TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM-UP?
Radio in the Service of Democracy: Experiences from South Africa and Namibia

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Abstract / The focus in this article is on two different modes of ‘giving a voice to the voiceless’ in Southern African new democracies, namely South African community radio and its support apparatus, Democracy Radio, and the Namibian People’s Parliament. South African community radio operates within a sphere of its own, it is supposed to be closely linked to the grassroots, while the Namibian contact programmes fall under the auspices of the Namibian Broadcasting Company. There are differences in administrative form, but both models have come up against very similar problems in the design of the content. It is easy to talk about community and grassroots orientation, but to implement such policies is difficult, especially when the basic task is to promote democracy and citizenship.

Keywords / community radio / citizenry / citizens’ radio / democracy / Southern Africa

In the context of Southern Africa, problems of public memory have received most attention so far in the debate around issues of national reconciliation. There has been considerable controversy on a number of issues – both around whether reconciliation should be achieved by a ‘final stroke’ of official forgetfulness, or by an officially organised process of public remembrance, which would involve formal and explicit recognition not only of the exploits of freedom fighters, but also of the suffering and injustice inflicted by all sides of the conflict. (Kössler, 2003)

With the rapid changes in the political arena in Africa during the past 10–15 years, the role of what has often been called the communication sphere or communication space (e.g. Splichal, 1993: 5–8) has become more and more decisive, because mobile social networks are crucial for the discursive nature of citizenship. Citizenship is not a fixed constellation, but constructed and reconstructed by various local, national and global factors.

From the ancient Greeks onwards, the general conception of democracy has been based on at least four assumptions that are related to the mediascape. They are the following:

• Citizens are well informed;
• Citizens are interested in politics, as a consequence of socialization processes;
• Citizens have equal rights to speak and participate in decision-making;
• All decisions are submitted to public discussion.

In the construction of citizenship, attributed images of oneself and the other play an important role. As many authors have stated, otherness is needed as a basis for reflection; the unity and togetherness of we is really understood only if there exists them or the Orient, otherness (e.g. Bauman, 1990; Said, 1985). In the African context, at least two factors make the new constellation especially interesting and challenging. On the one hand, the conventional media sphere is weak in most parts of the continent and, on the other hand, there are several social structures overlapping one another, with several roles reserved for the so-called man-on-the-street, or in the African situation, rather, the man-in-the-village. A Northerner recognizes the significance of the first factor, while the second easily escapes attention, because some of the ‘ancient’ social structures are not easily visible to an outsider. The other might be defined in a variety of ways, depending on which social structure happens to be dominant.

A prerequisite for most democracy theories of our times is the idea of the informed citizen, able and willing to take challenges and to act. In many respects, there is a marked difference between the ideals of representative democracy and participatory democracy, but in this respect the two perspectives of democracy do not differ much. They both view citizenry in roughly the same way. However, the perception of social institutions differs markedly in these two categories. In representative democracy, institutions are born and developed out of the will of the citizens and aimed at fulfilling their needs, while in participatory democracy, institutions are often perceived as an enemy of the citizen, a bureaucratic machinery trying to subdue the individual and his or her needs. Further, the perception of the citizen might view the citizen as a member of the community or the public sphere and active in a variety of associations, or more individualistically, view the citizen either as a ‘lonely rider’ or a consumer.

Processes instigating citizens’ interest in collective affairs pose great challenges in countries where media messages are scarce or unevenly distributed, perhaps also found irrelevant by a considerable part of the population – or, where the public sphere in general does not create great motivation for action. The basic idea has been to bring the media closer to the public, thus enabling more ‘natural’ communicative spaces to be born, following the line of many so-called alternative media.

Since the 1920s in Europe, public service broadcasting (PSB) has been assessed as a valuable media mode for strengthening citizenship in society, although the concept of PSB has recently also met criticism. The PSB ideology is linked to representative democracy. Some authors who have analysed the ‘new’ African media-scape have also emphasized the potential embedded in the public service formula. For example, Clive Barnett (2004) has given credit to South Africa for having broadened the definition of educational broadcasting beyond the confines of formal educational contexts, thus enabling multiple media literacies among citizens, adults and children alike. Most often, however, the community media, especially community radio, are recommended as a standard emergency aid for strengthening
African citizens. Although most community media remain in some form of public ownership, they are considered as providing a closer route to the grassroots, thus enabling ‘voices for the voiceless’ to develop. According to its ideals, community radio is run and controlled by members of the target community. Thus, the relevance of the substance should be ensured. One of the most recent accounts of this type is presented by Patrick Alumuku and Robert White (2004). Their survey on African community radio concludes as follows:

The single most important factor in this process is the fact that community radio ‘taps into’ and revitalizes community communication, the strongest and most vital form of communication in Africa. Sharing of joys, sorrows and resources is a way of life in African communities where interdependence and reciprocity are the norm. The development model introduced into Africa has not only neglected the community, but often has attempted to destroy it. People are ‘hungry’ for community communication. The ongoing feuds and tensions remain, but community radio is a defense against the politicians and religious fanatics who enter to stir up the flames of conflict.

However, especially South African authors who have been following the development of community radio in their country (e.g. Teer-Tomaselli, 2001; Teer-Tomaselli and Mjwacu, 2003) are far more careful in their wording. They emphasize that the crucial issue for success is the organization of community contacts. In a study of five South African community radio stations, participation appeared sharply uneven, thus mitigating against a fully integrated community radio ethos, as the authors state in their conclusions (Teer-Tomaselli and Mjwacu, 2003: 85–91).

Community radio has rarely operated as planned (e.g. First Footprints, 2001; Teer-Tomaselli, 2001). Discussion groups do carry significance in societies with scarce and narrow mediascapes. However, they remain predominantly upper- or middle-class oriented. They can perhaps be compared with the clandestine radio stations (e.g. van der Veer, 2002) during the liberation struggles, but it can also be claimed that the present-day discussion groups are more elitist than clandestine radio.

These contradictory accounts reveal that despite the fact that media have been found important in the development of ‘new’ citizens in democratic African societies, the role of media has remained rather blurred. Some researchers (e.g. Barker, 2001; Mason, 2001) have even claimed that the goal for media policies in Southern Africa has been ‘no policy’, and many (e.g. Tomaselli, 2002) have stressed the financial constraints – before the political changes, the oppressive political regime regulated the media; now economic constraints, and above all, internationalization of ownership does it.

It is interesting that neither domestic democracy groups nor foreign donors have prioritized PSB as an option for Africa. PSB has not been assessed as a challenge but rather as an institution belonging to the past. Huge, bureaucratic public broadcasting companies have been left fairly much on their own. Governments, stressed by demands set by the IMP and the Monetary Fund, have gladly left public broadcasting without subsidy. Foreign donors have greeted such a development with applause, assessing it as a sign of increased media freedom. One of the few exceptions on the continent is the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which has been moving towards a PSB ideology.
Although television is spreading fast on the continent, radio remains the main medium for Sub-Saharan Africa. Roughly one-half of the population listens to public radio stations regularly, some 20 percent read newspapers regularly, while listening to community radio stations remains at the level of 2–3 percent, and commercial radio stations at around 7–9 percent. The number of newspaper titles has grown fast, but the actual readership has practically not grown at all, because circulations are small and newspapers are mainly distributed in towns. Listening to public radio stations has decreased, because the equipment in many countries is very poor and old-fashioned and the finance for expensive relay stations and studios is not available. In short, public radio is a clear loser in the new African mediascape – and so is the population in the countryside. Commercial media are not interested in people who lack purchasing power, and public media can no longer afford even the poor distribution systems they used to have 15–20 years ago.

