

## **Mediated Sociability: Audience Participation and Convened Citizen Engagement in Interactive Broadcast Shows in Africa**

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This article examines what drives audience participation in interactive broadcast shows, with implications for the democratic potential of these shows as spaces of citizen engagement and public discussion. It makes three contributions, the first two to audience and media studies and the last to political communication. First, it provides evidence to fill a gap in empirical knowledge on what drives audience participation in interactive broadcasts in Africa. “Mediated sociability”—the ways in which audience members are socialized into thinking about interactive broadcast shows as a space in which people like them have a voice—emerges as a strong determinant of audience participation. Second, it then uses this evidence from a non-Western perspective to reinforce the importance of conceptualizing the interactive broadcast show as a convened social space that can enable active citizenship. Third, by advancing scholarship on audiences and publics, the article deepens our understanding on the democratic significance of interactive broadcast in Africa and beyond.

*Keywords: Africa, media, radio, broadcasting, audiences, participation, publics, public sphere*

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Across Africa, interactive broadcast shows—shows that invite audience input through call-ins or short message service (SMS) and social media—have burgeoned in step with media liberalization and mobile telephony. Where such interactive shows address public affairs, some scholars are cautiously enthusiastic about their promise for fostering citizen engagement and social accountability (Bosch, 2010; Chiumbu & Ligaga, 2013; Tsarwe, 2018), and for offering “democratisation by other means” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 28). Others voice caution on how state and commercial interests distort these public spaces (Moyo, 2013; Willems, 2013) and on their vulnerability to co-option as “staged events” (Stremlau, Fantini, & Gagliardone, 2015). Unequal citizen access to such spaces or their reductive forms of “participation” (Carpentier, 2009; Willems, 2013) may temper any democratic potential. Yet very little systematic empirical work has been done on the crucial question of what determines who participates in interactive shows.

The lack of systematic empirical research on what influences audience participation in interactive shows risks a default to common-sense assumptions too often imported from Western scholarship. Access to communication technologies, including affordability and usability, and social and cultural norms influencing who has a voice in public discussions, are undoubtedly important determinants. They are also easily overemphasized compared with determinants from the media context. An explanatory focus on access oversimplifies the relationship between greater availability and affordability of communication technology and increased participation. Explanations of participation that consider sociocultural exclusions temper this, emphasizing the salience of social identity and norms. Yet sociocultural critiques can also be overly structural. Social inequalities rarely operate in fixed and rigid ways.

The evidence presented in this article corroborates the relevance of both of these explanations—individual resources and sociocultural norms—but rejects them as exhaustive. Analysis of household survey data from rural and urban constituencies in Kenya and Zambia finds that the typical participant in interactive broadcast shows in these countries is male and relatively more educated, and, for political and current affairs shows, relatively younger: This profile of audience member has the means, technological access, social status, and repertoires to participate. However, these determinants are found to be inadequate to fully explain variations in participation. Contributing to a tradition in media studies that considers the recursive relationship between audiences and media producers, our results support the argument that interactive shows are social spaces convened by media actors. How such shows are convened plays a significant and logically consistent role in determining who participates and why. The extent of this, what we term the interactive broadcast’s “mediated sociability,” bears significantly on whether and how the interactive broadcast might foster inclusive democratic publics.

The underpinnings of the concept of mediated sociability introduced and analyzed in this article are not new, but their quantitative empirical analysis in the African context is. In media and communication scholarship, there is a substantial body of work that unravels relationships between audiences and publics (Livingstone, 2005), and among media use, civic life, and citizenship (Couldry, 2012; Dahlgren, 2005). Sociability is directly or implicitly studied as the means by which broadcast shows are convened social spaces, which may, in turn, constitute publics. Sociability refers to the ways in which strangers interact and relate in their world and grow as a feature of modernity (Calhoun, 2011). Public discussion is possible where sociability allows for open communication among strangers (Warner, 2002).

The study of interactive broadcast audiences from this vantage is more crucial, but also illuminating, in African contexts, where orality, sociality, and conviviality are prominent (Nyamnjoh, 2017). Understanding the mutually constituting relationships among audiences, broadcast media producers, and society in African societies has a rich heritage (Barber, 1997; Mwesige, 2009; Schulz, 1999; Spitulnik, 2002; Willems, 2013). These qualitative empirical studies usefully examine social determinants and the democratic significance of interactive shows. While they offer a rich base of conceptual and qualitative insights, there is a lack of systematic empirical analysis of factors influencing audience participation in interactive broadcasts. This article helps to fill this empirical gap and in so doing enriches the wider field of audience and media studies with insights from a non-Western perspective, namely, on the salience of mediated sociability. Furthermore, the arguments developed deepen our understanding of the media's role and potential in political participation and democratic public life in Africa and beyond.

### **The Interactive Broadcast Show in Africa: Why Mediated Sociability Matters**

The starting point for understanding the role of mediated sociability in interactive broadcast is the two-way relationship between how media production makes possible audiences and how, in turn, audiences shape media production. Karin Barber (1997) explained this insightfully. Media production takes the form of "performances" that constitute their audience, in what Barber terms "addressivity." However, such possibilities are embedded within wider social influences. "Ways of being an audience," Barber (1997) notes, "are made possible only by existing ways of being in society" (p. 348). These "ways of being" are themselves subject to change. Media actors can shape new trajectories by using changing modes of communication.

Equally, audiences, using new media and communication technology, can shape new ways of being in mediated social worlds. Audiences are not merely passive receivers. Barber (1997) places importance on how audiences, in choosing to be addressed, actively shape the nature and form of media. Audiences, as collectives, help to constitute the meaning of performances in between the performer and the individual listener or viewer. In this way, reception and consumption are a form of production (see also Hall, 2006; Morley, 1992). Before the idea of "producers" was applied to digital media (Bruns, 2006), scholars had shown how audiences actively shape media production and its role in social change. This combination of new media formats, new communication technologies, and the recursive relationship between media production and audience reception is central to whether audiences come to be publics made up of citizens exercising voice in politically salient ways.

