Democratization

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The Promotion of Democracy at the Grass-roots: The Example of Radio in Mali

MARY MYERS

With the advent of multi-partyism, the West African state of Mali has seen the liberalization of the airwaves and a dramatic expansion in the numbers of privately owned radio stations. A background to the development of both urban and rural stations is given and a discussion follows as to radio's actual and potential role in defining and defending a democratic culture. The overt political stance of the urban stations is compared and contrasted with the more subtle forms of democratic education used by rural studios. Problems relating to funding, sustainability, bias, regulation and popular access are discussed. The examination concludes that despite facing many problems radio is an important force for the promotion of civil society and a democratic culture in Mali.

Introduction

The ‘free press’ in the sense of independent radio broadcasting is the subject of this examination of the actual and potential role of radio in defining and defending a democratic culture at the grass-roots level in the West African state of Mali.

Since 1991 Mali has officially been a multi-party democracy. Having ousted the military dictatorship of General Moussa Traoré after 23 years, this former French colony is regarded – notably by the United States – as something of a flagship democracy in an otherwise uncertain region. After winning the country’s first elections in 1992 President Alpha Oumar Konaré has remained popular. His party, ADEMA (Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali), managed to consolidate its base in the most recent round of elections early in 1997.

However, these latest legislative and presidential polls were not a smooth affair. The first round ‘produced chaos at polling stations, an opposition boycott ... and streetfighting in the capital, Bamako.” The legislative round was annulled and had to be re-run, while the procedure by which Konaré was re-elected President was condemned as flawed by both the Malian opposition and by international observers. The opposition mood has remained hostile and the West looks on anxiously, noting a number of human rights violations such as the arrest of journalists.
Recent events show that Mali’s democracy, though real, is extremely fragile. The very existence of opposition parties is the proof that it is real. But the recent curbing of the press is partly what makes observers uneasy. The question is, to what extent are the popular mass media (which in Mali takes the form primarily of radio) helping to strengthen this fragile democracy at the grass-roots and what chance does independent radio have to survive?

Why Radio?

Radio is perhaps the most natural ‘press’ for a largely non-literate country such as Mali (average literacy rates are among the lowest in the world at only 29.3 per cent). In many ways radio is the tangible modern extension of oral tradition. Since the end of one-party rule radio stations have burgeoned. With over 60 independent studios, Mali now boasts the highest number of radio stations of any country in the region. Although individual ownership of transistors is not particularly high by African standards (officially 44 radios per 1,000 people in Mali compared to an average of 149 for sub-Saharan Africa) radio is acknowledged as the most effective way to reach the majority of Malians. For instance, UNICEF and other health agencies have chosen to concentrate on radio broadcasts as a means of public education about AIDS, after surveys showed that 76 per cent of men and 50 per cent of women in Mali cited the radio as their primary source of information about the disease.

Radio is the most powerful mass medium in Mali. Furthermore, independent radio stations see themselves quite explicitly as integral to the democratic process. Born out of popular socio-political changes, they are perceived as both a product of the Malian ‘revolution’ and a motor behind the gains made by that revolution. Just as Mali’s new-found democracy is viewed by the international community as a ‘promising experiment’ so its new popular radio network presents an interesting case study of the potentials – and problems – of grass-roots democracy.

Background to the New Radio Pluralism

The first urban community-type radio station to break the monopoly of the state-run broadcasting corporation (ORTM) was Radio Bamakan in 1991 (though a rural community radio had been run by an Italian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Kayes since 1987). Five others (Liberté, Kayira, Klédu, Tabale and Fréquence 3) followed in quick succession, as the Transitional Government (1991–92) enshrined the liberalization of the press in law. Broadcasting in local languages, where state
radio had always broadcast in the colonial language of French, these *Radios Libres* (free radios) saw themselves essentially as the mouthpiece of the population in direct contrast to ORTM – the mouthpiece of the government.

Free speech over the airwaves followed the lead taken initially by radical newspapers. Lansana Traoré, the founder of *Radio Fréquence 3*, a teacher and union leader says: ‘The creation of *Les Echos* [newspaper] in 1989 helped awaken people’s consciousness. *Les Echos* was laying bare everything that was corrupt and fascist about the old regime. I asked myself: couldn’t the same thing be done with radio? Because the written word only touches the intelligentsia.’

