The Wilderness of the Public Sphere: Clandestine Radio in Africa

Jendele Hungbo
University of the Witwatersrand
Abstract

The role of the media continues to be central in understanding the concept of the public sphere put forward by German scholar Jurgen Habermass. However, the various strictures which characterize the public sphere constituted especially by the media in Africa reverberate in the emergence and subsequent multiplicity of clandestine radio stations, which deploy the transnationalism of the airwaves and the technological convergence blurring various borders, which before now proved impregnable for media messages, to set up alternative spaces through which diverse views are ventilated. In taking its own share of a phenomenon which since its emergence in the early 1930s has continued to impact on the political history of various states, this subversive and underground version of the mediated public sphere makes a loud statement about the failure of the policies and processes which pretend to democratize the medium of radio in Africa. This paper seeks, therefore, to explore the ways in which these ‘voices in the wilderness’, seeking to break the hegemonies of the mainstream media, reflect the absence yet of a free media environment in spite of the deregulation of broadcasting which has taken place in numerous African countries. The paper concludes by hinting at the potential of a persistence of this transgression of the public sphere in Africa except there are new ways of implementing media deregulation policies in many African countries.

Introduction

The role of the media in society has become one subject which continues to attract critical attention from scholars, professionals and even nonprofessionals or social commentators from within and outside the media industry itself. The justification for this level of attention being paid to the media can be found in the seemingly overwhelming impact of the media on various spheres of human endeavour. For societies experiencing socio-political transition, the role of the media becomes quite fundamental as an agent in the mobilization and conscientization of the populace. In addition to this is the crucial role of the media as a repository of power in contemporary society. The contestation for power which manifests itself through the use of the media at both the local and international levels in contemporary society is such that further positions media studies as one form of social engagement too difficult to ignore. Again, the rise of social
movements as well as organizations interested in the control of political power in emerging African states also contribute, in no small measure, to the centrality of the media in the scheme of things. More importantly, radio, with the immense capacity of reach and access becomes a medium aggressively hunted by different players in the manipulative tussle for dominance. Stephen Barnard observes that radio is ‘the most pervasive, the most readily available, the least escapable of all mass media’ (1989: vi). As a result of this pervasiveness, the influence of the media generally, and that of radio in particular, can no longer be taken for granted because of their ‘power to shape cultural values and identities’ (Hendy, 2007: 18).

Through various programme genres ranging from news to commentaries and talk shows radio, especially in societies undergoing one form of transition or the other, becomes a platform which offers ‘a focus for considerable public debate’ (Tolson, 2001: 3). This platform is of a fundamental significance to the landscape of popular democratic cultures as much as the various programme formats take on contemporary issues germane to the progress of society. In emerging democratic societies where the media, especially radio, play a prominent role in providing direction and setting agenda for public discourse, the kind of engagement as well as volume of access allowed the various contending forces becomes a major determinant of the unanimity or dispersal apparent in the polity. Again, the ability to foster a culture of open critical debate in the mode of what the German social philosopher, Jurgen Habermas envisions as major ideal of the public sphere becomes a crucial challenge for the media in the face of policies drawn up by the state, or better still the ruling elite, in order to control power. Beyond this is the importance of radio as a major transmitter of culture in the contemporary society. This cultural transmission function is performed by the medium through the broadcast of news, music, drama and other forms of programmes which appropriate the cultural practices of the people who constitute radio’s audiences. A closer look at radio shows that a lot of interests, including the political, have found space in the medium for the actualization of different kinds of objectives which tend to advance their causes either in favour of society or otherwise. Radio thus becomes a channel through which different interest groups in society seek to reach the people with different kinds of messages and ideologies. In other words, the medium of radio has grown beyond the capabilities as an instrument of relaxation and entertainment, with which it was traditionally credited, to
become ‘more than a music box’ (Crisell, 2004). This growth has also brought with it so many attractions including the urge to investigate different aspects of the medium.

**The Importance of Radio in Africa**

The experience of the African continent, no doubt, makes radio a very crucial medium for the dissemination of information. This stems from the literacy level, the limited technology available as well as the paucity of basic infrastructure in most African countries. Added to these is the pervasiveness of radio and its ability to reach even remote communities and settlements where other forms of media encounter difficulty in making an impact. These factors perhaps inform the contention of Alfred Snider that:

> Radio is the most pervasive of the electronic media, in large part because of its characteristics. It has fewer technological requirements than its electronic competitors. Its range is greater than conventional television and involves less equipment than satellite TV. As a result, it is accessible to the vast majority of the world’s population. (Snider, 2005: 11)

