



5. Radio

Being largely an agricultural country, radio fits with the lifestyle of many people in Uganda. It is a popular media channel because it does not require electricity, and because people can listen to the radio while they work, walk or drive. By broadcasting in local languages, radio goes a long way in addressing the information, education and entertainment requirements of its localities and audiences. For many people, especially in rural areas, radio remains the main source of information and entertainment.

Listenership in Uganda is very high, with InterMedia estimating in 2005 that 100% of the population had listened to the radio in the past year, 92.8% in the past seven days, and 73.7% as recently as the day before (InterMedia, 2005). The 2002 census showed that about half of households (49.2%) in the country reported that “word of mouth” was their main source of information, followed by radio (47.8%). This is compared with less than 1% of households who reported the print media (newspapers and magazines) as their main source of information and 1% for TV (UBOS, 2002).

Some stations are funded by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), while others are commercial and depend on advertising revenue. Only the stations of the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) depend on state subsidy. The number of community stations has picked up in recent years, especially in the northern part of the country where, due to the war with the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), commercial radios have not ventured. But due to the situation in the north of Uganda, these radios have to be careful with the content and style of their broadcasts, lest they anger the LRA or the government.

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

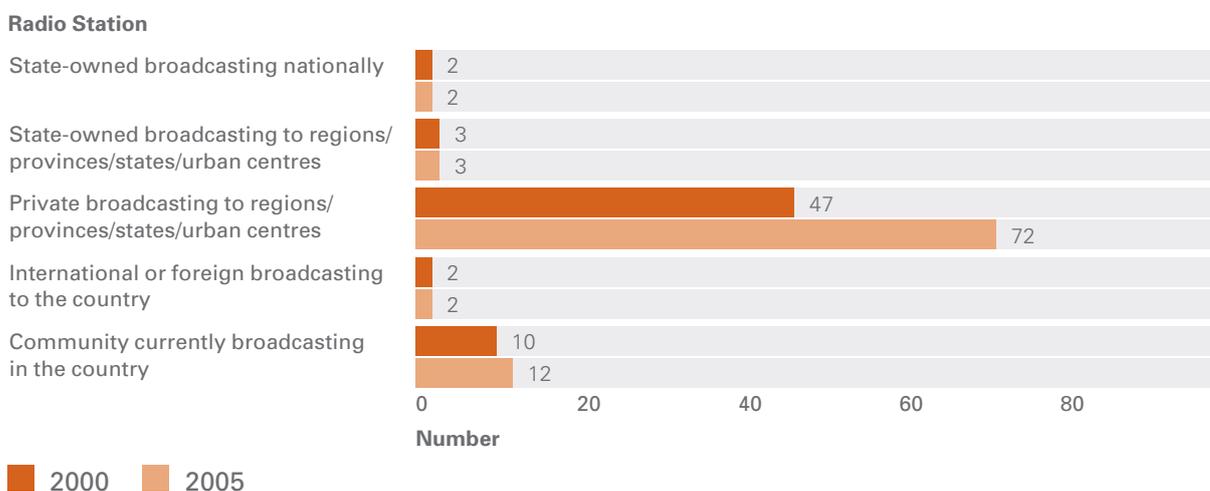
Since 1986, there has been liberalisation of the radio airwaves, with new community and commercial stations entering the market to compete with the state-funded radio broadcaster. Liberalisation has thus entailed the establishment of several FM stations across the country, with several of them concentrated in Kampala. Today, in 2006, there are 92 radio stations registered with the Ugandan Broadcasting Corporation, with 37 booster/repeater stations. Seven further stations are licensed but not operating (Uganda Broadcasting Council, 2006b). There are also two international stations available in the country: Radio France International (RFI) and the BBC World Service.

There are only two stations with national footprints, both state-funded and run by the UBC – UBC Radio and Star FM. The newly-named UBC Radio, established in 2005 by the provisions of the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation Act. This Act effectively merged Radio Uganda and Uganda TV into the current Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC). The Corporation operates five stations in total, including the commercial Star FM (BBC, 2006c).

At regional/local level, there are more than 70 private commercial FM stations (see Figure 4). There are also three state-run UBC stations at regional/local level, and around 12 local community-run stations. The majority of the regional/local FM stations are located within Kampala City in central Uganda, where they fight for market share in the city. Also in central Uganda, there are stations targeting the towns of Masaka (Buddu Broadcasting Service) and Mityana (Radio Skynet). In eastern Uganda, the town of Mbale has, among others, Top Radio, Impact, Open Gate and Mbale FM. Also in the east, the town of Jinja has Kiira FM and Nile Broadcasting Service (NBS). In western Uganda, the most popular radio station is Radio West, with its headquarters in Mbarara and broadcasting on several frequencies, allowing it to cover most districts of the western region. Other stations target the towns of Hoima (Hoima 88.6 FM), Kasese (Radio Messiah) and Kabale (Voice of Kigezi). Stations in the northern region include Radio Lira, Radio Paidha, Radio Wa, Radio Apac and Radio North.

