

VOICE + MATTER

COMMUNICATION, DEVELOPMENT AND THE CULTURAL RETURN

Oscar Hemer & Thomas Tufte (eds.)

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Africa's Voices Versus Big Data?

The Value of Citizen Engagement through Interactive Radio

Sharath Srinivasan & Claudia Abreu Lopes

Abstract

In this chapter, we reflect on opportunities to expand citizen engagement in developing world contexts using digital technologies and interactive broadcast media. Taking seriously the need for a reality check that gives emphasis to valuing human voice, to actual social realities and to technologies in use, we guard against the latest technological fetishes and the troubling big data bandwagon. Instead, we examine how and why African audiences engage in growing numbers in local radio shows through mobile phones. We draw on insights from a two-year research project, *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa* (PiMA), and the related applied research pilot, *Africa's Voices*, which worked with local radio stations in eight Sub-Saharan African countries. We examine the social and political significance of new opportunities for voice, debate and claim-making in the mediated public sphere that interactive broadcast media enables, and how an approach to citizen engagement that values pluralism and inclusivity and is not extractive, might better seize opportunities that interactive broadcast offers. The chapter critically reappraises what kinds of engagement count in communication for development, what kinds of 'publics' audiences in interactive shows constitute and how we should understand the power of these 'audience-publics'.

Keywords: interactive media, broadcasting, mobile telephony, citizen engagement, public sphere, big data

The danger with the current fetishist fascination with big data for development is that it is yet another technologically determined trip that obscures what matters for engaging citizen voice in inclusive, dignified and valuable ways. The data obsession creates a data hunger that can unquestioningly reinforce inequalities of access and engagement in search of large and fast flowing hosepipes of digital code. It also produces a data driven logic of knowledge production that disembodies voice from human context and content. We must get real about citizen engagement, focusing on the actual social spaces of communication, discussion, information exchange and mediation that people value. To be sure, that reality is fast-changing, but never as fast as a myopic focus on shiny new technological advancement might delude us into thinking. Starting from a more realistic foundation of actual lives lived, the remarkable affordances of digital communications for fostering new opportunities for strengthening citizen engagement and building social knowledge can be more carefully assessed.

This chapter reflects on opportunities to expand citizen engagement within governance and development processes in Africa using new communication technologies and interactive broadcast media. We examine how and why African audiences engage in radio shows through mobile phones, guided by insights from a two-year research project *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa* (PIMA)¹, funded by the UK Department for International Development and Economic and Social Research Council and the related applied research pilot, *Africa's Voices*, which worked with local radio stations in eight Sub-Saharan African countries. Both projects investigated the social and political significance of new opportunities for voice, debate and claim-making in the mediated public realm, created by the intersection of prodigious growth in mobile telephony access and the burgeoning broadcast media landscape.

Drawing especially upon evidence we gathered through household surveys and behavioural data, this chapter explores the ways in which people engage in interactive shows by calling or texting, whose voices populate these shows, why audiences contribute to these discussions and what conditions facilitate participation. We reflect on what kinds of engagement count in communication for development, what kinds of 'publics' audiences in interactive shows constitute and how we should understand the power of these 'audience-publics'. On a more applied level, this chapter also discusses the challenges of designing technology-dependent programmatic interventions to collect spontaneous voices in interactive radio shows, particularly the balance between the integrity of individual voices and aggregation; the compromise between anonymity and recognition; and the interplay between structured technology-led processes, and open spaces for voice and discussion anchored in their social contexts. Pivoting our argument on the vital importance of valuing voices in the face of the depersonalising and deterministic qualities of new technological affordances, we turn our attention to how innovation and method should come after, and not precede, modes of engagement that are grounded in real social realities and actual human living.

Valuing voices

In *Why Voice Matters* (Couldry 2010), a searing critique of how neoliberal techniques of governance stifle socio-political life, the media and social theorist Nick Couldry draws our attention to how new opportunities for voice – enabled by increasingly sophisticated and accessible media and communications ecologies – are in themselves not enough to bring about progressive social change that might stem and reverse the dominant tide. How we *value* voices matters, whether in our own societies or as actors interested in supporting progressive social change in other societies. Couldry elaborates some key elements of how voices can be better put to work in processes of social cooperation, which he connects to Pierre Rosanvallon's search for "an authentic rediscovery of ordinary politics" (quoted in Couldry 2010: 145).

Whether seen through the frame of social cooperation or that of 'ordinary politics' what is at stake is not citizen engagement for, or as a means directed towards, another valued end (*for* development, *for* governance, *for* democracy etc), but rather for itself, as a valued end and as a vital constitutive property of a vibrant, inclusive and empowered body politic. Voices enabled, shared, heard, contested, concurred are arguably at the heart of what makes us political beings who can create a common world between us. Therein lies the power – contingent, unpredictable, fleeting and always capable of new beginnings – that humans coming together in shared social and public spaces are capable of, and with which greatness is made possible. Such greatness is not measured by specific achievements, but by the very fact of creating something bigger than us that may outlive us.

The value of voice as a process of organising human experience through interconnected narratives lies in the emergence of social and political realities where people can be heard and influence decisions that affect their lives. That said, institutions and even the physical world matter, for they enable and constrain not only the possibilities for voice but also the manner in which they are valued.

