

**THE POWER OF RADIO IN INFORMING AND
EDUCATING COMMUNITIES: THE AFRICAN
PERSPECTIVE**

**A Presentation by Tony Ekata at the Asia-Pacific
Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD)
Regional Webinar to Mark World Radio Day**

22 FEBRUARY 2024





INTRODUCTION

Tony Ekata is a seasoned, widely travelled broadcast journalist with a teaching background. He joined Voice of Nigeria (VON), the statutory radio broadcasting organisation of Nigeria in 1996 after over a decade teaching English at various secondary schools in Edo State.

He quickly learned the broadcasting ropes and went on to serve the corporation locally and internationally at various times as the Head Economic and Business Desk; State House Correspondent/Chairman, State House Press Corps, Presidential Villa Abuja; and Pioneer Bureau Chief, VON Southern Africa Bureau Pretoria, among others.

Tony retired from service in 2020 and resides in South Africa where he has practised international journalism for over two decades. He is the CEO and Editor-in-Chief of NewsPlus Communications (Pty) SA, a strategic communications consultancy firm, and the Convener of the Broadcasters Global Forum, a virtual organisation of hundreds of veteran journalists across the world committed to enhancing media standards globally.

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DEFINITIONS

RADIO

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines RADIO as “the wireless transmission and reception of electric impulses or signals by means of electromagnetic waves.” It goes on to explain it as “the use of these waves for the wireless transmission of electric impulses into which sound is converted.”

- We are not just talking about the small box with batteries and an adjustable antenna rotated manually to detect broadcast signals.

POWER

The ability or capacity “to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events.”

INFORM

To tell someone or a group of people something.

EDUCATE

To instruct someone or a group of people on a particular subject to make them aware of the subject, add to what they already know, or correct wrong knowledge they may have on the subject.

COMMUNITY

The Oxford English Dictionary defines community as “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.”

- Technology has since altered this definition with the Global Village concept.

The Community we shall be talking about is both the local and the global community.

WHO STILL LISTENS TO THE RADIO?

The question above underlies a general misconception about Radio. Many people still see the radio as simply a talking box carried along to listen to news, music or some form of education or entertainment. There is news for such people. The radio has evolved to different formats. The Internet Revolution has made it possible to listen to the radio on mobile phones, tablets, computers, in cars, on ships, trains, aircraft, and at restaurants and other public places without seeing the physical source of the information or education dispensed in that process.



In Africa, radio boasts the highest usage among mass communication mediums, with listenership estimated at between 60% and 80% of the continent's 1.4 billion population, according to findings by Sisanda Nkoala, an Associate Professor in the Linguistics Department at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. This preference for traditional radio is attributed to factors like poor literacy rates, uneven internet access, and inadequate technological infrastructure. Unlike in many Western countries where streaming and podcasts are gaining popularity, traditional radio continues to be widely embraced in Africa due to its reliability and inclusivity.

Statista projects the user penetration of traditional radio to be 33.3% of the 4.7 billion Asian population in 2024. The penetration is expected to increase to 33.5% by 2029 when the number of Radio Users is expected to reach 1.6 billion. This underscores the enduring significance of radio as a vital source of information and education, especially in everyday life and during emergencies. Despite technological advancements, radio remains indispensable for reaching diverse audiences and fulfilling essential communication needs globally.



RADIO AS A DYNAMIC MEDIUM

Radio reaches individuals across all socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, and demographics. Through deliberate programming, it caters to diverse audiences, offering something for everyone regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or religion. Its versatility allows people to listen while engaging in various activities, such as driving, cooking, or relaxing, making it a universally accessible medium. Importantly, radio is also known as the "blind medium" due to its accessibility to the visually impaired, further enhancing its inclusivity.

In addition, community radio stations with special programming help build and foster meaningful engagement and participation in communal projects. Dedicated Gospel channels also provide spiritual empowerment through evangelical broadcasts.

Radio's unparalleled ability to inform and educate stems from its unique characteristics. It is portable, affordable, and accessible, allowing people to listen to it anytime, anywhere, even in areas lacking electricity or internet connectivity. Not only is it affordable for consumers, but the production costs of radio programmes are also comparatively lower than those of television and other visual content.



