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The Limits of Governmentality: Call-in Radio and the Subversion of Neoliberal Evangelism in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The spread of mobile telephones in Africa has enabled a broad range of citizens to join live conversations on call-in radio shows. Both African governments and foreign aid agencies claim that broadcasting such debates can raise awareness, amplify the voices of the poor, and facilitate development and better governance; they now fund a large share of interactive shows in some countries. Critics of such participatory initiatives typically accept that they have powerful effects but worry that debates among citizens are deployed as a technology of “governmentality”, producing forms of popular subjectivity compatible with elitist economic systems and technocratic political regimes. This article argues that instrumentalising political debate is harder than either side assumes, and that the consequences of these shows are mainly unintended. It develops an in-depth case of a Zambian call-in radio programme, “Let’s Be Responsible Citizens”, emphasising the ability of the show’s audience, and its host, to subvert the programme’s surveillance and governmentality agenda, and to insist that the key responsibilities of citizens are to criticise, rather than adapt to, policies and systems of governance that do not meet their needs.

KEYWORDS

Radio; call-in; interactivity; governmentality; social accountability

Researching Radio as a Technology of Governmentality

Radio in Africa was intended from the start as a tool of the powerful, one that created relations between “deaf senders” and “mute receivers” of information (Gumucio-Dagron, Tufté and Gray-Felder 2013). Colonial authorities, postcolonial states and development experts have since used the medium to evangelise to the masses about approved uses of everything, from fertiliser to condoms to ballot boxes. The theory underpinning such broadcasting was rationalised by David Berlo’s “Sender–Message–Channel–Receiver” (SMCR) model, which assumed that listeners received messages from expert sources such that knowledge diffused from core to periphery, changing attitudes and ultimately facilitating nation building and modernisation (Berlo 1960). Its track record in achieving these transformations is more mixed.

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The Central African Broadcasting Services (CABS), that region's first radio station, grew out of the colonial administration's desire for a propaganda tool to strengthen African support for the Allies in World War Two. Harry Franklin, the first director of CABS, understood that, "for a mass medium to establish itself as the central source of information and entertainment, it must take the audiences' needs and wishes into account" (Heinze 2014, 625). CABS sought to achieve this effect by opening itself up to the audience's own voices, enabling the exchange of "call-outs" between colonial subjects fighting with the Allies and their families. Nonetheless, Robert Heinze illustrates the unintended consequences of CABS audiences talking to each other, and to sympathetic journalists. They did not simply reproduce official narratives – Africans also talked back to power. CABS was thus "a fundamentally ambivalent project", becoming over time "a source of information and education for colonial subjects, as well as a mediator of social change and, finally, an intellectual forum for Zambia's decolonisation" (Heinze 2014).

"Call-outs" are just one of a wide range of broadcasting techniques allowing audiences to go beyond mute listening, including through the reading out of letters, live and pre-recorded "vox-pops", and "listening clubs" (for a comparative historical survey, see Chignell 2014; for a more contemporary African case, see Mchakulu 2007). All forms of audience participation present possibilities for producers to coach, edit and censor their voices. However, since the 1990s, media liberalisation and dramatic increases in mobile telephone ownership in Africa have driven a proliferation of radio stations and shows on which callers are broadcast live, reducing editorial dominance.

Weakening direct control over what is voiced does not necessarily limit didactic opportunities. Indeed, champions of "communication for development" (C4D), including Paolo Meftapoulos, writing for the World Bank, emphasise the advantages of two-way communication over transmitting "expert knowledge" as a means to tailor messages and "generate new knowledge and consensus in order to facilitate change" (Meftapoulos 2008, xi). States' and aid agencies' belief in this potential of public deliberation to alter attitudes has resulted in "sponsored" call-in radio becoming a standard element of agricultural, health, post-conflict reconciliation, sexual violence and other "behaviour change" campaigns (Komodromos 2021).

Interactive broadcasting also serves as a repository for hopes of *political* behaviour change. Foreign aid donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) increasingly fund radio call-in shows designed to create "demand-side governance" or "social accountability". These concepts start with the thought that citizens (or "consumers", "the poor", "local actors", "communities", "civil society" or "marginalised people") have needs that are not being met. Government agencies and other "service providers" responsible for meeting them are seen as either ignorant of these needs, corrupt, or having insufficient institutionalised incentives to care. The declared hope is that supporting the confluence of mobile telephones and FM radios (which enjoy by far the widest ownership of any medium in Africa) will generate spaces of free communication, through which people's experiences and needs can be aggregated, informing and embarrassing service providers, and/or presenting a demand for better governance, and thus improving its supply (Ringold et al. 2011).

It is not obvious why faith in the (positive) effects of airing public opinion in diverse cultural contexts is so pervasive. One possibility is that the development industry is the contemporary bearer of a liberal ideology that has long needed to believe that political

subjectivities are reducible to “rational” interests, and seeks ways to make it so. Alan Kahan (1992) shows how, in classical liberal thought, democracy – to the extent that it implies mass rule – is seen as historically inevitable but full of risks that elites must manage. He depicts John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville and Jacob Burckhardt as “aristocratic liberals”. They were keen, in theory, to introduce institutions of mass self-rule. However, in each particular (nineteenth-century Western) context in which they considered it, they found reasons why democracy should proceed only as quickly as the popular consciousness could be transformed away from various forms of irrationality. Education and forums that bring proletarian elements into conversation with enlightened elites feature as prominent means of effecting this transformation (Kahan 1992).

