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# Community Radio, Content Diversity, and Representation in Kenya

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## Abstract

The current study aimed to examine community radio service, the promotion of content diversity, and representation in Nairobi, Kenya. The objective was to examine how community radio stations based in Nairobi balance the representation of various demographic groups including marginalized communities. Furthermore, the study also investigated how they ensure that a wide range of topics, both local and national, are covered. Using a mixed-methods approach: Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) with listeners, interviews with producers, and content analysis of programs across the selected community radio stations**,** the study assessed the place of community radio in achieving inclusive content. It was revealed that while community radio broadcasts in Nairobi have made positive developments in diversifying content and representing different demographic groups, content diversity in Nairobi's community radio stations is limited, with certain demographics underrepresented. National issues often overshadow the local content. Moreover, there is insufficient engagement with marginalized communities, leading towards a lack of diverse perspectives in listenership. Additionally, challenges, such as political interference, limited resources, and technological constraints continue to slow down their growth to full potential. To improve content diversity and representation in Nairobi's community radio stations, enhanced community participation including in content creation is imperative. Moreover, providing ongoing capacity-building programs for staff and volunteers within the stations to ensure ethical standards, securing sustainable multiple funding to support high-quality through various methods, and inclusive programming which mirrors diverse community needs and the adoption of modern innovative technologies to overcome financial and other existing challenges would improve content diversity and representation.

***Keywords:*** community radio, content diversity, Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), Kenya

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## Introduction

Community radio in Kenya has helped to raise voices of social minority groups, strengthening cultural practices and bringing about community participation in democracy (Okinyi 2019) asserts. Unlike commercial radio, community radio promotes public interest and allows communities to disseminate information about their uniqueness, languages, and cultures in that medium. Kenya is a country of multiple cultures, practices, languages, and ethnic groups. Community radio is a vital instrument, contributing to the process of making sects and groups diverse (Kimani, 2017).

While community radio unites people and responds to their desires, they, at the same time, accommodate their cultures. This is a huge challenge given this potential as it would ensure that all groups are involved and the content is substantial as they undertake their mandate (Moffat et al., 2024). Kenya's media landscape is characterized by concentrated ownership, dominated by a few private media conglomerates. This kind of landscape is disadvantageous to marginalized and unrepresented youth, women, and other minorities due to the fact that media plurality is constrained. The current study aimed to analyze content diversity in Kenya's community radio and discussed the level of representation in community radio programming. Moreover, it also analyzed the engagement mechanisms and feedback in community radio stations in Kenya.

### Significance

The current study is significant since the data collected showed the role of community radio in Kenya. Furthermore, the gaps which exist in ensuring community radio service in Kenya become more apparent in programming. The data collected also showed which issues community radio focuses on in the local communities and which ones are not given enough weight. Therefore, the study aimed at helping come up with some guidelines on planning and creation of regulatory mechanisms for community radio subsector in Kenya. Additionally, it might be helpful for the community radio subsector in Kenya in coming up with unique content reflecting cultural and indigenous knowledge thus, creating strong bond with audiences.

Community radio shares different viewpoints on different topics, mainly ignored by mainstream media in Kenya. Furthermore, community radio also guarantees people of all ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds

that local cultures are preserved.

## Literature Review

In Kenya, one of the purposes of community radio is to relay information to and from the urban and rural communities. Community radio station is highly prioritized when it comes to providing service to the listeners. Furthermore, the programming that makes it (community radio) holistic is indeed a basic human right. Community radio serves its community with the service assured by the hallmarks of its (community radio's) right to exist and freedom by way of these airwaves operating as a public sphere mediating between society and state (Bello & Wilkinson, 2017)

Several studies have shown that community radio can play a vital part in ensuring that traditionally marginalized voices are heard in public discourse. Okinyi (2019), for instance, noted that community radio stations in Kenya produce a commendable amount of content in local languages that addresses important community issues, such as health, education, and agriculture. This content is more or less guaranteed to reflect the unique culture of the community it serves, since the community itself is quite likely to understand its situation better than anyone else. As such, programming that comes out of a community radio station is quite relevant to the audience immediately and tangibly compared to, say, a program produced by a national broadcaster.