Community radio seems to offer the so-called ordinary person a better chance than the PSB mode to get his or her voice heard, although most African public radio companies also have a long tradition of contact programmes such as daily workplace interviews and marital and death announcements. In many cases, members of extended families living far apart have received family news via radio. Still, a community radio based in the neighbourhood can better take into account the community’s requests and concerns. As a medium it no doubt comes closest to the democratic-participant theory, which Denis McQuail proposes:

This theory found expression in the 1960s and 1970s in pressure for local and community radio and television. It challenged the dominance of centralized, commercialized, state-controlled and even professionalized media. It favoured media that would be small in scale, non-commercial and often committed to a cause. Participation and interaction are key concepts.

(McQuail, 2000: 160)

The role of so-called ‘small media’ has also been discussed in this respect (e.g. Spitulnik, 2002). Small media refers to a variety of communicative forms using mainly electronic technologies such as video cassettes, audiocassettes, electronic mail discussions lists, telephones and facsimile machines. Spitulnik says that she has found very active, dynamic modes of critique and mobilization in these communicative spaces, opening up in various African states during the 1990s. The small media debate has its links to the renaissance of alternative media literature emerging in a multiplicity of arenas in the past years (e.g. Atton, 2002; Rodriguez, 2001). It has, however, only in passing focused on Africa, while references to Latin America are numerous. Despite the community radio ethos, no ideal implementation has yet been found for the flourishing democracy rhetoric.

**Economy First, Democracy Second**

According to a survey, South Africans and Namibians exhibit the greatest awareness of the concept of democracy in Southern Africa, and they have a largely positive understanding of the concept. Democracy is viewed as the realization of individual rights and civil liberties. However, South Africans and Namibians are more
likely to emphasize the realization of socioeconomic outcomes as crucial to democracy than key procedural components such as elections, multi-party competition or freedom of speech. They have become pessimistic. They put significantly less trust in elected institutions, see them as less responsive to public opinion, and are dissatisfied with the performance of these bodies (Mattes et al., 1998).

The average South African support for democracy (60 percent) is markedly lower than in several other countries in the region. Botswana (82 percent) scores highest, followed by Zambia (74 percent), Zimbabwe (70 percent) and Malawi (66 percent), but Namibia (58 percent) scores even lower than South Africa. In both low-score countries, the respondents give more positive evaluations to the present democratic system than to apartheid, but there are also signs of a certain ‘nostalgia’ of the ways these countries were governed under apartheid, especially among white, coloured and Indian respondents. The country really seems to be in danger of developing a ‘democracy without the people’, as some researchers have warned (Mattes, 2002: 22).

These intriguing results could perhaps be interpreted as that Africans who have lived under an indigenous authoritarian government (e.g. Banda, Mugabe) have learned to attach an independent value to democracy that has not yet been widely developed in Namibia or South Africa. Instead, ordinary people in these two countries are distressed about the slowness of change, perhaps even the direction their governments have chosen to take. Accordingly, they rank quite poorly in terms of interest and participation in democratic politics.

Although media distribution is uneven, both South Africans and Namibians have the highest level of access to political information through the various forms of news media in the Sub-Saharan region, and they are significantly more informed than their neighbours when it comes to awareness of important national leaders. Yet they exhibit a low sense of citizen efficacy, though they retain a general sense of the efficacy of voting and elections. They have a very low level of actual contact with government or community leaders. Thus, although the system as such is found to be right, it remains distant to the majority of the citizenry.

In the attempts to motivate people for political activity in these two countries, attention has been especially directed to the radio. Many studies have explicitly identified the special ability of radio to ‘mediate the popular word’. Radio speaks the language known by the majority of the population, for an oral language is not simply the product of illiteracy, a lack of education or poverty. The oral language of the radio is a bridge between symbolic-expressive rationality and instrumental-informative rationality. Radio is a medium that, for the popular classes, fills the vacuum left by the disappearance of the traditional institutions for the construction of meaning (e.g. Martín-Barbéro, 1993: 234–6).

It is against this contradictory background that any action to strengthen civil society and citizenship among South Africans should be placed, rather than against the glorified fight against apartheid during the past 10–20 years. The problems mentioned as the most important in the country in the 2000 poll did have an indirect link to democracy, but they did not have too much to do with representative democracy. These problems were: job creation, crime/security, housing, education,
HIV/AIDS, health, poverty/destitution and corruption (Mattes et al., 2000: 55). In the same survey, the mass media and especially the SABC rank highest as most credible social institutions – far beyond the president, the parliament and the army – in all population groups (Mattes et al., 2000: 35).

However, the media did not do remarkably well in their coverage of the October 2000 local government elections. According to a monitoring report (LGE 2K, 2001), sizeable attention was given to the elite political figures. The coverage revealed a close approximation to the 1999 national election coverage, with little realization of the differences in priorities between national and local elections. Events were favoured over issues, with little analysis, interpretation or debate over the election issues. Female local candidates were neglected, as well as issues that would be of concern to women. The media also failed to provide a gendered perspective on such issues as poverty, housing and HIV/AIDS. Low coverage of issues relating to human rights was also detected, while a highly dramatized coverage was given to the pre-election political violence and the election day process. The mainstream political parties received the bulk of attention at the expense of smaller parties. The coverage was overall similar across the press and the broadcasters. It could be claimed that in this sense the SABC failed to fulfil its role as a PSB; it was not able to bring the issue any closer to its audience than the commercial media.

However, it is fair to state that the media coverage was 'professional', thus resembling, with its weaknesses and its strengths, the behaviour of media in older democracies. But it did not relate in an ideal way to the situation in the country concerned. On the other hand, these results also give support to the opinion poll figures: the mainstream media that were studied did nothing to bring the political processes closer to the so-called ordinary person.

The South African Independent Broadcasting Act (1991) delineated three levels of broadcasting: public, commercial and community. The third sector was established with the purpose of giving voiceless communities a medium through which to comment on their lives and experiences. The background literature on community radio indicate that the 'ideology' of this form of mass communication can clearly be classified under McQuail's democratic-participant normative theory (Teer-Tomaselli and Mjwacu, 2003: 83). There are some 95–100 community radio stations operating and still another 20–30 on paper in the country. It is quite common for South African community radio stations to be alternately on or off air, depending on the financial situation of the station. Community radio activists have formed the South African National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) to promote and support community radio. These activists emphasize that local residents should take part in the decision-making, identification of felt needs and the work of the station (Teer-Tomaselli, 2001).

These stations have received their basic equipment either from the government or the Open Societies, in some cases also from other foreign donors. Although formally independent, the stations often have strings to political actors, donors and projects. The stations have economic problems, although most stations do not pay any salaries or honorariums to journalists working for them. There is also concern about the content and professional quality at community radio stations. Funds are
scarce. Accordingly, the programme time is filled with cheap and easily available material, not necessarily the most relevant content. Around 90 percent of all community radio programmes are broadcast live, and the requirement of 60 percent talk, 40 percent music is frequently not fulfilled. Volunteers working for the stations tend to leave the stations for paid jobs as soon as they have learned the basics of the profession. The stations are left with an eternal need for relevant material and competent personnel. The government has realized this, and in autumn 2004, introduced a new support policy. Community radio stations are able to apply for subsidies for the production of programmes on particular educational themes selected by the government. This new policy has naturally also started debates about indirect state guidance, because practically all stations applied for such funds in the first round.

