Radio Call-In Shows on Intimate Issues in Benin: "Crossroads of Sentiments"

Tilo Grätz

Abstract: The article focuses on the growing prevalence of radio call-in shows in the Republic of Benin that discuss topics such as sexuality and intimacy that are taboo in other settings. The popularity of this emerging format exemplifies current processes of appropriation of electronic media in West Africa, including its impact on contemporary public communication. The article argues that the current public prominence of these programs corresponds to considerable shifts in the media landscape that are enabled by a variety of factors, including an increasing expertise among presenters and technicians and the influence of mobile phones.

Résumé: L'article porte sur la prévalence croissante des émissions radio participatives dans la République du Bénin traitant de sujets tels que la sexualité et l'intimité qui sont tabous dans d'autres contextes. La popularité de ce format émergent illustre les processus actuels d'appropriation des médias électroniques en Afrique de l'Ouest, y compris leur impact sur la communication publique contemporaine. L'article affirme que la position publique actuelle de ces programmes correspond à une évolution considérable dans le paysage des médias qui sont activés par une variété de facteurs, y compris l'expertise croissante des animateurs et techniciens radio et l'influence des téléphones mobiles.

Key Words: Africa; Benin; media; radio; call-in shows; intimacy

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Introduction

Beginning around 2000, a proliferation of new radio shows related to issues of relationships and sexuality began to circulate through the Beninese airwaves. This emerging format, which presents listeners' problems in the form of anonymous letters subsequently discussed by radio presenters and call-in listeners, soon became one of the most prominent and successful types of radio production in the Republic of Benin. In these programs, issues of partnerships, sexuality, and moral conduct are vividly debated, primarily late at night on weekends. According to my investigations, these programs were first introduced to Benin by the private radio station Golfe FM in Cotonou and the public broadcaster Radio Parakou. Other stations soon after started to integrate similar talk radio shows into their broadcasting schedule, especially following the boom in mobile phone use. Today, this genre is flourishing across the country on both smaller private and community radio stations, most often in French but also in Beninese languages, with titles such as *Carrefour des sentiments* (Crossroads of Feelings), *Blues du coeur* (Heartsick Blues), *Âmes sensibles* (Sensitive Souls), *Lumières nocturnes* (Night Lights), *Sans détour* (Straightforward, or Frankness), *Autant en emporte le vent* (Gone with the Wind), *Cas pratique* (Practical Matters), *Supplice du cœur* (Torture of the Heart), and *Coeurs en détresse* (Troubled Hearts).[1] They enjoy high audience ratings and the hosts (*animateurs*), predominantly young men and women, figure among the most prestigious personalities on the air.[2] Enthusiastic listeners of certain shows have established clubs for the fan base, and presenters of these shows are even occasionally called and appealed to by stricken couples who require mediation in private disagreements.

What explains the success of these programs? Generally, these shows follow a model for call-in radio talk shows that was invented in the U.S., where they have existed since the 1940s, and has spread worldwide (see Halper 2009). Indeed, this format has become a radio staple throughout various West African countries and in multiple languages.[3] In the Republic of Benin the rise in popularity of these programs occurred in close conjunction with a new openness, plurality, and interactivity in public media. This process began about ten years ago in the country (ODEM 2001; Adjovi 2001; Carlos & Djogbénou 2005) and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (M'Bayo et al. 2000; Hydén et al. 2002; Nyamnjoh 2005; Bergstresser 2009; Wasserman 2010). It has been enabled by new media laws governing the mass media and information technology introduced in the mid-nineties, with a growing freedom of expression and the proliferation of new media technologies such as computer-based radio production, mobile phones, and the Internet. Furthermore, new issues and topics reflecting social and cultural changes in the country have increasingly found their way into public discourse, both inspiring, and in a reciprocal manner reflecting, the popularity of these interactive radio programs.

The appeal of talk radio in Benin stems chiefly from its often racy content; these shows not only discuss intricate moral issues and dilemmas,

but they also routinely transgress conventional taboos about what can be discussed in public while preserving anonymity. For example, on February 4, 2007, at 10:00 p.m., the Sunday night program of Radio Fraternité in Parakou, northern Benin, titled *Instant d'une vie* (Moment in a Life), hosted by a female and male presenter (Marie-Annick and Stanislas Lanlozé, alias Stan Le Doux) discussed the serious problems of a young female listener. She had sent an anonymous letter to the station—which was read at the beginning of the broadcast and repeated throughout the show—concerning marital problems connected to her husband's sterility. Both the woman and her husband wanted a child, but the husband was ignoring his situation and friends and relatives were constantly spreading rumors about their child-lessness. Eventually she had a secret affair with her husband's colleague and became pregnant. Her husband, not familiar with the real cause of her pregnancy, was now pleased to find that the curse of infertility had finally been lifted and believed the child to be biologically his. The woman heavily regretted the deception—even more so when her husband wanted a second child. She felt pressed to make a decision about whether to confess her cheating or find a similar solution with an external source of fertilization (although she preferred not to). She asked listeners for advice. Overwhelmingly men called in to the program in the course of the broadcast, with a great majority advising her to confess the truth, even at the risk that her husband would be quite angry. Some listeners stated that in the worst case scenario she might face a divorce but could live with a clean conscience, perhaps even making the biological father of the child publically known in order to increase the chances of receiving support from him. Few callers argued in favor of keeping the secret, and most callers believed the marriage was in crisis. The presenters discussed the topic with the callers and prompted discussion by continuously juxtaposing the opposite arguments. The conversation revolved around issues such as love, truth, conscience, and honor. Opinions that listeners sent in via text message were also read on the air.

