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HOW THREE COMMUNITIES ON LAKE VICTORIA LANDING SITES IN UGANDA PERCEIVE AND INTERPRET THE RADIO PROGRAMMES ON THE LAKE'S CRISES

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ABSTRACT

Over the past four decades, Lake Victoria has come under pressure from a multiplicity of interlinked human activities including industrial pollution, eutrophication and sedimentation. These pressures have contributed to ecological changes in the lake, incorporating unprecedented loss of biodiversity and water quality deterioration. This is threatening the lake's capacity to provide for the communities, as well as its contribution to the local economy. In performing their social responsibilities, the news media (particularly radio) have endeavoured to highlight the environmental crises on Lake Victoria. The Victoria Voice radio programmes on Uganda's CBS radio are one of the endeavours targeting lakeside communities. The key question raised here is how these radio programmes are perceived and interpreted by the communities. While they attest to their relevance in providing information on the crises on the lake, it is also evident that audiences are not naïve and passive, but recognise the 'power relations' embedded in the programmes. The communities also argue that the programmes shifted their focus from the major causes of pollution, and pointed fingers at them in addition to excluding their views from the programmes. In the end, the audiences advocate for opportunities that will increase their participation in these programmes.

Keywords: cultural studies, environmental crises, Lake Victoria, participatory communication, radio programmes

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INTRODUCTION

Located astride the Equator and the Central African plateau, Lake Victoria is a significant resource within the entire Great Lakes region and beyond. It was, until recently, the source of nutrition and protein for many people in the region. Of the 30 million people of the riparian community, at least three million depend directly or indirectly on fish and fish-related activities on Lake Victoria (World Bank 2008). In Uganda, about 200 000 metric tons of fish are landed annually from Lake Victoria, earning the country approximately US $100 million (ibid.). Critical issues in relation to the environmental crises on Lake Victoria are located within the current trajectory of globalisation, namely industrialisation and commercialisation. Various industries operating along the lake's shores have severely polluted it by discharging untreated effluents there. For example, severe deoxygenation has occurred at shallow depths of the lake, rendering a large volume of the lake's waters unable to sustain fish life (Kolding et al. 2008). Similarly, huge supplementary quantities of nitrogen, discharged by the industries, are exacerbating acidification, causing changes in the species composition of ecosystems and raising nitrate levels in the water beyond acceptable limits for living organisms and human consumption (EAC 2006). While Uganda has reasonably strict pollution laws, they are rarely enforced because the government often has a significant stake in such industries owing to the taxes they pay.

The Victoria Voice radio documentaries emerged within these contexts with the overall objective of creating awareness about the environmental crises and related issues underpinning Lake Victoria. Consisting of 12 episodes, the radio series was sponsored by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and aired bi-weekly on CBS radio on Sunday evenings (16:00–17:00) between January and June 2005. CBS radio covers many parts of Uganda, with higher audience ratings in Central and southern Uganda and parts of western Uganda, putting its total audience coverage at approximately ten million people (CBS 2005). The station broadcasts predominantly in Luganda, a language widely spoken and comprehended by the majority of Ugandans. While the broad audience for Victoria Voice included all Ugandans residing within CBS's coverage area, specific target audiences were the lakeside communities on the various landing sites on the Ugandan side of the lake.

The research presented here is part of a broader investigation conducted between 2006 and 2012 to explore how CBS radio represents and constructs the environmental crises underpinning Lake Victoria and the negotiation of the programmes by the lakeside communities (see Jjuuko and Prinsloo 2014). Informed by media studies perspectives, this article interrogates the manner in which the communities (audiences) on three landing sites in Uganda, including Gaba, Mulungu-Munyonyo and Kasenyi, perceived and interpreted the broadcasts. How such radio programmes can successfully engage audiences to participate in finding solutions to the lake's crises is another concern of this article. Given the significance of Lake Victoria in

the lives of many East Africans and radio's central role in representing such public concerns, it is crucial that these issues be interrogated.

The commercialisation of the fisheries resources within the Lake Victoria basin is a result of trade liberalisation of the sector. Micro-economic policies such as the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) have introduced stiff competition for the fish resources, consequently impacting on both access among the landing site communities and their economic base. Inasmuch as the fish export sector has had a strong beneficial effect on the Ugandan economy as a whole (see, e.g., Marriott et al. 2004), the precise distribution of the benefits in regard to the local fisher folk and communities (who are both producers and consumers) is not just, in light of their vulnerability to systematic shocks – especially current trends in the industrial/export sector. As the prime economic driver for fishery on Lake Victoria today is fish processing for export, export demands have led to a significant increase in the price of fish, which in turn has resulted in an increase in fishing efforts and catches (Kolding et al. 2008). To deal with these shocks, some fisher folk (due to a complex set of reasons) have resorted to overfishing, irrespective of fish sizes and use poisonous chemicals to catch fish as the easiest and quickest way of earning a living. The resultant effects of such malpractices go beyond the most obvious pollution and degradation of the lake to losses of aquatic and human life, thus disrupting the aquatic equilibrium in Lake Victoria as well as the traditional lifestyles of lakeshore communities.