Achieving a well-rounded and inclusive community radio station is still a work in progress, even though significant strides have been made. Kenyan community radio stations are really up against it, according to Manje (2024). They deal with the politically-motivated pressures faced by all forms of media, coupled with scant financial support and poor technical facilities. That potent mix leaves them struggling to create high-quality, diverse content that would allow them to serve all the different communities that they are supposed to represent. Additionally, the staff of these radio stations is not trained enough to create content that is as inclusive and representative as it needs to be.

Community radio, which broadcasts in local languages and focuses on indigenous issues and inclusivity, is a significant factor in Kenya's promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity (Pavarala & Malik, 2021). Underrepresented groups may discuss important local issues and share their cultural history. However, community radio is frequently unable to

sufficiently promote diversity due to budgetary constraints and resource shortages.

Concurring, Naaikuur and Dombo (2021) reporting on Ghana indicate that community radio incorporates a more prominent advantage over standard media when it comes to speaking to underrepresented populaces, such as women and people living in rural regions. Rather than centering on media that is specific to cities, community radio stations help in far flung areas, with a stronger, and an improved work of covering issues that are vital to marginalised and rustic communities.

Diedong and Dzisah (2023) also highlighted issues that confine community radio from expanding and how comprehensive the issue is, such as sexual orientation inclination and shortage of women in administration positions in community radio. This study illustrated that political mediation proceeds to be a considerable deterrent to the independence of community radio. Their inquiry revealed that neighborhood authorities, as often as possible, have a say in what is broadcasted on community radio stations, smothering voices that do not bolster their plan. In expansion to restricting the range of perspectives communicated undermines the stations' capacity to serve as scenes for bona fide community representation and democratic participation.

Community radio has also adopted to digital media to improve feedback and engagement mechanisms. This transformation in communication dynamics has reshaped the engagement between citizens and community media (Susan, 2020). These media platforms actively foster interactions that elevate local voices, especially those of diverse and marginalized groups. In doing so, community media serve as channels of information and inclusive public spheres that empower underrepresented communities and facilitate a richer, more pluralistic discourse. Consequently, community media have become critical instruments for social empowerment and democratic participation. This shift profoundly transforms local engagement and participation.

According to Diedong and Dzisah (2023) political interferometer with community radio could be a major issue. As investigation illustrates, nearby lawmakers habitually have an influence on what is disclosed, advancing stories that adjust with their plans and restricting feedback. Moreover, it limits the extent of points of views and conclusions that can be listened,

undermining the stations' capacity to precisely reflect the community. Kimani (2017) analyzed community radio in Kenya in connection to people, production and participation processes postulating that rules are vital to ensure moral broadcasting are important. To permit community radio stations to cover a wide range of subjects without fear of censorship, Okinyi (2019) contends that there has to be a link between control and free expression and participation.

Hermansky (2022) examined how advancement, especially technical issues, impact the contrasting qualities of offerings and texture on community radio across Unites States of America. This study emphasized the significance of community possession and engagement in guaranteeing that community radio speaks to an assortment of issues. Agreeing to the question, the substance of the station is more likely to reflect numerous interfaces and needs of community when local people are effectively included in its administration. Therefore, to keep community radio on the threshold of serving community interests, it is important to ensure that the community has and feels a sense of proprietorship.

Community radio in Kenya has a huge potential in enhancing content diversity yet faces systemic constraints. These include inadequate training, financial instability, political interference, and technological impediments, limiting minority representation. Strategic interventions—sustainable funding, policy advocacy, and skill development—could bolster inclusivity and editorial autonomy, as Mpehongwa (2024) argues, by strengthening operational capacities and community-driven content production.