Although many of these programs are broadcast at night, this is not exclusively the case. For example, the debate on the weekday program *Contact* in Fongbé on September 24, 2012, at 9.30 a.m. was on the "normal" frequency of sexual intercourse in marriage. The host of the show, Nan (Eugenie) Adoukonou, also offers individual partnership counseling (interview, Cotonou, March 2013). Most discussants and callers argued that both partners in a marriage have an obligation to be ready to sleep with the partner, and can only retreat in severe situations, like illness. In any case, it was agreed, men and women should communicate their desires constantly, and also the reason for sexual abstinence in order to avoid mutual frustration.

These examples illustrates the allure of contemporary call-in shows as spaces where technology allows compelling content to be discussed anonymously without risk to the reputation of the participants. This article describes the contents and production methods of such shows, the relationship of the presenters to their listeners, and the popular perceptions of these programs.[4] The success of these broadcasts is situated within the larger context

of urban social change, in which electronic media have been appropriated by various actors and created new spheres of public exchange. The central thematic concerns of these shows—intimate relationships and sexuality—are of great interest to numerous listeners and fill a void that existed in the past by their hitherto complete absence from public debates and the media. The increase in these programs has also corresponded with other developments in Benin, including the proliferation of new and independent radio stations that increasingly compete with one another for listeners, and the increasing expertise of presenters and technicians, who avail themselves of current radio technologies and also assess which topics and programs appeal to listeners. The boom in mobile phones has also created novel dimensions in enacting social and virtual relations (see Bruijn et al. 2009; Archambault 2009) and, increasingly, facilitated interactive radio shows.

An in-depth analysis of the various societal issues discussed in the above radio excerpts is beyond the scope of this article. However, these examples illustrate how radio shows effectively discuss otherwise delicate issues that are usually discussed only privately. This currently popular radio format presents a culturally condoned avenue for the discussion of intimate problems of marriage, sexuality, and also issues that exist between parents and children.

The Changing Media Landscape of Benin

As in many other African countries, Beninese radio, despite its short history, is number one in popularity among electronic mass media. As the first radio service in the former French colony of Dahomey, Radio Cotonou began broadcasting on March 7, 1953. Operating from a regional post office in Akpakpa, a district in Cotonou, the station produced seventeen minutes of programming each day with a limited number of personnel (ODEM 2001:26). The first production studios (still known today as Ancienne Maison de la Radio and partly in use by the public station Atlantique FM) were inaugurated in the city center in 1957. The station broadcast as Radio Dahomey from 1958 onwards after the country gained independence. In 1962 the first programs broadcast in the country's national languages were introduced. This service was widened to include other languages in 1968, and was broadened again in 1976 by the new revolutionary government with the establishment of a special subdepartment called Radio Rurale at the newly opened radio center (which, along with a television station, was near the airport in Cotonou). The radio service's name was changed to La Voix de la Révolution and had the primary aim of encouraging a positive public opinion in regard to the Marxist-Leninist ideology that had been adopted by the regime. Another station, Radio Parakou, was established on March 23, 1983, to enhance regional representation in local languages in the northern part of the country.

The liberalization of the media following the democratic renewal (*renouveau démocratique*) of 1990 led to a considerable variety of media

outlets such as community radio stations and independent newspapers (Grätz 2000, 2010). A new media law in 1997 also enabled the establishment of independent radio and television stations, including religious broadcasters (Adjovi 2001; Grätz 2003, 2011b), which are licensed by the supreme media board, the Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication (HAAC). Currently a variety of stations, including private, religious, and community stations, operate particularly in the urban centers of Cotonou or Parakou. These all provide an outlet for critical voices against governmental policies, despite recent actions of the Yayi government to enforce a kind of soft censorship and place some restraints on independent journalists (Podesta 2009). These developments also correspond with the media situation in other countries on the continent (Fardon & Furniss 2000; Vidali 2008; Wasserman 2011; Gunner et al. 2011).

The various radio stations offer a multifaceted program schedule, including shows that provide information, entertainment, advice, and public announcements. Interactive shows, such as *Grogne Matinale* (Morning Anger), are gaining more and more attention from listeners, and the popularity of press review programs, quiz shows, and political debates is also on the rise.[5] These stations are one manifestation of what is a general expansion of media productions in Benin, including a flourishing of local video film production and a growing number of commercial media production companies. Both solidarity and competition exists among the new media actors as they compete for funding and advertising and strive not only to gain a broad spectrum of viewers and listeners, but also to become leaders in public opinion. The competition for domination of the radio airwaves—what Oosterbaan (2009) calls "sonic supremacy"—consequently urges all broadcasters to develop ever more compelling programs and to promote talented presenters who are able to attract listeners.

In Benin, the HAAC has proved to be very effective in its role of licensing new media and in exercising a necessary control of broadcasting without obstructing the functioning of independent stations. Journalists' associations, together with media-related NGOs, donor organizations, and political foundations, also help to better the standard of production. A recent development is the growth of larger private media groups, established either by private businesspeople or career journalists. These conglomerates, which combine ventures in publishing, television, and radio, enable larger investments in technology and media infrastructure than are possible with smaller enterprises and profit from program exchange. In general they strive for enhanced professional standards, and they may also become powerful players in national politics (see Frère 2000; Adjovi 2003b).

One of the most important results of these processes, besides the appearance of new media products and their multiple effects on public information, entertainment, and cultural creativity, is the emergence of a large new set of media actors who enhance the social field of media production in postcolonial Africa. Up to this point, this field had been dominated mainly by state employees and a few established filmmakers and editors

who had often gone through a formal system of professional training, including spending time at universities in other parts of Africa or in Europe, and who faced considerable political and technical constraints in their professional lives. Today, the most publically visible result of the expansion of radio production is the regional celebrity status and skyrocketing careers of many of the new generation of radio presenters, especially those in the southern part of the country (Cotonou-Porto-Novo area), despite their lack of formal training in media production.[6] Some of them have even become directors of their own media outlets and strive, especially in the face of growing competition, to promote novel programs and genres and present an alternative to state-dominated media outlets.

