

## **A Brief History of Radio Broadcasting in Africa**

Radio is by far the dominant and most important mass medium in Africa. Its flexibility, low cost, and oral character meet Africa's situation very well. Yet radio is less developed in Africa than it is anywhere else. There are relatively few radio stations in each of Africa's 53 nations and fewer radio sets per head of population than anywhere else in the world.

Radio remains the top medium in terms of the number of people that it reaches. Even though television has shown considerable growth (especially in the 1990s) and despite a widespread liberalization of the press over the same period, radio still outstrips both television and the press in reaching most people on the continent. The main exceptions to this are in the far south, in South Africa, where television and the press are both very strong, and in the Arab north, where television is now the dominant medium. South of the Sahara and north of the Limpopo River, radio remains dominant at the start of the 21st century. The internet is developing fast, mainly in urban areas, but its growth is slowed considerably by the very low level of development of telephone systems.

There is much variation between African countries in access to and use of radio. The weekly reach of radio ranges from about 50 percent of adults in the poorer countries to virtually everyone in the more developed ones. But even in some poor countries the reach of radio can be very high. In Tanzania, for example, nearly nine out of ten adults listen to radio in an average week. High figures for radio use contrast sharply with those for India

or Pakistan, for example, where less than half the population is reached by radio.

## **History**

There have been three distinct phases in the development of radio since the first South African broadcasts in 1924. The first phase was the colonial or settler period, when radio was primarily a medium brought in to serve the settlers and the interests of the colonial powers. Later (and in many cases not until toward the end of colonial rule) the authorities gradually introduced radio services by and for indigenous people.

The entire continent, south of the Sahara, with the exception of Liberia and Ethiopia, had been colonized by the European powers—France, Britain, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Germany, and Portugal. (At the end of World War I, Germany lost all of its African colonies, and their administration was taken over by France, Britain, and Belgium.) The domestic broadcasting systems of all European powers were at this time state (not government necessarily) monopolies such as the British independent public service model of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) or the French government radio stations. The Portuguese permitted some private broadcasting by colonial settlers in their colonies, but the main picture was one of national state monopolies.

The earliest broadcasts on the continent were in South Africa. In Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban, three organizations - a private club, an advertising group, and a local authority - were granted licenses to

broadcast. But they all soon incurred large debts and were taken over by an entrepreneur who, after some difficulty, moved the stations toward commercial viability. However, the government decided that a commercial solution would not provide the service that they sought. They looked instead at what had happened in Britain and invited John Reith, the BBC's first director-general, to come to South Africa. 1934 and help them devise a national public service form of broadcasting. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was created in 1936 and maintained a monopoly on broadcasting there for the next 45 years.

The SABC departed from BBC's way of doing things very soon after its establishment. First, it was never far from political influence and control, both of which increased during the years of apartheid. Second, it soon began commercial services designed to make a profit to supplement license fee income for broadcasting. When neighboring Mozambique was a Portuguese colony, a successful commercial radio station there (Radio Lorenzo-Marques) targeted South African audiences with popular music programs. To counter this the SABC began its own commercial service, Springbok Radio, in 1950. For most of this period, the SABC's programming was dictated by the needs and tastes of its white audiences. Until 1943, it broadcast only in Afrikaans and English, and none of its programs were directed toward African audiences. Even then, broadcasts in African languages formed only a small part of the total output. Broadcasting for Africans was expanded in the 1960s when Radio Bantu was developed during apartheid to reinforce the apartheid ideology of the separation of the races.

Elsewhere in Africa, radio was also developed first to serve European interests - in 1927 in Kenya, in 1932. in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), in 1933 in Mozambique, and in 1935 in the French Congo. The earliest radio in British West Africa was not broadcast by wireless transmission but via wired services-subscribers had loudspeakers (linked by wire to the radio station) installed in their homes to receive the service. This was how broadcasting began in Siena Leone in 1934, Gold Coast (now Ghana) in 1935, and Nigeria in 1936. Unlike the wireless services in Britain's other colonies, these were created with native African listeners in mind. Then in 1936 the British colonial administration decided to develop radio broadcasting throughout its African colonies as a public service for indigenous people.

In Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), World War II provided an impetus with major consequences for the development of radio in that territory. A small radio station was established principally with the objective of carrying news (in African languages) of the war's progress to the Families of Soldiers fighting with the British forces in Africa and Asia. Radio also developed rapidly in other parts of Africa due to the war. The free Belgian government, exiled from German-occupied Belgium, set up a shortwave station in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) for broadcasts to Belgium. The Free French set up their own radio stations in Cameroon and French Congo, and the French Vichy government had its own station in Dakar, Senegal.

### **Postwar Developments**

After the war, expansion of broadcasting in most of its African colonies became official British policy. This means that radio services would be developed principally to educate and inform African listeners. Several experts from the BBC were sent to advise on developmental issues in broadcasting, and some of them stayed to play major roles in establishing services. Most notable among these was Torn Chalmers, a successful BBC radio producer who was involved in the development of radio in Nigeria, Nyasaland (now Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and Tanganyika (now Tanzania). He was the first director-general of the Tanganyika Broadcasting Corporation. Chalmers and others tried hard to separate broadcasting from government along the lines of the BBC model. But despite the establishment of public corporations in several British territories (Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, Zambia, Uganda, and Tanganyika, and others had broadcasting corporations modeled on the BBC), the stations were all closely supervised by their respective governments and had little real independence.

The French developed a different policy. Whereas in British territories the emphasis was on broadcasting in African languages to reach the widest possible audiences, nearly all broadcasting in French territories was in the French language. Radio broadcasting was also centralized and, to a large extent, originated in France through the *Societe de Radio-Diffusion de la France d'Outre-Mer* (Society for Radio Transmission to French Overseas Territories) or SORAFOM. As the society's title suggests, the prevailing philosophy was that the French territories in Africa were actually an extension of France. A series of relay stations across French Equatorial and

West Africa carried the same programs. It was not until the French territories were granted independence in 1960 that separate national radio broadcasters were established in Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Niger, Chad, Gabon, and other locations.

By the 1960s (the decade in which most African colonies gained their independence), all territories had radio broadcasting services. In every country they were instruments of government in much the same way as the national armed forces or the police. Broadcasters were civil servants - if not always in name, certainly in their relationships to the rest of the state apparatus. Without exception the new African governments maintained for 30 more years the monopoly of radio broadcasting established by colonial authorities. During this second phase of African broadcasting, which lasted until nearly the end of the 20th century, all 53 African countries had national broadcasting services, mostly dominated by radio. Broadcasting headquarters were generally in the capital or main city of each nation; from there, one or more national radio services were transmitted to reach the whole country. A few local and regional services were developed in Nigeria and South Africa but not many in other areas. Radio in Nigeria developed along different lines than in other African nations, reflecting that country's ethnic divisions and unique federal character. Two parallel state systems of state radio developed, often in direct competition with each other. The federal government had its own broadcasting system, and each of Nigeria's several states had its own system, as well.

Radio broadcasting in much of sub-Saharan Africa still relies heavily on shortwave (the main means of transmission for many years) to reach widely scattered populations over large areas. This is a feature of broadcasting in Africa not often seen elsewhere in the world. In Ghana, for example, all radio transmission until the 1980s was via shortwave. This means of transmission is in many respects ideal for African circumstances, although it can suffer from interference and is subject to fading and distortion. Lack of sufficient resources and infrastructure have meant that developing networks of FM or AM relays usually has not been possible, so the only way to reach an entire territory has been by shortwave. Outside of South Africa (where an FM network was quickly established in the 1960s) and the small island states, all African national broadcasters continued to use shortwave for their main national radio services at the beginning of the 21st century. So most radio receivers sold in Africa (except in South Africa) have shortwave bands on them, and virtually all radio owners outside of South Africa have ready access to international shortwave broadcasters such as the BBC, Voice of America (VOA), Radio France International, Radio Deutsche Welle, and Radio Netherlands. The South African international shortwave station, Channel Africa, is also very popular. Such international broadcasters have become popular for their African-language (Swahili, Hausa, Amharic, and Somali) transmissions and in the widely spoken languages of European origin (French, English, and Portuguese). Africa has the world's largest audiences for international shortwave radio broadcasts.

