

# Sinking into oblivion? Ethnographic insights into the place of radio in the lives of women living in a rural community in Zimbabwe

Selina Mudavanhu

## Introduction

In 2010, I decided to embark on a journey to study for a doctoral degree in Media Studies. I was required to come up with a research topic and to write a proposal. I remember speaking to a number of people regarding my potential topic. I wanted to focus on radio and women living in rural Zimbabwe because I felt that this was an area that had not received much attention from media researchers in the country. Of all the discussions that I had, one conversation in particular has stuck with me to date because the person I was speaking to was convinced that studying radio (read old media) in 2010 was not a good idea – “Who cares about radio in 2010? The action is happening elsewhere,” the person said. By this the person meant I ought to be focusing on new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The person talked about the then-latest gadgets and the different social networking platforms as well as possible research topics. I nonetheless proceeded to write a proposal on radio. Besides the aforementioned motivation to undertake the research, in Africa, radio remains “by far the most powerful tool of communication on the continent [...]” (Moyo, 2010: 24).

Although ICTs are increasingly becoming ubiquitous in Zimbabwe (most people own at least a mobile phone), this paper argues that this has not meant that traditional media such as radio has sunk into oblivion as the person advising me seemed to be suggesting. Qualitative research carried out between March and April 2011 with some women residing in one rural community in Zimbabwe showed that radio still occupied a position of primacy in their lives. Whereas one woman, Mai Marjory<sup>1</sup> sometimes listened to the radio on her mobile phone when she was away from home, the rest of the women still listened to radio (particularly Radio Zimbabwe)<sup>2</sup> on portable

radio sets or on solar-powered radios. Drawing on the findings of the research, this paper provides some ethnographic insights into the place of radio in the daily lives of the women who were interviewed.

## The context

The everyday engagement with radio in the rural community should be understood in the context of the political and economic crisis that took place in Zimbabwe after 2000. The community itself was not immune to the political polarisation that characterised the rest of the country. In the initial meeting of gaining entry into the village, the headman stated in no uncertain terms that he and *his* people were ZANU-PF supporters. Drawing on dominant ideas, the headman framed those who supported ZANU-PF as “patriots.” In ways that seemed to contradict the headman’s self-assured declaration that *his* people were ZANU-PF, he however acknowledged that there was a “problem” in the community of some people supporting the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).<sup>3</sup> He blamed the division on the influence of “outsiders” (MDC activists coming from the cities as well as activists from non-governmental organisations). In ways reminiscent of hegemonic political discourses in Zimbabwe since 2000, the headman constituted the MDC as a party of “unrepentant traitors.” Labelling the opposition in this manner worked to delegitimise them as serious and credible contenders to govern the country. It also worked to create fear in opposition supporters of being seen to be “unpatriotic.” This classification also served to justify any actions that might be taken against these political “deviants.”

In addition to the headman making his political affiliation known, the community was under surveillance to curb “selling-out,” that is people supporting opposition political parties. The community was policed through the headman’s police who took on the role of spying and telling the headman of any clandestine political meetings taking place. In addition to the designated police, other people in the community who supported ZANU-PF took it upon themselves to police other people.

The economic situation in this rural area was also not very different from what was happening in the rest of the country. At the time the study was conducted, there were very few men in the community. Whereas in colonial times it was mostly men who left rural areas for towns and mines, the research participants talked about their daughters also having joined the bandwagon of

going away in search of greener pastures in neighbouring cities and countries. As was the case during the colonial era, the women who remained in rural areas relied on subsistence farming for survival (Schmidt, 1991; Gordon, 1996). Almost all the women in the study spoke about life in the community as well as in the country as generally “hard.” Asked to elaborate what this meant, most participants alluded to the disconnect between their hard work in trying to provide for their families on the one side and the seemingly unending challenges they faced to survive. They mentioned that they were struggling to feed their families and to keep their children in school. Women who would have been retired if they were in the formal labour force continued to work for their families (for example, Mbuya vaKizito<sup>4</sup> and Mbuya vaJoyce). Mai Nomatter commented that what made 2011 even more challenging was the fact that “it had not rained well and the maize crop was beginning to show signs of strain.”