Radio journalists in one of the private or community radio stations are generally not well paid, with monthly salaries ranging between 50 and 150 Euros (approx. U.S.$66–198). Many, therefore, hold side jobs and work in advertising, in municipal offices, or as MCs, actors, press officers, music producers, or teachers. Often they work simultaneously for several media outlets as presenters, journalists, technicians, DJs, editors, or PR officers. Technicians often run workshops at home, or help provide technical assistance at parties or public events. These activities may result in demanding schedules, but the outside work nevertheless keeps them in close touch with potential audiences and other professionals. They also gain much insight into the daily work life and business dealings of various elements of the public, and this, in turn, shapes their media content. They are entrepreneurs who employ creative media tactics and technologies in order to shape the public sphere (see Certeau 2007; Hörning 2001; Joas 2002) and enhance their careers—as well as other goals, such as individual religious, developmental, or cultural endeavors—through new media channels.[7] They act as mediators or cultural brokers between diverse systems of meaning in a globalizing world.

Regardless of their actual position and power within the media field, most media actors within this new generation share a similar attitude of professional pride and devotion. Beyond these general commonalities, media producers employ their personal style—be it in radio talk programs, television shows, or press commentaries—through the manner in which they address their audiences (Barber 1997).

Main Topics and Modes of Production in Call-In Radio Shows

The radio shows that are the focus of this article deal with various aspects of personal relationships, intimacy, love, and sexuality, and are concerned with the reasons for and reactions to occurrences such as jealousy and adultery. The emphasis on such issues is not exclusive to these mostly late-night programs. Whether commercial, content-focused, or religious, radio stations throughout Benin commonly pursue programming that integrates issues of private life and morality with numerous other formats offering advice and education—often with studio guests and in cooperation with NGOs,

teachers, or pastors. Benin is currently witnessing the expansion of a particular discursive field (see Foucault 1982) concerned with morality and the management of emotions and individual conduct—a discursive field that has much in common with ongoing debates taking place particularly among the younger generation on everyday issues of relationships, sexuality, and intimacy. The call-in radio shows that are examined here discuss modes of conducting a harmonious partnership or marriage, the ways in which crises or problems can be solved, and the effects of familial crises on children. They frequently include stories that tug at the heartstrings, like harrowing tales of children in search of their biological parents. The formats include debates on diverse and controversial topics, such as the right method of family planning, issues of sterility, or how to avoid sexual frustration. They may also address general marital problems, including conflicts with parents and in-laws or just issues of deficient communication and trust. Other topics include male friendships that have been put to the test by a quest for the same women, sexual liaisons between female pupils and male teachers (often resulting in teenage pregnancy), and adulterous relationships between married men and younger women. But even Christian religious radio stations in Benin have learned from the popularity of these call-in shows, with individual pastors contracting for air time and radio producers adopting the call-in format as well as the focus on intimate issues. Religious broadcasters, of course, approach these issues from their individual perspectives; for example, religious programming frequently condemns adultery. But in many ways all of the programs resemble one another with their assertion of the central importance of moral issues and various ethical dilemmas and their focus on conserving troubled marriages and preserving domestic peace.

In most of the late-night shows, presenters read anonymous letters written by listeners about their problems. Other listeners call in, respond, and provide advice. The letters of the listeners are in most cases slightly edited for content and French colloquialisms, read and recorded prior to the transmission, and then presented repeatedly during the broadcast.[8] Whenever there is a lack of substantial material to use as a topic for debate, the hosts create hypothetical listener problems and a fictive letter is produced in a joint session with colleagues. Presenters assert that they mostly base these letters on real facts and figures, known real-life examples, and recent societal problems that can be introduced via the vehicle of a letter. Ideas frequently circulate among stations as a result; some radio presenters in the Cotonou-Porto-Novo area said that they were often inspired by the popular column called "Coeur à Coeur" (Heart to Heart) that appears in the newspaper *l'Informateur* in which readers' letters are published anonymously and answered by a certain "Bill" (Noël Kpatinde). Kpatinde has himself declared that he was influenced by the show *Coeurs en détresse* (interview, Cotonou, October 2010).

Usually radio moderators ask callers to present their first names and occasionally their current location. The callers are also frequently admonished by the presenter to stay on topic, since many listeners call the station without

having followed the current debate attentively. Many of the programs take on the form of a counseling session, with the hosts playing the role of advisers and trying to convey useful information to enhance listener responsiveness. Other hosts put a lot of effort into creating a very intimate, welcoming atmosphere by staging themselves as good friends. They usually conclude the show by summing up the general debate with caller opinions, often contributing their own advice couched in comforting, encouraging closing remarks. The presenters are always eager to avoid taking sides and to present constructive, moderate conclusions to the debates at the end of the shows; as Valentin Kwagou from Radio Nanto said, "The conclusion is always the most difficult part of the show, because we would like most callers to identify with our summary of the debate and the main tendencies of the opinions raised, despite the often very divergent views expressed" (interview, Natitingou, February 2008). Differences in the formats of various shows are contingent upon the individual styles and talents of each presenter, and are particularly evident when hosts integrate additional elements like music, greetings, partnership requests, poems, short stories, sketches, translations of pop songs, and more to their discussions of listener problems.[9]

In most shows, slow and ambient music and introductory jingles are implemented at key moments to lend the shows a comfortable, soft mood. The choice of background music in these programs seems to be quite similar, often consisting of soothing melodies from French artists such as Francis Cabrel or Beninese musicians such as Pierre Dassabouté or Nel Olivier. Stéphanie Montcho, who worked for Radio Topka from 2008 to 2010 before moving to Radio Ocean, frequently integrates contemporary English-language songs into her shows, often from the U.S., and usually sings along at the beginning of her broadcasts. She occasionally explains the content of the songs, a feature received very positively by young listeners. The music choices also depend somewhat on the preferences of the technicians (or their relations to musicians they may wish to promote), because the show's technician is responsible for choosing the tunes from the hard drive of the studio computer and adding them to the playlists. In stations such as Nanto FM in Natitingou, popular romantic West African songs, often about unfaithful girls and wives—for example, from the well-known blind singer Solo Dja Kabako from Burkina Faso—are aired in both French and local languages.

