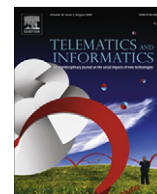


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'Pirate' radio, convergence and reception in Zimbabwe [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Using a qualitative research approach, this study examines the appropriation of digital technologies and their implications for the reception of the so-called 'pirate' radio in Zimbabwe. It specifically explores how the use of the Internet (and its associated digital technologies), including the mobile phone by two prominent 'underground' radio stations, *Short Wave (SW) Radio Africa* and *Voice of America's Studio 7*, beaming into Zimbabwe from the UK and the US, respectively, has impacted on the reception of their content. Drawing on reception theory, the paper highlights the ambiguities and complexities associated with the reception of (pirate) radio in the era of convergence in Africa. It argues that while both *SW Radio Africa* and *Studio 7's* multiple digital transmission strategies have broadened the range of options available for the reception of their content (albeit in disproportionate ways), traditional forms of reception remain in force. This is largely because of enduring questions of access to digital technologies (especially the Internet), and the lasting connections between traditional live radio and the oral traditions of local culture. These contextual factors sustain reception practices that differ markedly from the scenario in the economically developed world of the North where digital technologies have radically redefined radio reception practices. Similarly, the mobile phone has expanded options for the generation and reception of news content from the radio stations thus pointing to the fact that in Africa convergence can indeed assume unique forms, shaped by an intricate combination of local socio-economic and cultural factors.

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1. Introduction

Although new digital technologies are redefining communication everywhere, across Africa there is consensus among researchers that radio remains by far the most powerful tool of communication (Daloze and Verrier-Frechette, 2000; Moyo, 2010). Kalyango (2011, p. 119) observes that 'radio has been the dominant medium, as well as the most accessible source of public affairs information and news'. Similarly, van der Veur notes that radio has 'continued to grow in [...] significance as a prime medium for defending and promoting a wide range of [...] projects or programmes. Many of these [...] pursued in the name of democracy' (2007, p. 88–89). Developments in digital technologies have further expanded the range of options for radio programming and reception, with most scholars arguing that the newfound ability to listen to audio streamed over the Internet and the advent of podcasting, offering programming on demand have redefined radio consumption practices (Barker, 2009).

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Against this backdrop, the present study examines the reception of two prominent 'pirate' radio stations, *Short Wave (SW) Radio Africa* and *Voice of America's Studio 7*, in Zimbabwe's three major cities – Harare (the largest city and capital with an estimated population of 1 606 000), Bulawayo (the second largest city located about 439 kilometres southwest of Harare and with an estimated population of about 731 003) and Gweru (located in the midlands and has an estimated population of 146 073, making it the fifth largest city in the country). Although the country has endured a lengthy period of underinvestment as a result of a protracted political and economic crisis, these three cities have a relatively reliable telecommunications infrastructure that has enabled good Internet connectivity and mobile phone coverage. The growing demand for Internet services, in particular, has been shown by the rise in the number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and the mushrooming of cybercafés in almost every corner of these cities. For example, in 2004 Harare alone 'had about 30 Internet cafes and [by] 2008 they were estimated to have doubled [in] number' (Chari, 2009: 13).

Short Wave (SW) Radio Africa and Voice of America's Studio 7 respectively beam into Zimbabwe from the United States of America and the United Kingdom via Shortwave/Medium Wave¹, the Internet and mobile phones. Although these radio stations are widely known to be popular sources of news in Zimbabwe, the 'underground' nature of their operations as well as their consumption, makes it difficult to measure their audience ratings, especially through 'official' audience survey channels such as the Zimbabwe All Media and Products Survey (ZAMPS) ratings.

