

## **Women's radios in Africa: towards a new configuration of the public sphere. The example of Radio Munyu in Banfore (Burkina-Faso)**

Etienne I. Damome<sup>1</sup>

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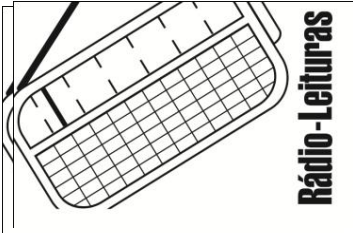
### **Abstract**

Local radios, whether owned by association or local community, play an important role in the democratization of communication by giving "voice" to "everybody". They also contribute to modernize socio-cultural structures through the introduction of innovations in all fields. At last, they foster transmission of culture (literacy, information) and local development through communication for social change. Their use of local languages, their deep knowledge of social and cultural environment, especially in rural areas, make easier their shared ownership by the people. Local radios, compared to urban and public media, appear as an alternative means of communication that it may be interesting to analyze. But when this process is led by women, it gets to a higher level of interest because such care of social communication by women in Africa indicates a try by women to "seize power" on men. What happens when women are taking charge of local communication and direct "palavers"? Which social development model is proposed by women? Which social and cultural trends can we expect? When women run media, how this media talks about information, awareness and mobilization of women for their self-promotion? We choose to examine the case of women radios in Burkina Faso. It will lead us to deal with both functions of democratization of communication, empowerment of women and social development induced by women's local action on radio.

**Keywords:** Women radio in Burkina Faso, women and communication in Africa, social communication by women, community radio in Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Etienne L. Damome, CEMIC/GRER, Université Bordeaux 3



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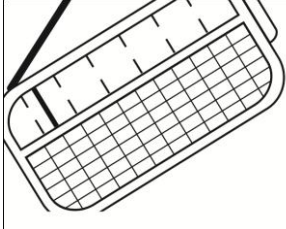
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Analyzing communication in a women's community radio straightaway implies considering two problems. It actually seems hard to deal with such a subject when eluding the notion of gender and the question of customs.

The gender theory originates from the Anglo-Saxon world and constitutes the ideological matrix from which most of the questioning about the differences between the sexes arises; it is applied in diverse spheres, and research in social sciences is thus confronted with a large field to explore in every domain of social reality.

The concept of gender in fact is a social concept that starts from the principle that sexual differences do not make up and do not justify inequality between social beings. Only culture plays a part, by creating an identity for each male or female and elaborating gender systems. Differences then become inequalities. Some men or women refer to it in order to base all kind of claims on it, in the name of a "corrective" justice, which, since Aristotle, calls to bringing back equality in a deal where some people would have unfairly granted themselves excessive shares; yet, social analysts bring "gender studies" forth to depict the social phenomena that illustrate a de facto inequality – the under-representation of women in the field of the medias for instance – and the "strife" of the women and the specialized social institutions to restore the balance. Inside the theoretical system of the *gender studies*, one looks at the institutions as identified with institutional wardens of the symbolic Law, which is perceived as issuing from norm effects, tending to duplicate traditional hierarchies. One thus tends to oppose to them "progressive" arrangements that try to reverse the order of values.

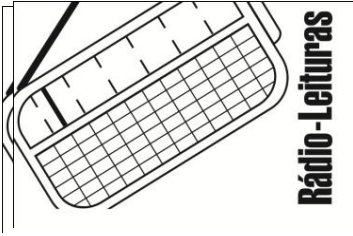
My study clearly fits fully in that frame, given that the analyzed context imposed it. The study actually focuses on women's speech takeover within societies that traditionally minimized or even bullied it. The virtues of the "palaver tree" often are underlined, by praising the "democratizing" function of this traditional institution in Africa, yet forgetting that women and children's speech are excluded from it. The palaver tree recalls the "bourgeois public space" of the nineteenth century, rather than a true democratic frame in the present meaning of the word. Let me remind you that it is in the private space that one observes the effective exercise of this democracy. A non-written law as well as recognized traditional practices indeed gives much room to women's speech in the private space. Within that frame, she has the right to argue as equal with men, to advise and to correct her husband, but in his ear, in



their bedroom, in private. Women speaking in public thus rouse special interest. Within a traditional African context, what can be the measure of this highly symbolical “takeover” women grant themselves by conquering the right to speak in public? How do they exercise that power and to whose profit? What happens when women take the local communication in hand and run the “palaver”? What model does that new compact between men and women propose for a society and what elements of the democratic frame are being institutionalized then? In my study, my first preoccupation is to bring some kind of answer to that question.

