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Community Radio, Power, and Social Change: Navigating Participation and Transformation in Khwezi Community Radio, South Africa

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Abstract: This article examines the transformative potential of community radio (CR) in facilitating social change. Using a case study of Khwezi Community Radio (KR) in South Africa (SA), the study draws on vignette-based analysis informed by content analysis of KR programming, supported by excerpts from interviews and focus groups with community members and radio staff from the broader doctoral study. It advances a nuanced analysis of power that goes beyond its hierarchical and oppressive dimensions, exploring it as relational, negotiated, and potentially transformative. The study interrogates how communities engage with power through KR, particularly in relation to leadership structures, as exemplified in the KR mayoral show, where decision-making power remains contested. Findings highlight how communities cultivate collective agency through the Masibumbane Listeners Club (MLC), reinforcing a shared sense of community and participatory engagement. However, the study problematises static conceptualisations of participatory spaces by demonstrating how power asymmetries persist and are continuously negotiated within CR-facilitated interactions embedded in broader socio-political and economic structures. The study argues that understanding the extent to which CRs contribute to social change requires a critical power lens, revealing the constraints of transformative power when community leaders act as gatekeepers, thereby impeding service delivery and obstructing participatory governance. Furthermore, the study challenges the assumption that power asymmetries exist solely in external structures, highlighting subtler forms of power embedded within collaborative spaces such as the MLC.

Keywords: community radio, participation, social change, power dynamics, transformative power

1. Introduction

Community radio (CR) has long been recognised as a critical component of participatory communication, serving as an alternative media space that facilitates local dialogue, enhances civic engagement, and fosters community-driven development (Dagron 2001; Gumucio-Dagron 2001). Globally, the first community radio station, Radio Sutatenza, was established in Colombia in 1947, while in Africa, the model took root with the launch of the Homa Bay community station in Kenya in 1982, expanding rapidly in the 1990s as part of democratisation and media liberalisation efforts (Mtimde 2000; Myers 2011). In South Africa, community radio emerged in response to post-

apartheid media reforms, aiming to decentralise communication, amplify marginalised voices, and support participatory democracy.

Existing scholarship highlights the role of Community Radios (CRs) in advancing public awareness (Diedong and Naaikuur 2014), fostering dialogic communication(Myers 2011), and enabling locally relevant content production (Mano 2012). CRs have also been credited with empowering marginalised communities (Milan 2009a; Manda 2015), strengthening community identity (Soola 2003), and facilitating participatory governance (Schramm 1964; Perkins 2000). However, despite CRs transformative aspirations, they operate within structural constraints shaped by both local power hierarchies and global capitalist imperatives (Fardon and Furniss 2003; Carpentier 2017). During apartheid, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) monopolised the airwaves, systematically excluding marginalised voices and limiting access to alternative perspectives (Bosch 2014). While the transition to democracy facilitated the liberalisation of the media landscape, enabling the emergence of CRs as platforms for participatory development communication, these gains have been uneven. Commercialisation, donor dependencies, and state regulatory frameworks continue to impose significant limitations on CRs, often reinforcing neoliberal logics that prioritise financial sustainability over genuine social transformation (Mhlanga 2009; Rennie 2006).

Moreover, there remains a significant gap in research exploring the power dynamics that underpin community radio engagement, particularly the ways in which listeners navigate and contest authority structures within participatory spaces(Bosch 2014; Myers 2011; Mhlanga 2009). This study contributes to addressing this gap by critically examining how communities engage with KR to negotiate power, both by overcoming leadership gatekeeping and by cultivating transformative forms of collective action through initiatives like the Masibumbane Listeners Club (MLC). This study critically examines these tensions by focusing on the role of Khwezi Community Radio (KR), the oldest community radio station in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, in shaping participatory engagement and social change. By examining how KR navigates the challenges and possibilities of CRs as sites of transformation within a neoliberal context, the study contributes to an understanding of the interplay between local power dynamics and global capitalist pressures.

These key research questions guide the study: (i) How does KR *facilitate* communities' engagement with *power* through the radio station? (ii) How *participatory* are *CR-facilitated* engagements (what are the power dynamics at play?) and what are the implications for social change, and (iii) (How) Can Community Radios (CRs) facilitate communities' transformative power to improve their livelihoods?

2. Literature Review

Community radios (CRs) have emerged globally as an alternative voice to mainstream media, providing marginalised groups with platforms to articulate concerns, resist dominant ideologies, and challenge hegemonic narratives(Pavarala and Malik 2007; Rimmer 2021) . CRs have been identified as a unique "third tier" of broadcasting, distinct from public and commercial media due to their emphasis on community ownership, non-profit orientation, and being participatory platforms, with listener communities positioned at the centre of CRs (Dagron 2009; Mtimde 2000; Amadu 2025; Tsarwe 2014). Scholarship on alternative and community media highlights the role of participatory communication platforms in enabling citizen participation, amplifying marginalised voices, and challenging dominant media structures (Atton 2001; Bailey et al. 2007a) At the same time, research grounded in the Global South emphasises the developmental and participatory dimensions of community media, particularly in contexts

characterised by structural inequalities (Dagron 2001; Manyozo 2012; Pavarala and Malik 2007). Scholars have identified a range of critical functions for CRs, extending beyond information dissemination to supporting cultural and linguistic diversity and creating "action spaces" for citizen engagement with local leaders and institutions (Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada 2002; Megwa 2007; L. S. Khumalo 2021). These roles position CR as a vehicle for social cohesion, collective identity, and participatory governance.

