From 'animation' to encounter: Community radio, sociability and urban life in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract:

Drawing upon ethnographic research on community radio in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, this article argues that tracking production practices outside of the studio allows researchers to better capture radio's entanglements with everyday urban life. This spatial reconsideration mirrors a conceptual move beyond community media labels and normative criteria, toward a privileging of context. To illustrate both points, the article centers around 'animation,' the practice of enlivening social situations. Animation is central to community radio in Abidjan, but 'animateurs' also practice their trade in a multitude of venues and events around the city. Following animation's movements between on- and off-air provides an understanding of how community radio is assembled as a porous 'micro-public,' and insight into the particular kind of sociability that it produces. The article shows that while this sociability is tinged with the quest for status and social capital, it is mostly characterized by indeterminacy, and valued for the unforeseen encounters it can foster.
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Introduction

In early November 2014 I started fieldwork in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire's main metropolis. The bustling and cosmopolitan city is home to around 5 million inhabitants. It is also home to 15 or so 'proximity radio' stations (*radios de proximité*). These stations are area-based (they cannot emit beyond a range of 10 kilometers) and non-profit. They have to broadcast predominantly in French, while catering to some of Côte d'Ivoire's many African languages. Their main mission, in regulatory documents, is to promote 'local development' (AMARC Afrique, 2008). Through my fieldwork, I wanted to know – paraphrasing Nick Couldry (2010) – what people are doing with proximity radio in a city like Abidjan.

The first phone number I obtained was Sylvie's.[1] Sylvie is one of the few women occupying a paid position in proximity broadcasting. She works for Radio ATM in the small, coastal municipal district (*commune*) of Port-Bouët. Radio ATM, like a handful of other proximity radios in Abidjan, is municipally owned and run; other stations are run by private individuals and associations. When I called Sylvie she exclaimed: 'Fantastic! You'll be here for our new show [*émission*]. It's Saturday night in the municipal assembly hall in Vridi [a neighborhood of Port-Bouët].' I told her I was confused because that's not where I thought ATM's studio was located. 'No,' she clarified. 'It's a public show [*émission publique*]. It's a big event because it's the first one since the crisis.'

The crisis Sylvie evoked was a period of intense post-electoral violence in the spring of 2011. It followed a decade of simmering political-ethnic conflict (Akindès, 2004; Banégas, 2011; McGovern, 2011; Marshall-Fratani, 2006; Vidal and Le Pape, 2002). As a result of 'the crisis,' the previous Ivoirian president, Laurent Gbgabo (2000-2011), was arrested by French military

and now stands trial for crimes against humanity in The Hague. The current president, Alassane Ouattara, came into office backed by international institutions and a coalition of armed 'rebels' that had occupied the north of Côte d'Ivoire since September 2002. Abidjan, where one finds all of Côte d'Ivoire's sixty-something ethnic groups, as well as a large foreign-born population from West Africa and beyond, remains marked by traumatic memories of inter-ethnic conflict at a micro-local level. The city's climate of public expression remains dampened by mistrust and fear of repression.

The *émission publique* that Radio ATM put on was titled *La Nuit des Ethnies* (the 'night of ethnic groups'). Its goal was to showcase Port-Bouët's 'reconciled' ethnic diversity through song, dance and laughter. Though these things were not brought up, everyone in the room – except me – knew that Radio ATM had been seized and looted during 'the crisis,' and that several of Port-Bouët's neighborhoods had turned against each other in occasionally deadly ways.

The public show was a puzzling experience for me. It was not actually aired, or even recorded, even though the French word *émission* denotes broadcasting. It consisted of a series of short concerts, lip-synched for the most part, except for the presentations and jokes. During the show I recognized members of ATM's staff that I'd already managed to meet. Two, Armand and Philippe, were particularly active: they were hosting, praising, dancing, riling the crowd, coordinating, shaking hands and drinking. In each of these activities, they were followed by groups of people – an entourage in which everyone seemed so familiar and so involved that I mistook many people for radio practitioners when they were but acquaintances, even strangers hanging about.

