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Radio ways: Society, locality, and FM technology in Koutiala, Mali

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ABSTRACT

Radio ways: Society, locality, and FM technology in Koutiala, Mali

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This study in media anthropology uses participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, and recorded broadcasts to analyze how people use FM radio technology in the Koutiala area of southeast Mali, and particularly how they use FM radio to produce locality by relating audience members to one another, to the dominant national culture, and to international donor groups. The current state of FM broadcasting in Mali emerged when radio regulation was loosened during the transition from one-party state to multi-party democracy in the early 1990s.

I examine the diverse practices of social interaction facilitated by FM radio stations, or what I call "FM radio ways." I argue that because of their precarious financial positions, radio stations use one set of strategies to their listening audience and another set to address a secondary non-listening audience of donor groups. I show that FM stations write documents in French for donor groups, describing their programs using discourses of democracy promotion and minority culture preservation. For their largely illiterate listeners, FM stations produce most programs in the unofficial national language, Bamanankan, and read paid interpersonal announcements on the air, relying on the system of face-to-face communication for the recirculation of messages broadcast using radio technology. I use observations and interviews to argue that the most popular FM stations in Koutiala encourage messages and donations from ardent listeners by engaging in localized factional conflict with government officials, other radio stations, and individuals who have aggrieved club members. I argue that FM stations allocate program time to different listener groups

according to their place in the national ethnolinguistic and religious hierarchy, using these programs as icons of social identity along patterns established by the national radio station. In Koutiala, my interviews demonstrate that stations represent localized rural ethnic groups, like the Minyanka, with a few minority language programs, while obscuring traditional Minyanka ritual practices which many dominant Muslims view negatively.

This study offers insights into how locality is created through the mediated circulation of social information and knowledge, and how everyday uses of media technologies in new contexts may alter scholarly understandings of their role in society.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	American Broadcasting Company
ACC	(French) Association Cottonière Coloniale
ADEMA-PASJ	(French) Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali - Parti africain pour la Solidarité et la Justice
AEEM	(French) Association des Eleves et Étudiants du Mali
AIF	(French) Agence intergouvernmentale de la Francophonie
AM	Amplitude modulation
AMARC	(French) Association Mondiale des Radios Communautaires
AMUPI	(French) Association Malienne pour l'Unité et le Progrès de l'Islam
AOF	(French) Afrique Occidentale Française
ATT	Amadou Toumani Toure
AV	(French) Association villageoise
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CFDT	(French) Compagnie Française pour le Développement des Fibres Textiles
CMDT	(French) Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles
CNID	(French) Comité National d'Initiative Démocratique
CNN	Cable News Network
CRK	(French) Coordination des Radios de Koutiala
CSC	(French) Conseil supérieur de la communication
CSCOM	(French) Centre de Santé Communautaire
DNAFLA	(French) Direction Nationale de l'Alphabetisation Fonctionelle et Linguistique Appliquée
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (of the United Nations)
FM	Frequency modulation
GTZ	(German) Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
HKI	Helen Keller International
HUICOMA	(French) Huilerie cotonnière du Mali
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LJS	(French) Liberté Justice et Social
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPR	National Public Radio
ONG	(French) Organisation non-gouvernmentale
ORTM	(French) Office du Radio et Télédiffusion du Mali

RFI	(French) Radio France Internationale
RKII	(French) Radio Kayira II
RRK	(French) Radio Rurale Kayes
RTLM	(French) Radio Télévision Milles Collines (Rwanda)
SADI	(French) Solidarité Africaine pour le Dévelopement et l'Indépendence
SCOT	Social construction of technology
SNF	Sédou N'Diaye et Frères
SOTELMA	(French) Société des Télécommunications du Mali
STS	Science and technology studies
SYCOV	(French) Syndicat de Producteurs du Coton et Vivriers
TDM	(French) Télédiffusion du Mali
UDD	(French) Union pour la Démocratie et le Développement
URTEL	(French) Union des Radio et Télédiffuseurs Libres
VOA	Voice of America

ORTHOGRAPHIC AND TRANSCRIPTION NOTE

In a note on orthography at the beginning of their edited volume *Status and society in West Africa*, Conrad and Frank describe some of the difficulties in choosing how to represent West African and specifically Mande linguistic forms in English. They point out that scholars of Mali tend to choose between a standardized Bamanankan orthography created by an official applied linguistics organization in the Ministry of Education, DNAFLA (Direction Nationale de l'Alphabétisation Fonctionnelle et de la Linguistique Appliquée), or to use common French orthographic methods developed during the colonial era, and still used today in much everyday writing, journalism, public documentation, and so forth. The former is in many cases easier for Anglophone readers as it is closer to common English phonetic usage; the latter, is found in much scholarship and contemporary documentation on the area , facilitating further research for the non-specialist (Conrad and Frank 1994, xi-x). Consistent usage is difficult when referring to authors or public figures who use an orthography for their own names that is different from what one has chosen to use in one's work. Lexical units assimilated from one language to another pose further problems.