Audiences in Africa have long played a direct role in the production of media. Since the advent of radio, listeners have interacted with stations in diverse ways. Spitulnik (2002), for example, shows how Zambians have participated "not only by listening but also by speaking with the radio and by speaking like the radio" (p. 343). Mwesige (2009) identifies a "silent majority" that listens to talk radio in Uganda and shapes the meaning of its content. Participation in interactive shows is not only about the "vocal minority." The audience may reproduce existing social relations, but may also realign them.

Fluid dynamics among performer, performance, and audience bring the roles of media professionals to the fore. Schulz (1999) explains how radio speakers on Malian talk radio facilitate a process through which the audience sees itself as part of a "moral public." Grätz (2014) notes that the prominence of

interactive radio shows in Benin owes partly to the expertise of media professionals in convening these shows. In a Ghanaian study, Selormey (2013) finds that creative programming, off-air interactions between stations and listeners, and show formats are crucial to the democratic potential of interactive radio.

Interactive broadcast shows are thus diverse phenomena, with each station, show format, and presenter enabling and constraining opportunities for citizen voice in different ways, notwithstanding background contextual factors. Interactive broadcast shows are best understood as convened social spaces where the mediator, as inviter, host, and entertainer, plays a crucial role in fostering the sociability of the audience and how audience members imagine themselves as citizens (Srinivasan & Diepeveen, 2018). The basis of sociability need not be specifically political. Public discussion on interactive shows of political significance relies on the broader fabric of sociability. The freedom to enter a public space and converse on whatever one wishes protects the potentiality of publics. If we can account for the significance of mediated sociability in explaining variations in participation in interactive shows, we can evidence their potential as convened social spaces that may foster democratic publics. To do this, we must examine mediated sociability as one driver, among others, of audience participation.

### **Drivers of Audience Participation**

This section reviews competing explanations of causal determinants of who does and does not participate in mediated publics in order to derive hypotheses to be tested against our household survey data (methods described later). We examine, in turn, explanations of participation that focus on technology access and use, sociocultural characteristics and intergroup inequalities, and motivations tied to democratic satisfaction and views of the media's effectiveness. We then consider mediated sociability and propose specific factors for how interactive shows are convened and audiences are socialized into participating.

#### ***"Digital Divides": Participation as a Function of Access to and Use of ICTs***

Given the high availability of interactive broadcast shows across much of Africa, variations in real-time audience participation are first a question of access to communication technology that makes it possible to participate. Crudely, access to and ownership of mobile phones might explain levels of participation in interactive shows. This invokes digital divide arguments, especially studies that link ICT availability to democratic outcomes (Shirazi, Ngwenyama, & Morawczynski, 2010; van Dijk, 2005). A variant of this thinking is that the "divide" should be conceived in social, and not only infrastructural, terms. Social inequalities, including poverty, literacy, gendered and generational access, and geography (rural/urban), play divisive roles (Hafkin & Huyer, 2007; Park, 2009). Scholars warn of the potential of ICT in developing world contexts to exacerbate existing inequalities and produce new ones (Thompson, 2008). Often these dimensions are compounded at the individual level: An older, illiterate woman from a linguistic minority in a rural setting is less likely to access and to be able to use ICT. A sociodemographically disaggregated analysis of mobile telephony access and its effects is essential. Assuming a sufficient supply of interactive broadcast shows, we may state this in terms of the hypothesis:

*H1: The levels of ownership and use of mobile phones explain variations in participation in interactive shows among sociodemographic groups.*

Arguments concerning political participation focused on access to technology unduly emphasize individual communication practices as central to active citizenship. Meta-analysis of studies (primarily in established democracies) suggests that increased social media use correlates with higher likelihood of civic and political participation, but the causal relationship is unclear (Boulianne, 2015). Perhaps instead, we should conceptualize access to digital media "not as a steady, continuous, or uniform influence on behavior that can be measured reliably at the individual level, but in terms of changed context for political communication and information" (Bimber & Copeland, 2013, p. 136; see also Bimber, 2001). In part, this points to social institutions and norms that enable and constrain citizens' public participation.

### ***Publics and Counter-Publics: Sociocultural Determinants of Who Has a Voice***

Participation in interactive shows is not merely a question of access, cost, and motivation; sociocultural factors shape who participates and how. Here, we introduce scholarship on the public sphere, which, since the work of Jürgen Habermas, also has a heritage in thinking about broadcast media. Nancy Fraser (1990) neatly summarized Habermas's idea of the public sphere as "a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is a space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction" (p. 57).

At first sight, thinking on the public sphere discussion appears relevant to our analysis of interactive broadcasts. Yet interactive radio shows, with presenters often motivated by creating entertainment, compare poorly to Habermas's ideal for public deliberation. Indeed, Habermas attributed the deterioration of democratic citizenship in late modernity to the rise of consumerism and mass media. Habermas's deliberative ideal, epitomized in the 18th-century bourgeois public sphere, is demanding. Vital conditions of openness and accessibility of publics meant that private interests were disallowed, and status inequalities had to be "bracketed" for individuals to deliberate as peers. To imagine an ideal equality, real inequalities had to be overlooked. By contrast, mediated interactive broadcast arguably amplifies, rather than brackets, inequalities. The staccato nature of audience interactions falls short of rational critical discourse.

Critical thinking on the public sphere is more open in identifying actual public discussion in plural forms and thus more capable of accommodating interactive broadcast shows. Habermas's ideal, Warner (1992) argues, rests on "a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal" (p. 383; see also Fraser, 1990). Equally, excluded groups were not idle. There were multiple publics, some properly thought of as counter-publics contesting norms of the dominant public (Warner, 2002).