The problem of usage cannot be ignored as well. The sociology of usage has been representing a fruitful trend in the French-speaking world since the eighties and its questionings do not stop (CHAMBAT, 1993). A part of the studies on usage spot the way Information and Communication Techniques (TIC in French) fit into the dynamics of autonomy practices in diverse sectors of social welfare: they demonstrate that the individuals appropriate tools for the purpose of personal emancipation, self-accomplishment through work, or sociability (JOUËT, 1987). Others analyze the socialization of the technique, the processes through which TIC become social objects, by questioning the relation between technical innovations and transformations in society. In that respect, one is invited to take into account the double mediation of technology and society. This double mediation reestablishes the link between social and technical innovation. Technical determinism must therefore be avoided. Technology does not de facto shape custom and it does not mechanically induce social changes. The very fact it is adopted does not mean the representation the people have of themselves or of the world, will evolve. There must be the intention, the will of making it play a role, to grasp it as being a tool for progress. The social mutations brought about by technological innovations follow from that mediation.

From there on, analyzing the processes of appropriating the radio, elaborating social links, integrating customs in the social relations that these appropriations bring can be of great interest. As far as my subject is concerned, the question is about identifying the use women make of the radio, the different social functions they have it fill, as well as analyzing the social changes induced by the double mediation: a technical innovation – the introduction of a modern means of communication – and a social innovation – the new habits, initiated or appearing. What does then the model for social development proposed by women look like?



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Which social or cultural dynamics can we expect from them? Such are the fundamental questions that underlie the second preoccupation in my study.

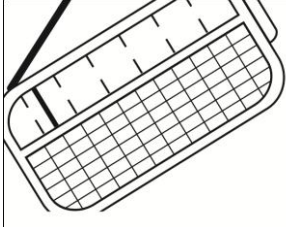
The analytical corpus is based on notes that were taken during interviews in Banfora, in July 2005 and June 2008. The interviews were conducted with key people in the station but also with listeners met through the streets of the city. But the interview also dealt with all the people I met even they were not listening to the radio, because Munyua was the only local radio throughout the region at that time. Everyone had always listened at least once. Analyses are also based on recordings of broadcasts.

### **Broadcasting Of Women's Associations: A Promising Sector**

Since the emergence of community and associational radios in Sub-Saharan Africa, the sector has diversified considerably. In most countries, religious institutions were the first to seize the opportunity offered by the new laws governing broadcasting stations to create their own radios<sup>2</sup>. Today, there are hundreds across the continent. All faiths are represented (all Christian congregations, Muslims, and most recently, also traditional religions). However, in some countries, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, groups of civil society have started their own radios at the same time. These countries are among those who have the largest number of community radio stations, 43 in the case of Mali and 41 in the case of Burkina Faso. It is also in these countries, as in Ghana, that this sector has the most diversity. We can find local community radio stations, linguistic and socio-professional radios. On a professional level, initiatives are indeed numerous. There are radios of farmer groups (in Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana), of fishermen (Ghana), of tradespeople (Togo), of cotton-farmers (Burkina Faso), orchards-operators (Burkina Faso), as well as of cocoa (Ghana) and stock breeders (Mali). These groups use them as a support in their multiple efforts towards local socio-cultural development and as a communication tool. The preferential use of local languages helps to

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<sup>2</sup> African radio, especially in the former French colonies, has always been dominated by the public sector. After independence and the rise of dictatorships, the State exercised a monopoly text. However, since the early 1990s, most countries liberalized the sector enabling the emergence of countless media of any kind.



reinforce social and community ties and at the same time it creates opportunities for the formation of a public space. It is the same with the radios connected to socio-demographic categories (women, youth). Among them, it is mainly the radios of associations of women who have found fertile ground.

