

Committed Listener Groups and Media Participation in Francophone West Africa

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Participation is one of the major features of contemporary culture. It extends beyond the media domain where it is in vogue, as witnessed by the many studies of the subject in recent years highlighting the commitment of media publics. This article applies the sociology of collective action and participative communication to present and analyze the forms of action observable in listener groups developing around radio stations in Francophone West Africa.

Keywords: participation, listener groups, listener community, participative communication, participative culture, publics, sub-Saharan Africa

At the turn of the century, the public sphere in several sub-Saharan African countries saw a resurgence and multiplication of committed (i.e., participant) listener groups. In itself, this phenomenon is not new. In the late 1950s, radio clubs and listener and discussion forums sprang up around listeners who wished to play a role in the life of the radio medium. Largely flourishing in the 1960s (Cassirer, 1977; McAnany, 1972; Robert, 1967a, 1967b), they fell somewhat out of fashion around 1979 and 1980. However, they made a spectacular comeback in the second half of the 1990s, at the initiative of listeners in the form of fan clubs, as a result of the liberalization of media that succeeded the state-controlled monopolies dating from the mid-1960s. The resurgence of listener groups is not directly linked to politics. But it is difficult to imagine that the sociopolitical context of those years—marked by Black Africa’s adoption of the principles of freedom of expression, of conscience and of assembly—did not give rise to a desire for listeners wishing to participate in radio content, programming, and public debate, and sometimes even in the running of stations, to organize and develop a collective experience of the medium.

These groups did not develop in isolation, far from radio media. On the contrary, they grew up around and in the shadow of existing stations and demanded recognition as fan clubs or listener associations of one radio or another. No category of station was spared. Public radios, private commercial radios and especially community and association radios—all had their collectives of participant listeners. Of course, these groups organized ordinary media interactivity through live participation in talk shows and by providing feedback on programs. But they also organized neighborhood assemblies and demonstrations, occupying station premises to prevent closure, addressing mail to media regulation authorities for the return of suspended programs, conducting communication campaigns to recruit new listeners for their station and

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new members for the collectives, and developing local development projects. Participation around a station thus seems to have been no more than a pretext for sharing experiences that reached well beyond the experience of the medium itself, leading me to propose the term "community of listeners" to describe these collectives. This term is justified by the fact that these groups consist of individuals who are happy to share, over and above the experience of the medium itself, everyday acts of friendship and mutual assistance. Empirical observation and analysis of these forms of commitment around a medium lead me to wonder whether or not this model of social communication—founded, on the one hand, on coconstruction of the content and experience of the medium and, on the other, on an extra- or postmedium experience—constitutes an alternative to the more classical model of the radio audience. More generally, does the commitment of collectives of radio users invite us to broaden our definition of media participation?

I thus formulate the hypothesis whereby listener associations generate the emergence of associational militancy and not merely medium interactivity. Indeed, the majority of actions by these formal and informal groups lead to other forms of medium-extending mobilization that is anchored in tangible forms of solidarity, particularly intergenerational solidarity, and the creation of social, economic, and cultural development projects. This hypothesis is discussed in the light of the observation of six associations in three West African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo. These countries are neighbors. Their contemporary sociopolitical history is similar. It is characterized by an observable democratic trend to adopt political and media pluralism in the early 1990s. However, the sociopolitical context varies from one country to another, Benin having introduced greater freedom of citizen expression in the last three years than Burkina Faso or Togo over the same period. The three countries nevertheless share a common cultural context. In addition to sharing the French language, several of their vernacular languages are transnational, thus rendering mutual comprehension possible. They also share similar media traditions. In any case, the phenomenon of participant listener associations can be observed in these different countries. The associations bear names linked to the radio stations with which they are involved. Those that I studied are thus named after Radio Immaculée Conception, set up on the border of Cotonou since April 19, 1998; Radio Dinaba, created in September 2004 in Boukoumbé, in Benin; La Voix du Paysan radio, created on April 18, 1996, at Ouahigouya in North Burkina Faso; Radio Munyu, created in 2002, in Banfora, in the southwest; Radio Mecap FM, launched in 2004, in Dapaong, in Northern Togo; and Radio Maria, launched in 1998, in Lomé, in the south. These are all local stations, which adds to the community dimension of the listener associations. Four are private community radios: La Voix du Paysan, Munyu, Maria, and Immaculée Conception; one is commercial: Mecap FM, and one is rural: Dinaba. Logically, the disparity in status of the radios should add a nuance in the name, the level of community commitment and the level of media participation of the associations. However, the aim of this article is less to analyze their differences than to stress their similarities in terms of media participation.