What matters, then, is understanding exclusions and their contestation. Even when formal exclusions are removed, informal exclusions can matter. Sociocultural norms regarding the appropriateness of having a voice in public can reproduce themselves in multitudes of ways. Discursive interactions enact certain protocols and decorum and invoke norms on language and argumentation. Attempts at inclusive deliberation might only encourage conformism that slips into domination (Fraser, 1990). Besides sociodemographic variations in access and use of technology, we should assess a determinant of participation from the sociocultural context:

*H2: Social and cultural norms on citizenship and public voice that dictate who should or should not participate, and how, influence participation in interactive shows.*

***Democratic (Dis)contents: Individual Participation as a Function of Perceptions of Citizenship and Democratic Life***

Critical analyses of publics, though revealing of sociocultural exclusions and disablers of participation, can be overly structural. Fraser (1990) rightly tasks critical theory with the aim to “render visible the ways in which societal inequality infects formally inclusive existing public spheres and taints discursive interaction within them” (p. 65). Yet in explaining variations in who participates, such analyses risk being overdetermined and, because of this, serve to conspire against opportunities for individual agency. Moreover, when contrasted with the bourgeois salons and coffee houses that Habermas studied, the interactive broadcast show, in its materiality, is less hedged in, and its possibilities more open.

What happens when we see variation within the same context, for example, interactive shows with more or less participation from certain social groups? Returning to the problems with identifying a causal relationship between access to and use of communication technologies and broader political participation, one strand of literature focuses on individual perceptions of the quality of democracy and citizenship. Satisfaction with democracy has been argued to moderate the linkage between ICT use and demand for democracy (Nisbet, Stoycheff, & Pearce, 2012). A less structural and more individual agency-based explanation of audience participation addresses the motivation to participate in democratic life. For any given sociodemographic group, the motivation to participate in public discussion may vary depending on perceptions of the quality of democracy and the efficacy of the media in fostering accountability. We can render this determinant as follows:

*H3a: Greater satisfaction with democracy and/or greater political participation motivate participation in interactive shows.*

*H3b: Perception of the positive impact of interactive shows on enhancing political accountability motivates participation in interactive shows.*

***Mediated Sociability as a Determinant of Participation***

We now return to the central focus of this article, namely, to account for mediated sociability as a determinant of participation in interactive broadcast media. Earlier, we established that the interactive show is a social space convened by media actors. The role of mediation in influencing the subjectivities of audiences has been given attention by media and communications scholars. Daniel Dayan (2005) has argued that audiences require professional mediation to become visible, even to themselves, and to stake a claim to be a public. Livingstone (2005) echoes this, summarizing,

in different ways, the media are crucial to today’s publics (and audiences) in inviting, shaping and managing the focusing of collective attention and, hence, the construction

of the collective fictions through which publics come into being, perform and, eventually, die. (p. 12)

Interactive shows, given their audience participation, arguably involve something more. They might reflect what Wenger calls “communities of practice,” sites of lived experience where active citizenship is perceived as possible and desirable. Communities of practice, Wenger argues, provide “a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence” (as cited in Couldry, 2008, p. 385).

The convened social space of interactive shows may draw on, and contribute to, what Dahlgren (2005) analyzes as the quality of “civic culture” that includes values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities, and discussion. Building on this, Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007) coined *public connection*, which they defined as citizens’ “shar[ing] an orientation to a public world where matters of common concern are, or at least should be, addressed” (p. 29). The notion of orientation gestures toward a background condition for active citizenship. These authors turn their attention to a “mediated public connection,” namely, how media consumption sustains an orientation to the public world that is a precondition for political action.

It is easy to get carried away here. Most participation in broadcast shows is not related to public affairs directly, and much of it not even indirectly. The audience may be much less “meaning-making,” to recall Dayan (2005), than a consumer audience enjoying entertainment value. From shopping shows to shock jocks, any excessively normative framework for analyzing interactive shows risks being out of touch with their reality. Yet the role of mediated sociability in encouraging audience participation should not be reduced to shows of immediate political significance or a demanding ideal of what constitutes “good” public discussion (see also, Lee, 2002). The policing of publics, in theory as in practice, goes against their potentiality as social forms that might foster active citizenship over time. Familiarity and experience with participation in one mediated show format may be a pathway to participating in shows more directly related to current affairs. Part of the value of understanding effects of mediated sociability across diverse media content is that this allows for comparative insight: how for some social groups, particular genres of interactive shows might reinforce public *disconnection*, hierarchical civic culture, or exclusionary communities of practice.

Insofar as mediated sociability turns on the nature of the interactive broadcast show as a convened social space, we can propose some parameters on the extent to which audience members feel a sense of connection with the show, are familiar with other participants, or perceive that people like them are participating. Within the possibilities of the household survey data that we describe and analyze in the following sections, we operationalize mediated sociability as a determinant of participation as follows:

*H4: The social aspects of interactive broadcast shows (e.g., trust in the presenter, affinity and familiarity) lead to greater levels of participation.*

With these four hypotheses established, we turn to the analysis of household survey data from Kenya and Zambia that provide the evidence for our arguments on the determinants of participation in interactive broadcast shows.

### **Method**

We tested Hypotheses 1–4 with data from a face-to-face household survey implemented in four selected constituencies in Kenya and Zambia. The fieldwork in these two countries was part of a larger mixed-methods study on interactive media and politics in Africa. Kenya was chosen for being a relatively advanced country and Zambia a relatively middle-ground country in terms of media landscape, access to communication technologies, and dynamics of democratic politics. The two constituencies in each country were selected to capture some within-country variation in socioeconomic factors, political context, and the media landscape (see, further, Mudhai et al., 2014).

The objectives of the survey were to generate descriptive information on demographics of people who listen to or watch, and who text or call in to, radio or television stations and to understand individual and sociocultural determinants of participation (e.g., participants' sociopolitical attitudes and their opinions regarding the efficacy of participating in interactive broadcast shows as a means of expressing political agency or holding authorities to account). The surveys followed the same core methodology in the two countries, as explained in the next paragraphs.

