



Radio in Africa: Past and Present

Peter Brooke

To cite this article: Peter Brooke (2024) Radio in Africa: Past and Present, Journal of African Cultural Studies, 36:1, 1-5, DOI: [10.1080/13696815.2023.2294814](https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2023.2294814)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2023.2294814>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 02 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 707



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

INTRODUCTION



Radio in Africa: Past and Present

Peter Brooke 

African Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

A century after its appearance on the African continent, the radio set has become so ubiquitous and seemingly old-fashioned a technology that it is easily overlooked. But like the automobile – perhaps the only other late-nineteenth century invention to have had a greater impact – radio continues to have a profound global influence. If it tends to be outshone in the Global North by the more recent innovations of television and digital media, in the South radio continues to have a dominant presence, particularly in Africa where it retains its status as the most popular mass medium. A recent continental survey of news audiences by Afrobarometer suggested that 68% of Africans source their news from the radio on a daily or weekly basis, while only 53% get their news from the television and 37% from internet sources (Malophane 2022). Nor is the dominance of radio limited to countries that have low rates of internet access. Another recent survey found that 80% of South Africans listen to the radio at least once a week in a country where digital media attract their largest African audiences (Bosch 2022). This special issue seeks to ask two questions. First, why has radio achieved such enduring popularity and, second, how has its impact evolved over time? To address these questions, the issue presents research that combines historical methodologies with media studies and ethnographic methods. The regional focus is southern Africa but, as the authors demonstrate, their chosen case studies exemplify the African media landscape more generally. Its genesis was a conference on “Radio in Southern Africa” hosted jointly by the Department of Communication and Media Studies at the University of Johannesburg and the African Studies Centre at the University of Oxford in May 2022, at which earlier versions of the five articles presented here were delivered.

Our starting point was that African radio has yet to attract the scholarly attention that it deserves. There are understandable reasons for this. Media Studies as a discipline long postdates the advent of radio and has conventionally given its attention to newer technologies and contemporary developments, especially television, the press and currently social media. Historians, meanwhile, can find the ephemerality of the radio archive daunting as few transcripts of broadcasts survive, let alone recordings, and the archives of national broadcasters are often subject to access restrictions. For these reasons among others scholarship on radio in Africa has traditionally been dominated by research on the politics of state media control and development policy-driven studies of the uses of radio for education and agricultural improvement (e.g. Fardon and Furniss 2000;

CONTACT Peter Brooke  Peter.brooke@africa.ox.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Hyden, Leslie, and Ogundimu 2002; Tudesq 1983; Ugboajah 1985). Both approaches have their merits – and remain popular themes in more recent scholarship – but they also have their limits: a tight focus on the dialectic of state versus citizen, an over-optimistic assessment of the power of community radio to buttress democracy and, in the case of development studies, a triumphalist faith in the power of radio to modernise society, in the tradition of Daniel Lerner and other modernisation theorists (1958). From the early 2000s the field took a more ethnographic and historical turn, thanks in particular to Deborah Spitulnik's work on Zambia (2002), Brian Larkin's on Nigeria (2009) and Harri Englund's on Malawi (2011). The new approach used interview-based research with listeners to analyse how audiences ascribed meaning to the texts and sounds of broadcasts and the materiality of radio sets, while interviews with broadcasters explored the significance of voice and their experience of mediating or sometimes subverting powerful broadcasting institutions. At around the same time Liz Gunner (2000) and Dina Ligaga (2005) demonstrated the value of taking a literary studies approach, in their work on Zulu language and Kenyan radio dramas respectively, with particular attention to the gendered nature of the genre. This new generation of radio studies was showcased in Gunner, Ligaga and Dumisani Moyo's edited volume on *Radio in Africa* (2012).

