The changing college radio model of broadcasting in Ghana

Michael Yao Wodui Serwornoo

Abstract

There is a considerable history of campus radio that is under-developed and analysed as part of the larger community media movement. This paper situates an account of the history and recent developments at one campus radio service in Ghana within an international perspective. Inspired by the notions of participatory communication theory and the ideal public sphere, the paper recounts how a restrictive ownership policy directive issued by the National Communication Authority (NCA) of Ghana led to further commercialisation and bureaucratisation of ATL FM, a college radio at the University of Cape Coast. Through a longitudinal ethnographic research, this paper argues that these changes have weakened the prevailing power dynamics and excluded students and lecturers from participating in the core activities of campus radio broadcasting. The surrender of ATL FM to the university wide bureaucratic entanglements and vigorous commercial interests has also empowered the professional management team with distorted incentives rather than the ideals of a community public sphere rooted in active participation and deliberation.

Introduction

The institution of campus radio in Ghana has existed, either as pirate or de-facto broadcasters, since before the deregulation of the broadcasting sector in 1996. Prof. Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang confirmed in a personal conversation on 8th April 2009 that by 1991 ATL FM had requested broadcast authorisation and assistance from the Secretary of Information. In 1993, two years later, the station received a transmitter rather than the formal authorisation from the Secretary of Information and continued to broadcast as a "recognised" pirate radio until 1997 when the station was issued with an authorisation. According to Sauls (2009, 9) most campus radio stations globally were started as experimental radio stations, operating on university campuses. In the United States, for instance, before the commercial model of broadcasting was introduced in the 1920s, there was an alternative non-commercial system that included campus radio stations. These radio stations were hosted on both state supported universities and private colleges and universities (Slotten 2006, 486). However, scholars over the years have rather ignored campus radio broadcasting as part of community broadcasting. According to Wallace (2008) and Downing (2001), community radio stations are expected to lift local communities with peculiar content useful to their circumstances. It also gives communities the opportunity to represent themselves in mass media. Even though campus radio stations fall squarely within the frameworks mentioned in Wallace and Downing, they have not received the commensurate attention from both regulatory bodies and scholars.

In 2007, over a decade after deregulation in Ghana, the National Communication Authority (NCA) issued a directive that classified campus radio stations as part of community radio. The directive also ordered university authorities that had radio stations on their campus to take over the running of the stations or risk the withdrawal of their authorisation. This move was partly to de-commercialise and stabilise the campus radio sector. Today, there are about 15 campus radio stations across Ghana, mainly on public university and polytechnic campuses.

Public Sphere and Participatory Communication

Community radio has attributes that distinguish it from commercial and public broadcasters. Prominent among these attributes is the community's participation in content generation and involvement in management structures. The local community owns the station both in reality and in abstract form, and can be understood as an expression of the 'ideal public sphere' as theorized by Jürgen Habermas. In such cases, we identify that the normative pressures and dialogic rationality both allow for community to flourish (Habermas 1989; Delanty 2005 and Wallace 2008). A campus-based community radio is expected to represent these ideals on university campuses as a community that usually has the features of a full diverse community. In the Habermasian concept, the station is a local public sphere – 'the sphere of private people who are together as a public – where every voice has a chance for its input in a mass – mediated "ideal speech situation"' (Habermas 1989, 27). Habermas also theorized communicative rationality as a necessary tool for participatory democracy that is opposed to the ideals of a mass communication controlled by commercial interest, consumerism and mere media markets (Habermas 1989). Wallace (2008, 58) also described a three-element framework that includes 'inclusiveness', which supposedly suggests community radio as an open to all bounded local medium. The second is 'egalitarianism', whereby all participants are considered equal in how public dialogue is enacted, and the third is 'openness', that any issue can be raised for consideration in the public sphere (Habermas 1992 and Benhabib 1992). Forde et al (2002, 57) explained these three elements as having 'important community building functions' that are part of the community public sphere aimed at 'cultural citizenship'.