In the far smaller Namibia, a clear-cut division into public and community media has not been established. Media policies support, remarkably strongly, nation-level mass communication. The broadcasting channels, traditionally, have been more or less vehicles of those in power, although today there are some private local radio stations as well – some educational or religious, most only playing popular music. The number of community radio stations barely exceeds five. The strongest government grip is perhaps felt today at Namibia Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) television, but the largest audience is gathered by NBC radio. Some commercial satellite/terrestrial television services, such as M-Net, are made available but are used only by hotels and bars, plus the urban well-to-do. The main reasons for the different route taken in Namibia compared with South Africa are probably the small size of the population, scattered across a huge country, plus the fact that the literacy rate among Namibians is very high and availability of newspapers has long been the best in Africa.4

The wider public is used to a public/private mix in media matters and even more, a media mix that disagrees both within itself and with the power elite. In the apartheid era, there already existed private media – in those days only newspapers – prepared to criticize those in power; while some other private media more or less openly recognized the authority of the apartheid rule. Also, today, Namibia offers its southern urban population a numerous and many-voiced media mix. In the poorer, totally black northern regions the distribution of the media is poor. Occasionally, the government or individual ministers try to regulate the media, but due to the complex structure of the mediascape, a big hullabaloo is raised and after a while such measures are forgotten. The target of such attempts has been predominantly The Namibian, which was a dissident voice in Namibia during the apartheid rule, but has not applauded the present governing party SWAPO's policies, either. During the last few years, the government has refused to use The Namibian as its advertising channel, although the paper has the largest readership figures in the country.

Thus, the Namibian public is fairly sophisticated in its relationship to the media, and the public is even more used to contradictory approaches in the mediascape than in many other countries on the continent. However, the public remains limited and it is mainly in towns. While the public is able to express sophistication in media matters, official media policies are quite vague and lack consistency, although both
the public and the private media see as one of their functions to inform citizens about their rights and responsibilities. But there are still different options: is it a top–down or a bottom–up mode that best promotes democracy via the media – or does it really matter?

In the following, I elaborate with both a South African and a Namibian case study. The South African case represents a mixed model. South African community radio is, by definition, a bottom–up medium, but especially its organizational set-up, including such mechanisms as the NGO-based Democracy Radio, often in fact includes semi-public support apparatuses, also enjoying donor support. The Namibian case started as a top–down programme, operating within the public NBC, but in fact has become a mediation of the ‘popular word’, as Martín-Barbero says.

**The Invisible Grassroots Channel**

Unlike most of Africa, television is undoubtedly a mass medium in South Africa, but there are still quite large ‘pockets’ in the country without the slightest possibility to watch television or listen to radio, even on an occasional basis. Despite fine policies, some 15–20 percent of South Africans have extremely limited access to any means of mass communication, although the urban – predominantly white – middle class enjoys the supply of all the modern means of media. There are approximately 3.5 million illiterate adults in South Africa, with the majority based in rural areas, who constitute 54 percent of the population. Community radio stations are scarce in the poorest provinces. Even community radio seems to need some infrastructure and at least minimal purchasing power in the community in order to operate properly.

In short, the national and regional media in South Africa seem to fulfil people’s immediate information needs, being, on the one hand, strong in news and, on the other, in entertainment. Players in the conventional mediascape are not there to promote advocacy or motivate social action. With a slight exaggeration, one could claim that the orientation of the conventional mass media clearly serves the needs of the urban middle class.

Radio is no doubt the number one mass medium in South Africa. However, there are at least two major types of radio listeners. For most of the adult audience, radio is and has always been the main source for information, while for the youth, it is more a source of entertainment. Young people often refer to middle-age South Africans as the ‘Miriam Makeba generation’, which wants to combine music with social activism, while the young would simply like to listen to London hit lists. This is the framework in which community radio is operating, with scarce funds and ever changing personnel, because the experienced staff tend to transfer to ‘ordinary’ media with a chance of a regular salary, plus far more respect on the part of professionals. Community radio is rarely mentioned by the conventional media professionals. The infotainment series *Soul City* makes an exception and, accordingly, has received considerable attention simply because it does marketing for this quite ‘unknown’ sector of the media. Nevertheless, some 5.4 million people of the 46 million are reached by the 95–100 operating community radio stations on a regular basis.
Besides problems of acquiring the basic equipment, the community radio stations have come up against the problem familiar to any broadcaster: a radio channel engulfs an enormous amount of programmes. A station run by two or three professionals and a group of volunteers is more dependent on so-called independent producers. One solution is to make an agreement with international programme providers, as a few stations such as the Cape Town-based ‘mother of all SA community radios’, Bush Radio, have done. The programme time could not be filled without this material, and it has been found relevant because it is said to broaden the view of the receivers (Shelley Knipe, Bush Radio station manager, interview, 2001; see Appendix).

Most experts in the field recommend that the community radio stations should liaise more with domestic independent producers. However, this field is not without problems. Many domestic producers receive funds from either domestic or international donors, willing to promote ‘good’ causes such as health, HIV/AIDS prevention or refugees. These donors must be accountable to their home base. Accordingly, they put conditions on their support: their programmes should be broadcast within a particular time slot, or even on a particular date and time. ‘Packages from an unknown sender’, comprising a CD with a covering letter expressing such demands, are a familiar phenomenon at most community radio stations – and quite often, the stations fulfil the conditions, fearing that if they did not, another ‘instalment’ might never come.

Happily, most of these donors are well-meaning NGOs, but a cynical analyst could see a danger in such an unbalanced situation: a well-meaning but wealthy advocacy agent sends material to a poor and perhaps somewhat naive receiver, in great need of material. These independent producers represent a totally different standard of professionalism to the community radio stations, but they, again, are dependent on donor funds. Some stations have realized their value and have asked payment for broadcasting material produced by independent producers or interest organizations. There may be clashes to come in the future.

As one report (First Footprints, 2001) indicates, not all independent producers just send packages. They also offer training. However, the otherwise very suitable hands-on training tends to focus on technical matters only. Responsible trainers carry out a needs assessment before designing the format of the training, but most volunteers have a modest educational background, and it takes a while – although it is also rewarding – to teach them the basics of radio programming techniques. In such a situation, the substance part remains limited. From a democracy standpoint, this poses a problem: if community radio becomes only a channel for individual expression, it easily remains uncritical and obedient to those in power in the community. Its advocacy potential remains modest.

All partners – the public regulator, the NCRF and the OSF-SA (Open Societies), as well as independent producers (Brett Davidson, interview, 2001, 2005) – seem to agree that more attention should be devoted to local governments and local governance. Community radio stations have a unique possibility, due to their geographic closeness to local government bodies, to check, to criticize and to analyse the activities of local governments and to encourage citizens to participate.
The community radio stations tend to concentrate around urban areas, although people there have access to other forms of media as well. Areas with practically no mass media at all have not been lucrative for the community radios, or they have given up the tedious procedure of applying for a licence. However, rural communities could provide a small-scale potential for collecting advertising as well, because there is not much competition available.5

The majority of community radio stations have a permanent or semi-permanent staff of two or three people, and a volunteer circle of 30–80 people, offering their services in return for travel expenses and occasional fringe benefits. Poor, often unemployed people simply seem to enjoy working and meeting new challenges, such as coping with a computer. They do not ask for recompense, against all Northern expectations (Keith Armstrong, interview, 2001). They enjoy learning new things.