## Methodology

As mentioned in an earlier section, the fieldwork took place in 2011 in a rural village in Zimbabwe. During this period, time was dedicated to listening to Radio Zimbabwe as well as to extensive recording of the station’s broadcasts from the time it was officially opened at 6am to the time it closed at 12am.<sup>5</sup> Having knowledge of Radio Zimbabwe’s programmes and presenters was useful when it came to conducting interviews with women who listened to the station. It assisted in building rapport between the researcher and the participants who initially thought that by virtue of the researcher being “young and from the city” she would not know much about a station like Radio Zimbabwe that broadcast in vernacular. Seemingly surprised, some women would remark: “*Saka munototeererawo Radio Zimbabwe?!*” (So you also listen to Radio Zimbabwe?!).

In addition to recording the station’s broadcasts, 30 women who listened to the radio every day were identified and interviewed. The aim was to gain the greatest insights possible into their interaction with radio as well as the ideas that were broadcast (Esterberg, 2002). In that context, semi-structured interviews were used. In conducting the interviews there was no dutiful adherence to a predetermined set of questions (Priest, 2010; Flick, 2011); most interviews took unpredictably different directions from the ones the researcher had anticipated. Some of the questions arose during the interviews as follow-

ups to what the women had said. Other questions, particularly those that were asked in later interviews were framed using experiences of earlier interviews.

While in the quantitative research tradition, keeping participants at a distance is regarded as a way of contributing to the production of “objective” knowledge, in this study, there was a conscious attempt to minimise the gap between the researcher and the participants. Drawing on work by feminist scholars such as Mama (1995), the research tried to address the top-down researcher/participant relationship; the researcher was open to being asked and responding to questions posed by participants. In addition to the deliberate move to draw closer to the participants, it should be noted that due to the political situation in the country, the women themselves were not passive and “confined to the role of data source” (Walsh, 1989: 437). They asked questions in order to understand what they were getting themselves into to avoid trouble with the authorities. Some of the questions posed by the participants included: “So are you married?”/ “How old are you?”/ “How many children do you have?” Similar to Achebe’s experiences of interviewing women, responding to these questions that bordered on being invasive worked to “break down some of the walls of distrust and fear that are intrinsic to the qualitative research setting” (Achebe, 2002: 13).

Besides conducting interviews with the women, the researcher was also engaged in a process of making notes of observations made during the stay in the community. A range of different things were observed and noted which included the ways power was exercised in the community, women’s interactions with radio, observations made during interviews as well as anything that occurred in the community that seemed interesting.

### **Ethnography of radio**

While for young middle-class women studying at the University of Cape Town, the internet occupied a central position in their lives (Mudavanhu and Fröhlich, forthcoming), for the women interviewed in this study, radio was still the medium of choice. For all women except one (Mai Margaret) who had a television set at her home, radio was the only source of information that they had. Mai Sheila for example, explained that she preferred radio because “it was cheaper than buying newspapers and television sets.” Other women said even if they could afford to buy newspapers, they were hardly ever sold at their local shops. In addition to economic reasons, most participants mentioned

that they liked radio because it fitted perfectly into their work schedules. As will be alluded to later, the participants said because of their work they hardly had time to sit down so radio was convenient in that while they did their work around the homestead, they could listen to it. “Unlike television where you have to sit down and watch it, with radio I can be sweeping the yard while I am listening to *Nguva yavarwere*”<sup>6</sup> (Mai Tendai).

All the women who were interviewed singled out Radio Zimbabwe as the only station they listened to. None of them acknowledged listening to any other radio stations. While “other” radio stations could mean state-owned radio stations such as Spot FM, Power FM and National FM, in this community however, “other” radio stations was understood to mean “independent” radio stations such as SW Radio Africa that were regarded as promoting a “regime-change agenda.” Thus, admitting to listening to these stations was the same as admitting to being a “traitor” and this could have deadly consequences (see Moyo, 2010). Mai Sheila who spoke of listening to “alternative” radio stations said she did so in the context of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle. In the interview Mai Sheila gave a detailed account of how during the pre-1980 liberation war she and her family clandestinely listened to Radio Mozambique,<sup>7</sup> a station that the Ian Smith government prohibited people from listening to. She narrated how her family would huddle around a radio set at night in order to “hear from the exiled nationalist leaders regarding how the war was progressing.”