## Research Questions

The current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How does community radio programming in Kenya amplify the voices of marginalized groups?
2. What is the level of social-cultural representation in community radio programming in Kenya?
3. What are the participatory content production and feedback mechanisms in community radio which enhance civic and democratic engagement among unrepresented communities in Kenya?

## Methodology

The current study used mixed methods approach to look into the difficulties of representation and diversity of content in community radio in Kenya. The combination of different techniques in the research aims to bring a well-rounded perspective on the topic. The study zeroed in on community radio stations located in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. A cross-sectional design was used to collect data that helped understand how these stations handle issues of content diversity and representation.

The criteria to choose five radio stations were their reach and the role they play in the local communities. The choices show how different neighborhoods in Nairobi are. To have a holistic coverage of setbacks and prospects concerning diversity and representation, the main responsible persons, such as listeners and producers were included. This study looked at five specific radio stations: *Ruben FM* in the Kwa Reuben area, *Mtaani Radio* in Dagoretti, Ghetto FM in Pumwani, Koch FM in Korogocho, and *Pamoja FM* in Kibera. The chosen stations are popular and cover many issues.

### Data Collection

The required information was collected by conducting interviews with leading hosts from various community radio stations, producers, and station managers. The thoughts shared with producers centered at what shaped the choice of content, such as what the audience likes, political factors, and financial support. A review was conducted on radio shows which were aired from October 2023 to January 2024. This study determined different topics covered, how various social groups were represented, and how much local versus national content was included. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with frequent community radio listeners from different backgrounds to understand their thoughts about diversity and representations in the shows. The numbers and trends in ratings were examined to find possible trends in the variety and representation of content. The information from interviews and FGDs was checked for common themes. This combination of methods helped understand the results better. All participants gave their consent orally and to keep their information private was very important during the study.

## Data Analysis and Discussion

For analysis, the issues considered included range of topics discussed,

determining different groups of people, and balance between local and national information. It also examined how money, politics, and what people like affect what shows are put on the air. Focus groups, interviews, and survey showed both the strengths and difficulties that community radio faces in catering to the needs of various audiences and communities in Nairobi, Kenya.

**Diversity and Range of Topics Covered**

Community radio in Kenya reaches many people by discussing important issues, such as education, health, culture, and farming that matter to the local communities. In countryside areas, radio stations usually talk about farming methods and updates on selling crops, while health programs provide important information about preventing diseases and nutrition. However, the variety of programs is not the same at every station. Bigger stations with financial power air different topics, such as human rights, gender equality, and issues affecting young people. In contrast, smaller stations usually focus on popular topics that are easier to make. Shows, for instance "Goteana" on Ghetto Radio (89. 5 FM), talk about youth culture and important issues that matter to society. "Pamoja Mtaani" on Pamoja FM (99. 9 FM) teaches about civic education and government in Kibera. Health-related programs, such as "Health on Air" on Koch FM (99. 9 FM) provide important information about mental health, HIV/AIDS awareness, and personal cleanliness.

These stations talk about different issues, however, keeping that variety is a challenge for them. Many of these stations depend largely on donated money, which may make their programs to focus more on what the donors want instead of what the community actually needs. Additionally, due to stiff competition in the media, many stations often follow popular content which is mostly entertaining as a strategy to rain in more listeners. This may take their attention away from important discussions on serious topics.

Generally, while Nairobi's community radio stations demonstrate a positive commitment to addressing community needs, their coverage is mostly constrained by their specific audience focus and resource constraints. Each of the stations brings valuable content to the airwaves, however, a more balanced and inclusive range of topics might enhance their impact, providing a richer and more diverse platform for community voices across Nairobi.

## Factors Influencing Topic Selection

Many issues help decide what topics Nairobi community radio stations would air. Some stations might not have the competence to talk about specific subjects, which reduces the range of topics they may air. Covering a variety of topics can be challenging to community radio stations. Furthermore, many volunteers do not have enough skills or trainings. They often lack professional experience in creating content therefore, it becomes difficult for them to work on good programs regarding different topics.