In this dissertation I will use the rules formulated by DNAFLA (Ministère de l'éducation nationale 1983-1991) in transcriptions of Bamanankan speech. I have used Arial Unicode MS for all representations of speech in Bamanankan to accommodate characters which are not standard in Western European alphabets (ɛ, ɔ, ɲ). In transcriptions, French assimilations are underlined; Arabic ones are italicized. In writing place names, I have used French versions instead of the DNAFLA form (Koutiala instead of Kucala). I will, however, omit the accents, and make exceptions if there is a common English variant (Segu instead of Ségou; Timbuktu instead of

Tombouctou). For personal names, I give preference to any spelling used by the person named or, if the person is a public figure, the spelling most commonly used, minus the French accents (Alpha Oumar Konare instead of Alfa Umar Konare; Djeli Baba Sissokho instead of Jeli Baba Sissoko). I have used auto-ethnonyms and other self-categorizations where possible. One noteworthy exception is the name used for Minyanka religious practicioners, *Bamanan*, which is also the term used for one of Mali's most important ethnic groups. To avoid confusion, and to avoid using the technically inaccurate term "animist," a translation of the common French term applied by many Malians, I will refer instead to "Minyanka ritual practitioners."

When introducing foreign language terms into my own text, I italicize the term on first use and note the English translation in single quotation marks; subsequently I write the term in normal font. All translations of foreign language sources are my own except where noted. To create a smoother narrative flow, in most cases I present my English translation exclusively. In cases where the original text is of analytic importance, I reproduce it after the English translation, either in its entirety as a separate block quote or as a parenthetical insertion to the English translation.

Finally in transcribing speech I have attempted to represent speaker's patterns of talking - their pauses, hesitations and the sounds they use to retain a turn at talk ("ah," "euh," "ehh," etc). The reason for this is not to prove that there are errors in everyday speech, but to demonstrate when radio announcers produce the remarkably seamless flow of words. The printed page permits the writer to convey the verbal artistry of very skilled radio announcers only imperfectly, but it does not permit the adequate representation of instances where the audio stream is affected by the technologies of recording and transmission such as defective cassettes, faulty microphones, blown speakers.

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Chapter One - Introduction

Despite the proliferation of new technologies of communication, radio remains the most important electronic medium in sub-Saharan Africa. Historically, though, radio is understudied not only in Africa, but globally. Tremendous growth in African broadcasting since the 1990s, particularly the appearance of FM radio, offers opportunities to re-examine the use of the technology in new contexts. These new contexts of communication and technology use push the boundaries of existing theories of electronic mediation developed in Western countries.

This study examines the adaptation of FM radio in Mali, and suggests that there are four factors that should be considered in analyzing the introduction of the medium in Africa. First, the material limitations of FM radio technology and the intentions of its developers create both possibilities and constraints on the use of the medium that distinguish it from other media. Second, FM radio developed and evolved in particular institutional contexts which tend to travel with the technology, influencing its eventual uses in Africa. Third, an analysis of FM radio in Africa must distinguish three different discourses about the medium that influence its use. The first are the set of theoretical discourses from which aid organizations and regulators draw their ideas; the second are the official discourses of radio station administrators, which interpret discourses of aid organizations which help support their operations; and the last are the unofficial discourses produced for local audiences, which may diverge significantly from official discourses but appeal to local political and social principles. Finally, a consideration of FM radio in Africa must take into account the innovative everyday uses of FM radio that tend to be obscured by the layers of discourse that envelop the technology.

