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Media of Autonomy: Community Radios of Dakar

Introduction

From September to December 2009 I conducted interviews with different actors in the field of community radio in Dakar, Senegal. These actors included practitioners or journalists, technicians and directors, consultants, trainers and project managers in NGOs specialized in media development, and civil servants from major governmental regulations institutions.[1] Although the research literature on radio for development tends to focus on rural radio stations, I chose to focus on stations in Dakar because their urban location and physical proximity to international actors confer on them a front-line role, exacerbating the forces affecting their activity. The region of Dakar,[2] the capital of Senegal, accounts for approximately 20 percent of the country's population. It kept its place as the regional (West African) capital from the colonial era, housing many transnational organizations, NGOs, and cooperation agencies' main quarters/offices and concentrating most of the country's economic activity (United Nations 2007). Through this research I discovered that the strong presence of international development actors poses a significant difference between the workings of community radio in Dakar versus the North American context.

My paper is not comparative, but centers on showing the unavowed relationship community radio stations in Dakar sustain with their international partners. I argue that simply taking this relationship for granted is a source of compromise for community radio's independent state of mind and action. Zones of turbulence and tensions within the extended environment of community radio reveal the nature of the relationship between the stations and their partners. The image of the "encounter" allows me to contextualize my object of inquiry as a space where social, political and cultural forces meet, affront or simply interact with each other, leading to compromise, affirmation or submission. Looking at community radio in Dakar as a space of encounter acknowledges that these stations are spaces where social movements meet international development actors, colonial history meets processes of autonomy, ambivalence, loyalty and resistance, where various discourses meet diverse definitions, and regulatory negotiations meet community aspiration. All of these aspects shape Dakar`s community radio milieu, for better or worse, as a space of encounters and interactions where contemporary

[1] The examples and empirical data presented within this paper are from these interviews unless otherwise cited.

[2] Senegal is administratively divided into forty regions. The region of Dakar is made up of the capital and its suburbs.

Senegal is represented as a dynamic of forces and trajectories. As media, the radio stations mediate both the waves to spread messages as well as social forces. In other words, they are a social catalytic converter. In this paper, I present instances of this catalytic dynamic around the figures of "ambivalence" and of "compromise." First, through the history of Senegalese community radio's emergence and the current debate around its legal status, I will describe an early set of forces encountered and the ambivalence they favour. Second, through empirical examples belonging to the daily concerns of community radio stations, namely programming and the practice of *séminaires*, I will elaborate on the forces at stake within the dynamic of compromise that shape these daily concerns.

Emergence of Community Radio Stations: Ambivalence towards Authorities, the Paradox of Support

The motto of Me Abdoulaye Wade's presidential campaign was "Sopi," meaning "change" in Wolof, the most prevalent vernacular language. Change indeed occurred in many ways when Wade was elected in 2000, though not entirely as a direct result of his party`s new power. Beyond the end of the socialist reign since the Independence,[3] the "Sopi" also meant the celebration of the "freedom of press." At the time the FM band was being generalized in Africa, thus providing a technical opportunity to diversify and create radio stations (Tudesq 2002: 11-12). In addition, Senegal was in the process of liberalizing its telecommunications sector, following the economic phases of stabilization and privatization dictated by the Program of Structural Adjustments of the World Bank (Kane 2008: 217-59). The process of liberating the airwaves started in the early 1990s and turned into ten years of arm-wrestling between social activists, journalists and the government, which was itself experiencing a dynamic process of reformation due to the World Bank requirements. In September 1991, *Radio France Internationale* launched an FM station in Senegal (Tudesq 2002: 16, 23), the first in the country. Taking advantage of this first "opening" towards media diversification, while also realizing the necessity for more democratic access to information within a context of very high illiteracy, a group of print journalists put pressure on the government and finally obtained a frequency in 1994, creating the first private station, Sud FM.

Several social activists, younger and less experienced, had been fighting on the side of the print journalists. They were focused more on social and cultural justice issues than reinforcing democratic process. Their battles were diverse, from illegal immigration of youth, to women's access to entrepreneurship and equal rights, to the reinforcement of local culture. The strong presence of international cooperation organizations in Senegal favored the interaction between the emancipative social movement and the field of development. In the early 2000s, the former obtained partnerships with development agencies that funded the creation of radio stations to reinforce their activities (Tudesq 2002: 17). From 2001 onwards the *Agence de Régulation des*

[3] Held first by Leopold Sedar Senghor (1960-1980), then by Abdou Diouf (1981-2000).