All of the new stations since 2000 have either been private commercial or non-profit local community stations. The private commercial sector has increased by about 25 stations since 2000, from 47 to 72³. The community radio sector has seen an additional two stations go on air since 2000, raising the total number of broadcasting community stations from ten to 12 in 2005⁴.

Figure 4: Broadcasting and Ownership Status of Radio Stations



Source: Uganda Broadcasting Council, 2006b; BBC, 2006c; Author's personal research

³ The 2000 figure of 47 commercial stations is drawn from the author's personal research.

⁴ These figures for the number of community stations are based on the author's personal research.

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

Privately-owned stations derive their revenue largely from announcements and advertising. The advertising market is small and dominated by a few economic giants, such as the Mobile Telephone Network (MTN), Makerere University, Uganda Telecommunication Limited (UTL) and Celtel.

Radio broadcasters like the Central Broadcasting Service (owned by the Buganda Kingdom), Capital Radio, Radio Simba, KFM (owned by Kenya's Nation Media Group), Dembe FM and Radio One have customers who sponsor some of their programmes. Well-known companies that sponsor programmes on those radios include MTN, Celtel, Nile Breweries and Coca-Cola to mention but a few. These radios generally realise higher revenue than others.

5.3 Plurality, ownership and control

The majority of radio stations in Uganda are now privately/individually-owned. Over the past five years, there has been a wider range of independent radio station owners, with proprietors coming from various sectors of Ugandan life: individual businessmen, church leaders, scholars, educationists, and others.

The liberalisation process has also encouraged more transparency in ownership. The trend is towards freedom, as seen in the transformation from the state-run Radio Uganda into a more independently-run UBC Radio, controlled by the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation. This was a result of the government's realisation that most people did not listen to the government-owned Radio Uganda, and the government found itself having to advertise in the private media to reach the majority of the population.

In spite of granting a greater degree of independence to its radio stations, the government still attempts to muzzle radio programming not favourable to the state. For instance, on election day (23 February 2006), government operatives stormed KFM, which was reporting election results at variance with the state-owned Star FM. KFM's radio frequency was jammed for several days, and the website of KFM's sister paper, *The Monitor*, was blocked. The station and website were unblocked only after protracted negotiations between management and government (BBC, 2006b).

As a further point, several radios are linked to private newspaper groups. KFM, as mentioned earlier, belongs to *The Daily Monitor Newspapers*, an affiliate of the Kenyan Nation Group. This Group also owns Uganda's main private daily newspaper, *The Daily Monitor*, *The East African* and the *Weekly Advertiser*. Another link between the radio and print sectors is via the Chief Executive Officer of the government-funded newspaper *The New Vision*, who owns Capital Radio. Consequently, *The New Vision* repeatedly runs promotional stories about Capital Radio.

The first community radio station – Kibale Kagadi Community Radio – was launched in the late 1990s by the Uganda Rural Development and Training Trust (Mwangi, 1999). By this time, the state-funded radio station, Radio Uganda, was experiencing heavy funding cuts resulting in a loss of morale, loss of quality in programming and reduced regularity in equipment maintenance. Irregular maintenance meant that the radio signal of the station was weak in many parts of the country, especially those far from the capital city. For their part, commercial radio stations were more concentrated in urban areas where people's purchasing power was much higher and promising in terms of attracting advertisements (Ojiambo, 1999). Thus, there was a gap in certain remote rural areas to be filled by community radio.

Most community radio stations in Uganda are owned and operated by NGOs. Development practitioners recognise the value of radio as a communication channel that can be used to tailor the specific development needs of the communities in which they operate (Nattimba, 2004). The community stations include:

- Kibale Kagadi Community Radio – This station is fully owned by the local community who selected a committee to take care of all the interests of the different stakeholders in the running of the radio station. It provides information to the local community of Kagadi sub-county in western Uganda. The Uganda Rural Development and Training Trust launched the radio station in 1999 to enhance its training programmes in rural sustainable development, in areas such as education, agriculture, small-scale business development, human rights awareness and advocacy, among others (Mwangi, 1999).
- Radio Apac – This is an example of a community radio station operating in northern Uganda where a civil war has been raging for the past 18 years. Its efforts are geared towards peace-building in the region and at improving the livelihood of the local community of Apac and neighbouring districts affected by the war, mainly Gulu, Kitgum and Pader (SDC/Panos, 2005).
- MAMA FM – This is a community station that specifically addresses itself to gender and women’s issues. It was launched in 2001 as the first radio station started and run by women in Africa to bridge the gender gap in addressing development needs of the people (SDC/Panos, 2005).

