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Empowering development through community media: A case of Obonu FM and its impact on Tema community

Gbambu, Abdul Rashid, Dzisah, Wilberforce Sefakor, & Omolade O. Sanni

Abstract

This study examines the role of Obonu FM, a community radio station in Tema, Ghana, in promoting participatory communication and local development. As a subsidiary of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, Obonu FM operates in Ga-Adangbe languages, serving communities across the Greater Accra, Eastern, and Volta regions. Using Participatory Communication Theory and community media frameworks, the research adopts a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews to evaluate audience engagement. Findings indicate that Obonu FM fosters participation through content creation, call-ins, and community forums, promoting inclusivity with minimal challenges in representation. The station contributes significantly to local development by addressing socio-cultural issues and encouraging dialogue. Despite operational constraints, it exemplifies community radio principles, empowering local voices and supporting development. The study concludes that while community radio stations like Obonu FM can drive local development, sustainable support is essential. The study recommends that greater support and investment be directed towards Obono FM, as it plays a critical role in empowering marginalised communities and promoting inclusive development within the Tema Municipality and the Greater Accra Region.

Keywords: Obonu FM, community radio, participatory communication, local development, Tema-Ghana.

Background

COMMUNITY-BASED MEDIA, INCLUDING RADIO, TELEVISION, AND NEWSPAPERS, have long been vital channels for addressing the needs and representing the interests of local populations and their immediate environments. Ideally owned and managed by community members, these platforms foster development through inclusive participation (Busolo & Manalo IV, 2023; Devajana & Nanjunda, 2024). In this context, community-based media refers to platforms such as community radio stations like Obonu FM, which

exemplify the role of media in empowering local voices and fostering active participation.

Obonu FM, a subsidiary of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), operates as a prominent community-based radio station located in the vibrant Tema Metropolitan Assembly in Ghana's Greater Accra Region. Broadcasting predominantly in the Ga-Adangbe languages, Obonu FM serves the Ga and Adangme-speaking communities, extending its reach to parts of Greater Accra, Ada, Sege, and neighbouring areas in the Eastern and Volta regions. Despite its broader transmission coverage, the station's primary focus remains on the Tema metropolis, which comprises four districts: Tema East, Tema South, Tema West, and Tema North, covering twenty-six communities identified as Community One through Community Twenty-Six (Tema Metropolitan Assembly, n.d). Tema is renowned for its ethnic diversity, hosting a variety of groups with a population of 177,924, as reported in the 2021 Population and Housing Census (Ghana Statistical Authority, 2021). The demographic composition varies, with Ga-speaking populations concentrated in coastal areas and Akan and Ewe-speaking groups predominating in the central sectors.

Despite its reach, Obonu FM is expected to meet the community participatory requirement through its programmes. Devajana (2024) posits that the key defining characteristic of community media is its primary aim to empower local voices and foster active community participation. McQuail (2006) emphasises that participatory communication is achieved with community media when it enables community members to engage in content creation and dissemination. According to Dreher (2017) and Howley (2013), these platforms amplify marginalised voices, address local issues often overlooked by mainstream media, and promote community development, social justice, and cultural representation (Atton, 2015). Considering the diverse and cosmopolitan nature of Obonu FM's location, where community unity and identity are paramount, there is a need to explore how inclusive its programmes are in realising the community participatory requirement. This should be evident in the programme production process of Obonu FM. The production process of community radio is inherently participatory, engaging community members in developing programmes that reflect their concerns and interests. Gaynor and O'Brien (2017) and Moffat, Osunkunle, Mabika, and Moffat (2023) underscore this collaborative approach, which enriches programming while fostering unity within communities.

Researchers have identified that, unlike commercial broadcast media, community media often face challenges, including financial, technical, and regulatory obstacles (Faisal & Alhassan, 2018). Despite these hurdles, Obonu

FM has demonstrated resilience by broadcasting to the people of the Tema metropolis. Its initiatives, such as the Kenkey Party (Daily Guide Network, 2019) and the Heritage Month grand durbar in 2022 (Ahulu & Mensah, 2022), showcase its active involvement in local affairs. These events foster unity and cultural pride, reflecting the station's commitment to celebrating and preserving community traditions. However, the question remains: are all these achievements realised through community participation?