The original idea of South African community radio was to mobilize the marginalized, and the public was not to comprise just an audience, its members could also work at the stations, getting involved, not only receiving information. However, this profile hardly fits the realities of the townships, where dozens of radio channels compete for receivers’ attention. In such locations, the community radio receiver is perhaps an individual who is already socially conscious. In part, this means that the community radio ‘is speaking to the converted’, but it also advocates for activity. According to licence regulations, community radio should focus on the whole community, on all age groups. In practice, this rarely happens. People lacking everything hardly have the time, interest or power to devote time to gathering information. This does not, however, reduce the relevance of community radio ideology. If the capacity of community activists is strengthened, the whole community will benefit, in one form or the other.

There is at least one receiver profile that does not fit too well into the community radio ideology: a young suburban or township receiver, who is fond of a particular programme format or a particular disc jockey at the station, who listens to several other stations as well – and if the community radio does not meet his or her liking, the station is dropped. It is easy to condemn the stations that have neglected the educational undertone and adopted the formats of commercial stations, but if the station is able to ‘hijack’ the minds of young receivers, this might well be a route to bring the leaders and power structures closer to the citizens.

Such a ‘lost generation’ of youngsters is also found in rural and semi-urban societies. In fact, they might be more attached to the community station, because no alternative channels for entertainment are available. Still, youngsters’ programme choices differ considerably from the rest of the community. They select predominantly music and skip the rest. The advocacy side of the community radio does not then get through.

The volunteers producing the programmes in townships and villages are predominantly young, male and better educated than the rest of the community. They definitely have a social mission – otherwise they would not do the demanding work without pay; although the work at the station might open avenues for further training and, thus, to permanent employment. They feel the ‘media thrill’, they are
interested in getting on the air. It is easier for them to relate, on the one hand, to the youth to which they belong, and, on the other hand, to the community. Both of these groups make their will known by contacting the station. However, the elderly scarcely make their viewpoint known at the station. Some elderly people have even openly resisted programmes on the stations, because sensitive issues – HIV/AIDS, sex education and family planning – have been brought up. The elderly are not against the political part of programming, but the ‘new’ social issues seem improper.

On the other hand, being out of work does not always mean that one is marginalized. Fairly often, a group of the unemployed want to get employment via a station, either at the stations themselves or via the potential the station offers concerning job creation and similar functions. Unemployment is a permanent feature in South African communities, where the rate often exceeds 50–60 percent. An unemployed person can lead a meaningful life – perhaps partly due to the existence of the community radio, which enables him or her to learn new things. It is not a simple task to define who is marginalized, and does it really matter if serious attempts to reach these groups are made or not?

**Democracy Radio: Substance Support**

Democracy Radio was a child of the dramatic and enthusiastic years of 1994–7, during which the ‘new’ South Africa shaped itself. There was an air of excitement, but on the other hand it was known that the ordinary person knew very little about how parliament works, what the budget is and how it is constructed, plus how a citizen can influence parliament’s activities. A well-established NGO, IDASA (Institute for a Democratic South Africa), had, since 1993, a radio unit, which prepared information programmes for radio stations before the elections. To expand its ability to spread information about sociopolitical and socioeconomic developments in society, IDASA designed a new project. For this, the sector of radio was chosen that was assessed as closest to the marginalized population: community radio. IDASA established Democracy Radio, a radio programme ‘features agency’, aimed at sending radio programmes to community radio stations free of charge and thus helping the stations to fill programme time with relevant material. Since 1998, Democracy Radio has sent out 45–50 programmes per year to some 50 stations. The full-scale activity came to an end in December 2004, when outside funding ceased. IDASA is planning to establish a Democracy Radio website, serving as a features agency and source for training.

The rationale of Democracy Radio has been to disseminate information on national policy issues in a manner that will render information accessible to ordinary people, to enable communities/interest groups to better understand national policy issues by simplifying and explaining complex information, and to create channels for intervention and opportunities for articulation, especially around socioeconomic issues.

The programmes targeted policy areas that affect service delivery (e.g. health, welfare, education, local government and housing). Each area would be related to
parliamentary sessions dealing with the same issues, thus including in the programmes a topical angle. Each programme would also incorporate a focus on how communities can proactively influence service delivery in their areas by making their input heard on a given issue. Advocacy advice would be tailored to the particular policy issue being discussed.

The programme model was first a 30-minute package of material, later on the length was reduced to 15 minutes. Each programme presented a short topical roundup and a larger focus description, attempting to highlight the core of the problem concerned. Each programme also covered citizen action in the form of short narratives correlating to the issues discussed in the focus part. The programmes gave also advice for advocacy and lobbying.

The reasoning behind such a package programme has been to make the programme as easy and simple as possible to use at the community stations. On the other hand, such a structure makes the programmes heavy with material. In the course of the years, the format was shortened and the style became slightly lighter than in the beginning. The choice of language caused debate, but finally English was chosen, because English sounded like the most proper language for nation-building. However, most community radio stations operate mainly in local languages. Thus, programmes were made in a language other than that used at the stations.

Before the two rounds of national elections in 2000, there were numerous foreign donors and independent producers who were interested in themes related to political processes. Since the elections, no producer other than Democracy Radio has been interested in the theme. There have been actors in the field focusing on HIV/AIDS, on health in general, on nutrition or on women’s issues, some also on agriculture. However, political institutions, policies and their implementation or local government are rarely covered by these producers, thus indicating the capricious mind of the international community, which has promised to safeguard and strengthen democratic processes in South Africa. Also, Democracy Radio was totally dependent on foreign assistance – it was at least temporarily brought to a standstill when its Finnish funding ceased.

As such, the selection of themes presented by Democracy Radio represented quite a conventional perception of democracy: the programmes repeatedly presented how democratic institutions operate and produce policy, but they also showed how policies are reflected in a common person’s life. Understanding how limited the knowledge of democratic institutions seems to be in the country, it was obviously justified to focus on political institutions and their work.

Roughly two-thirds of the programmes each year were devoted to genuinely political programmes, while the rest focused on health, social issues, domestic violence and features (see Table 1). In a series of five focus group discussions among radio listeners and participants in August 2001, quite contradictory opinions about the themes were expressed. Some wanted more local politics, some more programmes on women’s activities, some wanted more popular music. However, station managers themselves have been extremely satisfied with the programme themes.
The tendency seems to be that in election years and anniversary years such as 2004, political themes dominated the supply more strongly than in other years. Towards the end of the period, themes dealing with various aspects of local governance frequented the agenda. However, all Democracy Radio programmes in 2004 were considerably lighter and easier to follow than programmes produced in the earlier years. More than to delivery alone, democracy was linked to literature, art, music and humour.

The use of sources in Democracy Radio programmes has been exemplary. A range of sources, from decision-makers to ordinary citizens, were given a chance to express opinions – and so were dissident voices when there was a dispute. All sources were firmly asked to answer the questions and challenged if they declined to do so. This is a model very different from the one used by community radio stations. Local politicians are not willing to be interviewed, and when they do agree to an interview they tend to avoid the questions. As a woman in one of the focus groups (Qwa-Qwa) asked of community station presenters: ‘Why don’t you demand more from our leaders? Why are you so kind to them, although they do not bother to answer your questions?’ In Democracy Radio programmes, the treatment of sources was by no means tough but normal. However, the sources were brought to task if they failed to give an answer. This would give an example for the community radio stations in their own production work.

### Hyde Park, African Style

Namibia gained independence in 1990 as one of the latecomers on the African continent, with a constitution that became one of the most democratic in Africa. But it is not constitutions that make countries democratic, it is the implementation of the official texts. Thus, one of the most urgent tasks for the national broadcaster, NBC, was to develop a genuine profile for the institution, on the one hand, making a clear departure from the apartheid past and encouraging nation-building, but, on the other, also promoting reconciliation and freedom of expression. The main

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### TABLE 1


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of programmes</th>
<th>Policies and their implementation</th>
<th>Governance and elections</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
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<td>284</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mouthpiece for such endeavours was the radio, which is the most important medium in the country, now covering 98 percent of the population.