Armand and Philippe are *animateurs*. After spending time with them, and many of their colleagues around Abidjan's proximity radio scene, I learned that they carry that professional title both 'in' radio and 'outside' of it, in radio-sponsored public shows like the *Nuit des Ethnies*, but also in a wide variety of other events. Armand's and Philippe's trade, *animation*, takes them around their district and the city. In a single week, I followed Armand from Radio ATM's studio to a dowry ceremony in one of the most deprived neighborhoods in Port-Bouët (Adjouffou), to an actual wedding in a hotel of the Plateau, Abidjan's glitzy business district, and to a football match for which he provided live commentary from his mobile phone.

This article focuses on animation and animateurs in order to understand the urban work of proximity radio stations in Abidjan. I will show that animation's mobility and multi-sited nature are key to how proximity radio is assembled as an urban 'micro-public' (Amin, 2002: 959). Animation's combination of on- and off-air performances creates a distinctive *sociability* (Scannell, 1996; Simmel, 1949) which tells us a great deal about how and why people get involved in (or around) proximity radio, and how radio 'opens up' to the city. Taking a wide-scoped view of radio and its associated sociability allows both a nuanced understanding of the kinds of expectations, hopes and distinctions that people bring to small-scale broadcasting, and a clearer view of how radio sociability folds into the distinctly urban practices of 'popular research' (Simone, 2012: 209) and encounter.

Before I get to the heart of the empirical matter, I provide a brief framework that guided my thinking about radio in Abidjan. This framework emphasizes *context*, and seeks the significance of mediation in urban life and practices rather than 'in' media themselves. I hope it can be useful for further exchanges between community media studies and urban studies, in an African context and beyond.

From labels to context to practices: Articulating an urban perspective on community media

In a 1984 UNESCO report titled *Media for People in Cities*, Peter Lewis and his associates sought to understand what it means for community media to operate in an urban context. Does the city pose a particular challenge for community media activism, and why? Is there something specifically urban to the work that community media do in cities? The report lays out good questions, but fails to provide convincing answers. Thinking about why this is so helped me articulate what an urban perspective on community media might look like.

A key reason for the UNESCO report's failure to convince is that it is mostly concerned with testing and validating a normative model of community media. The authors thus conclude their section on Africa: 'Measured against the three criteria governing community media, namely, access, participation and self-management, none of the African case studies fulfills all the necessary conditions' (Lewis, 1984: 29). The conclusion, which follows rich descriptions of three East African case studies, was all the more preoccupying that it could easily be drawn in relation to proximity radio in Abidjan.

Proximity radio stations collectively belong to the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC). They use these internationally sanctioned 'community' credentials to fund progressive initiatives, or to push back against overbearing authorities. The stations all feature interactive programming, and through animation, I will show, they allow open-ended interaction between producers and audiences. Proximity radio's authorization in the 1990s was heralded as a 'liberalization' of the Ivoirian airwaves (Fardon and Furniss, 2000; Frère, 1996;

2005; Gunner et al., 2011; Nyamnjoh, 2005), but the stations were curtailed in their democratic potential by state-enforced regulations (Bahi, 1998; Théroux-Bénoni and Bahi, 2008). Stations are prohibited from airing political content, meaning they cannot amplify oppositional voices, and their 'non-commercial' status ensures that they remain cash-strapped, dependent on municipal subsidies, international development funding (Myers et al., 2014), and increasingly money from churches willing to sponsor programming. Proximity radio practitioners (both producers and audiences) are under significant financial and political pressure. The latter is sometimes applied directly by the authorities, but more generally results from the climate of post-conflict fear and mistrust that continues in contemporary Côte d'Ivoire.

In sum, proximity radio would have a hard time passing the UNESCO report's test of access, participation and especially self-management. Yet media studies have shown that such criteria and models are imperfectly realized and contested in *all* contexts (e.g. Carpentier et al., 2003; Carpentier, 2011). In Africa, models are most often challenged by hybrid realities (e.g. Gagliardone, 2015; Stremlau et al., 2015; Willems, 2013) in which several contradictory types of communication are at play. Media actors frequently use descriptors such as 'community media' strategically to position themselves in uncertain and power-striated environments (see Brisset-Foucault, 2011). More broadly, concepts such as civil society (see Willems 2014), citizenship, and even media itself (Slater, 2014: 52), which underpin normative models of community media, are themselves born out of a specific history of struggle and debate. In order to avoid unproductive analyses, it is important to consider the historical, social and political configurations under which these concepts get circulated, adopted and even instrumentalized. This is true everywhere, but particularly on the African continent. The legacy of media's origin as tools and symbols of colonial rule and postcolonial state power in much of Africa (Fardon and Furniss, 2000; Larkin, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2005) continues to constrain ordinary people's