While existing studies, such as those by Faisal and Alhassan (2018), which examine the financial and regulatory challenges faced by Ghanaian community radio, and Naaikuur, Diedong, and Dzisah (2022), which explore the dynamics of community participation in these stations, their works do not specifically focus on Obonu FM in Tema. Given Tema's diverse and cosmopolitan nature, understanding the role of a community radio station like Obonu FM is essential for fostering local development, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. This study therefore seeks to examine the level of community participation in Obonu FM's operations to assess its role in fostering community development within the Tema Metropolitan Assembly through programming, audience engagement, and public discourse.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework
Participatory Communication Theory

The Participatory Communication Theory, developed in the 1970s by scholars such as Paulo Freire and Everette Rogers, represents a transformative approach to communication grounded in participatory development principles (Tufte, 2017). It challenges traditional top-down models, which often treat communities as passive recipients of information. Instead, it advocates for a bottom-up, inclusive model that positions individuals and communities as active participants in communication processes. By fostering collaboration and dialogue, this approach empowers marginalised groups, enabling them to take ownership of their development and contribute meaningfully to decision-making and policy formulation. One key assumption of the theory is that active participation by communities in media production and decision-making processes can catalyse positive social change. It posits that when communities are given platforms to co-create content and influence communication agendas, the outcomes are more likely to reflect their lived realities and address their developmental needs. Furthermore, the theory assumes that participatory communication processes strengthen social cohesion, promote civic engagement, and enhance community agency (Tufte,

2017).

However, the Participatory Communication Theory is not without its limitations. Critics, such as Servaes (2022), have argued that the framework can be overly idealistic, presuming that all communities possess the resources, skills, and willingness necessary to engage in participatory processes. In practice, genuine participation is often constrained by financial limitations, political interference, and varying levels of literacy or access to communication technologies. Additionally, intra-community power dynamics can inhibit equitable participation, as dominant groups or individuals may overshadow marginalised voices (Servaes, 2022). These critiques highlight the importance of applying the theory in a nuanced manner, taking into account the socio-economic and cultural contexts of specific communities.

In this study, the Participatory Communication Theory provided the framework for evaluating Obonu FM's operations and its engagement with the Tema community. The theory guided the research design by focusing on how the station incorporated community input into its content creation, such as programming decisions, audience interaction through call-ins, community forums, and collaborative content development. It emphasised inclusion, collaboration, and empowerment, aligning with the study's goal to analyse Obonu FM's role in fostering a participatory culture. The framework highlighted the potential of community radio to amplify marginalised voices, address governance gaps, and support sustainable development in Tema.

Conceptual issues

Concept of community media

Community media, as a multifaceted communication concept, plays a crucial role in amplifying the voices of local communities, providing platforms for diverse representation and participatory engagement (McQuail, 2006). These media outlets, including community radio, television, and newspapers, are often characterised by their roots in the grassroots, prioritising the needs and interests of the community they serve (Rodriguez, 2017). The core essence of community media lies in its ability to serve local interests, empowering marginalised voices, and addressing issues that might be disregarded by mainstream media (Dreher, 2017). Such outlets are envisioned as vehicles for social change and community development, offering opportunities for fostering social justice, cultural representation, and civic engagement (Atton, 2015). The participatory nature of community media involves active involvement and contribution from community members (Dreher, 2017). This participatory communication approach is guided by the belief that community members should actively engage in

the creation and dissemination of content, emphasising the importance of collaborative communication processes (Servaes, 2022). This emphasises the shift from a top-down communication model to an inclusive, bottom-up approach, elevating the voices of individuals and empowering them as active participants within the community media framework (Tufte, 2017). Community media serves as a powerful tool for community empowerment, social inclusion, and the representation of local interests, offering a platform for diverse voices to be heard and fostering a sense of unity and identity within communities. The community radio operates as a non-commercial station, driven by a non-profit motive. Its primary objective is not centred on revenue generation or seeking profit. Instead, it relies on financial support from donors and community contributions to cover operational expenses and facilitate programme organisation.

Concept of development

The concept of development, a cornerstone in academic discourse, encompasses a complex and evolving understanding of societal progress, well-being, human rights, and transformation (Sen, 2017). Rooted in diverse disciplines such as economics, sociology, and political science, the literature on development reflects a multifaceted exploration of its dimensions (Bibri, 2018). Over time, development paradigms have shifted from narrow economic indicators to holistic approaches that consider social, cultural, and environmental factors (Nussbaum, 2015). Early perspectives often centred on economic growth as a proxy for development, while contemporary scholarship emphasises human development, human rights, and sustainability (UNDP, 1990). The literature acknowledges the challenges of achieving equitable development, highlighting the importance of addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and social justice (Ake, 2017; Jean-Paul & Martine, 2018). Additionally, the discourse incorporates critical perspectives, questioning Western-centric models and advocating for culturally sensitive, participatory, and context-specific approaches to development (Greer, 2017). This dynamic and interdisciplinary literature underscores the ongoing dialogue and complexities surrounding the concept of development.

