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## **The Significance of ‘Loud’ and ‘Quiet’ Forms of Audience Participation to Community Radio in Niger and Mali**

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# **The Significance of ‘Loud’ and ‘Quiet’ Forms of Audience Participation to Community Radio in Niger and Mali**

## **Abstract**

Community radio in Mali and Niger represents important hubs through which organized groups (such as listening clubs or associations) access information and participate in broadcasting through active and formalized channels. Drawing on radio listener focus groups conducted in Mali and Niger between 2018-2020, this article discusses the importance, to community radio, of ‘loud’ participation (formalized spaces), and ‘quiet’ participation (informal discussion spaces) amongst audiences. We argue that these ‘quiet’ forms of participation are important as they reinforce and support existing networks of solidarity in the community. Community radio stations rarely ‘hear’ listener participation via these informal spaces of discussion – which are more closely associated with women – but they are nonetheless crucial, yet overlooked, alternative forms of audience participation.

**Key words:** Community radio, listener participation, Mali, Niger, politics of listening, gender

## **Introduction**

This article investigates how community radio listeners in Niger and Mali construct arenas for listeners to act on behalf of a community, whilst also creating new community spaces. Radio is a principal source of information in these countries where access to other media forms is restricted by low literacy rates, restricted access to electricity, extreme poverty and rising levels of insecurity. Community radio is particularly important as it reaches isolated and marginalized areas, acting as a mouthpiece for national news whilst

also building networks of information reinforcing both geographical communities and communities of interest. Contributing to existing theoretical discussions on community radio (Forde, Foxwell, and Meadows 2002; Forde 1997; Fraser and Estrada 2001; Gordon 2012) and within an African context (Fraser and Estrada 2002; Manyozo 2012; Myers 2011), this article examines formal and semi-formal spaces where group listening takes place to show that, whilst these spaces are not gendered, who participates in each is significant and can result in the marginalisation of particular groups. We distinguish between 'loud' and 'quiet' forms of participations. The former are listening clubs, *fadas*, and *grins* which facilitate visible forms of audience participation, valued by community radio as active participants. However, they also tend to be associated with men. 'Quiet' participation, in contrast, describes informal spaces of participation where people come together to discuss radio in their communities. This becomes embedded in listeners' daily activities as community actors and is especially important for marginalized groups because radio can be a point of discussion or shared experience for these groups. 'Quiet' does not necessarily mean unimpactful or 'passive'. Rather 'quiet' listeners are not always 'heard' in terms of participation. Being attentive to 'quiet' forms of listening participation – particularly among women – is informed by a politics of 'listening' (Dreher 2009) to account for marginal voices in listener engagement activities.

The article draws on a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) with radio listeners conducted in the neighbouring countries of Mali and Niger from 2018 to early 2020. The listeners are categorized into three groups: men; older, married women; and younger unmarried women. It examines the significance of community radio stations (CRSs) amongst these groups in these countries and the extent to which 'loud' or 'quiet' forms of

participation prevail amongst them. It also discusses the importance of both forms of participation in building community networks.

## **Literature Review**

Radio remains a medium of choice in Africa given its durability, portability, affordability, ease of use, adaptability to conditions and its geographical reach, and its ability to engage listeners through phone-ins and talk shows. Although used as a propaganda tool during colonial rule (Brennan 2010; Gunner et al. 2011), radio has represented alternative and disruptive voices and acts as a 'tool of resistance' (Hyden, Michael, and Ogundimu 2002), by drawing on local cultures (Barnard 2000) and the many national languages of the continent, overcoming literacy barriers whilst also competing with colonial languages (Power 2000). The alternative platform that radio, be they commercial, local or community, represents allows the emergence of multiple voices through interactive programming. Alternative radio has played a political role in challenging state radio (Frère 2008, Moyo 2011), as a form of popular comment through 'pavement radio' (Ellis 1989), or as clandestine radio challenging messages from the mainstream media. This alternative emerges strongly through community media which have been widely discussed (Atton 2001; Berrigan 1979; Fraser and Estrada 1998; Howley 2005; Lennie and Tacchi 2003; Myers 2008) and particularly through community radio whose practices, according to Rodriguez (2001), create a 'fissure in the global mediascape', allowing new forms of political agency to emerge and also individual and collective identities to be produced (Ginsberg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002)

Community radio, the importance of which is stressed during discussions on the transformative power of alternative media (for example, Banda (2006) on South Africa), acts to bring together 'communities' united by specific ideological or political purposes, seeking a

representational voice who feel marginalized by mainstream media. Generally run on a non-profit basis for non-profitable purposes (Fraser and Estrada 2001), they have been defined as operating 'in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community' (Tabing 2002, 11) with the ability to empower 'ordinary people to become active producers, rather than mere passive recipients, of information and opinion' (Gumucio-Dagron 2001, 34).

