and carefully contrived "talks" can do more than any other known agency to convey palatable doses of truth – or of untruth – to the public.Moreover, in many cases across the world, there has been a perversion of the value of radio as a medium of communication into a strictly commercial model. In constant search of profits, the radio stations have forgotten their main role in light of democratisation, social change, and community empowerment initiatives. An 'alternative media' platform has emerged in the form of community/grassroots radios which provide citizens with easy and cheap access to information, conduits to decision makers, opportunities to build local capacity, and can even promote social empowerment. However, has the voice of the less fortunate, normally referred to as the 'voiceless' being heard and their issues addressed via this platform?!Have our disempowered female counterparts being empowered via this medium?! Has an all- inclusive social panacea being unearthed through this vehicle?! We are yet to found out.

Keywords: Community/Grassroot Radios, Public Opinion, Democratisation, Social Change

Themes: Public Opinion, Community Empowerment

1.0 Introduction

The mass media have indeed made our planet McLuhan's 'global village'. The media have a significant role to play in each of our lives. They are the conduits that improve social interaction, help develop citizens, and promote their engagement in identifying and solving local, national, and international concerns.[1]

Similarly; discovered in early nineteen hundreds;radio remains the most powerful mass media...reaching hills and rural areas away from cities that television cannot. Radio is cost efficient, has no language or literacy barriers, can be a direct expression of local oral culture and traditions, can be sustainable if managed properly, and its outreach can influence thousands of people. Most importantly, the technology is relatively inexpensive, compact, portable, and as a

result, it became widely used by governments and private enterprises all over the world.[2]

Radio broadcasts can provide real-time information, broadcasted 24 hours a day to provide the most recent updates to listeners. Stations have the ability to reach across borders and become a source of information where reliable news is scarce. When access to the internet is blocked and phone lines are cut, people can still search the airwaves for trustworthy sources. Even electricity is not a necessity for battery operated and hand-cranked radios.[3]

1.1 Radio as the 'Commercial'Model

Radio's fundamental strength continues to be the power of words and sound. With its human voice to persuade, it is a powerful branding medium. Advertisers use presenter endorsements to build trust and drive business with presenters often imparting personal experiences with the brand, on-air mentions and authentic chatter within their shows.[4]

The rising tide of commercialism in media operations and the excess of yellow journalism sparked the further evolution of the journalistic profession of a free press to a social responsibility model. The latter model is when journalists monitor the ethics of their own profession.

Yellow journalism is; on the other hand; a journalistic style that emphasized sensational photos and story selections over hard news, large headlines, an abundance of personality and human-interest stories, and sometimes hoaxes and fake interviews (Straubhaar and LaRose, 2002).

The social responsibility model allows free expression with some limits, either through government regulation or self-regulation by professional ethics. Most mass media according to Straubhaar (2002) are so expensive and difficult to operate that few can make use of this form of 'free' expression.

1.2 Media and Propaganda

Indeed, media can systematically manufacture propaganda under the guise of 'facts' to elicit consent from mass audiences for patently undemocratic and often scurrilous government practices (Jane Duncan & Mandla Seleoane, 1998).

Propaganda is a concerted set of messages aimed at influencing the opinions or behavior of large numbers of people. Instead of impartially providing information, propaganda in its most basic sense presents information in order to influence its audience.[5]

1.3 Relevance of the Radio in Today's Era

Even in today's era, the radio remains the ultimate local community and loyal friend. Radio is highly personalised because it requires the listener to fill in the blanks … and they are entirely in charge of what they "see". It is this personalisation that takes place every day in a radio listener's life.[6]

Radio remains relevant in today's world of time-starved consumers. It provides programming

content meeting the entertainment needs of people according to their demography, geography, ethnography, among others.

Radio is everywhere, reaching consumers on-air, online and on-demand – whether they are at home, at work or while commuting. It allows consumers to multi-task and listen while they work or play – essential in today's world.[7]

Currently, radio reception occurs in a variety of ways through a variety of devices, not just through the analog reception of traditional radios and stereos. Most mobile phones nowadays allow radio reception.

And nowadays with the Internet, some radio stations also broadcast to a worldwide audience, mainly to expatriates in Australia or in Europe. This demonstrates that radio continues to play a crucial role in the media landscape.

1.4 Radio as the medium in the poorest countries

In many countries, low literacy and income levels limit the reach of print media. These factors have helped in broadcast media taking on increased importance. The radio is the main mass medium in some of the poorest countries. Many people in Africa and South Asia do not have access to a radio, either because the signal does not reach them or they cannot afford a receiver or they do not have electricity. In Mozambique, for example, only about half of its people are covered by a

radio signal, and less than a third hear radio often (Straubhaar and LaRose, 2002).