In the South African context, stations such as Bush Radio which was founded in 1992 as a voice for marginalized communities during the transition from apartheid illustrate how CRs have historically provided platforms of resistance and, more recently, scholars have shown how CRs enable marginalised groups to engage with governance structures and mobilise around pressing social and economic issues (Bosch 2003; Mhlanga 2009). While these studies highlight the democratic potential of community radio, a growing body of scholarship also interrogates the power relations that shape participation within these alternative media spaces. Despite their significance in facilitating participatory engagement, it is worth noting that CRs also operate within the constraints of global capitalism and neoliberal governance, which shape their autonomy and influence (Milan 2009b; Rennie 2006). The implications of these dynamics for the transformative potential of CRs remain insufficiently examined in the literature. This study thus positions CRs as both sites for development communication and a contested arena where power and participation are continuously negotiated. Importantly, CRs do not exist in a vacuum but within complex political-economic structures that affect their autonomy, sustainability, and transformative potential.

2.1. Community Radios as Sites of Participation and the Negotiation of Power

Although CRs are widely recognised as democratic media that amplify marginalised voices and foster collective empowerment (Dagron 2001; Myers 2011), boasting participatory mandates, they are also shaped by power-laden processes in which authority, voice, and decision-making are continuously negotiated (Cornwall 2002a, 2004). More studies are recognising CRs in relation to broader dynamics of power and contestation. Rodriguez (2001) conceptualises "citizens' media" (including CR) as everyday sites of power negotiation, while other scholars (Malik and Pavarala 2020) examine how CR stations challenge institutional and ideological power. In the South African context, Bosch (2010) examines the role of CR in empowering women as a means of negotiating power. Theoretical lenses such as Fraser's (1990) counter-publics, Gaventa's (2004) power cube, and Lukes' (2004) three dimensions of power have provided analyses of how visible, hidden, and invisible power dynamics manifest which add value to analysing community broadcasting. A relational view of power, drawing on Foucault (1980a) further conceptualises how CR mediates these dynamics, viewing power as emerging from interactions and negotiations rather than fixed positions (Kelly 2010). CRs can be conceptualised as counter-public spheres that challenge dominant discourses and foster alternative forms of participation (Fraser 1990;(Bailey et al. 2007b). However, their transformative potential is frequently constrained by broader political-economic forces, including neoliberal funding structures, regulatory requirements, and dependency on advertising or donor support, which often undermine editorial independence and limit the scope for genuine community-centred control (Bosch 2014; Horwitz 2001). These structural constraints intersect with everyday power dynamics, highlighting the importance of analysing CRs not only as participatory spaces but as an institution embedded in, and shaped by, broader socio-economic and political structures

2.1.1. The Political Economy of Community Radio in South Africa

CRs in South Africa must also be understood within the broader political economy of media transformation, which reflects ongoing tensions between their normative roles as democratic alternative media vis a vis the structural realities of post-apartheid, democratic media systems. While the community broadcasting sector was established to democratise the airwaves and empower historically marginalised communities, scholars argue that South Africa's media transformation has been characterised by forms of elite continuity (Tsarwe 2014), where patterns of influence shifted from apartheid-era state control to new corporate and political alignments within the public sphere (Sparks 2009; Bosch 2014; Mhlanga 2009). As a result, despite the rapid growth of community radio stations since the democratic transition in 1994, many marginalised communities remain only partially represented in media discourse (Tsarwe 2014; Olorunnisola et al. 2022). These challenges are further compounded by the financial vulnerabilities of the community media sector. While CRs roles are widely acknowledged as critical media, providing an alternative voice, crucial to contributing to social change, scholars also draw attention to sustainability challenges affecting community media, within an unstable media environment(Lotter 2007). Many CRs rely heavily on limited advertising revenue, donor funding, and government support, which can expose them to political and economic pressure (Muswede 2009; Moffat et al. 2025; Da Costa 2012).