The concept of community

The concept of community has been a focal point in diverse scholarly discussions, revealing a nuanced understanding of social structures and interactions. Drawing from sociological perspectives, Ferdinand Tönnies' dichotomy between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft delineates community as an organic, intimate, and traditional setting where individuals share common

values and kinship ties (Tönnies, 2012). On the other hand, contemporary sociologists like Robert Putnam explore the concept through the lens of social capital, emphasising the role of civic engagement and collective participation in fostering community bonds (Putnam, 2000). Moreover, urban theorists such as Jane Jacobs examine the dynamics of community in urban settings, highlighting the importance of local interactions, shared spaces, and a sense of belonging (Jacobs, 1961). The literature on community spans disciplines, incorporating insights from psychology, anthropology, and geography, offering a rich tapestry of perspectives that explore the intricate fabric of human connections and communal life.

Historical Roots and Development of Community Radio: Insights from Development Communication and the Participatory Paradigm

The concept of community radio emerged prominently in the post-World War II period, gaining significant traction in Latin America as a response to socio-political and economic inequities. In countries such as Bolivia and Colombia, community radio stations began operating in the 1940s and 1950s, providing a voice for indigenous populations and other marginalised groups (Dagron et al., 2001). These early initiatives sought to challenge the dominance of state-controlled or commercial media by creating platforms that addressed social justice, political exclusion, and economic disparities. Central to the establishment and evolution of community radio was the framework of development communication, a discipline dedicated to using communication to catalyse social progress and development (McAnany, 2012). Within this framework, the participatory paradigm emerged as a transformative approach, advocating for inclusive, bottom-up communication strategies. Unlike conventional top-down communication models that treat audiences as passive recipients of information, the participatory paradigm underscores dialogue, collaboration, and local ownership of media. It aims to empower communities by involving them in the creation and dissemination of content that directly impacts their lives (Servaes, 2022).

Community radio exemplifies this participatory ethos, functioning as a medium through which rural and marginalised populations can exercise control over information dissemination. This participatory approach facilitates localised solutions to pressing issues such as education, healthcare, and agricultural development, contributing to broader socio-economic transformation. For example, in Bolivia, early mining community radio stations allowed workers to advocate for improved labour conditions, showcasing the medium's potential to address systemic inequalities (Pavarala

& Malik, 2021). The success of these Latin American initiatives served as a catalyst for the adoption of community radio in other regions, including Africa and Asia. In these contexts, community radio became an invaluable tool for fostering dialogue and community engagement, particularly in areas underserved by mainstream media. The participatory communication model underpinning community radio provided an alternative to traditional broadcasting, which often delivered content in a hierarchical manner with minimal audience interaction. By contrast, community radio offered a decentralised and inclusive platform, enabling feedback loops and amplifying grassroots voices (Lie & Servaes, 2015).

The participatory model has proven instrumental in tailoring messages to local needs, creating opportunities for capacity building, and fostering civic participation (Ibuot, Alawode, & Adeyemo, 2022). In practice, it has supported initiatives ranging from public health campaigns to agricultural extension programmes, illustrating its versatility as a tool for driving development (Lebenya, Mubangizi, & Ojogiwa, 2024). This adaptability and community focus have cemented community radio's role as a dynamic medium for addressing diverse developmental challenges across the globe (Pavarala & Malik, 2021), especially in Africa (Attuh & Kankam, 2024; Lewil Diedong & Dzisah, 2023).

The nature of community radio in Ghana

The nature of community radio in Ghana has undergone a significant transformation over the years. Historically, radio broadcasting in the country was dominated by state-monopolised stations, primarily situated in urban centres, which posed challenges in reaching rural and local audiences (Demuyakor, 2021; Essel & Govender, 2024; Faisal & Alhassan, 2018). However, the advent of community radio (CR) marked a pivotal shift towards a more inclusive and equitable media landscape, aiming to serve all segments of the population (Diedong & Dzisah, 2023). Community radio in Ghana has become a vital platform for amplifying local voices and addressing specific community concerns. Rooted in grassroots initiatives, these outlets are tailored to meet the unique needs of their communities, often communicating in local languages to represent the diverse cultural and ethnic groups within the country (Sokey, Adjei, & Ankrah, 2018).