People in some remote areas of some of the poorest countries where radio stations do not cover all the country listen to international broadcasters. They are usually on short-wave frequencies that can carry across thousands of miles, compared to the limited range of FM and AM radio. In Africa, people in remote areas listen on short wave to continent – spanning commercial radio stations such as 'Africa One', as well as to foreign stations such as the 'Voice of America' and the 'BBC' (Bourgault, 1994).

2.0 Radio and Democracy

The radio remains a significant communication tool. Not only is it a popular device among music lovers of all ages and an informer of current events and weather conditions, it is also a platform to express our opinions on local, state, national and international issues.

As per David D. Acker (1994), the radio is a medium through which public opinion is shaped.

Instrumental arguments start from the position that freedom of expression is an instrument in attaining a democratic society. The attainment of truth through untrammelled public debate is ...a precondition for an efficient democracy (Jane Duncan & Mandla Seleoane, 1998).

People need to be informed about abuse of power in order to hold their government representatives true to their original mandates. The press plays a

watchdog role in this regard, acting as the conduit for information about abuse and corruption (Duncan & Mandla Seleoane, 1998).

2.1 Radio as a Tool for Democratisation

Despite the fact that radio use… has been tied to entertainment, there is great potential for centering radio as a tool for democratisation (Robert A. Hackett, Yuezhi Zhao, 2005).

Democratizing the media cannot be simply additional facilities. It means broader and equal access to the media by the general public.

There is not necessarily a hierarchy in this process. Journalists are not above the people in this regard. They are servants to, or partners with, the people of the community. All people are considered equal and central to the purpose of the media.

Besides, the media do play a significant role in setting "the standards by which the public evaluates government and leadership performance and attributes responsibility for societal problems" (Lenart 1994:3).

One significant change in the media world is the setting up of community/grassroots radios, which are considered an alternative platform to democratizing the media space for the masses.

3.0 'Alternative Media' Platform– Community/Grassroots Radio

The growth of independent and pluralistic media was characterised by an urgent need to move from top to bottom, state-driven propaganda to message- driven and participatory forms of dialogue and expression.

In this respect, community media was established to provide individuals and communities with the means to participate in the media.

Community media historically positioned itself as different from both commercial and government-funded media. The primary concern of community media practice and theory has been the redistribution of what Raymond Williams called 'the means to communication', whereby 'with the ending of the division of labour within the modes of production of communication itself, individuals would speak "as individuals", as integral human beings'[8].In forums such as NWICO (in particular the MacBride Report of 1980), community media received recognition as a counter-balance to the inequities of global media systems (Ó Siochrú Girard & Mahan 2002).

3.1 Grassroots/Community Radio v/s Public Radio

Grassroots Radio or community radio is an offshoot of public radio, characterized by community access and volunteer involvement in every aspect of station operations. Reflecting the varied interests of their communities, grassroots radio stations have diverse formats, including eclectic music and information from a variety of

sources.

By definition, the grassroots is the bottom of the political pyramid, opposite the "establishment," which controls the top. While the establishment concentrates power in relatively few people in the highest echelons of power--typically party leaders, elected officials, appointed aides or bureaucrats, and others who wield considerable authority over others (and whose business is limiting others' choices)--the grassroots includesvirtually everyone else, those common people who do not necessarily hold any political office and who may even be getting their first taste of politics in a particular cause.[9]

It is important to understand, however, that the above model is overly simplistic. The grassroots and the establishment can often be the same. People can function simultaneously in either realm, and many often do. In fact, a large proportion of grassroots activistsaround the world are current office holders or party leaders who are deeply engaged, alongside common citizens.

What this means is that, ultimately, "the grassroots" is an ATTITUDE. It is an attitude of freedom, of creativity, of unrestrained political enthusiasm, of willingness to blend together with ordinary citizens for a common purpose. It has nothing inherently to do with holding a position. It is what some political leaders do outside or beyond their official duties when they get involved in popular causes. It is what regular

people do politically alongside others of like minds, without undue concern for conventional roles or authority.[10]

As per this definition, any citizen can form part of the 'grassroots'; irrespective of the position that one holds in society. Nevertheless, he or she must have the best interests of the society at heart and the uninhibited desire to contribute for some constructive change in the social order.

