Radio Trottoir and Political Communication in Ethiopia

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This submission is based on research conducted by Ethiopian researcher Elizabeth Demissie Dadi through the Radio, Convergence and Development in Africa program. Her work has been edited and condensed for use here as a research field note.

One of the most interesting recent intersections of "radio" and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Africa does not involve real radio at all, but rather so-called 'radio trottoir' or 'sidewalk radio,' and its nexus with Bluetooth technology and other ICTs used to pass messages in the fraught political context of Ethiopia. This research draws on qualitative interviews and participant observation to explore radio trottoir as an alternative forum for criticism of the government and political actors in Ethiopia between 2005 and 2010. Radio trottoir or sidewalk radio is the use of humorous tales, folk music, poems, graffiti, gossip and other verbal genres transmitted through word of mouth, distribution of underground cassettes, SMS or Bluetooth and infrared features of mobile

phones[26](Spitulnik, 2002; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1997).

For this study, 32 informants were interviewed in four cities – Addis Ababa, Gonder, Bahir Dar and Hawassa. Snowball sampling was used in selecting the interviewees, and to provide more context to the interviews, participant observation techniques were employed. Direct observations of the use of radio trottoir in the political context were made in many social gatherings such as the 2010 Ethiopian Great Run and football matches in villages. This technique allowed for a greater understanding of messages and information that were disseminated through radio trottoir within the socio-political contexts.Generally, it was found that radio trottoir in Ethiopia helps communicators exchange information, reflect opinion on politics, comment on, criticize and challenge the system. Moreover, this researcher observed interesting intersections between radio trottoir and ICTs such as Bluetooth and SMS.

Introduction

To understand any political communication one must consider multiple dimensions like culture, politics, economy, and technology (Hyden and Leslie, 2002, p. 2). As Graber (2004, p. 45) contends, contextual factors make for differentiations in political communication across environments. As such, political communication studies must begin with observing how people are communicating in their own situated context, so as to come up with appropriate analysis. This study set out to conduct such contextual research in Ethiopia by looking at radio trottoir communication about politics.

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[26]   Bluetooth and infrared are mobile phone features that enable the wireless transfer of data from one phone to another in the 2.4 GHz unlicensed band when the phones are physically proximate to each other. These features cover a distance range of 10-100 meters (www.TechTerms.com).

While every context is different, it is important to note that in many African contexts, different forms of so-called radio trottoir can play a more significant role in political communication than the mainstream media, which might not hold true for Western societies (Hyden and Leslie, 2002, p. 24; Spitulnik, 2002). This characteristic emanates from the dominance of oral tradition and the relative weakness of formal media institutions in the continent. In Ethiopia, conventional radio has not played a significant role in the political arena for several reasons. For one, there are relatively few radio stations and those that do exist are either government-owned or do not engage in political discussions because of systematic state suppression (Aadland and Fackler, 2009). Until recently, independent broadcast media were prohibited in the country. In the last few years a handful of private FM and community radio stations were given permission to broadcast, mainly on social issues. However, politics is still virtually off limits for non-government radio transmissions. The government-owned stations, conversely, are advocates of ruling party politics. Consequently, most political discussions on radio are either artificial or unrepresentative of much of society. To deal with such communication gaps, some scholars (Spitulnick, 2002) suggest looking at radio trottoir as the public sphere. Accordingly, this study explores this important sphere, which can be considered as a participatory and representative form of media (Spitulnick, 2002, p.180; Fekade, 2006, p.149).

Many scholars (Fekade, 2006; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1997; Spitulnik, 2002; Hyden and Leslie, 2002; Graber, 2000) agree on the potential of radio trottoir to mediate political discussions in contemporary Africa. Some even suggest that a close examination of radio trottoir messaging could provide insights into future developments. As Graber (2004) states, "If the political climates were known, one could forecast political developments in the nation" (p. 56). And yet, the role of radio trottoir in political communication is relatively under-researched (Spitulnik, 2002;Hyden

and Leslie, 2002; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1997). In Ethiopia, the area is almost untouched.