The participatory nature of community media in Ghana fosters active engagement from community members, enabling them to contribute to content creation and dissemination. This bottom-up approach challenges the traditional top-down communication model, ensuring that the voices of individuals are not only heard but also reflected in the media (Essel &

Govender, 2024). In this context, the Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN) plays a crucial role in supporting community radio stations, offering technical and advocacy support, and facilitating collaboration among member stations (Diedong & Naaikuur, 2023). Additionally, the regulatory framework established by the National Communications Authority (NCA) governs the operations of community radio, ensuring compliance with broadcasting standards while promoting their role in enhancing grassroots participation and cultural preservation (NCA, 2008). Together, these efforts underscore the transformative impact of community radio in Ghana's broadcasting ecosystem.

Empirical review

Various studies have investigated community radio in Ghana, offering insights into its role in development and civic participation. For example, Faisal and Alhassan (2018) examined community access and participation in the broadcasts of Radio Gaakii, focusing on the philosophy and practice of community involvement in development through participatory development communication. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Carpentier (2011) and Arnstein (1969), the authors identify four key indicators to assess community participation in Radio Gaakii's broadcasts. The study utilized a cross-sectional survey design and multistage sampling technique, gathering data from 150 respondents across five listening communities. Results show that community engagement is mainly limited to the listening phase, with most participation occurring during phone-in segments of specific programs. To increase community involvement, the study recommends establishing Listening Clubs at Radio Gaakii, which would allow community members to participate more actively in the station's governance, management, programming, and financial decisions. This approach would deepen participation and foster a sense of ownership, ensuring the station's sustainability.

A study by Naaikuur et al. (2022) explores the potential of community radio (CR) to enhance civic participation in local governance processes in Ghana. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with representatives from key stakeholder institutions, community radio stations, and a community media expert. The findings highlight the capacity of community radio to mobilise civic engagement, particularly through innovative programming that encourages public involvement. However, the study identifies significant barriers to the effectiveness of CR, including financial constraints among community members and the limited linguistic proficiency of CR staff, which undermines

their ability to effectively communicate complex local governance policies. Although community radio has considerable potential to enhance participation in policymaking, the study concludes that this potential is not being fully realised. In order to overcome these challenges, the researchers recommend public funding for community media in Ghana, drawing inspiration from models in Denmark, France, and South Africa. Furthermore, they advocate for collaboration between the Ghana Community Radio Broadcast Network (GCRN) and local language experts to improve the language proficiency of CR personnel, thereby enhancing their capacity to communicate effectively with diverse audiences.

Although these studies offer valuable insights into community radio's role in civic participation and governance in Ghana, they do not address the specific case of Obonu FM in Tema. Faisal and Alhassan (2018) explore community participation at Radio Gaakii, focusing on engagement levels and content creation, but do not examine the dynamics of community involvement in urban areas like Tema or the unique context of Obonu FM. Similarly, Naaikuur et al., (2022) assess community radio's role in promoting participatory governance, but their study does not focus on how Tema's diverse population interacts with Obonu FM's programming. A gap exists in the literature regarding community participation in Obonu FM, which this study aims to address. The research will examine the extent of community involvement in Obonu FM's operations, identify barriers to participation, and assess the station's role in fostering community development in Tema. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the empowering potential of community radio and participatory development.

METHODOLOGY

Brief profile of Obonu FM

"Obonu FM" stands as a prominent entity among Ghana's 121 community-based radio stations, operating on the 96.5FM frequency modulation and situated within the vibrant Tema Metropolitan Assembly. The station takes pride in broadcasting primarily in the Ga and Ga-Adangme ethnic languages, extending its reach from the Greater Accra region to areas like Oda in the Eastern and Volta regions. As a subsidiary of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), it upholds a vital role in the media landscape. Originally established within the GBC headquarters in Accra, Obonu FM later found its home in Tema, allowing it a certain level of operational autonomy while remaining connected to the directives of the GBC headquarters. Notably, the station sustains itself primarily through internally generated funds, reflecting its commitment to maintaining independence

and financial self-sufficiency. The director of this community-based radio station expresses a dedicated commitment to meeting the community's expectations. This dedication extends beyond on-air programming to include active community engagement through various outreach initiatives. These initiatives encompass diverse events such as the celebrated Kenkey Party and pivotal community services like blood donations. Each event is carefully curated to promote and celebrate the immediate culture and traditions of the community. Furthermore, Obonu FM has become a hub for not only disseminating information and entertainment but also a platform for community empowerment and cultural preservation. Its consistent efforts to engage, entertain, and serve the community, both through the airwaves and in live events, exemplify its integral role in uniting and promoting the rich cultural tapestry of the regions it serves. In addition, the station's commitment to community-driven events and cultural celebrations not only enriches the local population but also serves as a testament to its dedication to being more than just a broadcaster, but a true ally and supporter of the people it serves. This aligns with the broader mission of community-based media, where Obonu FM stands as a shining example of the power and impact of localized radio in preserving heritage and fostering community cohesion (Nimo, 2021; Modern Ghana, n.d.; Owusu-Ofori, 2015).

