Review Essay

Communicating for Social Change, Empowerment & Human Rights in Africa

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Empowerment Radio: Voices Building a Community, by Birgitte Jallov. Gudhjem, Denmark: Empowerhouse, 2012, (234 pp).

Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities, edited by Liz Gunner, Dina Ligaga and Dumisani Moyo. Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2011, (320 pp).

Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities, edited by Liz Gunner, Dina Ligaga and Dumisani Moyo, and Brigitte Jallov's book *Empow-*

erment Radio provides a contextual "insider's perspective" on the unique blend of radio, cultural and participatory communication strategies for social change. Together, these two recent works that deal with radio in Africa provide the most comprehensive view on the subject published in English since the appearance of the edited collection on African broadcast cultures by Fardon and Furniss in 2000.

Built mainly on qualitative empirical evidence, *Radio in Africa* is a compilation of essays that is preoccupied with radio in everyday life and in the socio-political affairs of several African countries. It examines diverse radio formats and programs that range from radio theatre and talk-shows, to religious programs and public-service announcements in their socio-cultural contexts. *Radio in Africa* is grounded in scholarly research evidence and theories. Contrastingly, *Empowerment Radio* is more anecdotal and draws upon the author's work experience in community radio in Africa, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Empowerment Radio provides a contextual "insider's perspective" on the unique blend of radio, cultural and participatory communication strategies for social change. In this blending, the author highlights several instances in which the communities in question harnessed community radio stations for social change and empowerment of marginalized groups. Among the cited cases are Radio Muthiyana in Maputo, Mozambique and 101.7 Mama FM in Uganda. Both radio stations are run by women for women's empowerment. Through their diverse educative programs, these radio stations address the plight of under-privileged women and ensure that these women's voices are heard in the political stream. A 2008 impact assessment shows that Mama FM has been "successful in mobilising its audiences against domestic violence and to take up positions of leadership in the local council system among others" (Judith, 2008: 3).

Jallov's book not only highlights the successful community radio stations and 'what works best' in the operation of these stations for social change, book also examines 'what did not work' and the challenges that regularly confront community radio stations. These challenges include poor planning, absence of funds and the poor integration of the community's needs into the programming. In sum, Jallov's book can be seen as a compilation of 'best practices' for running community radio for social change in Africa.

Empowerment Radio serves as a complementary practical guide to *Radio in Africa*, which critically assesses socio-political and cultural functions of radio in Africa. Some of the community radio stations cited by Jallov as models – such as Radio Okapi in Congo – are among the radio stations empirically and critically scrutinized in *Radio in Africa.* As an edited collection of essays that explores the interwoven relationship between communication and social change, *Radio in Africa* draws on theoretical perspectives that range from Jurgen Habermas' public sphere to Paulo Freire's dialogic communication approach and Nancy Fraser's subaltern counterpublics in its analyses.

Radio in Africa is divided into three major sections. The four essays that constitute the first section, "Radio, Popular Democracy and New Publics," discuss the relationship between public discourses and radio. Though not explicitly articulated in each of these essays, Habermas' conceptual frameworks of public sphere and communicative actions underpin the analyses. The first essay, by Wisdom Tettey, conceptualizes radio as a "genre of participatory media" that promotes civic engagement and participation in Ghana. What makes radio distinctive in this case is the opportunity that it offers citizens, in particular marginalized groups, and "members of civil society to 'talk back' to the large institutions of public life" (Howley, 2010: 73). The case study of clandestine a radio station in Zimbabwe, which is the focus of the third essay in this section, contextualizes this further. The author analyzes the strategies of the Short Wave

Radio Africa (SWRA), a clandestine radio station based in London, and how it gave voices to exiled Zimbabweans and political activists.

The last essay in this section underscores the differential power relation in the multiple public spheres that radio fostered. To illustrate this, Dorothea Schulz analyzes the constellation of discursive frameworks that were linked to differential power relations between males and females in Islamic radio sermons in Mali. In the essay, she examines the emergence of female preachers (*hadjas*) on the radio and the tension this generates in the community. Implicit in her analysis is the "dissonant valuation of the authority" (p. 65) and the patriarchal approach in which communication messages were processed, interpreted and renegotiated in the sacred public space of religiosity.