Ownership varies with individuals initiating CRSs which, through ongoing community participation, become community-owned enterprises (Banda 2006). However, stations' sustainability is heavily dependent on financing (Da Costa 2012). Finance can come from international or national donors, NGOs, local businesses or organisations or other radio stations seeking to buy airtime to broadcast their own programmes (Mhagama 2015a). Not only are broadcast hours at risk but the content is also vulnerable since donors with particular political, commercial or ideological perspectives can shape the broadcasting. This has consequences for radio listening clubs (RLCs), the formalized spaces discussed below, because if the community radio broadcasting is shaped by donors or political influence, then organized groups in close association with the community radios are unlikely to differentiate from these interests.

Because they serve local populations, community radio focus on topics which are of interest to them and also act as a tool through which awareness campaigns and educational programmes can be channelled in the knowledge that information relevant to that community can be targeted with precision (AMARC International 2020). Often viewed as a 'sociable' medium, community radio is at the heart of communication and reinforces democratic processes (Siemering 2000). It encourages group listening as people often gather to listen to programmes around a single radio set and then to discuss them allowing

their opinions on decisions affecting them to be known. In Niger - one of the countries analysed here - such group listening dates back to 1965 when it was used for education purposes when local teachers in Niger would work with those in remote areas to collect suggestions for radio programmes on health and farming topics. The recordings would then be listened to and discussed by radio clubs in villages (Bertrand 1995).

Group listening can be listening groups, clubs, or associations - formalized or not - and each with their own identity. It is the difference between these formalized and informalized spaces, or what we label respectively as 'loud' and 'quiet' forms of participation, which is of interest here. Much research has focused on formalized or visible forms of participation such as radio listening clubs (RLC) whereby radio, maybe in conjunction with NGOs or external organisations, trains club members in basic radio production, giving them access to equipment. RLCs discuss their community needs and problems, which are recorded, edited and converted into programmes with responses from experts and policymakers for broadcast. Listeners then discuss the broadcast and provide feedback on the extent to which their needs have been fully addressed (Manda 2015; Manyozo 2012). This approach involves the direct, or 'loud', participation of community members and ensures a way in which topics of main importance to them are foregrounded which might not have been the case had the choice of subject been left up to others. Carpentier distinguishes between participation in the media and participation through the media - 'content-related participation' or 'structural participation' (2011, 68). Content-related participation involves programme production; selection, provision and scheduling of programmes; and the making available of technical resources to ordinary people. Structural participation involves participation in the structuring of the station, such as the election of leaders, policy making for the station, its management and financing (Carpentier 2011).

Less formal approaches to RLCs also exist which are equally worthy of attention. These listeners do not necessarily participate directly with radio – via phone-ins or RLCs – but are nonetheless highly invested in community radio and reactive to its contents. In this case, participation occurs informally simply through listening and discussing. It is neither content-related nor structural-participation, but a *reactive*-participation through discussion whereby the content of a radio programme influences daily activities of listeners as actors within a community. We label this ‘quiet’ participation, not because it is passive or irrelevant to how community radio operates in a community, but because it is not ‘heard’ or recognized as participation.

Listener spaces enable members to discuss radio programmes, understand and explain their relevance to others, cascade information throughout the community raising awareness, and increase a sense of unity and solidarity through collective organisation and, for women, through *tontines*, or savings groups (Bruchhaus 2016), which are examples of cultural, social and economic solidarity. This mediated participation in public debate and self-representation is particularly important for those with low literacy levels and for women, who do not necessarily have permission from their husbands to attend formalized mixed associations (Heywood 2020). This also suggests that whilst ‘loud’ forms of participation via RLCs, formalized associations and groups play a vital role in the community, and that both men and women are involved in RLCs and ‘loud’ participation, they can still be exclusionary spaces on the basis of gender. This is evident when examining a form of listening group prevalent in Mali and Niger - *grins* and *fadas* respectively. ‘*Grins*’ or ‘tea groups’ (Bondez 2013) and *fadas* (Masquelier 2019) encourage listeners to come together and actively participate in public life by gathering to listen and discuss radio programmes whilst drinking tea. They enable listeners to discuss broadcasts, gain further information on



given subjects through NGO and expert visits, contribute to selecting subjects for future programmes and give feedback to the radio stations. However, these listeners are mostly men and boys suggesting that women may not be recognized as 'loud' participants.