Theoretical Framework: Markers of Media Participation

The notion of participation is broad, vague, and polysemic. As Bernard (2015) suggests, there is no doubt a need for adjectives such as "passive" or "active" to define it. The first case, passive participation, supposes a social subject who is accepted in a group without necessarily playing an active role. The second case, active participation, comes under the scope of expression, interaction, or procedural logic. In addition, this type of participation falls within the scope of decision logic or management logic. Having made this

distinction, it is obviously the second type of participation that interests us. The participation validates the participative authorities as so many spaces for learning democracy. This notion is therefore useful for studying the committed actions of media publics, particularly when supported by groups of listeners.

This notion of communicational commitment can be deciphered with the help of theories of medium participation as the driving force for the multiform relations that develop in a group formed around a common interest. For example, Jenkins uses the concept of convergence culture, particularly in fan clubs, to defend the idea of an environment in which members are linked by the force of their social interactions in the framework of their cultural or media consumption (1992). The sharing of information and convergence around their common interests remains essential. Fan club meetings, newsletters, and fanzines provide a space for collective socialization where communities are constituted. On the other hand, Wenger highlights three different but interdependent dimensions of small informal groups that are not recognized and often invisible from the outside, which he calls communities of practice: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and a shared repertory (1998). This new context is dominated by the feeling of belonging, solidarity, generosity, and network sharing. The internal dynamics foster collaboration and mutual comprehension (Donjean, 2006). The communication systems of the "groups of friends," "families," and fan clubs around radio stations can thus be analyzed in the light of these different but complementary dimensions.

Insofar as the activities developed by these communities of media practice relate to media participation, it is difficult to ignore theoreticians of media participation. Although they have analyzed this concept in terms of community radios and participant communities in an attempt to observe how community radio, in an inclusive manner, gives rise in its publics to several levels of participation, their theories may be useful to shed light on participative dynamics inside listener associations. Arnstein (1969), Frances Berrigan (1979), and Carpentier (2011a), for example, note several forms of media participation. Carpentier emphasizes two forms: participation in media and participation through media. The first refers to the role of the public in media production (content-related participation) and organizational decision making. The second, participation through media, deals with the opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and for self-representation in the various public spaces that characterize the media. Carpentier streamlines his analysis by introducing the notion of the level of participation, its two forms being minimalist or maximalist (2011a). In the first, "media professionals retain greater control over the process and results, limiting participation to access and interaction to such a degree that we may ask whether the concept of participation is still appropriate" (p. 69). In the maximalist form, Carpentier argue that "the models of democracy (and participation) oriented around a consensus stress the importance of dialogue and deliberation and focus on collective decision-making based on rational argumentation in Habermasian public space" (2011a, p. 70).

If we compare these with the categories presented by Arnstein (1969) in an article titled "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," Carpentier's levels of participation form part of a continuum situated on a larger scale, with nonparticipation at the bottom of the ladder, token participation in the middle, and citizen participation at the top (p. 217).

These analyses reveal relations of power that are deep rooted and inherent in the exercise of participation in general and particularly in participation in the media. Questions of power "are an inevitable

aspect of participative approaches to development and their evaluation," according to Lennie and Tacchi (2013, p. 147). Reducing power inequality "necessitates paying special attention not only to knowledge, to institutions and the best professional practices, but also to the knowledge, institutions, and best practices of communities," as pointed out by Eversole (2012, p. 31). This is the challenge that African radio as a participative medium, particularly local radio, is trying to confront to reach a balance of power or at least, to borrow Arnstein's expression, "citizen power." The other challenge facing African radio is to know how to be truly participative and how to render communication multidirectional and therefore maximalist. Thus, participation is not interactivity with the medium; it engages publics in a process that goes well beyond coconstruction of content and feedback, involving social processes and power. For this reason, it is also a study of the issues of the social link generated, occasioned, or favored by radio. However, participation in the media also supposes "the involvement of the public in the production and management of communication systems" (Berrigan, 1979, p. 18). This can be done in many ways. He ranks forms of participation in three levels: production, decision making, and planning, whereas Carpentier (2011b) distinguishes only two: participation in media and participation through media.

Berrigan and Carpentier's categorizations enable us to identify the forms of participation available in many radio stations we observed in sub-Saharan Africa. Arnstein's ladder of participation and Carpentier's minimalist and maximalist forms of participation were also used to evaluate public involvement in the production and development of media. Participation was ranked in two forms: "content-related participation" and "structural participation" (Carpentier, 2011b, p. 68). The first involves the production of programs, selecting, providing, and programming, and the availability of technical resources for ordinary people. The second involves inclusion in the circuit of governance and political and strategic decision making.

