5. Radio

5.1 Key changes and developments in the radio marketplace in the past five years

From 2000, the year in which a democratic regime change occurred in Senegal after 40 years of rule by the Socialist Party, there was an explosion in the number of radio stations. This number went from 40 to 62 between 2000 and 2005\(^\text{13}\).

From 2000 to 2005, there has been no increase, however, in the number of stations broadcasting nationally, with still just two at national level, both state-owned RTS services (see Figure 6, p.17).

State-owned radio stations broadcasting to regions increased by 25\% between 2000 and 2005, from 12 to 15, and private radio stations broadcasting to regions jumped from 20 to 35, an increase of 75\%. Community radio stations have also had an increase in number, from seven to 19, a 171\% increase (see Figure 6, p.17) (Panos, 2006). There are an impressive number of radio stations in the regions. According to Diagne (2005a, p.87), “More than 30 local radio stations exist in the various administrative regions of Senegal”. Most of these stations are public as they are branches of RTS. There are also stations set up by the Sud FM Group in many areas of the country. Dunyaa FM and, to a lesser extent, Walf FM and Radio Futur Media, also have regional commercial stations. All of these stations focus on entertainment, education and news. Most of the stations are private and specialise in general information but with a strong profit-making and commercial ethos (such as Sud FM and Wal Fadjri). There are some stations, mostly specialising in music, such as Dakar FM, a regional station that belongs to RTS, a state-owned network; and other private radio stations, such as Soxna Fm or Nostalgie.

The boom in radio stations includes community radios, which went from seven to 19 between 2000 and 2005 (Panos, 2006). Their aims are to give an account of the everyday life of the population, increase people’s awareness and participate in citizenship education. The odd one out is Alhamdoullilah FM, a private, specialised station that broadcasts the Koran 24 hours a day. Dunyaa FM was founded by the same owner and also broadcasts a number of Islamic religious programmes. Other community stations include Ndef Leng FM, which uses Sereer as its predominant language and seeks to promote the culture of that ethnic group. There is also Manoré FM, which is considered the “voice of Senegalese women”.

\(^{13}\) Calculation based on Panos statistics supplemented by researcher’s own knowledge. See Panos information at http://www.panos.sn/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=46&titre=&type=47&pays=6&statut=&periodicite=)
Community radio stations are close to their populations, acting as a window on a population’s expectations and its various social segments. They deal with local realities in their areas. For example, in Koumpentoum, a town in the eastern region of Tambacounda, community radio station Niani FM broadcasts information about agriculture, cattle-raise, products sold at the weekly market, and so on. A similar station is Awagna FM, which targets farmers in Casamance in the south of the country. Awagna FM broadcasts in Diola, Mandinka, Wolof and Pulaar. Pété FM is at the centre of farmers’ and breeders’ community concerns in the Fouta Toro, in the north of Senegal.

All these radio stations have contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of dialogue and discussion within Senegalese society, and have led their audiences to become more interested in politics and local development.

5.2 Investment and growth in the radio sector in the past five years

The large increase in the number of radio stations has, as a corollary, resulted in a relatively high failure rate, due to the difficult economic environment. Radio stations that survive are those with a proven audience and a reputation that draws in advertisers and sponsors. Investment costs for starting a radio station are not as great as the operating costs.

The continued growth of the broadcasting sector, with the increasing demand for new frequencies by private promoters, is a sign that private investors are willing to venture into the radio business. However, radio stations are being set up faster than the advertising market is growing, making it difficult for them to survive. Many stations disappear after just a few years.

5.3 Plurality, ownership and control

Today, there are many more radio station owners than five years ago, and the state-controlled RTS network now faces stiff competition from private radio stations. Transparency in radio ownership is sometimes lacking, however. Unofficial sources claim that the apparent owners of many private radio stations and newspapers are actually fronts, and the real owners are important public personalities. The ‘fronting system’ is believed to be highly developed.

Meanwhile, the process of radio frequency assignment by the regulator ART is not seen as an entirely neutral activity. ART often deals with cases of radio frequency interference which, according to unofficial sources, may be a cynical way for the state to sabotage some private stations.
5.4 Diversity

Commercial radio stations, with a few exceptions, all offer the same sorts of programming: general information programmes, a great deal of music, some documentaries and programmes sponsored by powerful private companies. Programmes dealing with politics command a great deal of listeners' interest. The music programmes are overwhelmingly dominated by "mbalax", a national musical form popularised by the singer Youssou N'Dour.

Although this research found a balance in terms of political and religious diversity in commercial radio stations, the situation is different for ethnic and linguistic diversity. The Wolof language and French dominate private radio. The state stations and community radios, on the other hand, operate on the principle of respect for the balance of ethnic diversity in their audiences. All communities, even foreign ones, are given the right to express themselves. For example, at Radio Oxyjeune in Pikine, Fulbe from the Republic of Guinea have their own programme.

On commercial stations, there is generally a lack of innovation and effort to present new programmes.
5.5 Quality of radio output and programming

This research found problems regarding both form and content in radio. In terms of content, there is a problem with information imbalance on private radio stations, which have a strong tendency to voice opposing views to those of public authorities. It seems to be difficult for them to adopt an impartial position. This results in a climate of suspicion, with some observers denouncing the stations’ tendency to point out the failures of government while omitting to mention achievements that might build up public confidence. To avoid controversy, serious investigations into sensitive issues are not undertaken by private commercial stations. This poses a problem around the quality of information delivered to the public. At state-owned radio stations, there is the same tendency to be biased but to the benefit of the government. However, at least the treatment of information by state radio stations is more balanced than the information provided by the state TV station.

In terms of form, the problem is in journalists’ poor mastery of language. One finds today a generation of young and ambitious journalists, but their main difficulty is their level of linguistic competence, either in French or Wolof. This situation has an adverse effect on the quality of their work.

5.6 Specific challenges

There are many obstacles to guaranteeing investment needed for radio development in Senegal. In addition to heavy operating costs, services such as telephone and electricity are expensive. There is also a harsh fiscal environment with multiple taxes. All these things hamper the development of the sector. However, the even bigger challenges are training, building capacity and attempting to get closer to the various communities to make programmes more pluralistic. To this end, community radio stations need a clearly-defined regulatory framework.

Finally, there is the problem of the apparent clash, particularly in private radio, between journalists and politicians – a phenomenon which needs to be addressed as it blurs journalistic balance in the treatment of information.

Key findings

- From 2000 to 2005, the number of radio stations rose sharply at regional and local levels.
- The advertising market is not growing as fast as radio stations are being set up, leading to many stations collapsing after just a few years of operation.
- There is no significant concentration in radio ownership, with the exception of the state-controlled RTS network and a few groups such as Sudcom.
- Both state-owned and private radio stations need to aim for more diversity in programming and better balance in reporting on political issues.
- One of the biggest challenges remains training.