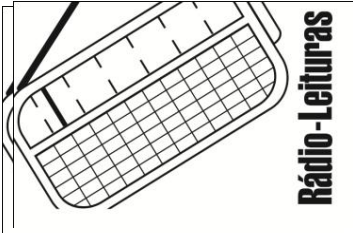
The involvement of women in the world of information and communication in Africa is undeniable since the Regional Conference on Women in Dakar (1994) and the Platform for Action that African meeting has generated, and especially since the World Summit on Women in Beijing (1995). African women, first in anglophone Africa, and then also in the francophone part of the continent, realized the importance of the challenges and opportunities offered by new information technologies and the need to invest this space to serve their interests. We have witnessed the birth of dozens of electronic networks run by women organizations (Femmes Afriques, Femmes Afrique-Info, Réseau électronique GAIN sur le genre, Réseau des femmes africaines pour le développement et la communication (FEMNET), Women's Net, etc.). It is because of the need to work with their counterparts who are largely illiterate that women have invested in radio. All over the continent, women's networks have launched women's radio and community radio to express their difference. Several rural radio stations run by women for women exist in Cape Verde, Cameroon, Malawi, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Togo, Cameroon, Angola, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Namibia, Rwanda, Swaziland, Togo, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Kenya. There is even a project to establish a Regional Media Centre for Women and a Pan-African Radio for Women. Women in Radio became a reality.

Women have become aware of the need to produce alternative information, mindful of the concerns and characteristics of their kind. The progressive feminization of the sector has a definite impact on the program content. They disseminate advice on health, education of children, vocational training opportunities and employment, the role of women in local development initiatives, particularly in agriculture and so on. Addressing the population that prevails<sup>3</sup> in most countries, and uses the most radio media<sup>4</sup>, women concentrate on a radio

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<sup>3</sup> According to demographic statistics in most countries of Africa of southern Sahara, there are 51-52% of women against 48-49% of men.

<sup>4</sup> Several monographs and comprehensive studies emphasize the predominance of women among the listeners of radio in Africa (Tudesq 1983, 1998; Johnson 1996; Sanu-Méda 2002;



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audience that many public media do not reach. According to a study made by the Institute IMMAR of France at the request of Radio France International (RFI) in January 2007, Nana FM, the radio of the vendors of tissue of Adaolato Market in Lomé, came top of the radio audience of radio stations in the Togolese capital. The ongoing development of the broadcasting of the associations of women shows that the media is not done yet to prove its popularity and usefulness. It mostly shows that it immediately gives a social power to one who uses it, even against the provisions of traditional structures.

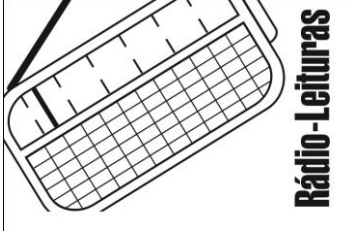
### **“The Voice Of Woman” Within A Patriarchal Society**

Radio Munyu is a product of the *Munyu* Association (*Munyu* means “Patience” in the Dioula language), founded in 1992 to “gather, heighten the awareness of the women in town and country, and help them get organized; to contribute in making women’s liberation implemented in the province; to fight illiteracy, ensure appropriate education and training for girls and women; contribute in the awakening of women and work to improve their life standards; fight the exploitation of, the oppression of and all form of discrimination against women”. Its activities encompass different fields: education, with the creation and running of training centers in domestic management for teenage girls and women; teaching women and teenage girls how to read and write in their national languages; the backing of groups involved in technical training and the transformation of products, the management of windmills; the creation of savings cooperatives or economic interest groups. The headquarters of the Association, called “Women’s House”, are a series of structures supposed to make life easier for women: a public secretary’s office, phone booths, a lecture room, a lodging center, a cafeteria and a restaurant.

The first objective assigned to the radio was then the backing and accompanying of all those initiatives, and at the same time the constitution of an information tool for its ten thousand members dispatched through more than three hundred villages in the Comoe

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Damome 2002, 2003, 2007; Bagassi 2004; Capitant 2008). Several factors explain this, but in every study that seems to be unanimity: housewives radios competing programs attractive to accompany the household needs of women who are more at home than in offices.