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore community participation in the operations of Obonu FM and its role in fostering community development in Tema. A qualitative approach was selected for its ability to offer a rich understanding of participant' lived experiences, perspectives through a phenomenology study design, and the meanings they attribute to specific issues, as highlighted by Creswell (2013). This methodology was particularly well-suited to examining the intricate interactions between the Tema community and Obonu FM's programming, audience engagement, and broader public discourse, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of community involvement. The research was conducted within the Tema community, located in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, a region recognized for its industrial importance and socio-cultural diversity. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census by the Ghana Statistical Authority, Tema Metropolitan has a population of 177,924 (GSA, 2021). Obonu FM plays a vital role in providing local news, entertainment, and educational content in this region. As a central platform for community engagement, the station is integral to the daily lives of local residents. The study focused on the Tema Metropolitan Assembly, including both the capital city and surrounding areas, all of which are directly impacted by Obonu FM's programming.

The target population for this study comprised individuals who actively engage with Obonu FM's programming and activities. These included regular listeners who participate in discussions and provide feedback, community leaders who collaborate with the station on community initiatives and cultural events, and station personnel such as programme producers, on-air presenters, and administrative staff. Additionally, the study included other stakeholders, such as representatives from local NGOs, cultural organisations, and youth groups, who partner with Obonu FM on projects aimed at promoting community development and cultural preservation. In order to ensure a diverse and representative sample, purposive sampling was employed to select 15 participants from the three zones of the Tema Metropolis: South, North, and Central. As Patton (2014) highlights, purposive sampling is an effective method in qualitative research for identifying information-rich cases that provide in-depth insights. The population of the Tema Metropolis, estimated at 177,924 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021), provided a broad pool of potential participants. However, the chosen sample of 15 participants was suitable for qualitative research, which prioritises depth over breadth, enabling an exploration of nuanced perspectives.

This sampling strategy ensured that the study captured diverse voices and experiences, reflecting the unique dynamics of the community. The inclusion of regular listeners, community leaders, station personnel, and other stakeholders from the three zones of the Tema Metropolis provided a comprehensive understanding of how Obonu FM influences and interacts with its audience and the broader community.

Data collection was carried out using in-depth interviews, the primary method for gathering insights from the selected participants. These interviews provided a platform for participants to share their views on Obonu FM's role in the community, their engagement with its programming, and its broader impact on local development. By allowing participants to articulate their perceptions and experiences, the interviews generated rich qualitative data that served as the foundation for subsequent analysis. In aiding data analysis, each participant was assigned a unique code based on their role and residential zone. Community members from the South Zone were coded as CM-S1, CM-S2, and so on, while participants from the North Zone were assigned codes like CM-N1, CM-N2. Similarly, station personnel from the South Zone were labeled SP-S1, and community leaders from the Central Zone were given codes such as CL-C1. This coding system, as suggested by Saldana (2021), facilitated accurate tracking and analysis of responses while ensuring participants' confidentiality and the ethical integrity of the research process.

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the data gathered through the interviews. This method enabled the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and trends in the responses, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2023) framework. Thematic analysis provided a nuanced understanding of community participation in Obonu FM's operations, revealing how community members, station personnel, and leaders perceive the station's role in development. This analysis was guided by the principles of participatory communication, which emphasize inclusion, collaboration, and empowerment in community media. These principles offered a valuable framework for understanding how community participation can contribute to development and social change. Ethical standards were followed in the study, with informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw ensured. However, the study was limited to the Tema community, meaning its findings may not be applicable to other regions of Ghana. While purposive sampling was used, the sample may not fully represent the broader population of Tema. Despite these limitations, the qualitative data provides valuable insights into Obonu FM's role in community development.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section presents an analysis of the data gathered through in-depth interviews, exploring community participation in Obonu FM's operations and its role in fostering community development in Tema. The findings are based on the thematic analysis of responses from 15 participants selected from the three zones (South, North, and Central) of Tema Metropolis, including community members, station personnel, and community leaders. The analysis reveals three distinct folds of community participation in Obonu FM's operations, each reflecting varying levels of engagement in promoting cultural development and social change within the community. These include physical presence on live programmes, phone-in participation, and involvement in community outreach initiatives. Alongside these forms of participation, several barriers were identified that hinder the depth and effectiveness of community involvement, offering insights into the challenges faced and opportunities for enhancing engagement.