opportunities for mediated critique and resistance, and sometimes forces critical expression 'off the radar' – which does not mean it does not exist (Englund, 2011; Willems and Obadare, 2014). The ways and venues in which African citizens take up democratic values may not be immediately recognizable according to 'western' criteria, but they are often just as rich and spread widely through a variety of channels, starting with popular culture.

Debates over models and criteria can be side-stepped by looking for the social significance of community media in a specific context and a broader 'communicative ecology' (Slater, 2014). The city, provides an excellent opportunity to do so. Another reason the 1984 UNESCO report fails to convince, unfortunately, is that it relies on a narrow conception of the urban. Distinctive cities are reduced to a universal and unidirectional process of 'urbanization,' itself tied to global 'modernity' (Lewis, 1984: 7-9). Urbanization is summarized as the 'loss of community' which leads to the emergence of 'individuality.' In 'dependent cities' (read: cities of the Global South), furthermore, urbanization is presented as a problem to be remedied. This is apparent in the section of Africa (Lewis, 1984: 13), where urbanization is said to be recent and linked to unmanaged population growth as well as infrastructural shortages. This is a one-sided representation of urban Africa. As Mamadou Diouf and Rosalind Fredericks (2014: 1) argue, it is typical of 'a developmentalist ethos that limits the framing of African cities to invectives of perverse growth, crumbling infrastructure, and flagging economies that demand a series of interventions, often from the outside.'

By focusing on the 'death of community' and the problems of urbanization, the UNESCO report obscures the multiple reconfigurations of identity and co-inhabitance that are at stake in city-making. As AbdouMaliq Simone (2014: 32) points out, African cities, like cities elsewhere, are also positive social terrains that 'enable diverse peoples to discover an ability to act in concert

and to attain a working sense of responsibility to, and identification with, each other.' Cities are grounds for new forms of citizenship (Diouf and Fredericks, 2014; Holston and Appadurai, 1999), for new forms of social collaboration and commonality (Amin, 2012; Simone, 2004b), and for new forms of political awareness and counter-hegemonic mobilization (Harvey, 2012; Lefebvre, 2003). Such social formations do not usually happen through a single impetus, or a single channel, but result from myriad social, aesthetic and communicative *practices* through which ordinary urban residents compose and navigate the urban as a social world (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Calhoun et al., 2013). These practices are variously mediated, anchored to a plethora of different technological assemblages, and are often found at work in the unspectacular spaces of urban sociability that Ash Amin (2002: 959) calls 'micro-publics.' In these spaces – such as the workplace, the market, the school, etc. – regular presence and even minimal participation can foster new interdependencies, commonalities and mutual exchange through a 'micropolitics of everyday social contact and encounter' (Amin, 2002; 2012; Hall, 2012).

I would like to pause on the significance of *encounter*. Cities are complex places of multiplicity and inequality, in which different social classes, ethnicities, religions, gender identities, and so on live in close proximity. Abidjan is no exception (Bredeloup, 2008; Konaté, 2005; Roubaud, 2003): it is estimated that a quarter of its population is foreign-born, and the city is home to nationals from all over West Africa and beyond, in addition to Côte d'Ivoire's more than sixty ethnic groups. Islam, Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity all have a significant, competing presence. Geographer Bill Freund (2001) notes that most areas in Abidjan are mixed, in social and housing terms, and *abidjanais* residents pride themselves on their cosmopolitan outlook. Yet neighborhoods and districts get associated with certain ethnic and religious groups, as well as with political affiliation (Dembele, 2003a).[2] As mentioned, Côte d'Ivoire has a history of

political-ethnic conflict; in Abidjan, cohabitation between ethnic and religious groups has occasionally lapsed into violent episodes of xenophobia, as well as a prolonged antagonism between 'northerners' (largely Muslim) and 'westerners' (a large number of whom are Christian Evangelicals) (Banégas, 2011; McGovern, 2011; Marshall-Fratani, 2006; Dembele, 2003b; Roubaud, 2003; Vidal and Le Pape, 2002).