We acknowledge some limitations in this study. The sampling strategy is random in all stages, allowing the results to be generalized to the respective constituencies with a certain margin of error. However, the results cannot be extrapolated to other constituencies or to the two countries as a whole. Additionally, variables selected for the statistical models were limited to the explanatory variables relevant to test our hypotheses and a small set of control variables available in the survey. We focused on the effects related to our hypotheses and the main control variables mentioned in the literature. Finally, the self-reported nature of the data is prone to self-desirability and memory bias. As such, results referring to political attitudes or frequency of behaviors, for example, cannot be taken at face value.

### ***Household Survey in Kenya and Zambia***

The face-to-face household survey was implemented in May 2013 in Kenya and June–July 2013 in Zambia, in two constituencies in each country. The four samples were designed to be representative of all households in those constituencies. We employed random techniques in all stages of sampling, using sampling with probability proportional to the population to select individuals of voting age (18 years and over) living in the four constituencies (for the complete methodology of the survey, see Mudhai et al., 2014).

In Kenya, the selected constituencies were Ruaraka, a peri-urban constituency in the capital, Nairobi, with mixed demographics, including one of the city's major slums, and Seme, a rural constituency settled around Lake Victoria in the western Kenyan county of Kisumu that includes a largely fishing-agricultural community. In Zambia, the selected constituencies were Mandevu, an urban constituency in the



capital city, Lusaka, with a mixed demographic, including some of the city's major slum settlements, and Chipangali, a rural constituency in the country's largely agricultural Eastern Province.

The sample sizes are 760 for Kenya (383 for Ruaraka and 377 for Seme) and 688 for Zambia (327 for Mandevu and 361 for Chipangali). The response rate for Kenya was 90.4% (84.6% for Ruaraka and 96.3% for Seme) and 90% for Zambia.<sup>2</sup> The margins of error for a 95% confidence level are no more than plus or minus 5% for both Ruaraka and Seme, 5.4% for Mandevu, and 5.1% for Chipangali. The results allow inferences to the voting population in the four constituencies with some degree of accuracy, with two percentages considered statistically significant if they differ at least 10%.

The survey employed 12 enumerators in Kenya and six in Zambia who received training for three or four days, respectively, to familiarize themselves with the questionnaire, to standardize instructions for the selection of households and respondents, to sharpen communication and interpersonal skills, and to conform to research ethics. The questionnaire was back-translated in Swahili and Luo (Kenya) and Nyanja and Bemba (Zambia) from and to English, ensuring that the meaning of the questions was equivalent in all languages.

### ***Key Variables and Questions***

The dependent variables in this study are listenership to and participation in broadcast interactive shows, operationalized through these questions:

1. Have you ever watched or listened to any shows on the TV or radio that allow you to contact them? [listenership]
2. Have you ever participated in any show on the TV or radio that allow you to contact them? [participation]

The following group of variables explain variations in listenership and participation across the four sites: (1) the macro context and structural characteristics; (2) participants' sociodemographic characteristics; (3) individual differences regarding motivation to participate and perceptions of media accountability; and (4) mediated sociability in interactive broadcasting. We could have included other control variables, such as media use in general, and political and social interests, but to avoid the problem of underidentification of the regression models given the sample size, we prioritized the variables more related to our research hypotheses.

## **Results**

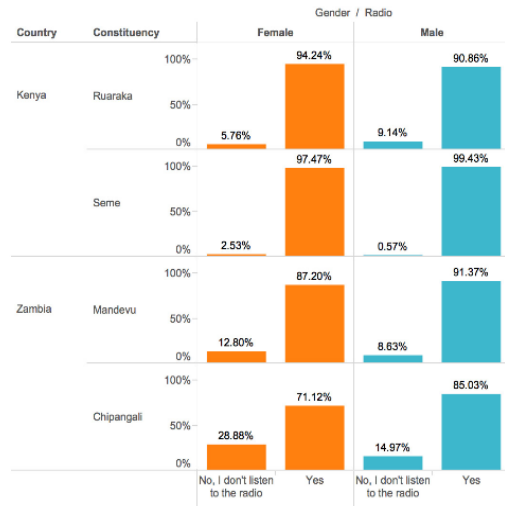
### ***Listenership and Participation Patterns in the Four Constituencies***

The descriptive results reveal that mobile phone use and radio listenership are higher in the Kenyan constituencies compared with the Zambian constituencies (Figures 1a and 1b); there are negligible

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<sup>2</sup> The response rates per constituency were not available for Zambia.

differences between urban and rural samples for Kenya, but a marked urban–rural divide for Zambia, with higher levels of mobile use and radio listenership in the urban sample (Mandevu).<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1a. Levels of radio listenership (by gender and rural/urban).**



**Figure 1b. Levels of mobile phone access (by gender and rural/urban).**

While general radio listenership in the Kenyan samples is higher (93% for urban and 98% for rural) than in Zambia (89% for urban and 78% for rural), the difference between the urban constituencies of the two countries is small. The sample from the rural constituency in Zambia (Chipangali) has the lowest levels of radio listenership.