Some programs are broadening the range of potential listeners and participants through a variety of strategies. For example, Radio Tokpa increased its listenership through the introduction of live Internet streaming, which allows listeners from outside the broadcast range and abroad to listen and participate in the program *Sans détour*. At the end of 2011 a Facebook site was also created which announces upcoming topics and allows listeners and fans of the show to post opinions, which are subsequently read out at the end of the show. Older, interesting cases are frequently revisited through updates on the course of events and further developments. In January 2007, for example, the program *Coeurs en détresse* in Cotonou produced

a serial story based on the complaint of a young women about the lack of attention by her husband and her in-laws after the birth of her child. After the story aired, the husband, mother-in-law, and some friends participated in subsequent Sunday shows to give their version, which made the case very well-known all over Cotonou.[10]

Some programs are hosted by two or more presenters, often a man and women who work together in order to get different gender perspectives on sensitive topics and appeal to different listeners. Some repeat callers may be invited to join the studio discussion, along with close friends of a presenter. Program formats often change over time with the interests and ideas of its hosts. According to the program director Donklam Abalo, the interactive show *Lumières nocturnes* was integrated into the Radio Tokpa, Cotonou, lineup because "I had the feeling that this element was missing in our schedule and would meet the interests of listeners" (personal communication, Cotonou, December 5, 2008). Abalo hosted the show for several years but stepped down when he was appointed program director of the station, feeling that the role of host would compromise his new position. From November 2008 to October 2010 the show (now called *Sans détour*), which was very popular among younger listeners, was hosted by Stéphanie Montcho together with a male presenter. When Montcho left the station to join Radio Ocean she was replaced by Innocencia Ligan.[11] At the end of 2011 the show was taken over by Amed Ahossivi Picardi and Dossi "HDK" (Murielle Houndekon), with Picardi emerging as the main force driving the current shape of the program.

Picardi, who completed law studies and works part-time as a salesman and a musician, now focuses primarily on issues of sexuality, including delicate topics like impotence, masturbation, and abortion, sometimes including expert guests and psychologists. Between the end of 2011 and early 2012 other topics included coital positions, the use of lubricants, violence during sexual intercourse, the advantages of separate beds, keeping virginity until marriage, the role of parents in the sexual education of their children, and kinship relation intricacies like levirate marriages. Picardi argued that a shift to such matters was necessary to maintain the interest and attention of late-night listeners and to distinguish *Sans détour* from similar programs (Graf 2013), although opinions over this change were divided. While some listeners welcomed the discussions of formerly taboo topics, others were distressed by Picardi's direct manner. Some frequent listeners and members if the program's fan club missed hearing references to their own activities and discussions of broader topics such as relationships. During the 2011–12 research period Picardi and Houndekon changed the usual modus operandi several times by preparing a numbered list of concealed questions to which callers were randomly assigned by choosing numbers. The questions were intended to reveal opinions and positions with regard to salient topics such as polygamy, jealousy, or sexual attraction. At times, other presenters from the station were interviewed about their private relationships and studio guests narrated their partnership

problems—both of which usually triggered high rates of caller participation. On September 16, 2012, Picardi and Houndekon celebrated the second anniversary of the show with a public broadcast in Cotonou.

Reception by Audiences, Relations between Listeners and Producers

According to interviews, a large portion of the attraction of these shows is the charisma and popularity of individual presenters. In regard to Lucien Sotondji from Radio Parakou, a listener said,

> He may not be the best presenter, but I thoroughly enjoy listening to his broadcasts. He speaks and explains very clearly, and deals with each individual caller. I like how he interacts with the callers and personally relates to them—it enchants me [ça m'enchante]. (Interview with A., Natitingou, March 2009)

Many listeners express a general interest in topics that are applicable to their own lives and listen to broadcasts for personal guidance. Fieldwork respondents commonly said that they hoped to receive moral education from the shows. According to Santa, a young tailor in Natitingou and a frequent listener of the Radio Parakou Friday night show *Blues du coeur*, the programming "is a broadcast that cultivates the individual [l'émission cultive l'homme]. The messages represent good advice for my life [conseils de la vie]" (interview, Natitingou, March 2009). In a similar vein, Antoine, a barman and devoted follower of the Radio Parakou Sunday night show *Carrefour des sentiments*, stated, "I would like to learn from the experiences of others, to be prepared for all problems in life" (interview, Natitingou, March 2008). The modes by which individuals accomplish what Hall (1980) calls the "decoding" of such programs may be quite diverse; both those who call in and those who are "silent listeners" (who often do not have sufficient means to pay for calls) converse daily with their peers and friends about the latest intriguing topics. These shows help create what Schulz (1999) and Shipley (2009), with regard to talk radio shows in Mali and Ghana, respectively, have called (dispersed) "moral communities." The audiences do not constitute an abstract unidentifiable "mass," but rather a tangible group of interested and attentive listeners often sharing similar lifestyles and social situations. Frequent listeners, especially of programs in French, are often urbanites between the ages of twenty and forty-five, young professionals in unsecured positions, and immigrants detached from larger extended families. Members of the audience also often share simultaneous desires to realize their full potential and be socially respected, to find an ideal partner as well as success in life (see also Bochow & Alber 2006; Bochow 2010).