Another popular approach within which to discuss the campus-based community radio sector is the participatory communication paradigm. According to Singh (2010) campus radio survives on the ideals of participatory communication to achieve the needed progress and social change. Other major proponents of the participatory communication model have strongly stressed the horizontal process of communication, through which collective involvement in media-making and community empowerment act as catalysts to any positive, desired change (Melkote and Steeves 2001; Morris 2003; White 1994). These scholars also value the empowering role of dialogue and have argued that community members should be treated 'as agents rather than objects; capable of analyzing their own situations and designing their own solutions' (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995, 1670). Atton (2002) provides an encapsulating view that covers both approaches (public sphere and participatory communication model) when he posits that alternative media must be organised to include the social process of communication, such as organizational structure, content and how the content is produced, financed and distributed.

Forde et al (2002) and Van Vuuren (2006) have all argued that the community public sphere is neither free of competition from the mainstream public sphere nor its own internal community public sphere. It actually has its fair share of power dynamics woven around conflicts, exclusion and control. Fraser (1994) contended that minority groups within a public sphere have usually constituted alternative publics within the major public. This is the case because the creation of a community public sphere as an alternative single unique public contesting the mainstream public sphere is inherently flawed by the supervision of internal dominant groups who might deny the minority, within the alternative sphere, the opportunity to uphold their own interests. These contestations have become a characteristic of any public sphere and cannot be avoided.

That is why Dahlgren (1991, 2) considers the public sphere as a 'nexus which links a variety of actors, factors and contexts together' in a manner that both meaning and power have to be negotiated and legitimised.

Fraser (1994) discussed the delimitations of the public sphere when she was answering the question of who determines what is important to be discussed in the public sphere. Fraser suggested that participants themselves needed to choose what was important to them. Through this argument, she described the public sphere as 'bounded and exclusive'. Van Vuuren (2006) also later argued that community broadcasting, as 'a bounded public sphere', is not an open-access, free-for-all domain and should be, rather, evaluated as a common property right of the community members. She further elaborated that the practice of evaluating community radio, by the nature of its resources and not the rules and conventions people have developed to manage the resources, leads the analysis to focus on the quality of the 'content of messages' produced through the public sphere rather than 'the structure, norms, values, rituals and cultural dispositions' (Carey 1989, 18). When community radio is run by professionals instead of ordinary community members there is the temptation for the professionals to concentrate on the value of their content in relation to other mainstream broadcasters. Van Vuuren (2002) contended that good community radios should be evaluated from their community development functions, which includes the quality of management of volunteers, their training capacity and how fitting the radio is in the nature of its various networks within which it belongs. As Forde et al (2002) put it, community radios are not licensed either to compete with mainstream radio or to be run by professionals.

In this paper I shall attempt to explore how a regulatory policy directive from the National Communication Authority (NCA) in Ghana collapsed the power dynamics of the community public sphere that existed at ATL FM and estalished a new order, which pushed the practice of campus radio broadcasting beyond the reach of two crucial actors in that community: students and lecturers. The paper argues that the lack of students and lecturers participating in content generation and power play at ATL FM undermines the foundations upon which campus radio itself is built.

Method
My research methodology has been that of longitudinal ethnography. The theoretical approach of this paper basically seeks to unravel power dynamics and exclusions that have occurred both knowingly and unknowingly in a very closed community for which I have participated. My ethnographic research on ATL FM spans between 2007 and 2014. The approach affords me the opportunity to make explicit my own entanglements in my research field. Since 2007 till 2014, I have had the opportunity to be actively involved in the nexus of ATL FM's entire working framework as a management board secretary and deputy station manager. I had a break for one year to study media and that was when I started questioning myself. I became capable in making sense of many of the changes and continuities occurring over that time. Although at the beginning of my working life at the station I had had a question mark about the role of students, it only became more evident after I returned from graduate school that I needed to describe the phenomenon scientifically. I wrote about ATL FM for my master thesis where I described the station's programming, funding and challenges it endures from the regulatory regime. In this specific paper, I describe the general power dynamics within the university community by relying on my rich insider knowledge of the internal workings at the place. I conducted regular observations and interviews with presenters, programmers and ex-management members. I had access to minutes of meetings from management boards

before and after the takeover by the university authorities. I have, however, not made any verbatim quotes from the board minutes because of ethical considerations regarding confidentiality considerations for the University of Cape Coast. These connected bits of synchronic views and the opportunistic approach to gathering evidence over 6 years provided me with the insights that would not otherwise have been possible to gather.

