

## **Student Protests and Disruption of the Academic Calendar in South African Universities: What Is the Role of Campus Radio?**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the prospects of campus radio programming as a mitigation communication infrastructure in violent student protests that have led to the disruption of the academic calendar in South African universities. This follows the outrageous events that occurred, particularly in 2015, across the higher education sector, where student protests caused costly damage to institutional infrastructures and other public assets on campuses across the country. The functional communication paradigm is adopted as a theoretical proposition to construct a relational analysis between campus radio programming and its service to its target audience (university community). The paper argues that instead of viewing campus radio as a medium concomitant with the entertainment needs of students, universities should recognize its transformative power and ability to foster responsible behavior among students. Furthermore, the paper views campus radio as the legitimate carrier of the higher education transformation dialogue, which can be facilitated through an inclusive programming that embraces effective stakeholder participation and collaborative partnerships within the sector.

**Keywords:** communication paradigm, transformation, campus radio, student protests

## **Güney Afrika Üniversitelerinde Öğrenci Protestoları ve Akademik Takvimin Kesintiye Uğraması: Kampüs Radyosunun Rolü Nedir?**

### **Özet**

Bu makale Güney Afrika üniversitelerinde akademik takvimin kesintiye uğramasına yol açan şiddetli öğrenci protestolarında yatıştırıcı bir iletişim altyapısı olarak kampüs radyosu programlarının sunduğu imkânları incelemektedir. Çalışma, yükseköğretimde özellikle 2015'te ülke çapında kampüslerdeki kurumsal altyapı ve kamu varlıklarında maliyeti yüksek hasarlara neden olan öğrenci eylemlerine odaklanmaktadır. Çalışmada, kampüs radyosu programları ve bunların hedef kitleye (üniversite topluluğuna) sunduğu hizmet arasındaki ilişkinin analizine dayanak teşkil edecek kuramsal önerme olarak işlevsel iletişim paradigması benimsenmiştir. Makale, üniversitelerin kampüs radyosunu öğrencilerin eğlence ihtiyaçlarına karşılık veren bir araç olarak görmek yerinde onun öğrenciler arasında sağduyulu davranışları geliştirmedeki dönüştürücü gücünün ve becerisinin farkına varmaları gerektiğini öne sürmektedir. Ayrıca makale, kampüs radyosunu, sektörde etkin paydaş katılımını ve işbirlikçi

ortaklıkları destekleyen kapsayıcı bir programlamanın kolaylaştırabileceği yükseköğretimde dönüşüm diyalogunun meşru bir taşıyıcısı olarak görmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** işlevsel iletişim paradigması, dönüşüm, kampüs radyosu, öğrenci protestoları

### Introduction

Despite the evidence of increased access to higher education in South African universities since 1994, as promulgated in policy documents, some scholars have argued that there has been inadequate political imperative to ensure that the hopes of the majority of students are achieved (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). This is in spite of the African National Congress (ANC)'s Framework for Education and Training (1994) which projected major shifts from the apartheid education system to one premised within the notion of inclusivity and embracement of democratic values and practices (Wolpe, 1995). As a result, in most instances, pre-1994 institutional structures remain intact while critical issues such as access, redress and equity continue to sit alongside some progressive democratic gains. This has prompted stakeholders in the sector, particularly students and civic groups to question the capability of government and its willingness to commit to the transformation process as opposed to paying lip service to their grievances. Ironically, attempts at effectively implementing these policies have been frustrated by lack of sustained investment in both financial and material resources through which institutional transformation would become a reality (Akoojee et al., 2007). Over and above, the state has demonstrated limited capacity to mobilise requisite operational resources to create the conducive setting to fulfil its transformation policy, particularly the provision of quality education.