The research for this dissertation was conducted in the Koutiala area, an agricultural, industrial, and transportation center in southeastern Mali bordering Burkina Faso. While extremely important economically, especially for its cotton production, Koutiala fits awkwardly within predominant national narratives which tend to portray Mali as culturally unified based on adherence to Islam and, to a lesser degree, common Mande sociolinguistic traditions. Koutiala, on the other hand, is the historic home of non-Muslim agriculturalists - particularly the Minyanka but also some Bobo - whose languages are not related to the national Mande market language, Bamanankan. Despite the fact that many Minyanka and Bobo have declared themselves to be Muslim or Christian, and most also have some mastery of Bamanankan, many Malians remain convinced of their alterity. FM radio stations and their announcers play an important role in representing diverse social groups through their scheduling and on-air discourses, while reproducing the narratives that create the impression of the cultural and political unity of the Malian nation.

Media anthropology and the significance of "radio ways"

The mass media were long ignored by most anthropologists; they were deemed "too redolent of Western modernity for a field identified with tradition, the non-Western, and the vitality of the local" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 3). That changed beginning in the early 1990s (Spitulnik 1993), and recent publications indicate that media anthropology has emerged as a distinct disciplinary subfield (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002; Wilk and Askew 2002; Peterson 2003). Media anthropology currently "comprises ethnographically informed, historically grounded, and context-sensitive analyses of the ways in which people use and make sense of media technologies" (Askew 2002, 3). Scholars of the media in anthropology study the people who use

media technologies to create, distribute, and consume content, and "examine how they manipulate these technologies to their own cultural, economic, and ideological ends" (Askew 2002, 1).

The subfield is relatively new, but scholarly study of the media is not. Therefore, media anthropologists pursue their research in creative tension with other disciplines. "The construction of media theory in the West, with rare exceptions, has established a cultural grid of media theory" that limits what, where, and how media studies are pursued; anthropologists therefore have an important role to play in "remapping the diversity of media worldwide" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 2) by conducting research on media use by people and in places places so far neglected. How media anthropologists work also distinguishes them from media scholars in most other disciplines: long-term ethnographic work permits anthropologists to track production and consumption over time and across space. Ethnographic work also has shown that local practices often influence not only the interpretation but "the very experience of media texts" (Askew 2002, 6). Ethnography can reveal interactions between producers and consumers (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 2) and connections between global and local circuits of cultural actors, texts, and meanings (Hannerz 1996; Appadurai 1996; Sreberny-Mohammadi 1991) that may otherwise be neglected.

This dissertation builds on scholarship within the subfield while drawing on work in other disciplines. A specific concern that this study shares with many, but not all, media anthropologists is the role of technologies in mediated interactions. Anthropologists do not generally approach the media as technologies that act upon people, as did literary scholar McLuhan (1964). Instead they theorize that there are particular technologies which "mediate between people and this is what defines them as a distinct variety of technology" (Askew 2002, 2). Each technology or combination

of technologies offers different material limitations and possibilities, which in turn enable certain kinds of interactions and discourage others. Identifying and analyzing what kinds of interactions emerge involves the close study of a technology's use. Specifically, this dissertation follows other work which considers how media technologies affect semiotic processes and how the representations they enable are linked to broader shifts in categories of social identity. Anthropologists have considered these issues in film portraiture (Pinney 1997), in cassette sermon listening (Hirschkind 2005), in radio broadcast audiences (Spitulnik 2000), and in the recording of ethnographic material for the production of anthropological knowledge (Brady 1999). I also build on the work of Larkin in assessing the limitations that technologies impose on mediated interactions; his work focuses on film viewing and video production within the broader social and technological context of urban Nigeria (1999; Larkin 2004). Larkin's work is particularly important to this study because he focuses on contexts of media use that contrast with Western ones, and analyzes how social mechanisms are developed which compensate for technological breakdowns. His work demonstrates how anthropology can expand upon theories of media use, particularly those in British cultural studies (Hall [1973] 1980; Morley 1980) and American communication studies (Lull 1980, 1990).

I also draw on anthropological scholarship of media production, or what Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin call "the social sites of media production" (2002, 17). Anthropologists emphasize that media producers are "agents grounded in the same types of interpretive worlds in which their audiences are" (Dornfeld, 16), and often interact directly with those audiences (Grätz 2000; Schulz 1999). Anthropologists have also shown that while media producers have a certain specialized power that media consumers do not have, their power is conditioned by the specific

economic, political, and institutional conditions in which they work (Mandel 2002; Spitulnik 1998; Ginsburg 1994; Hasty 2005). Constraints on the power of producers are particularly common for people in large media institutions who "are manipulated as much as they manipulate" (Bourdieu 1998, 17). Media anthropology research also highlights difficulties that anthropologists may experience in studying media institutions. "Studying up" (Nader 1974), or studying people in a similar or higher social position, can be problematic for any researcher. The institutional nature of media work often puts anthropologists in such situations (Dornfeld 1998). Even where social positions do not directly correlate, such as in my research, anthropologists and media producers are engaged in producing different and sometimes competing forms of knowledge. It should not be surprising that media producers consciously or unconsciously try to influence accounts of their activities (Bourdieu 1998; Himpele 2002), as I found in conducting the research for this dissertation.