2.2. Negotiating Power and Resistance: Community Radio as a Relational Platform for Social Change

Figure 1 below represents the interconnections between Community Radios (CRs), Participatory Development Communication, Transformative Power, and Social Change. At the core of these interactions is the notion of Power as relational and constantly being negotiated, for the attainment of transformative power and social change. The study examines how listener communities engage with KR, cultivating collective engagement for contesting everyday socio-economic challenges.
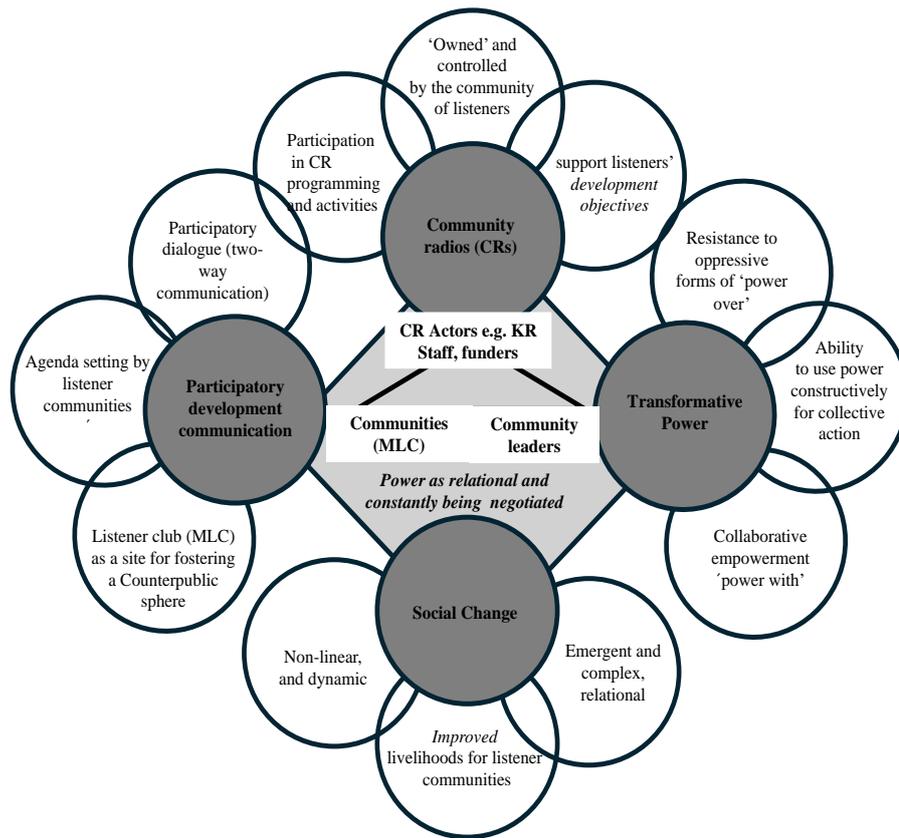
Figure 1: Community Radios facilitating transformative power and social change conceptual framework

The participatory ethos of CR grounded in community ownership and dialogic engagement aligns with theories of participatory development communication and the conceptualisation of "power within" (individual empowerment), "power to" (the capacity for constructive agency), and "power with" (collaborative empowerment) (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002; Bradley 2019; McPhail 2009). While CRs have the potential to amplify marginalised voices and foster collective agency, their transformative impact is shaped by the interplay of internal and external power relations, political-economic constraints, and the ongoing negotiation of community agency.

By integrating a critical power lens into participatory development communication, this study offers a more critical framework for understanding how CRs contribute to social change. The study's approach enables a more in-depth examination of the broader structural conditions that shape the transformative potential of community media. It interrogates how KR facilitates communities' engagement with power, the participatory nature and limitations of CR-facilitated engagements, and the conditions under which CRs can facilitate transformative power for social change. This framing illustrates how CR-facilitated engagements are not simply democratic but are shaped by visible, hidden, and invisible forms of power that shape the nature of participatory development (Gaventa 2004; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Lukes 2004). It further highlights how power operates within local governance structures, where community leaders mediate access to decision making spaces, often reinforcing existing hierarchies. However, the study also highlights how alternative forms of power, such as the relational and collective agency cultivated through the MLC can challenge these constraints. By

fostering a sense of community and collaborative engagements in micro spaces, the MLC exemplifies how relational power can serve as a potentially transformative force, enabling communities to contest dominant power structures and advance more inclusive forms of participatory development. Ultimately, while CRs can amplify marginalised voices and foster collective agency, their transformative potential is shaped by the ongoing negotiation of power asymmetries and political-economic constraints.

3. Methods

This article draws on data collected as part of the author's broader doctoral research project that investigated the role of Khwezi Community Radio (KR) in participatory development communication and social change in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The doctoral study employed a multi-method qualitative design comprising in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and content analysis. The analysis presented in this article draws primarily on the content analysis of radio programmes broadcast on KR (S. L. Khumalo 2021a). The content analysis focused on two key segments of Khwezi Community Radio (KR): (i) the Mayoral Show, a monthly live radio slot where local and district municipal leaders engage with community members, selected to assess dynamics of mediated accountability and vertical engagement with state actors; and (ii) the Masibumbane Table, a Sunday evening programme facilitated by members of the Masibumbane Listeners Club (MLC), focusing on community dialogue and peer engagement, which provided insight into horizontal, relational forms of power among listener communities.