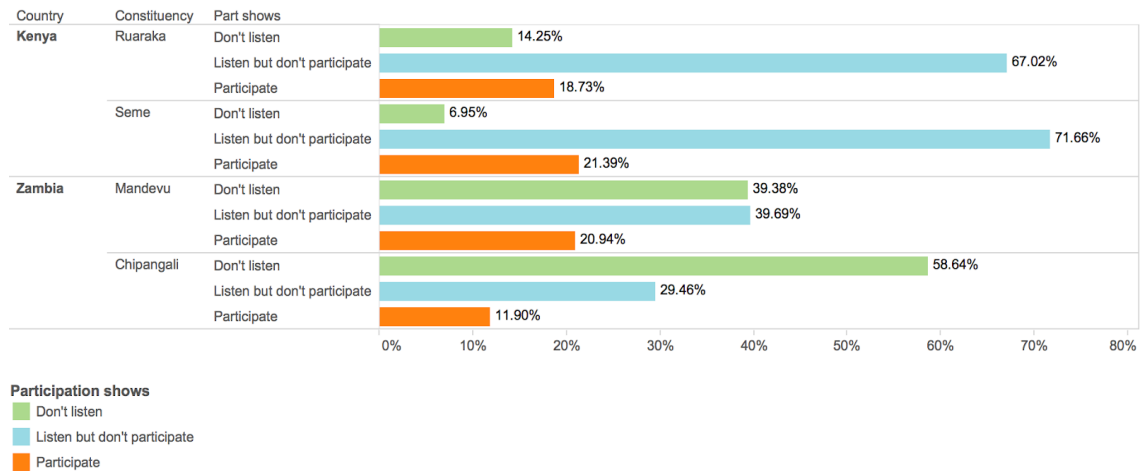
For mobile phone access and use, there is a marked difference between Kenyan and Zambian samples.<sup>4</sup> In Kenyan samples, access is nearly universal (over 96% in the sample), with a negligible urban–rural divide and no significant gender gap. In Zambian samples, access to mobile phones is considerably lower than in Kenya, with a wide gap between urban and rural (84% urban vs. 54.2% rural) and between genders (62.8% women vs. 74.9% men). The sample from the rural constituency in Zambia has the lowest levels of mobile phone access.

The rural–urban and gender gaps for general radio listenership and mobile phone access are not reflected in participation in interactive shows (Figure 2). Roughly 10%–20% of the sample has ever

<sup>3</sup> An extensive paper on descriptive results from the survey is available (see Lopes et al., 2015). The data set (Srinivasan, 2015) and questionnaire can be found at <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-851648>.

<sup>4</sup> In 2013, the estimated value for mobile phone penetration was 70.1% for the Kenyan population and 69.7% for the Zambian population (ITU, 2019).

participated in interactive shows, with fewer people participating in the rural constituency in Zambia. The urban–rural pattern in participation is reversed for the two countries, with higher participation in the Kenyan rural constituency (Seme, with 21.4%) and in the Zambian urban constituency (Mandevu, with 20.9%).



**Figure 2. Levels of listenership for and participation in interactive shows in four sites in Kenya and Zambia.**

However, relative participation (ratio of those who have ever participated to total listeners of interactive shows) is higher in the two Zambian constituencies. In Kenya, the ratio of participation is 0.22 in the urban sample and 0.23 in the rural sample, whereas in Zambia the ratio of participation is 0.35 in the urban sample and 0.29 in the rural sample. This pattern of absolute and relative participation in interactive radio shows is not consistent with mobile phone access (higher in the Kenyan samples and lower in the rural Zambia sample) suggesting that access per se does not explain participation in interactive shows.

**Sociodemographic Profile of Listeners and Participants**

In the four samples analyzed, participation, more than listenership, is consistently biased toward men and the more educated. Nearly twice as many men have engaged in interactive shows as women. The average odds of men having participated is 1.7 times that for women. However, women and men have similar levels of listenership. Thus, the relative participation (ratio of participation to overall listenership) is higher for men. Male participants also tend to be younger, more educated, and wealthier. In turn, female participants tend to be single, younger, more educated, and wealthier compared with women who do not participate. Because some of these characteristics are associated (e.g., age and education), multivariate analyses are needed (presented in the next section).

Neither access to mobile phones nor levels of radio listenership explain higher male participation in interactive shows in Kenya, given that mobile phone access and radio listenership are not gendered.

However, in the rural constituency in Zambia, men have more access to mobile phones, and they participate relatively more than women.

An age pattern among participants is not clear through the survey: Younger listeners participate more in rural Kenyan and urban Zambian constituencies, and older listeners participate slightly more in the urban Kenyan constituency, suggesting that additional variables related to the context of the shows should also be considered.

Levels of listenership of interactive shows do not differ substantially across types of shows. When grouped into politics and development (politics, current affairs, agriculture, and development programs), sociocultural topics (religion, relationships, cultural, sports, and women's programs), and entertainment (music, competitions/quizzes, shopping programs), listenership levels for all three types shows range between 60% and 85% of people who ever listen to interactive shows. The statistical analysis of the survey focused on listenership to and participation in any type of interactive show. We could have focused only on political and current affairs shows, given the central premise in this study. However, the small sample sizes would have resulted in low statistical power to test our hypotheses. Moreover, as explained earlier, we argue for an expansive definition of audiences as publics given their generative qualities and the role of mediated sociability in enabling this.

### ***Multinomial Logistic Models for Listenership and Participation***

The descriptive results emphasize that patterns of participation and listenership in interactive broadcast shows depend on a multitude of determinants and interactions between them. These determinants are analyzed in this subsection to test the four research hypotheses introduced earlier.

Through multiple multinomial logistic regressions, we tested the effect of variables of mediated sociability, motivation, and sociopolitical attitudes, independent of differences in technology access and sociodemographic characteristics, on the likelihood of respondents to listen to and participate in interactive shows. Multinomial logistic regression allows us to estimate the effect of each of the explanatory variables (of any measurement level) in a response variable with three or more categories (nonlisteners, listeners only, and participants) while controlling for other variables in the model.

The first model (Table 1) tested the first two hypotheses:

- H1: The levels of ownership and use of mobile phones explain variations in participation in interactive shows among sociodemographic groups.*
- H2: Social and cultural norms on citizenship and public voice that dictate who should or should not participate, and how, influence participation in interactive shows.*

Table 1 presents the results of the first model, which aims to understand the drivers of listenership and participation. The baseline group "listeners" refers to those who said that they listen, but do not participate. To understand the factors that distinguish (1) nonlisteners from listeners only and (2)

participants from listeners only, we analyzed the effects of each explanatory variable on the odds of being a listener only and on the odds of being a participant. The direction and magnitude of the effect were given by an odds ratio and by the statistical significance for at least a 95% significance level ( $p < .05$ ).