Longitudinal ethnography is actually not a rigidly methodic sampling of views, but it shows the continuities and social reproduction of a particular culture. The potency of this approach is based on my rich understanding of the background of ATL FM within the university community and the detailed descriptions of events that replays those moments more vividly. I also subjected the whole research process to the concept of reflexivity as a significant guide for validity. In this approach, I questioned my role several times in the research process in a manner that limited my biases and improved the emic validity that my knowledge of the research field brings. After all, Wimmer and Dominick (2011, 116) argue that without the active participation of the researcher, no data actually exist in the qualitative interpretive paradigm.

ATL FM and Campus-based Community Radio Broadcasting in Ghana
ATL FM, a campus-based community radio in the University of Cape Coast, started as a music request programme in 1988, in a room known as "FM Room". This room was located in the Atlantic Hall, a residential facility for students at the University of Cape Coast. According to the personal communication of Prof. Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang (Lecturer and Manager of Atlantic Hall at that time), he and his colleagues allowed the students to broadcast using their minute transmitting board installed by a student from Cape Coast Technical Institute because it was fun for students. In the 1992/93 academic year, the station was launched by the then Information Secretary, Kofi Totobi Quakyi. He also donated a transmitter to the station a year later. By 1997, ATL FM was officially assigned the frequency of 100.5MHZ. The situation of campus radio broadcasting across Ghanaian public universities was not significantly different. The School of Communication Studies (SCS) at the University of Ghana in Accra sought authorisation to broadcast when the late Professor Paul Ansah, Director of SCS, approached the authorities in the mid-1990s to seek approval for the establishment of a campus radio station. The idea was rejected by the presidency and the national security agency seized the equipment the school had received from UNESCO. This equipment was later donated to the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), the state broadcaster that had a monopoly over broadcasting at that time (Kwame Karikari, Personal communication, 22 January, 2011). Similarly, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi had two pirate radio stations as well. Alumni of KNUST have narrated their long history of pirate campus radio broadcasting. All these campus-based community radio stations, including ATL FM, got their official authorisation to broadcast after the deregulation of the broadcasting sector in 1996.

As the first independent radio to broadcast in the Central region of Ghana, ATL FM has maintained its influence and featured prominently in listenership surveys in recent times. The station's broadcast went far beyond the university campus because it broadcast on 1000watts of power. The exclusivity of ATL FM's case as the only local FM broadcaster in the city for a long time worked to the advantage of its image and brand. Even though there has been re-branding in recent times, the station regularly enjoys some popularity for being the first independent broadcaster in Cape Coast and in the Central region. This made the station a "different kind" of campus radio compared to other campus-based community radio stations in the country. The station was owned by Atlantic Hall (a

residential facility in the University of Cape Coast). The residential facility management known as the Hall Council consisted of students, administrators and lecturers. They appointed the manager and his team at the station. They maintained six regular positions: Station Manager, Marketing Officer, Accounts Officer, Programmes Coordinator, News Editor and Messenger/Cleaner. The rest of the staff were volunteers and guest presenters who were rewarded with some transportation allowance. During this era of ATL FM's history, the management at the station had to lobby Hall Council members and students regarding several activities of the station. The power dynamics were intense, with stakeholders and supervisors seeking to know running details. An ex-manager narrated how he used to receive phone calls almost on a daily basis regarding advertising slots and quality of broadcast, from board members. The Hall Council was a much smaller and closer community within the bigger university community.

The NCA in 2007 issued a policy directive that required the central university administration to take over the running of ATL FM. Even though this was resisted, it eventually led to takeover negotiations between the bigger university administration and the Hall Council. It is evident that parties to the negotiations were all within the same university, but that did not stop the negotiations from being difficult. Parties took very entrenched positions until the final day. The negotiation process was, by itself, a good example of public sphere contestations, where parties sought to maximise their interests and insist that they were heard. I joined ATL FM in the heat of these contestations.