Steve Buckley tends to agree with Snider on the importance of radio to different kinds of population spread across the developed and the developing world. For Buckley ‘only one electronic communication medium has become both an intimate and pervasive presence throughout the developed world and penetrated into the remotest rural areas of the poorest countries. That, of course, is radio’ (Buckley, 2000: 181). In advancing a similar argument, Briohny Clark (2006) comes to the obvious conclusion that ‘radio is affordable, flexible and sustainable.’ Linking the questions of affordability and access to Africa and similarly economically disadvantaged climes Jonathan Temin argues that ‘radios themselves are inexpensive and often function as public goods, as a small number of sets can serve an entire community’ (Temin, 2003: 655). Radio, therefore, becomes a medium for popular and participative communication through which different categories of people and institutions seek to advance their views and interests.
The mobile nature of radio sets also constitutes a great advantage for the medium. This mobility is further enhanced by the availability of transistor radios, the evolution of which has greatly transformed the history and importance of radio in the field of communication. As Andrew Crisell observes:

Not only did the transistor allow the listener to take her radio anywhere, for it was no longer a fixture of the home or factory but could go with her to the seaside or out into the country; it greatly extended the number of things she could do while listening, such as working out in the garden or even driving her car. (Crisell, 1994: 29)

Apart from the portability of transistor radios, a radio set comes with almost every new car manufactured in recent times, taxi drivers fix the device in their cars and in some African countries like Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, Togo and Benin Republic commercial motorcycle riders are now fond of having radio sets attached to their bikes. Radio messages, in addition to breaking the barrier of illiteracy through the use of local languages in their simplest forms, also reach different people without discrimination and the receivers or listeners require less intellectual exertion to understand the message. This accessibility, in a sense, benefits the African continent more than any other as the people continue to seek valuable information on various issues affecting their lives on a daily basis. It is quite obvious that a lot of the decisions people make is based on information available to them, through the media; hence the quantum of importance which the media enjoys today in various forms of discourse having to do with transformation and development. Vicky Randall agrees with the views of Snider and Buckley on the prime of place that radio occupies in the dissemination of information even to the remotest of communities around the world. In relating the crucial role of the electronic media to the question of development in different ramifications, Randall concludes that the importance of the media to the development of democracy in Africa is a matter of ‘critical importance for the understanding of continuity and change in contemporary political systems’ (Randall, 1998: 1). In a similar vein, Mary Myers, who draws on the experience of the role of radio in promoting democracy in Mali submits that ‘radio is perhaps the most natural ‘press’ for a largely non-literate country…. In many ways radio is the tangible modern extension of oral tradition.’ (Myers, 1998: 201). The same argument reverberates in Clark’s (2006) contention that ‘the oral nature of radio and other

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1 This trend may indeed not be limited to the West African sub-region.
broadcast media can merge with the Aboriginal oral culture in which alphabetic writing is not traditionally used.’ This question of orality is quite crucial to the primacy of the medium of radio and its significance for audiences on the African continent as radio merely replicates and extends the already existing or predominant oral culture which forms the base of the society. In this manner, a community’s level of literacy becomes inconsequential in the determination of access to information about contemporary issues bordering on personal and communal development.

Approaching the issue of the importance of radio from an ideological (neo-Marxist) point of view, Graham Hayman and Ruth Tomaselli contend that:

In modern urban society within a large nation-state, the radio is clearly the medium through which many people experience the world beyond the geographical limits of their daily life. The act of listening to the radio (switching on the receiver in the family home, with one or more members of the family present) could be considered as a daily habit or ritual in which ideology is present. (Hayman and Tomaselli, 1989: 2)

This view not only hints at the importance of radio in the political landscape and the search for transformation in different facets of life, but also tries to draw our attention to the transnational as well as transcontinental orientation of radio as a medium of communication. Over the years, evidence has shown that radio can transcend various barriers which would have otherwise inhibited the realization of the medium’s potential as a means of mass communication. This also explains why, as Leonard Sussman reports, ‘three-quarters of the nations of the world regularly censor or in other ways control the flow of information within, into, and out of their countries’ (1982: 176). With the emergence of new media, the internet mainly, radio has just found an ally in the spreading of its transnationality and transcontinentiality as radio stations now set up websites on which people can read information and also listen to live programme streams from any part of the world. Two typical examples illustrate the transnational nature of radio, at least at a sub-regional level. The first is the case of Talk Radio 702 which is based in Cape Town, South