From the late colonial period to the present, Western agencies have frequently hoped that engaging the African population in public debate will prove “civilising”, while simultaneously worrying that mass democratic politics (about which they were particularly nervous during the Cold War) risks empowering majorities who they fear lack reason and expert guidance, and might thus be led by nationalists, communists, or ethnic or religious extremists. Anti-plebian and anti-democratic snobberies are not exclusive to debate on Africa – they pervade contemporary liberal commentary on “populism”, “fake news” and “low-information voters” – but scepticism of majoritarian systems, mass/partisan politics and manipulative politicians on the continent is particularly acute. As Thandika Mkwandawire put it, “Even as they swear by democracy, part of the aid establishment is still preoccupied with finding ways and means of insulating aid from the encumbrances of democratic politics” (2010, 1149).

The promotion of call-in radio might then be understood as typical of the search for such ways and means: those that bring them into being hope that public debate can be managed to serve as a corrective to the pathologies they assume hobble African democracy. While advocates are rarely explicit about why the same pathologies would not equally overwhelm talk radio, Foucauldian critiques of Western aid provide possible answers, emphasising how stabilising capitalist societies involves building regimes of “governmentality” that remake people. These regimes remake people through means including “responsibilisation” – incentivising people to embrace a moral responsibility to pursue their own material betterment rather than, for example, demanding socialised welfare systems or relying on class solidarities (Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle 2017). While a number of analysts have identified the consciousness-transforming *intentions* of various Western interventions in Africa (Williams and Young 1994; Duffield 2002; Gabay and Death 2012), few provide close empirical studies of how African citizens react. There is thus a risk of moving too quickly from identifying the desire to win hearts and minds to enthroning “dominant discourses”, assumed to be omnipresent and self-reproducing (Jessop and Sum 2006, 163–164). Jonathan Joseph thus seeks to police the “limits of governmentality” (2010), insisting that, rather than providing a catch-all explanation for neoliberal hegemony, governmentality is most valuable when used to assess the impacts of concrete practices of rule.

Three notable studies of call-in radio in Africa take on this challenge, seeking to understand not only how public discourse is produced and framed, but how participants react to incentives to adopt certain self-presentations. These contributions do not add up to an alternative theory about the impacts of interactive radio. Rather, they tend to be concerned with the media productions they consider as useful windows on pre-existing social and political dynamics of the settings they study.

The “multi-voice” of African interactive local language radio is celebrated by Liz Gunner and others, who see the subversion of postcolonial political norms as a wider range of public moralities (embedded in African languages) circulate, and new figures act as intermediaries and spokespeople, often representing marginalised communities (Gunner, Ligaga and Moyo 2012, 13). Harri Englund also shows that those who position themselves as intermediaries and spokespeople may not have a (neo)liberal agenda, but may still impose hierarchical values. His study of Gogo Breeze, a Zambian radio personality, argues that it is only possible to speak freely on local-language call-in shows with an acceptance that discursive spaces constituted in Chinyanja-speaking Eastern Zambia are laced with culturally inscribed hierarchies. Englund emphasises the agency primarily of a “radio elder”. Gogo Breeze used interactivity to reveal the concerns and agendas of marginalised actors, and in the process secured his role as their revered tribune. But he also used his role as chair of discussions and his mastery of local idioms to “teach” his listeners to adopt a subject position as his “grand-children” and to accept his readings of their moral responsibilities and preferred terms for understanding injustice and pressing their demands (Englund 2018, 91).

In her study, Florence Brisset-Foucault discusses the uses, abuses and regulation of open-air debates, *ebimeeza*, broadcast on Ugandan radio (before being repressed by the state). She emphasises, like Foucault, the co-construction of political norms. However, while the (largely) young men who dominated discussions, state agencies, ruling and opposition political parties and radio stations interacted to produce a “relative stabilization of the rules on how to talk about politics” (2019, 244), Brisset-Foucault’s concern is not with the legitimation of any particular social practice, regime or policy field. Thus, while Englund emphasises the agency of a particular media professional, Brisset-Foucault describes multiple sites and programmes, and shows how a variety of “speech orders” emerge, and how multiple understandings of “good citizenship” are performed and observed by a range of actors pursuing quite different interests through the *ebimeeza*.

This case study’s context is different. Brisset-Foucault considers a semi-authoritarian state. The Zambian state’s capacity and will to control dissent are weaker. The discussions considered here took place in English (the language of government business and most call-in shows in urban Zambia, but just one of eight official languages). The political moralities revealed are thus not encoded in African languages and idioms. Nonetheless, it takes methodological inspiration from these authors’ attention to context and reception, and their refusal of deterministic assumptions about which agents and interests make most use of the political potentials of call-in radio.