It is by turning our attention to practical opportunities for valuing voices that Couldry suggests we can begin to critically reassess how we think about citizen engagement within development and governance work. Much depends on taking a socially situated approach to the contexts in which voice already matters in how people engage with each other, and then amplifying and extending these opportunities to new contexts where they can be valued in innovative and more powerful ways. We should not treat voices as data points, as dominant neoliberal logics of economic and social ordering do, there to be farmed and harvested and brought into mechanised forms of knowledge production. We should give value to what sustains voices, including acts of greeting and communicative gestures, by which people “recognise each other as included in the discussion, especially those with whom they differ in opinion, interest or social location” (Iris Marion Young, quoted in Couldry 2010: 145). We must foster acts of exchange and listening and new spaces of narrative formation where citizens do not merely give or receive information but are motivated to empathise, understand and form active judgments. We should not isolate spaces for engagement but rather see them as situated within wider acts of retelling, where interpretation recurs and is refreshed and citizens make sense in new ways. And we should be attentive to the meaning that exercising voice holds for individuals as social agents within a social reality that they care about, above all by giving due attention to forms of recognition that value voices. It is these concerns that have motivated reflections on the research discussed in this chapter, in the context of interactive media in Africa.

Interactive media in Africa: an opportunity

The uptake of new information and communication technologies (ICT) has transformed the media landscape in Africa. Hybrid and convergent media infrastructures combining new ICT (mobile phones, social media) with traditional print and broadcast media are enabling journalists as well as audiences to generate content in new ways, for listeners/viewers to participate in talk shows and audience polls, and for a range of third party actors to ‘intervene’ to create interactive programmes on specific issues. More than previously was the case, media institutions have come to be seen as “participatory organisations” (Willems 2013) where audience opinions might be communicated to and amplified by the media reaching other citizens, governments, companies, and international actors.

Despite growth in television and, from a low base, rapidly rising internet penetration and use of social media, radio remains the dominant media channel across the continent in part due to its geographic reach, the low-cost of equipment and the versatility to operate with different sources of energy. Following different degrees of media liberalisation in many countries in the 1990s, the African radioscapes has progressively become richer and more diverse. Local language broadcast, commercial, community and religious broadcasters, and internet-based broadcasting have served to further extend radio’s importance. It is a medium that also resonates with and augments dominant oral cultural practices in many African societies. On the heels of radio’s efflorescence, mobile phone penetration has also rapidly risen across the African continent. In 2014, Africa was the fastest growing mobile market in the world and was reaching close to 70 per cent of the adult population with mobile subscriptions (International Telecommunications Union 2014).

Although there has long been elements of audience participation in broadcast – ranging from letters, landline calls and studio guests to vox pop recordings and out of studio broadcasts – the popularity of interactive radio shows arises out of a relatively recent revolution in media and communications, with much work yet to be done to assess its potential for expanding opportunities for voice, practices of citizenship, and discursive publics. New public spaces of discussion are being created with diverse forms, characterised by their wide spatial reach, communicative immediacy and their higher density of interactions. Changes in the production of popular culture, the generation of news, and the social life of meeting and greeting are some of these manifestations alongside debates on social issues, politics and development (Wasserman 2011). The latter exhibits interesting potentialities, such as the possibility of exposing facts, ideas and beliefs to public scrutiny and allowing for them to be reinforced or contested by citizens holding similar or different worldviews. It is this potentiality that the collaborative research project, *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa* and its sister applied pilot, *Africa’s Voices*, sought to interrogate.

A reality check:

From unique voices to the spectre of 'big data' in a digital age

Sitting on plastic chairs outside the office of Breeze FM – a private FM radio station broadcasting from Chipata, the slow-paced regional capital of Zambia's Eastern Province – a casual conversation we are having with a journalist and production hand is interrupted by the station's founder and owner, Mike Daka. "You want to talk to people here about the importance of the radio station in their lives? Come in and meet this man." Daka is one of Zambia's media pioneers of recent decades. He came back to his hometown and founded Breeze FM in 2002, giving up senior official positions and a career in national broadcasting in the capital Lusaka to seize an opportunity to shape Zambia's new liberalised media landscape. Breeze FM reaches an ever-expanding regional population in local languages as well as English, combining news, music and social shows with discussion programmes. Third parties such as government departments and NGOs sponsor some shows, whereas the station's programmes team creates others. Many shows take calls and SMS, in addition to older methods for capturing audience voices such as vox pops, letters and studio guests.

We step into the station building and are introduced to an elderly man, Dackson Nywingwe, by a station presenter, Grayson Peter Mwale, famous locally as 'Gogo' (grandfather) Breeze. We sit down and talk a little, through Grayson as our interpreter. Dackson came to Chipata that day from his village a good hour's travel away. He was born in 1915 and had led a long life with stories he wanted to share on Radio Breeze. Broadcasting in the local language, Breeze FM was a love of his, especially the interactive shows with Gogo Breeze. People rang up, texted in, and sent letters, sharing concerns and discussing how their culture had advice to give on everyday life. Live on radio Breeze, Dackson continued, "a lot of wrongs have been announced, and most people have known them. And it's up to those perpetuating these wrongs to learn and stop these wrongs. Before these radio programmes, during the one party state," he added, "more people were in the dark". Later that day, at the end of his radio interview with Gogo Breeze, full of reflections from his long life, he was asked for any last words. He ended the interview by announcing that he was looking for a new partner. He was 98, with 16 children, and going strong!