Upon the realisation that the process of radical transformation of the education system has failed to deliver on its mandate more than two decades into democracy, violent student protests have landed South African universities on the “knife’s edge” (Cloete, 2016, p. 6). Picketing students have disrupted academic programmes, using “mass pressure” (Koen, Cele & Libhaber, 2006, p. 4) to infringe into the rights of other students by halting classes and examinations. The new wave of activism has exposed numerous universities to a barrage of insurgencies, particularly the *#Fees Must Fall* campaign. Students at the University of Cape Town have specifically called for a decolonised higher education system. An example of this action was expressed through the *#Rhodes Must Fall* campaign (2015) where they demanded cultural and linguistic transformation including curriculum review. The protests spread to other universities where protesters pledged their solidarity with poor students for a fees bail out

including relief from the so called “black debt” against the historically white universities’ privilege of presiding over healthy financial reserves (Ndlovu, 2017, p. 66). They have also questioned the social impact of privatisation as a mechanism that continue to exploit the poor working class. Subsequently, in a desperate bid to express their frustrations about slow education reforms, students have directed their protests towards the very scarce material resources by burning laboratory equipment, lecture halls, furniture and other valuable accessories (Muswede, 2016, p. 4) with some campuses being forced to temporarily close down.

In view of the above, numerous internal remedies have been applied in an attempt to quell these protests with limited success. Central to these efforts have been the use of inclusive democratic values in the form of student participation and involvement in decision-making. It was hoped that the students’ wilful involvement in decision-making would facilitate buy-in and therefore guarantee peaceful restoration of order in campuses. Unfortunately, these and other compromises including the suspension of tuition fee increases for the academic year 2016 did not succeed to replace insurgent actions by the students (Nkosi, 2015). Following a couple of foiled government-led stakeholder negotiations, the situation became untenable leading to use of heavy-handed and somewhat lethal reactive responses by both state and private security agents. This spectre has generally received extensive criticism for undermining the constitutional civil rights of the role players and more significantly, tends to hinder peaceful attempts towards achieving negotiated solutions (Muswede, 2016). In view of the previous protests, the latter approach has been associated with providing additional impetus for even further protests (Koen et al., 2006), with students sympathising with jailed fellow protesters demanding their release as pre-conditions for further negotiations to resume. This scenario has weakened the institutions’ legal authority to sanction students against violent behaviour and vandalism of property in their respective campuses (Pretorius, 2016).

The above events and the preceding circumstances demonstrate the students’ sense of low confidence in the state-led transformation dialogue, as evidenced by the abortive intermittent ministerial and inter-sectorial negotiations. Essentially, a majority of the erstwhile endeavours to resolving issues relating to violent student protests have remained external to the situational context obtaining in affected universities. More significantly, while student activism may be influenced by social movements and political situations external to the campus, scholarly contestations argue that the interests, motivations and tactics of activists are influenced by the campus context (Barnhardt & Reyes, 2016, p. 2). Hence, in a bid to

communicate their ideas, the nature of students' actions is often shaped by their experiences as students at the (very) institution of higher learning where they are studying. To a large extent, their actions are a response to institutional autonomy and a reflection on the effectiveness of individual institutions' structural approaches to campus challenges. This therefore suggests that an attempt to understand the rationale behind students' violent protests should emanate from the manner in which students themselves experience and perceive their campus environment.

Apparently, almost all public universities entangled in this turmoil are endowed with vibrant community radio stations housed within their campus structures dating back to the mid-1990s. These are a low cost communication infrastructure imbued with opportunities to address transformation challenges through sustained stakeholder-driven programming formats such as informative campaigns and framed editorial genres. Thus, instead of institutional authorities viewing campus radio with livid contempt as a budgetary burden concomitant with "duke-box" entertainment, universities should envision it in terms of its predictive transformative power and ability to foster responsible behaviour that is resonant with institutional goals.