CRSs, acting as alternative media spaces, therefore have local clusters that support them with listeners who become active participants in the community *through* media. This may be in the form of the abovementioned listening groups, clubs or associations, *grins* or *fadas*. Few studies have taken an approach to listener engagement with CRSs that goes beyond these organized listening spaces in order to explore the role of informal listening. This article underlines how community radio creates alternative spaces for marginalized groups to informally organize as listeners. Many studies have explored how community radio can offer a way for women, for example, to 'break silence' or have a greater say in development projects and policy (Heywood and Tomlinson 2019; Rimmer 2020; Oduaran and Nelson 2019). The evidence below demonstrates that while women listeners might not participate directly in radio, as listeners they nonetheless actively respond to radio broadcasts they have heard by passing on information, discussions, acting as amplifiers. Whilst they are reinforcing their community by integrating radio broadcasts in daily discussions, amplifying information to neighbours etc. who do not have access to radio, we suggest the marginalization of women's voices may be a secondary consequence of community radios focusing on 'loud participation'.

### **Radio in Mali and Niger**

Transnational approaches to radio studies tend to examine how diasporic or minority groups reinforce community spirit and identity through radio (Föllmer and Badenoch 2018).

This article, however, employs a comparative, transnational approach to rural and marginalized communities in neighbouring Niger and Mali to reveal the localized but also interconnected nature of community radio generally. In this regard, the model of community radio in Niger and Mali are similar, although with important differences. Radio remains a main source of information in both countries and is increasingly accessed by mobile phones increasing interaction between listeners and radio (Gilberds and Myers 2012; Manyozo, Linda, and Lopes 2012; Nassanga, Manyozo, and Lopes 2013; Sullivan 2011) and supported by the abovementioned culture of listening groups or *grins* and *fadas*. ORTN is Niger's state radio and is widely accessible and accessed. There are also 60 commercial, 184 community and several religious radios. Despite challenges from the authorities, radio succeeds in providing critical journalism. In Mali, there is the state radio (ORTM), and 170 private radio stations, 121 of which are volunteer-run CRSs (Konaté 2020; MINUSMA 2019). Most CRSs belong to the *Union des Radios et Télévisions Libres du Mali* (Union of Free Radios and Televisions of Mali - URTEL). Although Mali is low on the World Press Freedom Index (108<sup>th</sup>) (RSF 2020), radio is widely trusted and meets a range of interests through community, religious, and confessional radios. The CRSs examined here often broadcast localized news but also rebroadcast NGO and national media. In Mali, political voices can pay for airtime. This privilege is reserved for national radio in Niger. In other words, community radio rarely only considers the perspectives or interests of their closest community. Whilst community radio can be considered alternative media, it is important to note that, in Mali and Niger, remoteness or limited infrastructure means that community radio is frequently the only source of information to which many people have access.

Low literacy rates coupled with the dominance of French in state and mainstream media in both Niger and Mali has meant that non-French speaking communities have

remained historically marginalized as consumers of media in both countries. Broadcasting in national languages in Niger and Mali has been shown to improve outreach and participation among rural and agricultural communities (Oduaran and Nelson 2019). Widening access to the radio, via listening posts and mobile technologies, also changes the demographic makeup of listeners. A broader target audience of communities located in rural areas and even conflict-affected communities, means that new forms of collective identities can form through association to radio via formal or informal listening groups. This article explores how listeners participate in listening communities through these networks of community radio broadcasting.

## **Methodology**

The data for this article draws from focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted as part of two research projects conducted in Mali and Niger between 2018 and 2020 both assessing the impact of radio on women's rights and empowerment (Heywood 2020). These impact assessments comprised baseline and endline evaluations, workshops, and two rounds of FGDs (Heywood et al 2020). This article focuses on the data collected from the FGDs.