Local radio stations like Breeze FM are generating new public spaces for discussion, debate and voice that matter to Africans. Dackson Nywingwe visited the studio, but was inspired by the many others who call and text in. In a growing number of African countries, interactive radio shows are amplifying African voices. Listeners relate to these new expanded spaces of social meaning and belonging because they connect with them in relevant ways.

Yet the dominant, but by no means only, tendency in thinking about the use of ICT in citizen engagement has been to focus on technological innovation. The internet, social media, 3G-based mobile innovations etcetera are all exciting and certainly point to dynamic and fast changing futures, notably in growing urban centres and among

younger generations. However, citizen engagement endeavours focused on African societies writ large, especially those directed at people whose voices are least heard and often most in need of delivery of public goods, must start with communication technologies that are dominant in the here and now.

There is another, more recent, dimension to this that speaks to new potential digital divides. The recent ‘data revolution’ and the turn to ‘big data’ frameworks are heralding new possibilities of analysis and action on grand scales. Yet ‘big data’ approaches that rely on clustering of individual moments of expression into large and often abstract categories risk overshadowing and silencing the diversity and uniqueness of voices, especially the hardest to hear. The same information and communication technologies that enable voices might also undermine them in other ways. Those excited by big data are hungry for data that flows with volume, velocity and variety, with an inherent bias to already digitally encoded data flows, such as from internet and mobile data applications. Analogue and other non-digital voices, such as those on local radio shows, are invariably devalued. Big data driven approaches that search primarily for general patterns are also incompatible with the uniqueness of voices and local meanings.

The big data revolution also creates new socio-political imbalances at a global scale, by favouring those at the top of the ‘data pyramid’ who have access to data and thus the production of knowledge at the expense of other groups in society. These new digitally capable actors are centralised, with high value technological assets at their disposal, and are becoming privileged in understanding and organising society and thus exercising power. The instantaneous and seemingly unmediated nature of digital communications mistakenly distract us from the material infrastructure, capital investment and institutional control that make digital communications and digital publics possible. The same enabling digital technologies for citizen engagement can, in the control of powerful actors – from national security agencies to telecommunications and Internet giants – be directed at purposes and logics that are quite at odds with the political agency and power of citizens coming together.

A commitment to valuing voices must adjust to technology and big data developments while guarding against these undermining tendencies in a digital age. This involves, in part, gathering harder to reach voices: because they matter to inclusive citizen engagement. It also involves gathering harder to analyse data, such as voices in local languages, with multi-formats (audio, text), framed in real interpersonal and social dynamics, whose meanings are linked to local contexts. An innovative approach to voice implies thinking about new ways of analysing these more complex voices, often combining human knowledge of encoded meanings and subjectivities with computational approaches that help manage large volumes of complex data. And finally, there needs to be an ethical commitment away from extracting and ‘scraping’ data to collaborating with locally meaningful spaces for ‘voice’. In the research discussed in this chapter, these are aspects of working with interactive radio shows that are central to the *Africa’s Voices* applied project.

Audiences, listenership and participation in interactive shows

Another reality check that our research has pointed to, is how the social dimensions of citizen engagement matter greatly, in addition to the more common concerns of access to communications technologies. Our research underscores how interactive shows in radio stations are social spaces influenced by cultural and social norms and also by material constraints that shape patterns of listenership and participation (by which we mean the fact of interactive engagement by texting in or calling in) of audiences. Mobile phone use and radio listenership are relatively widespread in many African countries, and thus the basic ingredients for interactive broadcasts are becoming commonplace. This is only likely to strengthen as mobile phone penetration and use extends and radio remains the most prevalent and popular media. However, as socially constituted spaces, interactive shows are expected to reflect society in many ways, such as being skewed towards those with more education and resources: typically men. The diversity of voices heard on radio is also influenced by media habits.

Participation in interactive shows is shaped by gender roles and social norms that dictate who should speak on the radio. As some ethnic or social groups are more politically active, and confident of their place in social and public life, their voice may dominate certain types of programmes (such as those on public affairs). However, our research has showed that the design of shows and the way that presenters invite and manage participation also plays a crucial role on the level and quality of audience engagement. When audiences perceive shows as interesting and presenters invite opinions from different groups and voice their diverse opinions, these spaces become more inclusive. Recognising individual opinions and encouraging meaningful discussions that matter for all audiences are important ingredients for engagement.

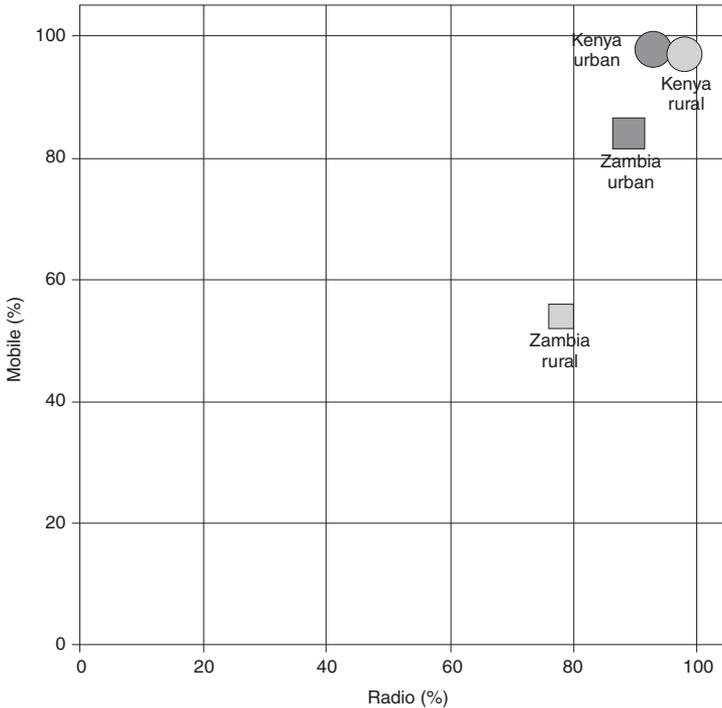
The questions of whose voices populate interactive shows, why audiences participate in radio discussions, what conditions facilitate participation and the significance of interactive shows for public debate and accountability processes were investigated in the research project *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa* (PiMA). Based on an eclectic methodological approach, PiMA advanced knowledge about interactive radio shows in Kenya and Zambia, particularly the media context, their political significance, their impact, social perceptions, and characteristics of participants. The research conducted for PiMA was enriched with insights from the applied pilot project *Africa's Voices*.²