A specific example highlighting radio's impact is the recent AFCON soccer tournament in South Africa, where radio commentaries were broadcast in English and local languages. This enabled all listeners, including those with visual impairments or facing electricity disruptions, to enjoy the games, underscoring radio's role in providing inclusive and accessible content for diverse audiences.

HEALTH INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

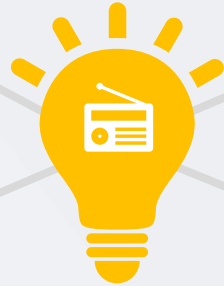
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It is commonly said that information is power. It is the living who can be empowered with information and education. The dynamic nature of Radio makes it the first choice when it comes to disseminating health and sanitation information.

This is the case during epidemics and pandemics like during the Covid-19 lockdown when people could not go out to earn income, and the little they had needed to be conserved for more critical needs than paying for data bundles which are far more expensive than radio batteries.

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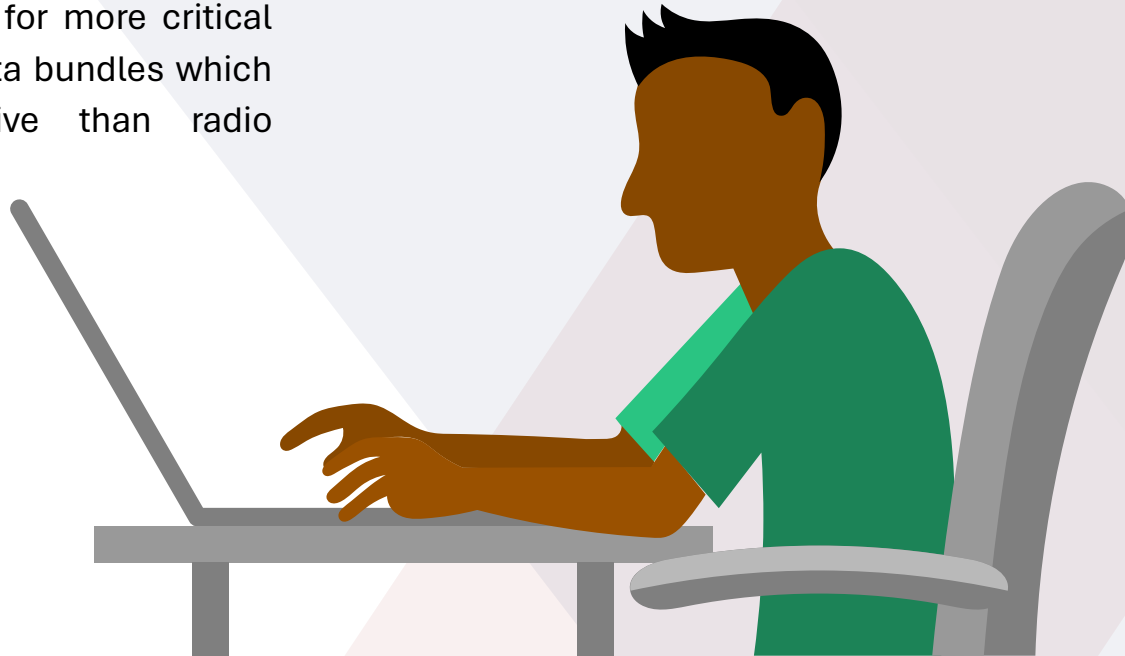
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More people were, therefore, more able to listen to life-saving radio jingles on valid preventive measures, harmful conspiracy theories, trauma counselling, and how to access palliatives provided by governments, charity organisations, and philanthropic individuals.

Learners around the world received academic tuition via the radio during the lockdown. For instance, Radio Okapi, a UN-sponsored radio network in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), launched Okapi Ecole (Okapi School) - a twice-daily remote learning programme for primary, secondary and vocational school students.

UNICEF initiated a programme with the Rwanda Broadcasting Agency to produce and air nationwide basic literacy and numeracy classes, with the same support provided to Malawi.





EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

SCHOOL LESSONS BROADCAST ON THE RADIO

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC



NATURAL DISASTERS AND WARS

- ❖ For the same reasons above, Radio is indispensable when it comes to information and education about natural disasters and wars. This is essentially because it is a trusted medium. This is particularly vital in this era of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information.
- ❖ For instance, during the Nigerian Civil War, the federal government relied heavily on Radio to propagate the war. There is no war without propaganda, negative or positive. The secessionist authorities did the same with Radio Biafra. At the end of the war, Major General Philip Effiong announced the cessation of hostilities and the surrender of Biafra to Nigeria on Radio Biafra on 12th January 1970. Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo made the acceptance speech on the same Radio Biafra, after which the name was immediately changed to Radio Nigeria Obodo-Ukwu.
- ❖ Obasanjo's speech, made on behalf of the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces Major General Yakubu Gowon, urged the people of Biafra, whom he called "our brothers and sisters", and Biafran soldiers still in hiding to come out of hiding and surrender their weapons with assurances of their safety.

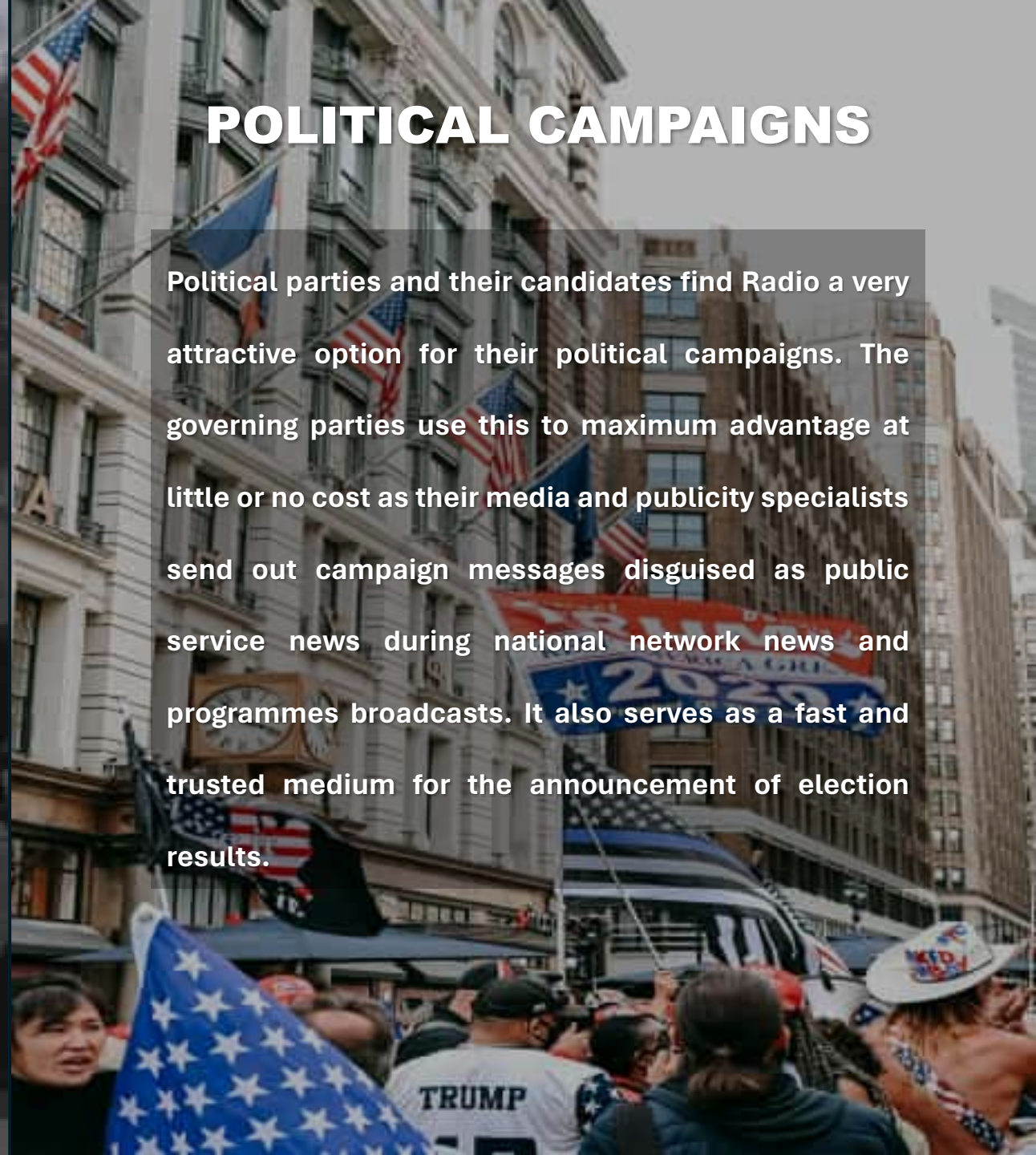


MILITARY COUPS

To date, military coups are announced on the network service of national radio stations. This is because of its guaranteed reach and the people's confidence in them as trusted news sources. In the same vein, pirate radio stations are used by resistance movements as we saw in the case of Radio Kudirat deployed in the wake of the annulment of the June 12 Presidential election adjudged to be the freest and fairest election in the annals of Nigeria by General Ibrahim Babangida's military government. Other pro-democracy movements across the world use the same medium for their mass communication.

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Political parties and their candidates find Radio a very attractive option for their political campaigns. The governing parties use this to maximum advantage at little or no cost as their media and publicity specialists send out campaign messages disguised as public service news during national network news and programmes broadcasts. It also serves as a fast and trusted medium for the announcement of election results.



RADIO INFORMS AND EDUCATES



The power of Radio in informing and educating people cannot be overstressed. By broadcasting in indigenous languages, information and education are imparted in various areas, including healthy living for pregnant women and mothers, medical updates for health workers, infection prevention for the populace, modern farming methods, and civic education for all.

DAILY WEATHER, TRAFFIC, AND FINANCIAL UPDATES