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2 There is yet a contentious debate on what constitutes new or old media. Here, I intend to adopt the position of Francis Nyamnjoh (2005), reinforced by Paddy Scannell (2007), in which he sees radio especially in Africa as constituting part of new media because of the peculiarities of development on the continent when compared to the developed economies of the West.
Africa but broadcasts opposition news and interviews which are received in Zimbabwe. Also Studio 7, run by the Voice of America broadcasts daily into Zimbabwe where it is difficult for opposition radio to officially obtain operational licences. The second example is that of Radio Ouake, one of several Beninoise community radio stations brought on stream to ‘improve access to information for the rural population, especially in African languages, and to promote development initiatives’ (Gratz, 2000:111) whose broadcasts are received across the border by some Nigerian communities. The signals of this radio station travel further beyond towns and villages close to the border especially at night or during the last quarter of the year when the harmattan appears to aid radio signals. These examples not only illustrate the transnational power of radio, they also echo what Michael Hilmes and Jason Loviglio describe as ‘the medium’s transgressive power’ (2002: xiii).

Radio, therefore, penetrates various barriers and, in a sense, limits the ability of government to totally restrict the flow of news and other forms of information. Added to this power of reach are the social and development roles which radio performs in every community, especially in rural and remote locations. With listening groups fostering community relations and enlightenment programmes related to development issues like education, health and even democracy, radio is gradually becoming a development tool in countries seeking to improve their ranking on the world growth index. For instance radio stations often engage in voter education shortly before elections in most African countries with programmes about political parties, their logos and identification marks, how to cast valid votes, regulations about voting and the like. In many instances, this process of educating, reawakening or conscientizing the populace comes in form of talk shows and radio drama as was the case with South African Zulu radio drama which ‘may paradoxically have cleared a space for the discourses of democracy even though it was—in part at least—conceived as an instrument to be used, …, to shape and control the mindset of its listeners,’ (Gunner, 2000: 223). This is often done in realization of the centrality of democracy and transformation to general development as well as the importance of participation to the success of a liberal and permissive developmental process in society. It is important to note,

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3 There are more community radio stations now in Benin whose signals filter into Nigeria in spite of the absence of any community radio in the country. Gratz’s work deals with five community radio stations existing in Benin by 1996.
however, that the question of equal and fair access to media exposure for different political parties still remains a very contentious issue in broadcasting on the African continent.

The attractive characteristics of radio notwithstanding, there have been instances where the medium has been manipulated for negative purposes. While radio became a very strong propaganda tool during World War II (Hilmes, 2002: 3, 6), for instance, the medium has been extensively fingered as the promoter of ethnic hate speech during the Rwandan genocide (Carver, 2000; Hendy, 2000; Mitchell, 2007). A more recent example is found in the role played by the media, especially radio, in the 2007 post-election crisis in Kenya. In the Kenyan case, some local language radio stations propagated some form of hate speech that further fuelled the tense political situation (Ismail and Deane, 2008; Oyaro, 2008). For Ismail and Dean, the posture of some local language radio stations during the period can best be described as propagating ‘part hate, part peace’ (2008: 321). It is instructive that radio stations broadcasting in local languages were more culpable in the two African examples cited here. What sets the Kenyan scenario apart from the Rwandese experience, however, is the fact that while the incitements were openly aired in the latter, it was made more implicit than explicit in the former. There have also been similar other instances where radio’s power of reach has been manipulated to the detriment of the development of freedom of expression and the protection of the common good. In such instances, we encounter ‘how the media influence the distribution of power’ (Entman, 2007: 163) with the hegemonizing deployment of different kinds of media, including especially radio, in the suppression of alternative views. In the case of South Africa, the SABC served as a government mouth piece during the era of apartheid shutting off opposition views which sought to challenge the status quo (Gunner, 2000; Fardon and Furniss, 2000; Wasserman and De Beer, 2005; Bosch, 2006). This kind of use of the medium of radio attained a curious height when ‘special services were created to mirror segregationist practices’ (Bosch, 2006: 250). The grip which the apartheid regime exercised over the SABC was not easy to eliminate. Fardon and Furniss observe that ‘the concessions wrought from the South African government were not won without concerted, politically inclusive and protracted agitation’ (2000: 15). The kind of agitation referred to here has often led to the establishment of alternative media, or clandestine radio to be specific in this instance, which operate outside the control of government like we have seen in several African
countries, including South Africa and Nigeria.\(^4\) Again, it is worth pointing out that the destabilizing roles of radio, or of the media generally, alluded to here is not limited to local broadcasters as studies have also revealed the culpability of international media conglomerates in the fuelling of crisis especially in third world countries, where prevailing circumstances make people to rely more on such media for information. One major example that readily comes to mind here is the controversial role of the British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, in the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d’Ivoire. In all three instances, the support of the British broadcaster for the propaganda of the rebel forces helped in aggravating the conflict (Temin, 2003).