In talking about the kinds of radios they owned or had access to, the women mostly talked of two types of radio sets – the “big radio sets” and portable radios that used disposable batteries. The “big radio sets” were solar powered and were located either in the bedroom or the dining room.<sup>8</sup> As noted in the introduction, Mai Marjory was the only woman who had a mobile phone from which she could listen to the popular greeting and music request show, *Kwaziso / Ukhubingelelana*. When approached for the interview, Mai Marjory was watching over one of her cows that had an injured leg as it grazed, while she was tuned into the programme on her mobile phone. Mai Marjory explained that she only switched on the radio on her phone when she was not at home. After the programme, she said she switched off the radio to “save on her phone battery” in case someone wanted to phone her. While the portable radio sets were largely brought out to listen to particular programmes (especially the news and *Kwaziso / Ukhubingelelana*), the “big

radio sets” tended to be always switched on with the volume on high when the women were at home or working in fields close to the home. It was not uncommon to hear radios playing loudly in the distance. Whereas researchers like Spitulnik (2002), whose work focused on radio in Zambia, showed that people carried portable radios beyond the home, in this study, the participants said they mainly listened to the portable radios at home. Besides listening to the radio at home, Chipo, a young woman in her late teens said she sometimes went to the shops with her friends during weekends to “hang out and to listen to the radio.” The radios at the shops were among the few that were powered by electricity in the community. Almost each shop had the radio playing on full volume music by artists from Zimbabwe as well as neighbouring Botswana and South Africa.

Speaking about other people who listened to the radio with them, most women said this largely depended on the time of day and sometimes on the programme. During the day for example, the majority of them listened to the radio “alone” with small children and grandchildren. Occasionally some women like Mai Chido went to listen to the news at a neighbour’s house. In the evenings, most women said they listened to the radio with other family members; husbands, sons and daughters-in-law.

While some people would name listening to the radio as something they do in their leisure time, for the participants in this study, their everyday listening to the radio was embedded within their work routines. Like Mai Tendai (mentioned at the beginning of this section), Mai Peter said her listening to the radio happened as she did her work. She continued: “I hardly sit down and just listen to the radio [...] it’s either I am cooking or washing dishes or preparing to go and sell my wares. I never just sit and listen to the radio.” For most women, the working day generally started around 5am and ended around 8pm. “Work” for them meant a range of things. Firstly, it meant doing reproductive work such as cooking, cleaning the homestead, bathing and feeding children, fetching water from the well and fetching firewood.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it meant doing agricultural work. Depending on the season, the women went to the fields to plant, cultivate and harvest crops especially maize. The women also had vegetable gardens which they tended to. These gardens were located a few kilometres from their homes. The third kind of work that women did was entrepreneurial; they bought and sold fruit and vegetables (Mai Nomatter, Mai Peter and Mbuya vaJoyce).

In the context of the work mentioned above, most women said during weekdays they listened to the radio in the early morning, at lunchtime and in the early evening. Mai Victor and Mai Marjory said they switched on their radios around 6am to listen to the daily morning devotional and prayer as well as the early morning news bulletin. During this time the participants said they tried to listen attentively to what the Pastor was saying. Thereafter, the radio seemed to be in the background as they started attending to their children or grandchildren before they left for school. Notwithstanding the season, most women mentioned they usually came back home at midday from the fields or the garden or from doing business. As they prepared lunch they switched on the radio again to listen to *Kwaziso / Ukhubingelelana* and the news. After lunch, the radio was usually switched off as the women went back to do their work except in cases when they were working in fields close to the home (Mai Victor). Mai Kuda and Mbuya vaJoyce were the only women who were not in the habit of listening to the radio at lunchtime. Mbuya vaJoyce explained that the radio remained switched off because she “wanted to save the batteries.” In the evenings, some women (Mbuya vaJoyce, Mai Joyce and Mai Kuda) brought the portable radios to the kitchen to listen to the 7pm news while they prepared or ate supper. Mbuya vaJoyce explained that after the news, they usually switched off the radio because they wanted to rest after a day of hard work. Other women like Mai Peter and Mai Mutsa however, stayed up for another popular programme, *Chakafukidza Dzimba Matenga* aired on Tuesday evenings.

In addition to the fairly predictable times mentioned above, some women kept the radio switched on the whole day when they were at home on particular days such as *musi wechisi*.<sup>10</sup> Mai Kudzi also said on Sundays her daily routine of listening to the radio was slightly disrupted. On days she did not go to church, she usually left the radio on the whole day while she oscillated between paying attention and not paying attention to it.