**Table 1. Model 1: Multinomial Logistic Regression for Listenership and Participation, Baseline = Listeners.**

Model 1 Variables	Nonlisteners (1) vs. listeners (0)				Participants (1) vs. listeners (0)			
	Estimate	SE	OR	p value	Estimate	SE	OR	p value
Intercept	1.56	0.25	-	< .001	-2.46	0.38	-	< .001
Male (vs. female)	-0.31	0.15	0.74	.039	0.44	0.16	1.56	.006
Age 35+ (vs. -35)	-0.15	0.16	0.86	.349	0.34	0.17	1.41	.046
Education level <sup>a</sup>	-0.18	0.09	0.84	.046	0.34	-0.10	1.40	.001
Kenya (vs. Zambia)	-2.02	0.17	0.13	< .001	-0.58	0.17	0.56	.001
Urban (vs. rural)	0.02	0.16	1.02	.901	-0.24	0.17	0.79	.158
Mobile phone <sup>b</sup>	-0.87	0.21	0.42	< .001	0.47	0.35	1.60	.179

Note. Total sample size = 1,148; SE = standard error; OR = odds ratio; p value = two-tailed p value of the estimate.

<sup>a</sup>4 = postgraduate, 3 = undergraduate, 2 = secondary, 1 = primary, 0 = did not go to school. <sup>b</sup>1 = I use a mobile phone, 0 = I don't ever use a mobile phone.

Reinforcing the descriptive results, the regression results also show that people in the Kenyan constituencies are more likely to listen to interactive shows (less likely to be nonlisteners), but in Zambia, those who listen are more likely to participate when demographic characteristics of respondents (gender, age, and education) and access to mobile phones are controlled for. People in the two Kenyan constituencies are 87% more likely to be listeners compared with the two Zambian constituencies. Among listeners, those in the Zambian constituencies are 44% more likely to participate compared with those in the Kenyan constituencies. Because these results hold when controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and mobile phone access, we can conclude that sample differences in the demographics and access are not plausible explanations for differences in the levels of listenership and participation between the constituencies in the two countries.

The results in Table 1 show that if mobile phone access were universal, there would still be relevant sociodemographic variations in participation, disconfirming Hypothesis 1. Moreover, having a mobile phone increases the chance of listenership by 58%, but it has no direct impact on participation. People without access to mobile phones are more likely to be nonlisteners. The two necessary conditions for participation in the shows—listening to interactive shows and using a mobile phone—are not sufficient for participation. This indicates that social and cultural factors need to be taken into account to explain participation.

Results for Model 1 evidence a gender and education bias in participation, offering support for Hypothesis 2. Irrespective of mobile phone access, women are less likely to listen to and participate in interactive shows, controlling for age and education. Women are 26% more likely than men to be nonlisteners of interactive shows. Among those who listen to interactive shows, men are 56% more likely

than women to participate, even if there were no gender gap in access to mobile phones. Gender roles and social norms are stronger determinants for gender variations in listenership and participation than access to mobile phones.

We also found an education bias: Irrespective of mobile phone access, gender, and age, people with higher levels of education are more likely to listen and to participate. Education has a greater impact on participation than on listenership. One additional level of education increases the chances of listenership by 16% and of participation by 40% (among those who listen to interactive shows).

Model 1 is nested in Model 2 (Table 2). Model 2 comprises the same variables as Model 1, but it also includes the mediated sociability variables (having a favorite show, trusting the presenter, knowing other callers) and variables for satisfaction with democracy and perception of media effectiveness as a watchdog. Model 2 tests the following hypotheses:

*H3a: Greater satisfaction with democracy and/or greater political participation motivate participation in interactive shows.*

*H3b: Perception of the positive impact of interactive shows on enhancing political accountability motivates participation in interactive shows.*

*H4: The social aspects of interactive broadcast shows (e.g., trust in the presenter, affinity and familiarity) lead to greater levels of participation.*

Hypothesis 3a is not corroborated. There is only a slight tendency for people more satisfied with democracy to be more likely to participate in interactive shows ( $p = .06$ ). Satisfaction with democracy has no significant effect on listenership.

Hypothesis 3b is also not corroborated. People who think that the media are effective in revealing government mistakes and corruption (media watchdog) are 53% more likely to be listeners. However, a perception of these shows' positive impact does not affect participation. Consistent with this result, people who have a favorite show are 62% more likely to be listeners (versus nonlisteners) but having a favorite show does not impact participation.

The results offer support for Hypothesis 4. People who know other callers in their community are 124% more likely to participate in radio shows, even though knowing other callers does not affect listenership. People who trust the radio presenter are 41% more likely to be listeners (versus nonlisteners) and 132% more likely to participate. All results hold when controlled for gender, age, education, and access to mobile phones.

**Table 2. Model 2: Multinomial Logistic Regression for Listenership and Participation, Baseline = Listeners.**

Model 2 Variables	Nonlisteners (1) vs. listeners (0)				Participants (1) vs. listeners (0)			
	Estimate	SE	OR	p value	Estimate	SE	OR	p value
Intercept	1.12	0.69	-	.105	-3.60	0.74	-	< .001
Impact (positive = 1 vs. negative 0)	-0.75	0.30	0.47	.012	-0.19	0.25	0.83	.447
Have a favorite show (1 = yes vs. 0 = no)	-0.97	0.26	0.38	< .001	0.20	0.20	1.22	.317
Know other callers (1 = yes vs. 0 = no)	-0.39	0.30	0.68	.194	0.80	0.19	2.24	< .001
Trust presenter (1 = yes vs. 0 = no)	-0.53	0.27	0.59	.050	0.84	0.31	2.32	.007
Male (vs. female)	0.25	0.24	1.29	.298	0.40	0.19	1.50	.035
Age 35+ (vs -35)	0.29	0.27	1.33	.283	0.40	0.21	1.49	.057
Education level <sup>a</sup>	-0.04	0.15	0.96	.790	0.27	0.11	1.31	.014
Kenya (vs. Zambia)	-1.54	0.27	0.21	< .001	-0.73	0.22	0.48	.001
Urban (vs. rural)	0.46.	0.27	1.58	.088	-0.45	0.20	0.63	.024
Mobile phones <sup>b</sup>	-0.50	0.39	0.61	.200	0.88	0.52	2.40	.091
Media watchdog <sup>c</sup>	-0.27	0.13	0.77	.038	-0.08	0.10	0.92	.424
Satisf. democracy <sup>d</sup>	0.15	0.11	1.16	.173	0.15.	0.08	1.16	.061