The PiMA research project included a representative household survey of individuals of voting age (18 and over) in four constituencies in Kenya and in Zambia in 2013.³ In Kenya, the surveys were conducted in Ruaraka: a peri-urban constituency in the capital city Nairobi, with mixed demographics including one of the city's major slums; and Seme: a rural constituency settled around Lake Victoria in a largely fisher-agricultural community near the western city of Kisumu. In Zambia, the surveys were conducted in Mandevu: an urban constituency in the capital city Lusaka with a mixed demographic including some of the city's major slum settlements; and Chipangali: a rural constituency in the country's largely agricultural Eastern Province. The four

samples were designed as representative cross-sections of all households in those constituencies and were selected based on the possibility of capturing variation in terms of socio-economic factors, political context and media landscape. The household survey was supplemented with behavioural data of audience interaction using SMS from a radio station in one of the Kenyan constituencies (Radio NamLolwe in Kisumu).⁴

The high penetration and usage of both radio and mobile phones, especially in Kenya, offers supportive conditions for audience participation in radio shows, both in rural and urban areas (Figure 1). In Kenya, the levels of radio listenership and access to mobile phones is very high for both genders, with 99.4 per cent of men and 97.5 per cent of women listening to radio, and 99.4 per cent of men and 95.5 per cent of women using a mobile phone (the gender difference is not statistically significant). In Zambia, radio listenership is higher in the urban sample (89.7 per cent in the urban sample and 77.6 per cent in the rural sample) and among men (87.9 per cent of men and 77.6 per cent of women listen to the radio). Similarly, in Zambia, mobile phone penetration is significantly higher in the urban sample (84 per cent in the urban sample and 54.2 per cent in the rural sample) and among men (74.9 per cent of men and 62.8 per cent of women use a mobile phone).

Figure 1. Radio and mobile phone penetration in Kenya and Zambia rural and urban constituencies, 2013 (per cent)



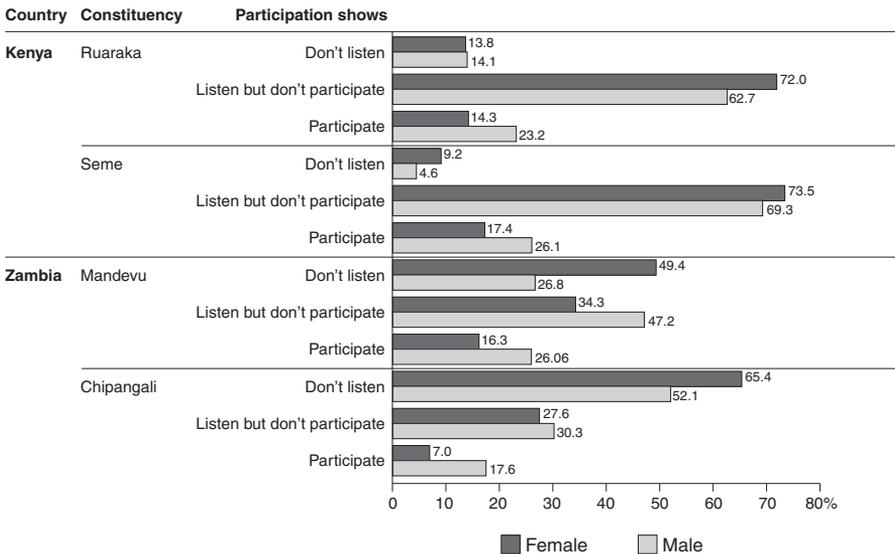
Source: Srinivasan, Sharath (2015). *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa (PIMA) Household Survey, Kenya and Zambia, 2013*. [Data Collection]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive.

The survey reinforced field observations, which revealed that interactive engagement with radio shows is done mainly by calling the studio, especially in rural areas. SMS is more popular in urban areas, particularly in Kenya. Using social media is not common, with only 10 per cent of those who have participated in interactive media shows having ever used social media to communicate with stations. Across all sites, the main barriers to interactive engagement identified are cost and expectations of not getting through.

Despite interactive shows attracting diverse audiences, participation is very skewed. Different pieces of evidence from our research clearly show that participation through mobile phones in radio stations is biased towards men and more educated populations in all the four constituencies. The survey showed that men are twice more likely to have ever engaged in interactive shows than women across all sites, suggesting that the observed bias cannot be fully explained by access to mobile phones (ownership and regional coverage of network) and radio listenership.