Although these projects were conducted separately, bringing their data together allows for a transnational analysis which contributes to identifying, analysing and explaining similarities and differences across the two societies in question (Hantrais 2009). Mali and Niger were chosen for the comparison as, in addition to their geographic proximity within conflict-affected areas in the north Sahel, their similarities extend to both experiencing North-South anxiety over conflict and their urban and governmental centres are situated in the South whilst their Northern communities remain rural, isolated, and more vulnerable to violence against a context of growing insecurity. Community radio in both countries is of

central importance to isolated populations in these conflict zones in times of crisis and during seasonal concerns over agriculture (see, for example Manyozo, Linda, and Lopes 2012). The longer-lasting conflict within Mali is also a valuable point of comparison with Niger where an increasing insecurity situation is emerging. As stated above, the countries' linguistic similarities resulting from their common experience of French colonialism means that French is their official state language (Bambara and Hausa are the *linguae francae* in Mali and Niger respectively) and is the main language of state media. Community radio, characterized by being broadcast in national languages, therefore provides an alternative source of information to many populations.

FDGs, as analysed here, can be defined as 'a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment upon, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research' (Gibbs 1997, 1). They are cheap, easy to organize, and provide contextual information which is of interest here. The FDGs in this case were conducted using the same methodology in each country. Two rounds of 20 FDGs were conducted, with the same participants each time, with intervals of 8 months in between each in each country to determine whether any change in knowledge or shifts in consciousness had occurred after listening to specific radio programmes broadcast by CRSs. Each group comprised 5 participants from predetermined categories: married women, unmarried women, and men, to ensure representativeness. There were 8 focus groups of married female listeners, 8 groups of non-married female listeners, and 4 groups of male listeners. In addition, the 20 FDGs were all recruited equally in urban and rural areas via community radios stations in and around Bamako, Mali's capital, and Niamey, Niger's capital. Some of these CRSs had formalized RLCs and associations whilst at others, active listener participation existed but on a more casual basis.

The hour-long interviews, conducted by the same facilitators in French, with translation into national languages by group members where necessary, were recorded and transcribed in French. The transcriptions were prepared for subsequent analysis and produced qualitative and quantitative data. In Mali participants were asked about domestic violence, inheritance and climate change and in Niger they were asked about women and politics and child marriage. Data were coded using the software Nvivo according to the ways in which participants described their engagement with CRSs, involvement in listening groups, and more generally how they reacted to the content and style of radio broadcasting as listeners. The coding was also attentive to the differentiations according to gender, age, and the location of the discussants (rural, urban, conflicted-affected, etc.). Participants were anonymized in the analysis and were asked similar questions in each country: about their understanding of women's empowerment, their use of radio, their listening habits (ages, who listened, which radio stations, social media habits, devices, education level, marital status). Radio station identifiers have also been removed to reinforce the participants' anonymity.

Drawing on the qualitative findings from the coding of the FGDs, this article analyses audience participation regarding CRSs. It asks the following questions:

1. What is the significance of CRSs in Mali and Niger as perceived by groups of selected listeners (men, married women, unmarried women) in urban and rural locations and how is this shaped?
2. To what extent do 'loud' or 'quiet' forms of participation prevail amongst selected CSR listeners (men, married women, unmarried women) in urban and rural locations in Mali and Niger?

3. To what extent do these forms of participation in CSRs contribute to building community networks?

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Hubs and networks of information*

Before discussing the different ‘loud’ and ‘quiet’ forms of audience participation in community radio in Niger and Mali, it is essential to understand that CSRs do not exist in an information vacuum. The FGDs in both Mali and Niger stressed how CSRs function as hubs of information within a wider network. The role of community radio in these networks of information are determined by two factors: language and technology.

Firstly, CSRs broadcast content in indigenous languages as an effective way to address local issues (Oduaran and Nelson 2019, 103). Niger and Mali are multilingual countries, although French remains an official language in both countries as a legacy of French colonialism. Hausa and Zarma are the most commonly spoken languages in Niger. In Mali, the dominant lingua franca is Bambara, followed by Fulfulde. Reflecting trends in radio studies literature, the FGDs confirmed that community radio is preferred over national media since it was easier to understand, tended to broadcast in community languages, and offered more diversity in terms of choice (Mali\_RM6 ). CSRs that broadcast in national languages might already be defined as ‘alternative’ in the sense that they are providing an ‘alternative’ to the francophone hegemony that continues to dominate media, education, and government. However, ‘alternative’ does not equate to ‘minority’ in terms of number or volume. Broadcasting in national languages other than French is vital for the creation of

majority publics that are 'drawn from different social classes and regions [...] all actively drawn to the new medium in their language' (Lekgoathi 2011, 120). CRSs also draw together different publics by re-broadcasting aural content produced by external and centralized studios and radio stations. Selling airtime to external studios is an essential source of funding for community radio, although it also influences their scope of broadcasting (Mhagama 2015a). Partnerships between centralized studios and regional CRSs means that local and national multilingual content are broadcast consecutively, connecting local audiences to a wider information ecosystem.