A further handful of stations are owned by religious organisations, mostly Christian ones. Power FM is owned by the Kampala Pentecostal Church and the Church of Uganda (Anglican); Super FM is owned by Pastor Peter Sematimba, who contested and lost the Kampala mayoral seat in the recent elections.

5.4 Diversity

The net beneficiary of the liberalisation of radio has largely been the Ugandan listener, as radio stations now exist across the width and breadth of Uganda. The language of programming has shifted significantly towards the local dialects that the people in the area where the radio is located can understand. Particularly because of the multiplicity of languages used for broadcasts, there is relative diversity between the regions. For instance, Central Broadcasting Service (CBS) broadcasts mainly in Luganda for the central region, and Radio Paidha broadcasts in Luo dialects.

The emergence of *Ebimeeza* (open air discussions broadcast live on radio) has raised much interest and controversy. The discussions centre mainly on the political issues of the day. It is Radio One that pioneered *Ebimeeza* (singular for *Ebimeeza*), every Saturday 3pm to 5pm, before other radio stations adopted the concept.

In some cases, what started as diversity has become replication, as the same format of programming is duplicated by various stations in the same locality: For instance, KFM’s *Andrew Mwenda Live* is aired at the same time as Radio One’s *Spectrum*. Both programmes have the same format (live phone-in, interactive talk-show) and at times have the same focus and subject of discussion.

In 2002, the government, weary of the criticism it was fielding from the *Ebimeeza*, attempted to ban them. Information Minister Basoga Nsadhuh announced that *Ebimeeza* would be banned on the grounds that the licences issued to radio stations only allowed them to broadcast from “indoor”, rather than from “outdoor” studios, and thus they were not consistent with broadcasting regulations. A vigorous defence of the *Ebimeeza* by sections of the general public and civil society allowed many of them to outlive the government threat. However, the sting has gone out of the discussions, as a lot of radio owners prefer to avoid raising issues, that may attract government threats and compromise their business interests (RSF, 2004).

5.5 Quality of radio output and programming

In the view of the researcher, many stations are lacking in quality. Stations try to cut across educational, informational and entertainment needs, but often it is entertainment that dominates. KFM, which started as Monitor FM, altered its name, format and content after it realised that audiences were more inclined towards music than news and analysis.

On many stations, programmes tend to be full of drama created by comical presenters, with a lack of systematic flow from programme to programme. Another problem, in the researcher’s view, is the mixing up of local languages with English, making language use inconsistent. And there is frequent use of slang and jargon, which may not be understood or interpreted by many listeners. As well, music dominates most of the programmes and, as a result, entertainment surpasses education and information dissemination.

5.6 Specific challenges

One key challenge for the radio sector is the fierce competition for the Kampala market, with several stations striving for listeners in this affluent area. Often music-dominated programming is used in an attempt to draw listeners. The interests of advertisers are of primary importance and commercial interruption, even during news broadcasts, is pronounced. Indeed, for several radio stations, news reporting is concentrated on inner-city news (where the cost of collection is cheaper), or just taking the news out of the newspapers.

Another challenge for radio broadcasters is the payment of licence fees to the Broadcasting Council. Many stations are hard-pressed to afford these fees, given their other costs for equipment and staffing, and may feel compelled to employ low-wage, poorly-trained workers. This eventually affects the quality of the stations’ broadcasts. The Broadcasting Council currently charges between 1-3 million shillings per year (US\$530 – US\$1600) for a radio licence (Uganda Broadcasting Council, 2006b).

A final challenge is government interference. In 2004, the government closed down Radio Kyoga Veritas FM for several weeks. In this case, the government was incensed over the reporting of the civil war in northern and eastern Uganda at the time (RSF, 2004). And as already mentioned, in August 2005, KFM radio was closed for a week. The government also refers continually to the use of its power of licensing, via state-appointed regulators, to bring order and “professionalism” in the broadcasting industry. Broadcasting licences in Uganda are renewed annually (RSF, 2003).

Key findings

- The state-funded stations are now under an independent agency, the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC), but they do not yet have the complete editorial independence needed for them to operate as public-service broadcasters.
- Only two of the country's stations (state-owned UBC Radio and Star FM) have national footprints, with the rest of the stations targeting regions or local areas; all four regions have their own regional and local FM stations.
- Content diversity is lacking, but a measure of diversity is achieved from region to region through regional and local stations using local vernacular languages in their broadcasts.
- State interference in the operations of private stations is practised, as evidenced by the temporary shut-down of Radio Kyoga Veritas FM in 2004 and KFM in 2005 over reporting that was apparently not 'favourable' to the government.