These categories are generally used by the defenders of basic development because "participation has become the reference index for measuring the efficacy of basic processes," explains Tamminga (1997, p. 94). For my part, I use them as a criterion for evaluating the different forms of participation in radio media and the role of the different levels of participation in involvement within the community. Arnstein's ladder is particularly useful for describing and evaluating the participation of populations in media and in the social processes involving them.

Although the exemplary character of this theoretical framework led me to adopt it, I wish to change the perspective. The idea is no longer to see how community radio involves its milieu in determining its programming orientations, content production, participation in public debate, and organizational management. In short, my analysis is not concerned with how the milieu or community in which the radio station is installed supports it, as analysts of community radio have done, and the participative dynamics the radio generates (Berrigan, 1977; Carpentier, 2011b; Girard, 1992; Halloran, 1975; Howley, 2005; Lewis, 2008; Magallanes-Blanco, 2014; Rodríguez, 2004, 2008; Vinod & Kanchan, 2007). On the contrary, in the wake of reception and postreception studies, the idea is to observe how ordinary radio station listeners decide on their own initiative to participate in the life of the station, irrespective of whether it is a commercial, community, associative, or public station, and to form an association to better coordinate their actions. In fact, the sociology of media publics invites us to focus on the relations established in the postmedia consumption. This amounts to exploring postreception social dynamics (i.e., commitment and militancy arising from postexposure to media). Among the proponents of this approach, we find Eliasoph and Morley.

They undertook to analyze the conditions of collective commitment consecutive to media exposure (Eliasoph, 1998; Morley, 1986). But we can also refer to Dayan, Breton and Proulx who stress the collective and individual resources mobilized by the process of reception and interaction (Dayan, 2000; Breton & Proulx, 2002). On the other hand, Cerfaï and Pasquier (2003), Gripsrud (2002) and Pasquier (1991) have observed how singular experiences are transformed into collective commitment. Their studies indicate that for a media experience to be transformed into a collective commitment, the media publics must adopt positions on current topics and assert the public nature of the social problems involved. The focus is thus on the public and not on the station, and the community in question is the one that develops inside an association formed a posteriori by a share of the station's listeners, independently of the geographical, ethnic, or cultural group supporting the station, in the case of a community radio, or which constitutes the principal broadcasting target in the case of other categories of radio, to which they may indeed belong. These interactions may be generated by the satisfaction or gratification they derive from the action of the station in question, as in the work of Meadows, Forde, Ewart, and Foxwell (2007), as it is the loyal listeners who come together in an association. However, these "communities" may be generated by the force of frequent social interactions in a situation of shared media practices, as theorized by Wenger (1998). In any case, I do not focus here on what motivates their commitment, as this article is devoted solely to presenting the participative community practices of members once the association has been formed. Finally, the association in question is not the equivalent of what Howley (2005) calls "community media people," because, on the one hand, it is not specifically a part of a community radio's public but of any other radio, and on the other, it is not necessarily initially targeted by the radio.

Consequently, the use of theoretical frameworks of media participation developed around community radios must not hinder comprehension of this study whose goal is to demonstrate how listeners participate in a station by exploiting the participatory systems it sets up or by provoking their establishment. The aim of this article is to use these categories while adding a new dimension: commitment in the form of media participation as a subcategory of participation "through" media. This level of analysis of media practices is still rare in specialized literature in this field. We thus give priority to the forms of commitment of media publics that use media and media relations as a backup for associative militancy.

Methodology

To analyze the social interactions within a group, there is nothing like the participant observation enunciated by Goffman (1961). It "aims at compiling the most complete information possible on a social situation" (Laperrière et al., 1992, p. 253). This method obeys a principle according to which the researcher enters or immerses the group, which is the object of the study, and gets involved in the operation of this group, without disturbing it as best as he or she can, to raise all the facts and actions that will be interpreted or that will help him or her to understand other data. Defined in this way, participatory observation is a major methodology in human and social sciences in that it makes it possible to analyze empirical data deemed as too fragmentary, too superficial, or which has been the object of very few studies, as is the case for radio audiences on the African continent.