The entire scenario discussed above, thrives in contemporary African societies as a result of an over-regulation and censorship of mainstream broadcast media by the state. In some instances, though, the fear of an unpredictable reaction to programme content on the part of station managers further heightens the tension between governments and opposition or other social groups with alternative views which are often precluded from being circulated via the existing media. Again the process of deregulation of the media appears to be exceedingly slow in many African countries. And in those countries where deregulation came a bit early the reservation of ‘no go areas’ in the enabling statutes still renders such deregulation processes half-hearted. The Cameroon and Zimbabwe experiences, for instance, are quite instructive considering the fact that both countries still operate a monopolistic media environment in which state broadcasters remain the only effectively licensed media organizations recognized and allowed to operate in the countries. Yet, the tactics employed by the governments of the two countries in trying to control the media space vary to certain degrees. Though different African countries have made and implemented moves to liberalize broadcasting through the licensing of private radio and television stations which operate under regulatory codes and the supervision of broadcast regulatory agencies, Cameroon and Zimbabwe have maintained a stance of aloofness from the pluralization of the electronic media space which is pervasive in other countries including their African neighbours. This is generally done through the manipulation of policies which pretend to allow for the existence of other radio or electronic media organizations other than the national broadcasters. The major challenge which radio faces, and in Africa especially, in view of the

\(^4\) The case of Bush Radio in South Africa and Radio Kudrat in Nigeria are quite instructive in this regard.
intersection of the media and public participation is how the medium survives as the purveyor of a deliberative public sphere through its dissemination of news and other programmes.

**The Public Sphere: A Conceptual Framework**

The idea of the public sphere was introduced into public discourse by the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. Though the original text of Habermas’ postulations, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was published in 1962, the English translation of the work published in 1989 and various editions of the work which have been released since then have made the idea of the public sphere proposed by the German philosopher a major issue of scholarly attention in a multiplicity of disciplines. In examining the progress of European society in the Seventeenth and early Eighteenth centuries Habermas dwells on the dynamics of state-society relationships at the time and identifies the need and existence of a deliberative ‘public’ or civil society which discusses various issues affecting the progress of society in a public arena. As Habermas contends:

> We call events and occasions “public” when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs—as when we speak of public places or public houses. But as in the expression “public building” the term need not refer to general accessibility; the building does not even have to be open to public traffic. (Habermas, 1991: 1-2)

Elaborating on this concept, Habermas further states that the public sphere can be regarded as ‘a domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [where] citizens… deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion… [to] express and publicize their views’ (cited in Alan McKee, 2005: 4). Participants in the public sphere are therefore at liberty to deliberate on issues ranging from the mundane to the exotic as ‘the targets of such a developing critical sphere broadened from simply complaining about notorious dress codes to criticizing governmental affairs, such as taxations, state budget, and other public policies’ (Koo, 2006: 3-4). In all this, the major emphasis, Habermas argues, should be on the constitution of a ‘critical-rational’ debate. It is through such a process that citizens could protect their own interests because of his belief that ‘prior to that period… citizens did not distinguish
their own interests from those of the state, and rulers claimed to represent the masses’ (Herbst, 1994: 12). Habermas then identifies the various conditions and institutions which makes the constitution of the public sphere possible. For him, places like coffee-houses, salons and table societies where the bourgeoisie often gathered for ‘rational-critical’ debates would constitute ‘public sphere institutions.’ The public sphere, therefore, becomes, in the words of Steven Clayman, ‘that aspect of civil society in which persons from various backgrounds meet to confer on matters of public importance’ (2004: 31). In envisioning an egalitarian public sphere, Habermas presents the sphere as a space for activism where people enter the discourse on the basis of equality. This egalitarian imagination of the sphere is one major assumption that has attracted a considerable amount of criticism of Habermas’s theory.

In taking a critical look at the idea of the public sphere, Alan McKee argues that:

The concept of the ‘public sphere’ is a metaphor that we use to think about the way that information and ideas circulate in large societies. It is a term in everyday use to describe information when it’s made generally available to the public: we say that it’s in the public sphere. (McKee, 2005: vii)

It is important to note, however, that to effectively talk of a public sphere there must be room to grant the individuals involved more than mere access to information. The deliberative character expected of the public sphere suggests the need for the people to be active participants in whatever goes on in that arena. It is in line with this need that McKee further contends that:

It’s where each of us finds out what’s happening in our community, and what social, cultural and political issues are facing us. It’s where we engage with these issues and add our voices to discussions about them, playing our part in the process of a society reaching a consensus or compromise about what we think about issues, and what should be done about them (Ibid: 4-5)