Radios like *Fréquence 3* began with a great self-awareness of their role in promoting a democracy based on the common person. For them, democracy meant ‘transparence, participation du citoyen, civisme’ (transparency, audience participation and civic responsibility), not just elections or party politics (though for some – notably *Radio Kayira* which identified itself strongly with one of the opposition parties – this was also an option). Political debates, interviews with the opposition, students and intellectuals, round-table discussion, educational programmes about rights, health, civic issues: all these mixed with local music and a fresh style of live presentation in local languages combined to attract large audiences and to establishment of a reputation as ‘platforms for the defence of democracy’.

In September 1993 President Konaré signed the Bamako Declaration on Radio Pluralism which declared ‘Radio pluralism is an essential component in the deepening of the democratic process now underway: it allows people greater access to a diversity of information, and guarantees increased popular participation in sustainable human development’. In so doing, Konaré not only committed his government to encouraging plural and multiple radio stations, but also placed Mali firmly at the symbolic forefront of media liberalization in Africa: ‘African states must speed up the ending of the monopoly over the air waves, and give priority to national proponents of independent radio when allocating broadcasting frequencies ...’

This significant official backing gave strength to diverse groups such as religious organizations, women’s groups, NGOs and rural associations to start up their own small FM stations all over the country. Though less overtly political than the first urban *Radios Libres*, these stations were – and still are – no less committed to the fundamental principles of democracy: transparency, participation, civic rights and responsibilities. Rural radios, especially, started with a mission to ‘give a voice to the voiceless’ – the vast rural majority. For rural stations, the democratic imperative was less a call to arms than a quiet but firm assertion of rural people’s priorities, languages and culture in order to counteract years of centralism.
Though some may be privately owned, some funded by NGOs and others run on a more commercial basis, whether urban or rural, all these independent radios have become known collectively as radios de proximité—literally radios which are ‘close-by’, but figuratively radios which are part of the landscape of everyday life.

Urban Free Radios

The proportion of radio ownership in Malian towns is far higher than in rural areas (96 per cent of the population of Bamako have at least one radio set at home\(^\text{12}\) whereas the national average is 44 sets per 1,000 people). These figures reflect the huge disparities between the rural and urban milieu which is so typical of much of the Sahel: only 26 per cent of the Malian population is urban\(^\text{13}\) yet it has a disproportionately large influence over social, political and economic affairs. In Mali the way radio stations have established themselves has largely followed this urban bias, with the majority of the 63 new stations concentrated in urban centres such as Bamako, Séguéla, Koulikoro and Koutiala.

The majority of local urban stations are small outfits, based on music and local news, broadcasting on FM (frequency modulation). Typically, they are housed in basic premises, with relatively weak (one kilowatt) transmitters, reaching a radius of up to 50 kilometres. Often they are set up with a grant from a local NGO or community association, and sustain themselves financially from advertising revenue and receipts from record requests and personal announcements. In some cases sponsors are Malian businessmen or well-known figures such as film director, Cheik Omar Sissoko, who is president of the association which runs Radio Kayira. The better established studios often negotiate sponsorship from international bodies like United Nations agencies for specific public service programmes. Capital investment is relatively low and is seen by backers as a cost-effective way to reach thousands of listeners. For the young men of Bamako’s suburban shanties, where unemployment is a major scourge, there is the opportunity of a job and to become something of a local celebrity as a disc jockey.

Costs at Radio Bamakan are illustrative: the recording and transmitting equipment cost approximately 8 million CFA Francs in 1992 (roughly £15,000 sterling), while its monthly revenue is 300,000 CFA which almost covers its total expenses. Salaries for technicians and presenters are not fixed but are derived from the station’s daily takings and are typically about 30,000 CFA per month each—about four times the Malian minimum wage.\(^\text{14}\)