A distinctive feature of the scholarship since the early 2000s has been a concern to contextualise the present by reference to the past, including a willingness to engage with archives going back to the early days of broadcasting. Despite the evolving nature of the technology, its relationship with the state and society displayed as much continuity as change over the decades from its introduction. The current issue takes its lead from this approach by presenting research from the 1950s up to the 2010s with an eye to continuities not only across geography, but also the historical *longue durée*. The last decade has witnessed a minor efflorescence of historical studies of African radio (see Heinze's 2023 bibliographical essay), moving beyond the institutional focus of earlier histories of national broadcasting corporations (e.g. Tomaselli, Tomaselli, and Muller 1989) to consider content and audience as well. Leading interventions in this field were Gunner's study of Zulu language radio in apartheid South Africa (2019), Marissa Moorman's study of Angola from 1931–2002 (2019), Robert Heinze on Zambia (2014) and Audrey Gadzekpo on Ghana (2018). Although national histories remain the norm, several historians have recently begun to explore the transnational impact of radio, notably Rebecca Scales (2013) and Arthur Asseraf (2019) on the liberationist stations that broadcast to Algeria, James Brennan's study of the impact of Radio Cairo in colonial East Africa (2010), Peter Brooke on cosmopolitan audiences in the border regions of postcolonial Zambia (2021) and Sekibakiba Lekgoathi's collected volume on the clandestine cross-border "guerrilla radios" that were a feature of southern Africa's liberation wars (2020).

The current issue makes a major contribution to the scholarship on African radio by interrogating three familiar themes in new contexts and new ways. First, in an African context, radio was commonly a transnational medium with little respect for national boundaries, thanks to the prevalence of Short-Wave (long-distance) transmission. The blurring of political geographies was apparent across the continent but most obviously so in southern Africa where a high level of migration and prolonged liberation conflicts produced a uniquely busy cross-border broadcasting landscape. By uncovering the history of Goan audiences in colonial Mozambique, Catarina Valdigm presents the first study of trans-Indian Ocean broadcasting to the region. Lekgoathi and Kasonde

Mukonde show that although the ANC's guerrilla Radio Freedom was able to establish an effective operations base in Lusaka – where it was allowed to use Zambian radio's External Service to broadcast to South Africa during the apartheid era – the relationship between the Zambian government, the ANC and other liberation movements was complicated and sometimes strained thanks to the politics of Radio Freedom. In an unusual study of the iconic status of radio in visual print culture, Brooke argues that advertisements for sets were emblematic of the gravitational pull of white settler culture across the region, most obviously in independent Zambia where it undermined the "nation building" agenda of Kenneth Kaunda's government.

Second, the concept of voice lies at the heart of three of the articles. Gunner, Lekgoathi and Mukonde consider the ways in which broadcasters shaped the sound of South African radio. The subtle feminine sound of isiZulu subversion that Gunner finds on the South African airwaves during the apartheid era contrasts with the more militant and (usually) masculine voice of Radio Freedom in the same period. The cat-and-mouse game of covert criticism from within repressive states and overt attack from without was at its most intense in southern Africa, thanks to the persistence of white settler regimes, but was typical of the rest of the continent both before and after independence (e.g. Scales 2013). Fast forward to Lusaka in the 2010s and Fraser finds a blurring of the boundaries between broadcaster and listener in his analysis of a local call-in show. The eruption of a chaotic and ungovernable multi-vocality in the 1990s was the most obvious change in radio broadcasting since the decolonisation era, resulting from democratisation, deregulation of state media and the rise of listener-led shows on commercial and local FM stations (Brisset-Foucault 2019).

The third major theme of the special issue is audience: specifically the question of what the sound of radio meant to listeners. Researching call-in shows is an ideal entry point for this enquiry, as demonstrated by Fraser's case study of the ways in which listeners in Lusaka used radio as a platform to lambast the city council. Valdigem's analysis of listenership among the Goan community in Mozambique finds conflicted memories of Goan sounds from afar that unsettled Mozambican identities and provoked generational tension between younger listeners and their parents. Idealised images of listeners are the dominant feature of the advertisements considered by Brooke. The visual association that they manufactured between radio, whiteness and masculinity had a powerful framing effect during the decades when most people encountered the technology for the first time. Meanwhile, the audience for the ANC's Radio Freedom seemed very distant from the perspective of Lusaka, and sometimes non-existent when the station was being jammed by the South African authorities. But Lekgoathi and Mukonde find that Radio Freedom's message was so powerful that some listeners were inspired to flee to Lusaka to take up arms and, in some cases, to join the broadcasting team. If Radio Freedom had only one intended audience, Radio Zulu had two: on the one hand those who identified as amaZulu, and on the other, white South African officials who managed the South African Broadcasting Corporation. As Gunner highlights, the presenters at Radio Zulu successfully negotiated this double audience to carve out a space for Zulu culture and occasional political subversion by exploiting the subtleties of language, song and history.