### **Campus radio, social functions and programming utilities**

Most studies have demonstrated the role of the media, particularly radio in perpetrating conflict and violence and to a lesser extent, on how they can in practical terms contribute towards conflict resolution and reconciliation as in the cases of Bosnia and Rwanda (Gilboa, 2009). Nevertheless, scholars and practitioners have undoubtedly observed that, despite the negative effects the media have had in causing conflict and exacerbating violence, their effects can be "reversed and converted into positive contributions to conflict resolution" (Gilboa, 2009, p. 88). As such, radio broadcasting has been proven to be particularly adept in national-building (Betz, 2004, p. 1) and peace advocacy in conflict zones through its innovative "mediating" programmes. In South Africa, community radio formed part of the anti-apartheid alternative press before it was formally licensed through the Independent Broadcasting Act of 1993, e.g. Bush Radio. As a preamble to the nascent propositions of this paper, this section presents an overview of the conceptual definition and basic functions of campus radio as it is known regionally and internationally. This is followed by a discussion of its programming utilities with respect to its relevance to the context of student development and campus environments.

### **What is campus radio?**

The concept campus radio implies a type of community radio station that is run by the students of a college, university or any other form of tertiary educational institution. In many instances, the facility is often called by various names such as college radio, university radio or student radio. Although they (campus radios) vary from country to country, they are generally licensed and regulated through a government legislation and often have unique organisational features. One commonality among them regardless of their geographical location is their non-profit operational status, a major element that differentiates them from commercially oriented radio. In South Africa, campus radio is classified, together with other community broadcasting entities, within the third category of the three tier system alongside public and commercial broadcasting (IBA Act 1993). From a regulatory and policy viewpoint, the host universities are the licensees and therefore, are entrusted with the legal and financial responsibility to ensure that the stations run sustainably. This entails the facilitation and establishment of the stations' operational, administrative and governance aspects in order to meet the regulator (Independent Communications Authority of South Africa)'s licencing conditions, with which they can renew their licence every four years. This has direct implications on the development of inter alia, the stations' constitution, vision and mission, board of directors, training and supervision of volunteers, daily administration and more essentially, the programming of content (ICASA, 2000; Muswede, 2009, p. 36).

### **Social functions of campus radio**

Campus radio is set up as a non-profit organisation to provide a broadcast service particularly to the university community, but may also serve the broader society within its licence footprint. Its purpose is to promote academic and social development consistent with the terms and conditions of the license and broader aims of the university. Among others, the radio facilitates and promotes ideas, principles and aspirations of the community radio sector through local voices and productions that enhance participation by target communities at all levels. This is done in tandem with the broader scope of supporting democracy, development and empowerment of target communities to promote freedom of expression, diversity of opinion, inclusivity, and to combat all forms of discrimination including racism and sexism. Campus radio's founding principle is premised within the resolve to promote democratic values through education, entertainment and information dissemination (Independent Broadcasting Act 153 of 1993; Constitution of Radio Turf, 1995).

Despite their varying operational contexts, community radios are driven by a social development agenda tailored to respond to their target community needs and priorities through an interactive and consultative process (Muswede, 2009, p. 22). In a broad sense, they are seen as an extension of the public space as well as a tool for creating and expanding public participation. This initiative posits the sector to serve target communities as an organic mechanism that ensures that stations become “efficient local knowledge centres” (Jallov, 2005, p. 6). Like any other community radio station, campus radio exists to support and contribute to its target community’s social and cultural development. Hence, use of local languages therefore forms a critical aspect of its programming. Due to the internet and accompanying surge of new technologies, campus radio is now “endowed with new communicative, transformative capabilities” (Pulido & Gomez, 2013, p. 65), an element that makes it more amenable to addressing young listeners’ informational needs.

### **Campus radio’s programming utilities**

Most campus stations carry a variety of programming features such as news, sport, talk shows, drama, and contemporary music entertainment with a deliberate bias towards local material. Usually their programming is exclusively by and for the student community, but may also include the broader community as prescribed in their licensing conditions. They operate on a “free-form” radio format with ample space for creativity and variations, thereby making the sector to be recognised as an essential alternative media outlet by both its internal and external stakeholders (Pulido & Gomez, 2013, p. 70). Due to the age and lifestyle of the majority of its listeners, particularly students, campus radio often provides airplay and promotional exposure to the new and emerging musical trends including punk, new wave, hip hop, a variety of rock and contemporary genres from local artists. This is one of its instrumentalist feature (light programming) that enhances its audience-building strategy. This form of daily scheduling often helps to create a platform for its successive “serious” programming in the form of magazine or topical shows, news and other interactive formats based on culture, musicals and sport.

