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Deconstructing the Community Radio Model: Applying Practice to Theory in East Africa

Abstract:

Community radio is often theorized as being (1) independent from political and economic influence and (2) a platform for the meaningful engagement of marginalized populations traditionally excluded by its private and commercial cousins. Contrasting this model against the reality of practice, this study argues that the theorized benefits of community radio are unlikely to be realized given the reality of donor, rather than community, funding structures. Voices from 64 in-depth interviews reveal a community radio environment in East Africa that is significantly influenced by the interests – both political and economic – of external donors. Rather than engendering meaningful participation in media-making, donor funding has also caused communities to assume recipient roles in the communication process. Since it is unlikely that stations will naturally evolve to fit theoretical models, what needs evolving is our perspective as scholars regarding the role of journalism in marginalized communities and the authority granted to practitioner experience.