Generally, top issues which influence Nairobi community radio stations' topic selection include audience demographics, community needs, and funding constraints. Stations, such as Ruben FM and Mtaani Radio focus on informal settlements and choose issues that work well with target audiences including health, education, and employment for Mukuru's residents. Slum dwellers have informational demands which drive topic choices, for instance youth unemployment and crime are the leading topics. Similarly, Koch FM in Korogocho slums prioritizes topics, such as sanitation and crime prevention due to the high community concerns about public health and safety. Funding sources also shape content.

Radio stations that receive financial support from health organizations focus on health and education, while those with local NGO partnerships address social issues, such as Ghetto FM's social justice programs which focus on accountability. An analysis of Nairobi radio stations shows that though funding ensures sustainability, it, at times, restricts topic flexibility, as stations follow sponsor priorities alongside community contextual interests. This means that stations must observe balance between resource limitations and audience relevance that shape Nairobi's community radio content.

## Representation of Different Demographic Groups

Nairobi's community radio stations play an important role in representing various demographic groups, though the depth and balance of this representation vary across stations to cover different cultures of people living in cities. They include voices from different ethnic groups, women, young people, and older adults in their programs. These stations put in a considerable effort to show different ethnic groups in Nairobi by broadcasting programs and looking at different cultural traditions. The community radio stations have created spaces to talk about women's rights

and equality between men and women. Shows, such as "Wanawake na Jamii" on Pamoja M have helped women gain strength and confidence. While "Queens of the Street" on Ghetto Radio showcases women in art and music giving them space to air views in entertainment.

Stations, such as Koch FM and Ruben FM, located in slums of Korogocho and Mukuru in Nairobi, serve slum dwellers in the expansive city, focusing heavily on issues that affect youth, low-income families, and informal workers. For instance, Koch FM runs segments on public health and education for low-income listeners whose access to formal healthcare or educational resources is scanty and difficult. This focus is due to the needs of communities, however, limits representation of other demographics, such as elderly listeners or working community members.

While the youth demographic is especially represented on stations, such as Mtaani Radio and Ghetto FM, both highlighting young people's voices, on various issues including unemployment, crime, and drug use. Ghetto FM, in particular, hosts programs on social justice and police accountability, appealing to younger audiences who are often directly affected by these issues. The challenge in this is that the other demographics, such as women or persons with disabilities, are sometimes underrepresented in the programming. On the other hand, Pamoja FM, broadcasting from Kibera slums, has been promoting discussions and debates on women's rights and gender-based violence. For instance, Ghetto Radio's "Goteana" talks about popular trends and young people's interests. Additionally, there are other programs for older people, such as "Elders' Corner" on Koch FM that talk about health, rules, and traditional values. However, broader representation of Nairobi's ethnic and cultural diversity remains a challenge. This is because the radio stations' focus on local concerns sometimes means less coverage for ethnic minorities or topics that cut across different Nairobi communities. This is what cultural theories (Hall, 1997) assert that community radio has the potential in meaning, making, and identity construction. The fact that community radio does not effectively represent different demographic groups including the marginalized in Nairobi indicates that their identity construction lacks a local media forum. This is because they lack that opportunity to express themselves and listen to others express themselves in discourses leading to identity construction and meaning construction.

Nevertheless, Nairobi's community radio stations still occupy a pole position in giving voice to minorities, and balancing issues may go a long way in impacting all demographics.

**Balancing Between Local and National Content**

Community radio stations in Nairobi juggle between local and national programs, something which challenges and presents some difficulty to their audience. This is because most radio stations talk about local news, however, also report on national events and policies. This situation helps listeners learn about both their community and beyond community issues.