The case considers 15 one-hour call-in shows, placing the conversations produced in their economic and political contexts. The analysis is based on in-studio non-participant observation of the production of the shows, and interviews with people who paid for, hosted and participated in them, to understand what motivated their production, and how they were responded to by the audience. The article finds that the aims of Lusaka City Council (LCC), which paid an independent radio station to make the programme, included increasing residents’ compliance with privatised systems for distributing social goods, generating depoliticised forms of “customer feedback” to privatised monopoly service providers, and enabling technocrats to better surveil the city’s unruly spaces. The programme was, in other words, conceived as an instrument of governmentality.

However, the article describes how LCC's agenda was so persistently contested by callers that the host consciously evolved the format and content of the show, encouraging expression of an entirely different understanding of appropriate state–citizen relations than the one required of compliant neoliberal subjects.

Political and Media Contexts of the Case Study

Zambia was an early adopter in the wave of dual transitions to free markets and democracy after the Cold War. The two have not fitted together easily and the country has experienced rule by four different ruling parties and seven different presidents since 1989. All have struggled to resolve the tensions between the democratic task of mobilising mass electoral support in a context of persistent poverty, deepening economic inequality and ethnic diversity, and the technocratic task of wielding the machinery of a state dependent on foreign providers of aid and investment who have typically been biased towards neoliberal solutions.

This article provides a window on how, immediately after it took power in 2011, a new ruling party, the Patriotic Front (PF), experienced debilitating internal power struggles. While much of the rancour was personal, we can also (crudely) talk about tensions between “neoliberal/technocratic”, “populist” and “clientelist” factions within the party. The article illustrates the limits of governmentality by considering how the technocratic leadership of the LCC tried and failed to deploy call-in radio shows as a tool, seeking both to evangelise the council's neoliberal vision for the city and to establish its authority against clientelist actors in the same party.

Radio Phoenix, Zambia's first commercial FM station, broadcasts from the capital, Lusaka. It hosts the country's longest-running interactive programme, “Let the People Talk”, and has long been politically influential (Mbangweta 2011). In 2006, Phoenix's call-in shows provided a forum for charismatic politician Michael Sata to draw attention to the PF, which he had founded, advertising himself as a “man of action” who had “cleaned up the streets” of Lusaka as city governor during the one-party era. Sata endorsed callers' frustrations with clientelism and poor services and promised to clean up the whole country. His initial appeal was widely described as “populist”, attracting the energetic support of those living in urban informal settlements (Larmer and Fraser 2007).

In 2006, the PF won control of Lusaka's administration, presenting a test of its ability to bring order, and thus readiness for national office, but Sata fell just short of the presidency. The ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) frustrated the opposition-controlled LCC, withholding funding as well as denying urban councils the ability to allocate residential land, slots in bus stations and stalls in markets by keeping their distribution under MMD-dominated clientelist networks (Resnick 2013). Violence, necessary to this strategy, repulsed middle-class voters and, ahead of the 2011 elections – shaking off their nervousness of Sata's populism – the Catholic church, Zambia's professional civil society and the private media swung behind the PF. The PF cemented these relations by hiring a number of former NGO and media workers – including several Radio Phoenix staff.

In 2011, the PF won the presidency and both the central administration and the PF-controlled LCC faced increased expectations of delivering order. Having seen Sata take

power partly by mastering call-in shows, both central and local authorities now experimented with governing through them, buying airtime from media houses economically dependent on “sponsored” shows (Fraser 2016). The first LCC-sponsored programme on Phoenix, “Sanity in the City”, encouraged callers to report nightclubs breaching licensing and underage drinking regulations. “Lusaka City Council and You” and “Government and You” had open agendas, which quickly became unmanageable, and senior PF figures stopped attending.

Contention flowed from the realities of “cleaning up” Lusaka, which divided the interests and values of the PF’s electoral and governing coalitions. Some “populist” PF members of parliament (MPs) and ministers favoured altering Zambia’s liberal economic model and delivering state-funded services to the poor. Lusaka’s mayor, on the other hand, representing the technocratic values of many in the city administration, as well as middle-class voters, prioritised an urban “order” that threatened the interests of party cadres embedded in clientelist structures. He argued on Radio Phoenix that “good governance” would attract investment, while also recognising that this implied costs for some:

Historically, it was common practice that political party cadres, their payment, or the way that people said thank you to them, was for them to jump on any land they find. So, unfortunately, this was cultivated for a very long period of time, resulting in the establishment of some of these settlements, which we are struggling with to offer services, because we find there are no proper roads – in short, no planning. The Patriotic Front government won’t do this and will try to put things back in order. Bring sanitation to the city. Bring dignity to the way our people live ... It’s a challenge because at times it looks like we’re being harsh on our people.¹

“Our people” refers here to PF voters, who, over bitter decades, had found “orderly” routes to jobs, houses and market opportunities impassable. Positioning themselves as “cadres”, many young men in the urban informal settlements offered themselves as foot soldiers for hire to needy politicians. The mayor was setting the council up against a political system in which not just voters but also many MPs in his own party were deeply implicated. This battle played out through the fourth PF-sponsored call-in programme at Radio Phoenix, “Let’s Be Responsible Citizens”, which ran for 15 shows at a cost to the LCC of Kw 15,000,000.