Télécommunications et des Postes (ARTP) allocated radio frequencies distinguished between public, private and community stations.

In the 1970s, several methods of development stressing the importance of public participation within programs were developed in and by rural communities in conjunction with First World academics (Chambers 1994: 953-57). In Africa, the participatory development school was particularly prevalent in the implementation of community radio as the favoured media in an environment where infrastructures were dilapidated and illiteracy rates very high (Manyozo 2006: 82). By the 1990s, these methods had proved effective in several peripheral projects**.** The participatory approach that had emerged in the South with community radio was a model of success, but community radio also had a parallel history, especially in North America and more recently in Europe, which provided its own inspiration and tools for development.[4] They were complementary in terms of principles: participation, freedom of speech and raising the voice of the voiceless. In the post-Cold War context of massive democratization and consciousness of the value of information for building new societies, both the participatory approach in general and community radio specifically inspired mainstream methods of transnational institutions responsible for dictating the lines of conduct in terms of development policy. The orientation and priorities of these institutions' programs became more "local" and "community" oriented along with the tremendous expansion of NGOs (Lewis 2001: 20-21). Community radio became the favoured media for local and community-based communication, now a crucial factor for development. New methods and programs were implemented that focused more on local issues than structural concerns, although the politics of structural adjustments had been launched and the processes of regulation and reformation were ongoing (Pieterse 2010: 26). The key to these new methods and programs was autonomy, having all citizens participating on a local level while also privatizing public sectors to lessen State implication. In the Senegalese context, however, the tradition of strong government involvement in public affairs remained, despite the neoliberal philosophy infusing structural adjustments.[5] In addition to this continued State involvement, the paradox of this new development reality lies in the omnipresence of the international actors, which are another source of authority and of non-autonomy.

In his article "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and Terms of Recognition*,"* Arjun Appadurai explains "capacity to aspire" as a state of mind, to be encouraged by developers, in which all poor and marginalized communities demand to be recognized in equal and dignified terms by the rest of the society, and especially by those who hold authority (Appadurai 2004). The social movement that preceded the creation of community radio stations achieved the recognition from international developers, which funded their programs of communication. Appadurai considers recognition as a cultural value illustrated by "cross-cultural transactions apart from issues of

[4] The history of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) particularly illustrates this dynamic of encounter between participatory approach and community radio (AMARC).

[5] "*L'organisation institutionnelle sénégalaise tient à certains moments de son histoire d'un régime hybride qui tient autant de la tradition juridique française que de la régulation anglo-saxonne*" (Kane 2008: 259).

redistribution" (Appadurai 2004: 62).[6] The recognition of international partners is materialized by their funding support to the radio stations. Although it is economic retribution, it involves the reinforcement of social actions and does not belong to the "abstract political" recognition Appadurai condemns (66). Thus, the community radio stations become literally the *voices* of the social movements held by local communities, "the voice as a cultural capacity" (66). The voice is part of a set of possible relations as described by Appadurai (quoting Albert Hirschman's work), which articulates the range of reactions poor communities may have towards the normative system of which they live on the margins (63, 69); these reactions include "loyalty," "exit" or "voice." Poor communities can be loyal towards a system that oppresses them; they can be in brutal opposition and/or forced to leave it ("exit"); or they can raise their voices to obtain recognition from this system, becoming a rich resource. These reactions express the ambivalence poor communities have towards the norm. Appadurai sees the "capacity to aspire" as "a navigational capacity" (69, 80). In other words, he refers to the capacity that a person or a group can develop to obtain enough latitude within the realm of its/his/her own ambivalent attitudes. This latitude can become a tool to play with for the sake of the person or group's own empowerment, development, and cultural affirmation (69).

The support from international actors provided a decisive argument for the social movement to obtain a partial recognition from the Senegalese government. I say "partial" in reference to the abstract political recognition Appadurai wants to mark out with his "capacity to aspire." Indeed, next to the frequencies allocated by the ARTP, the government tied the hands of the radio stations as efficient social communicators with a handicapping regulation, the "promise of performance."[7] In Articles 18 and 19 of the promise of confidence, it states that community radio stations in Senegal will not talk about politics and will not emit any advertising. Thus, indirectly, the Senegalese regulation encouraged the collaboration of community radio with international founders on the one hand, and with local sources of income—the communities—on the other, without providing a comfortable work environment.