The levels of listenership and participation of interactive shows vary considerably among the four sites (Figure 2). In Kenya the levels of listenership range between 80-90 per cent of the population, whereas in Zambia, the levels of listenership ranging between 40-60 per cent of the population. The pattern of who communicates with radio shows, such as calling in or sending messages, does not follow the same pattern of listenership. For example, in the two Kenyan constituencies, access to mobile phones and radio listenership is not gendered, but participation is highly biased towards men. Also, despite lower levels of listenership and penetration of mobile phones, Zambia

Figure 2. Listenership and participation in interactive shows by location, 2013 (per cent)



Source: Srinivasan, Sharath (2015). *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa (PIMA) Household Survey, Kenya and Zambia, 2013*. [Data Collection]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive.

has similar levels of participation as Kenya in the four constituencies studied (roughly 20 per cent).

Probing this further, the higher relative participation in Zambia than in Kenya (ratio of people who participate by people who only listen to interactive shows) cannot be explained by assuming that participation is simply a function of a growing media offering and mobile telephony access (lower in Zambia), nor simply by summarizing participation skews in terms of basic socio-demographics (young men participate, women do not). There appears to be a more complex set of drivers of participation in radio shows, including social and cultural norms as well as the characteristics of the shows (style of presenters, format and content of the shows, topics discussed, strategies to engage listeners, popularity of shows and presenters). The latter, especially, points to the importance of sociality in understanding the potential of interactive broadcast shows for citizen engagement and citizen voice.

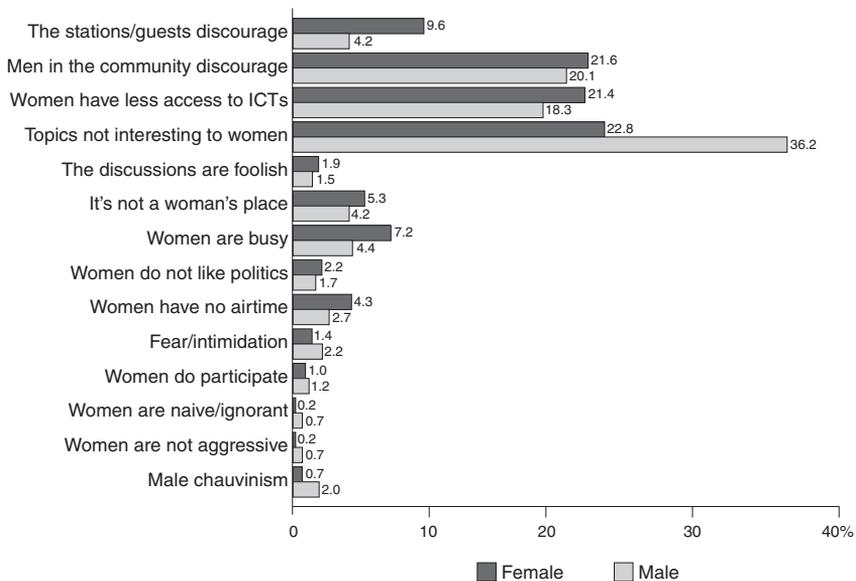
We found some evidence to support the intuitive idea that the content of the show is related to participation. But we also found that the content of the show is not related to listenership. Participation, then, tends to be more segmented than listenership. A more fine grained analysis in which the shows were classified into themes (politics and development, social/cultural and music/entertainment), revealed that radio audiences tend to listen to all types of shows, with no particular preference. However, as regards participation, there are clear preferences. Some people participate only in one type of show, with the popularity of politics/development, social/cultural or music/entertainment shows varying across the different sites and with gender.

Men tend to dominate participation across all shows, but there are important exceptions. For example, our survey results suggest that participation in politics/development shows in the Kenyan constituencies sampled is not as gendered as in Zambia, especially in the urban constituency (Mandevu), where political shows are almost exclusively dominated by men. Our behavioural data from a radio station that is popular in Seme, the rural constituency surveyed in Kenya (Radio Nam Lolwe, broadcasting from Kisumu in western Kenya), provides additional evidence for the gender gap in general participation, even wider than the survey results suggest. On average, across several radio shows, monitored over two weeks, the ratio of male to female messages was roughly 4:1. But in line with the survey results, we found that the variation across shows and timeslots was considerable with some shows attracting more female participation than others. These findings reinforce that social, cultural and political contexts as well as the topics of the shows and the way that presenters invite and manage participation, by presenting interactive shows as more gender inclusive, play important roles in the levels of female participation and voice in interactive shows.

Understanding radio shows as real social spaces implies seeing participation as influenced by the audiences' perceptions of who participates in the shows. If male voices are dominant, the accurate perception of this reality dissuades women to participate. Regular callers or texters, who are often conversant with the presenters, also contribute to giving the impression that these spaces are not open to new and different voices.

The PiMA household survey confirmed that all audiences' are aware of the lower levels of female participation. Audiences explain this, particularly for political/public affairs shows, as due to the discussion of topics not of interest to women (30.6 per cent), to low access to radio and mobile phones by women (16.9 per cent) and men discouraging women from participating (11.3 per cent). As perceptions rather than real reasons, they provide evidence of gender roles and related expectations. For example, the myths that women have less access to technology and that women's interests are confined to family affairs were challenged by the PiMA survey. Not only was the gender gap in access to radio and mobile phones (only observed in the Zambian samples) not sufficient to explain participation in radio shows, but there was also a remarkable gender difference in perceptions of reasons for female non-participation: men suppose (far more than women) that women do not participate because the topics are not interesting to them, as Figure 3 shows (36.2 per cent of men and 22.8 per cent of women). These ideas, when widely disseminated, contribute to shape their own reality through a self-fulfilling mechanism where social expectations turn into actual practices.