While the new urban radios deliberately sought to establish themselves at the physical heart of their local communities, their popularity among the
population rose steadily and is still unchallenged. After liberalization of the airwaves the incidence of radio sets in Bamako equipped with FM bands increased from 77 per cent in 1988 to 89 per cent in 1993, and Malian national radio was forced to establish a new FM channel – called O’FM – in order to compete with the popular independents. In a survey of spontaneous awareness of FM stations in Bamako carried out by the BBC in 1993, the four key independent stations (Bamakan, Kayira, Libérté and Klédou) were the clear favourites.\textsuperscript{15}

In the months following the popular ‘revolution’ of March 1991 the new FM stations offered listeners in Bamako a level of debate which had been unknown hitherto, and news which was no longer biased in favour of the ruling elite. On Radio Libérté programmes such as ‘L’Heure de Vérité’ (The Moment of Truth) and ‘Expliquez-vous sur Libérté’ (Explain yourself on Radio Liberty) invited politicians from all parties to defend themselves in turn. On Radio Kayira a programme entitled ‘La Parole aux Maires’ (The Mayors Have the Floor) attempted to find solutions to citizens’ real problems, such as unemployment and lack of health facilities. The new-found euphoria of free expression is summed up thus:

Most of them [independent radios] ... spark wild enthusiasm among listeners ... The switchboards are deluged with phone calls. For lack of a phone, listeners show up at the studios, in the corridor or the courtyard, to continue – in the flesh – debates begun on-air. Others ... stay glued to their transistors to follow their favourite programmes. Press summaries are translated from French (which no one understood) into local languages. At last! Adversarial political debate and discussions about social issues that were once taboo ... \textsuperscript{16}

At the same time programmes of an educational nature were begun, covering practical ‘life skills’ such as nutrition, health and hygiene – often sponsored by international bodies such as UNICEF and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Other programmes began which were more overtly persuasive in tone such as those aimed at women. A case in point is Radio Bamakan’s weekly magazine entitled Pour Votre Eveil, Madame (roughly translated as Women Wake Up!), which aims to ‘inform, awaken opinion and educate’. On Fréquence 3 a programme called Travaillons en musique (Music while you work) aims to ‘remind the population of their duty, to magnify the spirit of enterprise and to fight against idleness’.\textsuperscript{17}

Added to these were a whole section of programmes aimed at informing and educating urban dwellers specifically of their democratic and civic rights – and duties. According to Programme Director Mohamodou Cissé of Radio Bamakan:
The role of Radio Bamakan is to struggle positively in favour of the democratic process; to defend democracy and serve the population. There are a lot of aspects of democracy that the people don’t know about, and we are obliged to raise awareness, to explain that democracy is not anarchy; that democracy involves rights and obligations. We have the right to demand, but we also have obligations to the state.18

Programmes such as *Les Institutions de la 3ièm République* (The Public Institutions of the 3rd Republic) on Radio Kayira exemplify this kind of public education aimed at fostering a civic spirit.

**Democratic Impact of Urban Radios**

Inevitably, there is a corollary to high-minded talk of rights and responsibilities. Not all presenters were entirely impartial and not all have succeeded in staying as dispassionately detached as the authorities would like. Whether it is a matter of energetic investigative reporting or making potentially explosive allegations, the forthright character of some urban free radios has provoked harassment from the Malian government on several occasions. That the authorities should fear these radios’ influence is itself an indicator of their power and impact.

In the immediate years following the revolution the most famous cases have involved the repeated closure of Radio Kayira by the Konaré government. The station, which is openly opposed to the ruling ADEMA party, was primarily accused of inciting armed revolt against a young and fragile democracy. As groups of students occupied the state radio station in March 1993 and massive demonstrations were held against the government’s economic policy in April, there is some anecdotal evidence that the allegations about Radio Kayira’s involvement are true. Kayira’s broadcasts were jammed in 1995 and again on the occasion of a student strike in January 1996.19 In September 1997 international alerts were issued in defence of two of Kayira’s employees, arrested as members of the opposition Solidarité Africaine Pour la Democratie Indépendante (SADI) party.20 Staff of other radios stations such as Klédu and the relatively new Guintan have also been the subject of police harassment, interrogations, even beatings on occasion.21

There is a legitimate question of quality of output. Because of the veritable mushrooming of small FM stations and a lack of trained technicians and journalists, it is possible that the reputations of the more responsible stations could be tarnished by amateur outfits, which are little more than music and ‘chat’ stations. Rumours and misinformation are
known to have been spread via radio in Bamako; for example, staff of the NGO Plan International have noticed with disquiet that some young listeners believe that condoms (which are distributed free as protection against HIV/AIDS) are actually infected with the AIDS virus and are being donated by Northern agencies as part of a conspiracy to control the Malian population.  