*Note.* Total sample size = 1,148; *SE* = standard error; *OR* = odds ratio; *p* value = two-tailed *p* value of the estimate.

<sup>a</sup>4 = postgraduate, 3 = undergraduate, 2 = secondary, 1 = primary, 0 = did not go to school. <sup>b</sup>1 = I use a mobile phone, 0 = I don't ever use a mobile phone. <sup>c</sup>4 = very effective, 3 = somewhat effective, 2 = not very effective, 1 = not at all effective. <sup>d</sup>5 = very satisfied, 4 = fairly satisfied, 3 = not very satisfied, 2 = not at all satisfied, 1 = Kenya/Zambia is not a democracy.

In this analysis, mediated sociability is the strongest determinant of participation. Listenership is associated with positive attitudes toward the shows and with recognizing media's role in political accountability. Participation is triggered by the social aspects of the shows, such as knowing other callers and trusting the presenter. The effect may also go in the opposite direction: Knowing other participants and trusting the presenters are the result of participation in interactive shows. As a trigger or as an effect, we can conclude that mediated sociability is associated with participation.

Model 3 (Table 3) extends Hypothesis 4 by exploring the contextual effects of the mediated sociability variables, particularly the effect of a rural-urban divide. We tested whether the effect of knowing other callers on participation depends on whether the participant lives in a rural or urban area. Put differently, we tested the interaction effect between rural/urban and knowing other callers on participation in shows to examine if mediated sociability is a determinant of participation both in rural and urban areas.

**Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regression for Listenership and Participation, Baseline = Listeners.**

Model 3 Variables	Nonlisteners (1) vs. listeners (0)				Participants (1) vs. listeners (0)			
	Estimate	SE	OR	p value	Estimate	SE	OR	p value
Intercept	1.12	0.69	-	.105	-3.57	0.74	-	< .001
Impact (positive =1 vs. negative 0)	-0.75	0.30	0.47	.012	-0.18	0.25	0.83	.472
Have a favorite show (1 = yes vs. 0 = no)	-0.97	0.26	0.38	< .001	0.20	0.20	1.22	.317
Know other callers (1 = yes vs. 0 = no)	-0.39	0.30	0.68	.194	0.51	0.19	2.24	.007
Trust presenter (1 = yes vs. 0 = no)	-0.53	0.27	0.59	.050	0.87	0.31	2.32	.005
Male (vs. female)	0.25	0.24	1.29	.298	0.43	0.19	1.50	.024
Age 35+ (vs -35)	0.29	0.27	1.33	.283	0.39	0.21	1.49	.063
Education level <sup>a</sup>	-0.04	0.15	0.96	.790	0.28	0.11	1.31	.011
Kenya (vs. Zambia)	-1.54	0.27	0.21	< .001	-0.88	0.22	0.48	< .001
Urban (vs. rural)	0.46	0.27	1.58	.088	-0.70	0.20	0.63	< .001
Mobile phone <sup>b</sup>	-0.50	0.39	0.61	.200	0.97	0.52	2.4	.062
Media watchdog <sup>c</sup>	-0.27	0.13	0.77	.038	-0.07	0.10	0.92	.484
Satisf. democracy <sup>d</sup>	0.15	0.11	1.16	.173	0.15	0.08	1.16	.061
Know callers X Urban	0.42	0.28	1.52	.134	0.82	0.20	2.27	< .001

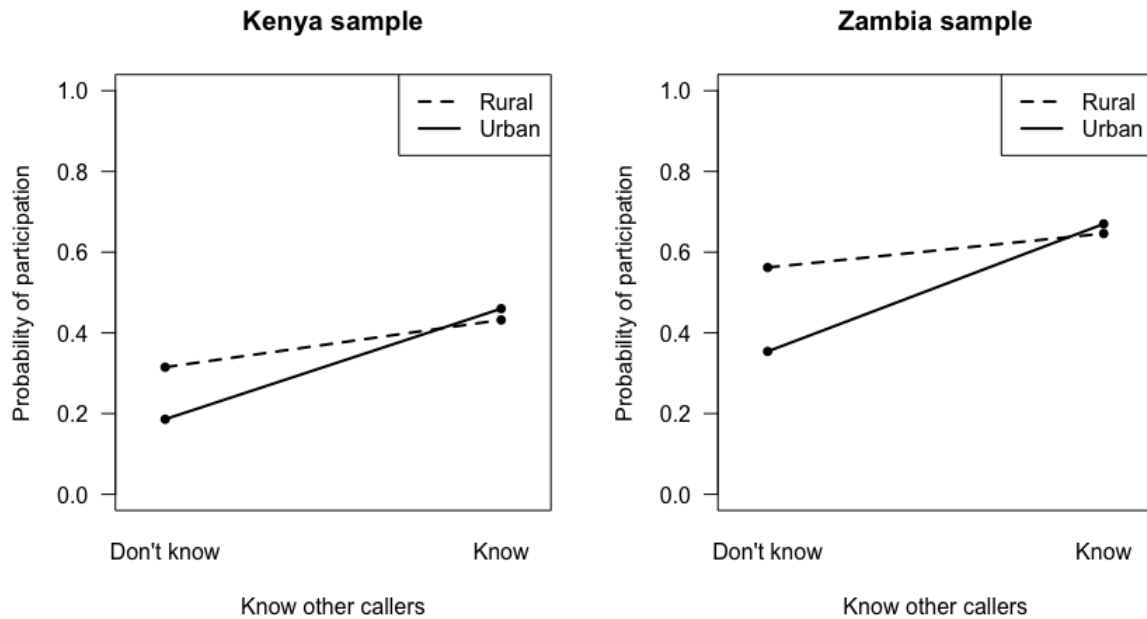
Note. Total sample size = 1,148; SE = standard error; OR = odds ratio; p value = two-tailed p value of the estimate.