In creating group identities, therefore, the public sphere survives principally on the encouragement of debates as well as the existence of a multiplicity of views on any specific issue
under consideration at a particular moment. In any case, Habermas’ idea of the public sphere was not in any way premised on any form of passivity as it sought to challenge the status quo which privileged the elites at the time. It is in light of this argument that Nicholas Garnham sees McKee’s criticisms of Habermas, for instance, as a mere misconstruction ‘fixated on his historical analysis of the bourgeois public sphere’ (2007: 203). Since Habermas’ conception of the public sphere is based on the contemporary dynamics of eighteenth century European society, it would be expected that his understanding of happenings at that time would reflect a bid to provide ‘a dialectical critique of the historical process of modernity that disentangled concretely the progressive and liberating potentials of social rationalization from its repressive side’ (Ibid: 203-4). In other words, the need to liberalize society and make leaders accountable by listening to the views of the public becomes a central preoccupation when we talk of the public sphere. The democratization of society expected by Habermas in his imagining of the public sphere is inherent in his contention that ‘only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all’ (1991: 4). This visibility, or transparency if we like, of what is considered hidden, though it may not give the power of decision-taking to the public, serves one major purpose of at least providing an avenue for the ventilation of their views in the process.

We are then reminded here of the role of the media as an institution that has the potential of providing this platform through which citizens express their preferences on issues affecting society. In addition to this is the very crucial role of mobilizing people in the first place for the composition of the public sphere. Since audiences are usually dispersed and are also made up of people in different spatial and social locations, there is often the need to provide information which must be made available to the different audience categories in a bid to set up the public sphere. It should be noted also that every traditional society, including Africa, had its own way of deploying indigenous communication media in this important task of bringing people to the public sphere. But as society and communities become increasingly sophisticated in nature, newer forms of media have continued to either take over this role or combine with the indigenous forms of media in mobilizing for the public sphere. Though Habermas dealt mainly with the
press\(^5\) in his postulations on the idea of the public sphere as a result of the reigning popularity of the print media at the time of his emergence with his work, the general applicability of the concept to all forms of the mass media in the present day is no longer in doubt.

One of the major criticisms of Habermas is offered by Nancy Fraser whose main contestation is centred on the absence of subordinate groups, including women and lower classes in public sphere institutions (cited in Butsch, 2007: 4). In addition to this is Fraser’s disputation of the assumptions by Habermas which tend to create the impression that there can be a unified public sphere incorporating different classes of people on the basis that it is possible ‘to bracket status differentials and to deliberate as if they were equals’ (Butsch, 2007: 4). Also making reference to Fraser’s position, Susan Herbst contends that ‘it is problematic, from theoretical and pragmatic standpoints, to think of the public sphere as a monolith or to think about public opinion as the aggregation of individual opinions measured by surveys’ (1996: 131). It is in this regard then that it becomes important to view the public sphere ‘as composed of smaller publics, each with particular concerns and channels of communication’ (Ibid). The implication of Herbst’s argument, therefore, rests in the fact that the diverse concerns and social locations of people are major determining factors which define the behaviour of different individuals on talk shows as well as their reactions to such shows and issues debated on them. In view of this diversity of concerns, it becomes clear that there would be a number of public spheres in place as opposed to one unified sphere at every point in contemporary society. Most of the criticisms proffered by Fraser and other critics of Habermas, though not unmindful of the structural foundation of his postulations, attempt to harp on the transformational implications of the theory for society at large. In attempting to put most of these criticisms to rest Luke Goode argues that:

What in fact distinguishes Habermas’ approach is \textit{not} outright antipathy towards argumentation and particularism but, rather, a stubborn insistence that, if we aspire to argumentation gaining ascendancy over coercion in the public realm … then it is necessary to engage in the tricky business of imagining democratic norms which,

\(^5\) Habermas did not limit his identification of the public sphere to the tangible print media alone as it included discussions held in such public spaces like coffee houses and salons where issues bordering on business, culture and politics were openly discussed.
although they could never operate in a vacuum, could reasonably motivate a diverse citizenry to favour argumentation over ‘costlier’ alternatives. (2005: 77)

The critical purchase in Goode’s understanding of Habermas is to the effect that discussions, deliberations and debates would continue to remain a preferable option over strife and rapaciousness in every society which seeks to advance the cause of liberal democratic tendencies. Radio, it appears, has also got the rare potential for setting up the space for this deliberative platform. With this potential no lost on both the authorities and oppositional social and political movements in Africa, the contestation for space and control of the media becomes a matter of major concern. More often than not, we witness a recession into the wilderness where marginal views may gain currency when the battle in the public sphere appears to be lost on the basis of access to political power which translates to a hegemonic control of the broadcast media.