Campus radio’s participatory formats such as *phone-ins* and talk shows are characterised by interactivity in order to satisfy the informational needs of its target listeners. With its tradition of local people’s involvement, its content allows for a diverse and interactive programming that gives listeners an opportunity to contribute to the community’s developmental needs (Muswede, 2009, p. 87). This allows the station to support the

development of intellectual debate through public participation and promotion of civic education. Its programming content is packaged in a way that reflects collective cultural expression through use of indigenous languages which are often neglected by mainstream and commercial media (Girard, 2007). Moreover, its programming remains an integral part of the community it serves as an effective means for community relations, education and addressing other community issues.

As a policy imperative and requisite licensing condition (ICASA, 2000), community participation by its audience at all levels of the station's operations is one of the most outstanding features of campus radio. This form of inclusivity fosters its social capital among community members through their involvement in the board of directors, management and programming structures of the station. This has the potential to empower those who often feel marginalised to participate in nation-building and determining their future through local and organic establishments. Accordingly, participants take the development of the community into their hands by assuming various roles in the running of the station as volunteers, presenters, developers of programme content and other administrative responsibilities (Muswede, 2009, p. 20).

### **Functional communication paradigm**

The functional communication paradigm falls within the category of classic communication theories that view institutions, including the media as performing roles designed to meet the needs of individuals and societies (Gilboa, 2009, p. 19). The approach preceded and paved way for modern communication research on community development theories and media effects resulting from agenda setting and framing, uses and gratifications, cultivation and spiral of silence theoretical propositions. The main focus of the functional communication paradigm evolved from its pre-occupation with the role and how media messages (implicit or explicit) are designed to meet the needs of target audiences. Thus, its functionality and relevance to society is derived from an understanding of how communicators apply it through agenda setting or framing, uses and gratifications by users, socialisation and promotion of the dominant public view in society.

Agenda setting is in many ways tied closely to framing because both propositions focus on how the media draw the public's eye to specific topics, and in the process, set the agenda for their day to day engagements. A frame refers to the way media programmers and editors organise and present the ideas, events or topical issues to media users (Fourie, 2007, p. 245) in

order to influence their thinking. Uses and gratifications theory posits that individuals do choose, as active consumers of media content, what they want to use the media for, rather than the contrary. Cultivation theory sees the media as socialising agents that creatively construct and sustain the values, opinions, knowledge, and attitudes of individuals through media content. Spiral of silence suggests that the opinion expressed by the media often become the dominant public view such that contrasting ideas are then silenced due to fear of isolation by those who hold such views (Banda, 2003; Fourie, 2007, p. 246).

To this effect, the functional communication paradigm is important for the constructing of a relevant framework for analysis of the relationship between the media and society. Its significance lies in its ability to highlight the functions that the media serve in society such as surveillance (news), correlation of parts of society (editorial), cultural transmission and entertainment, and mobilisation (McQuail, 2000, p. 79-80). The last function is more relevant to this paper as it operates on the basis of public education initiatives used to build community efforts to reduce violence and promote mediated conflict resolutions. Social mobilisation usually functions through a news selection criteria that places responsibility on the media editors through elevation of nation building values to prevent, manage, resolve, and transform society. Thus, instead of responding to protests through reactive means, this framework employs “soft or smart power” which integrates the latter with public democracy to generate responsive actions (Gilboa, 2009, p. 15). However, the effectiveness of the social mobilisation process also depends on the interactions between social actors, contextual dynamics and the nature of communities served by the particular media.