Through their national association, *Union des Radios Associatives et Communautaires du Sénégal* (URAC), community radio stations in Senegal, and more specifically in Dakar, have been fighting for years to reform this promise of performance. Many supporters of the cause stress the need to define community radio's identity not only to stress its social importance, but also to reinforce their argument both in their dialogue with international partners and with the Senegalese government. They perceive this negotiation as a first step towards a better affirmation of identity. Except for the promise of performance and the ARTP regulations that consider all media, there is no particular legislation that frames community radio activity—thus no

[6] The following citations are from the same source.

[7] I use this term for "*cahier des charges*" in the Senegalese context, as commonly employed in the Canadian vocabulary in reference to CRTC rules and regulations. In the case of *cahier des charges*, the rules and regulations referred to are only related to community radio stations.

recognition. This is a recurrent problem faced by community radio worldwide, as AMARC pointed out in 2007 in a participatory assessment (AMARC 2007).

In the specific case of Dakar, radio stations are struggling with and battling against the government to obtain recognition rather than exit while acknowledging loyalty towards their international partners. Community radio stations are always negotiating with a figure of authority: the government or international actors.[8] The latter recalls a relation inherited from the colonial era that set up roles along the line of the ambivalence towards authority. One might question the "capacity to aspire" these stations have, considering their partners' many interventions, including: the financial support of meetings for the negotiations following the shutting down of radio stations during election time in March 2009 (CNRA 2009; Diallo 2009; Ndong 2009); the financial aid to achieve support for the press (*l'aide à la presse*);[9] and the many *séminaires* aiming to facilitate the dialogue between non-State actors and the government. How does one become a voice in between these nets of authority? Here is a debate that confronts the initial dissensus between community radio stations and the government through the legal frame that was applied to them (Appadurai 2004: 63-64). Although they are very active and argumentative in their relation to the State, they are still being loyal to their international partners who support them in their affirmation against the State. This is the ambivalence of the radio stations. Year after year they developed their capacity to aspire, calling for a revision of the promise of performance, fighting to be recognized in legal texts and thus obtain a real status acknowledged by the support to the press. They worked on their capacity for being recognized by the Senegalese state without recognizing the ways the aid from their partners was blocking their autonomy of action.

Agency and Compromise: How the Radio Stations Run their Activity

Looking at community radio stations as agents of the dynamic of power described earlier, rather than at the dynamic as a structural system enclosing and dictating the actions of all agents, allows us to describe the ways radio stations react to these pressures and thus empower their actions. We can argue that development organizations are now part of the Senegalese culture in which community radio navigates. The stations are the product of this culture as well as one of its main reproducers, but they also have the power to question and challenge their own ambivalence regarding authority and to keep aspiring for increased autonomy from the various actors that determine their conditions of existence.

[8] This omits mention of another source of authority that is not developed here, the *confréries*, religious groups that strongly govern many levels of Senegalese society (Cissé 2007).

[9] This is a governmental allocation dedicated to the funding of media in general. Its allocation has varied through the years and not every media or station benefits from it every year. However, in 2010 URAC obtained its first general allocation for community radio stations.

"*Séminaire*"[10] is a generic term used in the field of development in Senegal and in Africa in general to describe a variety of official gatherings, including press conferences, conferences, panels and workshops involving NGOs, cooperation representatives, diplomats, government agency civil servants and civil society representatives coming from various organizations, cooperatives, activist groups, etc. Journalists from community radio are invited both to benefit from the content of the *séminaires* and to report on them. *Séminaires* can be on various problematic subjects for which development communication will support the implementation of solutions. Two sets of themes and use of community radio appear. The first are problems related to public policy about which community radio will communicate; the second are problems of structural use of communication for development and its democratic stakes: thus, both form and content. Journalists receive a per diem between 5,000 and 25,000 CFA (roughly $9.50 to $42.50 CAD) for attending these *séminaires*. This allows them to supplement the income they receive monthly from the radio stations as reimbursement of travel expenses, which can be up to 50,000 CFA per month, or about $95 CAD.[11] Between ten and twenty persons work on a daily basis at the radio station as their principal activity—in other words, their unpaid full time job from which they have to support their extended families. The reports of the *séminaires* are written either in French or in Wolof and are aired within the two daily news editions. "Good governance," "transparency," "non-state actors," "regulation between civil society and public policy"—these words flow onto the waves without being culturally translated. They become part of the local reality as abstract concepts eventually referring to concrete aspects of the communities' daily lives. Radio stations serve partners by reporting on their activity and thus legitimating their work, while partners serve radio stations by supplementing journalists' monthly income. Once we integrate this conflicting and apparently unhealthy dynamic into the activities of community radio stations, the picture appears less interest-oriented. Because the journalists can earn a little more thanks to the *séminaires*, they can stay in the station and keep working on other content more directly related to the community.

