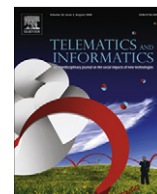




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“Communities of strangerhoods?": Internet, mobile phones and the changing nature of radio cultures in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the role of new media technologies in transforming radio practices in South Africa in terms of institutional cultures and audience engagement. With emphasis on the Internet and mobile phones, the paper focuses on three radio stations – *Safm*, *Talk Radio 702*, and *Bush Radio*. Drawing on theories of public spheres and theories of publics, the paper argues that ICTs have expanded communicative radio spaces and transformed the nature of audience engagement. Through these expanded spaces, radio stations increasingly view their listeners as publics rather than merely audiences, meaning that listeners now produce, circulate and share information in ways that allow them to organise themselves into a public around radio texts. While the argument in this paper has acknowledged the positive role of ICTs in expanding discursive spaces and transforming radio publics, realities of the digital divide in South Africa are not ignored.

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1. Introduction

This article analyses the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in transforming radio cultures in South Africa. By ‘radio cultures’ we refer to both institutional changes within the radio stations as well as new forms of audience engagement. With a focus on the Internet and mobile phones, the paper examines three radio stations in South Africa that are representative of the three-tier system of broadcasting – *Safm*, a public service radio station, *Talk Radio 702*, a commercial station and *Bush Radio*, a community station. We focus on the three tiers of broadcasting to illustrate trends in transformation of radio cultures across all broadcasting systems. This, we hope, will provide us with more meaningful findings than had we focused on only one type of radio station.

The paper addresses the following research question: How have new media technologies transformed radio cultures in South Africa? Drawing on theories of public spheres and theories of publics, the paper makes two main arguments. First, although the radio medium has always encouraged deliberation and participation through phone-in programmes and studio audiences, we argue that ICTs have changed the nature of this participation by expanding the discursive spaces and drawing audiences closer to production and the station’s institutional processes. Second, we argue that new media technologies have enabled the construction of new publics in radio, allowing for an engagement with audiences as discursive ‘fields’ or spaces. We borrow the idea of ‘publics’ from Michael Warner (2002, p. 416) who argues that the term has to be understood as mediated by cultural forms and that they [publics] ‘do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them’. We therefore engage with the kinds of new publics that have emerged from radio’s collision with new media, and the subsequent meanings such new formations have created.

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Structurally, we begin the paper by mapping out scholarship on ICTs' impact on radio in order to trace, engage with and contest ideas already in circulation. We then provide a brief contextual history of radio in South Africa, before engaging with the two main theoretical considerations underpinning this article: public sphere and participation; and radio, publics and audiences. Finally we explore our findings in order to determine how new media technologies have transformed radio cultures in South Africa.

2. Radio and its 'new meanings': A review of the literature

Radio studies are experiencing a resurgence of interest among scholars due to the growth of new digital technologies. A great deal of this research, with a focus mainly on public service and commercial broadcasting, examines how digital technologies are reconfiguring radio in terms of access and participation (e.g. Tacchi, 2000; Van Selm, 2000).

Within this growing literature, there are also nascent studies that examine the impact of ICTs on community radio (see Jankowski and Prehn, 2002; Rennie, 2007). These studies focus on the changing and fluid nature of community radio in the interconnected multi-media environment. This research agenda is generating new theoretical angles by locating community radio studies within concepts of imagined community, translocalisms and networked audiences (Carpentier, 2007). Therefore, as Carpentier (2007) notes, the traditional essentialist approaches to community radio, which still locate communities as nationally embedded, are no longer adequate. For instance, Carpentier (2007) provides an example of RadioSwap, a community radio project in Belgium, which brings together six Belgium community radio stations that share and exchange programmes via the Internet and create links with transnational media and civil society organizations.

This emerging literature on radio and ICTs, however, is mainly confined to Western scholarship. In Africa, scholarly debates on radio and ICTs are scarce. Existing research, most of it commissioned by donors and policy organisations (e.g. AMARC, 2008; Panos, 2008) is often framed within administrative and evaluative approaches. This research mainly focuses on how radio stations, specifically community radio stations, are using the Internet to find answers to listeners' questions, translate them to local languages, and encourage discussion and learning around issues of community interest (e.g. Girard et al., 2008). The few academic studies on the subject (e.g. Pringle and David, 2002; Dralega, 2008) are situated in the broader Internet for development literature and highlight how Community Multimedia Centres are combining radio and the Internet for community development.

While generally there is growing literature on radio in Africa, most of it confines the reading of radio within an instrumental narrative that privileges issues of development and democracy (e.g. Myers, 2000; Teer-Tomaselli, 2001; Kivikuru, 2006). This view is supported by Algan (2005, p.88) who states that 'people in developing countries use radio in various ways other than for development, which is usually the focus of research when radio is studied in an underdeveloped area'. Radio in Africa locates itself centrally within the continent's communication industries. Given its availability, affordability and accessibility, it remains the most popular medium of acquiring information and entertainment. Despite its dynamism, the mundane, popular and 'everyday' uses of radio by citizens have not been rigorously investigated. However, a small but steady body of work is emerging that addresses the social and cultural significance of radio in everyday life (Spitulnik, 2000; Fardon and Graham, 2000; Ligaga, 2008; Gunner et al., 2011). This present research locates itself within this broad readings of radio. While, as stated earlier, research in the area of radio and ICTs has broadly focused on how these technologies are introducing new participatory cultures in radio, this present study adds a new dimension – analysing how radio stations, through ICTs, construct their audiences. In particular, this article focuses on use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter for audience and its implications for expanding discursive and deliberation spaces.

Our approach follows the 'cultural studies' turn to studying radio and thus contributes to emerging research that variously read radio within notions of 'public sphere' (e.g. Squire, 2000; Bosch, 2011), 'publics' (e.g. Easton, 2005; Fitzgerald and Housley, 2007); 'popular culture' (e.g. Ligaga, 2008; Bosch, 2011 and Mudhai, 2011) and 'rhizome' (Bosch, 2003)). By taking this approach, we hope to disrupt the preoccupation of studying radio in Africa within normative perspectives.

3. Contextualising SAFM, Radio 702 and Bush Radio

When apartheid ended in the early 1990s, South Africa adopted a diverse broadcasting system comprising three tiers – public, commercial and community broadcasting (Mtinde, 2003). *SAfm* is a national public service radio station operating within the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). It is one of the 18 public radio stations owned by the national broadcaster. The radio station, previously known as Radio South Africa in pre and apartheid South Africa¹, became known as *SAfm* in 1995 at the dawn of political independence². The radio station has the biggest radio footprint in South Africa with 120 transmitters and it can be picked up almost anywhere in the country. *SAfm* programming comprises a blend of talk radio, commentary, magazine, music, youth and children programmes. Its leading programmes are *AM Live*, *Afternoon Talk* and *After 8 Debate*.

Talk Radio 702 is a commercial FM talk radio station that was established in 1980 and started as 'Channel 702 at the height of apartheid era in June 1980 (Wigston, 1987). The radio station played a significant role during the last years of apartheid by

¹ Apartheid was introduced as an official policy after the 1948 election which was won by Daniel Francois Malan, known as the architect of apartheid.

² www.safm.co.za.

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