Schulz's essay, alongside that by Maria Frahm-Arp in the book's third section, opens a new frontier in the scholarship on media and religion in Africa. Despite the popularity of religious programs on radio and television in many African countries, relatively little scholarship interest has been shown in the new forms of religious imagery and representation in public imagination. Hopefully, both Schulz's and Frahm-Arp's essays will serve as springboards for more scholarly enquiries into the use of mass media for the dissemination of religious sermons in the African context.

Radio's "thick cultural expressions" are the central preoccupation of the collection's second section: "The Cultures of Radio: Languages of the Everyday." The six essays in this section examine the intertwined history of everyday culture, politics and radio. In this respect, the editors assemble essays which explore that entanglement of radio in everyday cultural activities, identity formation, and normalization of certain political norms in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. Specifically, Sekibakiba Lekgoathi's essay, "Bantustan Identity, Censorship and Subversion on Northern Sotho Radio under Apartheid, 1960s-80s", shows how the apartheid government attempted to use the South African Broadcasting Corporation's Ra-

dio Bantu as a propaganda tool for the reinforcement of "ethnic separatism in apartheid South Africa" (p.118). Lekgoathi explores how the government 'normalized' its censorship techniques of counter-perspectives on Radio Bantu through its editorial control of program contents and selective hiring practice. What is most interesting is the black radio hosts' use of cultural idioms and proverbs to bypass the government's censorship mechanism. These cultural idioms and proverbs "gave them a freedom of interpretation and usage that censors could never completely control" (p.126). More so, cultural idioms and proverbial talk allowed them to undermine the government's propaganda agenda of "ethnic separatism" and control.

In addition to Lekgoathi's essay, contributions by Liz Gunner and Dina Ligaga also stand out in this section. Gunner and Ligaga write on indigenous radio drama in oppressive environments (South Africa and Kenya, respectively). Both demonstrate the multivocality of indigenous languages and folklore in the evolution of a culture of resistance, and renegotiation of collective social memory within the web of social relations of power and linguistic diversity (Ngugi, 1986; West & Fair, 1993). Overall, this section provides a valuable insight into the intertwined relationship between the indigenous oral culture and radio in colonial and postcolonial African countries. In particular, it shows the prevalence and fluidity of indigenous language forms in social and advocacy communication on radio.

Furthermore, the authors affirm the vitality of traditional genres such as proverbs and folktales in the socio-cultural knowledge transfer and political process. In this context, radio serves as "a forum of self-referential discourse in which reflexive public subjectivity laid a foundation" (Coleman & Ross, 2010: 30) for the formation of public opinion and counter-hegemonic discourse. As Jallov contends in her book, radio's versatility and adaptability to the traditional genre makes it a vital community voice and a strategic transmitter of cultural heritage in Africa. Being the eye, ear and voice of common people, it speaks in "dialects and languages" that both the subaltern

and dominant groups understand (Gilberds & Myers, 2012). Thus, it is not only a platform of creative expression; it is also the heartbeat of civic and communal life. No wonder Marshall McLuhan called it the extension of people's "central nervous systems that is matched only by human speech itself" (2009:46).

Against this background, the collection's last section focuses on radio and national conversation. Stephanie Wolters starts this section with her essay, which explores the role of Radio Okapi in the peace-building process in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). She discusses the operation of Radio Okapi and its larger contribution to the peace process that saw the "formation of a transitional and a new constitution," following the assassination of President Laurent Kabila in 2001. While Radio Okapi's contributions to the peace process are assessed and given positive review, Wolters also discusses the volatile working environment in which Congolese journalists operate. She underscores this fact with reference to the assassination of two of Radio Okapi's journalists.

Apart from the threat to their lives, journalists also have to contend with the political inference in their work. This does raise the question of editorial independence, which has implications for the quality and the standard of journalism in the long term. These challenges are also echoed in David Smith's essay, which focuses on radio in the peace building process in Somalia. Although Wolters and Smith both provide descriptive accounts of their experiences in Congo and Somalia, respectively they also provide rich resources for scholars working in this emerging subfield of peace journalism. In view of the complexity of the practical side of peace journalism that they explore, both essays would be good materials for seminar discussion in courses on peace journalism, and media and conflict.

Overall, *Empowerment Radio* and *Radio in Africa* are excellent additions to the scholarship on African media culture and development communication. They attest to why radio still remains the most significant communication platform in Africa's diverse socio-

cultural milieu and political landscape. Both books are highly rec-
ommended for anyone with an interest in African media studies and
development communication.

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