CULTURAL STUDIES AND PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

The study draws on two related theoretical paradigms, namely cultural studies and the participatory approach to communication for development, the latter being an extension of the former. Viewed together, these theoretical frames are concerned with socio-cultural, political and economic power relations in the construction of meaning and contestations over meaning. They foreground the idea that social action and the achievement of empowerment-related outcomes are heavily dependent on the lived experiences, cultural dispositions and participation of those involved. Cultural studies is specifically concerned with the processes through which people make sense of themselves and their relation to society (Hall 1982). Theorists working within this paradigm (see, e.g., Hall 1997; Tomlinson 1991) have emphasised a strong connection between media production and consumption, and the socio-cultural aspects of society. Within cultural studies, meaning is not fixed or intrinsic to a particular text, and 'audiences do not make interpretations based solely on their interaction with the text' (Crafton 1994, 308). Instead, audiences interpret cultural texts based on their lived experience and on whatever else is going on in their lives

(Tomlinson 1991, 61), and through their active and subjective interpretation of texts, they become producers of meaning.

Informed by similar understandings, the participatory approach to communication for development is viewed as an umbrella framework that encourages participatory strategies in messages geared towards social change (Melkote and Steeves 2001; Servaes 1996). In the main, the approach insists that progressive social change cannot be achieved without the involvement of those implicated by the change (Servaes 1996). The absence of audience participation, particularly in development communication, has been argued to impact on the reception of environmental messages (Kiambu and Kiai 1999). It is argued further that how people act will depend, in part, on how the situations in which they act are defined (Hall 1982; Tomlinson 1991). The notion of participation in media textual production (radio programmes), as in development communication, has been understood at times to occur if people are responding to available information (see, e.g., Allan et al. 2000; Lester 2010). However, the dialogic view (Freire 1985), which stems from the idea of a public sphere (see Habermas 1989), contrasts with this understanding and proposes active participation at both initial and subsequent stages of decision-making (see also Lester [2010, 39] on the conceptualisation of the public sphere notion). This study thus draws on the framework that includes people's participation in programme production as sources and voices, as well as their participation in making decisions related to the production of a particular programme. It is within these theoretical understandings that I interrogate the manner in which the members of the lakeside communities perceive and interpret environmental radio programmes on the lake's crises, and the possibilities of their participation.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This qualitative research adopts a case study approach to interrogate the questions:

4. How do the audiences by the lakeside perceive (and interpret) environmental radio programmes relating to the crises on Lake Victoria?
5. How can such radio programmes successfully engage audiences to participate in finding solutions to the lake's crises?

The three landing sites (Gaba, Mulungu-Munyonyo and Kasenyi) formed the elements that constitute the case selected. Participants were selected on the basis that they had listened to all (or at least a few) episodes of the radio series. In line with arguments which view 'consumers' of media texts as single entities with individual private opinions on a particular text (Hall 1982; Tomlinson 1991), a qualitative research approach was adopted to obtain the experiences, views, opinions and perceptions of the study population. Specific methods included participant observation, in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).

In addition to observing the depreciating conditions on Lake Victoria, which formed the basis of this study, I spent time with the study populations to observe their radio-listening dynamics and interpersonal engagement with environmental issues. The in-depth interview technique aimed at generating primary data from a few selected respondents in leadership positions at the three landing sites. This category comprised local council chairmen (LC), fisheries officers and the officers in charge of beach management units (BMUs). The FGD, as an extended qualitative research method to discover participants' meaning and ways of understanding the studied phenomenon and related issues (Lunt and Livingstone 1996), aimed at examining the dynamics and frames of interpretation which audiences bring to bear in their use of media texts, particularly the Victoria Voice radio programmes. In media and communication studies, especially with the rise in reception studies in the 1980s, FGDs have become a widely used method for studying audiences in their natural setting (Silverstone 1991; see also Morley 1980).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of this study are reported under four sections. In the first section, a brief description of the socio-economic contexts of the lakeside communities is offered to understand the impacts of the lake's crises on them. The place of radio as a resource for environmental information in the communities' everyday lives is interrogated in the second section. The third section analyses how the programmes were interpreted and perceived. From the perspective of the audiences, the last section teases out the possibilities of audience participation in the production of such programmes (intended to address people's problems), as well as the discursive difficulties that might exist in attaining this goal.

The socio-economic contexts of the lakeside communities

The three landing sites are largely artisanal, with over 70 traders and 80 fishers operating at Gaba, 80 traders and 75 fishers at Mulungu-Munyoyo, and 130 fishers at Kasenyi. At both the Gaba and Mulungu-Munyonyo landing sites there is a big market for merchandise, ranging from food products (including fish) to household commodities and appliances. In contrast, the trading activities at Kasenyi landing site are limited to food and fish, with an insignificant market for other products. Overall, the main activities at the three landing sites include fishing, fish trading, fish smoking and the general market vending of other commodities, the success of which greatly depends on the vibrancy of the fishing industry. Fishing is generally the domain of men, while fish smoking and frying are traditionally performed by women, with a few men involved.