Why Try to Make Citizens Responsible?

The initial format of “Let’s Be Responsible Citizens” centred on LCC’s public relations officer Henry Kapata (“Mr K”), inviting people involved in delivering council policies to field 30 minutes of questions from the host Luciano Haambote (“Luchi”), Phoenix’s most skilled political interviewer. The phone lines then opened for a further 30 minutes. [Table 1](#) shows the evolution of the show, listing each episode’s guests and topic.

The show’s very name suggests instrumentalised concern with transforming political subjectivities – as does the following trail, played at the start of each show and after each advertisement break:

“Let’s Be Responsible Citizens” is a Lusaka City Council initiative, designed to change the mindset of citizens, to take responsibility of their actions, of their surroundings, public property, and be mindful of facilities, equipment and installations. But most of all, be responsible

Table 1. The Guests, Topics and Dates for the 15 Episodes of “Let’s Be Responsible Citizens” broadcast on Radio Phoenix, Lusaka, Zambia between December 2011 and November 2012.

Guests	Topic	Date
Henry Kapata, LCC (Mr K) with Willy Chikwemba and John Ndlovu, refuse collection contractors	Waste in Matero	08/12/11
Mr K with Donald Mwiila and Smart Lungu, refuse collection contractors	Waste in Garden	15/12/11
Mr K with George Mwamba and Joaquim Kaoma, refuse collections contractors	Waste in Kaunda Square	29/12/11
Edgar Mulonda, LCC with Alan Mulenga and Lazarus Mangela refuse collection contractors	Waste in Chawama	05/01/12
Mr K and Edgar Mulonda, LCC with Beatrice Kafue, Stephen Kamana and John Chonda, refuse collection contractors	Waste in Ngombe, Kabanana and Chaisa	19/01/12
Mr K and Edgar Mulonda, LCC with Mr Ndlovu, Waste Management Association	Open forum	26/01/12
Mr K and Edgar Mulonda, LCC with Mr Hussain, GL Carriers Ltd	Waste collection in low-density suburbs	02/02/12
Mr K with Moses Mulenga, Funeral Superintendent	Cemeteries	09/02/12
Mr K and Chief Fire Officer	Combatting fire	16/02/12
Mr K with Patrick Simuchimba, Electrical Engineer	Traffic lights and street lighting	23/02/12
Mr K with Reuben Matebula, Assistant Manager for Markets	Markets in Lusaka	01/03/12
Daniel Chisenga, Mayor of Lusaka	Open forum	15/10/12
Cllr George Nyendwa, Chaisa Ward, and Cllr Cassius Balazi, Kabwata Ward 6	Role of councillors	29/10/12
Cllr Potipher Tembo, Chawama Ward 2. Cllr Lawrence Chalwe, Nkoloma Ward 1	Floods and relocation of illegal settlements	05/11/12
Jean Kapata MP for Mandevu; Cllr Nyambo, Roma Ward 17; Cllr Bwalya, Garden, Ward 19	Development in Mandevu	12/11/12

citizens, to obey all rules and regulations, be aware of nuisance bye-laws related to the environment, rates collection, town and country planning, flea markets, general hygiene, street vending, and what we, the citizens are responsible for.

The “responsibility” discursively demanded here is obedience to state regulations, not a neoliberal responsibility to pursue one’s own material betterment. Nonetheless, it soon became clear that “what we, the citizens are responsible for”, in the eyes of the programme’s sponsors, was indeed the adoption of market-compatible attitudes and behaviours.

The topic of the first five episodes of “Let’s Be Responsible Citizens” was refuse. In Lusaka, in the “socialist” era, refuse collection in formal settlements was free and organised by the council. Police checks enforced prohibitions on burning, burying or dumping waste. Economic decline through the 1980s saw inadequate investment to maintain or extend services and burning, burying and dumping became ubiquitous, resulting in air and ground-water pollution, blocked storm drains, annual flooding of compounds and repeated outbreaks of cholera.

From 1997, the UN Centre for Human Settlements, Irish and Danish aid programmes, the International Labor Organisation, the UN Development Programme and various NGOs extended pilot projects in different compounds in a growing and increasingly informal city. The model donors converged on was essentially neoliberal (privatised, low-cost). Residents would be charged fees by micro-enterprises (“community-based solid waste management companies”), which were granted monopoly licences to run compulsory door-to-door collections in defined areas. These enterprises consolidated waste in collection zones, and the council was tasked with moving the waste from there to the city dump using municipal refuse trucks. By 2011, low payment rates (in spite of legal compulsion to subscribe), weak micro-enterprises and broken-down council trucks saw widespread

burying and burning, and vast refuse mounds at collection sites and in storm drains (Munthali 2006; Nchito and Myers 2004).