Programme transcripts and selected qualitative data from IDIs and FGDs were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns of interaction, contestation, and negotiation within the programming. To illustrate these patterns, three vignettes were constructed. Vignettes consist of stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes(Hughes 1998, 381). Vignette one draws on two mayoral shows broadcast in April and July 2019; Vignette two examines the perceived value of the mayoral on-air engagements, using selected excerpts from IDIs and FGDs from the broader study; and Vignette three outlines the Masibumbane Table, detailing how the programme facilitates engagement among listener club members. The vignettes were purposively selected for their relevance to community participation and leadership engagement. The use of vignettes in this research is informed by social constructivist and interpretivist frameworks, which emphasise the co-construction of meaning and the importance of context in understanding human interactions (Barter and Renold, 1999). By using vignettes, the study delves into the values, norms, and assumptions underlying participants' actions, offering a richer understanding of KR's role in fostering participatory engagement and social change.

To strengthen the rigour and contextual grounding of the findings, the programme analysis was triangulated with insights from in-depth IDIs and FGDs conducted as part of the broader doctoral study (Denzin 2012). The initial data analysis took place between June and December 2020. In addition, relevant secondary literature on community radio related to the research questions has been analysed and incorporated in this article to contextualise the analysis, and ensure that interpretations are relevant and aligned with recent developments in the field.

3.1. Presentation of the Case

This research focuses on a case study of Khwezi Community Radio (KR), the oldest community radio station in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. The station operates

within the community broadcasting sector, which is regulated by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA). KR serves a predominantly rural, isiZulu-speaking audience, providing a vital platform for dialogue, information exchange, and collective action. The station's programming addresses issues such as spirituality, agriculture, health, education, and local governance, making it a key resource for its listener communities (Bosch 2014; Mhlanga 2009). A unique feature of KR's engagement with its audience is the Masibumbane Listeners Club (MLC), an informal network of active KR listeners who are members of their respective micro-communities or villages. The MLC creates organic spaces for deliberation and action on issues deemed valuable by its members, extending the participatory engagements initiated by KR into local contexts.

By focusing on KR and the MLC, this study offers a localised perspective on the transformative potential of CRs, while also highlighting the structural constraints and power dynamics that shape their operations. The case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how communities engage with CRs to address their socioeconomic challenges, providing valuable insights into the role of participatory communication in fostering social change (Yin 2018).

4. Findings

The findings reveal two key themes, illustrated through vignettes from KR programming. The first theme, *engaging with hierarchical power* ('power over'), is exemplified by communities' interactions with local mayors during KR's monthly mayoral shows. While this platform enables community members to engage with their leaders, it also highlights the limited room to manoeuvre in setting the agendas and changing their socioeconomic circumstances. The second theme, *engagement with collaborative power* ('power with'), is demonstrated through interactions among communities in MLC. While these engagements may foster a deep sense of community and transformative power for collective action to address shared concerns, these spaces are not immune to more subtle forms of power that affect participatory spaces.

4.1. Communities Engaging "Power Over" Through Community Leaders

Khwezi Radio facilitates multiple forms of engagement between listener communities and local leaders through both on-air programming and community-based activities. One KR manager described the station as being in demand, given the widespread interest in engagements with KR from various community leaders across the board:

> *"In IsiZulu, we say, "uyinyama" direct translation – "You are meat" – meaning we are in demand. The community leaders call us all over. We ask them to tell us in advance. They say we know Khwezi will give t*
> *he story as it is – because the radio helps them to communicate with their people, e.g., even when they want to call a meeting" (IDI, KR Staff).*

In IsiZulu culture, meat holds significant dietary, cultural and symbolic value, often associated with celebration and communal unity. The saying *"uyinyama"* thus captures the essence of being highly valued and indispensable.

A key platform on KR is the *Monthly Mayoral Show*, a 30-minute development programme that enables mayors to interact with listener communities. I highlight the mayor's show to illustrate the interaction between the mayor and community members through KR. The show allows the mayor(s) or district mayor (s) to engage live on the station to discuss progress on development projects in listener communities.

While this discussion focuses on mayors as the heads of Municipal Councils who are responsible for governing municipalities at the local government level in SA, their role is interconnected with the four local leadership structures in SA: the municipal council, ward councillors, traditional leaders, and the municipal administration officials collectively influencing social change (Bosch et al. 2017). The engagement with community leaders through the Mayoral show was the most consistent engagement with leadership, which provides pertinent analysis for the study.

4.2. Mediated Accountability: Communities Contesting Service Delivery Through the Mayoral Show

The vignette below presents excerpts from the mayoral shows in 2019 (one in April, just before the national elections, and another in July. These illustrate the nature of engagement between the mayor(s) and community leaders and demonstrate how community members hold their leaders accountable for service delivery in their communities. I highlight the indicative excerpts from the show that are relevant to this contribution to providing a valuable basis for an analysis of KRs facilitatory role between communities and their leaders.