From the very beginning, radio had quite a challenging task in Namibia, because it was due to operate both in the form of a national channel, in English, as well as in six other languages, through what was called the Language Service. Quite a small proportion of the population was fluent in the new official language, English – in Namibia regarded as ‘neutral’ and without such bitter memories as German and Afrikaans carried. Hence, one of the roles of the National Radio was to promote nation-building, also via the new national language. Still, it was unavoidable to set up the Language Service. It operates even today in Afrikaans, Damara-Nama, German, Oshiwambo, Otjiherero and Rukavango languages.

In August 1991, the NBC board decided to introduce, at a 9–10 a.m. time slot, a ‘national window’, broadcasting in English on the National Radio but also being sent out on the whole spectrum of the Language Service channels. The board left the development of that particular time slot to the middle management. In his discussions with South African-born producer Robin Tyson, the then manager of National Radio, Rector Mutelo,9 recalled his visit to London and the strange experience he had in Hyde Park’s Speakers’ Corner, where speakers freely take the podium and cover in their speeches an incredible variety of topics. What if the time slot could be developed into such a platform for Namibians? The top leadership was hesitant but allowed the programme, called Chatshow, to be launched. Robin Tyson was chosen as the first presenter of the programme, and he remained in the job for many years. For many listeners, Tyson is still the symbol of the programme, he is ‘Mr Chatshow’. In the beginning, people did not dare to phone in, having lived through apartheid. For months to come, Tyson played mostly music on his live morning programme, but gradually people found it.

Later on, some Namibians would have liked to have seen the programme format as an immediate answer to the demands set by the Windhoek Declaration (1991), expressing the significance of freedom of expression and the need for a multiplicity of mediascapes in Africa. However, according to the individuals (Rector Mutelo, Robin Tyson, interviews, 2002) who put the programme on the air, the two were parallel but separate processes, taking place independently from each other. No doubt, however, Chatshow, quite soon unofficially renamed the ‘People’s Parliament’ by its listeners, would have been killed off early on without the somewhat euphoric atmosphere following the Windhoek Conference.

The programme was established to give people a platform to vent their anger, stemming from the country’s bitter past. Chatshow was meant to become a platform to heal, to promote peace, unity and nation-building, and to create a culture of tolerance. The idea was not to bury differences but to develop a meaningful discussion between the government and opposition. Further, the role of Chatshow was to promote the use of the English language among so-called ordinary citizens (Mutelo, interview, 2002).

It can be claimed that of the two main objectives, nation-building and reconciliation, nation-building seems to have been more strongly promoted over the years. Partly, this is due to the whole set-up: each large language group has been
approached separately. Furthermore, the prohibition of racially related statements has perhaps led to the fact that all callers are fairly careful about talking about people’s skin colour or tribal background, because these were the primary reasons for discrimination during the apartheid era. A devil’s advocate could in fact state that the structure of the programme family – approaching language groups separately – and the deliberate avoidance of tribalism in content are slightly contradictory. In practice, however, these considerations do not appear marked. The National Radio programmes, *Chatshow* and *Open Line*, are no doubt the main mouthpieces of what is now known throughout the country as the ‘People’s Parliament’. The programmes in other languages have been used mainly for localizing problems and activating people who are not fluent in English.

**A Programme for the Adult Majority**

Today, *Chatshow* is a national institution and, as such, quite a unique one. It is still broadcast every weekday at 9–10 a.m., with a feedback session at 1–2 p.m. and its sister programme, called *Open Line*, aired at 9.30–10.30 p.m. With repeats, the daily volume of People’s Parliament programmes on the National Radio reaches four hours on weekdays. In addition to the National Radio, *Chatshow* has sister programmes on all six channels of the Language Service. This group of phone-in programmes, and the feedback sessions attached to them, has grown into an institution. Some 12,000 calls are made annually to the various People’s Parliament programmes. The idea of the feedback session is to provide individuals and institutions criticized in *Chatshow* the opportunity to defend themselves and to offer information on their activities.

The platform is free for people to express themselves on politics, on the economy, on military issues, on abortion, on local government, on bad roads, on poor service in public and private institutions, or on world politics. Roughly two-thirds of the contributions include a question, most others offer comments or broader views. Over the years, both National Radio and the Language Services have acquired some true friends who contribute to the programmes on a frequent basis, but there are also occasional callers who are regular listeners but do not often contribute actively. Furthermore, most regular callers have their own ‘networks’, which provide them with questions and enquiries. Instead of phoning in themselves, people approach a person known for their ability to express themselves well. Usually, each programme carries eight to ten discussions based around two or three themes, and the discussions continue on following days. If the focus is on an individual’s behaviour, the discussions tend to die out quite soon, while a debate of a more universal nature might continue on and off for more than a month.

Namibia is a large country with a rather small population of only 1.8 million. Radio is listened to daily by almost 90 percent of the population. According to NBC listener statistics, the People’s Parliament reaches 63–70 percent of the potential audience in all services. The People’s Parliament ranks among the favourites of all radio programmes.
Although the idea of introducing feedback sessions was to strengthen the power of the programme, to force decision-makers and institutions to increase transparency, the popularity – based on audience figures – of the feedback sessions has not come close to the figures of the phone-ins. While roughly two-thirds of the potential audience listen to the phone-ins, only one-third listen to the feedback programmes. The People’s Parliament programmes are thus offering an arena for self-expression rather than programmes increasing one’s knowledge level on a variety of matters.

No listener surveys have been carried out, but the presenters say that the core audience is composed of middle-aged and older age groups. Thus, while more than half of the total population is under 20, the People’s Parliament reaches mainly middle-aged and elderly citizens. Young people do not feel strongly about politics and society in general. They tend to prefer commercial radio stations, of which there are an abundance especially in the capital Windhoek and in bigger towns. In the countryside, the NBC stations are the only ones available. Two out of three Namibians still live in rural areas.

Another group often distancing itself from the People’s Parliament comprises intellectuals who consider the programme banal, offering an easy way to let off steam, but operating on an individual basis, and thus not creating any harm to the existing power structure. Most power-holders, however, have openly expressed their appreciation for the phone-ins. Although politicians and civil servants are often annoyed about the issues brought up by the People’s Parliament, they do admit that the programme also offers a unique perspective on life outside the chambers of power, nationally or locally. Most contributors to the People’s Parliament are community activists, but in a sparsely inhabited country, with much of the formal activity concentrated in Windhoek, the agenda of the regions is still different from that of the power elites. On several occasions, members of parliament have stated that they follow the People’s Parliament in order to know what people think.

The broadcast time also reflects on the audience. Most People’s Parliament programmes are aired during working hours, and obviously many workplaces do not mind their workers listening to Chatshow. More complaints have been filed about the fact that some evening programmes overlap with the main television news bulletin.

With the exception of the two predominantly white listener groups in the Afrikaans Service (female: male ratio 50:50) and the German Service (female 55: male 45), a vast majority of callers are men, the total ratio being something like female 30: male 70. This characteristic can hardly be a reflection of transmission time only, although it clearly favours housewives, pensioners and the unemployed, and a higher proportion of white than black women in Namibia stay at home. Rather, it can be explained by the traditional role of women among the Namibian black and coloured populations. Women are supposed to keep quiet and be reserved. From this standpoint, white – German- or Afrikaans-speaking – women are more liberated, although they might be politically conservative. Among the Afrikaans and German broadcasts, women seem to be more concerned about particular services and the poor performance of civil servants, which are quite practical matters, while
men are far more opinionated on general issues. Big political themes are predominantly left to male callers.