Secondly, different forms of technology allow individuals and groups to listen to radio in ways that reinforce community-making. With traditional radio sets, people gather together physically to listen to a static radio or gather together 'virtually' by tuning in remotely via a mobile telephone. For example, for many of the Nigerien women in the study, listening to radio is a communal activity that brings people together. With a radio set, women can place it in a public place and gather to listen: "I turn on the radio for the whole neighbourhood, I put it outside and turn up the volume. Everyone comes over to my place' (Niger\_UMW5). However, even if listeners do not explicitly gather as a group to listen to radio, participants testified that the very act of tuning in is a way to 'come together': "When it's time, when [radio name] is on, everyone is listening" (Niger\_RMW6). In this respect, the act of radio listening as a collective audience also reinforces community ties through shared listening experiences.

Mobile technology is increasingly important for audiences who wish to tune into radio remotely or on the move (Chiumbu and Ligaga 2013). One's relationship to radio and technology seems to be determined by daily routine, work, and class. For example, many Malian women stated that they relied on their mobile phones to tune in, whereas others in

closer proximity to urban centres and internet infrastructure also used the internet as an important source of information. In this respect, the class and location of any listener determines their options for tuning into the radio. Women in rural areas appeared less likely to have the means to pay for internet access.<sup>1</sup> Nigerian women in rural communities suggested the predominance of static radio sets meant they missed out on day-time radio broadcasting while they worked on the land. Mobile phones are therefore helpful alternatives for women tuning into community radio as a classic form of ‘secondary’ listening (Berland 1990; Chignell 2009; Fleming 2002) and can thus unite individual listeners with others. On a practical level, CRSs are essential for communicating information to otherwise isolated communities (Mali\_UNM1). Communities profit from CRSs in order to promote local announcements, such as weddings and family ceremonies (Niger\_RMW2). Radio is therefore a flexible medium that is employed in different ways to serve individuals and local communities: depending on their access, audiences listen when they want and how they want and engage with its content for their own purposes. As discussed below, frameworks of ‘loud’ and ‘quiet’ participation explain these different scales and modes of audience engagement.

### *‘Loud’ participation*

CRSs encourage audience participation by creating spaces for organized listening. These formalized structures of listener engagement facilitate forms of ‘loud’ listener participation. If scholars discuss ‘media visibility’ to analyse the images of individuals and groups within the spectacle of visual media and the rise of social media (Omojola 2104),



CRSs and their audiences are invested in the extent to which they are *heard and audible* (Tsarwe 2014). Radio listening clubs (RLC) are spaces where members can discuss and react to community radio broadcasting. RLCs allow audience members to engage and dialogue directly with CRSs (Manda 2015; Mchakulu 2007; Mhagama 2015b; Nyirenda et al. 2018). RLCs function as ‘a platform for the voiceless’ (Manda 2015, 216) and form a valued strategy in mitigating top-down reductionist approaches to media development: ‘people who are objects of policy needs to be involved in the definition, design, and execution of the development process’ (Melkote 1991, 191). By amplifying participating voices so that they may be heard by CRS managers and producers, RLCs facilitate ‘loud’ participation through this direct dialogue and proximity between listener and radio.

‘Loud’ participation also takes place through semi-formal listening clubs that are not directly organized by CRSs but are nonetheless closely associated. Discussion-based radio programming is a popular medium among participants from both Mali and Niger. One reason for the popularity of discussion-based programmes is how conducive they are to audience participation. Some CRSs encouraged listeners to call in to participate in debates. Frequent callers tend to originate from semi-formal listening groups such as *grins* in Mali and *fada* in Niger. There is a strong relationship between *fadas* and radio broadcasting in Niger (Heywood 2020; Masquelier 2019). Men participants from Niger confirmed that *fadas*, as mentioned above, are a formalized space in which men can gather repeatedly at regular intervals with familiar faces in order to discuss and converse together:

- We do it in a group in *fadas*. And we debate.
- It’s not good to listen to radio on your own. I’ll call him to see if he’s listened to [radio name] .