This local focus strengthens community relevance and trust, as listeners receive content tailored to their specific environment. However, using some programs, Ruben FM occasionally integrates national health policies or government initiatives, incorporating local concerns to broader frameworks without overshadowing community-focused content. Mtaani Radio, known for its youth-centered programs, often features local discussions on education and entrepreneurship while also providing updates on national education policies or youth employment schemes. This balance engages young listeners in understanding how national policies may impact their local opportunities. Moreover, this also helps them connect the dots between their immediate circumstances and the wider socio-political landscape. Additionally, Ghetto FM's approach focuses on national issues, such as police brutality and social justice as well as topics relevant to both local and national audience. While this is good for audience to get a critical national perspective, there lies a risk of neglecting important local issues that uniquely affect specific communities within Nairobi. Balancing these scales remains a complex challenge, as each station carefully tries to take care of listener expectations, local impact, and the significance of connecting local realities to national discourses.

**Audience Engagement and Feedback**

Audience engagement and feedback are central to the operations of Nairobi's community radio stations. This enables them to tailor content which follows listeners' interests. For instance, Ruben FM and Koch FM, located in two different slum areas of Nairobi, use audience feedback to develop and shape content. Furthermore, Ruben FM frequently invites listeners to call in and share their views during health-focused segments, creating a dialogue that informs programming and community trust. This

real-time interaction allows the stations to address pressing community health issues that listeners raise. Similarly, Ghetto FM, known for its emphasis on social justice, encourages listener participation through call-ins and social media platforms.

For instance, programs on police accountability receive live feedback which represents the voices of those affected by specific policing community issues. Ghetto FM provides audience marginalized listeners with a sense of empowerment and involvement in their daily lives.

For instance, Ghetto Radio's "Brekko" talks with listeners on social media, and Pamoja FM's "Voice of the People" uses messages from listeners through SMS and WhatsApp. Every station works hard to make sure that the voices of community are listened to and included in their programs. Pamoja FM in Kibera also uses its feedback mechanisms, especially in its peacebuilding and conflict resolution programming. Listener feedback on issues of harmony and coexistence within Kibera slums' diverse community focuses on content that promotes dialogue and mutual understanding within the community.

Nevertheless, while audience engagement is high, feedback often reflects specific demographics, such as youth, leaving gaps in representation from older and other less digitally connected groups, such as those from low-income households and individuals with disabilities. Overall, the feedback mechanisms by Nairobi-based community radio stations help create responsive and relevant content which aligns with listener preferences, interests, and expectations. This is in line with the issue of public sphere which brings to fore the concept of public participation and enhanced public dialogue (Hebermas 1989). The data collected in the current study cleared that community radio has high potential for this purpose. This is because it falls within the theoretical underpinnings to ensure inclusivity in public dialogue pertaining to community issues. The challenge with the theory in this perspective is that national issues override local and community issues, thereby negating the same concept of equitability in public discourses.

**Inclusivity and Informational Needs of Diverse Communities**

Community radio stations play an important role in Nairobi, since they involve everyone and address the needs of different groups. Furthermore, they provide a platform to various groups, such as women, young people,

and ethnic minorities, who usually don't get enough attention in mainstream-regular media. The local programs on these radio stations relate directly to what people experience every day. Therefore, Nairobi community radio stations play an influential role in addressing the informational needs of diverse communities by filling gaps left by the mainstream media. They do this by creating content relevant to audience needs and enhancing community engagement and empowerment.

For instance, Ruben FM addresses the needs of Mukuru's residents by focusing on certain pressing issues, such as health, sanitation, and employment. By airing programs on accessible healthcare resources or job opportunities, Ruben FM ensures that low-income households, who often lack access to digital information, remain informed. Key programs, such as "Health Matters", provide advices on accessible healthcare, disease prevention, and local health campaigns, ensuring listeners stay updated about health issues. "Job Connect" focuses on employment opportunities, vocational training, and entrepreneurship, helping community members enhance their economic standing. "Clean Community" helps listeners on sanitation issues, waste management, and hygiene. Another program, "Voice of Mukuru" helps community members discuss their issues and seek advice, as well as receive real-time support since it is a call-in program. Most of these programs empower the community, providing relevant and practical information to listeners.