Literature Review

Radio trottoir or sidewalk radio is an informal communication media which appears in both traditional and modern modes of communication. These modes of communication include humorous tales, folk music, poems, graffiti, gossip and other verbal genres that are transmitted through word of mouth, distribution of underground cassettes, web pages, SMS and Bluetooth and infrared features of mobile phones[27] (Spitulnik, 2002; Sreberny-Mohammadi &Mohammadi, 1997). Established networks like neighborhoods, friendships, workplace relationships and religious spheres are often utilized as the sites of production and distribution. Due to multiple sites of production and distribution, the information flow in radio trottoir is multi-directional and participatory political communication (Spitulnick, 2002:201). Scholars (such as Spitulnik, 2002; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1997; Finnegan, 1970) have argued that radio trottoir is a cultural form of radio in 'illiterate' societies where oral communication is dominant. As Lent (1987, p.146) describes, radio trottoir (he calls it folk media[28]) is more or less media of the masses and relished by different age groups.

Radio trottoir is often used to reject and resist the oppressive discourse and power in society. In other words, it is a platform for anti-hegemonic discourse and political mobilization from the bottom up. For example, during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, some political protests were expressed through various forms

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[28] Radio trottoir has also been described in the scholarly literature as a form of alternative media, informal media, small media, minor media, personal media, popular media, and community media (Spitulnik, 2002, p. 200).

of radio trottoir. In particular, cultural songs and religious verses were widely used (Finnegan, 1970). Similarly, through songs, the leaders of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya were able to widely mobilize the masses for their cause, in spite of the government's official ban of the movement. The innocuous nature of radio trottoir communication, as Finnegan (1970) argues, gave it an advantage over other formal media for political mobilization and communication.

In Ethiopia, radio trottoir is a space that serves to express what cannot be said directly about the political system. Thus, it is a public arena that citizens use to exchange information, comment and criticism, and to mobilize the masses (Fekade, 2006, p. 149). Since the mode of communication favours interpersonal and cultural forms, it is a highly valued method of political communication. Some of Ethiopia's former emperors recognized the potential of this sphere for taking the pulse of popular feeling on the political and economic affairs of the nation. As Fekade (2006) describes, leaders asked what had been communicated over radio trottoir by saying, "'ïrräňňamïnalä?' (meaning, "what do shepherds say?")" (p. 149). In the ancient Ethiopian tradition, it was believed that the shepherds' songs were an accurate expression of community views. As a result, many of these leaders gauged public opinion through radio trottoir and used those insights to shape the political system.

Data collection

For this study, data was collected from individuals who live in Addis Ababa, Gonder, Bahir Dar and Hawassa, and who have been using radio trottoir for political communication. Addis Ababa, the capital, was selected by purposive sampling because participants there generally come from all corners of the country and thus represent a diversity of opinions and views. Gonder, Bahir Dar and Hawassa cities were included by lottery sampling to represent other regions of the

country. In all, 32 key informants were selected through snowball and availability sampling. The sampling methods were chosen because radio trottoir communications are not open to just anyone. Therefore, to unveil what has been going on, when using personal networks and key persons who are perceived as 'insiders' to be linked with other participants of the communication, availability and snowball sampling were of paramount importance. It was important to incorporate various voices in this study. To this effect, based on availability, selection of respondents was done in a way that would include people from diverse age groups, sex and educational background.

For the sake of having available data, the research was limited to collecting messages in the forms of jokes, folk music, puns, and oral poems. Among these, messages in electronic form were exchanged by mobile phones users through their Bluetooth, infrared and short text messages (SMS) were collected. In addition, messages communicated or performed in oral and written forms in different gatherings and public squares ware collected through participant observation and interviews.

To understand the messages and the purposes of communication within their own social and communicative contexts, direct observation was undertaken at social gatherings where data collection was possible. In this regard, the 2010 Ethiopian Great Run, football fields in different villages, and friendly gatherings in local refreshment centers such as cultural houses, cafes and tearooms, were found to be convenient and safe settings for data collection in all cities. Many jokes and folk poems were thus collected with participant observation. With the consent of informants, note-taking was utilized as anonymous informants did not allow the recording of their voices for safety reasons.

To collect some political messages and have a clear understanding of how and why they are communicated, interviews were employed. Informants who were engaged in informal conversations

during the above mentioned occasions were asked about the purposes of their communication and contextual meanings of the political messages expressed in the jokes, songs and oral poetry communicated therein. In addition, information about the sources of the messages, the channels and networks were collected via interviews on several occasions.