Desiré Dah Allognon is typical example of a frequent caller, particularly to programs aired by Radio CAPP FM and Radio Tokpa in Cotonou. He justifies his passionate participation through his curiosity, his desire to contribute to important debates on good conduct in life, and his dedication to

the moral enhancement of the lives of fellow citizens. He works as a vendor in a Christian devotional shop and aspires to better his professional and family situation. Deeply affected by the untimely death of his former girlfriend, Dah continues to search for an ideal partner, an issue that certainly influences his interest in such shows. According to Dah, calling in and getting on air require a special expertise. He spends a lot of money on these calls, yet tries to limit his expenditures by selecting the ideal tariffs. Dah's voice is immediately recognized by most hosts and he is also well-known among listeners across Cotonou, who either praise his vigor and engagement or disapprove of his mostly conservative statements (interview, Cotonou, February 2012). Yet many listeners also express wishes to preserve a distinct "Africanness," calling upon traditional values at the same time that they strive for more individual liberties. This is a position of ambiguity that is typical for young urbanites throughout Africa (Abbink 2005).

Although the centrality of moral issues and the preoccupation with private life within these media productions can be seen as an expression of particular agenda-setting processes (Rössler 1997), they can also be seen as an element of ongoing social transformation that puts pressure on the younger urban generations. Urban centers may potentially enjoy more social liberties than rural areas, yet the residents of these areas must cope with the daily struggles and fluidities of urban life. Living largely in smaller households rather than rural homesteads, modern urban actors are still trying to keep up with their idea of harmonious family life, striving to be good husbands or wives and admired lovers, to show solidarity in times of growing competition, and to keep up with necessary social and physical mobility in a society moving toward a more liberal economic structure. This discursive field was certainly not created only by radio stations, but these take a central role in these debates, adding their particular message and meanings. Programs that address issues of partnership and sexuality are undoubtedly followed by many listeners because of their sensational touch, but they are sustainable in the long run only when there is a direct connection to the needs and concerns of listeners. Part of these needs are clearly fulfilled by the feelings of concern, intimacy, and good will that certain presenters are able to project.

In the active fan clubs that have been founded by the most committed listeners, members meet to discuss the contents of the shows and invite presenters to voice their critique, and they themselves are often invited into the studio to contribute to the discussion during live broadcasts. Most of the core members of these clubs usually call in during the broadcasts, either to contribute to the discussion or simply to greet the presenters and other listeners. The fan club for *Lumières nocturnes*, composed of approximately thirty mostly well-educated, urban, male youth, was created in 2007. Members meet each other on a regular basis, organize excursions, and celebrate various festivities. The president, Gildas, a young teacher, explained that he is an avid listener because the program provides answers to questions never discussed anywhere else (personal communication, Cotonou, March 2009).

The fan club "Cercle d'action pour une vie de couple harmonieuse" (CERAVICOH) in Parakou regularly holds meetings for the show *Carrefour des sentiments.* This group was established in 2008 and is composed mostly of well-established professionals and merchants between the ages of twenty-eight and sixty. This club conceives of itself as an association with multiple duties revolving around the improvement and deepening of program content: the discussion of pertinent issues, the proposing of studio guests, and the pursuit of and follow-up on problematic individual cases, especially when the radio presenters are unable to do so. During a meeting on February 21, 2010, members first discussed the common practice of letting young children sleep in parents' bedrooms, including its potentially detrimental effects on the sexual life of the couple. The second issue discussed was the use of mobile phones within partnerships. Is my partner allowed to answer a call on my mobile phone, or is it strictly a personal item? Does hiding my phone activities create distrust in the relationship? Members' opinions on these issues were not always in agreement. Thus the group decided to send various representatives to partake in a studio discussion on this topic scheduled at Radio Parakou.

Modes of Media Appropriation and Skills of Young Radio Presenters

The formatting of these programs, their skillful presentation, and the vibrant relationship between the radio presenters, technicians, and audiences represent a creative usage and implementation of modern radio technology and media. Accordingly, these widely popular programs exemplify a process of cultural appropriation of media technology (see also Spitulnik 2000).

Radio Parakou's programs are a prime example of this cultural appropriation. Silvère Savi hosts the Sunday night call-in show *Carrefour des sentiments.* She usually either presents listener letters that address partnership issues or proposes an overarching topic to discuss with the listeners. In either case, she invites studio guests to help her explore the particular issue and add more knowledge and flavor to the debate. She usually contacts the potential studio guests at least a week before the show, and, when possible, meets them beforehand to explain the main ideas she wishes to address. In some cases she sends out invitations to representatives from the frequent listeners' club as well. All guests are introduced to one another at least one hour before the show starts and usually begin a debate on the show's key issues at that point. Savi begins by giving them some introductory advice on the discussion format—for example, to try to avoid misunderstandings, to quote real names, and so on—and then leads them into the broadcasting studio, where she explains the uses of the technological devices. On the other side of a large window sits the technician preparing the selected playlist and jingles announcing the beginning of the show. In the course of the show Savi carefully allocates equal time to each studio guest and tries to induce clearer statements from them when necessary—for example, by playing devil's advocate and offering potential counterarguments, or citing

cases that conflict with the positions advocated by the guests. For example, in a show in March 2011 on the components of a successful long-lasting partnership, to which I was invited to participate as a studio guest, Savi constantly reminded participants of common quarrels and sore spots between couples, which prompted them to take clearer positions and move the discussion forward. The same show included an elderly couple and the representative of a Catholic NGO that supports families in social difficulties. After thirty minutes Savi interrupted the discussion, signaling the technician to play music, in order to allow the guests to take a break. Later in the show she opened the airwaves for caller participation. After the show we took pictures and briefly summarized the outcome of the discussion.