As shown in the 2003 MISA Media Monitoring Survey, most comments and debates in the People’s Parliament are critical of the state of affairs on a local, regional, national or international level. Only rarely do people phone in to say that they are pleased with the way the society and the world is run. Twice – a few years back – the programmes were shelved for some time due to some heated discussions that arose on tribal matters. In principle, only racist remarks or incitement to tribalism are forbidden in the People’s Parliament programmes, all other themes and opinions are allowed. However, every now and then, disputes have arisen about the house rules. In some rare cases, an offensive style of presentation has caused opposition or even an open fight, as in August 2002 on Chatshow, when a white commercial farmer remarked that he would rather set fire to his farms than give them to black farmers. Besides the moderator, many regular callers reacted and used inflammatory language themselves. A few nights later, the white farmer apologized for his statement. The question of land ownership seems to be a theme that easily causes heated debate, because a similar incident took place in the Otjiherero-language programme in February 2003.

A One-Year Round-Up

Throughout the one-year period studied (March 2002–February 2003), the question of land ownership appeared on the agenda at frequent intervals. Most of the People’s Parliament programmes discussed whether or not the size of land (10 hectares) allocated to communal farmers was large enough, while the German Service (indirectly representing the largest group of land owners), especially, debated over whether the approach taken by the government was justified or not. They also made frequent references to the situation in Zimbabwe, stressing differences between the two countries. Furthermore, discussions on the marked difference between the interests of commercial and communal farmers were pointed out, mainly by callers to the German Service.

Another theme relevant throughout the year was the drought and drought relief aid offered to various parts of the country. Callers to the Oshiwambo Service (in the northern region of the country) were especially concerned about this issue, both the drought as such and the government’s inability to arrange well-functioning drought aid. Isolated incidents of racial problems featured throughout the year, but most of these were quite subtle. Instead, complaints about poor service by national or regional – mainly public – institutions were a prevalent topic and caused bitter, although short-lived discussions.

Most of the People’s Parliament programmes feature negative or critical aspects, big or small, but some of them are considerably more critical than others. All feedback programmes clearly have a defensive tone. The programmes can also be divided into politics or service oriented. This way one can develop a rough matrix (Figure 1), although the divisions between different categories are somewhat blurred, and it is difficult to define what criteria on the attitude axis might represent...
a neutral stance, especially when related to a political issue – in fact, a neutral stance only emerges mainly in debates around certain foreign issues. The two categories of politics and services are quite clearly distinguishable. Services cover both public and private services. Typical cases are debates on how particular institutions treat their clients or students. In this category, complaints about discrimination against special groups – women, war veterans, people from the rural areas – formed a clear category. In a few cases, complaints about covert racism also came up, and they fell into this category; according to callers, people of different colours were not treated equally.

Thus, the selection of items comes quite close to that in South Africa’s Democracy Radio. In Democracy Radio, the choice was made by media professionals, but based on discussions with community radio volunteers; in the People’s Parliament, the choice is made by individual callers. However, in almost two-thirds of the items, the theme discussed in the People’s Parliament programmes have also recently appeared in the news media. The moderator tends to pick either ‘big’ themes to be debated in parliament, or such items that have created debate in the media. In short, the selection by the moderator tends to be based on that day’s readings. However, media-based items brought up independently by callers have already appeared in the media some time earlier. Partly, this is no doubt a reflection of the fact that media distribution and use in the country are not as fast as in industrialized countries. Also, the reason for the ‘brewing up’ of a particular theme might be based on an agenda-setting function. When the media repeatedly publish a certain item, it gradually arouses the receivers.

Especially in the case of new laws being passed by parliament, the People’s
Parliament focuses either on the implementation and its effects or selects a side-issue that has not received much attention. Thus, there is also spontaneity in items originating from the media agenda. The links with the media agenda are more frequent when politics, policies or particular events are discussed. The spontaneity is far larger in themes linked to poor services. They are obviously based mainly on individual experience, either the caller’s own or that of somebody they know.

Thus, it is perhaps justified to state that, as such, the social publicity arena created by the programmes is rather reactive than proactive, following a table set by the power elite and the media. But given that, the debates might take quite unexpected turns.

When assessing the pros and cons expressed in the phone calls, it is worth noting that the word ‘establishment’ stands for different things in different situations. If services are under discussion, the establishment directly or indirectly refers to public institutions responsible for training, social benefits, health care, etc. Even if criticism is directed to private services, the final source for criticism is often a public organization that is accused of neglecting its task of regulation and control; Namibia is a country with a strong public grip in a variety of fields. On the other hand, the basic line of politics is rarely questioned, although individuals belonging to the power elite – even the president – can be criticized.

It is clear that the German Service talks more about the land issue than the others, because it is a very relevant issue for this language group, owning most of the big farms. In the same way, the Oshiwambo Service (in the north, an especially strong support constituency for the dominant political party, SWAPO) is concerned about the continuous unrest on the Angolan border. Although land ownership is also a vital issue in the north, most callers to the Ewilyamanguluka programme seem to approve the government line of careful, gradual action with regard to this extremely sensitive issue. The Angolan border is close and is causing problems, and many services are more poorly organized than in the south of the country. Thus, the complaints are directed to less sensitive, but still relevant issues.

The German and Afrikaans programmes focus more on services than politics, but some policy criticism can also emerge. These programmes have a fairly contradictory profile. The tone changes when issues relevant to their population group are brought up. The Oshiwambo programme is an example of strong pro-establishment politics and policies orientation. The northern provinces, as mentioned earlier, are strong supporters of the governing SWAPO Party. Nevertheless, on the services axis, this programme can also present critical views about how people have been treated by public institutions. Chatshow could perhaps be best characterized as an ‘all-round’ channel, covering pro-establishment, neutral and anti-establishment views, mainly indicating a politics orientation, but also including debates on services. Most feedback programmes fall into the services and neutral box; obviously the producers try mainly to get replies for the services questions rather than party views. During the elections campaigns, it is strictly forbidden to bring onto the programme politicians running for election, but every now and then such persons still appear on the programmes.
Citizenship Links

As indicated earlier, the People's Parliament mostly discusses the ‘big’ issues, although bad treatment encountered by ordinary citizens in various institutions and services is an ‘evergreen’ topic. It can be said that people are pursuing their rights in relation to the services offered by public institutions. They want their self-esteem to be protected. The intellectual gap between the challengers and the challenged is often obvious in these kinds of debates. The person who has been mistreated elaborates on his or her presentation, often with lengthy deliberation, and can be quite emotional. Most callers represent the lively African oral tradition, although they do not always speak their mother tongue. But a public official, explaining his or her actions, tends to avoid narrative and adopts a bureaucratic vocabulary.

Obviously, the People's Parliament operates partly as a system to release tension, via the feedback programmes; a superficial impression of two-way communication is created and perhaps even the idea that the programme can really change things. It is difficult to assess how many issues really have been changed because of the programme. Many politicians claim that they have followed the advice given by the People Parliament, but no follow-up has ever been done.