The radio stations emerged as direct responses to the state's monopoly in broadcasting as well as increased political and ideological control of programming in the country's broadcasting services (Moyo, 2010). Following the government's onslaught on the media and negative responses to calls for the liberalisation of the broadcast sector², a number of Zimbabwean journalists migrated to countries such as South Africa, the UK and the US where they joined Zimbabweans masses pushed into the diaspora by the deteriorating political and economic conditions. Keen to rekindle their careers, 'some of these journalists set up news websites, radio stations and even newspapers that served as alternative voices on Zimbabwe' (Moyo, 2010, p. 25). *SW Radio Africa* and *Studio 7* emerged from these developments and promptly positioned themselves as challenging government's monopoly over the country's communicative space (Batist, 2010).

Predictably, the radio stations have faced radical criticism from ZANU PF party leaders who have described them as 'unauthorised and [...] unlicensed' (Keith, 2007, p. 534) 'pirate' stations illegally broadcasting into Zimbabwe's media space 'with the intention of expressing discontent with the political status quo' (Wachanga, 2007, p. 10). However, contemporary developments show that the scope of these so-called pirate radio stations is now much wider and pervasive than is implied by 'authorisation' and the 'issuance of license'. Traditionally located outside the political jurisdiction of the countries into which they beam their signals, they are also variously known as 'clandestine', 'underground' or 'exiled' radio stations (see van der Veur, 2007; Wachanga, 2007; Moyo, 2010; Batist, 2010). Although all these terms can be used to describe both *SW Radio Africa* and *Studio 7*, the present study deploys the term 'pirate' radio, which has been widely used as an expression of contempt by ZANU PF, which has invested in technology to jam the stations' shortwave transmission signals consequently forcing them to devise ways of stifling the jamming efforts, including persistently shifting their shortwave frequencies.

The radio stations have also resorted to the use of a variety of alternative transmission strategies as ways of widening the reach of their content. In particular, they have leveraged their operations on new digital technologies such as the Internet and the mobile phone. They have also set up interactive news websites on which they post news bulletins as well as offer programming on demand through podcasting and live audio streaming. In addition, all news and current affairs programmes are archived and available for download from the stations' websites. The radio stations' websites have become one of the main avenues through which they interact and engage with their audiences. Similarly, contact with audiences is sought and triggered through social networking sites such as Facebook. It is this investment in the promise of new digital technologies that makes the radio stations a significant case study for the present research.³

The mobile phone has also assumed a central place in the operations of the radio stations. Apart from the fact that it does not require a lot of money or electricity (other than charging the battery every now and again), it is an ideal way to get around government censorship in Zimbabwe. Both stations see the short message service (SMS) as one of the most direct ways of building and informing their audience. The creative appropriation of the SMS technology to disseminate news headlines to subscribers scattered across the globe (free of charge), is seen as strategic in the operations of both stations. Similarly, much of the radio stations' newsgathering is mediated through the mobile phone.

Although the mobile phone business is growing in Zimbabwe⁴, as it is doing across Africa, local factors are contributing to the increase in its reach and use (Mabweazara, 2011). For example, the collapsed landline network and limited access to public phones makes the technology a useful communication tool. A further advantage with the mobile phone is that even communities in very remote areas have access to the technology, although they will not be able to use it to call and send out messages themselves, they still can receive them (Batist, 2010; Mabweazara, 2011).

¹ *SW Radio Africa* broadcasts 2 h a day between 6 and 8 pm on Shortwave and *Studio 7* broadcasts live between 7 and 8:30 pm on Shortwave and Medium Wave.

² Although a coalition government between the main opposition political party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and the Zimbabwe African National Union: Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) came into place in February 2009, the ZANU PF led government prior to this arrangement effected most of the unsettling changes to the country's media landscape. Thus, the term 'government' in this study is used to refer to the ZANU PF dispensation.

³ By a wide margin, these radio stations have the most advanced radio production technologies when compared to the dominant state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation's four radio stations that are still heavily reliant on out-dated analogue production facilities.

⁴ The rise in the number of mobile phone users is partly reflected in the rapid growth of its penetration rate in recent years. For instance, between February 2009 and November 2011, the penetration rate rose sharply from 14 percent to 59 percent (NewsDay, November 25, 2011).

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