First Fold: Physical Presence on Live Programmes

The first form of community participation identified was the physical presence of community members on live programmes aired by Obonu FM. This mode of participation primarily revolved around discussions on cultural development, social change, and pressing local issues. Community members expressed that their presence in the studio allowed them to share their

perspectives, engage in meaningful dialogues, and contribute to discussions on topics such as education, local governance, and environmental sustainability. For instance, a community member from the South Zone remarked: "I come to the station sometimes to be part of the live programmes. It's an opportunity to speak up about issues affecting us, like improving our local schools or tackling environmental challenges." (Interview with participant CM-S1, South Zone, April 3, 2024). Similarly, a community leader from the Central Zone shared: "Having the community here for live discussions allows us to share our thoughts and collaborate on solutions. It's a way for us to actively contribute to the development of the area." (Interview with CL-C1, Tema Central, April 3, 2024). another participant from Tema West state: "I was personally on-air during the 2019 Kenkey party programme expaling to people how it is important for us to promote our culture and the response was good. Manay people came to take part." (Interview with participant, North Zone, CM-N1, April 5, 2024). These quotes emphasise the role of live programmes in fostering community dialogue and promoting collaborative problem-solving. This participation highlights the station's dedication to engaging local stakeholders in discussions that advance community development initiatives.

Second Fold: Phone-In Participation

Phone-in participation emerged as the second fold, with community members engaging in live radio discussions by calling in during specific programmes. This allowed individuals to express their views on local issues, though it was mostly limited to brief, one-way interactions. Phone-ins were particularly common during discussions on governance, public health, and community welfare. A community member from the North Zone (CM/NZ1) shared, "I usually call in when there's a topic I'm passionate about, like education for children. It feels good to contribute, even if it's just a short call." (Interview with participant, CM/NZ1, North Zone, April 6, 2024). This comment reflects how phone-ins provided a quick way for listeners to share their thoughts on issues that matter to them. Similarly, a station personnel member (SP1) noted: "Phone-ins are a common way for listeners to share their thoughts. They often call in when there are programmes discussing pressing local issues, especially during election periods" (Interview with participant, SP1, Tema, April 6, 2024). This observation shows that phone-ins were frequently used during critical moments when community members felt the need to voice their opinions.

While phone-ins were an effective way for people to engage with the

station, participants expressed that this form of participation limited deeper interaction. The brevity of the calls often restricted the depth of discussion and did not allow for a thorough exploration of the issues raised. A community member from the South Zone (CM/SZ) explained, "Sometimes, the phone-in segments feel rushed, and I don't always get a chance to fully explain my point." (Interview with CM/SZ, South Zone, April 10, 2024). This sentiment highlights the constraint of time during phone-ins, preventing more elaborate contributions. A community leader (CL2) also noted: "Phone-ins are good for quick contributions, but they don't allow for meaningful back-and-forth discussions. It would be better if we had more time to engage." (interview with CL2, Tema, April 12, 2024). This statement reflects a desire for more sustained interaction, suggesting that extended discussions could improve the quality and depth of participation.

Third Fold: Community Outreach Programmes

The third fold of participation in Obonu FM's operations was characterised by its community outreach programmes, which aimed to involve local residents, market associations, community organisations, and individuals in direct development activities. These initiatives were designed to promote local engagement and foster a sense of shared responsibility among community members. They included a variety of activities such as local development campaigns, environmental projects, and partnerships with key stakeholders to address community needs.

A notable example of such engagement was the Kenkey Party organised by Obonu FM in 2019. The event, held at the station's compound in Tema, sought to celebrate the Ga-Adangbe culture and introduce the traditional dish of kenkey to a broader audience. It was not only an event to showcase local cuisine but also a significant community engagement opportunity. From its inception to the final day of the event, community members were actively involved, contributing both financially and physically to ensure its success. Participants contributed foodstuffs, money, and other necessary resources to prepare the kenkey and support other activities such as clean-up campaigns and tree planting. As one community member from the South Zone remarked: "The Kenkey Party was a great opportunity for us to contribute to something bigger. From donating foodstuffs to participating in clean-up activities, it felt like we were all working together for the community's benefit." (Community Member, South Zone: CM-SZ, April 15, 2024). In the Central Zone, a community leader reflected on the collaborative nature of the event: "The Kenkey Party showed us the power of community radio. It was more than just a celebration; it was a collective effort that contributed to a greater cause."

(Community Leader, Central Zone: CL-CZ, April 15, 2024).