Figure 3. Reasons for female non-participation in radio shows by gender, 2013 (per cent)



Source: Srinivasan, Sharath (2015). *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa (PiMA) Household Survey, Kenya and Zambia, 2013*. [Data Collection]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive.

Unlike the gender pattern in participation that is more tied to cultural norms and social expectations, age patterns are more visibly molded by the topics of the programmes and use of SMS by different age groups. Behavioural data of participation through SMS from the radio station in Kisumu (in the rural constituency in Kenya) illustrate this clearly. Although the most active age group for sending SMS to the station is the

20-29 year old bracket, older (30-39) and younger (<20) age groups also dominate participation on certain days and at particular hours. These age-specific spikes are related to the topics (and presenters) of the shows, such as younger participation on Saturday mornings coinciding with the young people's show, and 30-39 year olds participating more prominently during public/political affairs in early weekday mornings.

These selected results from the PiMA survey and behavioural data highlight the importance of what we call the 'mediation context', the various factors that shape the mediated social space of broadcast, including the design of shows, norms and practices for managing participation, audiences' perceptions of presenters, shows and participants. Together these elements shape interactive spaces for discussion within societal constraints, while also challenging and possibly contributing to reshaping them. More or less rigid social norms may be challenged by facilitating inclusive discussions, where women's voices are encouraged across all shows, including political affairs, and not limited to women's programmes (traditionally centred around relationships and family). This can be achieved by purposefully broadcasting more diverse voices, giving priority to female and more unique voices in order to shift audiences' perceptions; or by tailoring programmes for audiences' interests that cut across socio-demographical groups.

The power of audience-publics and political accountability

A dominant frame for understanding broadcast audiences comes from critiques of 20th Century mass media, and sees them as passive consumers and objects of manufactured consent (Herman & Chomsky 1988). "Radio stations," Habermas noted, "have turned the staging of panel discussions into a flourishing secondary business [where] discussion seems to be carefully cultivated [and] assumes the form of a consumer item" (Habermas 1991: 164). Such a monolithic argument has been countered by equally demanding claims in media studies (Silverstone 1990) that audiences are always participants and indeed always publics because of their constitutive role in any broadcast media production. This section critically reappraises what kinds of engagement count in communication for development, what kinds of 'publics' audiences in interactive shows constitute and how we should understand the power of these 'audience-publics'.

Interactive broadcast matters, in spite of its constraints and limitations. Interactive shows attract high levels of listenership, and are diverse in locations and languages. There is thus a tension that while listenership is broad, participation (as our survey and behavioural evidence made clear) is skewed towards men, particularly the more educated, somewhat wealthier and slightly younger. These are spaces that matter in spite of this, because audiences value and engage in them. They reflect the social reality from which they arise and are spaces for social influence to be exercised; yet precisely because of this, and their role in shaping shared ideas and collective beliefs, they matter greatly. They are also under-determined and full of possibilities for new voices to be heard and for a range of socio-demographic groups to be 'socialised' into having a

public voice. Whether listening alone, or listening and participating through mobile phones, audiences actively co-constitute and co-produce these interactive broadcasts.

'Participation' and 'inclusion' are also complex phenomena that have to be protected from parsimonious and populist definitions. Our close-range studies of frequent or 'serial' callers, who sometimes dominate the airwaves, underscores the well-known tension between pursuing popular 'inclusion' versus effective 'representation' in democratic politics. Many such callers conceive of themselves as brokers, representatives and mouthpieces for wider constituencies, even if they also use such shows to further their own social and political ambition. Indeed certain callers who call frequently are central to the success of these current affairs shows and stations and listeners value them. One frequent caller in Zambia, who describes himself as an "activist," explained how he uses the media to "amplify the voices of the silent people,"⁵ while another in Kenya spoke of his answering the call to act as scrutineer and watchdog: "the leadership of this country needs to be taken to task for whatever is happening. The new constitution has enlightened us, it is not right to sit down and wait for other people to voice concerns to correct the government. So, I have felt it is a noble thing and I should also be part of that. I want to be counted as those people who are trying to correct the government, to make sure that things are being done right."⁶

Interactive radio shows are mediated social spaces and media actors are central in enabling and constraining the quality and dynamism of interactive discussions and in shaping possibilities of public opinion. As Sonia Livingstone has noted in the European context, "in different ways, the media are crucial to today's publics (and audiences) in inviting, shaping and managing the focusing of collective attention and, hence, the construction of the collective fictions through which publics come into being, perform and, eventually, die" (Livingstone 2005: 12). A less idealised and less monolithic, more elemental, concept of publics allows for more subtle treatment of when and how audiences may be publics and publics may be audiences.