Shortwave coverage by Africa's national broadcasters is rather poor in many cases, and radio transmission remains underdeveloped on a national scale in many countries. The lack of financial resources, frequent breakdowns, power cuts, the scarcity of spare parts and other consequences of the general economic weakness in many African countries have weakened transmission capacity and performance.

Radio pluralism came late to Africa. Before 1987 there were only five or six privately owned radio stations on the entire continent in Gambia, South Africa, Swaziland, and Liberia. In 1987 a trend to end state monopolies in almost every country began. In December, Horizon FM went on the air in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, launched by a local entrepreneur who announced rather defiantly that the station would have "lots of music, lots of commercials, lots of laughter, but absolutely 00 politics. People are tired of all that stuff." A week later the station was forced to close. The revolutionary government was clearly unhappy at this development, which it had not authorized. Horizon FM survived that early dispute and became one of several independent radio stations in Burkina Faso.

### **Competition**

The arrival of Horizon FM was of historic significance in that it marked the beginning of the third phase of radio in Africa, one in which the national state radios continue but must compete for audiences with a growing number of independent radios. (The same trend is evident with television, which also was previously almost entirely a state monopoly.) There are important

differences between state and independent radio on the Continent. While the State radio services are mostly national in both reach and purpose, the new independent radio stations are mostly based in cities, and their coverage tends to be confined to the urban areas. They have also almost all been FM stations, whereas the national broadcasting stations have relied and continue to rely on a mix of transmission methods - FM, AM medium wave, and shortwave. At the turn of the century there were more than 450 independent radio stations in Africa. Most of them are the result of limited deregulation, which has invited applications for the limited coverage offered by FM. Only five or six independent radio stations existed on the entire continent 20 years earlier.

Independent radio stations in Africa can be categorized into five types. There are fully commercial stations that seek to make a profit from the sale of airtime for advertising or sponsored programs. Religious radio stations (most, but not all, Christian) use radio to communicate their faith and beliefs; some of these may carry some advertising, but most are financially supported by their sponsoring organizations and some with support from outside. The third category, comprised of community radio stations, is probably the fastest growing sector. There has been strong support in some countries for the development of very local, generally low-powered FM stations broadcasting in a community's indigenous languages or dialects. These are often staffed by volunteer helpers, are run at very low cost, and are supported by outside agencies (various non-government organizations have supported some for developmental reasons). By the year 2000 there

were more than 70 community radio stations in South Africa and about 100 in West Africa, several in rural areas.

The fourth and fifth categories each emerged as the result of political and ethnic or other conflicts. Factional radio stations (some referred to as "clandestines") are used to promote a particular faction in a conflict. Somalia, a country without a government for the last decade of the 20th century, has several such stations, each supporting one of the warlords who control different parts of the country. There are similar clandestines in Sudan and Ethiopia. Some of these operate from neighboring countries rather than from within their nations of origin, for obvious reasons. Occasionally they may even broadcast from further afield. The factional radio category also includes the so-called hate radio stations. The most notorious of these was the *Radio des Mille Collines* (Radio of a Thousand Hills) in Rwanda. Broadcasting from within Rwanda (and almost certainly with the government's approval if not its backing), it was widely held to be responsible for promoting ethnic hatred and killings during the 1994 genocide.

The fifth category, humanitarian radio stations, came as a counter to the influence of factional radio. The power of radio in Africa has led various aid and relief agencies, including the United Nations, to support the establishment of humanitarian radio stations that promote peace, harmony, and democracy. Such radio stations have operated in Rwanda, Somalia, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. One organization that has been prominent in supporting humanitarian radio has been the Fondation Hirondelle (Swallow Foundation)

in Switzerland. It has backed radio stations in areas of conflict for limited periods in countries such as Liberia, the Central African Republic, Somalia, and Rwanda.