4.2.1. Vignette One: Community Engagement Through the Mayoral Show

April 2019 Show with the Local Municipal Mayor

The mayor greets the listeners and outlining current development programmes. For example, the mayor discussed the fencing of farming fields and officially opening of two community halls, constructing roads and buildings for learners. She emphasised that while it is not the municipality's responsibility to build people homes, there was a dire need to intervene:

> *"We note that it is not the responsibility of the councillor to build people's homes. However, there is an important need to intervene".*

The mayor ends her progress report by highlighting : *the outlined projects were being put in place in response to the councillor's recognition that people were not living under favourable conditions,* thus calling for the need to intervene." After the outline of current projects, the presenter opens the telephone lines, Facebook and WhatsApp communication channels to allow listeners to call in and ask the mayors any direct questions. Callers raised concerns regarding sanitation, electricity access, and infrastructure deficits:

> *"1: Thank you for the work you're doing. I am familiar with what you are referring to, even the roads...*
> *2: I wish I could talk to the Mayor in private.* (Accompanied by the mayor immediately sharing her mobile number)
> *3: We have toilets issues, we still have open-pit latrines, children can drown in them.*
> *4: We have electricity issues in my area.*
> *5: ..we have electricity issues.*
>
> The mayor responds: *toilets are in the pipeline... We are at the stage of getting the contractor to continue with the construction.*

….The issue of electricity (I thought I addressed it last time)..we are hoping to talk to the service provider..."

July 2019 with the District Mayor

The mayor details the community events that had taken place in July following planned development related activities, highlighting the prioritisation of water projects for the subsequent month, refers to himself through his political party, "*as the [xxxx] political party , we will be at uMsinga for a Water Installation project.*" And *…"our goal is to ensure service delivery. We need water to be installed in all houses. People should see that we are focused on service delivery"*.

The presenter opens the lines for engagement with listeners/callers (through telephone lines and social media), and these are some excerpts from the community members who were able to dial into the live broadcast:

"1: *Where are the water tanks..? We are dying of hunger.*
2: *We are still experiencing Water issues...*
3: *There is no water.*
4: *Thanks to the Mayor for the development programmes on the ground."*

The Mayor's response:

"*We had a meeting with councillors and the Indunas with the community. We received water tanks and noticed two was not enough. We assured the community we would send more.*
... I want to be hands-on. I will go with the workers myself to deliver water."

The mayor ended the show by reprimanding the theft of borehole pipes and equipment and the failure to deliver water, and warned against making water service delivery to community members a political issue.

The analysis of Vignette 1 reveals several power dynamics within the mediated interaction between municipal authorities and listener communities. There is an evident pre-set agenda determined by the mayors on what they present at the start of their shows, followed by a limited time for the community members to call in, usually within the preset frame, for example, other community members calling in to give thanks, e.g. in the vignette where one member says "*Thank you Mayor for the work you are doing*". This gratitude may also critically question the normalisation of low expectations for public service delivery, as other listeners present their struggles pertaining to lack of electricity, water and poor sanitation.

In addition, the remark "*our goal is to ensure service delivery*" in vignette b suggests a recognition of the importance of service delivery but also highlights the ongoing struggles to meet community needs in a tangible and sustained manner. This contextualises the persistent challenges communities face and the aspirations of service delivery articulated by the Mayor.

Moreover, the mayor's statement – "*while it is not the municipality's responsibility to build people's homes*" – highlights both the severity of community conditions and the municipality's discretionary power to determine which interventions are prioritised. There is also an emphasis on "*what is being done on the ground*" and showcasing visible development efforts to communities.

Comments like "*Mayor, we are trying here*" point to communities striving to cope with challenging circumstances, signalling that while efforts are underway on the ground, they are insufficient. Moreover, more explicit expressions of desperation are evident in remarks such as "*We are dying of hunger*" or "*There is no water*", which underscore listener communities' urgent and persistent challenges. On the other hand, hope and commitment are evident in the interactions, accompanied by the mayors' promises of direct action. For example, the District mayor remaking:"*I want to be hands-on. I will go with the workers myself to deliver water*"

This statement could indicate a commitment to direct intervention in response to community concerns and may signal responsiveness, giving communities some hope. The mayor's willingness to share her mobile number during the broadcast may also suggest an attempt to demonstrate openness and accessibility to listener communities.

The next vignette illustrates the perceived value and the nature of participation between communities and their leaders. This enables an analysis of how participatory the interactions are and the power dynamics thereof.

4.2.2. Vignette Two: The Perceived Value of the Mayoral on-Air Engagements

A KR presenter working on the Mayoral programme described the high demand from listeners trying to call in and engage with the mayors:

> *"Listeners phone in freely and it's such a good opportunity, but the demand is too high; many people try to phone in but the time is limited, and not everyone gets to contribute. Most of the mayors' slots are 30 minutes, they use like 20 minutes to speak, then the 10 mins we give to listeners, we encourage listeners to call in. The problem is no municipality has more than one slot in a month, so by the time they come on air; the listeners need to speak to them" (IDI, KR Staff).*

Several listeners expressed challenges regarding the accessibility to the mayors, and raising questions about how participatory the show is and the extent to which it contributes to change, for example:

> "*I have not been able to call in… nothing is happening on our side*" (FGD, Masibumbane member)

> A presenter acknowledged:

> "*The time is always short… not everyone gets to ask questions*" (IDI, KR Staff)

> "*Even us at Hlathi, we haven't experienced development, the roads are bad, the pipes are burst, the water is leaking, so the roads are full of water. The pipes that they said they would install are still not there. Some are broken. I wish I could get a chance to speak to the leaders. I don't get a chance to connect when the mayor is live. There are many people who will be connecting*" (IDI, Masibumbane member).