From less than six regular staff, the University of Cape Coast migrated almost all staff at the station at that time to its payroll. The University further appointed part-time and guest presenters to the station. However, apart from salaries of full-time staff and the electricity bill, all other running cost and staff allowances were to be paid from the income generated by the station. The staffing situation could no longer allow student presenters to play any significant role at the station. Lecturers and senior administrators played a much lesser role than before. The journey towards professionalisation from this point intensified. Before this, ATL FM already had a 24-hour broadcast schedule that was formal and not based on DJ availability - a popular feature of campus radio stations. The Hall Council had also advocated commercial advertising but with a less vigorous approach. Due to the formal nature of the station's broadcast and the large staff strength that it had gained after the takeover, the station needed to generate more income from advertising in a vigorous manner to keep up with its running costs. To achieve this meant that the station needed to become more professional, a strategy that further pushed away student trainees and amateurs occupying crucial roles at the station and hosting primetime slots.

I have been involved in campus radio broadcasting for about fourteen years. But, more importantly, I was involved as an undergraduate student with Radio Valco at the same University of Cape Coast campus. I served in several capacities from marketing to news through to a regular disc jockey slot. When I later evaluated these personal opportunities I had enjoyed against what was available at ATL FM for students, I realised a massive shift in focus. In the past, ATL FM has had several other similar stories. The stations meant three things to the pioneers:

(i)   A training platform for students and community members interested in radio broadcasting.
(ii)   A source of entertainment for students, lecturers and the entire university community.

      (iii)   As the pride of Atlantic Hall, the residential facility where the radio station
               was located.

However, this era of professionalisation and large staff strength ended these opportunities and outlook. I joined ATL FM at the stage where the University of Cape Coast administration was negotiating a takeover deal that would take management of the station from the Hall Council. With the pool of knowledge available to ATL FM, by virtue of its location (university campus), it was expected that students and faculty volunteers would serve in responsible decision-making roles and represent their respective groupings or unions on campus. This was not the case, as the university employed professionals who headed all aspects of the radio station. At this point, it was clear that the station was no longer interested in entertaining the existing "community public sphere" and our initial approach to managing the station which was to win more adverts and become popular among advertising agencies. To achieve this, we did most shows on campus, not necessarily to encourage participation but to present the campus audience as "bait" to the advertising world, that we control a constituency and niche market, which would make us a unique destination for advertising.

Existing governance structures, such as management board and university administrative control systems, only pushed the station into main university bureaucratic entanglements and further alienated student participation. As the secretary of the board for more than 5 years, I did not witness a public sphere that was "open" and "egalitarian". The rightness of decisions was judged by their administrative and bureaucratic soundness. We made lecturers and students, in particular, send all their requests to the station through the main University Public Relations. In fact, students had to first route these requests through the Student Council and Dean of Student Affairs before they finally arrived at the University Public Relations. The only thing the Public Relations Office did was to forward these requests to the station. So, in this university-wide community public sphere, the dominant groups (Central administration and professional team of staff at the radio station) relied on bureaucracy to control major constituents such as students, lecturers and even heads of departments.

Discussion

ATL FM was a complete student initiative. Students built the radio station from scratch. The residents of Atlantic Hall led the first fundraising activities that saw ATL FM equipped with decent broadcast equipment at that time. Prof. K. Opoku-Agyeman (personal communication, 7th September 2012), who was Atlantic Hall Master (facility manager) at the time, recalled vividly how encouraging the enthusiasm of the students urged him and his colleagues to defend the initiative and to guide its growth. At the level of Hall Council management, the community public sphere was smaller, and that encouraged some relational dynamics. Almost every year, new student executives take office and new lecturers are appointed every two years as Counselors. Due to the fleeting nature of the stakeholders, management at the radio station had to constantly negotiate their ideas and this supported the upkeep of an active public sphere.