Here, the context of broadcast in Africa, especially radio, matters greatly. The work of Schulz (1999), Spitulnik (2000, 2002) and Barber (1987, 1997), amongst others, points to the deep social contextuality of local radio in particular. The kinds of imaginaries that radio programmes sustain are expansive and cooperative in nature. Daniel Dayan usefully distinguishes "meaning-making" audiences from "consumer audiences", the former catalysed into imagining the publics they are part of, the latter having these imagined for them in advance (Dayan 2005). Some of the show audiences we examined, appear to be 'meaning-making'. For example, audiences for morning current affairs shows seemed to imagine the citizen-public voicing to and holding to account elected politicians, with the uncertainty of who was listening creating solidarity amongst the audience and proximity to aloof politicians. One station manager noted, "People are very willing to be heard on the radio because I think they want to have audience with their area member of Parliament ... this is a general complaint in Zambia that once elected they are hardly seen in their area."⁷ Such motivations are echoed by regular callers, who are motivated by a view of democracy in which proper representation

of the people requires knowing and engaging with the electorate. Politicians' absence and lack of connection to their constituents is misaligned to their responsibilities. One frequent caller explained that because the politician avoids the people, these callers see themselves as compelled to use the interactive programme to enforce engagement between representatives and those they represent.⁸

Our station case studies in Kenya and Zambia broke down the false binary that often frames African media, as either an ideal watchdog or emergent public sphere, or lamentably caught in the intrigues of the wider political economy. Factors shaping shows as a social space (e.g. audience perceptions and trust of the show and its host, knowledge of people who participate) have an important role to play. Particular shows and presenters may matter but they are constituted and sustained by a wider audience-as-public potentiality that the station, presenter, guests and listenership mutually imagine, create, negotiate and contest.

These factors point to how interactive broadcasts are unconventional spaces for political accountability. Through their live, dynamic nature, interactive shows become spaces of legitimation and delegitimation, where public opinion is formed and has political effects at a particular moment. Certain radio show formats – such as shows attending to hot topics that are unscripted, immediate and local, or formats with political guests that are focused on efforts at mobilisation and legitimation – drive engagement. Such engagement is unpredictable and untidy, mixing insights into fluid manifestations of public opinion on important issues of the day with call-outs to presenters and friends, jokes, jibes, song requests and personal information. Far from the artificial neatness of structured surveys and the like, this social interaction data is messy but it is also real; it warrants greater effort to nurture its creation and to analyse it for social insights.

Incorporating voices into authentic ICT4D

The unique opportunity to access and analyse voices from hard-to-reach African populations using new ICT poses a set of pressing analytical, ethical and methodological challenges: the balance between individual uniqueness and aggregation; the compromise between anonymity and recognition; and the interplay between structured technology interfaces and workflows and open spaces for voice and discussion anchored in their social contexts.

One challenge that the *Africa's Voices* pilot project presented was dealing with forms of participation that work well on interactive shows but which do not lend themselves to easy aggregation and analysis. The desire to allow for individual expressions of opinion whilst seeking to learn at societal or community levels reflects a wider issue for research seeking to capitalise on Africa's digital communications revolution: how to encourage, value and protect unique voices while seizing the opportunities presented by ease of gathering larger volumes of data.

The possibilities of using live and unstructured data for social research remain underexplored (Gonzalez-Bailon 2013) not only because of complexity of tools for analysis but also due to some scepticism about the quality and usefulness of this type of data. Big social data is unstructured, mixed-format and incomplete, and complexity does not necessarily translate into rigour. Often big social data carry imperfections that threaten the validity of social research: self-selection of cases; self-presentation bias; few covariates; and ethical and access issues.

Moving away from traditional polls and survey-type approaches to gathering 'public opinion' (for example, featuring probability sampling, panels of respondents, or closed format questions), *Africa's Voices* has gradually adopted an approach that produces data that is richer and more dynamic, led by the pilot insights about audiences' preferred ways of participation in public discussions through interactive radio and SMS. This approach resulted in large volumes of texts in multiple languages and mixed formats (textual and predefined answers) whose meaning cannot be detached from local realities. Yet this type of data can capture, in a genuine and meaningful way, public opinion in hard-to-reach communities, at the expense of conventional scientific canons. The usefulness of such data to capture social or local specificities is limited by the non-representativeness of samples, which may lead to flawed interpretations. Such samples may however be adequate to capture patterns and contrasts in social ideas and collective beliefs, the uniqueness and contextual embeddedness of voices, the richness of arguments and the dynamics of discussion and the formation of opinions.

Another central finding of the *Africa's Voices* pilot is that having a voice, through the 'publicity' or recognition (Honneth 1996) generated by radio, matters, when audience members engage in debates on the airwaves either by calling in or sending SMS. Despite all the efforts to ensure anonymity of participants at the point of communication (although their mobile phone numbers are unavoidably communicated), people prefer to send their names, residence, and sometimes their occupation and the names of family members. If the answers give more elaborate reasons for their position, it is more likely that they will be accompanied by personal details, supporting the idea that audiences seek recognition for their opinion.

Recognition of one's own voice and contribution to the debate (or even the hope of contributing) or the vicarious sense of recognition that comes from a space in which others 'like you' participate, seems to be a key factor in interactive engagement in *Africa's Voices*' discussions. Yet the research team's concern for protecting anonymity in *Africa's Voices* data generated a tension between local recognition and research ethics. To some extent, anonymity does not seem to be a concern for audiences as they are eager to send information that reveals their identity. The opportunity to express their opinions and the actual or anticipated acknowledgement of taking part in a relevant discussion by other members of the community had to be given due regard by the research team. The public character of the discussion and the accessible format are designed to invite participation from different social groups, yet knowledge of the identity of who participates reinforce voices that are already dominant in the community.