Vignette two highlights the tensions between high demand for interaction and the limited airtime available. Although the programme is framed as participatory, opportunities for meaningful dialogue remain constrained. Limited slots and technical barriers, such as connectivity challenges, further restrict participation. For instance, the listener who expressed frustration at being unable to connect during the show and described how

her area felt neglected, with the mayor's limited visibility deepening this sense of marginalisation.

Moreover, the findings reveal that many community members appeared disengaged and disconnected from their Ward councillors, undermining their transformative capacity to drive change at the local level. Therefore, greater emphasis is needed on fostering closer, more consistent engagement between Ward councillors and community members. Although there is evidence of KR facilitating interactions between communities and Ward councillors, these engagements tend to occur in response to specific problems or crises, often addressed during current affairs or news programming. There are also power dynamics at play here, wherein the mayors have the financial means to pay for such radio slots, which Ward Councillors don't.

4.3. Relationality Through the Sense of Community in Masibumbane Listeners' Club

4.3.1. Vignette Three: Tuning into the Masibumbane Table

The *Masibumbane* table is a show dedicated and facilitated by MLC members on Sundays from 19h05–21h30. The group of presenters on each Sunday show is made up of Masibumbane coordinators from different branches, and a KR presenter typically introduces themselves and is referred to as "*itafula*" (*the Masibumbane table*). The presenters usually change weekly as different MLC branches can be represented on the show.

The presenters introduce themselves in a jovial manner using their Masibumbane name, a nickname that they have given themselves, and they would like to be called by fellow MLC members. Listeners from the different Masibumbane members call in and greet the MLC "table" members, acknowledging those present on that particular day. The listeners appreciate what is "adding flavour" or decorating the MLC table "*lihlobe ngani itafula*" (This refers to the "flowers" around the Masibumbane table, i.e., the characteristics or admirable descriptions of the people around the table).

The MLC further fostered a sense of belonging through ritualised greetings and nicknames. There is also a celebration of new members who are calling in to express interest in joining the MLC. Presenters shout "joiniiiii" (colloquial term for a new joiner) to show appreciation and to welcome new Masibumbane members, a listener reflected: "When they call me by my nickname on air, I feel respected and part of something". These ritualised welcomes reinforced solidarity,

The *Masibumbane* show dedicates a lot of time to listeners from different branches greeting each other and wishing each other well. The MLC coordinators are given the opportunity to call in with any announcements for their branch members, e.g., invitations to upcoming activities. During the show, birthday announcements and well wishes are also presented each month for MLC members.

Thus, the show illustrates how community radio can foster relational forms of power through practices that cultivate belonging, recognition, and collective identity among listeners. The symbolic and ritualistic aspects of the MLC engagements, such as the nature of greetings, shouts of joy at the MLC table, acknowledging presenters' characteristics, and celebrating new members, highlight the importance of relational power, creating a sense of belonging and fostering social cohesion (S. L. Khumalo 2021b).

The study found that the MLC created strong linkages that ensure interaction between the station and community members (listeners). The interactions between KR and the listeners support the notion of a sense of community which is used in this study. MLC represents a form of "invented/claimed" space within Khwezi radio, where

listeners subscribe to a code of conduct informed by KR's objectives, which share goals and interests with MLC members and unite them in claiming their space as their own. The objective of this space is, in part, to collectively engage with community development concerns. In this way, MLC functions as an active agent of KR's work in the communities. As Mhagama (2015) asserted, the establishment of RLCs (Radio Listeners' Clubs) has enabled ordinary people to express their views and have their voices heard on issues concerning them and their environments. Listeners' motivations for participating in Masibumbane reflect the importance of interaction in building a sense of community, supporting Brennan (2007) assertion that "community" cannot exist outside interaction. Masibumbane nicknames and rituals, such as calling presenters "flowers" or celebrating new members, reinforce belonging and mutual recognition within the MLC. The ability to choose your own name provides one a sense of power in one's identity as you get to define who you are, with names like "*the woman who loves people*", "*the guy who's forever smiling*" *which* uplifts fellow community members.

However, it is still important to acknowledge the subtle, more invisible power dynamics in MLC, for example, in the role of MLC coordinators and their ability to steer discussions, which suggests the presence of gatekeepers within the participatory process. As Hickey and Mohan (2004) caution, participatory spaces can sometimes reinforce existing hierarchies, favouring those who already influence the group. Moreover, Schutz (2019) further asserted that collaborative empowerment spaces can face challenges of scale, notably the difficulty of making decisions on behalf of a large group.