Three plausible motivations for LCC to sponsor call-in radio shows as tools to ameliorate these problems were visible during the first phase of “Let’s Be Responsible Citizens”, when managers of community enterprises were brought into the studio by Mr K, one area of the city at a time. The first is the generation of a consensus on the benefits of the privatised system and a discourse of civic responsibility, encouraging residents to pay up. A contractor from Matero was interviewed by Luchi at the start of the first show:

Luchi: Why don’t you have that many residents in the area of your jurisdiction who are on board with this very important exercise?

Contractor: We need to change the mindset of people. People have always felt they can just dispose of garbage anyhow. They don’t see the reason why they should pay for disposal of garbage, so we need to do a lot of sensitisation. Anyway, who can give me a reason why they cannot afford Kw 20,000 or Kw 30,000?

Luchi and his guests encouraged callers to discuss anyone in their area burning, burying or dumping rubbish, and asked listeners to take photos and report recalcitrant neighbours to the police or community enterprises.

A second identifiable motivation can be understood in terms of management theories of public value. Here, superintendent authorities generate public feedback on the performance of privatised contractors for monopoly services that are not subject to competitive pressures (Dunleavy and Margetts 2005). Airing complaints, it is hoped, puts pressure on companies and gives customers a sense that their concerns are heard. During the same broadcast, Mr K praised the community enterprises accompanying him, but noted:

We have been failed several times by some of these community-based enterprises ... they give us a very rich CV: ten trucks, four forklifters, what, what. But when you see them working on the ground, all you see are two over-age people with two shovels ... That’s why we keep terminating contracts.

The first two framings blame, in turn, citizens and community enterprises, shifting attention away from either the policy framework or the council’s inability to perform its allocated task. However, Mr K’s expansive response to a query about why the system requires households to register and pay a per-resident fee revealed a much more ambitious vision of city-wide surveillance.

They’re going to have to tell us how many people are dwelling in that one particular structure. Because it’s been extremely difficult for the council to monitor development in peri-urban areas. There are a lot of illegal structures. Where you expect a two-room house, it’s now a 14-room home ... They don’t pay anything to ZESCO [the parastatal power company] – there are illegal connections. They don’t pay for water. There are just illegal connections. They don’t pay for garbage. So we’ll have to capture all these units so that they become part of the council. So that we work in collaboration with our partners at ZESCO, so that before they put power in this particular new house, they’ll have to consult with us to say, “What is it that these people have done that is not within the law?” If we tell them we don’t recognise the extensions they’ve put forward, they won’t put power.

Building support for subscription-based refuse collection is imagined here to drive a city-wide database, disciplining and producing more citizen consumers of both

already privatised and soon to be privatised services. Whatever the balance between these motivations, none of these discussions generated an audience eager to share these ambitions.

The first show, featuring community enterprises from Matero, received three text messages, and, in 50 minutes with the phone lines open, just three short calls. The first was an ordinary service user, Gordon, calling from Matero, who initially performed his allocated role: "There are a lot of problems here. Our neighbours are just dumping litter in the night". This gave one of the contractors in the studio, Willy Chikwemba, a perfect opening. He replied:

People who dump at night and burn at night are really affecting their neighbours who are subscribing. Because if you burn at night, you know the pollution comes out of it. If you dump at night in the drainage then when the area floods you will say, "The council is not doing anything." But it's you who are doing it ... So let us do the right thing and subscribe to the system.

However, when Mr K asked which service Gordon subscribed to, he replied: "Well, I used to pay a certain company, but now I've dug a very big pit where I dispose of garbage". Mr K, half-jokingly, responded: "You are the people we're looking to prosecute, because we've said several times, we don't allow that. So please give us your details so that we can make an example".

By the time of the fifth and final show on waste management, the programmes were attracting more participation, but the tone and content were uniform: callers consistently refuted the idea that the problem with garbage collection was citizens' failure to subscribe. They attacked the principle of payment, the price, the council and the community enterprises. Community enterprises similarly consistently refused to accept that the crisis was their responsibility, focusing instead on the council's failures. The fifth show heard from seven callers over the allocated 30 minutes, with all but one criticising the quality or price of the service. Even a contractor invited by the council recognised the profound challenges facing their conscientisation efforts:

We have a number of people who are retired, and widows, widowers. Those people, their complaint is that they don't have money – that's the reason why they are throwing their garbage into the drainages and digging garbage pits. But even if it's like that, we are trying the whole time to sensitise them so that their mindset can be changed.

After five shows of consistent criticism, Mr K reframed the objectives of the show:

We know as a council that we have not done well. We know that as [a] community-based enterprise system, we have not done well. We know that as residents we have not subscribed as stipulated by the laws. So we said let us bring up some discussion where we involve everybody at the same time, so we know who is wrong, who is right and what is the way forward.

The conversational format of live call-in radio required and allowed the reworking of a format initially imagined as transmitting market-compliant ideas and behaviours. The depth of the challenge facing privatised refuse collection was clear from broadcast conversations, but these discursive realms also exist alongside material realities. While the shows were being broadcast, some community enterprises withdrew from their zones in the poorest compounds (Chibolya in this case), having been stoned by residents protesting against the price and quality of the service.