The passion and youthful exuberance of the newest generation of radio presenters contributes greatly to the success of the programs. Despite their fragmented job training, these new hosts and producers pursue their vocation with a professionalism and pleasure that appeals to listeners without falling into the trap of sensationalism. They use nicknames like Prince Cool, Master T, Chevalier des Ondes, or Stan le Doux, and live in the same city and setting as their listeners. They are also reachable outside of the broadcasting area and times and are present in the public arena. In their on-air lives presenters must moderate caller influx and opinions and be able to manage various technical problems. They need to skillfully combine music, narrative techniques, and rhetoric styles to produce these shows. Their prestige also depends on their social conduct off the air, and their presentation of other shows at the station. Several hosts of these programs are also sought after for private consultation and advice. The show *Fréquence Rose* (Rosy Frequency), aired by Radio Arzèkè in Parakou, for example, was hosted for several years by a man known as Elronic who was known for being accessible to listeners and for responding on air to letters he had received. In one case Elronic was visited by a young craftsman who recognized his wife as the person whose letter had been discussed on the air and who complained that his wife had not explained the issues accurately. Elronic subsequently invited both parties to discuss the matter in private and helped to reconcile them. Indeed, many show presenters are frequently asked to mediate in marriage or partnership disputes.[12]

Radio presenters eagerly take up these challenges. According to hosts' own statements, many strive to satisfy the needs of their listeners. However, on a larger, macro-level, the hosts of these programs help create new modes of audience participation through their interactive relationship to the listeners and openness to a reciprocal exchange of ideas.[13] This programming also contributes to the creation of novel audience groups rather than simply reflecting the needs of the generalized, local community, allowing for an "appropriation" of radio technology to create processes of exchange between listeners and producers that blur the boundaries between these categories. Particularly in German-speaking anthropology, the term *appropriation* (*Aneignung*) has been used by anthropologists to describe the adoption of material culture, consumer goods, and technologies into local life worlds

and their impact on and modification of local cultural practices. Influenced by discussions in cultural studies but also by classical anthropology (especially with regard to the concept of domestication introduced by Silverstone et al. 1992; see Röser 2007; Hartmann 2008), the concept has developed into a multidimensional, dynamic framework that explains culturally encoded, localized usages of various ideas, technologies, and objects (see Silverstone 2006; Berker et al. 2006; Ang 1996).[14] In this sense, radio technologies are heterogeneous and fluid assemblages of infrastructures, sites of media production, and interstitial realms between global processes and local and private spaces.

Radio, Public Sphere, and Media Change as Sociotechnological Drama

Although this article focuses on radio in Benin, it is generally the case across Africa that a preoccupation with issues of emotional life and intimate relationships, sexuality, and trust seem to be a part of urban landscape and routinely manifest themselves in various discursive forms and media platforms.[15] In Kinshasa, for example, talk shows on issues of intimacy, moral conduct, and sexuality are prominent on television, especially on the new urban private channels (Pype 2009). In Tanzania (Reuster-Jahn 2008) and South Africa (Narunsky-Laden 2010), such issues find their place in serial stories published in newspapers. In Ghana and Nigeria, there is a long-established market for popular literature on self-help and moral advice (Newell 2000, 2008).

The case study of Benin throws several questions regarding the contemporary uses of media in West Africa into relief: First, why has radio, of all things, assumed the role as the main communication platform? How has it provided a forum for the emergence of new discursive fields? And why has this type of discourse not presented itself in other media forms (although topics from press publications and films do influence radio programs)? To explain this phenomenon, I attempt to retrace the pathways through which new radio technologies and public spheres coevolved and were shaped since 1990, both enabled by particular institutional conditions. Such an approach borrows from the anthropology of technological change and the concept, developed chiefly by Bryan Pfaffenberger (1992), of "technological drama" as "a discourse of technological statements and counterstatements" (285). This approach also borrows some insights from the work of Victor Turner (1975), as well as classic Science and Technology Studies (or STS; see Hackett et al. 2007). It is similar to models such as the "circuit of culture" (Du Gay et al. 1997) or "sociotechnical ensembles" (Pinch & Bijker 1989, 1992), and assesses the overall sociocultural processes by which technical innovations are introduced and culturally shaped, stressing the considerable openness and multiplicity of the pathways of such processes of technological change.

The starting point of any such analysis is the concept of a "sociotechnical system." In the context of radio production, this refers to the complex

assemblage of actors—including not only radio presenters, listeners, station managers, and media politicians, but also the broadcasting technology, radio apparatus, firms, repair workshops, etc.—that shape these processes and permanently impact its functioning. The use of the word *drama* in this context thus refers to processes of what Pinch and Bijker (1989:44) call "technological destabilization and closure." According to this conceptual framework—and in combination with the institutional context of the media field—the development of radio stations and radio programs in post-1990 Benin can be interpreted as a social and technological drama. A large proliferation of media first occurred in the socialist era (1972–90), when they were politically restricted and economically limited. The media later experienced a period of timid growth (1990–97), when radio technology was appropriated in a fast and localized manner. The press throughout this time focused primarily on political issues, despite the existence of more than thirty well-established newspapers. Two waves of new radio station growth between 1997 and 2003 followed, along with their vigorous acceptance among the public. The rising competition between media producers consequently forced all broadcasters to develop compelling programming and to promote talented presenters who were able to attract a large listener base. This then led to the preferred production and nationwide dissemination of successful genres such as phone-in shows (2000–4). After 2002 the rising ubiquity of mobile phones along with shared landlines enabled even more people to call in and listen to the shows, which encouraged even more interactivity and acceptance of these broadcasts. Parallel to these changes, multiple new listeners' communities emerged, followed by counter reactions from critical conservative listeners (2004–7). Risqué broadcast contents, especially on issues of intimacy and sexuality, also triggered the attention of state authorities. Subsequently, some stations began cutting back on programs of this genre. However, these setbacks did not dissuade many stations from continuing to integrate similar shows into their program schedule. In the last couple of years such shows have gained even more listeners through the integration of text message comments. New technological possibilities such as those provided by the Internet may change these future configurations, potentially contributing to debates between traditionalist versus Internet-savvy radio listeners.