Diversity, in cities, is both the norm and always potentially conflictual, albeit to various degrees. Different groups often live side by side as a 'mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate' as sociologist Robert Park famously noted (cited in Tajbakhsh, 2001: 9). It is often difficult for urban dwellers, whose identities are mediated by various group memberships, to work out common ground. Urban encounters are widely seen to be one of the primary social occasions through which individuals step out of the 'little worlds' of group affiliation by meeting people outside of their class, gender, ethnic and religious circles (Georgiou, 2008; Liggett, 2003; Merrifield, 2013; Valentine, 2013). In so doing they have more opportunities to accept diversity as banal or non-problematic (Tonkiss, 2005: 22-27; also Hall, 2012), and to further develop positive orientations toward multiple Others. The actual political and social significance of encounters is an object of debate, and many have warned against their 'romanticization' (Valentine, 2013). I do not address the issue here: the consequences of sociability and encounter for proximity radio practitioners' experience and perception of urban diversity will be the subject of another paper.

If encounters can be conducive to a positive experience of urban diversity, AbdouMaliq Simone has argued that African urban dwellers are particularly adept at seeking them out; he calls this disposition and practice 'popular research' (Simone, 2012: 209; see also Simone, 2004a, 2008). In essence, encounters are unplanned and unforeseen, but one can maximize opportunities by

being open to them and by multiplying the venues in which they can happen. By research, Simone designates urban dwellers' willingness and constant efforts to '"step into" situations where they don't necessarily belong and have no apparent eligibility to participate' (Simone, 2012: 212), as a way to regularly 'try different ways of being in the city "on for size" without making definitive commitments to them' (Simone, 2012: 209). Exploring situations and identities, residents are able to gather valuable knowledge on how things actually work in the city (which is not always immediately clear, and occasionally arbitrary). In the process, they also increase opportunities for 'dense entanglements of implication, witnessing, and constant acknowledgements of other residents' that 'extend the ways in which things are implicated in each other' (Simone, 2012: 215). Overall, 'popular research' is about multiplying the chances for encounter, but also about making these encounters as conducive as possible to unprecedented commonalities and collaborations.

An urban perspective on community media involves leaving aside normative models in order to look for media's significance in the context of such urban practices, cultures, and 'micro-public' spaces of everyday sociability. This approach implies '[rethinking] the qualities of media not as a discrete domain of practices, but rather as helping to constitute various types of inherently mediated [urban] practices' (Rodgers et al., 2009: 247). In order to do so, researchers need to fully open up media forms, functions, spatial configurations, imaginaries and practicalities, so that, to paraphrase Brian Larkin (2008: 3), 'what community media are is interrogated and not presumed'.

This is a move initiated by conceptualizations of community media as 'rhizomes' (Carpentier et al., 2003; Bosch, 2010). In these conceptualizations community media are characterized by a unique fluidity and malleability, as well as an ability to act as an open-ended, non-hierarchical

connecting force. Their ability to connect across pre-conceived fields and categories are precisely what makes community media different from more 'rigid' institutional mediators. However, rhizomatic conceptualizations often remain too 'media essentialist' as Don Slater (2014: 18-19) puts it. They retain a presumption of what community media look like and position media at the center of the rhizome, so to speak. Taking urban life and practices as a starting point involves considering wider and more complex 'communicative assemblages' (ibid.: 48-49) in which media are neither the end-game nor even, sometimes, the primary vehicles for information and communication. From a methodological point of view, it also favors ethnographic inquiries that consider community media audiences as well as producers.

In my empirical study of *animation* in Abidjan I focus on a mobile practice rather than on radio as a static object. Looking at the multiple sites in which animation unfolds, and at the kind of open-ended, producer-audience sociability that results, I aim to document proximity radio's openness to urban life.