With the exception of perhaps South Africa, various governments on the continent have been accused of muzzling the voice of the opposition parties and even non-governmental organizations whose activities are deemed by the authorities to be harmful to the individuals or political parties in power. This attempt to ‘limit democratic space by restricting access to broadcasting’ (Moyo, 2004:12) is carried out through both direct and indirect means in different African countries. The need for democratization and the wave of anti-dictatorship ideas sweeping through the continent appear to have forced a number of governments in Africa to attempt to liberalize access to the media. In Mozambique, for instance, the constitution in 1990 not only guaranteed all citizens the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press, it explicitly outlawed censorship (Seleti, 2000:357). In spite of this legal provision, however, the government employed the use of other institutions especially the police to prevent the assertion of these rights granted by the constitution. In various other countries, monitoring agencies which are set up to regulate broadcasting often play the role of policing the media in such a way that smacks of indirect censorship. In Nigeria for instance, the National Broadcasting Commission, NBC, is yet to issue a licence for community radio or television since its establishment in 1994 while the application for broadcast licence by religious organizations remains prohibited. Also in South Africa, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, ICASA, recently shut down Radio Klub
100, a whites-only community radio in Orania for broadcasting without a licence and being ‘a racist-based station and very right-wing’.6

**Clandestine Radio as Alternative Media**

In finding a way out of the denial of space that pervades media practice under the watch of the state or the ruling elite, social movements, especially those with a political agenda, buoyed by the imagination of the possibility of social and political change helped into being by the media, find ways of ventilating their views through alternative media which come in varying forms. In addition, ‘public strategies such as large scale events, rallies, and sit-ins’ (Adams, 2003: 47) which are possible under democratic dispensations are not just risky to organize, they attract less patronage on the part of the public who find less wisdom in participating in them for ‘dictatorships do not allow grouping together or protests of any sort, and impose a high degree of repression on the population, making such strategies impossible’ (Ibid: 47). One of the alternative media employed by oppositional movements, therefore, is found in the establishment of clandestine radio which offers an avenue for the dissemination of opposition views. As Benitez argues, ‘revolutionary movements in different parts of the world have relied primarily on clandestine radio more than any other mass medium to communicate with their supporters, enemies, and population in general’ (2004). To be sure, radio provides the technology with which the opposition circumvents the strictures imposed by the state. Without such technology, ‘the audience has to be in the same space as the performers, which can be a constraint’ (Ibid: 51). It is important to note here that the realization of the power of radio on the part of such groups often makes the medium a target in such search for alternative means of reaching the public. Initially labeled pirate radio stations, clandestine radio stations are described as ‘unauthorized and thus unlicensed stations’ (Keith, 2007: 534). The use of authorization and licensing as points of reference in the definition of clandestine radio by Keith and numerous other scholars who had earlier written on this form of medium is quite understandable as the dawn of deregulation of broadcasting also require that broadcast stations register and obtain licenses before the commencement of operation.

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6 ICASA official Lydia de Souza quoted by the BBC news online November 9, 2005 [http://news.bbc.co.uk](http://news.bbc.co.uk) accessed on 19/05/07
However, contemporary experience has shown that the scope of clandestine radio can be much wider than what is implied by authorization and the issuance of license. Some forms of clandestine broadcasts are also possible in the authorized, licensed media which may also allow for certain content which ordinarily would not have been allowed by the authorities to be broadcast. Such content may even appear in form of coded messages comparable to the strategic codification employed by the Birmingham civil rights movement in Alabama between the 1950s and 1960s to challenge white supremacy and official policies of segregation (Williams, 2005). In most instances, this kind of subliminal activity when found out, attracts severe sanctions against such broadcasters. Again, the internationalization of the media industry which has produced big media conglomerates in the global North implies a hegemonic presence on the part of such conglomerates that then deploy their power of reach to the establishment of clandestine stations or accept clandestine material for broadcast on their networks. With the transnationality of the entire electronic media pointed out earlier, ‘the radios of one nation [can] beam ideas and information over the heads of another nation’s leaders to reach the foreign population directly’ (Sussman, 1982: 177). In some instances, clandestine broadcasts on international media have regional targets. A good example of this is Radio Democracy for Africa, a clandestine broadcast ‘project’ tucked under the VOA by the United States government in 1998. The objective of the ‘project’ was ‘to create a surrogate radio operation throughout Africa to promote democracy and human rights’ (Grace, 1998). From this kind of intervention can be seen the major dynamics of imperialist domination of the media space and how ‘Western-dominated global news media create a hegemonic presence in the South’ (Thussu, 1998: 155). Beyond this, such interventions also raise questions about the universal application of the concept of the public sphere creating the foundations for criticisms of the concept and the establishment of cynicism about the possibility of a global public sphere (Sparks, 1998; McGuigan, 1998; Herman, 1998; Fraser, 1992; Corner, 2007; Howley, 2007).