In Democracy Radio programmes, the link with the ordinary person came through carefully chosen soundbites, which the community radio stations could use in other programmes as well. However, the citizen-level comments definitely lacked the spontaneity that the voices in the People's Parliament represent. But, the People’s Parliament is definitely not a clear-cut grassroots medium, either. The issues raised in the programmes are nationally or regionally significant – at the very least, they have a regional dimension. Village-level or suburb-based issues are seldom brought up. But a ‘big’ issue is often combined with a link to the grassroots. While discussing a political matter, callers often name themselves, their relatives or friends as those affected by a particular practice. On the other hand, some participants like to keep the discussion more on the level of principles. This is most probably a reflection of the fact that the majority are used to expressing themselves on social matters, either due to better education or their role as a community activist.

Some 55–60 percent of the People's Parliament phone discussions deal with socially relevant matters, and do so in an amazingly open manner. Policies and politicians are criticized, civil servants challenged, but the line of criticism practically always deals with the implementation of policies, not with the basic political line as such. In maintaining this, the moderators have a central position. They regulate and lead the discussions in such a way that the border is not crossed. However, these discussions no doubt have a strong link to strengthening or reinforcing citizenship, as Europeans assess the development of democracy. From a political perspective, Democracy Radio has definitely been not only more consistent but also more daring in its choice of items. The debates have expressed real opinion differences, and they have dealt with big, basic issues – but perhaps too big for many villagers listening to community radio.

The People’s Parliament family of programmes supports individuals and their right to discuss public matters. The strengthening of the public sphere comes up
rarely. Even rarer is any sign of mobilization or organization. The white minority, speaking mainly German or Afrikaans, still has a strong hold on the country’s economy. Questions touching such deep power relations emerge occasionally in the People’s Parliament debates, but the cases are few and they focus mostly on the sensitive land ownership problem. Participants tend to avoid questions on the economic problems, but they frequently attack both the government and politicians. Politics is obviously still closer to the individual citizen than economic structures, which are in large part hidden from most people.

Understanding of otherness does not come up too often in the debates, and if such issues do arise, they adhere fairly clearly to the dominant values on women’s place, relations between elders and youth and the urban–rural contradiction. The conservative tone was especially obvious in debates around the Domestic Violence Bill, which was tabled in parliament in 2004. Male and female callers to Chatsshow disagreed strongly on this particular issue; in other People’s Parliament programmes, men almost totally dominated the debate, agreeing with the majority of members of parliament. Domestic violence has been a prominent issue in South Africa as well, and, at least once a year, Democracy Radio produced a programme on it. Both women listeners and station managers have indicated that they would have liked to have more of this kind of programme. Another similarly popular theme in both countries is working conditions and work security, understandable in societies with a high unemployment rate. The theme became more significant in Democracy Radio programmes in the recent years.

Only very seldom have wounds from the past been touched on in the People’s Parliament, mainly around official occasions like the Heroes’ Day ceremonies. The German-speaking programme discussions were very different from the rest, positioning German-speakers as the other in this situation. Callers claimed that only whites were involved in the preparations, labelling them as ‘Boers and colonialists’. On Democracy Radio, the ‘rainbow’ ideology and need for tolerance have been reiterated far more than on its Namibian counterpart. However, Democracy Radio has not been willing to bring up memories from the past as such.

As foreign others, those appearing most frequently on both radio set-ups are Angolans and Zimbabweans. Members of the Angolan army bring instability to the northern regions of Namibia, and their wild and violent behaviour is referred to. However, the unrest is not presented in a political light but rather as instances of looting by badly behaved individuals. All but the German-speaking People’s Parliament and some Afrikaans speakers have been quite careful about voicing their opinions on the Zimbabwean situation, although all emphasize that such contradictions that exist in Zimbabwe would not be possible in Namibia. About this particular issue, white callers use stronger words. Still, it can be said that the People’s Parliament is harsher towards Namibia’s own politicians than those of other African countries. The phenomenon is, however, an example of African courtesy. Leaders and decision-making machineries in other countries should be respected – leaders are leaders and merit respect. In the home arena, things are different, because citizens know more about the issues in question.

Democracy Radio has adopted the same tone. The case of Zimbabwe has been
discussed quite carefully, and a far more popular theme has been African unity, in politics, trade and education. Programmes on foreign themes have been rare, and they tend to remain on the policy level.

**Alternative or Releaser of Tension?**

At first sight, the People’s Parliament and South African community radio appear to be at either end of a continuum. The first was born within a public broadcasting system but by accident has grown into an institution. The latter is marked simultaneously by considerable deliberate media planning and a great potential for genuine grassroots orientation. However, the reality is not so obvious. Much of the commentary and theorization around community radio takes a strongly normative position. They emphasize the connection between community participation and democratic values. This throws into question the definition of ‘community’. Should it be the potential audience covered by the broadcast footprint, should it be those who choose to listen to the station but take no further action to interact with it, or should it be confined to those who involve themselves with the station’s operation and management? In fact, both the People’s Parliament in Namibia and the sophisticated empowerment paradigm developed in educational broadcasting in South Africa (e.g. Barnett, 2004) indicate that the public service paradigm could at least have a chance in such media-strong parts of Africa as South Africa and Namibia. Despite undeniably unbending bureaucratic administration and occasional political pressure, the public service formula has been able to both challenge and implement various elements attached to highly ambivalent ‘liberal’ notions, like empowerment and participation.

On the other hand, Andrew Crisell (1994: 181–99) has a fairly cynical view of telephone contact programmes. According to this author, they do not represent real interaction. They merely confirm that the channel is open and people at both ends of the channel somehow understand each other. Callers can be divided into three types: expressive, exhibitionist and confessional. The first group fulfils a caller’s need to bring his or her opinions into the public arena and to create an illusion of the ability to challenge those in power. The second group represents people who simply want to perform publicly: the issue in question is of secondary significance. The third group characterizes people with problems: they want their personal problems to be dealt with publicly. Other researchers have also emphasized that the power in phone-ins remains with the moderator in the studio.

Most of these researchers are talking about light entertainment programmes in terms of western, media-rich culture. Such descriptions are not so appropriate to the People’s Parliament programmes – although, no doubt, there is always a hint of exhibitionism displayed by the programme participants. The People’s Parliament programmes have a far more essential, informational function than western entertainment programmes; the latter serve to keep the channels to their audience open rather than to provide real information. The popularity of the People’s Parliament programmes expressed by their listeners could perhaps be interpreted as an indication of an experienced will to challenge the authorities. Another issue is
whether or not the People’s Parliament really is interactive in the same sense as community media – ideally, at least – are.

Compared with ‘pure’ community media, the weakness with both South African community radio and the People’s Parliament perhaps lies in the fact that the radio is still used as an arena by individuals. The power structures are also aware of this, and thus these media are allowed to operate freely because they approach people as individuals, not as organized citizens. They lack the structures to pursue and achieve change. In this sense, both forums really do resemble the Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park or the letters-to-the-editor tradition: anyone is able to say almost whatever she or he wants, because what is said has little influence.

In the Namibian case, the People’s Parliament does perhaps have some enforcement power through the very fact that the programmes themselves have become a national institution. It does not have power of implementation as such, but with its continuous bombardment on, say, the run up to elections, it is able to cause the administration some unease. It brings into the arena unwanted issues, although it does not have the capacity to organize action. Citizens are informed, and they have the option to become interested in general politics, as viewed by the ancient Greeks. However, the system of bringing issues into the public arena is quite haphazard, if not anarchistic. People want to talk about issues that are either very close to their lifeworlds or are interesting for their exoticism. The final push for mobilization is lacking. Many vital issues might be bypassed unnoticed, because they are hidden deep within the administration structures. If they do emerge and attract the attention of Chatshow activists, in most cases they have already advanced to such a stage that nothing can be done to change the course of events or policy line.