Animation and the 'Sociability of Encounter'

Animation is a widespread media-related practice in Abidjan. It is most of what goes on on proximity radio. Sébastien, a lead animateur for Radio Téré in the dense trading district of Adjamé, describes his work in the following way:

> The animateur is there to spice up the situation, any event really – weddings, baptisms, sad events, even during funerals and such, I've done those things in addition to radio. The animateur is the one to make the evening or the event *better*. You need to captivate people; you need to keep them occupied so they don't get distracted. You need to amuse them. Any event which features a good animateur won't be forgotten, because an event without animation is one without flavor. You need a moderator, someone to say do this or that. There is a need for someone to set the tone of the night.

In Sébastien's description, animation is about doing whatever it takes to ensure that a social event is successful. It is about leading a collective performance, in which people are at least minimally attentive and inclined to participate. What matters, regardless of the occasion, is that things are happening, that talk is flowing and energies are getting spent.

One key aspect of animation's work is the production of *sociability*. Drawing on Georg Simmel (1949), Paddy Scannell (1996: Chapter 1) argues that sociability is one of broadcasting's essential accomplishments, or what historically came to make radio (in particular) what it is. Sociability in this sense is the pre-condition for any social exchange and interaction. It is an infrastructural level of social connection, or to paraphrase Simmel (1949: 255), social relation in its least instrumental form, geared only toward itself: social interaction whose primary purpose is to foster more social interaction. Radio sociability, in Scannell's reading, is produced primarily through talk. It allows a radio listener to know what is going on, to recognize a radio program as a convivial occasion, and to feel invited to contribute in whatever way, even if only through listening in.

For Scannell, radio sociability is specific to the medium on which it is carried, even if it artificially mirrors the sociable occasions of everyday life. In contrast, the type of sociability that is at play in animation is inherently multi-sited, or multi-contextual. Part of an *animateur*'s skill and professional know-how is her/his (mostly his) ability to foster social interaction and conviviality in all sorts of contexts, from the radio studio to an official ceremony, a football match, a concert in a bar, an evening of prayer in a stadium, a street advertising campaign, a wedding or a funeral.

Why might animation's portability, and the extensive, multi-sited nature of its associated sociability, matter? To start with, I consider animation's political economic significance. Its ability to generate revenue beyond the studio is essential to animateurs' livelihood, and by extension to proximity radio stations' survival. Lamine recounts his trajectory as an *animateur* for Radio Treichville, a municipal station in one of Abidjan's oldest and most diverse districts:

> Back in the days, each time there was an event around Treichville or even Cocody we sought out the organizers: here, I can be of service, I'm an animateur. At first it wasn't money, just to make a name for yourself. ... Now of course I'm less and less outside. ... But I still do weddings. For the last three weeks people have been calling me to animate, and I've been telling everyone I'm ill. Otherwise, ... I can get 200 000 francs or 150 000 [around 200-250 dollars], and when you have three or four weddings in a month, that's rent paid, gas paid for my car, and the whole month is OK. ... We do get to round up the month with these gigs.

Lamine has a senior administrative role in Radio Treichville. He is formally employed, with a regular salary (undisclosed), and a middle-class lifestyle symbolized by car ownership. Lamine's story is atypical in this regard, but his trajectory exemplifies what radio producers aspire to in terms of professional development, and illustrates the crucial role that external animation gigs play in this respect.

Most animateurs are not formally employed. The lucky ones get an hourly salary or a sponsor for their show, but most are simply paid a small monthly 'bonus' to cover their transport costs to and from the stations (25 to 30 000 FCFA, 40 dollars a month). This allows them to take the communal taxis or minibuses that traverse the city; only a tiny fraction of proximity radio animateurs can afford to own and drive a car. Animateurs' ability to perform beyond the studio thus allows many of them to make ends meet. Many make more money in external gigs than they do through studio activities. Yet for animateurs, studio work and external gigs are not separate activities, nor diverging career choices, but mutually reinforcing sources of financial, social and symbolic capital. The fact that animateurs continue to work in the studio indicates that radio provides them a reach and symbolic capital that live animation does not carry.

Bertrand, a young animateur on Cocody FM, in one of Abidjan's more well-off districts, implies this when he notes: 'People listen to the radio and they'll phone in saying "I have such and such event – I would like you to animate it".'