There is also the problem of defining what is meant by what Radio Bamakan calls 'a positive struggle in favour of the democratic process'. A look at voter turn-out provides a pertinent case in point. During the most recent elections (which were re-run in July 1997, after the initial legislative poll of April was cancelled), there was a low turn-out by voters, which was disappointing for the ruling ADEMA party who would have wished to see its mandate strengthened by consensus at the polls. But opposition parties had called for a boycott, accusing ADEMA of manipulating the election timetable. The boycott appeal was publicized by opposition newspapers and by a number of urban radios. This may partly explain the low turnout. But the question arises: were radios infringing their democratic responsibilities by advocating a voter's boycott? Or were they, on the other hand, defending the rights of all political players – opposition parties in particular – to articulate their views by any means – including, in this case, a boycott?  

In order to arbitrate in such questions and to advise the government on the granting of broadcast licences, the need for a regulatory body is accepted by all concerned. The Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC) is meant to fulfil this function at present, and is closely monitored from the journalists' side by URTEL, the Union of Free Radio and Television. However, there is some dissatisfaction about the CSC's supposed neutrality. Instead of allowing its Secretary General to be elected by CSC members, the government have appointed a civil servant in his place, thus opening the CSC to charges of partiality. Moreover, as abuses against journalists continue, neither the CSC nor URTEL seem at present to have any real power.

Such issues of responsibility, impartiality and accuracy on the part of broadcasters, and of neutrality on the part of regulatory bodies, are germane to the ongoing discourse on the role of the free press in a democracy – in whatever region or continent it may take place. In Mali, like anywhere else, a free press can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand it has the potential to promote dangerous divisions and to incite violence; on the other, it can promote respect for the rule of law and foster healthy and informed debate. As far as the future is concerned, the Malian government's threshold of tolerance vis-à-vis its chattering urban classes will continue to be monitored with interest.
‘Radios Rurales’

While the urban Radio Libres were causing a political stir in the early 1990s in the Bambara-speaking heartland, a number of rural radios were quietly establishing themselves and redefining what mass media means to ordinary Malians. The majority of the population are rural peasants, cattle herders and traders; they live for the most part in semi-arid zones of subsistence agriculture, in some of the harshest and poorest habitats in the world.

Radio Kayes was the first alternative rural radio and it began in 1987, even before the end of Traoré’s dictatorship, under a special agreement between an Italian NGO (Gao International Co-operation) which sponsored it, and the government. (This special arrangement may have been partly due to Kayes being President Traoré’s home area). Following Radio Kayes’ lead in providing a public service for the Soninke-speakers of the Kayes area, other radios like those of Douentza and Bankass followed in 1993 and 1994. These provided a voice for Peulh/Fulani-speakers and Dogon-speakers respectively. For the first time Dogon-speakers on the dry eastern plains, hundreds of kilometres away from the capital, were able to tune into programmes in their own languages. Furthermore, they could listen for the first time to subjects and music which not only interested them but which, in some cases, they had recorded themselves: subjects such as cereal and livestock prices, rural taxation, literacy, environmental issues and local conflicts over land and water.

Like Kayes, both Douentza and Bankass radios began life by virtue of their links with long-term integrated rural development projects sponsored by international NGOs. They also received enthusiastic backing from local people in the provision of land, labour and materials to build the studios. All three radios – Kayes, Bankass and Douentza – share a distinctive vision of what rural broadcasting means. Though supported by international NGOs, they are all run by local associations made up of members of the local community: peasants, traders, teachers, housewives, traditional leaders and youth groups. These associations maintain the organizational and editorial control and therefore ensure that local issues, culture and music receive priority. Essentially, these radios are developmental tools, designed and run to foster a spirit of local identity and empowerment; to ‘bring knowledge to the rural communities and to give them a say’.