On the other hand, the treatment of mediated space in this study is not typical of most work in media anthropology. This study is neither about national media, nor about the use of the media by specific minority groups within a nation. Many media institutions and technologies are regulated within national boundaries, making the nation a logical unit of study for all media scholars. Media anthropologists have studied various media as national phenomena, especially television (Abu-Lughod 2005; Wilk 2002; Himpele 2002; Dornfeld 1998; Armbrust 2006; Mandel 2002; Mankekar 1999), but also film (Abu-Lughod 1997; Larkin 1999; Hahn 2002; Powdermaker 1951; Dickey 1993; Heider 1991), photography (Mead and Bateson 1942; Pinney 1997; Jenkins 1993) and radio (Spitulnik 1997; James 2000; Spitulnik 2001; Schulz 2001). There are numerous anthropological studies of indigenous media, which are "produced and consumed primarily by people living in remote settlements" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 8). These studies focus on sub-

national groups (O'Connor 2002; Ginsburg 1994; Nakassis and Dean 2007; Goodman 2006; Hoffman 2008). The present study is about a medium, FM radio, whose audience is defined neither by its relation to the state nor to a particular category of identity, but by the practices that surround it. Instead, like Yang's work on the production of a Shanghai identity through transnational mediated communications (2002), this study focuses on practices that produce shared ideas of identity, in this case the process of the "production of locality" (Appadurai 1996, 194).

Studies of purely auditory media are also relatively unusual in media anthropology, as they are in other fields of media research. In her introduction to an edited volume on the anthropology of media, Askew notes that

> aural forms (such as radio and cassette technologies) are significantly underrepresented in comparison to contributions focusing on the visual genres of television, photography, and film. This in no way reflects a diminished global significance, for in fact radio and cassettes have penetrated a substantially larger percentage of the globe than the considerably more expensive media of television and CDs. But for reasons yet to be explored, they have attracted less academic attention than they deserve. (2002, 2)

Steven Feld, a pioneer in the study of audio phenomena in anthropology (Feld [1982] 1990), opines that anthropologists are disinclined to attend to sound in part because academic literature treats sound as an adjunct to the visual representation of social life through the written word and visual icons such as photographs, drawings and maps (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 74). This "visualist" (Askew 2002, 3) or "ocularcentrist" (Jay 1991) tendency draws a researcher's attention towards what she can see and away from what is audible. Some anthropologists researching media have attended

to specifically auditory media, notably cassettes (Launay 1997; Newton 1999; Miller 2007; Hirschkind 2005) and radio (Spitulnik 1997; Fardon and Furniss 2000; Grätz 2000; James 2000; Richards 2000; Schulz 1999, 2003; Tacchi 2002; O'Connor 2002; di Leonardo 2008; Keesing and Keesing 1956). Students of aural media must still grapple with what media scholar Lewis described as "a mental substitution… of sound for vision, of analysis of acoustic images for their visual counterparts" (2000, 163). The present study does not deeply analyze audio phenomena, but the preference for visual representation limited the collection and presentation of research data as I explain in the notes on orthography and methodology. Brady's research on the implications of recording technologies and methods in the early 20th century ethnography (1999) is exemplary in underlining how the scholarly process is affected by methods of audio data collection, but more research on contemporary contexts of audio recording and analysis are needed.

The study of radio has an important role to play in increasing scholarly knowledge of audio phenomena, but it is significant for other reasons as well. Radio scholars in other disciplines have left certain areas unstudied, suggesting the potential for anthropological contributions. For example, in seeking reasons for the general neglect of radio in contemporary scholarship, Garner underscored the low public profile of radio and the "low status of the sense of sound" in the West, adding that "so much radio-listening happens in private, and is therefore so closely woven into our daily lives as an accompaniment to mundane tasks - waking, washing, working, eating, driving - that it is taken for granted" (2001, 7). The mundane tasks Garner lists, and the description of them as private ones, suggest a particularly Western form of existence; anthropologists have the opportunity to expand on the understanding of radio based on these limited contexts of use. Furthermore, the combination of "private passion" and "public neglect" that describes radio's position in the West (Lewis 2000) is a