The central university administration had been seeking ways to control this powerful public sphere. The Vice Chancellor appointed a Campus Radio Stations Monitoring Committee to oversee the activities of the campus radio stations, including ATL FM; however, the influence of this committee was only advisory. The debate about the committee's powers continued until the National Communications Authority policy directive forced the Hall Council to enter takeover negotiations with the central university administration. The takeover was fiercely negotiated to the last minute and

appropriate compensation was paid to the Atlantic Hall Council. I argue that the community public sphere was also, at this point, unknowingly sold, as ATL FM joined the main university administrative structures. Due to the bureaucratic nature of the university administration, little or no power relations and dynamics existed afterwards. The competitions and contestations within and outside of the community public sphere, as described by Forde et al (2002) and Van Vuuren (2006), became significantly constrained by bureaucracy. It is crucial to note that bureaucracy and administrative systems are usually based on hierarchy, authority and rules that are inherently inconsistent with the elements of the public sphere framework (egalitarian, inclusiveness and openness) described by Wallace (2008). Bureaucracy also favors the dominant groups within the public sphere in a manner such that meaning and power no longer have to be negotiated and legitimised but justified in a backdrop of administrative rules made by the dominant groups themselves. According to Dahlgren (1991), negotiations and legitimisation lie at the nexus of the public sphere in a way that links a variety of actors, factors and contexts. It is difficult to talk of community public sphere where no power dynamics exist.

Another significant finding is the engagement of professionals to manage ATL FM. From a staff strength of 6 regular employees (on general allowances) and 12 part-time and guest presenters and DJs (on transportation allowance), ATL FM was immediately staffed with almost 20 full-time employees (professionals) by the university administration. The station was also tagged as an income-generating unit of the university. Amateur DJs and student presenters lost their appeal because professionals had arrived. Even though there were student presenters, they no longer occupied any useful roles. The opportunity to host primetime radio shows and occupy responsible positions at the campus radio station, as I did when I was a student, no longer existed. This phenomenon echoed the argument of Da Costa (2014) that community radio stations end with distorted incentives and purpose when professionals are employed to manage them instead of members of the community. ATL FM was to the pioneers a training platform for students and lecturers, a source of entertainment for the university community and the "pride of Atlantic Hallers". The professional team had a different vision after they were tagged as an income-generating unit. The vision was to professionalise the radio station and to compete with mainstream media; a very different motivation to that of the pioneers.

Another critical dimension of running ATL FM with professionals tasked to generate income is that they concentrate their efforts on the quality of content of broadcast as a means of attracting more business. In fact, at the management board level, discussions were predominantly on finance and marketing. The effectiveness of the professional management team at ATL FM was evaluated on the basis of how much money they had generated and their influence on the market. Even though these forms of evaluations are generally virtuous, it wasn't the domain to which ATL FM belonged. According to the arguments of Van Vuuren (2002), Carey (1989) and Forde at al. (2002), ATL FM's concern should have been in the number of talented student broadcasters they are churning out, the importance of counseling and training roles lecturers play in daily broadcasts and how open and equal the "local bounded" community public sphere operates in.

Conclusion
Drawing on longitudinal ethnographic research, this paper describes the evolving terrain of the campus radio as a bounded community public sphere and medium of participatory

communication where power dynamics are no longer negotiated because of professionalisation, commericalisation and bureaucracy. The article suggests that the campus radio sector in Ghana has gone through different stages of development, where different stakeholders have sought to exert their power on several aspects of its running. In the case of ATL FM, the National Communication Authority policy directive truncated the contestations and fierce competition for influence and, as a result, allowed the introduction of a bureaucratic system that privileged the rule of a dominant group that was made up of hired professionals and central university administrators.

Describing the influence of the dominant group within the Habermasian frame, the article contends that ignoring active community participation as a necessary element of the deliberative democracy of a campus-based community radio is not only inimical to the 'ideal speech situation' of the community but also to the very structure of the community public sphere milieu. I conclude that the existence of administrative and governance structures at a campus radio station do not necessarily result in participation and an active community public sphere because most governance structures are buried in administrative bureaucracy that is inherently exclusionary and restrictive in nature. The paper also contends that both professionalisation and commercialisation of campus-based community radio are inconsistent with the participatory approach of alternative media, where community members are actually needed to be active agents and discussants of their own issues. As Forde et al. (2002) summarised, campus-based community radio stations are not licensed in the first place to compete with private radio stations or to be run by professionals.

About the Author
Michael Yao Wodui Serwornoo is an Assistant Lecturer at the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana but currently on study leave in Germany as a PhD Fellow at the School of International and Intercultural Communications (SIIC) at the Technische Universität Dortmund, Germany. Email: michael.serwornoo@siic.science or michael.serwornoo@ucc.edu.gh

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