- We listen to radio together in the same group. It's not mixed. (Niger\_RM1)

Radio plays a central role in determining the subject of conversation during a *fada*: “[The radio] sets up the problem, they’ll say ‘Did you hear this on that radio, they talked about this issue, discussed this question?’” (Niger\_RM4). By discussing the content of the broadcast in this way, *fada* members introduce the radio debate into their own personal and social spaces.

*Fadas* also allow participants the opportunity to be heard and participate ‘loudly’, by sharing their perspectives on the topic raised by these programmes. Like the RLCs, *fadas* can provide direct engagement with CRSs and therefore constitute ‘loud’ forms of participation. For example, producers at a rural community radio station in Niger highlighted the dialogical relationship they have with *fada* members in the community who frequently participate in radio discussions and debates. Topics of debate are themselves occasionally selected by members of the community during training sessions with radio producers. Community radio thus helps structure the social spaces by which men gather for *fadas* in Niger, but men in these groups also play a role in shaping the editorial scope of the CRS. By privileging discussion-based programmes and encouraging phone-ins from *fadas* during production, CRSs provide the framework for semi-formal listening groups to be heard directly by other listeners and by CRS managers. In other words, through their close association with radio, *fadas* in Niger also encourage ‘loud’ forms of listener participation.

It is important to consider *who* is taking part in ‘loud’ participation via these formal and semi-formal listening clubs. *Fadas* are also important spaces for younger men who might be marginalized from local leadership. As a homosocial space, *fadas* allow men to gather and form collectives according to mutually constitutive values. While *fadas* tend to

be spaces for men, this does not mean that women are excluded from formal and semi-formal listening groups. For example, in Mali, women also discussed their active involvement in radio programming. Women's voices are particularly amplified in relation to women's radio programming. Independently of CRSs, women in rural Mali have formed listening groups specifically with the intention of discussing a woman's advice and debate programme. Each neighbourhood has a discussion group and members are encouraged to call in in order to find 'ideas, solutions coming from the speakers' (Mali\_RMW6). By calling in, the listening groups also help disrupt the unilateral flow of information from community radio to community audiences. Audiences of women therefore feel particularly implicated and enabled to participate 'loudly' in CRSs when they listen to broadcasting for which they are a target audience. Although not directly organized by the CRSs, listening groups for women provide opportunities for 'loud' participation.

With their focus on local issues and news, CRSs play an important role in reinforcing the identity of local communities (Backhaus 2020). The FGDs in Mali and Niger revealed that CRSs also support individual and personal civic pride among listeners who took part in forms of 'loud' participation. For example, one participant in rural Niger suggested that they were motivated to participate in radio discussion programmes by more than a desire to share personal opinions and ideas. Rather, it was important for her *to be heard* as a radio participant and for others to hear her sharing her ideas: "When they [other listeners] hear your voice, they're proud, they're happy" (Niger\_RMW5). 'Loud' participation with CRSs amplifies the voices of the listeners via phone-ins and debate programmes and, as a consequent, reinforces an affective sense of community connection and pride where listeners gain recognition and reinforcement among listening friends and family.

### *'Quiet' participation*

Beyond RLCs and listening groups, listeners engage with CRSs in a variety of other ways that can still be described as participatory. 'Quiet' participation refers to forms of audience participation that are indirect, informal, and rely on pre-existing community networks, rather than spaces created or used by the CRS directly. In this respect, 'quiet' participation is not always 'heard' or recognized as such. For example, all the listeners consulted for this study confirmed that they react to radio through engaged discussions with third parties. While they participate in the dissemination of information from CRS to local communities, the CRS might not recognize or 'hear' this participation given that it evolves independently of RLCs.

'Quiet' participation involves listeners who are invested in radio broadcasting but do not contact radios directly. For example, listeners will debate radio content among themselves but might not always wish to call in: "If the radio gives information, we chat about it and ask questions. Sometimes, if I want to, I'll get involved with the discussion and telephone" (Niger\_RM7). Participants in Mali suggested that 'quiet' participation might involve using radio as a tool to resolve family problems: "they can come on the radio, or they can come to see us so that we can talk to each other, without them speaking [to the authorities]" (Mali\_UM1). In other words, community actors listen to radio and incorporate its content in intra-community activities and debates. However, the CRS itself is not involved in the execution of conflict resolution. Through 'quiet' participation, community actors disseminate information they heard via radio but do not engage directly with CRSs.