## **Programs**

Radio programming in Africa has suffered from the economic realities present there. It has been hampered to an even greater degree by the often heavy hand of government. Many broadcasters in state radio stations are government or civil servants, and the civil service does not lend itself to creativity, imagination, and entertainment. Much of the output of state radio stations has been dominated by government propaganda. In the early days of national independence there was a heavy emphasis on messages about nation building, with exhortations to hard work and discipline. Much of this was rather boring. A high proportion of news bulletins on radio featured heads of elite visiting projects or speaking at events. Broadcasts would usually focus on what was said and who was there-sometimes remarkably uninteresting speeches would be carried in full on the radio. When the head of state visited several different projects and said more or less the same things at each appearance, subsequent broadcasts would repeat the same details. Other stories were similar-ministers and other state officials making speeches or announcements, visiting state institutions. opening schools or hospitals, and so on. Each event would be reported with the main locus on what the official said and little on any other aspect of the story.

But it would be wrong to categorize all African state radio in this way. Much of it has been entertaining and even innovative. Ad-lib or unscripted drama has often flourished, especially in Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia; poetry and storytelling have become popular features in many countries. Local music is now a major part of the programming in many states with an emphasis on local talent in such countries as Mali, Senegal, Ghana, the two Congos, and Tanzania. Many of Africa's very successful popular music stars began their careers on radio. There have been radio stars since the early days, as the media thrive on more than mere news. Most of the time the media, radio especially, are used for entertainment. Although a cautious approach generally has been seen in news and news-related programs, this is not always the case in other creative areas.

African radio stations have been important patrons of music and, in some countries, of poetry and oral literature. In the 1970s many radio stations made regular program collection safaris into remote parts of the country to record songs, drama, poetry, and other indigenous material for later broadcast. However, in recent years these activities have been curbed by financial restrictions. Similarly, the studios of many national radio stations were once a focus for much new music, but this happens less now, largely because many state-run radio stations have stopped most payments to artists.

African radio once played a major role in popular music and still does play a role, but mainly by playing commercial records. Many African musicians find that they do better financially by marketing their own

cassettes through street sellers. But copyright laws are not widely used, and few African artists are members of rights societies. Financial pressures have also slowed the growth of (and sometimes even reduced the amount of) original indigenous drama and other spoken word programs on both radio and television. The economic weakness of many states has meant that talented artists had to stop working in state radio because they were not paid adequately (sometimes not at all). The growth of successful commercial radio may change this.

### **Private Stations**

More freedom has generally been given to the printed press in Africa than to the radio industry. Independent newspapers have been permitted to operate in most African countries, and many of them have been permitted some degree of freedom to criticize, oppose, and challenge the existing political order. The same has not been true of radio. Many African governments have been slow and reluctant to change laws and allow private broadcasting stations. Those that have legislated for independent radio have in many cases imposed restrictions on the degree to which independent stations can report news.

The reluctance to allow private radio arises in part from fear of the power of the medium. It is known that radio reaches many more people in Africa than any other single medium. Government officials may be legitimately concerned about misuse of the medium by rival political, religious, or ethnic factions, particularly when they have a shaky hold on

power or rule in countries lacking in infrastructure, with weak institutions of control, and where there may be several regional, ethnic, and linguistic divisions. It is significant that there has been much greater reluctance to grant freedom to radio than to other media.

In Ethiopia, new laws to permit private broadcasters were delayed by fears that private electronic media would be critical of the government, as the private press has been. In Kenya several applications to run private radio stations were delayed for several months in 1998 and 1999, probably due to similar fears. But a major press group in the country opened its first commercial radio in Nairobi in 1999, the first example outside South Africa of major commercial press involvement in radio in Africa. In Tanzania gentle pressure has been put on the private radio stations to carry national news from the state radio station; in Zambia, the few licensed independent radio stations are not permitted to make their own news bulletins. Even after several years under new laws permitting independent broadcasts, there were still only one private commercial radio station and three private religious stations at the beginning of 2001, although the election of a new president at the end of that year led to change during 2002 and the emergence of several new independent broadcasters.

