

**Networked radio:
The role of social media interactivity on radio broadcasts in Ghana**

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Abstract

Social media and mobile communication have facilitated new forms of interactivity online, as well as on-air on radio. In Ghana, old and new media intersect in ways that reveal broader changes to public discourse, particularly on issues of citizenship and class. Through an analysis of an urban English-speaking station's interactions both on air and online, this paper shows why radio remains a significant social and cultural institution in the country, and how convergence underscores broader cultural shifts, not just technological change.

Keywords: *radio, social media, interaction, Ghana*

Introduction

At its core, the relationship between broadcasters and audience is one that is social. Regardless of the particular aim or manifest content, there is a prior sociable commitment in the communicative form of every program (Scannell, 1996). While, for instance, news may intend to inform, and thus the modes of address used are different from say, a variety talk show, the point is that even though there are different motives in broadcasting's communicative ethos, there's more to it than that. It is this necessarily sociable relationship between broadcasters and audiences, an unforced or unenforceable one at that, which lies behind every program. Clearly not all broadcasting is *just* for the sake of sociality/sociability but it is present in people-centered programs.

In the last few years, social media has facilitated new forms of interactivity and hence the sociality of radio. Used in the production of radio content as well as in consumption, social media and other new media such as mobile applications converge with old media in interesting ways. In terms of technological forms, the incorporation of social media content in radio represents convergence (Jenkins, 2008). However, following Jenkins' crucial point that convergence is not purely a technical matter but, more importantly, represents a 'shift in cultural logic', this paper shows some of the ways that radio (a strong social and cultural institution in Ghana) and social media (a relatively newer but increasingly important mode of interpersonal and mass mediated communication) come together to reveal not just class peculiarities in the country, but also ongoing discourses on what constitutes good citizenship.

Method

I analyzed the on-air talk of selections of three broadcast shows on Citi FM, an Accra based commercial radio station, in conjunction with the station's online social media interaction, contextualized by recent events in the country's social and political landscape. The shows, the Citi Breakfast Show (CBS), Traffic Avenue (TA) and The Big Issue (TBI), air weekdays from 6:15am-10am, weekdays at 11am after a news roundup, and Saturday mornings respectively. The shows are broadcast live but recordings are saved online onto the station's public Soundcloud account, where anyone can access them.¹ Most of my analysis came from these recordings (across the month of June 2014), save one that was listened to confirm that the recordings online were not edited for time or content.

To get a good sense of the conversations, commentary and general interaction between listeners and station, I also analyzed the Twitter (@citi973) and Facebook feeds of the station as well as that of the individual hosts. Conversations took place between listeners and broadcasters via the personal (and public) Twitter accounts of the program hosts, not the station's official one on which news updates and program information are posted. The CBS is the station's flagship morning variety show, hosted by Bernard Avle (@benkoku) with a group of studio co-hosts who play different roles like reading headlines from local newspapers on the Newspaper Report, conducting interviews, etc. For the most part, they generally banter with Bernard and debate issues in-studio and state their personal opinions, sometimes in opposition with their peers in the same studio. TTA, hosted by Jessica Opare-Saforo (@Jessicacitfm), is a show dedicated to reports on 'what's happening in the streets' and relies much on listeners' input as well as reporters deployed who return to studio to discuss their findings. Shamima Muslim (@shamimamuslim) and Richard Sky (@RichardDelaSky) alternate hosting of TBI. I used Sysomos, a proprietary market analysis tool purchased by the institution I work at, to mine all the tweets sent out during each of the days that correspond with the recordings. Given that these tweets were from public accounts,² I treated them the same way as the recordings of the radio broadcasts and words of the broadcasters – as publicly available data that was willingly put out for public consumption, accessible by anyone who searches the internet.

Initial Findings

In the shows analyzed, mobile technology, especially in the use of the chat application Whatsapp, played a role in defining who was being spoken to on-air and how their contributions were valued. In the first place, one single number (tied to the mobile web application Whatsapp) was used across all shows as the access point for audiences who wanted to send text messages, send photos, videos or call-in. The

¹ SoundCloud is a public audio sharing website that is used mostly for the sharing of music by artists and fans alike. Citi FM maintains an account at <https://soundcloud.com/citi97-3>

² Protected tweets, i.e. tweets from accounts set to private were not included.

latter was never included live (i.e. hosts did not pick up calls live on air to talk to listeners) but whatsapp allows users to leave voice messages and so some of these recordings were played on air after they had been recorded. For instance, during the latter end of the CBS on June 30, voice recordings from listeners were played back-to-back on air. During a TA edition in which the topic was recent floods in Accra, Sanda, Jessica's co-host that day, would say "let's hear from someone at [location]" and then play a recording of a listener who had been caught by the floods in said location.