Although the proportion of families owning radio sets in rural areas is low in comparison with the towns, there is evidence of much communal listening and sharing of sets. In one survey in the Douentza area, it was found that ownership of FM receivers in the local vicinity jumped by 140 per cent after the new community station went on air. This indicates that radio listening may be as much a function of people’s interest in what is
offered over the airwaves as their ability to afford radio sets. For many young men and women in this impoverished area, it suddenly became worthwhile to spend hard-earned cash on a transistor because, for the first time, there was something worth listening to.

As far as their minimal budgets will permit, the programme content of such community radios is based on recordings made in villages where discussions, debates and interviews are organized, then edited and broadcast. Broadly, the themes covered are health, agricultural work, the environment, social issues, local and international news, local announcements; all mixed with plenty of local and national music. More specifically – at Radio Douentza, for example – themes include:

- Women’s programmes: excision, abortion, young unmarried mothers, being single, divorce, rape, polygamy – the problems of children, old age, contraception, infidelity, sexual equality, AIDS etc.
- Men’s programmes: a programme around the theme ‘there is no such thing as a useless job’, the generation gap, crime, rape, traditional justice, credit, the cost of marriage, forced marriage, cheating, ignorance, etc.
- On technology and society: breastfeeding, latrines, the fight against prostitution, public works, the problem of loose livestock, taxation, unemployed graduates, etc.  

**Education for Democracy On Air**

Like their urban counterparts, rural radios take their educational role very seriously, particularly education about Mali’s new-found democracy. For example, in the case of Radio Douentza the rationale for the station’s establishment was based on the promotion of grass-roots democracy through education:

Politics had opened up in a big way, the [radio’s strategy-] document made clear ‘that these changes (and their implications) are not known by the rural majority within the population ... the rural communities must, as far as possible, be the instigators of their own development.’ Whence the idea to provide farmers and herders with a flow of news which would allow them to take part in the democratic process that was in progress.

Likewise, democratic education was the original raison d’être of Radio Seno in Bankass:

Rural radios broadcasting in local languages and dialects can efficiently reach the whole population who are at present ignorant of
their rights under an 'état de droit' and who have only a vague idea of democratic rules. Programmes explaining citizens' rights and obligations are of utmost importance; politicians and decision-makers will be asked to explain their political platforms and justify their decisions.  

Accordingly, long-term education campaigns were instigated at a number of rural radio stations. At Bankass, programme titles include: Droits et Devoirs des Citoyens (Rights and Duties of Citizens), Les Jeunes et la Société (Youth and Society) and at Radio Douentza a two year series was started under the title PDD (Programme d'Appui à la Democratie et à la Décentralisation), funded by international NGOs. This latter programme provides us with an interesting case, particularly because it has been the subject of a relatively thorough impact assessment, unlike the majority of other radio initiatives – notably, and regrettably, the urban programmes.

The aim of Douentza’s PDD programme was to ‘contribute to the consolidation of democratic gains, promote the emergence of a civil society and of citizens’ consciousness of their rights and duties and make them capable of resisting infringements and injustices’. Conceived and run by the local NGO, the Near East Foundation (NEF), the radio was used in conjunction with other media, including popular theatre, booklets in local languages and newspaper articles. Mini-dramas, ‘spots’, interviews, ‘game-shows’ and translations of key texts were recorded by the radio presenters and systematically broadcast to Radio Douentza’s catchment of an estimated audience of about 120,000 listeners. By NEF’s estimate the PDD programme has ‘directly influenced’ a total of about 52,000 people in the Douentza area.

Key texts such as the new constitution, the electoral code and new laws concerning land rights, rural taxes, marriage and women’s rights were all translated from French (the official language) and broadcast – with explanation – in Fulani, in a dialect of Dogon, and in Bambara. Mini-dramas brought fictional characters together in scenes such as feuds between neighbours, which emphasised respect for modern justice instead of resorting to traditional ‘tit for tat’ violence. Another drama portrayed farmers and forestry guards in conflict over pruning of trees; this drama reinforced the message that farmers should claim their legitimate rights rather than submit to the illegal, but all too common, fines by corrupt officials.