The development of independent radio should not be seen only in political terms, however. Its commercial and cultural impact and function are almost certainly of equal and perhaps greater significance. Music has always played a major part in African radio, but when the stations were almost entirely owned and paid for by the state, entertainment often took second

place to other requirements. On many occasions radio schedules would be cleared for major political events. Speeches of political leaders and commentaries on national events would be given extensive coverage, with state political and administration requirements taking precedence. With deregulation and the licensing of independent and particularly commercial station's listeners. He no longer compelled to listen to long and often tedious political broadcasts. At the same time, radio has become a much more attractive medium for advertisers, who can develop media campaigns in line with different stations' formats and content. The new and often very successful commercial stations have adopted musical policies that define their places in the market, just as their counterparts are free to do in Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world where the industry is not controlled by government. It is significant that in the African states once ruled by France, one of the most successful of the new commercial radio stations, *Radio Nostalgie*, is affiliated with a major French radio group of the same name. In 1999 it was reaching about 60 percent of all adults in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, and Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast.

In Ghana, the new commercial radio stations have been so successful that they have pushed the government's Ghana Broadcasting Corporation out of its place as one of the top eight stations in the country. Private, independent, commercial radio stations in Uganda and Nigeria, mostly broadcasting popular music, outstrip the state radio services in audience reach and share.

The reason for the success of many private stations is easy to understand. Competition from other domestic broadcasters was entirely absent in the broadcast media until their arrival, so program producers had never worried about attracting audiences or advertisers. Now this has changed in many countries (although not yet all), and there is lively competition for audiences. On the whole, radio in these countries has become livelier and more attractive. However, there has been a downside also. Whereas state radio put a strong emphasis on education and development, featuring many programs that promoted better health or provided other forms of education and improvement for the general population, competition for commercial revenue tends to push these programs out or to marginalize them. Moreover, national and state radios have broadcast programs in local minority languages for many years, which is not usually a feature of commercial stations. Community stations may increase their use of local languages and dialects in response to this shift, however.

Radio's contribution to national education and development will probably continue to be of major importance. Many developmental agencies strongly favor the use of radio in campaigns for better health, as in the campaign against AIDS and such diseases as trachoma, malaria, tuberculosis, polio, and leprosy. In the past, many broadcasts of this type were worthy but very dull. In recent years, however, there has been a welcome growth in the imaginative and entertaining use of radio to encourage development in such areas. One of the best examples is the soap opera

*Twende na Wakati* (Let Us Go with the Times) in Tanzania. This regular drama features the daily lives of ordinary people, and within its entertaining story line are messages about family planning, infant nutrition, other health issues, and the changing role of women. A regular program in Senegal, *Radio Gune Yi*, made entirely by and for children, promotes the rights of children and the equal rights of girls and boys.

## **Technology**

Radio has played a major nation-building role in Africa. This arose from an interesting and very important historical coincidence. The invention (in 1948) and commercial development of the transistor (in the 1950s and 1960s) led to very large numbers of cheap battery-operated transistor radios coming into Africa at the same time that about 40 nation-states gained their independence in the 1960s. The transistor made radios portable and cheap, liberating them from reliance on a supply of electricity, which most African homes did not have at the time. Radio rapidly became the most widespread medium in Africa, and this had important consequences for Africa's cultural and political life. It was the medium by which many, if not most Africans gained day-to-day knowledge of their new national and international status.

At the beginning of the 21st century, new technology has arrived in the form of direct broadcasting by satellite. WorldSpace, a company based in Washington, D.C. and headed by an Ethiopian, Noah Samara, launched the first digital radio service by satellite in 1999. The technology makes very good sense in a continent where the establishment of FM relays has been so

difficult due to the costs involved and problems with maintenance and security. The WorldSpace service provides several high quality radio services that can be picked up with ease and clarity anywhere on the continent. The service is being used by some African and international radio stations, and it also offers some broadcasts of its own. The main question about the satellite service is whether it will establish itself sufficiently to be commercially viable in the long term. Use of the system requires the purchase of special receivers that are currently too expensive for most African listeners. It is, however, an example of a new technology that seems to meet an African need. (It is also notable as one of the first technologies ever introduced in Africa before it became available to the rest of the world.)

Another new technology that may overtake WorldSpace is digital shortwave. The major international radio broadcasters (the BBC, VOA, Radio Deutsche Welle and others) have joined together in a consortium, *Digital Radio Mondiale*, and have successfully developed a new means of shortwave transmission that employs digital coding, which vastly improves reception. If African radio stations take up this new technology (and already many are showing an active interest), it will revolutionize transmission in Africa, making high quality reception available throughout the continent.

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