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Breaking the silence: how community radio engages listening clubs a case study of Mudzi Wathu community radio

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2021
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/33927

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Abstract

In Malawi, research suggests that community radio has empowered communities by giving them a chance to express themselves. The community radio has provided a platform for people who have been marginalised by mainstream media to be heard which encourages audience participation. One of the ways in which community radio engages the audience is through Radio Listening Clubs (RLCs). This research explores the extent to which RLCs promote active listenership through community radio. It looks at how they promote participation amongst the members, what they discuss and how the discussion occurs as well as what kind of publics they create and how these align with the overall objectives of community radio. It explores these issues by interviewing members of various RLCs and members of staff of Mudzi Wathu community radio, which this research uses as a case study. The findings of the study are then discussed in the context of public sphere and agenda setting theories. The research finds that RLCs are more than "listening groups", they have become platforms where ordinary people in the communities discuss issues that affect them, leading to action and policy changes. RLCs have also opened up a space for marginalised groups in society, like women, to discuss issues that affect them and take part in development projects in their area. With little to no interference from the community radio, RLCs are independent and act on agendas that are beneficial to their communities. The research suggests that community radio serves as a catalyst for action in the community through RLCs. On the other hand, RLCs can also influence the content on the community radio and use it to support their community engagement activities, at the same time, use it as a way to hold those in power to account through setting the broadcast agenda.