To define the contours of these collectives and reveal the principal manifestations of their media participation, I systematically observed six groups as a participant between June 2010 and August 2017, in

Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo. Six collectives, two per country, were thus selected carefully. I chose collectives in different cities, based on their accessibility. When there were several groups, the choice was random, but it had to be accepted by the group. If not accepted, a new selection process was set up. I thus retained for Benin the Faric (Famille de Radio Immaculée) for the Immaculée Conception community radio, installed at the limit of Cotonou, and Les Amis de Dinaba for Dinaba radio in Boukoubé, in the northwest of the country. For Burkina Faso, I retained Le Grin¹ de La Voix du Paysan for the radio of the same name in Ouahigouya and the association Munyu for Radio Munyu in Banfora. For Togo, I retained Les Amis de Mecap FM in Dapaong and the Fama (Famille de radio Maria) in Lomé (Togo). This radio station and Radio Immaculée Conception in Benin are both religious, inviting us to take into account the spirituality variable in the listener collectives, which is not without consequences in terms of the community dimension. The Munyu and La Voix du Paysan collectives belong community radios. Here again, the grouping is around an ethos. The other two collectives were formed around a commercial radio and a private local radio, the main driving force being the passion that the radio arouses in its publics.

Each group was observed over a two-week period during three distinct research missions.² The observation protocol we established was adapted to the local context and the specific habits of the group. The observation grid allowed for the identification of events, interactions, places and objects according to the advice of Arborio and Fournier (1999). After identifying the group and establishing contact, I drew up a typology of the radio offer in terms of interactive and community programs and group actions: on-air and off-air media participation, meetings, actions in the public physical space (marketplaces, public squares, crossroads), online (social networks), and social actions. Each of these activities was then the subject of a systematic follow-up, where it took place (radio premises, public square, cybercafé) for the duration of the observation. When certain activities were programmed several times during my stay, this was an opportunity to register variations and presence in the organization, how it worked, and its discourse and practice.

The use of logbooks resulting from direct participant observation has allowed documentation for all the behaviors, attitudes, actions, and interactions that are produced within the framework of the association and that relate to media participation. The analytical notes and the descriptive notes made it possible to carry out faithful reports of everything that was observed during the different activities. Thus, the significant actions and the significant remarks of the various speakers were retranscribed in the logbook, with quotation marks adding time sequence, the intervening author, and place.

These on-site observations were completed by 60 in-depth interviews with 10 members of the collective for each group, based on encounters and the position of the players within the group. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed from a coding grid that captures the discourses that actors develop in relation to their actions (Bonnaïfous & Jost 2000). The data I present and discuss supporting my hypothesis, therefore, comes from these analyses.

¹ The term "grin" means a place of meeting, entertainment, exchange. It is used in Bambara cultural air (Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire), which makes it think that it is a French writing of the word "gere," which has the same meaning and the same pronunciation in Bambara.

² From July 2 to August 23, 2010, in Togo; from June 12 to July 8, 2013, in Burkina Faso; from July 15 to August 15, 2017, in Benin.

The data I present and discuss in support of my hypothesis thus come from four notebooks kept during the observation, verbatim extracts from interviews, but also from more informal conversations, along with data from the news watchdog. The comments quoted in the text have been translated from French.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data recorded in the notebooks during the observation period, combined with the content analysis of the qualitative interviews, enables us to group the results into three categories corresponding to three different forms of listeners' group participation.

Commitment "To" Media

This form of commitment concerns all forms of media participation involving the members of the association either individually or collectively. It involves participation in broadcast content and the organizational management of the stations.

Participation in Broadcast Content

Participation in content primarily involves media interactivity. Listener intervention determines the content of the programs. In this case, listener participation is the guiding principle. It is linked to a need for spontaneous expression or a directly formulated need for knowledge. This is the case of listener forums and open microphones. In the radio system, listeners are invited to ask questions or to give their opinions on a topic. Here, the listeners are no longer seen as mediators seeking knowledge transmitted by the medium, but as citizens wishing to have their opinions acknowledged by others. The stations remain attentive to listener suggestions, although their agenda tends to respect the priorities of their promoters. Listener associations thus participate actively in the program renewal. This is what I observed during the week of September 5 to 11, 2010, with regard to Mecap FM radio in Togo. Exchanges between the association of friends of the radio and the journalists occupied complete programs. These listeners spoke live on the telephone, sent in SMS messages that were read on air, and published comments on discussion forums on the site or the blog. Listener associations also encourage their members to make extensive use of the vox pop, or the open microphone used by some stations to renew their programming. This was the case of Dinaba de Boukoubé in Benin in July 2015. Radio Munyu in Bamfora, Burkina Faso, organizes listener groups or radio clubs to test its programming and reflect listener expectations. As for Radio Maria Togo, it relies on listener associations when renewing its offer. Their contribution is considered to be of better quality than the popular consultation. The first one is based on analysis and reflection, whereas vox pop is more superficial because it is based on people's impressions.