One of the earliest hints at the significance of clandestine radio in Africa is traceable to Frantz Fanon’s dialectic theory of revolutionary broadcasting (Fanon, 1963). In his postulation about independence as ‘an indispensable condition for the existence of men and women who are truly liberated’ (Fanon, 1963: 310), Fanon talks about the centrality of the media particularly radio to the struggle for liberation in colonized societies. In other words, Fanon tries to imagine ‘how
listeners through the radio broadcasting may achieve political consciousness and participate in the revolution’ (Benitez, 2004). Fanon’s activism which gained practical application in the Algerian Front for National Liberation (FNL)’s clandestine radio station, ‘The Voice of Fighting Algeria’, points to the fundamental significance of the alternative space offered to revolutionary groups and other categories of social movements whose activities are not likely to find voice in the mainstream media controlled by the establishment. Put differently, the regimentation of output, which today characterizes most of the electronic media especially in societies struggling with the import of the universal guarantee of fundamental right of expression, makes a resort to clandestine radio an attractive option for various movements with views opposed to those of the ruling elite.

The political experience of numerous African countries makes the continent a breeding ground for several clandestine radio stations. In terms of location, three categories of clandestine radio can be identified. The first category is made up of those radio stations which identify their locations from where their broadcasts originate and as such have established physical addresses. In most cases, such radio stations are located outside the political jurisdiction of the countries into which they beam their signals or exist in rebel held territories where they are protected by foreign or rebel forces. A few examples of this kind of clandestine radio will suffice. Radio Free Southern Cameroons, a clandestine medium ‘owned’ by the independence-seeking Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC). This radio station is located in Krasnodar, Russia.7 Radio Solidarity and Radio Xoriyo are both located in Juelich, Germany. While Radio Solidarity is run by the Tigrayan International Solidarity for Justice, a US-based Ethiopian opposition group Radio Xoriyo belongs to the Ogadenia National Liberation Front (ONLF), a group of ethnic Somalis pushing for independence for Ogaden from Ethiopia.8 One of about five clandestine radio stations operating in Angola at a time, Voice of Truth, was located in South Africa. The station owned by UNITA, sent signals mainly in Portuguese into Angola between the 1970s and 1980s. Though no clandestine radio seems to be active in Angola at the moment, the role of that country in the days of the ideological cold war and the two decades of civil war which ravaged

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7 This radio station became active on October 30, 2005 and still broadcasts signals into Cameroon (www.clandestineradio.com/intel/station.php 09/09/08)
8 The case of Ethiopia is quite instructive as the country appears to be one of the most fertile festering grounds for clandestine radio. At the last count, there were almost 26 of such radio stations about twelve active and about sixteen inactive (www.clandestineradio.com/intel/station/php 09/09/08)
the country mainly explain the various forms of clandestine broadcast activities that have been witnessed in Angolan history. The second category is made up of clandestine radio stations located within the national boundaries of the operators. In some instances, however, claims and counter-claims as to the control of territory may make it difficult to make conclusive remarks of the location of some of these stations. Radio Biafra, for instance had its facilities located in Eastern Nigeria during the three-year civil war, while Radio Klub 100 was located within South Africa’s geographical borders before it was shut down by the regulatory agency in the country. It is pertinent to point out at this point that clandestine radio stations which are conspicuously sited within the national borders are the ones most prone to sanctions from the authorities. The third category of clandestine radio would be the mobile ones. These are radio stations with no physically identifiable location. A good example of this is Radio VORGAN, a station run by UNITA from four mobile broadcast containers until the containers were said to have been captured by the Angolan government in 1999.9 Radio Kudirat, a radio station run by a Nigerian pro-democracy organization, the United Democratic Front of Nigeria, UDFN, during the anti-military struggle initially claimed to be operating from ‘the high seas’ and later from ‘somewhere within Nigeria.’ The belief then was that the radio station operated using the technology of mobile transmitters which made it impossible to locate. It is worth a mention, however, that the question of location as far as clandestine radio stations are concerned can often be used as a decoy to prevent sanctions and even attacks in extreme circumstances. Again, apart from short wave radio technology, the emergence of internet radio has greatly altered the ecology and even the deployment of clandestine radio broadcasts across the world.