We have already discussed how Nigerien men tend to dominate *fadas* and therefore associated forms of 'loud' participation. Nigerien women consulted for this study took part in 'quiet' participation by forming casual listening groups characterized by their informality and

reliance on closed WhatsApp messaging groups. For those who had access to the internet, WhatsApp groups were used to discuss informally what they had heard via radio. Most of these groups are created by friends and family, although some FGD participants noted that they are aware of WhatsApp groups for specific NGO-funded radios. WhatsApp groups for women and families are specifically discussed as alternatives to the men-only space of *fadas*:

- Men take part in *fadas*, sometimes young people, it depends.
- Us [women], we take part in family WhatsApp groups (Niger\_UMW2)

For these participants, the digital space of the WhatsApp group were alternative spaces to discuss and react to community radio broadcasts, in contrast to the physical (and masculine) spaces of *fadas*. While CRS value *fadas* as ideal spaces for ‘loud’ audience participation, these semi-private WhatsApp are ‘quiet’ forms of participation since they are, generally, inaccessible to the CRS. Furthermore, attentive but non-participative radio listening can support women’s conceptions of key issues, such as domestic violence. In Mali, women stated they listened to topics relating to domestic violence for advice relating to their own experiences:

If the radio has programmes on violence [against women], you can hear your own problems on the radio. It gives you advice. You sit like this, and you can get advice, you know. (Mali\_RMW1)

Informal discussion groups emerge among individual CRS listeners who use social messaging and in-person networks to pass on information that is important to them. In

other words, these 'quiet' forms of engagement with radio demonstrate its role in creating 'alternative' spaces for participation, beyond the RLC.

'Quiet' participation is not dependent on regular listening to CRS broadcasting. While there was no formal schedule for community radio broadcasting cited by radio managers, it was pointed out in the FGDs that listeners 'just knew' when programmes were on and followed a habitual schedule. As a result, radio managers can be reluctant to make changes to schedules for fear of inadvertently losing listeners. While women in Niger noted that their work commitments nonetheless clashed with the informal schedule of their CRS, participants suggested that missing programmes did not prevent their participation since the subject of the radio programme would be a topic of discussion among family and friends:

Sometimes when we're away, we are not at home [...], when you get back out of the car, they'll tell you what is going on [the radio]. Everyone wants to know what it was about. (Niger\_UM8)

In other words, discussing radio programmes after the fact is just as important as listening to the broadcast itself. While the formalized and semi-formalized spaces of listening clubs and *fadas* relies on the assumption of every participant being an informed and 'loud' participant, informalized spaces of discussion facilitate 'quiet' participation, including *non-listeners* and *listeners* alike. While CRS actively seek out participation through formal and organized listening groups, being attentive to the 'quiet' forms of radio participation emphasizes the practices and politics of 'listening' (Dreher 2009) to community voices that can remain marginalized. CRSs rarely 'hear' listener participation via these informal spaces

of discussion – which is more closely associated with women – but they are nonetheless crucial, yet overlooked, alternative forms of audience participation.

### *‘Quiet’ participation and community networks*

‘Loud’ forms of participation tend to be valued by CRSs since they are readily identifiable through RLCs and help demonstrate the mutually constructive relationship between CRSs and audience members. ‘Loud’ participation is therefore associated with the creation of new spaces of audience engagement and positive change. In contrast, ‘quiet’ forms of participation react to, engage with, and participate in CRS broadcasting in ways that are harder to identify but are nonetheless integral to the dissemination of CRS broadcasting through pre-existing community networks.

‘Quiet’ participation in CRS relies on pre-existing community networks that facilitate the sharing of information and debate among listeners. Networks of information are now most commonly associated with social media (Paterson 2014). However, CRSs remain the primary source of information for many of the participants in this study and were supported by ‘word-of-mouth’ discussion. This means it is important to pay attention to how CRS broadcasting relates to pre-existing community networks. As already discussed, ‘women’s groups’ have emerged alongside, but not entirely because of radio. Listening to CRS broadcasts is a shared experience among women and therefore part of their social fabric as they come together to organize development activities and mutual aid. These groups emerge independently of CRSs, but they can influence radio broadcasting. For example, rural women in Niger discussed a women’s cooking group which inspired the station to broadcast a cooking-themed programme. ‘Quiet’ participation with CRS therefore reinforces

women's collective efforts to support other women in their communities (Niger\_RUMW6). Similarly, Malian women working with community associations encouraged each other to tune into programmes rebroadcast by community radios that had been produced by centralized radio studios in Bamako:

We have others take part and encourage them to listen to [radio name]. We inform the other associations and residents in our neighbourhoods and communities as well.(Mali\_RMW6).