The ubiquitous and accessible nature of Radio makes it a primary source of information on the weather, daily traffic, and financial market updates. Even in traffic, motorists can listen to the radio and get information that can lead to informed movement and profitable investment decisions.



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

As indicated in the earlier definition of Community, Radio is a veritable tool for building local and international community relations and influencing foreign policy decisions. State broadcasters are deliberately funded to exercise this responsibility. Before the era of media convergence and the proliferation of broadcasting channels, the Voice of Nigeria (VON) was the go-to channel for Nigerians in the Diaspora and others to get credible information about Nigeria and to promote Nigeria's foreign policy initiatives. VON, as the external service of Radio Nigeria was instrumental in rallying public opinion against the apartheid regimes in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa, giving Nigeria a Frontline State status in the 70s and 80s. Even today, VON remains relevant with its broadcast in eight international languages, including English, French, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Kiswahili, Fulfulde, and Arabic. No television station or newspaper does that.



It is instructive that public radio broadcasters in the West, such as the BBC, the Voice of America, DW of Germany, and Radio France International are heavily funded to facilitate their role as mediums for subtle social, economic, technological, environmental and political diplomacy.

The BBC's Hausa Service is very popular among northern elites in Nigeria, including a former president who was known to be more at home with the Service than its local equivalent.

Building on that, the BBC now has a Pidgin Service which targets grassroots listeners in Nigeria with a major focus on development journalism.

Notably, there are in Nigeria similar special-interest radio stations such as Wazobia FM which has been broadcasting in Pidgin since 2007. Soccer legend Dr Segun Odegbami joined the likes of Dr Larry Izamoje, the founder of Africa's first sports radio, Brila FM, with his Eagle 7 103.7 FM radio station launched in June 2022. According to Odegbami, "the new Eagles 7 Sports Radio will among other things promote Afrocentrism, reflecting the dream and expectations of all Africans and people of African descent all over the world."

CONCLUSION

Having examined various aspects of the power of Radio to inform and educate, it is imperative to ask what should be done to sustain this role. Obviously, Radio must embrace new technology to remain relevant in the fast-evolving mass communication sector. Radio stations, particularly public broadcasters in Africa, need to be adequately funded to be able to produce quality, inclusive content, conduct audience ratings and listener feedback, and train and retrain staff to keep pace with emerging trends. Also, obsolete regulations that constrict their flexibility and ability to explore new vistas should be abrogated.

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