These practices constitute a central element in the legitimization of the deliberative spaces that build up public opinion and the public sphere (Fraser, 1992). Nevertheless, the participation of the friends of the radio does not play a role in the initial phase of "problem definition" (Berrigan, 1979, p. 26) and thus does not enable a joint decision on the orientation of communication programs, because they do not necessarily belong to the community that promotes and produces the radio.

However, based on post hoc legitimacy, listener collectives can influence the content of programs by producing programs themselves that satisfy their social and cultural needs and improve the quality of the radio offer. On-the-job radio training (particularly sound recording) enables listeners to record testimonies that make up the content of complete programs. *Farmers Talk to Farmers* on La Voix du Paysan is a typical example of this. Members of radio clubs share with other listeners how they have benefited by adopting modern agricultural practices. Listener groups produce their own programs, which they send to be broadcast. We find this mainly in Togo. The local leader of the Mecap FM listener group recounts the following:

In our village, they record programs on our agricultural activities. They mainly ask us how we conduct our agricultural practices and the advantages we derive from them. They also record the productions we accomplished based on agriculture and the progress we make. They record this so that when others listen to it, they can learn from it and be inspired by it. (Personal interview, July 25, 2010)

The club also collects its village news concerning various topics, which is used to produce mini-dramas, song and dance programs designed to develop awareness of the population of societal issues. The associations invite the radios to come into neighborhoods and villages to record directly accessible news that concerns the community, such as special evenings and events in the meeting places of the associations. This mode of direct on-site intervention thus showcases the everyday and immediately concrete aspects of the life of the listeners. Public intervention is also required in awareness-building programs, such as educational programs that prevent diseases. These programs thus fill out the daily program.

I may remark in passing that this corresponds to the same shared repertory and circulation of intragroup information discussed by Wenger (1998), in which "the creation of tacit knowledge, an effective and flexible mode of coordination, an identifying and socialization space that procures sense and motivation to commit together," evoked by Soulier (2004, p. 51). This also contributes to making radio a cultural resource (Forde, Foxwell, & Meadows, 2002). All of these processes thus authorize one and all to become active producers and not merely "passive targets for information" and opinion, in the words of Bresnahan (2007, p. 319). Listener participation in the production and management of program organization is the most convincing sign of the autonomization of local media.

Participation in content involves a third feedback stage. This is a sort of checking mission, but also a way of making suggestions that stations allow listeners to complete, especially when they are organized in associations. When they can, listeners produce a public discourse and participate in processes as ordinary people. Listeners expressing their viewpoints on the relevance of programs and the best times to broadcast them is part of this process. In this manner, stations conduct surveys while developing new programs, as we have already discussed. When Munyu listeners are dissatisfied with the manner in which certain programs are managed, they inform the radio operators directly through various interactive events or by means of a phone call. On receiving a complaint, the station management meets to come to a decision. In a sort of ascending movement, this type of media participation offers committed publics the possibility of exercising a certain influence on the media system (Carpentier, 2011b). The programs broadcast by the station are

not all decided by the station. Most broadcasts come from listener suggestions. Sometimes, listeners encourage the presenters by saying, "All right, your program is educational, continue."

"This is because this radio is destined for the people of Munyu and so it should comply with what we want. These programs we have now did not exist in the past. They were built up from listeners' ideas," explains David, head of programs. (Personal interview, August 22, 2012)

Listeners can respond to producer appeals on a given question, such as when Taanba requested the opinions of local populations in July 2010 on the name and content of the Foundation program. This example illustrates the important role that listener groups can play. It also highlights the fact that the *raison d'être* of local media is to facilitate this "two-way communication within the local community" (Fairchild, 2010, p. 16).

Moreover, associations encourage their members to visit stations, to address mail to them, electronic messages of greeting, announcements, and dedications, and to inform the reporters of the events taking place around them. At Ouahigouya in Burkina Faso, I observed listeners coming to thank the personnel of Taanba for broadcasting their messages—for example, concerning lost items or loved ones, asking to broadcast a thank-you message to a blood donor for a hospital). I also saw that the reception areas of radio stations are always busy, mainly with passersby who drop in to say hello to a presenter, although often with people who come in to send a message. People who cannot read or write are not shy, because they can dictate their messages to the announcers. We can conclude that illiteracy is not an obstacle to media participation. These examples illustrate the important role that listener groups can play.