They also described how they cited these radio programming when organising to reduce traffic violence in their local areas. Overall, 'quiet' forms of participation – informal discussions, WhatsApp chat groups, sharing information with non-listeners – are also associated with, and facilitated by, the pre-existing networks of solidarity among communities and audiences alike.

## **Conclusion**

Investigating CRSs within Mali and Niger, this article has developed a new framework for understanding different scales of listener engagement which differentiates between 'loud' and 'quiet' forms of participation. CRSs are crucial in Mali and Niger given the limited number of alternatives in telecommunications and the media infrastructure resulting from global inequalities and ongoing conflict. Indeed, the FGDs discussed in this study confirmed that community radio stations are essential 'hubs' of information for communities in Mali and Niger, especially rural communities without access to other forms of telecommunication and media broadcasting (television, internet). CRSs broadcast local news to local communities in their languages, while also rebroadcasting national news and



information. They affirm local identities and indigenous languages while connecting communities to wider networks of information. While CRSs in Mali and Niger might be the main and only source of mediated information for some communities in rural areas, they are nonetheless alternatives to the French hegemony represented by state media, government, and education. In this respect, CRSs represent the voices of rural and marginalised communities in both countries. Nonetheless, the application of this framework can extend beyond Mali and Niger to other areas whether CRSs dominate.

CRSs actively encourage 'loud' forms of audience participation. The article has defined 'loud' participation as cases where listeners engage with CRSs through organized spaces for listening and discussion. 'Loud' participants are therefore readily identifiable through formally organised RLCs or other semi-formal listening clubs that exist in close proximity to CRSs or participate in direct dialogue with radio broadcasts, especially discussion programming. Alternatively, 'quiet' participation, as defined by the article, refers to listener engagement that might not be directed at the CRS or be harder to identify as 'participation'. Being attentive to the 'quiet' forms of radio participation emphasizes the politics of 'listening' (Dreher 2009) to community voices that can remain marginalized. It does not suggest that 'quiet' participation is less impactful or passive.

This study has found 'loud' and 'quiet' participation has gendered implications. CRSs have long been implicated in campaigns for women's empowerment (Heywood and Tomlinson 2019; Wanyeki 2001) and this study confirms that women and men are both involved in 'loud' forms of participation via organised listening spaces such as RLCs. However, this study also found that men were more likely to engage in semi-formal listening groups via *grins* in Mali and *fadas* in Niger. Conversely, women were more likely to take part in 'quiet' forms of participation through informal discussion spaces. Women with more

economic capital in proximity to urban infrastructure might rely on the internet and mobile technology to do so. For others in rural areas, discussion takes place through word-of-mouth or by being 'caught-up' on missed broadcasting. Focusing on 'quiet' forms of listener participation is crucial to better understand women's participation in community media ecosystems. It is important, however, not to essentialize this association between 'quiet' participation and women's listening groups. 'Quiet' participation does not mean women are passive, but that their agency as listeners is employed through forms of participation that might not be recognised or 'heard' by focusing on RLCs alone.

In short, 'quiet' participation does not equate with passivity or ineffective engagement, nor with a particular gender. This study suggests that while 'loud' forms of engagement tend to be associated with innovation in RLCs and audience engagement, 'quiet' forms of participation are underpinned by pre-existing networks of community solidarities and values. 'Quiet' participants play an important role in disseminating information broadcast by the CRSs to non-listeners and are instrumental in integrating information heard via radio into their activities as community actors, helping them to organise new associations and groups in the service of women's mutual support and agency. This study demonstrates that community actors organize around, and benefit from, community radio because of its ability to connect with individuals and groups of people directly and effectively. In other words, groups and association are organized and facilitated by community actors alongside CRS broadcasting, but might not directly dialogue with CRSs. While they actively engage with, and disseminate information related to CRS broadcasting, such activities might not be recognized as direct participation. While these forms of listener participation may not be 'heard' directly by the CRSs themselves within formalised spaces of

listener engagement, such as RLCs, they demonstrate the subtle and widespread impact of CRSs in communities that are generally marginalised.

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<sup>i</sup> In 2020, internet penetration was 12% in Niger and 24% in Mali (Data Reportal 2020)  
<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-mali> & <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-niger>