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<http://radioleituras.wordpress.com>

Province – South-West of Burkina-Faso. Information and communication thus are the two cardinal functions assigned to the radio, used as a social link between the members. It supports the efforts to bring about the changes that women initiate everywhere in their own life as well as in society.

### **A Tool To Help People Work And To Link Them**

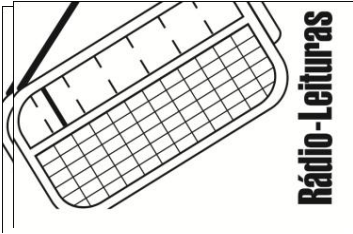
The idea of this mass medium originated from the following observation: communication went from bad to worse as the association grew. Written or oral information delivered through “couriers” began to be difficult to handle and there was a big loss between the center and periphery. Resorting to radio as modern information means aimed at a better circulation of information. “We had to travel to all the villages, which required more time, more money, more physical efforts too. During the rainy season, several villages were totally unreachable and contact was lost between us for several months. One day, we said to ourselves we must find a tool with which to reach most of our members. From there comes the idea of a radio (...)”, the manager of the radio explained.

Very soon though, the radio proved more than a mere contact and information tool. Within an oral tradition context, women quickly perceived other possibilities, particularly its function of communication. They understood that, besides using it to get informed, they could talk thanks to it. New uses were thus initiated and made life in the association easier: consulting women upon different subjects, decreasing the number of meetings in the villages... The radio thus became an indispensable support of the different activities of the association, particularly in the field of training. “We no longer needed to multiply training meetings, to meet the women of the different villages in turn, or to have them travel to the center”, notes the manager.

### **An Instrument Of Women’s Liberation And Social Promotion**

Within a context where women have to face severe hardships (illiteracy, lack of knowledge, submission to men, poverty, forced unions, physical violence in the domestic sphere, difficult access to land ownership and family income), and where they are in an





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inegalitarian relation to men, Radio Munyu initiates broadcasting programs that aim at solving those social problems, as well as reducing the great gap between men and women, especially in the public sphere. Thus, a great part of the broadcasts is devoted to education, health, teaching women how to read and write, and to activities generating an income, in order to give women a little financial autonomy, which is synonymous with more independence and liberty. Some programs are yet more openly connected with different aspects of the equity between men and women.

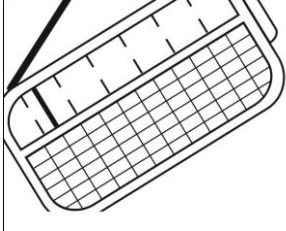
The programs come in two different formats: educational and consciousness-raising broadcasts are didactical. They aim at training women to allow them to “face their new responsibilities”, the manager of the radio says. Those that deal with social questions are open forums in which women discuss between themselves. *Parole de femme – Women's word* - and *Magazine de la femme – Women's hour* – thus allow women to exchange their opinions on their everyday life, mainly on questions concerning women's condition or the role of women at home or in the society. So, themes like equality between men and women regarding household chores, the care of young housemaids, the code of the people and family were discussed on the air, during my stay there. *La femme sur le chantier du développement – Women on the development project* – which is on the same format, is a space where the more advanced women in all fields of life, or socio-economic activities, advise and share their experiences. As we can easily conceive however, it is much more about trying to give a new definition of women's social position than about doing something for them.

### Access To Public Space And New Definition Of Women's Identity

Women suffer from double domination: that of male chauvinists and of gerontocracy. Not only do men make all the decisions about everything whatever their age, but the younger ones also stay under the domination of their elders. The challenge is double in that system: give women their position toward men and allow an evolution within the fair sex.

One of the major changes introduced by Radio Munyu is to break, little by little, the sexist and generation barriers: anyone is at liberty to express his or her opinion about any question upon social life. Women can debate at length over the domestic chores, the family health, the family code, the education of children... The teenagers, boys or girls, who used to



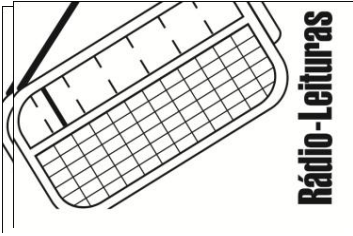


complain about not being listened to enough by the elders, have the same spaces of expression than their parents and express their satisfaction towards the attitude of the elders: “What we say is listened to by our parents. They now know what we wish and want, that’s what makes things different”. Thanks to the radio, men, women and teenagers now enjoy the same freedom of speech.