Radio can seem off-putting as a subject for academic study. Sound archives of broadcasts are sometimes voluminous but more often threadbare; audiences are slippery

collectives of individuals with near-infinite experiences of listening; and the unpredictable nature of radio waves makes for a messy geography of the ether that does not easily map onto other boundaries. Yet this special issue demonstrates that with innovative methodologies, transnational perspectives and, most importantly, an appreciation of the proximity of the past to the present, scholars of radio are building a rich and vibrant field.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Peter Brooke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7579-8673>

References

- Asseraf, Arthur. 2019. *Electric News in Colonial Algeria*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bosch, Tanya. 2022. "Radio Is Thriving in South Africa: 80% Are Tuning In", *The Conversation*, 11 February. Accessed 23 November 2023. <https://theconversation.com/radio-is-thriving-in-south-africa-80-are-tuning-in-176846>.
- Brennan, James. 2010. "Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953–1964." In *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*, edited by Christopher Lee, 173–195. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Brisset-Foucault, Florence. 2019. *Talkative Polity: Radio, Domination, and Citizenship in Uganda*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Brooke, Peter. 2021. "Transnational News Audiences and the Limits of Cultural Decolonisation in Zambia: Media Coverage of the Soweto Uprising of 1976." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47 (4): 587–603.
- Englund, Harri. 2011. *Human Rights and African Airwaves: Mediating Equality on the Chichewa Radio*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fardon, Richard, and Graham Furniss, eds. 2000. *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Gadzekpo, Audrey. 2018. "Glocalising Radio during Empire." *Obsidian* 44 (2): 164–181.
- Gunner, Liz. 2000. "Wrestling with the Present, Beckoning to the Past: Contemporary Zulu Radio Drama." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26 (2): 223–237.
- Gunner, Liz. 2019. *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gunner, Elizabeth, Dina Ligaga, and Dumisani Moyo, eds. 2012. *Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Heinze, Robert. 2014. "'Men Between': The Role of Zambian Broadcasters in Decolonisation." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40 (3): 623–640.
- Heinze, Robert. 2023. "Radio in Africa." *African Studies Review* 66 (2): 531–543.
- Hyden, Goran, Michael Leslie, and Folu Ogundimu, eds. 2002. *Media and Democracy in Africa*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Larkin, Brian. 2009. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lekgoathi, Sekibakiba Peter, ed. 2020. *Guerrilla Radios in Southern Africa: Broadcasters, Technology, Propaganda Wars, and the Armed Struggle*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lerner, Daniel. 1958. *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. New York: Free Press.

- Ligaga, Dina. 2005. "Narrativising Development in Radio Drama: Tradition and Realism in the Kenyan Radio Play Ushikwapo Shikamana." *Social Identities* 11 (2): 131–145.
- Malophane, Libuseng. 2022. "Digital Divide: Who in Africa Is Connected and Who Is Not." Afrobarometer, Dispatch No. 582, 14 December. Accessed 23 November 2023. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/AD582-PAP18-Digital-divide-Who-in-Africa-is-connected-and-who-is-not-Afrobarometer-Pan-Africa-Profile-13dec22.pdf>
- Moorman, Marissa. 2019. *Powerful Frequencies: Radio, State Power and the Cold War in Angola, 1931–2002*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Scales, Rebecca. 2013. "Métissage on the Airwaves: Toward a Cultural History of Broadcasting in French Colonial Algeria, 1930–1936." *Media History* 19 (3): 305–321.
- Spitulnik, Debra (Vidali). 2002. "Mobile Machines and Fluid Audiences: Rethinking Reception Through Zambian Radio Culture." In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, edited by Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, 337–354. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Tomaselli, Ruth, Keyan Tomaselli, and Johan Muller. 1989. *Broadcasting in South Africa*. London: James Currey.
- Tudesq, André Jean. 1983. *Les Radios en Afrique noire*. Paris: Editions Pedone.
- Ugboajah, F. Okwu. 1985. *Mass Communication, Culture and Society in West Africa*. Munich: Hans Zell.