What sets grassroots radio apart is that local citizens are the programmers, producers, and hosts of the programming. The average grassroots community station as per the Grassroots Radio Movement in the U.Shas anywhere from 40-100 citizens on the air each week, sharing their many interests, musical knowledge, passions, issues, concerns, ideas, and information with their communities. They have been trained, often free of charge, in the art and craft of radio production.[11]

There is magic and power in the concept of community radio. People are able to bring issues to the airwaves that are often misrepresented, if represented at all. Listeners are educated, uplifted, activated, enlightened, frustrated, surprised, or empowered by grassroots radio programming. These grassroots stations become a lifeline in a community. They are interactive radio stations. With community members sharing their various interests over the airwaves of our stations, programming schedules are created that no

Program Director could dream up. The Program Directors of the grassroots radio stations work with volunteer programming committees (usually elected by volunteers) to create the broadcast schedules, with community input encouraged. Some stations have no program directors, only program committees.[12]

3.2 Grassroots Radio Model NOT bound byCommercial Interests

A grassroots community station can easily be recognized anywhere in the country. There is a freshness one will not hear elsewhere due largely to the variety of voices and connections the station has with its community. The non-commercial nature of these stations allow one's independence uncommon in media controlled by commercial or corporate interests.[13]

The Grassroots Radio Movement in the U.S, for instance, strive for an engaging, professional air sound without sacrificing individual programmer's eccentricities. Sometimes the performances of inexperienced programmers are rough at first, but "the beauty of the very idea of community radio comes across with each new voice you hear: people from the community, ordinary citizens, are on the radio". [14]

4.0 Radio and Public Opinion

The mass media play a crucial role in forming and reflecting public opinion; as has been highlighted earlier: the media communicate the world to individuals and reproduce the self-image of society.

4.1 Definition of Public Opinion

"Public opinion is like a ghost in an ancient bungalow. No one has seen it, but everyone fears it", as highlighted by Gregory Maha Adikaram, 2008.

Isabella M. Cooper, 1977 further reiterated that "Public Opinion is the consensus of private opinions...formed from information absorbed largely through hearing and sight".

Public Opinion is dynamic, not static. The media can affect public opinion. The recurrence of headlines, repetition of themes in print, on television or radio, or in memorable cartoons, whether based on accurate assessments or not, can swing public moods and perceptions (Stanley R. Sloan, 1995).

4.2 Phone – in Programmes

With the introduction of phone -in programmes in radio broadcasting, the public has now a space to voice out their opinons, in many cases, challenging social norms and political structures, thus bringing a positive change in the community.

Indeed, 'Phone – in programmes' have dramatically changed audience participation. Brian Hayes, a UK radio presenter, speaks of the democracy of radio and the way in which speech – based radio, in particular, '*thrives on the opinions*

of its audience' (Lord Holme of Cheltenham, 2000).

Peter Barnard, radio critic for The Times (BBC, 2 December, 2000), says the phone-in has revolutionised broadcasting. He says being very much in favour of them. They have "democratised the airwaves - and that can only be a good thing."

As Grassroots community radios flourish and thrive, they create more space for dialogue in the public's interest and as such, an effective public opinion is being manufactured.

A space for the public that highlight irregularities in the society has been made possible with the advent of community radios and it is seen as a panacea offering. It is a golden opportunity for communities and otherwise marginalized and disenchanted citizens to reclaim their right to participate in an energized and revitalized public sphere.

However, the majority of people are either fully excluded or have very limited access. Access to broadcasting by women, the disabled, poor, and other marginalized groups has become a major concern.

Activists fear that despite this change in the media world, it "would further widen the information gap and have-nots would be left out of the knowledge loop and community dialogue" (Kovacks, 2004).

Special attention should be given "to ways in which ordinary citizens can overcome the constaints on time and resources that often prevent

them from participating in these forums" (Karlberg, 1996, p.275).

5.0 Community Radio Viewed with Gender Lenses

Gender inequalities in participation in and access to media limit their potential to become inclusive, democratic spaces. Biases, stereotyping and unbalanced reporting from a gender perspective normalize and further entrench unequal gender power relations at the root of discriminatory attitudes and practices.[15]

Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in 1995 underscores the importance of media to the advancement of women.

The shared interests, social behavior, and communication attributes that pull women, men, and youth into clusters and sub-clusters of society are visible to community radio through a lens that is unmatched by mainstream media. This has been evidenced by many community radio stations that have introduced socially acceptable virtual platforms allowing women to publicly discuss and debate issues that are related to their unique experiences and needs. That specific opportunity, matched with a response to international standards, lends credibility to community radio, as documented in numerous cases of good practice. It also leads to ethical practice and facilitates support from legislators, for enabling policies,

legislative frameworks and fair regulatory practice[16].

By reaching out to the unreachable, community radio are able to foster social inclusion, inspire creative cultural expression, disseminate information and knowledge and enforce democratic values that invite equal participation in shaping public opinion.

5.1 Threats in respect to Community Radios

However, community radio in South Africa, especially those services that serve black communities (i e, the 'historically disadvantaged'), is largely under funded and struggling to survive. There is limited state funding for these services in the form of seed funding or funding for particular programming initiatives such as AIDS awareness, so that ongoing core funding is often problematic. Combine this situation with the problem of the difficulties of volunteering in a country without adequate welfare systems and extremely high unemployment in the most disadvantaged communities and the situation is often critical. Added to this, some stations are still operating on temporary one-year licences rather than the full four-year licences, making the generation of income and financial planning difficult.[17]

Consequently, many communityradios across the world die a natural death.