Beyond strictly financial considerations, stations rely on animation's portability to carry out their own external, non-studio events – the public shows evoked in the introduction – which can be sources of revenue and especially publicity. All of the radio producers I met agreed that public shows are an excellent way for proximity radio stations to make themselves known and to recruit new listeners. The importance of 'going out into the field' (*aller sur le terrain*), taking radio beyond the studio and into the street, came up time and again, even when producers lamented that they did not have the money to 'go out' in an adequate way – through shows that would make the station look 'good', professional and well-equipped.

Adama was instrumental in launching Radio Yopougon's public shows in the mid-2000s. The shows became notorious before being interrupted by heightened competition and political tensions in the district. After a prolonged and near-fatal illness, Adama returned to the station to coordinate a new series of public shows, this time sponsored by USAID. These new shows, which I followed between March and September 2015, were intended to promote responsible electoral behavior in the 2015 presidential election, so as to avoid the kind of violence that tore Abidjan and Yopougon apart in 2010-2011.

> I may be the oldest in the station, not in age but ... in experience. ... I can say, without wanting to brag, that I know all of the neighborhoods and even sub-neighborhoods in Yopougon, through the shows I did ... Which means, whatever goes on here, I have a part in it. In 2011, I remember, we welcomed some Turkish businessmen. They needed information on different neighborhoods. They came with 30 cows to sacrifice for Tabaski [Muslim celebration, also known as Eid al-Adha] in Yopougon, and I was involved in distributing the meat in different neighborhoods. People saw that I could motivate the neighborhoods. When I came back (after illness), the director asked me to renew the public show we used to do, because it promotes the station in the

neighborhoods, it wins over listeners. We would go and record the show in the deepest neighborhoods [*les plus profonds quartiers*] and it was really interesting; people loved it.

In Adama's understanding, radio's ability to extend beyond the studio, through public shows and external animations, translates into knowledge about urban locality and its audiences. Public shows, he explains, contribute to the establishment of a station's presence in different, often remote socio-spatial contexts: the 'deep' neighborhoods he is referring to are so-called 'precarious' areas of predominantly informal housing (*quartiers précaires*), spaces into which Yopougon's municipality, from which the station emanates, has little visibility or reach.

Audiences also value proximity radio stations' ability to extend toward 'their' neighborhood. In my experience, this sentiment is particularly strong in poorer parts of the city. Anne-Lise, a young, unemployed woman in Yopougon's sprawling, peripheral neighborhood of GESCO, thus expressed her appreciation for Radio Yopougon's recent public show near her home:

> It's rare that... If it's not Radio Yopougon, I don't know that media would come towards us young people to ask us about things. That's what I meant when I said that these other media, they're "over there" [*là bas*]. ... With Radio Yopougon coming over, at least we know, someone's thinking of us young people. Especially we young people of GESCO. Because usually, no one factors us in [*on nous calcule pas*]. I can even say, they neglect us! Because people say GESCO is dangerous. It's true! Media don't come down here to see us.

Animation and its mobilities are what make such interactions and such instantiations of proximity between station and audiences possible. Even when proximity radio stations are unable to hold public shows, they rely on animateurs' comings and goings for indirect publicity, audience feedback (given the lack of any audience measurement tools), and sponsors. Only two of the ten stations I visited in Abidjan have a 'marketing service', whose role it is to seek out announcers and local advertisers. Elsewhere, stations rely on animateurs' personal networks, and thus encourage them to seek out connections wherever they can find them, from bars/clubs to Evangelical churches.

The political-economic significance of animation's travels beyond the studio, as a source of income for radio staff and a point of contact with audiences or advertisers, has some incidence on the kind of sociability that animation puts into play.

The fact that animation is tied to professional identity – what Lamine calls 'making a name for oneself' – means that, for animateurs, sociability is tinged with the instrumentality of networking. Animateurs are intensely attuned to the accumulation of social capital and 'useful' connections. Lamine, the administrator from Radio Treichville, further explains what he enjoys most in his animation work:

> I mostly love the contact with listeners [*auditeurs*]. ... It's wonderful when after a ceremony people come to see you and tell you that you were fantastic. ... In 2000 I started doing these things, weddings and the like – all the way to the top levels of the state: I once animated a ceremony attended by Hamed Bakayoko [Minister of the Interior under the current Ouattara government]. When he left he shook my hand and said ... we'd see each other around. Coming from a Minister of the Republic, I say that's the best gift one could receive.

