Grassroots challenges

Radio is still the most important mass medium in sub-Saharan Africa. Due to political liberalisation, the media landscape in many countries has become substantially more diverse since the 1990s. “Community radio stations” (CRS) are non-commercial stations run by non-profit organisations. They add to the range of information and entertainment, especially for illiterate listeners, and they help to foster pluralistic debate in Benin. In terms of management and programme quality, however, there is ample room for improvement.

Related Topics

- Journalism students support local media in South Africa
- The useful role of citizen journalists
- Humanitarian agencies neglect media in crisis regions

For a long time, the only firmly established media outlet in Benin was the state-owned broadcasting service. After the adoption of a democratic constitution in 1990, however, the media authority HAAC (Haute Autorité d’Audiovisuel et de la Communication) issued licences to numerous independent newspapers and radio stations. In agglomerations like Cotonou, the list of free-to-air radio stations is almost as long as in German cities. Availability of receivers has increased – they are now inexpensive and omnipresent – and more and more people make use of radio-capable mobile phones.

There are currently 55 radio stations in Benin (private, non-profit, association-run or religious), and 36 of them are CRSs. The state gives scope to their establishment, but application procedures and tenders for licences remain complicated and expensive. The radio sector is regulated strictly, and the HAAC meticulously enforces its rules.

Most CRSs broadcast a huge variety of formats including news bulletins, quiz shows, sports and music programmes, radio drama, debates on local or national politics as well as broadcasts for minority linguistic groups. CRSs promote interactive formats such as phone-ins or greetings and request programmes. They carry a considerable number of obituaries.
CRSs are able to respond immediately to current events in their region, stimulating debate on local issues. They have thus created a new, regionally effective kind of public sphere. CRSs keep a critical eye on policymakers and public institutions, thus boosting listeners’ interest in regional developments. Public events are often broadcast live. Many stations spread information on relevant matters like daily market prices. Such data is of huge importance to rural listeners who live far from the big urban centres.

In day-to-day life, CRSs are typically marked by close ties between radio producers and their listeners. Their contributors enjoy a public presence as reporters, for instance, but they often are also active in their communities in other roles such as teachers, spare-time DJs or electricians or sound-technicians at public events. People who visit a CRS can easily chat with broadcasting staff, see the studios or even participate in broadcast debates.

**Programming policy**

CRSs compete with other radio stations, private as well as public ones. For budgetary reasons, most CRSs do not broadcast a full 24-hour schedule. During long broadcasting breaks, many listeners tune in to other stations.

Some listeners prefer national broadcasters because they offer better information programmes. Indeed, many CRSs’ weak point is well-researched and detailed information packages. Larger radio stations have better online research facilities and more correspondent networks.

CRSs generally produce in-depth reports only on commission for someone who will bear the research costs. Therefore, critical reporting typically takes the form of studio discussions and phone-in contributions. Often, CRSs are even paid to put specific content on the air. The relevance of such programmes tends to be questionable, however. A report on rice-growers in Mali, for instance, is of little interest in areas of Benin where little or no rice is grown. Many consumer advice programmes have a didactic undertone.

**Sustainability problems**

CRSs do not succeed automatically. After the initial euphoria, many get stuck in structural problems. In principle, the representatives of the founding body (often a not-for-profit organisation) are in control. But day-to-day management is handled by the directors. While ownership of the stations is collective, daily operations are under individual responsibility. The disparity results in various conflicts of interests.

Many staff members see themselves as professional journalists. They do not consider themselves volunteers. They
demand creative freedom and commensurate pay. The board of trustees, on the other hand, are often influenced by local politicians. Leaders of small ethnic groups, moreover, want their interests respected in the choice of broadcasting languages – but quality programmes in minority languages require particular human resources as well as funds.

Typically, the funds of a community radio are barely enough to cover the payroll costs of a small team of generally polyvalent, flexibly deployed staff on top of current operating expenses and occasional investments in new technology. Revenues are generated mostly by broadcasts commissioned by development agencies or government institutions, as well as through paid announcements, music requests and advertising. Community fund-raising campaigns and occasional donations from sponsors also play a role.

Several stations have been forced to enter into frequency-rental agreements with major international broadcasters such as the BBC or the VOA. Others generate revenues by offering text messaging services in partnership with mobile phone companies. Broadcasting time is often sold to specific groups, such as religious communities. This practice is controversial, however, since too much air time for any given religious group is likely to draw criticism from listeners who belong to other faiths.

CRSs offer young broadcasting talents a fast career start. Many youngsters begin as freelancers or are recruited by selection. Their level of education is generally quite high, but they lack specific qualifications in journalism. Training opportunities for staff members are therefore a crucial issue.

At most CRSs, staff fluctuation is high. Many journalists move on to better placed media or even go into politics. Moreover, part-time staff – teachers for example – struggle to reconcile the demands of radio work with those of their main occupation in the long run.

In Benin, a number of CRSs got into serious difficulties because of technical problems or local conflicts. Their range of programming shrank, listeners’ interest decreased, advertising revenues dropped and staff left. Some CRSs in crisis found a stronger organisational or technological base thanks to donor assistance – notably from Switzerland.

**Outlook**

For a CRS to succeed, its formal establishment should be accompanied by a preliminary discussion process in which all parties concerned agree on goals, content, day-to-day operations, means of tackling possible problems and listener involvement. Another key requirement is effective networking – particularly among the community radio associations. They can help through technical cooperation, programme exchange arrangements or joint procurement. Greater financial leeway for
stations is helpful, and so are partnerships with government agencies. Using studio capacities for music production has also proven useful.

In spite of their obvious difficulties, the community radios are important elements in the national media landscape. They play a potentially polyvalent role in their region’s public communications. Their main strength lies in the ability to translate between cultures. To achieve that, they need a broad spectrum of quality programmes tailored to address all social strata.

Tilo Grätz
is a social anthropologist and a development consultant. He teaches as a lecturer at the University of Halle-Wittenberg.
»» tilograetz@yahoo.de

»» http://tilograetz.wordpress.com

More about
»» Read more about Democratisation
»» Read more about Media, communication
»» Read more about Socio-cultural factors
»» Read more about West Africa

D+C, 2011/01, Tribune, Page 38