### **Campus radio, communitarianism and the transformation dialogue**

This section presents an elaborative argument on the implications of a communitarian-driven campus radio programming for the promotion of peaceful campuses in the South African higher education sector. The premise of this argument stems from the view that, since the functionality or usefulness of the media is often dependent on the level of educational attainment of its recipients and the degree of social mobilisation (Gilboa, 2009, p. 10), the university community is precisely a suitable category for the uptake of campus radio programmes. Therefore, a careful implementation of the communitarian imperative of campus radio programming has the inherent potential to cultivate responsible communal upkeep of universities as training sites for vibrant intellectual discourse and active democratic citizenship.

### **Promotion of conventional social activism**

Barnhardt & Reyes (2016, p. 2) maintain that in “campuses where student voices are valued and social activism is promoted” institutions have addressed pressing social concerns much better than where campus leaders have condemned student activism as a mere challenge to institutional authority. This concurs with the scholarly view that students engaged in activism reap educational benefits inter alia, developing inclination to continue their political participation well into mid-life, acquiring a greater sense of social responsibility as well as identity consciousness (Barnhardt et al., 2016, p. 3). In addition, it has been noted that beneath the contention and dissatisfaction that characterise campus protest, students with a culture of activism and advocacy experience gains in critical thinking, civic engagement and commitment to the larger community (Gilboa, 2009, p. 20). This has a great potential for educating students on the importance of democratic participation, leadership and the ability to build coalitions among a wide variety of individuals on campus (Gilboa, 2009, p. 20). Thus, it helps to highlight the benefits that accrue (by way of cultivation) as a result of involving students in the university’s decision making processes. Furthermore, campus radio initiatives such as news bulletins have been acknowledged for yielding stakeholder buy-in towards a more peaceful social environment (Baum, 2003, as cited in Gilboa, 2009).

Campus radio can promote a peaceful environment through formats such as drama series based on a transformation-inclined storyline between protagonists (e.g. university authorities vs students) featuring an education policy expert (guest) as moderator. Such a strategy is useful in countering grapevine since it enables stakeholders, particularly students to receive and act on information that is based on authentic sources such as institutional authorities. Ultimately, this has the potential to provide feedback to both the protagonists and listeners on any outstanding grey areas which could be potentially harmful to institutional harmony.

### **Encouragement of civic engagement**

Operating within a new political system with a legacy of deep divisions, South African universities continue to thrive as precarious spots for potential divisions among the major role players (Reddy, 2004, p. 45). As such, it is not uncommon for stakeholder politics to play out within the university context, thereby creating a climate of hostility and distrust leading to dissent actions against those in authority. Notwithstanding, higher education researchers stress that activism should be viewed as a developmental component of student learning, and

therefore campus unrest/protest must be understood in the context of civic engagement. This will promote community engagement and participation as essential elements in holding those in authority accountable towards meeting basic human rights and fostering significant changes (Spren & Vally, 2006, p. 2). Hence, in expressing dissent, students are constructing ideas and perspectives that may one day provide solutions to societal problems (Barnhardt & Reyes, 2016, p. 2). Thus, campus radio may provide a multi-cultural fora to communicate and promote diverse stakeholder participation to consolidate institutional democratic norms. This is possible through its flexible and interactive talk show programmes which are capable of hosting multi-sectorial dialogue.