Short ‘spots’ of about two minutes each were used in order to repeat simple pieces of information about voting procedures and facts such as the length of the presidential mandate. Interviews were organized with local members of parliament, judges, council officials and women’s groups to
discuss the implications of decentralisation at the commune level. Recordings were broadcast of public ‘game-shows’ (jeux publics) in which whole villages would participate in solving a riddle designed to make some deeper point about, for instance, the problem of domestic violence or the importance of women’s literacy. These shows, with their musical interval and displays of traditional eloquence are meant not only to make a serious point but to offer a high degree of entertainment.

In 1996, after two years of the campaign, an impact study was done by NEF, the agency responsible. This gathered interviews with villagers to assess in a qualitative manner the effectiveness of the democracy campaign. In many cases radio was the favoured medium: ‘In Boumbam [village] the chief declared “we really learned a lot from the radio – about taxes and women, about the law to do with trees, about decentralisation, but what others were saying was not so clear to me as what was said on the radio.”’

Other testimonies bore witness to how the programme was understood at the grass roots level:

‘You opened our eyes’ was the reaction from Mondoro. In Gono a newly literate man said ‘the booklets, the plays, the radio programmes helped us a lot to understand the law on decentralisation; we understood that those villages that wish can join together to form a commune.’ In Tieécouraré, Prye, Dansa, the inhabitants declared they were no longer frightened to speak up [against persons in authority]. ‘Even in the Commandant’s office we say what we think; that’s democracy too!’... Seydou [a man from Boumbam village] said, ‘before we didn’t know much about laws and we were made to do a lot of things by force, but now if it’s not the law we don’t agree and we say so clearly and freely’.

Overall, the PDD programme was evaluated by comparing villages which had been covered by the campaign with those that had not – including those communities which, for reason of topography, could not receive the FM signal of Radio Douentza. The report concluded: ‘It appeared clearly in all the villages ... that the population knew little or nothing about the [decentralisation] legislation before the programme, but they had learned a lot thanks to the campaign. In fact, this project is the first and only one of its kind in Douentza Cercle where women as well as men have expressed their great appreciation.’ The radio station itself served in a sense as a focal point for those seeking information: ‘In concrete terms the interest of the local youth was shown by the letter they sent to [Radio] Daande Duwansa to ask for repeats, for clarifications and by their visits [to the studio] to obtain copies of recordings or to discuss issues with the radio personnel’.

Downloaded By: [University of Pennsylvania] At: 19:13 14 October 2010
Small but significant events are indicators of the population's heightened awareness of their rights, for example:

A citizen of the village of Banai claimed his right to an identity card that the chef d'arrondissement had refused to issue [in the hope of a bribe] and protested publicly at this official's abuse of his position ... Elsewhere, in N'Gorodia, for example, the women who are claiming their right to own their own plot of land for vegetable gardening have seized the chief of the village in protest against another claimant for the land ... In Bagui they managed to get their own land. In Dari the youth of the village protested in the Village Association meeting against the mismanagement of the village cereal bank and demanded that the situation be clarified.37

Democratic Impact

Small events such as those recorded in Douentza are telling testimonies that the democratic process has found its expression in remote rural areas with the help of radio. Democratic expression lies not only in the direct exercise of, for example, the right to vote, but also in the challenging of age-old exploitative patterns: of corrupt officials over uneducated farmers; of men over women; and of the village elders over the young.

There is, therefore, some evidence that radio is making a difference to people's lives in terms of strengthening a democratic culture: it is helping to create a citizenry which is better informed of its rights and obligations; and is going some way to eliminate corruption and to foster a more accountable civil service and local authority. However, this is only one documented case. More research needs to be done as to the impact of Radio Douentza and of the handful of other community radios in Mali which are running similar projects. It is probable that a number of positive results would be found.

Meanwhile, most, if not all, radios are labouring under a number of constraints. The main problem is one of funding. Rural radios have a much smaller potential for attracting advertising revenue than their urban counterparts, and therefore have to rely on grants or sponsorship, in-kind contributions from the local population and revenue from announcements and disk requests. The poverty of the stations limits journalists' ability to travel out to far-flung villages to meet and record their audience's views, news, music and discussions. Since grass-roots reporting and direct access by ordinary villagers is meant to be the raison d'être of rural radios, these limitations are a serious block to the stations being truly representative of their constituents.