These two modes of participation reveal a form of citizen power. Program production by listeners seems to give them a capacity to act in accordance with their needs and interests. The problem is that they do not control everything. The station still holds a certain power over the programs produced. This level of participation can thus be considered as a sort of partnership between the radio, which creates the canvas, and committed listeners who become contributors. The intervention of nonprofessional producers in the content nevertheless "provides an alternative model of media production and facilitates the participation of various (older and more recent) social movements, as well as different minorities and cultures," according to Jankowski, Prehn and Stappers (1992, p. 259).

Participation in Station Management

The affective and emotional attachment to the organization discussed by Allen and Meyer (1990) can sometimes lead individuals to even greater involvement. This participation can extend to concrete implication in the functioning of the radio—listeners being not just members of the association because they share the ethos of the station and appreciate its programs. It can take several forms, including contributing to financing and managing the radio. The observations demonstrate that associations are the main source of financial support for the day-to-day running of stations. Subscription systems destined to fill the coffers are instituted for all groups. Donations and legacies must be added to this. We have also seen members of the association Friends of Mecap FM regularly providing fuel to keep it

running. Sponsoring for certain programs constitutes another form of financial contribution, particularly public sponsoring. Financial contributions also extend to announcements. However modest the contribution, participation in the cost of broadcasting an announcement or a press release helps stations to cover their costs, but most of all it enables them to count on listeners' contribution to their project. Shopkeepers who are committed members of collectives advertise their companies, and nonshopkeepers post messages concerning, for example, marriages or lost property, which also constitute other sources of financing.

But the motivation that comes from this involvement in the life of the medium can constitute a force for participation in more direct management of the station, with the listener associations acting as institutions and taking responsibility for the management of their favorite station. Thereby, the president of the association of listeners of Radio Maria is therefore *de facto* the administrative director of the station. In reality, the association manages the numerous volunteers who give some of their time to contribute to the daily running of the station, presenting programs, carrying out technical work, running the secretariat, or answering the many calls recorded daily, while others maintain the studios and the yard or repair defective material. The management of Mecap FM has also been entrusted to the federation of radio clubs, so that the members of the management committee, and thus the management team, are chosen from among them. Fully committed listeners find a way to participate in managing the radio through these committees and management boards. Even if they have no special responsibility, their mere presence on the management board guarantees that their opinions will be considered in the decisions and options linked to the running of the station. Management participation can also take less direct forms. This is particularly the case when, confronted with a problem that it does not know how to handle alone, the management involves certain listeners by inviting them to discuss how to find a solution. The association of faithful listeners and listener clubs play this consultative role as groups. These facts validate Nico Carpentier's (2011a) thesis, whereby participation in station management corresponds to the maximalist level with access to the means of producing programs. We can nevertheless temper the enthusiasm that this might generate. Despite the existence of democratic forms such as rotating management, decision making about programming and management remains centralized. Moreover, the possibilities of participating in this way may privilege certain social players while silencing others. More specific inequalities may exist in terms of the right to expression, based on gender, age, or status. Moreover, these participation possibilities are not open to all social players. In conclusion, even optimal media participation constitutes only one aspect, it is only a first level of commitment.

Commitment "Through" Media

As more or less institutionalized groups, associations can adopt media commitment strategies designed to defend their own interests as militant or associational groups. This is the case of political participation in public debate, or the exercise of a form of supervision and citizen control by means of media. In this sense, "through" can be translated as "by" or "via" or even "thanks to."

Self-Representation

This form of participation corresponds to the concept we find in Bernard (2015) insofar as it showcases the contribution of participative authorities to democracy. The context of local democracy that appeared in the wake of the decentralization policies introduced in several countries during the 2000s enables citizens to be active in one or more of the many social microspheres in which they live. This context has contributed in several countries in Africa to the development of forms of citizen participation in the public debate on important societal issues. This new participation also contributes to reducing the feeling of being remote from the centers of power, as it fosters collective reflection on societal questions and contributes to the formation of a competent population capable of taking more risks and demonstrating an interest in governmental affairs. Here again, these manifestations of participation “by” media are observable in my own field of study.