Being a skilled communicator, and having sunk costs in bought airtime, Mr K shifted the show's focus from neoliberal evangelism – deploying his willingness to listen to critique as an illustration at least of an administration wanting to be responsive – a move widely admired by callers. The only individual who called during the fifth show and did not complain about the privatised system in Lusaka was calling from the Copperbelt to express his desire to see the show's format replicated there: “Mr Kapata has taken a lot of flak, I know that, and he's willing to stand up and explain things”. Even a vituperative condemnation of the council by a caller named Mr Phiri opened:

Mr Kapata, you know I like you very much because you seem to know everything. But you have got very few solutions. This whole thing, Mr Kapata, is because of the city council's weakness. This whole drive for garbage collection will be in vain.

Based on audience feedback, the whole programme then changed tack again to offer a revised format that featured just Mr K and Mr Mulonda, both staff from the council, in an “open forum” that was no longer focused on solid waste management. Measured by the number of calls processed, this was the most popular show so far, attracting 19 calls in 45 minutes. Of those, two simply complimented the format and asked that it be repeated. The others raised concerns about topics ranging from corrupt roads contracts and lax implementation of zoning to the state of pavements, disabled people's access to bridges and noisy neighbours. These calls combined gripes about the council's failures to implement regulations, the resulting collapse of order (and morality) in the city, personal criticism of antisocial neighbours and industries, and queries about how residents could press the authorities:

In Kaunda's day, bars were only allowed to open at a certain time and had to close at a certain time. These days, they can open when they want to and play music as loud as they like. (Mr Ndlovu, Jesmondine)

Chickens make noise, but guinea fowls are worse. Our neighbours are keeping them and we can't sleep. How should we make a complaint? (Samuel, Chawama)

This was the show that got closest to generating consensus on responsible citizenship: callers, host and council representative all agreed that residents and businesses should behave sociably, and that the council should step in where they refuse to do so. Mr K dealt humorously with callers, providing a bravura tour of relevant statutes and regulations and honest explanations of the reasons the council struggled to enforce them. Again, this approach mollified many callers.

Taking popular criticism, responding and debating policy are in the end political tasks, and Mr K was a civil servant. His imagined role in the shows on refuse reflected a neoliberal project that assumed the depoliticised nature of development. As such, he found it hard to respond to callers' repeated assertions that the council was incapable of resolving Lusaka's problems, and that only the senior leadership of the PF had the authority and resources. Even representatives from community enterprises, in spite of their dependent relationship to the council, endorsed this analysis. During the fifth show, Stephen Kamana, a contractor, discussed the council's failure to invest in refuse trucks:

We are moving from a situation where people were getting free services from the old regime. And we had equipment at that time. But now, all the equipment has broken down, so we have reached a stage where people are offering a poor service ... So, let the city fathers do

something, and you know we are lucky in Lusaka especially, we have got the senior councillors. Here we've got the Vice-President, even the Minister of Local Government is here. We've got the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Kamana's reference to "city fathers" points to the role that Zambian MPs have, alongside their job in the national legislature, as *ex officio* members on local councils. Lusaka residents, in voting for PF MPs, brought to national office a group of political celebrities. They now expected their needs to be met by that group working cooperatively and were alarmed by administrative inactivity caused by in-fighting between PF factions (Fraser 2017).

During the open forum show, one topic in particular pressed Mr K's limits: a ministerial announcement that the government was considering regularising informal street vendors' markets. Lusaka's vendors were militant, an important element of the PF's electoral victory, and wanted their markets regularised as a reward. Since 2011, they had engaged in running battles with the council's street-cleaning teams tasked with "cleaning up" Lusaka by enforcing council zoning regulations.

The issue split the PF's multi-class coalition, as well as dividing factions of the party connected to different political celebrities and cadre networks. In some cases, marketeers were operating with impunity, protected by ministers directing the security services. An anonymous female health worker called and commented:

Allowing the street vendors to come into the city is going to help those people – I am sorry to use this term – at the bottom of the food chain. But again you look at the health hazard it is causing.

The caller was reflecting the initial rhetoric of the "clean-up" campaign, targeting both cadre-ism (involving the allocation of informal market plots to political activists) and public health. But Mr K trod carefully, avoiding contradicting a minister. A second caller sharpened the issue, criticising council inaction against vendors squatting in an illegal market near Radio Phoenix and claiming to be PF cadres who enjoyed political protection. They had adopted the name "Don't Kubeba Market" (after the PF's slogan from the recent election). The squatters pitted the authority of the council, whose job it was to clear them away, against senior PF MPs keen to reward their base. Mr K commented:

I don't think that the current minister will allow them to continue with what they are doing there. There are no toilets, there's no running water ... We understand that now there's leeway for vendors to be part of us, but we will not allow that kind of behaviour ... It was on television when one of the cadres was point-blankly talking about the minister, to say, "I am warning the minister not to touch us." Such kind of utterances are not healthy for the city.

