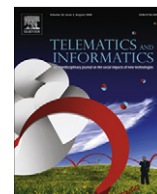


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## The digital turn in radio: A critique of institutional and organizational modeling of new radio practices and cultures

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### ABSTRACT

This article conducts a critical analysis of the use of Internet and mobile phone technologies by Capital radio in Malawi. It examines the uses of the Internet, social networking sites and mobile text-messaging by the radio station. Three central questions constitute the major concerns of the article: (a) To what extent do institutional and organizational contexts shape the uptake and uses of the Internet and mobile phones by radio journalists? (b) How do the uses of the Internet and mobile phones in turn influence the institutional cultures and organizational practices? (c) To what extent, if at all, does radio convergence reconfigure traditional radio to create new spaces that augment audience participation? The article argues that any meaningful critique of the technological affordances to the radio institution must critically engage with the complex questions of the dialectical relationship between technology, structure, and agency especially given the seductive myth of the so-called new media. It concludes that digital media technologies on radio are subject to organisational, institutional, and social shaping, and that questions about the emancipatory power of these technologies especially to audiences and citizens are often exaggerated because the question of power relations between actors or interests is often overlooked. The digital turn and the demotic turn on radio therefore must not be seen as synonymous with the participatory turn, especially in African countries where the regulation of corporate power in mass media is weak and where multiple forms of the digital divide that impede on consistent and meaningful use of digital media still persist.

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### 1. Introduction

The Internet and mobile phones are changing the face of radio across the world, especially in the technologically advanced countries from the North (see [Gordon, 2012](#); [Crisell, 2004](#); [Carlsson, 2006](#); [Buckly, 2000](#)). Theoretically speaking, radio is changing as a technology and these changes have also brought about changes on radio practices and cultures, especially in the production of news. Technological convergence on radio also seems to carry the promise of democratizing and opening up radio to audiences. For example, digital technologies like the Internet and mobile phones have arguably multiplied and pluralized radio spaces. Radio is now a virtual space, network space, mobile space while at the same time remaining a physical space when conceptualized in its studio format where citizens can participate in public debate. This pluralisation of spaces by new media technologies is subverting the old notion of radio as a unified and bounded medium-hence its greater accessibility through newer means that traverse the traditional methods of radio consumption. Radio as a space is now much more open, dispersed, through informal spaces of content production. Greater accessibility of radio to audiences therefore means that digitization and convergence can potentially make radio more participative within and

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across social divides. The multiple platforms of websites, social media, podcasts, online and mobile streaming should, in principle, make radio vertically and horizontally accessible within and across social classes.

While convergence of media and communication technologies has been largely a characteristic of late modern society in North America and Europe, Africa has a slightly different experience. Radio remains at the very best traditional for most people who still receive it through the simple mode of traditional broadcasts. However, the ever increasing convergence between telecommunications, broadcasting, and computing in the continent means that there are some interesting changes in the form, content, practices, and cultures on radio. In addition to normal broadband, the mobile phone is accelerating Africa's digital revolution in a way that enhances the availability, affordability, and accessibility of the digital media beyond the elite classes and elite institutions. For example, a significant minority of radio stations and their publics have mainstreamed these technologies into their cultures and practices.

In a recent study conducted in Southern Africa on radio convergence by Moyo (2011) covering four countries, it was more than evident that the use of the digital media by radio and its publics was reasonably high in the region. For example, in South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi, the uptake and use of the Internet and mobile phones by radio was, at least in principle, making the institution more accessible through the multiple digital platforms of webcasting, social media, podcasting, and mobile streaming. This study examines the uptake and use of digital media in a Malawian radio station. Malawi is considered a relatively poor country in the region. Access to the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) tends to follow the contours of economic disparities in the country and broadband Internet access therefore still remains below a million in a country with over 15 million people.

## 2. Focus of study: Capital radio in Malawi

This article seeks to conduct a critical analysis of the Internet and mobile phone uses by Capital radio in Malawi. Located in Blantyre's mosaic of telecommunication networks that anchor various Internet and mobile phone platforms, the station has a fairly good uptake of digital media technologies that merits academic interest and scrutiny. Capital Radio, a privately owned commercial radio station is Malawi's flagship for hard-hitting news and current affairs programming. This feat is in part traceable to its owner Laudin Osman who is a revered veteran radio journalist in the country. The article specifically examines the uses of the Internet, social networking sites and mobile text-messaging by the radio station. It also critiques the social affordances of these so-called 'technologies of freedom' in democratizing participation for radio publics (see Morriset, 2003). Three central questions underpin the enquiry of the article: (a) To what extent do institutional and organizational contexts shape the uptake and uses of the Internet and mobile phones by radio journalists? (b) How do the uses of the Internet and mobile phones in turn influence the institutional cultures and organizational practices? (c) To what extent, if at all, does radio convergence reconfigure traditional radio to create new spaces that augment audience participation?

It may be considered pondering on the obvious to examine institutional and organizational contexts of digital media uptake and use, but given the seductive myth behind the new digital media technologies there is certainly a need for direct engagement with the complex questions of technology, agency, and structure. To do this, the article recasts organizational and institutional contexts as structure within which journalistic agency in using the Internet and mobile phones can be understood. Premising my argument on the Giddensian theory of 'the duality of structure' (Giddens, 1981, p. 27), I contend that radio organizations are simultaneously material and symbolic features. Although organizations are by commonsense physical and concrete entities, they are also arguably symbolic products of discursive practices by agency that occupies them. Structures should be seen as not static because they are 'both the medium and the outcome of practices which constitute [them]' (Giddens, 1981, p. 29). To that end, the article also engages with the agency of radio journalists in the appropriation and deployment of the digital media in their practices and how those practices in turn impact organizational practices, institutional values, and the broadening of spaces for participation by audiences.

## 3. Key concepts: The digital turn and radio convergence

A few concepts that are deployed in this article need unpacking. First is the digital turn, and second, radio convergence, and finally, radio cultures and practices. The digital turn in radio refers to a paradigmatic shift from analogous to binary forms of representation. For example, digitization means that radio content has become compressible, storable, networkable, and fluid because it can now flow seamlessly across different media platforms. Indeed, these radical changes occasioned by digitization mean that apart from the traditional terrestrial radio, radio content can easily be distributed through a myriad of digital delivery platforms such as podcasts, webcasts, websites, and social media. Theoretically, radio content is no longer rigidly tied to the frequency waves, but now takes a liquid form which allows it malleability through different media delivery platforms such as the Internet and mobile phones.

Radio convergence is used here to refer to the coming together of formerly distinct content delivery platforms such as audio, video, and text to form a singular, albeit robust multivocal radio medium (see Kalodzy, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). Convergence is a useful concept to engage with the coming together of media technologies, practices and spaces. Apart from the merging of platforms at technological level, journalistic practices on radio can also be seen as implicitly reflective and expressive of the multiple forms of convergences like content convergence and audience convergence. Theoretically, the merging of telecommunications, broadcasting, and computing means that radio journalists and their audiences have to

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