One of the consequences induced in terms of social communication by “*The Voice of Women*” is probably also the modification of the social relations between generations. By allowing all the members of the community to speak, within a society branded by the opacity and arbitrary of a monolithic power run by the elders, the radio forces social relations and tries to reduce the privileges granted to social rank. Their society thus becomes a less inegalitarian one. That situation built new dynamics that gives the social dialogue its new face and grounds new rules to the sharing of public responsibilities. On Munyu women can be seen conducting debates, letting other people talk or not, as well as young people developing a speech that delegitimizes the uni-dimensional ascendancy of the elders. The general perception of the society on women is changing: “Men show much more respect for us now, they are much kinder to us”, a woman from Banfora explains. When asked what she brought to women in the South West, the manager of the radio unhesitatingly answers that the radio perhaps contributed in reinforcing women’s expression capability, but above all favored the emerging of women’s consciousness. “With Radio Munyu, women can be no longer on the same boat”, she concludes. The whole identity potential gets its new definition and produces a new repartition of skills. “The Voice of Women” could then be the vector of a social rebirth full of promises.

### **“The Way” Of Women: The Characteristics Of A Women’s Model For Social Management**

When reading all this, we could be led to believe that Radio Munyu only serves the interests of women, risking to make men jealous, and to make them fear to lose one sparkle of their prerogatives. It would be ignoring that the management of the radio and the communication strategy of women show a more global preoccupation that involves the whole society in its move towards progress. In that respect, the action of the “Voice of Women”



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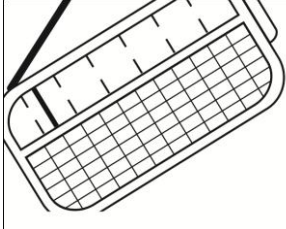
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becomes a new way put forward for society as a whole. As a symbol for the accession of women to the public sphere, Radio Munyu also offers us a model in social management.

### **A fundamental principle: collaborating with men**

Like the "Women's House", "The Voice of Women" is run by the Munyu Association. A management board of seven members is in charge of looking for the funding of the radio, of seeing to the enforcement of the decisions made by the association, as well as to the good running of the radio station. Yet, the women wish to put into light the fact that the radio can be a field in which collaboration, based upon equality and mutual confidence, is initiated with men. The executive team comprises women and men; the team of presenters comprises six women and four men. Out of a total of fifteen people working daily for the radio, six are men.

This is not mere pragmatism coming from women who would turn to men for the tasks they cannot themselves do. Among the objectives of the radio, a will can be seen, to "work with men for the better-being of women and of society, and to participate, with men, in the economical, social and cultural development of the country as a whole and of the province in particular". It is obvious, then that there is no desire to exploit men for their own benefit, or to take revenge on them from the part of these women. On the opposite, they think that men must be involved in order to have the wished for moves quickly and safely become real. "No social struggle is won by bringing the diverse social forces against each other" the manager of the radio says. In fact, men are involved in different activities beside women, in the training and consciousness rising of the women in particular. On the radio, in the field, many take an active part in the social promotion of women. They think they will themselves be the winners in it, not only in avoiding useless confrontations with women, but also in allowing the society to fill more efficiently its first function, the education of the young. For that reason, some men say they are highly interested in the broadcasts of "The Voice of Women". "We all draw a profit out of it, we men also. Who talks about women also talks about men because it is difficult to dissociate the two. If women show an interest for something, I think that us men share the same interest. Then, if you're being logical, you'll have to admit that it's not a radio for the women, but a radio that's for all." A man met in the street of Banfora says. "What is said to the women is directed toward us too. We get some pieces of information that we