The success of this type of broadcast has coevolved with the growing skills of a new generation of radio presenters and their increasing mastery and expertise. The success of their programs is also certainly due to the fact that the contents—as we have seen, extremely sensitive topics such as problems of marriage, sexuality, and illegitimate offspring—represent concerns that hitherto did not often leave the restricted circle of intimate friends. They are associated with a mode of counseling that frequent listeners may gain from them, a kind of indirect advice that is not often provided by other actors and institutions. In the past these heated issues were not debated openly or publicly in Beninese society, neither through parental advice and education, nor in school, nor by pastors or specialized counseling

institutions. Here they find a forum that allows for both intimate engagement and anonymity.[16] Certainly there is also an aspect of the sensational that raises the numbers of listeners, but far from merely satisfying simple curiosity, the programs teach listeners life lessons. They also provide many listeners with significant emotional experiences.

These programs may not represent a total innovation, but rather a recombination and localization (Hepp 2006) of existing media practices or a realization of cultural potentials (Horst & Miller 2006).[17] Conversely, the effects of these processes may slowly contribute to changes in public communication, shaped by a growing interactivity, intermediality, and a linkage of divergent public modes of communication, associating previously separate audiences in new ways. The spheres of communication that are shaped by these broadcasts represent a new degree of interrelation among a variety of public and private spheres or forms of communication—between mass-mediated and personal encounters, but also more generally between local and national spheres. We are also witnessing, to differing degrees and diverse effects, an increasing mediatization of private and public communication (see Krotz 2001) and new mass-mediated communication spaces (see Healey et al. 2007).

Although the concept of call-in shows is not novel, then, the Beninese example is in many ways different from the phenomenon in the U.S. and Europe. These difference are related not only to the cultural particularities of these shows (such as the tensions that are evident between more conventional marriage patterns and new urban lifestyles), but also to the near absence of such discussions in other media or in communication spaces in general. These radio programs have been rather unique in their creation of communities of listeners, whose interactions are then not limited to a virtual dimension, but rather extend to actual gatherings in clubs or associations. We are thus witnessing local uses of global media forms that cannot be understood without a consideration of these particular audiences and contexts, as well as the debates they trigger in the context of societal changes in West Africa. Through the fusion of both global media flows and local meaning, media-related proximities in Benin represent what has been conceptualized, following Eisenstadt (2000), as part of multiple yet entangled modernities (see also Friedman 1994; Meyer & Geschiere 1999): as an endlessly iterative process, reflexive and transformative, yet incorporating local cultural logics.

Conclusion

The example of interactive radio shows on personal issues in the Republic of Benin may serve as an entry into a more informed understanding of current shifts within West African mediascapes, both with regard to processes of sociotechnological appropriation and issues of public communication. One of the main factors triggering the success of these programs is the perception that they discuss subjects and issues that hitherto have not been addressed in public. Conversely, without institutional and technological

conditions and the particular abilities of the radio hosts to create unique communicative spaces, the rise of these shows would not have been possible. These call-in shows thus demonstrate not only a new openness of public communication, but also the nexus between a growing technological expertise of media actors and institutional changes in the landscape of radio production in Benin. The prominent place of these shows derives from a series of interventions, negotiations, and shifts, which can be understood in the context of Pfaffenberger's (1992) conceptual framework of the "technological drama."

The example of Beninese radio illustrates the successful local appropriation of global media formats. The proliferation of these genres cannot be understood without the local context and meaning they are related to—in the case of Benin, the particular morally charged debates that are triggered in the context of urban change in West Africa. The example of talk radio shows suggests that public culture and media practices in the Republic of Benin are not characterized by fixed local cultural systems—in which something new is simply incorporated—but instead are reconstituted by persistent processes of renegotiation and sociotechnical coproduction of media goods. The skilled young media producers in these technological dramas are acting as new cultural brokers: as mediators and translators at the interface of different realms of meaning.

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Notes

1. The programs are broadcast on the following stations: *Carrefour des sentiments* (Radio Parakou); *Blues du coeur* (Radio Parakou); *Âmes sensibles* (Radio Trait d'Union, Bohicon); *Lumières nocturnes* (Radio Tokpa, Cotonou); *Sans détour*

(Radio Tokpa, Cotonou); *Autant en emporte le vent* (Radio Univers, Université Abomey-Calavi); *Cas pratique* (CAPP FM, Cotonou); *Supplice du cœur* (Radio Nanto FM, Natitingou); and *Cœurs en détresse* (Golfe FM, Cotonou).

2. Based on my own quantitative survey among listeners conducted in March 2008 (Cotonou and Abomey-Calavi) and surveys done by the Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication in 2007 (HAAC 2007).

3. This format was introduced, for example, in the early 1990s in Ghana at private stations such as Joy FM or Choice FM. These shows are also broadcast in local languages.

4. This article is based on empirical fieldwork on radio broadcasting in Benin conducted over the course of five years: an intensive phase between 2008 and 2009 (8 months) and many shorter, intermittent stays between 2006 and 2012. I concentrated primarily on three case studies of radio stations in Cotonou (Radio Tokpa FM), Parakou (Radio Arzèkè), and Natitingou (Radio Nanto). The case studies were based on participant observation and a variety of other methods: numerous formal and informal interviews, content analysis of recordings and scripts, surveys, and group discussions with listeners in Cotonou, Parakou, Natitingou, Tanguiéta, and Djougou. I actively participated in shows on Radio Nanto (*Supplice du coeur*) and Radio Tokpa FM (*Lumière nocturne, Sans detour*), and occasionally on Radio Arzèkè (*Fréquence rose*) and Radio Parakou (*Carrefour des sentiments*). I have also talked to hosts and listeners of such shows (primarily those in French) in Cotonou (Tokpa FM, CAPP FM, Océan FM, Golfe FM), Abomey-Calavi (Radio Univers), Porto-Novo (Radio Wèké, Radio Alléluia), Parakou (Radio Maranatha, Radio Fraternité FM, Urban FM, Radio Parakou/ORTB), Natitingou (Nanto FM), Tanguiéta (RRL Tanguiéta), Djougou (Solidarité FM), Nikki (Radio Sutii Deera), Bèmbèrèkè (Radio Noon Sina), Kandi (Radio Kandi), and Bohicon (Radio Trait d'Union). Valuable information was also provided by Christine Graf, a student in social anthropology (Berlin) who did an internship at Radio Tokpa in early 2012 (Graf 2013), and Patrick Hinnou, a doctoral student at the University of Bielefeld.