This use of a single phone number tied to Whatsapp, is a significant development from comparing the 2014 programs to prior years. The practice for radio stations, not just Citi FM, was to list multiple phone numbers, one for every network (e.g. Vodafone, MTN, etc.) in an attempt to reduce listener costs. In-network texts are cheaper than cross-network ones and so the practice was to maximize audience participation by minimizing calling costs. Across different shows in June 2014, Citi's program hosts read out only one number "on whatsapp for all networks" in addition to listing it on Twitter and Facebook. While the consolidation of phone numbers into one might suggest a cost reduction in cross-network calls, it is more notable for its ties to a web data/internet enabled mobile application. Sure, one can send an SMS or call the number given, but repeatedly, hosts made utterances like "whatsapp us" or "whatsapp your views to our number", or as Jessica did on TA, "don't call, send a message to our whatsapp number", and so on and so forth. Most mobile phones in Ghana either do not have access to the internet, or have limited capabilities on widely used 'feature phones', and data use remains costly, compared to SMS and voice calling. Thus, moving one's audience access point via phone to one such web enabled application, speaks volumes about who the station is speaking to (a tech savvy and willing to pay extra for data audience) and how they were to participate.

In the second place, the social media pages of the station and program hosts were blended into the shows in ways that made their accessing and use, integral to the sociality of the programs. Direct appeals on air asked listeners to use the application to send pictures, videos, and messages of the damage caused by the flooding in the capital city in June. These calls were heeded, and on TA for example, Jessica read some out, referred to others on her Twitter page, etc., while Sanda gave summaries at various points in the show. For instance, while discussing the danger to drivers caused by roads covered by floodwater, Jessica noted "someone sent a picture where someone drove into a barricade" and later asked for more - "we'd like to see the pictures" and "send us videos". The Facebook page and Twitter accounts of hosts was also emphasized in the program, with statements like "if you go to our social media pages, we've asked people to send us reports..." (Sanda, U., Traffic Avenue, June 6, 2014), and "someone just tweeted a picture from Central Mosque area which I just retweeted. If you follow me on Twitter you'll see it" (Opere-Saforo, J., Traffic Avenue, June 6, 2014).

This inclusion of images and video to what is supposed to be an audio technological form is one that struck me about Citi's social media interaction. In 2013, some of the episodes of the CBS were streamed live on Google+, with listeners videoed in as it was being broadcast. Frequently videos of news items, such as the

July 1 #occupyflagstaffhouse protest, are posted on the Facebook page or website, and links shared via Twitter.³ On the official pages, the station posted images of those in the studio, as though to confirm that indeed they are live. Sometimes hosts posted photos via their personal feeds of themselves or their co-hosts. Such a multimedia environment, where journalists talk directly to listeners, respond to their requests for more information, and generally blend the space between radio and other technologies by incorporating video, images, and hypertext while still broadcasting live is a feature of elite media in Ghana, speaking to a segment of the population that is young, politically active, engaged in civil matters and on the move as working adults.

Participation from audiences in a sociable manner is demonstrated via social media, but the act of participation itself is characterized by the station as an act of 'good citizenship'. This can be seen, for example, in the following exchange on TTA:

Sanda [13:11]: "We still have been picking calls from our listeners. Ambrose spoke to us on the Ring Road between Circle and Ako Adjei interchange area. This is what he's been telling us"

[13:25 – they play recording of 'Ambrose' talking about his experience in the floods. Musical interlude at 13:50.]

Jessica [14:01]: "Alright this is The Traffic Avenue at 97.3 Citi FM and of course you need to stay tuned to this network because this is where you will get your updates on the flood especially where your neighborhood is concerned. Remember, you can be a good citizen and report ehm the situation you currently find yourself in. Call 0, don't call, whatsapp 0549986996. Even if you don't have pictures to share, you can still tell us, narrate the situation ehm to us. You can also send us videos if need be, 054... what is happening in your area?"