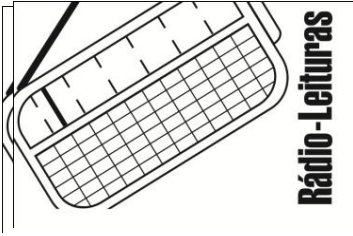


ignored and we feel concerned with what the women are denouncing. As a result, we can make an effort to make things easier for them, even if it costs us a lot”, another asserts. We can thus well understand that women do not need to build up a specific discourse aimed at men, they just need to talk between themselves on the radio, associating men to their debates on questions of social life, mainly on questions linked with women’s conditions or the role of women at home, to have men draw their own conclusions. It is a strategy of action and also a model for social running that women propose to men. They bet upon collaboration and mutual respect to gain equality to men. As they do not exercise a form of power in the detriment of men, they do not create new frustration. As they do not build themselves by removing anything from men, they indirectly invite to building a new winner’s partnership.

### **New referents participating in self-representation**

Radio Munyu is a window open on the wide world. Not only did it contribute in shaping a new look on women; it also opened the eyes of the whole society on the modern world. The first contact with the modern world came through “the Voice of Women” as the first up to date communication media in the area. Because communicating was hazardous, as said above, Radio Munyu broke the isolation of the populations living in that part of Burkina-Faso. It creates a link between people who live in more or less distant villages or hamlets, with one another and with the whole world: “The radio allows us to know what’s going on at the other end of the world and to feel connected with the people who live at the ends of the earth. Thanks to the information it brings to us, it makes us see the world differently”, a woman explains. The information more easily goes round and one can very quickly be in contact with the rest of the world. His opening to the world legitimates its commitment and is greatly inspiring: “Thanks to Munyu, people know we are not alone in our situation, others lead the same struggle as ours, under other forms, by different means. So, it inspires and encourages us”, she goes on. By widening the horizon, the radio broadens the field of possibilities.

### **Taking the local culture into consideration**

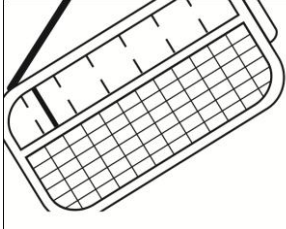


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Culture is a common social heritage. In traditional societies however, its protection and management are the duty of men, it is their right. The fact that women should be concerned with them to the point of developing, as Eric Macé says (2005), “cultural counter-movements” reveals the new socio-cultural dynamics that is getting under way. When somebody's death is announced on the radio, for instance, it should cause no problem; though, as Bagassi (200), who also studied that radio, points out, it could annoy the chief of the village and those who have a right, by tradition, to hear the news first and are vexed to hear of it at the same time as everybody else. It is the same thing, he remarks, with private visits that are said to be rarer because the radio is supposed to favor public relations, which could thus be substituted to private relations (friendly or family ones). Those who are in charge of the radio answer this criticism by replying that the radio rather broadens, particularly in an urban environment, the family and brotherly space. One would be wrong, indeed, to blame Radio Munyu for undermining the basis of the local culture.

Indeed, the radio bases its ideology upon the taking that culture into account. The function of the radio as a means of asserting local identity is fully part of its strategic action scheme. To hear its manager, this function imposed itself as essential from the very beginning; “If we want to bring things to change, we must know where we're coming from and where we're going”. They are thus “fundamental prerequisites that make every forward movement in the fight we fight for the better-being of women possible, for their visibility, even for the development of the milieu”. In her opinion, the new must not inevitably dispose of the ancient. It must enter in harmonious interaction with the latter: “We have to manage so as to avoid total discontinuity between what we propose and what we used to experience. A great many women wouldn't agree with that, not to speak of men”, a common sense that drove them to define quotas for producing and broadcasting their programs. “We must have the maximal production; in this way only will we be - without even knowing it - in adequacy with ourselves. Women don't need being disconnected from their society to live a better life. They must avoid being alienated. We deplore some aspects in our condition, but everything is far from being negative”. Radio Munyu is in partnership with Radio France International (RFI), from which it broadcasts a certain number of programs, but the presenters are careful to introduce them, so as to connect the broadcasts with the local social and cultural realities. “In