Lamine again presents an exceptional story but one which is revealing beyond his particular case. He points out that external animations allowed him to meet particularly prestigious 'listeners'. Hamed Bakayoko here stands for the kind of symbolic capital conferred by proximity with the 'highest levels of the state', and beyond that with the promise of social mobility through political patronage networks (however realistic that possibility might be).

The search for 'useful' connections has implications for how animateurs approach public talk and the production of sociability. They often seek to perform so as to live up to what Jean, animateur for Radio Arc-en-Ciel, calls the 'myth' of the media personality: 'When people see someone on TV, they immediately imagine pizza, shawarma, air-conditioned vehicle; they tell themselves that, after all, it is television. The guy who's talking on TV can't just be some ordinary citizen [*citoyen lambda*]'. Most animateurs cannot distinguish themselves through consumption of expensive cosmopolitan delicacies (such as pizzas and shawarmas) or car

ownership. *Linguistic* distinction is much more widespread. On and off air, the type of French that animateurs use in performance is strikingly formal, in order to signify 'media talk' and to demonstrate oral command.

Months spent with listeners' groups in the districts of Yopougon and Abobo revealed that many audience members also value the sociable occasions brought about by animation as privileged access to the 'media world' (see Couldry, 2000). Stéphanie is a good example. She is a single mother, hair-dresser, diversified informal entrepreneur and dedicated member of Radio Arc-en-Ciel's listeners' club in Abobo. For her, taking part in animation-related sociability, first through phone-in shows and later through the organization of a public show in her neighborhood, allowed her to tap into the celebrity and recognition conferred by radio: 'Through radio we became stars!' In several public shows around Abidjan, I also noticed that unconnected people would hang around animateurs, talking, offering drinks, or proposing small services in the hope of being called upon for future events. In yet other cases, listeners described to me their active contribution to radio sociability in terms of labor and demanded, more or less explicitly, that the station provide some sort of reward for their efforts.

Animation thus produces what we might call a 'sociability of distinction' (see Brisset-Foucault, 2013) in which producers and audiences attempt to distinguish themselves in order to signal their availability for upward social mobility. Overall, this gives sociability in and around proximity radio a certain 'respectable' and masculine orientation, such that people who have less resources (linguistic or otherwise) to distinguish themselves, as well as women, for whom social mobility and public display is partly codified along patriarchal lines, tend not to be drawn into sociable occasions so readily.

However, networking and distinction are not the whole story. The fact that animation-related sociability takes place off air as much as over the airwaves provides it with a face-to-face component that allows it to 'spill over' from the controlled interactivity of performance. On the margins of animated events, sociability relaxes, allowing less instrumental and less status-oriented talk to take place. The networks accumulated by animateurs in their travels often come to overlap, so that 'prestigious' acquaintances – municipal officials, pastors, 'traditional' community leaders, football players, journalists, etc. – and 'ordinary' women, workers and informal peddlers often share space. In a context of generalized poverty and insecure social distinctions (see Toh et al., 2009), where identities always carry a potential element of 'bluff' (Newell, 2012; Simone, 2012), the media/ordinary boundary, like its attendant distinctions, is easily blurred. The sociability that takes place in the interstices and margins of animation is difficult to capture and categorize precisely because it is open to indeterminacy. The informal and occasionally secretive interactions that result are fundamental to proximity radio's everyday dealings, as well as to the ways that audience-producer relations are lived out.

Indeed, audience-producer relations are valued and enacted beyond the instrumentality of networking. Friendship, romantic involvement, mutual respect or inspiration, collaboration, the pure pleasure of conviviality, discovery and multiple forms of reciprocity all come into play in how proximity radio producers and audiences interact. Micheline, a tailor and avid Radio Arc-en-Ciel listener, thus explains what she appreciates about the stations' current animateurs: 'Today's animateurs, we have their contact, we call each other, if something is wrong we know that such and such person has this problem, or that problem – and we can get together and go pay them a visit. And we do it. That's how it is.' For Micheline, knowing proximity radio animateurs personally is not just a way of increasing her own symbolic capital: it is, much less instrumentally, about increased social connection and chances for mutual support. In Abidjan,

everyone – animateurs and ordinary people – can have life-rattling problems, at any moment; the more people one knows, the better one's chances of finding the resources to pull through.