Although all the women did switch on their radio sets at some points during the day to listen to Radio Zimbabwe, there were times when they chose not to listen to the station. Four women, Mai Tiny, Mai Godfrey, Mai Marjory and Chipo said they sometimes did not concern themselves with radio programmes. Mai Godfrey explained that she sometimes enjoyed listening to her own music CDs by gospel musicians such as *Vabati VaJehovha*. Speaking about listening to “her own music,” Mai Marjory spoke of listening to music by the late

Zimbabwean musician, James Chimombwe. The idea of choosing not to listen to Radio Zimbabwe broadcasts is interesting for two reasons. Contrary to the passive audience thesis suggested in most analyses of media texts in Zimbabwe post-2000, the participants in this study were constructing themselves as active participants who could decide to listen or not to listen to Radio Zimbabwe broadcasts. Secondly, it is interesting to note that although the women showed some kind of agency, the songs that they listened to however reinforced the same mainstream ideas broadcast on Radio Zimbabwe.<sup>11</sup>

While women made the choice regarding what to listen to (as in the above instances) there were times when other family members (particularly those who owned the radio sets) decided what they listened to (Mai Themba and Mai Sheila). Mai Sheila for example, said when her sons were at home they “took over control of the radio set and played loud music while she wanted to listen to the news.” For Revai who worked in a bottlestore explained that some of the patrons made the decisions on what to listen to.

## Conclusion

While the new technologies are increasingly becoming commonplace, this has not meant that traditional media such as radio have become less interesting as the person giving me advice at the beginning of my PhD journey assumed. In the rural community that the study was based radio was still an important source of information for all the women who were interviewed. Mai Marjory’s listening to *Kwaziso / Ukhubingelelana* on her mobile phone begins to dismantle the rigid categorisations of “old media” versus “new media” as existing independently of one another. One begins to imagine a future in which there is more convergence rather than ICTs completely obliterating traditional media like radio.

## Endnotes

1. All the names that are used in this paper are pseudonyms. *Mai* is a title used for women to mean “mother of” or “wife of.” In this paper, the title is used to mean “mother of.”
2. Radio Zimbabwe is one of four state-owned radio stations at the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation. This station broadcasts in two main languages, Shona and Ndebele.
3. Although the headman spoke of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) as if it was one unified party, by 2011 the MDC had split into different factions.

4. *Mbuya* is used in this paper to mean “grandmother of.”
5. There were a few days when recording of the station’s broadcasts was interrupted by a loss of transmission.
6. *Nguva yevarwere* was a programme dedicated to people who were sick. Radio Zimbabwe listeners were invited to write into the programme and greet their friends and relatives who were not feeling well. Listeners would also include a list of songs that the presenter could select from to play for those people who had been greeted.
7. Frederikse (1982) writes about the programme, *Voice of Zimbabwe*, beamed for an hour every evening to the black population in the country by nationalist leaders from exile through Radio Mozambique during the days of the liberation struggle.
8. Most homesteads generally had three brick structures; a round grass thatched hut that served as the kitchen, a blair toilet and a three-roomed brick house with corrugated or asbestos roofs with two bedrooms and a dining room.
9. The places where women went to fetch water and firewood were not close to their homes. Going to fetch firewood generally meant walking on foot for several kilometres.
10. This was a day in the week that was set aside permanently for resting. No one in the village was allowed to go and work in their fields.
11. One of the central ideas repeated on Radio Zimbabwe is the idea that God is the all-powerful helper of “feeble” people. Some of the music CDs that the women listened to also reinforced this same idea.

## References

- Achebe, N. 2002. “Daughter, Wife, and Guest: A Researcher at the Crossroads”, *Journal of Women’s History* 14 (3): 9–31.
- Flick, U. 2011. *Introducing Research Methodology: A Beginner’s Guide to Doing a Research Project*. London: Sage Publications.
- Frederikse, J. 1982. *None But Ourselves: Masses vs. Media in the Making of Zimbabwe*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Gordon, R. 1996. “Legislation and Educational Policy in Zimbabwe: The State and the Reproduction of Patriarchy”, *Gender and Education* 8 (2): 215–230.
- Mama, A. 1995. *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge.
- Moyo, D. 2010. “Reincarnating Clandestine Radio in Post-independent Zimbabwe”, *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* 8 (1): 23–36.
- Priest, S. H. 2010. *Doing Media Research: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Schmidt, E. 1991. “Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Colonial State in Zimbabwe”, *Signs* 16 (4): 732–756.

- Spitulnik, D. 2002. "Mobile Machines and Fluid Audiences: Rethinking Reception through Zambian Radio Culture", in Ginsburg, F. D. et al. eds. *Media Worlds*. Berkley; London: University of California Press.
- Walsh, R. T. 1989. "Do Research Reports in Mainstream Feminist Psychology Journals Reflect Feminist Values", *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 13: 433-444.