The contribution of listener groups to public debates “via” radio participation in local questions, particularly in the form of telephone calls, SMS messages, and forums on social networks, has thus become progressively commonplace. Several listener associations invite their members to intervene in public and political questions and teach them the elementary rules for participating in public debates (respect for others, no insulting or defamatory comments, etc.), for example, via open mic and free air time. Mecap FM and Maria listener collectives provide examples for Togo. These two associations contribute amply to animating interactive programs in the local language that encourage listeners to take political stances. Testimonies, debating, and confrontations between different points of view liven up exchanges even among members of the association and with people from outside. Thanks to this, citizens who usually have no right to participate in political questions can take them on board. The radio becomes a public space in which citizens deliberate on societal issues, ask questions, and explore solutions to solve the problems they encounter.

Participation “by” media also translates as using stations to make community problems known to leaders and elected representatives. They present their preoccupations and discuss various necessary development projects in forums offered on-air or organized in listeners’ clubs. The forum is a basic entry point to enable listeners to participate in planning and implementing development projects at a village level. In certain cases, their preoccupations are then transmitted to the local authorities who pass them on to the regional MP or to managers and other regional leaders for them to deal with. This is what we find in Bukumbé, where the Dinaba listener association organized a development committee that meets once a month to review ongoing projects and to elaborate new ones. Its members then present the results of their discussions on the radio to receive the reactions of the population. If the majority approve of the ideas thus submitted, they transmit them by mail to the representative of the people of their region in Cotonou. But usually, they settle for presenting their gripes to village leaders, that is, to traditional authority who then takes the responsibility of speaking on their behalf to the representative. Here, I have transcribed the comments of the president of the regional committee in an interview I had with him in July 2010 concerning the role of Radio Dinaba:

The district development committee meets once a month. We review the ongoing projects and any necessary actions. For example, at the last meeting, we discussed the necessity

of repairing a road that is causing accidents in a village and the roof of the school, which the wind has partly removed. We also discussed enlarging the size of the pig pen because the animals are reproducing and getting fatter too fast. This is a big project that was introduced with the help of regional managers to create jobs for young people, but also to provide us with resources. . . . We then present the results of our discussions on the radio to have the comments of the population. If the majority approves the ideas, we email them to our MP in Cotonou. Sometimes, they come to discuss them with the population on the radio. They explain to us what we should do for ourselves and what they must do because it necessitates considerable means and outside expertise. (Personal interview, July 10, 2010)

In this regard, we find a result that can be described as counterintuitive. It is not only thanks to the community radio that “the local authorities and the politicians can hear, individually or in a group, citizens who are marginalized, oppressed or without the means to complain,” as demonstrated by Fraser and Estrada (2001, p. 20). Any local radio can do it, provided it has a group of engaged listeners. This is particularly the case where local stations set up an interface, generally a question-and-answer call-in program, or a presentation followed with questions between the local authorities and the audience on various subjects (e.g., politics, law, health, development), like *The Future of Our Village* on Radio Dinaba. The managers of the district council come to explain the development plans and to respond to the preoccupations of the populations.

These exchanges offer a unique opportunity to ordinary citizens to make their opinions known directly to functionaries, whereas the asymmetry linked to power relations does not allow for this. Opportunities for dialogue are thus set up between different decision makers and the populations “through” media commitment.

Sometimes people write letters to the local managers of one public or private service or another, via radio. The radio program presenters are in charge of transmitting these letters to them by broadcasting them on air in the form of open letters. The responses follow the same pathway. The following is an example taken from the program *Let Us Know* with Mecap FM. Its forum—although it is difficult to measure its direct impact on development in the district—at least stimulates debate, as indicated by the presenter:

The program deals with messages on development—the way in which development projects are implemented in the district. It is a formidable means of engaging dialogue between leaders and the populations. I think the people are happy when we broadcast their messages and even more so when the leaders respond to them, regardless of whether the response is favorable or not. (Personal interview July 17, 2010)

In certain cases, the listener groups do not wait for the authorities and management in their regions to accomplish their ideas. They take action themselves.

The movement that drives citizens to supervise and question public authorities involves introducing audience forums and spaces in the stations’ program grids. This enables politicians, civil society

organizations and the public authorities to better assess the expectations of the populations and sometimes to correct certain abuses. We must not forget the example of a little anecdote concerning a defective electricity pole that deprived the whole neighborhood of electricity, recounted live on air on Mecap FM on September 18, 2013. We learned the next day that the authorities in charge of distributing electrical energy had reacted immediately by reestablishing the current.

Setting Up Development Projects

This form of participation brings out the notion of empowerment associated with organizational commitment. This form of commitment “through” media can in fact, in certain respects, resemble what sociologists of collective action and change—like Crozier and Friedberg (1977) and Touraine (1984)—have called the bottom-up approach of organizational power.