This problem is linked to the question of who has access to the radio
station. Situated, as most studios are, in main towns, it is invariably the male, literate, able-bodied young or middle-aged population who find their way to the studio to air their views or deliver letters or pre-recorded cassettes. Children, women and the elderly are far less well represented, simply because they are less likely to travel beyond their home villages. Significantly, the NEF evaluation\textsuperscript{38} in Douentza found that popular theatre was more effective than radio for reaching women. Indeed it is generally observed that women are far less likely than men to listen to the radio for reasons of time and lack of access: radio sets are generally owned by men and are carried with them to their places of work and women’s workloads are so heavy that most say they have little time to relax and listen.

The gender problem is also linked to one of language. Rural women, being less educated and less mobile, tend only to speak their mother-tongue. This means that ‘minority’ dialects – Dogon, for example, has more than 50 – are virtually ignored by radio stations in favour of more universal ‘market’ languages like Fulani; but this means, again, it is mostly men who benefit. The symbolism of language is important: simply by insisting on languages like Fulani rather than Bambara or French, the rural radios believe they are making a statement of independence from the urban elite, the French-speaking civil servants and the old order. However, if, as Mody\textsuperscript{39} puts it, part of the task of popular media is to ‘convey the community’s consensus upwards’, a problem arises if those in power at the top do not understand – and possibly even disdain – the language in which that message is framed.

Moreover, there is the ever-present threat that those in power may act to close or jam rural radios. Although this has not happened to any serious degree to date, there is no doubt in rural journalists’ minds that it is a possibility. They look towards Bamako and are all too aware of the difficulties faced by outfits such as 	extit{Radio Kayira}.\textsuperscript{40} This is a compelling reason for journalists to avoid embroiling themselves in controversial political issues, since it could mean closure of the station and loss of their jobs. Unlike urban journalists who have other job opportunities (or for whom being a disc-jockey may be a part-time job among others) staff on rural radios are far from being investigative journalists, they are not rewarded for probing scandals, nor are they promoted for ‘scooping’ the latest story about corrupt officials. Thus, simply through a sense of self-preservation, rural radios have had to stop short of pursuing some of the ideals that were initially set for them – for instance, by international agencies such as SOS Sahel: ‘The worst evils of Malian society, corruption, nepotism, incompetence and mismanagement of public funds, will recede within a system of transparency and critical journalism’.

Such hopes have not yet been fully realized, although the signs are that the spirit of investigation will grow slowly. But this will not happen as long
as radio staff do not feel secure in their jobs. This is as much a matter of sound finance as it is an issue crucial to healthy civil society.

Finally, and most importantly, there is the question of popular expression. *Radios de proximité* have been hailed as the mouthpiece of the people. Trainers and theorists like Querre and Havelange see rural radio as a tool for ‘liberating the peasant voice’; Querre writes: that rural radio producers ‘will preserve the cultural identity of their audience and hand back to them their right to be heard.’ But, as we have seen, problems of access to the radio station, particularly for some social and language groups are serious. Furthermore, lack of funding limits the radios’ ability to achieve effective outreach to the socially, physically and linguistically marginalised. Moreover, until recently the particular security problems posed by a civil war with Tuareg rebels in the north were a very real brake on radio’s direct contact with rural communities. Even once these problems are permanently solved, the question still remains: given a tape recorder and a blank cassette, what would ordinary Malian peasants actually say?

The fact that ‘pirate’ radio stations were being spontaneously initiated in villages before the airwaves were liberalized is one indicator that ordinary peasants have something to say and were finding the ways and means to express themselves before being helped by officially-sanctioned radio stations. An example comes from Bankass in the east, where:

Several pirate radio stations started broadcasting in 1993 ... with extremely simple installations, based on FM microphones and ... antenna wire suspended between trees ... The local school headmaster as well as the village headman confirmed the usefulness of village radio for education and communication. Nobody had to go from house to house anymore to inform citizens on local developments, venues of meetings or dates and places for communal labour.