Further power dynamics are evident in KR's involvement in the MLC table, as one KR staff member explained:

> "*We organise the Sunday Masibumbane programs. We sit to look at how the program went, if there were any challenges, and fix the problems while still fresh*" *(IDI, KR Staff)*

KR's involvement brings into question the organic nature of the engagements, i.e., whether MLC members can really say what they want. These power dynamics call into question the organic nature of the sense of community and illustrate the porous nature of participatory spaces (Cornwall 2002b). Thus, while the establishment of MLC denotes the formation of a claimed space, it appears to resonate with certain aspects of invited spaces. It partly exists as an invited space within KR, particularly given that its code of conduct is derived from Khwezi, which influences the members' rules of operation in the listeners club. Hence, MLC members do not always have decision making power, as final decisions are bound to and by KR's code of conduct. Moreover, KR's ethos and values are closely influenced by its host and founder, KwaSizabantu Mission, which influences the preservation of the Christian focus of the station. These observations support Cornwall's (2004a) conception of the permeability and non-static nature of participatory spaces, in which power dynamics constantly shift within them.

These contestations surrounding the community-centeredness of MLC raise critical questions about the extent to which transformative power is and can be realised within this space. While MLC offers unique opportunities for engagement, its structural dependence on KR, such as its code of conduct exerting ideological power over communities may suggest limitations in its organic nature and potential to foster transformative power.

5. Analysis

This section critically examines how *KR* listener communities engage with the station and navigate power asymmetries. It further interrogates the *participatory nature of the MLC*, analysing its transformative potential in fostering community cohesion and collective action. Building on the political economy discussion outlined earlier, the analysis elucidates how community radio (CR) operates within broader capitalist information structures, often reinforcing rather than dismantling existing inequalities in participatory governance.

5.1. Participation and accountability in KRs Mayoral show: for whose benefit?

While community radio cannot substitute for face-to-face engagement with community leaders, programmes like KR's mayoral slot provide an accessible platform to reach broader community audiences. Broadcasting in IsiZulu, the predominant language among listener communities, enhances engagement by enabling comprehensive understanding and active participation in issues affecting community wellbeing (Soola 2003; Manyozo 2012).

The participatory and dialogic nature of the programme and the extent to which it leads to meaningful change in improving community livelihoods should therefore be critically interrogated through applying a power lens to participatory initiatives (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cooke 2001; Cornwall 2002a), which is important in examining the transformative potential of CRs, analysing the nature of participation, *the incentives for participation, and who benefits*. Further through the lens of Arnstein's (1969) foundational framework of participation, KR's programme's structure arguably borders on tokenistic forms of participation in which community members may engage with power holders, but with little guarantee that their contributions will be meaningfully considered or acted upon (Cornwall 2008).

Evidently, the extent to which previous points of discussion on the show are revisited and followed up on is largely at the discretion of KR staff, who determine the depth of probing and continuity in the conversations within the constraints of limited airtime. This casts doubt on the extent to which communities genuinely participate in agenda-setting and decision-making, and whether their engagements extend beyond consultation to the point where they can negotiate and make trade-offs with power holders, ultimately exercising "citizen power and control" (Cornwall 2008; Arnstein 1969). The discretion exercised by KR presenters in determining how community grievances are followed up on in subsequent mayoral shows illustrates forms of agenda-setting and ideological framing that shape the boundaries of permissible discourse (Lukes 2004; Foucault 1980b; Hall 2001).

Furthermore, the structural constraints related to the financial sustainability of CRs introduce additional power dynamics, as programming slots risk becoming commodified spaces, accessible primarily to those with financial resources. In this case, the Mayoral Show, being a paid slot, covered by the mayor's monthly budgets, illustrates how capitalist pressures associated with CR sustainability can shape programming opportunities (O'Neil 2010; Lotter 2007). Consequently, while participatory spaces such as CR programming are valuable for community engagement, they could also reproduce existing power asymmetries rather than enable genuinely transformative participatory governance.

The mayoral show ostensibly provides a space for citizens to engage with local leaders on pressing service delivery issues such as water, electricity, and housing. However, the extent to which these engagements lead to tangible change remains

questionable. Rather than fostering genuine participatory governance, the format often reinforces existing power asymmetries by placing decision-making authority firmly in the hands of local leaders, leaving communities with limited agency to effect substantive change (Carpentier 2012). Moreover, even though citizens may articulate their grievances or seek clarifications about service delivery projects, these exchanges rarely result in actionable commitments from leaders. Instead, the platform can serve as a performance mechanism for leaders to maintain legitimacy without addressing the systemic inequalities perpetuating inadequate service delivery (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

5.2. Transformative Power and Relationality in the Dynamics of the Masibumbane Listeners' Club

While the *Mayoral Show* demonstrates external power structures at play, where community members engage in vertical forms of power negotiation with municipal authorities, the MLC exemplifies more relational power, fostering social cohesion (S. L. Khumalo 2021b) and collective action (Lukes 2004)

MLC operates as a grassroots participatory initiative bringing together active listeners, predominantly from the rural communities of KR listenership. Through MLC, listeners engage in peer-to-peer dialogues, mobilising around shared community concerns and working together to improve their livelihoods. Similarly, in counter-public spaces, marginalised groups create alternative spaces of discourse that challenge dominant power structures (Asen 2000). MLC functions as a space where marginalised voices develop alternative discourse norms to challenge their covert exclusion from mainstream media and decision-making structures. The listeners' club provides an alternative space for participants to develop shared identities and strategise collective action.