Conclusion

The so-called 'data revolution' and rise of 'big data' are a salient reminder of the stubborn persistence of technologically-led visions of development and change. These visions invariably risk incorporating exploitative and dominating logics. They are instrumental in nature, pursuing ends with particular means (here the implements are algorithms). At a basic level, such thinking is at odds with human agency, human plurality and the power of humans to imagine and create common worlds. Any attempt to guard against such determinism and to be more ethically grounded in humanity must be, first and foremost, deeply realistic. Such realism implies taking into full account actual lives lived, including society's best and worst features, and working from this foundation. In the context of information and communication technologies and processes of social and political development, such a foundation involves working with media and technology in use and looking from here towards new possibilities for more inclusive and amplified citizen voice in social and public life.

Broadcast media, especially local language radio, remains vitally valued by a great cross-section of the citizenry and society in much of sub-Saharan Africa. The research project, *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa* (PiMA), reinforced this in many illuminating ways. Audiences of interactive shows are often as diverse as the societies from which they obtain, and even if that diversity does not map onto the demographic profile of those who interact by calling or texting in to such shows, the possibilities of the broadcast audience are vital to why these spaces matter. The interactive broadcast show forms an indeterminate social space into which people impose particular ideas about its significance. This potential is even more acute given the uncertain quality of the audience: its reach and who is listening. These are managed and mediated spaces – co-produced through the public contributions of the media professionals, the in-studio guests, the audience members who actively interact by calling in and texting in and the 'silent majority' who despite not actively interacting, by being addressed and thus imagined, are in effect working to constitute interactive shows.

Variation in the socio-demographic patterns of which audience members participate in interactive shows (communicating via their mobile phones), point to determinants other than mere access to communications or crude demographic predictions, and towards what we have called the 'mediation context'. This encompasses the particular qualities of each interactive show that, albeit within wider social norms and cultural parameters, enable and constrain possibilities for citizens to contribute their voices to discussions. These determinants include: the design of the show, and the imagination of the show articulated and conveyed by the show's host; station and show norms and practices for managing audience participation; and audiences' perceptions of presenters, the role of such shows and the profile and role of audience members who do participate. These are all under-determined dimensions of the show containing within them possibilities for citizen engagement and valuing citizen voice in different ways.

Valuing voices implies encouraging individual opinion and narratives and creating spaces where these voices can be heard. It also suggests that participants perceive that voice matters for making a difference to improve their lives and the lives of others. Most importantly, this requires that technology and methodology are first grounded in actual social realities of communication, and from this basis shaped to strengthen more inclusive and effective citizen engagement.

Notes

1. A collaborative research project, PiMA researchers included: Dr Sharath Srinivasan (University of Cambridge, Principal Investigator); Professor Winnie Mitullah (University of Nairobi, Co-Investigator); Dr Fred Mudhai (University of Cambridge and Coventry University); Dr Alastair Fraser (University of Cambridge and SOAS, University of London); Dr Claudia Abreu Lopes (University of Cambridge and Africa's Voices Foundation); Sammy Mangwi (University of Nairobi); Stephanie Diepeveen (University of Cambridge); Nalukui Milapo (University of Zambia); Moses Maina (University of Nairobi) and Emmanuel Tembo (Centre for Policy Dialogue, Zambia). The authors gratefully acknowledge the various contributions made by the entire research team to the research that informs this chapter.
2. *Africa's Voices*, a research pilot harnessing the reach of radio and the spread of mobile phone use to gather citizens' opinion on governance and development issues across sub-Saharan Africa was spun out into a social enterprise and registered UK charity in January 2015: see <http://www.africasvoices.org>. Africa's Voices Foundation now works with a range of development and governance actors, as well as researchers, to provide them with citizen engagement tools and social research outputs.
3. The results of the survey allow inferences to the voting population in the four constituencies (macro-units) with some degree of accuracy (but not to the two countries). The sample sizes are 760 for Kenya (383 for Ruaraka and 377 for Seme) and 688 for Zambia (327 for Mandevu and 361 for Chipangali). The margins of error for a 95 per cent confidence level are no more than plus or minus 5 per cent for both Ruaraka and Seme, 5.41 per cent for Mandevu and 5.12 per cent for Chipangali. The dataset and full methodology are available here: <http://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/851648/>. The methodology is also available here: <http://www.cghr.polis.cam.ac.uk/research-themes/pdtm/pima/pima-working-papers/pima-working-paper-1>. An extensive paper on descriptive results from the survey is available here: <http://www.cghr.polis.cam.ac.uk/research-themes/pdtm/pima/pima-working-papers/pima-working-paper-4>.
4. The text messages were gathered in real time from all the programmes, during two weeks in August 2014 using a private shortcode, in a total of 19,800 SMS. The SMS are gathered through a cloud based platform that allows listeners to send free SMS to a shortcode announced during the radio programmes. The messages are linked to demographic information (age, gender, location) collected through a mobile phone survey prompted by a keyword in the original message. The response rate for the survey was 82.3 per cent (gender question).
5. Interview, Royd Moonga, Lusaka, December 2012, conducted by Dr Alastair Fraser, a research colleague on the PiMA project.
6. Interview, James Githuku, Nairobi, July 2013, conducted by Sammy Mwangi, a research colleague on the PiMA project.
7. Interview, Norman Tembo, Yatsani Radio, Lusaka, December 2013, conducted by Alastair Fraser.
8. Interview, Radson Musonye, Lusaka, August 2013, conducted by Alastair Fraser.