Many compromises of this kind have to be made within stations. Another example is the competing conceptions of the type of journalism that should be practiced according to the training programs issued by local or international partners. Source checking, ethics around the treatment of information, training on reporting techniques, etc. are all part of training programs received by community radio stations.[12] One of the first techniques practitioners learn is to write

[10] The form of a *séminaire* can vary from lecture to group activities or plenary assembly. Both international development actors and governmental agencies hold this type of activity on a wide variety of subjects; e. g., non-stigmatized communication on HIV-AIDS, best communication practices for good governance, annual reports on the local media situation, journalistic ethics and deontology rules, various health issues (HIV-AIDS, malaria, hygiene rules, etc.), gender equality, youth education, democracy, etc.

[11] In addition to international funds, the radio stations obtain support from governmental agencies working on development issues (health, education, human rights) for the diffusion of commissioned programs on specific issues. In this case the money will go directly to the radio station and will be part of the travel reimbursement after all the domestic costs of the stations have been covered (electricity, water, office supplies, etc.).

[12] Such training is different than the *séminaires*, but it is part of the activities involving both the developers and the community stations. Sometimes, the *séminaires* and training crosscut each other in either form or content. Some

down what they are going to say before airing it. This means that only one part of the "community" can speak out on the radio because its majority is illiterate. The compromise is very clear within the schedule. Most of the community radio stations will air two daily news journals, written and articulated in French and in Wolof. Reports are written and the subjects treated can vary from national issues to regional or international subjects, sometimes with a little catcher from the community. Other times in the schedule will be dedicated to local actors speaking freely in one of the many local languages without any written references about various subjects related to the community: religion, cultural identity, unemployment, married life, the importance of public representation, of elder respect, etc. The mix of commissioned programs and journalists' content initiatives creates a programming that illustrates the encounter between the many forces at work in Dakar today. All of the content and techniques from the various partners are culturally processed and absorbed through religious values, joking relationships (*cousinage à plaisanterie),* ethnic subtleties, multilingualism, etc. to form the radio stations' identity. The stations obtain scarce resources that allow them to survive and air, in addition to the compulsory programs that really matter for local culture.

Conclusion: Community Radio, Mediating Culture

In most of the interviews I conducted, to the question "What is community radio?" most of the interviewees answered: "Radio for the community by the community." However, to the question "What community are you addressing?" most responses were unprepared and vague, attesting to the absence of a clear mandate amongst the stations. When I raised the question of this vagueness in the various interviews I conducted with consultants, they recognized it and stressed the necessity to think reflexively about the status of community radio. None of the many *séminaires* address the question directly, however, keeping the consensual and unelaborated vision of "the radio of the community by the community" as an element that ensured the presence of an ongoing democratization process and of a development program. But "community" is still a blurred notion for everyone and should be questioned in order for the stations to make their mandate precise and thus gain in autonomy.

Community radio stations are a vital social actor where the social complexity of contemporary Senegal has a chance to meet, to be mediated, to merge, to be understood, and to participate in the ongoing re-articulation of its society. The stations provide space for forces of mediation and interaction between many actors (government, international sponsors, local NGOs, civil society, etc.). This is not only a tool for development; this is a place where society and development meet along the lines of ambivalence and compromise. Their activity lies between the claim for recognition from the government and the loyalty towards their sponsors. Community radio is

may choose to hold a *séminaire* on a specific subject while the other will prefer training. In the case of training, the remuneration is not financial, but sometimes credential, although this has diminished because participants tend to use their diplomas as a means to be hired in private or public media rather than following the expected outcome of diffusing their knowledge within the community radio stations. Sometimes it is even the NGOs that hire the "good" students.

twice a media; as radio it mediates waves to spread a message, and as a social catalytic converter it mediates political and cultural forces. In the end, community radio stations are the radio of "the community by the community" as they illustrate the compromises and ambivalence of the Senegalese people regarding the government, the international developers, the relation to autonomy and public policies, and to history.

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