By confronting some embodied forms of power (i.e., engaging with community leaders), communities sought to exercise their transformative power to ensure service delivery. For example, actively "expressing" the demands for water, which was a considerable challenge in most communities. KR played a notable role in facilitating these interactions. The findings resonate with Brennan and Israel's (2008) model of community power and incomplete agency, which highlights the tension between local agency and limited capacity to achieve broader community wellbeing. Despite there being interaction between social fields, evident for example through communities working together in agricultural activities and having social gatherings to uplift themselves socio-economically, these efforts are not fully integrated at a societal level, so there remains a narrow focus on addressing the micro-community needs. Thus, MLC action is often localised and narrow in scope, focused on select segments of the community (the MLC network) , often unable to transform structural inequalities.

5.3. Negotiating Power and the Limits of Transformative Participation in Community Radio: Implications for Social Change

While CRs can contribute to transformative power by amplifying community voices and fostering collective action, through platforms such as radio listener clubs, the translation of this transformative power into tangible social change often remains constrained. This limitation is influenced by negotiated power dynamics and broader structural conditions. For instance, when local leaders act as gatekeepers, are not forthcoming in-service delivery, as we see in addressing the water challenges in the study.

Even though CRs can expand engagement of marginalised voices with key actors, they remain embedded within broader networks of power that determine whose voices carry weight. As such, CR spaces also embody more hidden, invisible and ideological forms of power(Dowding 2006), which are complex and difficult to identify and address. For example, ideological power may be reflected in how the station's founding Christian missionary ethos shapes the values embedded in KR's programming and the narratives and community priorities amplified .

Furthermore, while MLC fosters an organic space for collective engagement among KR listener communities, it also serves as a discursive arena where meanings regarding social change are contested, rearticulated, and projected into the broader public sphere (S. L. Khumalo 2021b). Its counter-public identity is not static but constantly evolving, shaped by shifting power relations, internal tensions, and external pressures from dominant publics (Fenton and Downey 2003). This challenges traditional participatory communication models that assume community radio inherently fosters inclusion, instead positioning it as an active site of discursive struggle, where mere access to media platforms does not equate to influence (Carpentier 2011).

The study insights thus highlight the fluidity and contingency of participatory spaces, and how counter-public participation can be shaped by hegemonic forces such as sociopolitical priorities of local governments that can constrain CRs transformative potential.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex and contested nature of participatory spaces in community radio (CR), demonstrating that while KR serves as a crucial facilitator of engagement, it is neither neutral nor inherently transformative. By providing on-air spaces for dialogue with community leaders, KR enables communities to articulate their concerns, challenge authority, and demand accountability in service delivery. However, participation within CR is shaped by intricate power dynamics that can both enable and constrain its transformative potential. The study underscores the importance of enabling conditions for CRs to fulfil their participatory mandate effectively, with key strengths, such as broadcasting in indigenous languages and fostering interactive dialogue, enhancing accessibility and community-centred engagements.

While CRs are often positioned as empowering platforms that foster participatory engagement and enhance access to information, the findings illustrate that participation in KR programming and MLC engagements is shaped by ongoing power on, negotiations that influence whose voices are heard and how issues are framed, followed up and addressed. The study further highlights that CRs abilities to serve as a truly participatory medium is mediated by broader structural conditions. These include external constraints, such as political and economic pressures, and internal challenges, such as the gatekeeping roles of community leaders and the hierarchical organisation of participatory processes. For example, while KR facilitates engagement between communities and local leaders on issues such as water access, decision-making remains largely outside the control of listener communities, with programming agendas often predetermined. This underscores the necessity of future research to critically interrogate the assumption that CRs inherently foster democratic participation and social change. The findings therefore contribute to critical debates within participatory development communication by showing that community radio operates as a contested participatory space in which multiple forms of power intersect.

Moreover, the study illustrates that CRs are embedded within broader networks of power that shape whose voices are heard and which issues gain traction in the public sphere. Despite their potential as counter-public spaces, CRs remain susceptible to co-optation within dominant media narratives. The vignettes demonstrated how KR programming at times reproduces predetermined local government development narratives that emphasise infrastructure delivery while limiting opportunities for alternative community-driven development discourses. Ultimately, the findings highlight that while CRs facilitate community engagement and may cultivate organic, community-driven interactions, they remain contested spaces where power is negotiated.

This calls for future research to further explore strategies to enhance the agency of listener communities, mitigating structural power asymmetries, and addressing systemic barriers that constrain the transformative potential of CRs.

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