From the perspective of the station personnel, the significance of such events was clear. One Station Personnel shared: "The Kenkey Party brought the community together in a way we had not seen before. It was humbling to see how people came forward, not just to enjoy the event, but to contribute to its success." (Station Personnel: SP-1, April 16, 2024). Another Station Personnel noted: "Events like the Kenkey Party help solidify Obonu FM's relationship with the community. We're not just broadcasting to them; we're part of their lives and development." (Station Personnel: SP-2, April 16, 2024). The outreach programmes facilitated significant interaction between the station and the community, offering a platform for local residents to contribute actively to development initiatives. The involvement in the Kenkey Party demonstrated a communal effort that extended beyond just cultural appreciation; it also reflected the station's role in mobilising local resources and creating opportunities for direct community involvement.

Furthermore, the Kenkey Party, were seen as vital in promoting local ownership of development activities. As a community leader from the North Zone pointed out: "This kind of engagement is important for the community. It's not only about the event itself, but the spirit of collaboration it fosters among us all." (Community Leader, North Zone: CL-NZ, April 15, 2024). Additionally, a community member from the North Zone shared: "It was a chance to come together and celebrate our culture. Everyone in the community, from children to the elderly, contributed in one way or another to make the event a success." (Community Member, North Zone: CM-NZ, April 15, 2024). These statements underscore the broad and inclusive nature of the outreach programmes, which facilitated a strong sense of ownership and collaboration in local development efforts. By fostering an environment where the community could engage in tangible actions, Obonu FM effectively promoted local development through cultural events that also addressed the community's pressing needs.

Barriers to Deeper Participation

The data reveal several critical barriers that hinder deeper and sustained community participation in Obonu FM's activities. These barriers include financial constraints, insufficient human resources, and time limitations, all of which affect the station's ability to fully engage the community. One significant barrier is the lack of funding from the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), the mother station, which limits the ability of Obonu FM to facilitate its activities effectively. The absence of adequate funding means that the station struggles to host interactive programmes, expand outreach, or invest

in the necessary infrastructure for more in-depth community engagement. As one of the station personnel (SP1) explained, "We face challenges in reaching every corner of the community. Financial constraints also limit our ability to expand our outreach and host more interactive programmes" (Interview with Station Personnel, SP1, April 13, 2024). This financial shortfall not only limits the station's capacity to produce and broadcast engaging content but also curtails its efforts to involve a wider section of the community in its activities.

Another pressing challenge identified was the lack of resource personnel, specifically volunteers, to support the station's operations. The absence of volunteers is attributed to the lack of funding, which prevents the station from covering the transportation costs for potential volunteers. As Station Personnel (SP2) noted: "We don't have the necessary volunteers to support our community outreach due to budget constraints, particularly to cover transportation costs" (Interview with Station Personnel, SP2, April 16, 2024). Without sufficient human resources, the station finds it difficult to organize or expand its community outreach initiatives, leaving a significant gap in participation from local stakeholders. Additionally, limited time allocated for phone-in segments was identified as another barrier to meaningful participation. Phone-ins, while effective in allowing brief interactions, do not provide enough time for participants to express their views in detail. As one community member from the South Zone (CM/SZ) mentioned: "Sometimes, the phone-in segments feel rushed, and I don't always get a chance to fully explain my point" (Interview with Community Member, CM/SZ, April 10, 2024). The brevity of these interactions restricts the depth of engagement, as participants are unable to explore the issues at hand in a comprehensive manner. These barriers; financial constraints, lack of volunteer support, and limited time for phone-ins, underscore the need for structural improvements and additional resources to facilitate more meaningful and inclusive community participation. Overcoming these challenges would enable Obonu FM to better engage with its audience, foster community development, and enhance its role as a platform for local empowerment.

DISCUSSION

The Participatory Communication Theory, as articulated by Freire (1970) and Rogers and Kincaid (1976), highlights bottom-up communication processes that empower communities to actively engage in their development. In this study, the operations of Obonu FM reflect elements of this theory, particularly in its engagement with the Tema community through participatory programming. For instance, community members are frequently invited to contribute to content creation, aligning with Freire's

notion of dialogue as a tool for empowerment. Similarly, Rogers' advocacy for inclusive media practices resonates with the station's efforts to facilitate call-in segments and community forums. However, the findings also revealed certain limitations in the application of participatory communication. While Obonu FM strives to include diverse voices, challenges such as financial constraints and unequal access to communication platforms hinder full community participation. This aligns with Servaes (2022), who critiques the overly idealistic assumptions of the theory, suggesting that true participation is often hindered by socio-economic barriers. These findings suggest that while participatory frameworks can foster inclusivity, their success depends on addressing structural inequities within the community.