Engaging such sensitive issues was not comfortable for Mr K and, after one episode of the so-called open forum, the range of debate narrowed as he brought in managers of council departments to discuss their portfolios: in cemeteries, fire services, traffic lights and markets. Through these shows, humility and recognition of failure remained a favoured "pressure-relieving" tactic for Mr K and the debates were largely anodyne, with relatively few calls fielded.

A more partisan tone returned with a second open forum, but this time Mr K came with an elected politician, the mayor of Lusaka Daniel Chisenga. Luchi's introductory framing

interview was gentle. He asked open questions and allowed the softly spoken mayor to answer technically, at length, setting a soporific tone. Nonetheless, having access to an elected leader, seeking credit not just for the council but also for the ruling party, politicised the discussion and callers started to address partisan comments to the guest, the host and each other. Three callers opposed the softening of restrictions on vending while another defended PF ministers in class-based terms:

People should sympathise with the vendors – they also have families and the cost of living in Zambia is very high. Those people who are calling and saying, “Arrest them,” them, they are eating. Their stomach is full with sausages. So please, be honest with the people selling in the streets. They don’t want to have to steal. They voted for this government.

The partisan tone adopted by callers provided licence for Luchi to sharpen his interview and he pressed callers’ concerns about whether, in the face of ministerial intervention in issues under the council’s purview, Chisenga had the authority to keep the clean-up going:

Chisenga: The law, the Bus Stations Act provides that the only legitimate authority that can run markets is the city council. You and your colleagues cannot just wake up and start putting ramshackles around and say you are creating a market. That’s illegal. So as long as the law remains, it’s the council that has jurisdiction over markets. So we will not entertain anyone who is going to break the law. The Don’t Kubeba Market, like we’ve always said, it remains illegal.

Luchi: Were you aware at the time that they were going to build this market? Because at the time it seemed, it took almost three months before it was all put up. I mean we could see it developing from upstairs here.

Chisenga: ... Everyone who has been a victim of any demolition in this city will tell you, “Yes I was served notice.” But what is the story? The people that promote them, sometimes political cadres will tell them to say, “You just continue. If you finish building it the council won’t demolish.” What I will tell you is, a law is a law.

The debate around this market appealed to both Luchi and partisan callers because it enabled them to raise indirectly a national political controversy: turmoil within the PF top leadership. As the show opened up to politicised topics, they became much more vibrant, callers debated with each other, and their conversations were reported in the national press. Listeners and the host were having a great time, but it became less and less clear what the council, let alone the PF national leadership, stood to gain from sponsoring a show openly debating problems the party was having in settling its agenda and resolving internal rivalries.

Operating in a “Normal Manner”

The next three shows featured as guests elected councillors from three different constituencies. The LCC’s initial aim with these shows was to challenge a form of politics which they saw as over-politicised, tied to a culture of clientelism, by establishing in the minds of the citizenry the roles of various layers of government, such that citizens’ concerns might be aggregated and processed “rationally”. Luchi explained the focus:

The big misconception in this country is people think when you have a problem in your area you speak to the MP. They don’t follow the chain of command. What the council would like to bring out to the people – in short the councillor is the first in a long chain of command.²

However, rather than councillors' presence attracting debate on the narrow realms in which they have formal responsibilities (primarily public maintenance works in their wards), since they were elected on party tickets (reflecting the city's electoral balance, all councillors featured were from the PF), callers and the host found themselves turning quickly to partisan controversies, and their tone was more hostile to the guests than it had been with council functionaries and contractors.

This dynamic was accentuated during a show featuring Councillor Lawrence Chalwe from Nkoloma Ward 1 and Councillor Potphet Tembo of Chawama Ward 2. Chalwe wanted to use the show to encourage squatters in Misisi, an area within his ward, to move. Around 200 very poor households, squatting in former quarries, were reluctant to leave ahead of annual floods that send cholera-infested water above the height of windows. The PF had made great play in opposition of the MMD's failure to deliver on a promised long-term relocation to better land. Now in office, PF Vice-President Guy Scott, responsible for disaster planning, had again called on Misisi residents to move out before the floods. In an initial interview, Councillor Chalwe argued that citizens had a responsibility, enshrined in the Zambian Constitution, to move and not to create a health hazard. Luchi asked where they should go. In previous years the squatters had been forcibly evicted and temporarily accommodated, at great expense, in a football stadium. Scott's line was that this could be avoided if residents voluntarily moved to rented accommodation elsewhere, and that a long-term solution would soon be announced by the cabinet. The councillors declared that they were unable to pre-empt a cabinet announcement and could therefore not express any opinion.

In a furious interview, Luchi insisted that the PF could not claim credit for a yet-to-be-announced solution. He condemned the councillors for attending a call-in show to deliver a message without the authority to engage constituents in dialogue. Following Luchi's cue, callers were merciless. The first of six, Sishula, stated:

How many times are we going to have a short-term solution? You carry on wasting money, wasting money, wasting money ... We are getting fed up of you.

The second, Chilufya, excoriated the councillors:

These are the people that were voted in by those people who are suffering right now ... you went to those people and said you are going to find a solution. So it is so absurd that today they can be talking as though they don't know what they are doing.