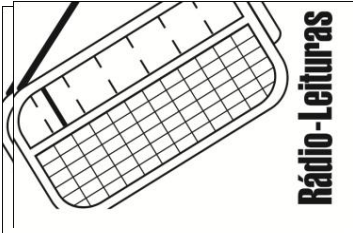
order to reach the people, your message mustn't seem strange or alien to them. The good running of a new part in a machine is conditioned by its right adaptation to the system! Either it harmoniously fits in, and it will drag the machine into full speed, or it works against it, bringing two possibilities: the machine grinds the new part and throws it away, or fails to do so and the risk is great that it will get altogether blocked". The women's communicating strategy, if there was a strategy, was not to go too roughly against the way people thought, against the shared values, but to work upon them from the inside to make them evolve.

## **Conclusion**

The first conclusion we can draw is that the accession of women to the public sphere through Radio Munyu contributed in making that sphere become plural and malleable. The strategy of women, who were taken in asymmetrical social relations, was to form, as Eric Macé (2005) says, into a "hegemonic counter-movement" in order to obtain that their points of view (seen until then as subaltern) should be taken into account. By granting all the members of the community the same privilege of access, the public sphere ceased to be made up of a unique scene, but it became multiple instead: the men's, the women's, the youth's and, the elders', each of them trying to make their point of view legitimate. From now on, they will all participate in defining the social and cultural meanings of their community.

In introducing in the public space questions that were till then confined in the "private" space and considered as non-problematic, the communication of women also contributed in the plasticity of the social field. The latter became richer in new representations and identities, thus bringing forth a reconfiguration of the space of meanings and symbols.

From that double viewpoint, we can say that the communication promoted by the "voice of Women" contributes in installing democracy in society. Radio Munyu actually develops a counter-speech within the global public sphere and broadens the objects and terms of the public debate by introducing new pictures, by becoming the scene and actor of the plural public scene, by turning the questions the more often relegated to the family sphere – conjugal violence, household chores and the care of children devoted to women, the right to financial autonomy – to public trends. This observation invites us to perceive the new deal in



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terms of its political dimension, ie, the power struggle – its dynamics of conflict<sup>8</sup> – rather than in terms of domination.

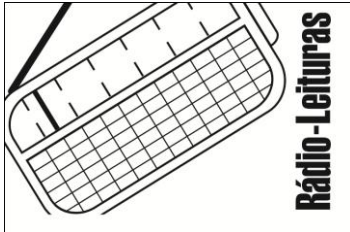
The second conclusion we can draw from this monographic example is that building one's legitimacy within a given system is possible, without one being obliged to form a subversive hegemonic counter-movement, and above all without trying to exert domination, in one's turn. In this way at least, the attitude of the women can be understood, who renounce "taking hold of the power" or exerting it against men and acknowledge the asymmetry of society as being "normal". Most of the debates on "the Voice of Women" aim at introducing new definitions that must be brought into account in order to give its new configuration to the reality itself of the public sphere; in that context, they are by no means aiming to overthrow the power of men and elders. Women's radio thus works less like a court than like a symbolical arena – constituted by the struggles for legitimization and disqualification that the social forces exert through debates – the very social forces that are inscribed in asymmetrical social relations. That may be hard to acknowledge but one has to take into consideration that, whatever its innovating and overthrowing power, a *medium* cannot bring about effects that would be unwelcome by the users and those who benefit from it. It is too easily forgotten that the sociopolitical and cultural context itself defines and imposes the communicating function – it does not work the other way round. The *media* strongly depend on their social environment, on contexts within which they lie – they cannot be used in the same way everywhere. It can be noticed that the *medium* does not beforehand impose a behavior on women; the use that is made of it does not automatically induce active women's lib-type preoccupations because the radio, as a symbolic object that crystallizes power stakes, could have allowed such a process in another part of the world. Communication here produces innovation only by mooring it to ancient values. It is a strategy that makes things move slowly yet safely forward.

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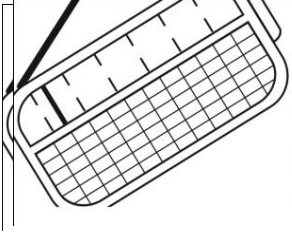
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Etienne I. Damome