The classification of clandestine radio offered above is by no means sacrosanct as other scholars may adopt different forms of criteria in drawing distinctions between forms or types of clandestine radio that exist10. John Nichols, for instance, hints on the question of purpose as a defining characteristic of clandestine radio. While some of these stations have a brief life span, coming into being as a result of circumstantial necessity or political expediency and ceasing transmission when such expediencies are no longer tenable, others are either permanent in nature

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9 The case of Radio VORGAN is quite ambivalent as it initially operated from South Africa. It claimed to later relocate to Jamba, Angola from where it operated from ‘mobile containers.’

10 Nichols (1997), for instance, classifies clandestine radio as ‘white’, ‘black’ and ‘gray’ on the basis of the purpose they are meant to serve.
especially when they are set up to fill a gap created in the mediated public sphere as a result of the shutting off of certain views or opinions which are considered unacceptable in mainstream media. In other instances, some of these stations merely change their identification, focus or frequency as situations warrant. While a paradigm shift in the political landscape or even a complete change in regime may motivate clandestine radio to adopt any of these changes the question of funding also remains one major determinant in their existence and orientation especially in Africa and the rest of the global South where donor support seems to loom large. A case in point is that of Radio Kudirat which announced a ‘temporary closure’ on December 31, 1998 but is yet to surface up till the present moment. Though the change to civil rule and the attendant international support for emergent new government(s) have been presumed to be the major factors behind the closure there are also insinuations pointing in the direction of a possible loss of funding which hitherto came from external donors for the running of the radio station (Grace, 1990).

The question of capturing the audience is one that often engages interest in media studies generally. Attracting listenership does not constitute any major predicament for alternative and as it should be no surprise why people are often interested in listening to clandestine radio. Nick Couldry and Tim Markham (2008) have argued that ‘most people [have] some degree of mediated public connection’ (19) by which they imply that media use is capable of shaping people’s orientation to a public world. This position, which is a further development of Paddy Scannell’s (1996, 1989) argument as to the ability of media to expand the horizons of everyday life for the audience, ‘at least in relation to the public and potentially political dimensions of media consumption’ (Couldry and Markham, 2008: 6), further validates the claim of the power of media debates to influence people’s attitude towards particular issues in the society. In creating a ‘connection’ between the audience and contemporary public issues, therefore, radio assumes a very significant role in the setting up of the space for discourse and creating a platform for deliberation akin to the idea of a public sphere. This, in a sense, tallies with Scannell’s argument that broadcasting offers a ‘universe of discourse’ (1989: 143) for the entire society. The realization of this by the ruling elite and oppositional groups continue to encourage the contestation for space in the mediated public arena. Added to this is the loss of confidence by the audience in mainstream media which encourages them to find alternative information sources,
especially clandestine broadcasts, exciting. As Stephen Ellis argues, ‘even when an African has a radio, and is seeking political news, he or she is unlikely to find fully satisfactory accounts from local radio stations which, as with newspapers, are controlled by governments and which broadcast news which the African public appears to find anodyne’ (1989: 326). In other words, the more difficult it is for the people to ‘experience a sense of political efficacy’ (Coleman, Morrison and Svennevig, 2008: 772)\textsuperscript{11} the more attractive clandestine media would be to the citizens.

Conclusion

The availability of technology has aided the growth of new media, which especially for Africa includes radio. In a way, this also represents a democratic manifestation of the technology of the media by which it is possible for more people to have ownership devoid of too much control. In other words technological advancements which aid the possibility of establishing clandestine radio stations also sustain the transnationality of such stations thereby making them immune to rigorous control processes before they can reach their target audience. The idea of the public sphere does not only require the legitimating of public opinion, it should also be inclusive as much as possible in order to grant access to a plurality of views. In fact, subaltern views which abound in society today deserve to be given some measure of legitimate space which would allow for their ventilation in order to reduce the frequency with which clandestine radio stations continue to multiply on the African continent. Such allowance may also to a considerable extent ameliorate the estrangement of social movements and opposition groups whose dissent should not always be taken for granted. The emergence of clandestine radio, experience in Africa has shown, is not just a mere transgression or indiscretion on the part of organizations who resort to this mode of communication but a denunciation of the hegemonies created by the state as far as the use of the media is concerned. In other words, the activities of clandestine radio are a form of counter-hegemonic practice which quite unfortunately further fragments the public sphere. Censorship and over-regulation of the media are symptomatic of a privatization of the public sphere, a trend which will continue to be challenged by various means including the proliferation

\textsuperscript{11} The concept of political efficacy which is based on the belief in the existence of a communicative relationship between the citizens and government institutions was first put forward by political scientist Angus Campbell.
of clandestine radio unless deliberate actions are taken to revolutionalize existing broadcast media policies in various African countries.

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