<sup>a</sup>4 = postgraduate, 3 = undergraduate, 2 = secondary, 1 = primary, 0 = did not go to school. <sup>b</sup>1 = I use a mobile phone, 0 = I don't ever use a mobile phone. <sup>c</sup>4 = very effective, 3 = somewhat effective, 2 = not very effective, 1 = not at all effective. <sup>d</sup>5 = very satisfied, 4 = fairly satisfied, 3 = not very satisfied, 2 = not at all satisfied, 1 = Kenya/Zambia is not a democracy.

The effect of knowing other callers on participation is stronger for urban versus rural constituencies, as suggested by the statistically significant interaction effect in Model 3. The graphs that follow (Figure 3) compare the probability of participation for people<sup>5</sup> who know and who do not know other callers, in urban and rural settings.

<sup>5</sup> We fixed values for other statistically significant variables in a way that maximizes probabilities of participation: male, 35 years or older, with at least secondary level of education and access to a mobile phone.





**Figure 3. Probabilities of participation in interactive shows depending on knowing/not knowing other callers, for listeners from urban or rural areas in Kenya (sample size = 760) and in Zambia (sample size = 688).**

The interaction pattern in Figure 3 shows that the positive effect of knowing other callers on participation is stronger for urban versus rural constituencies in both countries. This result is logical and reinforces our argument on mediated sociability. Social networks in more ethnically homogenous rural communities where people listen to local language radio shows are more cohesive than in more populated and heterogeneous urban areas where residents listen to city or national stations. In rural settings, people have a sense of familiarity and affinity with others even if they do not know them personally. In urban settings, familiarity is not assumed, but it can be born of knowing others who have participated, or at least perceiving to know them. Therefore, knowing other participants substantially increases the level of sociability and thus propensity to participate mainly in urban settings.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This article brings quantitative empirical social analysis to the theoretical tradition of studying the role of sociability in the making of publics and the role of media formats, personalities, and cultures in shaping audience engagement. The study shows that patterns of participation in interactive shows in rural and urban constituencies in Zambia and Kenya are not consistent with variations in access to mobile phones, suggesting that access alone does not explain participation. Despite lower mobile phone access and radio listenership in Zambia, the relative participation in the Zambian constituencies surpasses that in Kenya, where access to mobile phones and radio listenership are nearly universal.

A consistent pattern across the four samples is that participation, more than listenership, is biased toward men and the more educated. Men engage in interactive shows nearly twice as much as women do. However, neither differential access to mobile phones nor radio listenership appeared to explain lower levels of female participation; for example, in Kenya, mobile phone access is not gendered.

Research Hypotheses 2 and 4 were corroborated. First, this study revealed that mobile phone access and use do not explain gender differences in participation, suggesting that participation is influenced by sociocultural norms that regulate who “rightly” participates in interactive shows, what types of shows women should be interested in, and what forms participation should assume (disproving Hypothesis 1). The survey showed how both genders recognize that men in their communities discourage women from participating (Lopes et al., 2015). It also identified a shared belief, particularly among men, that women are not interested in current affairs and politics. This study thus underscores the limitation of focusing on access to and affordability of technology, common in the digital divide literature, even when sociodemographic variations are included. Access and affordability are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for fostering inclusive citizen engagement in the mediated public sphere.

Inequalities in listenership and participation are reproduced through sociocultural norms of the kind raised by critical scholarship on publics and counter-publics. However, an excessive focus on sociocultural norms can underplay other factors that determine who listens to and participates in interactive shows. For a start, more attention needs to be paid to perceptions of the media’s effectiveness as a watchdog and of the positive impact of interactive shows. The study highlighted that listening audiences for interactive shows on current affairs are a kind of engaged collective. Listenership is influenced by the perception that the media plays a role in political accountability and the perception that interactive shows have a positive impact in society. In this way, the study provided empirical evidence to support arguments made in African media studies about audiences’ active role in constituting interactive shows, as citizens seeking a strong role for the mediated public sphere in politics. More tellingly, however, participation, and not merely listening, is not influenced by liking a show or expectations of positive effects. A lack of faith in these shows and in the quality of democracy can lead citizens to switch off, but the converse of this does not substantially influence active participation.

We return then to the powerful role of situated factors that determine the convened social space of interactive broadcast—not technology access and not background or instrumental motivations about the quality of democracy and the media—as a strong determinant of audience participation. By accounting for the mediated sociability of interactive shows, the dangers of overdetermining and rigidifying sociocultural influences can be convincingly warded off. Our study gives empirical weight to the arguments of others concerning the media’s important and distinct role in convening public discussion and constituting audiences in ways that invite and enable listeners to be vocal citizens. The influence of mediated sociability may be productive of new trajectories, as evidenced by other studies of interactive broadcast shows in Africa (Srinivasan & Diepeveen, 2018). Interactive shows have demonstrative effects that are relevant to the body politic beyond the participants, beginning with the listening audience. For example, this could be in encouraging greater female participation by building awareness among female listeners of women like them who participate. Giving attention to the role of mediated sociability in audience participation in interactive

broadcast media allows researchers to better understand how the mediated public sphere is evolving, and can be shaped, in a digitally connected world.

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