Here, Jessica equates eyewitness reporting of citywide problem to being a good citizen. This is repeated at other segments of the show, and later in the week, Citizen Report aspect of TTA later appeared on the website with its own logo and tagline "Be the voice of change" on the Citi website. Often in other programs, such as CBS, the issue of what it means to be a good and responsible Ghanaian comes up in the studio banter, with hosts and guests opining on which acts, be it reporting bad behavior, or contributing to public causes, constitutes who is a good Ghanaian, often in opposition to political leaders who are perceived as incompetent and corrupt.

Beyond the use of participation via new media as a proxy for who may be thought of as a good, politically active Ghanaian, the station's use of the English language is revealing about class issues in the country.⁴ One hears words from Akan, the lingua franca used by both educated and illiterate Ghanaians alike in Accra, used every now and then alongside English. For example, Sanda and Jessica

³ Flagstaff house is the seat of government. A protest was held there on July 1 using the #occupy as part of the mobilization efforts on social media.

⁴ Ghana is multilingual and the official language is English. Broadcast media is available in each of the state recognized languages, particularly in their regions of origin. In Accra, the capital city, both English and Akan function as lingua franca while the language of those indigenous to that area, Ga, is spoken in just a handful of communities.

made comments about people's complaints about the responsibilities of the "aban" (the Akan word for government) without translating "aban" for the listeners. However, interviews and reports are mostly conducted in English, and where interviews with people 'on the street' are in any other language, they are dubbed over in English. An unplanned moment on TBI highlights the tensions this sometimes creates and how it divides Accra's elite and middle classes (i.e. listeners of stations like Citi) from the more vulnerable population in the city.

This moment came from a playback of a TBI interview conducted in a flooded area near the Odo River, one replete with shacks and inhabited by the city's poorest. A Citi reporter narrates the scene she had encountered, and amidst background sounds of people talking and moving things about, describes the people rescuing their belongings as 'aggressive'. Sounds of women wailing, men asking questions and children chattering could be heard in the background as the reporter interviews one person after the other, each responding in faltering English. One woman in the background who had been lamenting the loss of her things, and saying they (the people in that area) were tired of suffering, asks the reporter just as a young school child begins to respond to a question asked by the reporter "*aden na wooka borofo? Aden wo ye oburoni?*" [Why are you speaking English? Are you a White person?] (The Big Issue, June 6, 2014). While the microphone is still on the school child, who in broken English, is saying the same thing as others interviewed before her – that the rains prevented her from making her way home – the woman can be heard continuing in the background about how "you people" come here every year to talk each year there are floods and do nothing - essentially equating the journalist to the 'aban'.

This unintentional, unguarded moment of reportage reveals that as far as ordinary Ghanaians are concerned English speaking journalists asking self-evident questions about people's suffering are not 'of them'. Later on when the panel on TBI discusses the flooding situation, one panelist describes his car being stuck in a dip on the road where water had lodged and characterizes it as an "inconvenience, an unnecessary inconvenience" that he did not need. Contrast that with the wailing of the people in Odornor who had lost (according to one interviewee) 5 years of accumulated belongings because they can only afford to live in those areas, one gets a palpable sense of difference between the media elite and the portion of the population they report on.

Initial conclusions

Radio in Ghana today is networked, and for elite stations, functions as a digitized space of dialogue between elite journalists and a young audience that has or is acquiring the social and technical skills to exchange ideas and opinions. The ways in which one such station, Citi FM, a station that describes itself as an organization dedicated to journalistic values and audience engagement (Citi FM Website, 2014) talks to its audience is revealing of the ways that certain ideas are articulated in public discourse. Its use of new technologies (such as the web based mobile app Whatsapp) that only a small percentage of the Ghanaian society uses, is as telling of the station's elite status, as much as the education level and middle class

background of its staff, and its reliance on elite sources are.⁵ While the practice of including listener calls and text messages is considered industry practice across both English and local language radio, as well as both commercial and state radio in the country (Avle, 2011; Coker, 2012), the use of social media and mobile apps in live broadcast, at this point in time, is limited to elite urban-based English speaking stations like Citi FM and are telling of class tensions and discourses on what or who constitutes good citizenship.

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⁵ See Noam Chomsky's (1997) definition of what counts as 'elite media'.