Some stations are able to cover running costs through advertising and sponsorship revenue, but often need start-up funding for training and equipment. Some begin with start-up grants (some from the government) and then run with a mix of advertising revenue and donor support. The government, if it does supply funding, tends to fund start-up equipment costs only. The South African government has recently made 18 million rand (US$2.1 million) available for programme production concerned with HIV/AIDS, women, children and old people.[18] At times, international donorsmake a significant contribution to the sector in some areas.

Moreover, community radios – the cheapest and most accessible of the electronic mass media – are ruled out in many countries because of legal restrictions.

Due to these threats that impede the unremitting existence of community radios, the voices might be rendered weak and powerless. Community radios might fall prey to the corporate and political interests if they are not strong enough and the whole idea behind community radios will be endangered.

The call for a genuine democratization of the public sphere can therefore no longer go unheeded. The task at hand is no doubt daunting.

5.2 Community Radio and Policy change

The community radio can be a powerful means in reinforcing and embedding responsible citizenship

and an informed electorate, only if debate is kept alive. Possibly, this would be promotion of democracy at the grass – roots in its truest form. The approach should be citizen-centered and the focus should be less from the mouthpieces of business, industry, and government. Only then would participatory democracy triumph.

First and foremost, however, we should recognise that the free speech and free press environment, including the structure of the media is crucial. Freedom of the press is indispensable to preserve any nation from the worst bondage. Consequently, it will be good, if not absolutely necessary; both for the government and the people; to hear all voices and judgements, which they can never do, but by giving freedom to the Press.

In-depth broadcasting forums on significant issues to increase political dialogue and bonding among diverse groups should be made accessible. This initiative may lead to more democratic dialogue and movement towards policy change. A responsible government should see to it that community radios allow the masses to have a say on social issues that affect their lives. It is primordial that every government should vote a fund for the management of community radios so that the latter do not undergo financial crisis to the point that they have to forgo their rationale behind their very existence.

The quality of programming also needs to be reviewed. An ongoing concern of viewers and listeners is that "although the volume of programming and the number of available channels are rapidly expanding, their quality has been steadily declined" (Kovacks, 2004), according to the media performance norms such as objectivity, balance among others.

In this respect, though diversity of approaches and beliefs is certainly desirable to provide a large array of choices on the market (and thus ensure multiple voices are heard), some common ground has got to be found to ensure freedom of speech that is respectful of all (ChristinaChan- Meetoo, 2006).[19]

The government should see to it that there is some sort of media watchdog to redress similar situations so that the public is subject to quality radio programmes.

In the same vein, a new type of media needs to be showcased where minorities are not silenced and that their concerns are brought to the attention of all.

The media may have to go far beyond urban centres to reach all of the constituencies that they are to serve. Reporters must cover rural and urban areas, know how the people feel, and share information of concern with all citizens. The media should aim for an informed citizenry and a greater participation of the grassroots that is essential to their growth, empowerment, and sustainability. These are laudable goals that journalists should strive for in their daily work. Relationships must be forged between the media and the citizens as equal participants in the entire process.

Likewise, community radios need to adopt

the'Gender Programming Guideline for Community Radio' which is a tool that may facilitate, among others: (a) communication and dialogue through community radio to address local problems affecting women, provide a public platform, increase knowledge-sharing, and good gender practice (b) promote inclusive participation, (c) strengthen volunteer participation in community radio programming and production; and (d) develop strategic planning goals by community radio based on standards that enhance women's participation regardless of age, literacy level, indigenous origin and religion.[20]

6.0 Conclusion

More than any other mass communication medium, radio is accessible, affordable and easily appropriated by groups of people whose demands have traditionally been ignored by the mainstream media (Lisa Vinebohm, 1993). In addition, radio is often described by NGO's as one of the most important vehicles for giving a voice to the disenfranchised (Ad Boeren, 1992).

Radio remains consequently the world's most ever-present, certainly the one with the widest reach and greatest penetration (Hendy, 2000).With the advent of community radios, the media landscape has greatly improved.

From social interaction and citizen empowerment, people can find the necessary resources to take control of their daily lives, give shape to their future, and transform the community as a whole.

Indeed, community radios can be the recipe for transforming communities addressing the need for social interaction and civic engagement as long as all people irrespective of gender, race, religion among others are given a voice. Appropriate policies need to be put in place to encourage this empowered media platform.

People deserve and need their own media, media that tells what is going on in the real world, not just what is being bought and sold.[21]

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