In certain contexts, associations are not content with making proposals or calling on decision makers. They initiate for-profit projects themselves that can benefit their station, but whose ultimate goal is in reality the economic and social development of their locality, reinforcing the bottom-up empowerment (Craig & Mayo, 1995; Prakash & Esteva, 1998) of these groups. Here, the radio proves to be a veritable catalyst for collective action. Commitment is rendered possible “thanks to” the existence of the station. This is the case of the Radio Munyu Listeners Association, in Banfora, in Burkina Faso. It has thus established a pluridimensional center consisting of a restaurant, a cybercafé, a call center, and an inn. The members also operate a collective field and a market garden for the benefit of the association. The association also develops craft activities with the production of all sorts of objects (pottery, sculpture, loin cloths/grass skirts, traditional jewelry, etc.). In addition, the association produces audio content, essentially information sharing destined to develop awareness of topics of interest to the population. This content is sold at reasonable prices in the form of cassettes and CD-ROMs. With this other sale operation, the association thus contributes, as explained by its president in 2010, to the social and cultural development of its locality. The Mecap FM listeners’ association in Togo has set up a mill and has drilled drinking water channels to several localities. It also develops cultural activities and thus manages a cultural center for literacy and to provide functional education for adults. Famille de Radio Marie, in Togo, includes visiting the sick and prisoners. All of these observations illustrate how these collectives share authentic common projects through their promedia commitment and how they can, thus, in an African context, constitute a mobilizing force for action in cities.

Conclusion

The analyses derived from our on-site observations support the principal hypothesis underlying them. As a reminder, the central concern of this article questions the commitment of listener collectives to establish whether it demands that we broaden our definition of media participation. In this framework, I suggest that the issue of radio medium collectives in Africa extends beyond the simple question of media interactivity. I have observed that by taking part in radio activities, these committed collectives exercise their critical faculty of content corresponding to their interests and thus make the radio a space for public expression and social mediation. The development of committed media practices in the public sphere accompanies and promotes social, cultural, and economic action, and thus participates indirectly in improving the quality of life and social contact at the local level. Through these three forms of participation,

we see the emergence of the ascending, bottom-up approach that Crozier and Friedberg (1977), Touraine (1984), Craig and Mayo (1995), Prakash and Esteva (1998), and other sociologists of collective action and change have studied since the 1970s. This approach highlights the initiatives of civil society and encourages the participation of ordinary people in social processes.

However, one question remains. No group of committed listeners has been transformed into a political party. Exchanges with their members demonstrate that although they do become more aware of social and civic questions, their commitment to these groups does not necessarily lead them to desire to use the force thus mobilized to conduct more political actions. However, no one can deny that in the recent history of Francophone West Africa, civil society associations have played a significant role in the constitution of movements for social mobilization and the construction of political identities. Movements such as Balai Citoyen, in Burkina Faso, and Y'en a Marre, in Senegal, have thus, particularly through their committed media activities, participated in processes of political change. It is all the more surprising that the emergence of listener collectives is contemporaneous with other citizen phenomena that have enriched the public sphere. I am particularly thinking of the street discussion spaces that emerged in Côte d'Ivoire around the years 1990–2000. "The Sorbonne" and the "Sorbonnards" or "Sorbonniens" of the Plateau, close to the powers in place sharing the public space with the "Agoras," the "Senates," the "Parliaments" and the "grins" (Keita, 1985) of the opposition parties, in a citizen's appropriation of political debate and a social crystallization of ideological antagonisms (Bahi, 2003; Banégas et al., 2012; Cutolo & Banégas, 2012; Kieffer, 2006; Vincourt & Kouyaté, 2012). I am also thinking of the phenomenon of "standing parliamentarians" that proliferated in urban centers of the Democratic Republic of the Congo after the establishment of a multiparty system in the early 1990s. These outdoor "readers" of Congolese newspapers appropriated the political expression at the heart of the public space along with the radicalization of partisan competition. Associated with opposition groups, some of these parliaments became players in the competition between parties and in their internal disputes. This phenomenon is well documented from the point of view of political studies (Dugrand, 2012; Kaleleka-Bila, 1998).

What conditions would transform the communication practices in these radio listener collectives into an effective political commitment? For, as we have observed, and contrary to the Jenkins' hypothesis (2012), whereby political participation can emerge from fan culture, the civic commitment of listener associations is limited to defending social, cultural, and charitable causes, which remain in the prepolitical domain. This question would call for a specific new investigation in terms of these first on-site observations to shed light on issues that are difficult for observers to access.

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