Legal radios have now extended this very practical use of radio as a message-delivery network to a much wider geographical and linguistic area; a service which is undoubtedly of great value in such a vast and non-literate country. In the Douentza area, for example, notices on-air are proving extremely positive in conflict prevention: farmers give notice to cattle herders as to the dates at which their harvests will be completed, so that the herders may bring their cattle in to browse on the stubble-fields without causing damage to crops. Thus what may seem like simple communiqués are in many cases significant acts of horizontal communication between communities which were previously antagonistic. Radio thus becomes a type of social cement.

But what of vertical communication, as well as horizontal? What of popular media’s supposed power to ‘convey the community’s consensus
The problem here is that rural Malians have lived in silence and isolation for so long that it may take a long time before they feel safe to speak out against authority. Few do so at present on-air, though journalists may find ways of coaxing them to become more articulate. But ordinary people’s in-built conservatism and journalists’ own fear of censure combine to make rural radio less politically outspoken than its urban counterparts. Popular expression — for example, of the kind heard on opinionated commercial radio in the West — is limited by a strong traditional respect for authority. The ‘liberation of the peasant voice’ will be a slow evolution, but at least, with local and community radios, the means and mechanisms for it now exist in most rural areas.

Conclusion

The speed with which community radio stations have grown in Mali since the advent of multi-partyism surely indicates that the medium of radio broadcasting is fulfilling a need for self-expression which hitherto had been suppressed. If democracy is partly about ‘the man/woman in the street’ expressing their views, then radio has certainly helped promote democratization in Mali. If democracy is also about opposition politics, urban radios have, again, provided a relevant forum.

The question of how far Radios Libres actually helped bring about multi-partyism is arguable. A handful of urban radios certainly played a crucial role in the transition period between the fall of the dictator, Moussa Traoré, and the first elections of 1992 by keeping debate alive and helping to define democracy in its broadest sense as transparence, participation du citoyen, civisme. However, it was largely thanks to decisions taken by the Konaré government itself (once it was elected in 1992), that radio pluralism was finally allowed to blossom.

The difference between the urban and the rural definitions of democracy are interesting. Although it cannot be said that rural radio is completely unconcerned with party politics, it is still far less engaged in this kind of debate than urban studios. Democracy has perhaps been defined in a much wider sense in the rural context being about the power of the ‘little person’ in the face of corrupt authority, and even about the new-found power of women and youth in the face of traditional gerontocracy at village level.

That radio has helped to defend as well as to define democracy is also true. To a great extent it has helped simply by being there. The old scenario of a military coup in which the state radio was one of the first and most strategic points to control is now far less likely. The existence of over 60 independent transmitters reaching millions of people — in particular influential urban dwellers — is, perhaps, the guarantee. The type of
democratic education by radio shown to be successful in the Douentza case is also an illustration of how powerful radio can be in reinforcing and embedding responsible citizenship and an informed electorate. Possibly, this is promotion of democracy at the grass-roots in its truest form.

The problems that radio stations face – lack of funds, lack of trained personnel and problems of popular access – all have their roots in the extreme economic poverty of the country. But in theory these problems are solvable, though probably only over the long-term. The problem of censorship and government control, is, on the other hand, more immediate and more easily solved – given the political will. Both democracy and the free press are fragile in Mali, but the sheer numbers of independent radios and the thirst for popular expression that they have unleashed make them an incontrovertible force.

NOTES
(Note: All translations are the author’s.)

4. Ibid.
5. See United States Agency for International Development (USAID) *EDSM-II Demographic Health Survey, Mali* (Calverton, MD : USAID, 1995/6).
8. Ibid., p.61.
10. The Colloquium on Radio Pluralism in West Africa was co-organized in Bamako by the West African Journalists’ Association and the Panos Institute, 14–18 Sept. 1993.
11. Louarn, op cit.
17. Louarn, op cit., p.62.
29. Ibid., p.74.
32. Ibid., p.1.
33. Ibid., p.16.
34. Ibid., pp.16–18 passim.
35. Ibid., p.16.
36. Ibid., p.17.
37. Ibid., pp.18–19.
38. Ibid.
40. ‘We’re not like Radio Kayira which spends its whole time criticising people to left and right – they’ve been closed down five times!’ Ernest Damango, Radio Seno, Bankass 1995, personal communication.
43. Sturmheit, p.2.