Ethical Considerations

Radio trottoir is an indirect means of communicating with someone in power. These communications often involve sensitive political content communicated covertly and within closely-related social groups and networks of trust. In such situations, to access information one has to win the consent and confidence of the communicators. Care must be taken when securing consent from these communicators. This researcher used personal networks to find key informants who led to others; the key informants who are perceived as 'insiders' allowed for communication with other participants. Care was taken to maintain the confidence, anonymity and security of informants.

Key Findings of the Research

Throughout this research, it became apparent that messages dealing with elections and governance made up the bulk of what was distributed through radio trottoir. Election politics dominated the agenda on radio trottoir, particularly in the pre- and post-national elections periods in 2005 and 2010 in Ethiopia. Most of these messages reflected public discontent with political actors. In many instances, public policy announcements or media interviews with political actors were reworked by the populace into mockery of the government's proposed policies or actions.

For example, one story shared through radio trottoir is a re-working of an interview with Ethiopia's prime minister by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC):

Radio trottoir version: Interview with the Prime Minister by BBC journalist

Journalist: Honoured Prime Minister Meles, how do you look at inflation in the country?

PM: In principle, I glance at it sideways (in hatred). Ministers and their young followers are busy chewing 'chat', making 'du'a' (*a supplication in search of what they want Allah to grant them*) in order to make the economic crisis futile.

Journalist: Is this not contradicting your pledge that you endeavour to feed the nation thrice a day?

PM: It's not contradicting! No matter how it seems impossible to feed the nation thrice a day, since we have set a strategy which lets the nation to starve thrice a day and get away with it sitting idle in contemplation, talking. It could not be beyond our control at all. As far as it happens to be not an obstacle to the development, the hunger of the nation can never be our adversary. To your amazement, it has enabled us to rescue our nation from anti-health factors such as obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes that are affecting the international community.

Journalist: It's being heard that you will resign by the following election.

PM: Who said so? Me?

Journalist: Yes, you said so.

PM: Out of Meles, such a thing has never come. It is unfortunate that I don't have any competing antagonist to takeover my position. Consequently you find them calumniating me.

Journalist: But we have once witnessed, in the presence of foreign journalists as well, and took your word for it.

PM: Why do you talk nonsense? Has BBC ever recruited Amharic or Tigrigna speaking journalists? Do you hear me? Let alone leaving such a hot seat, a comfortable throne, see for yourself how much it's difficult to leave

the seat of your 'bercha' (*chat ceremony*)by just chewing a bundle of 'beleche' (*special type of chat*).

The intention is to show the government's inability to match its rhetoric or promises with actions. To some degree, this reworked story is meant to capture the real mood of the people as well as the government's failure in addressing food insecurity in its country. For instance, the prime minister's pledge, in the parliament, to feed the nation thrice a day was re-worked in the story as a promise to starve the nation. This underscores the peoples' lack of confidence in their government.

In other stories, human rights violations and the lack of freedom of expression are presented as important issues. For example, this story re-works a mainstream media report about the shooting of attempted bank robbers. In the radio trottoir version, the journalist challenges the official report:

> **Journalist:** On different occasions, it's been common to hear that "bandits were killed for attempting to rob a Bank." But, we have come to witness here that there is no Bank at all in this area. Are you not contradicting the truth with such news of a bank robbery?

> **Authority:** Not at all because our principle is to take necessary steps before any incident as a means of prevention. That is why we shot those bandits before the construction of a new Bank in the area.

The radio trottoir version uses a joke to pillory authority figures for punishing people for an offense they did not commit. Several radio trottoir stories also reflect the common perception that holding and expressing opinions which oppose government authorities could lead to death threats or loss of life.

The mainstream media, with its political orientation, is also discussed and evaluated in the radio trottoir political communication sphere. In these discussions, the main critique is that the only TV channel in the country – Ethiopian Television – lacks loyalty to the public when it comes to politics. The radio trottoir messages

make clear that mainstream media are not reliable sources of information on politics. The following radio trottoir story, entitled "The TV set shrank while ETV lied," captures this sentiment:

> A daughter sent her mother some money from abroad and told her to buy a 21-inch television. When the daughter returned back home to Ethiopia, she observed that the TV was only 14 inches and asked her mother why she bought the smaller one when there was enough money for a 21-inch. The mother replied, "My daughter I actually did buy the 21-inch set. However, whenever I watch Ethiopian television the TV set shrinks because of the lies they always broadcast. And after it happened repeatedly I am left with this 14-inch TV. Still, I'm glad for you to see it at this size because it might disappear completely after a while because of the lies."