The third, Mr Maina, a former councillor, advised the hapless guests:

Whenever you are going on such a programme, you have to consult with your seniors before you come ... the problem in your ward is bigger than yourselves. So the fair thing is to say you cannot manage. Development is not about you, it is all about the central government.

The last call that came in featured a more robust defence of the administration's position than either councillor had been able to muster. This was the first time any caller to any episode of the programme had deployed a recognisably neoliberal discourse of responsible citizenship:

I would like to disagree a bit with the previous callers ... Every person should be responsible. When you get a plot and you want to build, get a plot in a normal manner, in a legal manner

and then you won't have problems. But if you get a plot in an illegal manner, these are the results and taxpayers' money should not be spent on such illegalities.

It transpired that the caller was Mr K. He was not in the studio that week, but was calling from his office at the council.

The motivation for "Let's Be Responsible Citizens" had been to engage citizens in dialogue to build consensus around a neoliberal variant of personal responsibility and a marketised understanding of governance. In spite of his undoubted eloquence, and indeed his personal popularity, Mr K had enjoyed little success, having to accept the legitimacy of caller criticisms of privatised social provision and allow the host of the show to reflect listeners' understanding, that the resolution of development challenges is embedded in contentious electoral politics. The resulting shows were a broadcasting success, attracting increasing audience participation and wide print media coverage of debates the following day. This came at the cost of the weekly humiliation of PF councillors and persistent critique of the party's performance.

Luchi recognised that the programme's original objectives had been so thoroughly usurped that the tolerance of the show's sponsors, or the degree of journalistic licence they allowed him to amplify listeners' concerns and deal with guests robustly, might come into question:

If the council call me and say, "Listen, we are paying, don't roast them," I might slow down on how much I roast them ... but I think even the council understand that these are councillors who have been elected by the people, so ultimately they are answerable to the people.³

The council's response to the evolution of call-ins they had paid to bring into being towards rumbustious partisan debate was to pick a prize fighter. For the final show, two councillors were accompanied by Jean Kapata, a cabinet minister and a "city father" as MP for Mandevu constituency, a heartland of the PF vote.

In making this choice, the programme's designers effectively admitted defeat in their efforts to insist that local issues ought to be dealt with through "appropriate channels". Her performance, and the audience's reaction, also illustrated the extent to which the council was fighting a losing battle. The councillors were left unscathed as Kapata fielded most questions. She was praised and criticised in equal measure as she exhorted listeners "We're getting to it ... people must be patient", and they commended her openness to discussion as a model for the PF national leadership, which had largely retreated from public engagement. On one level, the conversation finally showed the potential of the show to achieve social accountability and to build consensus: citizens voiced concerns to an authority who accepted responsibility to respond. Her interlocutors did not question Kapata's ability to take their concerns to the people who mattered and she explained knowledgeably how their concerns might be fed into planning, management and budgeting processes in the constituency. However, in the local projects discussed, Kapata, a national legislator and government minister, had no formal role (except perhaps as a "city father"). Nonetheless, the MP, callers and the host discussed issues as though Kapata were a coordinator of all resources coming into the constituency, being held accountable for her performance.⁴ In other words, an elected legislator was reinforcing precisely the common, clientelistic, understanding of senior, elected politicians as mini sovereigns in local politics that "Let's Be Responsible Citizens" was partly conceived by technocrats at the council to combat.

Conclusion

By their nature, call-in radio shows combine opportunities to propagate discourses and for audiences to react. “Let’s Be Responsible Citizens” illustrates how difficult it is, in the context of biting inequality and politically sophisticated populations, to use this format to evangelise values or stabilise unequal social and political relations, even when this is clearly the intention. The show’s audience consistently imposed an understanding that “cleaning up” Lusaka depended principally on the ability of senior elected representatives to pull together, rather than an increased willingness of citizen to pay for privatised services, or to press their concerns through the “right (depoliticised) channels”. Callers presented a model of the responsible citizen as one willing to exercise popular sovereignty by condemning failing politicians and using their vote to punish and bargain with them. Rather than smoothing neoliberalism or building the legitimacy of those who paid to bring debates to air, call-in radio provided a valuable window on popular sentiment, revealing urban Zambians’ investment in existing, imperfect systems of agonistic, representative politics, the same system they eventually used in 2021 to boot the PF out of power nationally after a decade in office. During that time, neither technocrats in the LCC nor any other force could resolve powerful contradictions within the ruling party that “Let’s Be Responsible Citizens” made visible from the start (Fraser 2017; Hinfelaar, ‘Brien Kaaba, and Wahman 2021; Resnick 2022).

Notes

1. ‘Let’s Be Responsible Citizens’, Open Forum with Daniel Chisenga, Mayor of Lusaka, Radio Phoenix, Lusaka, Zambia, 15 January 2012.
2. Interview with Luciano Haambote, Radio Phoenix, Lusaka, Zambia, 4 December 2012.
3. Interview with Luciano Haambote, Radio Phoenix, Lusaka, Zambia, 18 December 2012.
4. Interview with Jean Kapata, Hon. Kapata’s Residence, Rhodes Park, Lusaka, Zambia, 23 September 2013.

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