Community media, as characterised by McQuail (2006), serves as a platform for amplifying local voices and fostering participatory engagement. Obonu FM embodies these principles, offering a non-commercial platform focused on local interests and cultural preservation. The station's commitment to empowering marginalised groups aligns with Atton's (2015) vision of community media as vehicles for social change and justice, while also acknowledging the limitations associated with this approach. However, the study also uncovered gaps in how Obonu FM operationalises these ideals. For instance, while the station prioritises community participation, logistical and financial constraints limit its ability to fully achieve these goals. These findings are consistent with Moitra, Kumar, & Seth (2018), who noted that the sustainability of community media depends heavily on external support and community contributions.

The study also suggested that Obonu FM plays a vital role in the development of the Tema community by fostering dialogue, promoting education, and addressing local issues. This aligns with Sen's (2005) concept of development as the expansion of freedoms and capabilities. The station's emphasis on inclusive programming supports the holistic approach advocated by Nussbaum (2015), which highlights the significance of addressing cultural and social dimensions alongside economic factors. Furthermore, the findings reinforce the potential of community media in promoting equitable development, echoing Greer's (2017) call for context-specific and culturally sensitive approaches. Obonu FM's programming effectively addresses the unique cultural and socio-economic contexts of the Tema community, underscoring the importance of integrating local perspectives in media content. This aligns with Greer's critique of Western-centric development models, as the station's content reflects and supports the community's values and aspirations, ensuring that development initiatives are firmly rooted in local realities.

The study's findings further reflect Tönnies' (2012) distinction between Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society), with Obonu FM playing a vital role in strengthening communal bonds within Tema. As a subsidiary of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), Obonu FM primarily broadcasts in the Ga-Adangbe languages, serving Ga and Adangme-speaking communities whilst extending its coverage across the Greater Accra, Eastern, and Volta regions. Despite its broader transmission reach, the station focuses mainly on the Tema Metropolitan Assembly, which comprises four districts; Tema East, Tema South, Tema West, and Tema North, encompassing twenty-six communities. The Tema metropolis alone, with a population of 177,924 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021), is ethnically diverse: coastal areas are predominantly Ga-speaking, whilst central areas feature Akan and Ewe-speaking populations. Obonu FM's role in fostering belonging and collective action further aligns with Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital, showcasing the impact of community media on civic engagement. However, challenges such as social fragmentation and power imbalances limit the station's ability to fully realise these ideals. Jacobs' (1961) work on urban communities highlights the value of local interactions and shared spaces, partially addressed by the station's programmes. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that greater efforts are needed to bridge community divides and ensure equitable representation.

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined Obonu FM's role in fostering participatory communication and community development within the Tema community. The findings indicate that while the station reflects core principles of participatory communication and community media, it faces operational challenges, primarily financial constraints and unequal access to platforms, which limit its full potential. Despite these limitations, Obonu FM's initiatives, such as call-in segments and community forums, align with bottom-up communication principles, empowering local voices and promoting inclusive participation. The study highlights Obonu FM's contribution to social transformation by providing a platform that serves the Ga and Adangme-speaking populations, fostering cultural preservation and local development. However, the station's success in achieving its potential is hindered by external funding dependence, limited technical resources, and unequal representation. These barriers, along with social fragmentation and power imbalances, impede its ability to foster a truly participatory environment. The study also reinforces the importance of community radio in promoting cultural preservation and social change but also underscores

the need for strategic efforts, including securing financial support, promoting inclusive programming, and ensuring broad community engagement. With sustained collaboration among stakeholders, Obonu FM can more effectively contribute to the empowerment of the Tema community and the broader goals of social transformation and equitable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders; Obonu FM management, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), and the Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN), to enhance the station's role as a participatory community media outlet and improve its impact within the Tema community.

Obonu FM management should address financial and logistical challenges by exploring alternative funding models such as grants, partnerships with local NGOs, and government support. These efforts should focus on providing resources, including transportation allowances for volunteers, to enable broader participation in live programmes and promote more inclusive engagement. Additionally, media literacy training programmes should be introduced to equip underserved community members with skills to contribute to content creation. Inclusive programming strategies should also be implemented, ensuring representation for underrepresented groups and diverse voices.

The GBC, as Obonu FM's parent organisation, should provide financial and technical support, facilitate external partnerships, and advocate for the station within the public policy framework. GBC can help ensure that Obonu FM aligns with national media policies while promoting community engagement.

The GCRN should offer operational and technical support, foster collaboration among community radio stations, and advocate for policy changes that benefit community media. This includes securing funding opportunities and improving access to broadcast infrastructure. By working together, these stakeholders can overcome socio-economic and logistical barriers, ensuring that Obonu FM becomes a more effective platform for social transformation and community empowerment through diversified income streams, inclusive programming, and policy advocacy.

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