5. *Grogne Matinale* (Morning Anger) is a very popular morning call-in show in which people may complain about any current problem in society. For discussions of similar such programs in Africa see Odhiambo (2011) on Kenya, Tettey (2011) on Ghana, and Bosch (2010) on South Africa.

6. In the case of Ghana, Shipley (2009) mentions the famous Ghanaian Radio host Grace Omaboe, who first hosted phone-in shows on moral issues at Choice FM and later on Metro TV.

7. I am referring to a functional-systemic approach to public spheres proposed by Merten (1999) that is different from the historical-normative model proposed by Habermas (1991).

8. Occasionally listeners will explain their problems directly to the presenter, who will write a letter on his or her behalf, provided that there is a minimal degree of trust. Since 2009, a free self-help hotline has also existed in Benin (Numéro Vert) that allows adolescents to call anonymously and ask for advice. The service was installed under the auspices of a former Miss Benin and is cofinanced by the United Nations Population Fund (FNUAP) and the Ministry of Health. Most commonly, youngsters call in to get advice on problems of contraception, inquire about the morning-after pill, and to ask questions about sexuality.

9. The announcement of love greetings and requests for partners (most often received in the form of text messages), combined with poems and slow music,

are typical of other successful late-night shows such as *Frequence rose* (Arzèkè FM, Parakou). The private broadcaster Radio Trait d'Union in Bohicon usually starts the Sunday night call-in show *Âmes sensibles* with a ten-minute sketch of a typical partnership or marriage scene enacted by the male and a female presenters (interviews with Fred'Espoir Hounmabou and Rose Christine Bamenou, Bohicon, November 2009).

10. This intervention took place only after the author of the letter had approved the revelation of her identity.

11. Montcho continues to host interactive shows that are mainly devoted to younger listeners on Ocean FM. She has also started a television career as a presenter of the business and advertisement magazine *Espace 12 heures* on the state-owned broadcaster ORTB. Other well-known hosts of such shows are "Rosymoh" (Symplice Hodonou, CAPP FM, Cotonou), Tatiana Ahanda (Golfe FM), Bienvenue Fandé (Radio Nanto, Natitingou), and Hadiza Aruna (Arzèkè FM, Parakou).

12. Listeners frequently expect personal involvement from the presenter in certain situations—for example, when a partner in a dispute shows up angrily at the station and has to be calmed down. Such requests are more common when there are extensive off-the-air, neighborhood relations between the radio personalities and their listeners (observed at Radio Arzeke, Parakou). My investigations indicate that many listeners personally know at least one, if not several, radio personalities.

13. Hungbo (2011), in his account of phone-in shows in South Africa, conceptualizes hosting and participation in talk radio as self-mediating and self-fashioning practices. Matza (2009) uses the term "technologies of the self" with regard to popular radio programs in Moscow. Some authors conceptualize these mediated interactions as parasocial forms of interaction (Horton & Wohl 2001; Döveling 2005) which are partly substituting for other social practices.

14. See also Spittler (2002); Hahn (2004, 2011); Beck (2001); Verne (2007); Postill (2008).

15. Starting in 2010, the television show *Unis pour toujours* (United Forever), presented by "Cyra" (Yvette Padonou Seke), has featured married couples talking about the key factors explaining the harmony in their marriage. Seke produces the (comparatively sappy) show together with her husband, Cyrille Seke, in connection with the state broadcaster ORTB. They also run the NGO "Love Power," which organizes workshops and conferences ("love time" and "love university" [université de l'amour]) on issues of partnership (http://la12.biz/ong/178-love-power.html). The couple constantly stresses their educational intentions while promoting their shows and seminars. This attitude is quite similar to that of many community radio station managers. Moussa Madougou, director of Radio Nikki, for example, explained in an e-mail to the author (September 13, 2007): "L'émission *Carrefour du sentiment* c'est une émission inter active avec des invités très suivi par les auditeurs. . . . L'objectif est de donner des conseils sur les situations de vie en couple qui deviennent de plus en difficile alors que la structuration de la famille qui permettait de régler de tel problème en famille large a disparu avec la modernisation de la société africaine. C'est en fait un cadre de discussion et de prise en charge des problèmes sociaux des adultes que avons créé, car les sujet débattus sont déposés à la radio par les auditeurs." [The program *Carrefour du sentiment* is an interactive program with guests who are of great interest to the listeners. . . . The goal of the program is to offer advice about living as a couple,

which has become more and more difficult ever since the traditional structure of the family unit, which allowed a couple to resolve a given problem within the extended family, has disappeared with the modernization of African society. The program is in fact a forum that we have created for discussion and for support for the social issues facing adults, since the subjects debated are submitted to the radio station by the listeners.]

16. I was able to view many of the letters that were sent to stations between 2009 and 2010 and occasionally was able to speak with the writers of these letters. Most of these were women, who often told me that they did not see any other option for getting their problem solved and were relying on the seriousness and delicacy with which their issues would be handled by the presenter.

17. Many recent studies on the introduction of media and ICT technologies in Africa suffer from either a kind of technological determinism (i.e., the discourse on the so-called digital divide; see critiques by Krings and Riehm [2006]), or conversely, from a one-sided perspective stressing the sociocultural agency of the construction of technologies and their daily uses (e.g., Bruijn et al. 2009). Both approaches do not address the process of coproduction of technologies and their users (Oudshoorn & Pinch 2003). Technology is culturally shaped as much as culture is technomorphous: sociotechnical assemblages (Marcus & Saka 2006) that feature a reciprocal influence of individual and technical agency, intrinsically articulated in the processes of sociotechnical change. See Latour (1996, 1996); Rammert and Schulz-Schaeffer (2002); Rammert and Schubert (2006).