particularly Western formulation. Understanding the practices surrounding the production and consumption of radio outside the West is part of media anthropology's role in remapping the diversity of media, as Ginsburg and her colleagues put it. Where radio is the predominant electronic medium, its importance in providing information, opinion, and entertainment is increased, as is its role in circulating social norms and mores. Additionally, radio, like other broadcast media, communicates instantaneously, permitting simultaneous reception of its signal and encoded audio stream across space. However, because of its relatively low cost and the nature of sound, which permits listeners to move about while still attending to radio content and is less restricted by physical barriers than visual media, radio also permits wider communication across social boundaries than broadcast media like television.

Like any communication technology, radio is a resource whose allocation raises important questions in the societies in which it is used, because it is part of a broader political economy (Nyamnjoh 2004; Hyden and Leslie 2002). Radio programming, and responses to it, reflect and shape the formation and cohesion of social groups (Spitulnik 1998; Schulz 2000, 2003). This is true not only in areas of relative calm, such as Mali, but in areas beset by conflict, which radio can be used to aggravate or resolve (Grätz 2000; James 2000; Richards 2000; Carver 2000; Kellow and Steeves 1998; Thompson 2007). Radio discourse can serve as a key entry point into the substance of emerging or changing subjectivities based on the experience of class, gender, religion, ethnicity, or other social characteristics as has been shown in certain African contexts (Soares 2004; Spitulnik 1997).

FM radio is particularly significant because is operates on a smaller scale than national media, including national radio, giving it an important role in shaping how people think about the spaces in

which it operates. The smaller size of stations and their audiences makes its practices easier to observe, offering researchers a window into the complex negotiations that occur between radio staff members, their listeners, their regulators and their funders, who all have a part in deciding the role of the medium on a day to day basis. Studying FM radio offers anthropological insight into how political issues are contested and decided, what cultural debates are of most concern, what role a local area and its people have within a nation and what understanding or knowledge they may have of the wider world and their place in it. The many practices involved in creating and maintaining FM radio constitute a unique "community of practice" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) that is based neither on geography nor identity. Understanding FM radio is part of the ongoing project of understanding how locality, as "an inherently fragile social achievement" (Appadurai 1996, 179), may be produced and reproduced. It does so in two ways underscored by Appradurai: it shifts attention away from space in defining units of study and towards techniques in creating community; and it underscores how people in seemingly oppositional or unrelated positions interact to create knowledge about local social worlds (1996, 182). FM radio stations in much of the world claim a central role in constituting and reproducing community, and this makes them an ideal point from which to observe those processes which are central to an anthropological understanding of social life.

The varied practices that make FM radio a center of social life in Mali constitute what I am calling "FM radio ways," or the diverse practices of social interaction that FM radio stations facilitate. These practices bring together radio's producers and consumers, who already live in relative proximity to one another. They also bring distant funders and regulators into contact with radio station staff members, situating stations within a national and international frame of reference.

FM radio ways are part of broader political, economic and social processes, and serve to illustrate them through the daily operations of FM stations. Because of their important social role and range of activities of FM stations, the radio ways that I discuss in this dissertation are not comprehensive or exhaustive, but serve to show some of the roles that FM radio stations may occupy where they operate. The radio ways I discuss also reflect a particular time, and it will become clear that this "conjunctural ethnography" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 7) is not only subject to change but has probably already changed. Developments such as the further spread of cell phones, changes in the regulation and funding of FM radio in Mali, and the establishment of more stations in the area under discussion are likely to impact FM radio's role. Still, FM radio ways provide a window on broader social issues and remain relevant in showing how the media may contribute to the creation and reproduction of social life.

Importance of studying radio in Africa

In all parts of Africa, but particularly south of the Sahara, radio developed a position in the 20th century as the preeminent medium which it has maintained, even as recently developed technologies of communication have been introduced. While a great deal of interest has been directed towards technologies that are new to both Africa and the West, FM radio, which is considered "old" in the West, has been adapted in interesting ways in Africa. The widespread use and social importance of FM radio in Africa, combined with the innovative uses that have evolved rapidly there, make it a compelling object of study for media scholars.

The primary mass medium in Africa

Radio remains an important medium globally, even in the West. While statistical representations can be misleading because of the variability of measurement practices, they