Ghetto FM also emphasizes topics that reverberate with Nairobi youth, such as social justice, crime, and police accountability. Its programs empower younger listeners to engage in civic matters that directly impact them. Koch FM and Pamoja FM also focus on local needs in Korogocho and Kibera, respectively. Koch FM's programs on sanitation and public safety are essential for daily life in Korogocho. While Pamoja FM's peacebuilding initiatives aim to foster harmony within Kibera's ethnically-diverse population.

Despite all these, Nairobi community radio stations still face many issues as they do not have enough finances. Therefore, they cannot make their programs as good as they should be or varied. Depending on volunteers and use of old equipment makes it difficult for them to produce regular and good-quality broadcasts. This is an even challenging issue in low-income regions where most of Nairobi's community radio stations operate. Furthermore, there is another difficulty to include all the different and

diverse groups in Nairobi. This is because the capital city is so diverse, it could be hard for stations to give equal attention to every community. Some groups, such as women, youth, and poor people, sometimes feel left out or not well-represented. This challenge is conceptualized in media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & Defluer, 1976). This theory shows how audiences like those of community radio stations depend on media to be able to appropriately live in their communities and surroundings. However, with the data showing that community radio in Nairobi falls short of content diversity, this particular role is espoused in this theory, especially the marginalized and unrepresented.

## Limitations

The current study has several limitations. Data collection may have been partly hindered by inconsistent record-keeping at the studied community radio stations in Nairobi, perhaps, limiting the accuracy of content analysis which was done a prior. Audience engagement and representation can be influenced by socioeconomic factors which makes it challenging to generalize findings, for instance from this study, across diverse communities. Additionally, the study was not certain about transparent reporting mechanisms within the radio stations' studios, leading to likely potential gaps in evaluating content diversity. Due to rapid changes in media consumption in Kenya, the data for this study which was collected months ago, in the country's capital city, may not accurately show current trends or listener preferences across Kenya.

## Conclusion

The findings show that community radio is central in promoting local culture, language, and values by minorities where radio stations operate (Chikaipa, 2020). This assertion is in line with the global perspectives which place community media as a channel to amplify marginalized voices (Hermansky, 2022). Additionally, the current study shows that despite challenges, such as political interference and financial constraints pose challenges to achieve true diversity (Mpehongwa, 2024). Data indicates that the content broadcasted by community radio stations in Kenya is often influenced by forces outside the radio stations (like sponsors) which ends up affecting the quality and diversity of programming (Busolo, 2016). Previous studies also highlighted this issue on vernacular radio in other African countries, showing commercial pressures affecting potential of

community radio mediating as a platform for inclusive dialogue (Ngala, 2023). This situation has had an effect where community radio stations now have a bias towards entertainment and commercial content, sometimes at the expense of educational and socially transformative programming (Bongo, 2022). This can be dealt with if community radio stations ensure that they have a variety of funding sources and not rely on a single or few agencies and ensuring that community members have a bigger say in running the stations including the creation of content which resonates with their priorities.

Therefore, it can be concluded that community radio has considerable potential, structural, and financial challenges which may add very little efforts to broadcast diverse and representative content. The study also found that community radio plays a central role in enhancing the local identity and self-expression, offering space for alternative discourse, especially among populations feeling marginalized by national and international media outlets as outlined by Backhause (2020). This reinforces the notion that local languages and cultural programming are essential to preserve Kenya's rich cultural diversity. However, balancing content between local, national, and community interests is still a big challenge. Community radio in Kenya is a key player in preserving the culture and engaging with local communities. Nevertheless, it is not easy for radio stations to consistently make money and content that is diverse to all. Moreover, other pressing issues also include constraints in stations' income which makes it hard for them to carry out their duties, as stated by Manje (2024) and Mpehongwa (2024). Tight budgets hinder the ability of stations to create good content. Moffat et al. (2024) stressed that sustainability challenges still exists since certain stations are affected by benefactor organizations that control some community radio stations and neighborhoods. Community radio remains important in developing social variety and ensuring that each part of Kenyan culture is reflected within the media.

## Conflict of Interest

The author of the manuscript has no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

## Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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