People are able to get away with criticism via radio trottoir because of their anonymity as sources behind these "creative jokes" that reflect public sentiment. Many of the interviewees for this study indicated that they do not worry about the sources of these political jokes and satire which are constantly being reproduced as they flow through a series of information networks. Moreover, these jokes appear in a variety of forms that range from oral narratives, poems and folk songs to print and electronic format. Hence, it is extremely difficult to track the original sources. This also makes it difficult for the government to censor or curtail the distribution of the contents.

Folk songs, for example, are often performed within small groups during events such as the Great Run, in social gatherings and at other sporting events. One informant who had participated in the 2010 Ethiopian Great Run said many of the poems in the songs performed at that particular event did not originate there. They were reproductions or recreations of previous performances from other occasions.

The source of the message does not seem to be important in radio trottoir. From interviews and observations it is clear that attention is paid not to who said it, but to what has been said. The participants seem to pay hardly any attention to the identities of original sources or producers of jokes. Most importantly, there is no fixed

producer or consumer role, unlike in mainstream media. Since the information flow is multi-directional, an individual who receives a certain joke may also act as a distributor to others. Those others may also redistribute it themselves, and the circulation thus continues.

The obscurity of the sources is also a common feature for the mobile phone SMS, Bluetooth and infrared messages in Ethiopia. The SMSs are perhaps the most likely messages to be attributed to an individual. However, the chain of the message exchange is very long and complex, making it difficult to reach back to the original source. The Bluetooth and infrared messages, on the other hand, are spaces where political message exchanges take place with a high degree of anonymity as the exact sources of the stories are not recognizable.

Networks and genres of communication

In Ethiopia, communications networks are founded on already-established linkages of friendship, kinship, neighbourhood, and membership in a similar ethnic group, party, profession or religion. Above all, however, having similar political views gets priority. In the radio trottoir sphere, people seem to communicate with trusted members of their network. The criteria to be considered a trusted member are unspoken, yet understood among members.

The majority of radio trottoir messages were communicated in folk or indigenous forms. The most-employed forms of these traditional modes of expression, and those selected for this study, can be categorized into two major folk genres: narratives, which appeared in the form of jokes or humorous tales and folk poems and songs, including Menezuma (Zakir), praise and curse verses (mirikatinaergeman), popular and Azemari songs, and verses in graffiti and couplets. As a general feature, all include entertaining elements for their audiences. In addition, the messages appear in oral, print and electronic forms.

Convergence of radio trottoir and new ICTs and conventional radio

By definition, radio trottoir refers to word-of-mouth transmissions but this communication now takes place using mobile phone technologies like Bluetooth, infrared and SMS. Most communications with mobile phones were exchanged via Bluetooth and infrared. Use of this channel of communication is free to anyone whose mobile phone is Bluetooth-equipped. Customers are not expected to pay any service charge for consumption. Vast utilization of Bluetooth for political dialogue could be attributed to the anonymity this method offers to the sender. The compatibility of these technologies to exchange multimedia messages like audio, video, and picture messages might be another factor in their popularity. Underground audio and video cassettes are also used to communicate political messages, but their application appeared limited by comparison.

Conclusion and Further Areas of Research

This research has attempted to analyze the role of radio trottoir in Ethiopia's political communications sphere. The most discussed political topics in the radio trottoir communication sphere between 2005 and 2010 were elections and governance, accounting for more than 120 of the 200 examined messages. Human rights and political parties are also among the important concerns raised. Most messages exhibit opposition to the current political system. As such, radio trottoir disseminates, educates, criticizes, mobilizes, and challenges information. The channels utilized vary from traditional oral communication to new technologies like the mobile phone.

It is evident that radio trottoir allows Ethiopians to use artistic and creative means to make their feelings known to their political leaders. From these messages, government and political actors can learn about the public's perception of their policies and governance record. They might also learn what measures should be taken to address popular discontentment.

This research was limited to probing two questions: "What was said through radio trottoir?" and "How was it said?" Future research will need to further explore the qualitative effects of radio trottoir on the country's politics, how it is used by Diaspora communities and its convergence with social media (in particular Facebook and Twitter).

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