As contradictory as it might sound, the People’s Parliament in fact appears more spontaneous than most South African community radio and its support organization, Democracy Radio. Only very rarely is a community radio station born out of genuine communication needs; in most cases, it is established as an NGO activity because the activists behind it – outsiders or community members – know that this is a project that can get outside financing. The situation resembles that of the 1970s, when literacy papers were established as appendices to the huge literary campaigns in various parts of Africa. Practically all of these died out as soon as outside financing ceased. ‘A gift from outside’ is not a good formula for media channels, because it is not based on genuine needs. Democracy Radio, with all its fine objectives, is a clear example of such a gift, although it has produced good programmes and carried out valuable training at the stations. In a way, it represents a welcomed ‘other’ in the world of the stations, filled with local contradictions.

The role left for these media types is, then, simply to release tension. The programme activity, in fact, works to strengthen existing power structures, by giving an illusion of power not only to those who engage in discussion over the airwaves but also to those who only listen. But however powerless these ‘new’ media institutions may be, they no doubt expand the communication sphere. So-called common people, local activists perhaps, but not public figures, have learned to articulate and defend their opinions in public without fear, and simultaneously to reinforce the traditional African oral culture, respecting debate and narration.
One of the most important human needs is security of survival, but ‘unity’ is necessary for the maintenance of peace and achieving the security needed for survival. . . . Two questions likely to be asked are whether all human activities are directed towards security or survival, and second, how far freedom to express ethnicity can be tolerated if it jeopardizes the security of survival of a multiethnic nation. If we wish to include the three Western ethical values—freedom, justice and security of survival—and at the same time maintain the three indigenous values—love, peace and unity—the choice of supreme value would be very difficult to make in dealing with multiethnic groups. The two ethical systems have the same end. (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1998: 90)

If one takes as a point of departure the typology Chris Atton (2002: 24–6) has developed of various forms of alternative communication, it becomes clear that neither the People’s Parliament programme family nor Democracy Radio fit into any of the categories, although community radio as a type might be included in his definitions. Likewise, it is even more difficult to place the People’s Parliament or Democracy Radio into the category of ‘New Social Movements’, which John Downing (2001: 24–35) views as the core of activity that radical media networks can support. Nevertheless, at least some community radio stations can come close to such movements. However, if one analyses the points James Scott (1990: 15–19, 120) makes about ‘infra-politics’ of social groups and classes, the situation appears somewhat different. Infra-politics expresses real, private levels of resistance and anger, i.e. obvious economic exploitation as well as the less visible personal humiliation or experience of it. Scott argues that many theorists are too willing to overlook ‘the massive middle ground, in which conformity is often a self-conscious strategy and resistance is a carefully balanced affair that avoids all-or-nothing confrontations’ (Scott, 1985: 285). This middle ground is, according to Scott, occupied by a constant testing of limits. From Scott’s writings, a panorama of oppositional cultures opens up, some of them strongly oppositional and action-oriented, others reactions to pressures in one’s own lifeworld and media representations.

In Scott’s line of thinking, the mode of communication is by no means decisive, but the content is. In such a multitude of alternatives, the People’s Parliament also fits well, and questions around top–down or bottom–up lose much of their significance. The present Namibian ‘no policy’ media policy has allowed a quite exceptional media mode to develop and flourish within a quite strongly regulated public company, and due to its network form and decentralization of production, the People’s Parliament is not easy to eradicate. It is by no means a final answer to a quest for media that are able to heal, unite and strengthen freedom of expression, but it is a programme with a defined mission. In the case of South Africa, such supportive structures as Democracy Radio should not be needed in the long run, but for the time being, Democracy Radio might lead its group of community radio stations towards some kind of ‘people’s parliament’ as well, no longer being dependent on programmes produced by external forces. Empowerment and participation are words that are easy to use but extremely difficult to implement. Both the People’s Parliament and Democracy Radio could be considered as ‘stopover stations’ on the way to conscientization in the style of Freire (e.g. Freire, 1998: 37–48), using communication channels to generate dialogue and to enable people to talk together and to understand one another.
Appendix

The following is a list of interviews, discussion forums and survey material carried out or referred to in the course of this study.

South Africa (August 2001, January 2005)

Armstrong, Chris, partnership manager, National Community Radio Forum (NCRF).
Davidson, Brett, project manager, IDASA/Democracy Radio.
Mati, Shepi, producer, Democracy Radio.
Mnyeni, Siviwe, research and information manager, Interfund.
Representatives of Bush Radio, Qwa-Qwa Community Radio, Soshanguve Community Radio, Naledi Community Radio, Radio KC, Valley FM and Khwezi FM.
Five focus group discussions in Naledi, Qwa-Qwa and Soshanguve.


Amupala, Johannes, consultant.
Kavita, Mickey, NBC Otjherero Service.
Mutelo, Rector, director general of radio, NBC.
Tyson, Robin, lecturer, University of Namibia.
Representatives of NBC National Service and Language Services.
Four focus group discussions in October 2002 and April 2003 with People's Parliament participants in Kawango, Rundu and Windhoek.

Notes

1. The proportions are very rough and indicate only crude trends. The calculations are based on UNESCO Statistical Yearbooks 1990, 1995, 2001 and 2002. The figures as such are not very reliable, and even more unreliable are the definitions of ‘regular use’. In any case, the trend in the coverage of public radio seems to be on a downturn while commercial radio is on an upturn. Commercial radio stations are based in towns or around them, while the majority of community radio stations are located in the countryside. Newspaper readership seems to be on the same level as in the late 1980s, although the number of newspaper titles has doubled.

2. Afrobarometer Series, based on a sample of 2200 South Africans, carried out from 6 July to 6 August 2000. A similar survey was carried out in late 1999 and early 2000 in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia and Lesotho. The results have been reported in Mattes et al. (2000).

3. See, for example, Kivikuru (2001). The government, via the Department of Communication at the Ministry of Communication (DoC), allocates licences for community radios, but only roughly one-third has received the equipment from the DoC, another third from the Open Societies (OSF-SA) and the rest from various donors. The Department of Communication is also the institution that takes care of the new support policy of giving subsidy for community radio stations to produce programmes on selected topics.

4. Namibia has a leading position in Africa in statistics of newspaper availability, produced by UNESCO and WAN.

5. ‘I have been losing customers but since I am advertising on Mafisa my clients are coming back to me’; ‘KCR is accessible, efficient, low cost. We can network through the station and get other projects. All the projects in Kathonus endorse the station. The quality is excellent, the people are motivated and show courage and love for the development of the community’ (excerpts from First Footprints, 2001).
6. These were held in Naledi, Qwa-Qwa and Soshanguve, collecting altogether 36 participants.
9. Rector Mutelo returned to NBC Radio in 2002, this time as director general for radio.
10. The Afrikaans-language programme is called Spreekbeurt; the Damara-Nama-language programme, Khom #Gaots Ra-e Khom (Air Your Opinion); the German broadcasts, Telefonhörer and Radiotreff, the Oshiwambo-language programme, Ewilyamanguluka (Open Voice), the Otjiherero-language programme, Eraka rOtjiwana (The Voice of the Nation); and the Rukavango-language programme, Mudukuli (People’s Parliament). All have their feedback sessions, and some offer feedback within the phone-in programmes as well.
11. Probably the best-known national figure is a blind liberation activist veteran in Windhoek known as Uncle Paul, contributing both to the National Radio and the Oshiwambo service, but there are quite a few frequent regional callers as well. Quite often these characters are either people with a ‘known past’ (freedom fighters, etc.) or present-day activists (members of NGOs).

References
KIVIKURU: TOP–DOWN OR BOTTOM–UP?


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