### **Enhancing academic freedom**

Luescher-Mamashela (2011, p. 8) noted that violent student protests often occur where “formal channels of communication and consultation were absent”. These findings have necessitated the creation of formal structures for engagement with student leaders as an appropriate response by university authorities to minimise disruptive political activism on campuses (Boland, 2005). As a result, student participation in decision-making processes is now recognised for the “creation of an atmosphere of openness and trust... leading to a positive organisational climate” (Luescher-Mamashela, 2011, p. 8). Despite these arguments, some institutions particularly the former white universities, have continued to employ the monolithic approach to governance in the post-apartheid era such as exercising stringent enrolment controls and maintaining high fees regimes. Subsequently, the spate of student protests and violence experienced by these universities in the recent past have proved that this approach to governance is not sustainable in the context of democratic governance. Instead of promoting institutional democracy, the approach has promoted a “tag of war” scenario between the authorities and the students. Hence, in as much as student activists may draw on discursive tactics to express dissent (Barnhardt et al., 2016, p. 3), so can campus authorities use campus radio platforms to facilitate the dialogue required to address students’ demands in ways that resonate with campus culture. This can be mainstreamed through “on air” talk show debates involving students and university officials, particularly those in the social sciences. The strategy has the potential to fulfil what John Locke once said, that ‘legitimate power requires the consent of the governed’ (quoted in Thompson, 1972, p. 159; Luescher-Mamashela, 2011, p. 9) since students’ participation may help contextualise how the university should be systematically governed.

### **Fostering a caring campus community**

In order to create a peaceful campus environment, the university community should be bound by some kind of socio-humanistic force that emphasises the benefits of co-existence among its stakeholders. This should emanate from the admission by all role players, particularly students, that there exists an alternative approach to coercive and disruptive antics to any form of conflict. This idea may help to “moderate the partisan views of other members of the university community” and potentially “create less adversarial relationships on campus” (Muescher-Mamashela, 2011, p. 10). Hence, campus radio content could be used to gradually build confidence through inter alia, dramatised efforts (radio drama, soapies or religious counsel) to discourage violent behaviour and encourage benefits of mediated solutions (through intentional spiral of silence techniques). Thus, themes on student protest, governance and peaceful campus environments could be framed as core elements of campus radio content. In addition, any issues pertaining to the causal links between student activism and violence, including alcohol and drug abuse (McClellan, Jablonski, Zdziarski, Ambler & Barnett-Terry, 2008, p. 12), could be mainstreamed into information campaigns with vested input from the university’s student affairs or governance department.

### **Promotion of media education and literacy**

Some scholars have expressed concern over the collective influence of media reports or footage in spreading information about violent student protests and the destruction of public property (Betz, 2004; Gilboa, 2009). This is partially a result of the passivity and uncritical attitude of students towards the media’s overt and somewhat sympathetic display of violent actions by protesters. This gives impetus to the argument about the need for media literacy to educate the audiences on how to interpret media messages. The rationale behind this approach is to empower the user(s) to be more critical and adept at deciphering the media messages (Pulido & Gomez, 2013, p. 65), as opposed to being gullible to unscrupulous news editors. This leaves campus radio with ample opportunity to present an alternative editorial angle to news production with respect to the extrapolation and development of a critical student audience. In this context, campus radio will be viewed as an extension of public social communication that disseminates progressive knowledge to its target listeners based on local contexts. In the long-run, the promotion of critical media users has the potential to create a vigilant campus culture which does not fall prey to the band wagon of sensational journalism

or tabloidism. This view is in tandem with Mattes & Luescher-Mamashela's (2012, p. 11-13) view that a systematic and intentional co-curricular development of attitudes, skills and competencies to support universities as training grounds and not political hothouses is feasible.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that campus radio has a communitarian responsibility to inspire and inculcate democratic values that should ensure the preservation of community infrastructure and other valuables in South African universities. While the paper does not claim that campus radio can be used as a panacea or as the ultimate intervention towards addressing the disruptive behaviour of students in universities, its programming utilities may be useful in creating awareness about realistic expectations regarding the dynamics of supply and demand of higher education. As a university-based social communication infrastructure, campus radio must wield its institutional role to cultivate and promote more pragmatic and utilitarian ways through social mobilisation to create peaceful campus environments. This should be driven by the fundamental premise that all students are full members of the university community and not mere clients and consumers of higher education. This is in view of the fact that their participation in the production and dissemination of campus information remain critical as part of a community of persons with collective communal goals. This notion can further advance the idea that, as a public entity, the university is an extension and object of survival for the community which all its stakeholders, including students must guard so jealously with valour.

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