If this approach to sociability still carries a degree of instrumentality, it is 'aimlessly instrumental' (Slater, 2014: 81): it indiscriminately values all sorts of social connections as potential benefit. Anne-Lise, the unemployed young woman in Yopougon's GESCO, captures this ethos perfectly when she explains why she volunteered to head her neighborhood's listening club and help organize a public show: 'What motivated me is that I'm looking for a job right now. I told myself it could also be a chance. ... In radio, you can cross a lot of people's paths. You never know. That's it: you never know where luck might smile from. So it's important to keep meeting lots of people'. For Anne-Lise, as for many others, proximity radio and live animation carry potential for unseen opportunities, embodied in unspecified (but numerous) individuals. Although Anne-Lise starts by mentioning a job, she trained as a nursing assistant, and has no interest in being 'in' the media (she sees it as incompatible with her 'discreet' nature). When she speaks of meeting lots of people in radio, it is unclear whether she is imagining romantic, business, patronage or other types of social connections. Most likely, she doesn't know herself, and leaving possibilities open is precisely the point. *You never know* is the name of the game.

Conclusion: Stepping Outside

Understanding the urban significance of community media such as Abidjan's proximity radio stations requires *stepping outside*. I have found it necessary to step outside of labels, normative models and pre-conceived formats, in order to let context take the fore. This is also a step outside of the studio and the spaces of production traditionally researched in community media

studies. There, one finds the city, its multitudinous diversity, its latent social discord, its vibrant cultural micro-climates – and the everyday practices that make it all hang together, in often precarious and repressive conditions. Cities, especially in Africa, are places where ordinary residents have 'too many things to do' (Simone, 2014) in order to simply get by, to have fun, to dodge danger, and to forge commonalities out of a 'land of strangers' (Amin, 2012). In the midst of all those things – routine activities, fears and pleasures – one finds media. Community media are no exception: they must struggle for their embeddedness and relevance in people's everyday lives.

Urban dwellers who actively participate in proximity radio, whether as producers or as audiences, are almost always looking to 'get something out of it.' This 'something,' frequently, is encounter. Encounters are unplanned intersections of individual trajectories, in which some of the myriad social worlds that compose the city come to interpenetrate. Encounters are the stuff of urban life, and one of the main ways that co-inhabitance and commonalities are worked out between otherwise segmented social groups (Amin, 2002; 2012; Georgiou, 2008; Hall, 2012; Merrifield, 2013; Valentine, 2013). Encounters are no easy accomplishment. They require venues, or prosaic micro-publics, in which conditions and dispositions are ripe. They require 'research', people's regular stepping out into the urban unknown (or urban unusual) (Simone, 2012).

Animation, in Abidjan, is the professional practice of enlivening social occasions, both on and off air. Through animation, proximity radio producers and audiences perform a kind of sociability (Scannell, 1996; Simmel, 1949) that is partly structured by expectations of social mobility and demonstrations of status. In the end, however, this sociability is about the facilitation of encounters: it rests on the valuation of indiscriminate interaction, and of

indeterminate, emergent social bonds. Following animation around Abidjan reveals that proximity radio's urban significance lies less in its conforming to a particular community media model, than to its role as a porous micro-public, with multiple points of entry and spaces for social interaction – a part in a wider 'communicative assemblage' (Slater, 2014) through which *abidjanais* residents live out their relation to the city and its unforeseen Others.

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Notes

[1] All of the names in this article have been changed.

[2] Abobo and Yopougon, the two largest peripheral districts of Abidjan, are a good example. Yopougon is the western entry-point into the city and is thus home to many ethnic groups originating in the west of Côte d'Ivoire; by extension, the district is widely seen to be a 'bastion' of support for ex-president Laurent Gbagbo, himself a westerner. Abobo, on the other hand, is seen to be predominantly 'northern,' which is to say predominantly Muslim, and predominantly acquired to current president Alassane Ouattara, himself Muslim.