The activities related to fish trade at the three landing sites indicate a competitive business environment aligned with the fish export industry. Fish export activities operate in a competitive international market, which also necessitates very high standards in product quality. This implies that the best fish should be 'earmarked exclusively for the export market where the prices are attractive and cannot be bargained' (interview, Frank Nyombi, Fisheries Officer). Unfortunately, when the Uganda government opened the economy to global competition, it did not consider any safeguards for the local market and local consumers (Marriott et al. 2004). Consequently, the fishing activities on Lake Victoria today have been supplanted by the large factories and plants that process fish fillets mainly for the export market and a few local supermarkets where the products are only affordable by the wealthy.[1]

Increased fish commercialisation on Lake Victoria has pressured the desperate fishers to resort to destructive methods, including the use of illegal fishing nets and poison to catch fish. Many women fishmongers have also been stripped of their income generated from smoking, drying and frying fish to sell. To stay in business, these women process fish by-products (waste) for selling, mainly of the Nile perch, locally referred to as '*Philly*'[2] or *Mgongo-waz*i (in Swahili). The terms signify the wastes as 'bony' and without flesh, as they refer to the fish skeleton comprised of only the head, backbone and tail. The women fishmongers who deal in by-products normally buy the fish waste from outside the processing factories (where it is usually dumped on the ground) at a very low cost. They deep-fry or smoke it and sell to the locals at a low price.

Other social issues contribute to the crises on Lake Victoria and consequently impact negatively on lakeside communities. According to Charles Ssonko, Chairman, Munyonyo Beach, the disappearance of the wetlands (which used to provide a watershed and breeding ground for fish) has caused a disruption to the aquatic life as '*fish cannot escape the targets of overfishing*'. This, he argues, is '*environmentally unsustainable and has led to the extinction of many fish species in Lake Victoria*' (interview, April 2008). A woman fishmonger at Gaba landing site was concerned about the buildings erected in the wetlands with '*full government approval and at the end of the day, it is us the poor who suffer*'. While these voices seemingly suggest that the Ugandan government is negligent, ordinary people, to some extent, are also liable. Poor communities, for instance, are dependent on the wetlands for income through cultivation, brick-making and the harvesting of wetland vegetation. Although these activities are threatened, they can also be argued to impact negatively on the environment when it is already stressed. Yet these wetlands are important for filtering the city's waste and storm water before it flows into Lake Victoria.

Health is another social factor challenging lakeside communities on Lake Victoria. In addition to the HIV/Aids pandemic that has affected all communities in Uganda for more than three decades, scores of health-related problems are associated with the degenerated state of the lake. Waterborne diseases, including '*typhoid,*

cholera and diarrhoea, for example, are a result of dumping untreated sewerage in the lake and nearby rivers' (Ssonko interview, April 2008). As fish prices soar beyond the common person's reach, protein-related malnutrition poses a real threat, especially among children. Overall, the socio-economic conditions discussed here have contributed to hardships amongst lakeside communities.

The place of radio as a source and channel of information for communities

As I interacted with various community members on a daily basis (through participant observation), I discovered that awareness of the environmental situation on Lake Victoria amongst these communities has, to a great extent, resulted from people's direct experience with the problems and challenges besetting their daily lives and their work. It also became clear that for many of them, a reading culture (including the reading of newspapers or magazines) is non-existent. From the FGDs, I specifically learned that CBS radio and a few other information networks contribute significantly by providing vital information relevant to people's livelihoods. The women who smoke fish and the other fishmongers identified radio as a key source of information on aspects relevant to their occupations, especially in determining market prices and trade opportunities.

While radio was referred to frequently as the most common source of information about the environment and other matters for the people at the three landing sites, it became evident during the course of this study that radio is indeed supplemented by other formal and informal communication channels, such as local social networks and structures. Weekly meetings, for example, enable the people to organise themselves in relation to the environment and the use of natural resources, and they also serve as useful public forums for lakeside communities to address environmental issues within the community, including developing strategies for managing waste, etc. Meetings were also identified as spaces where the Victoria Voice programmes were discussed and interpreted publicly. In this platform members would freely discuss the previous episode(s) or sometimes recounted them to other members who may not have listened to a particular episode. This, according to Joseph Mutyaba, Chairman of Kasenyi BMU, '*was a very useful platform for mediating the issues raised. It gets interesting to see how some people rely on others to interpret the meanings and implications of these programmes*.'

A few respondents at Gaba beach landing site specified that the channel of information they might use would largely depend on the nature of information needed. For example, one fisherman said in an FGD that for his information needs related to political issues, he would '*read Bukedde* [newspaper] *or listen to CBS radio*'. Whereas for information related to the landing site, he would get it from '*our channels such as Radio Katwe,*[3] *which is very effective*'. At Mulungu-Munyonyo and

Kasenyi beach landing sites, respondents had similar views about the relationship between information needs and channels of communication. However, for them, radio – particularly CBS and Radio Simba (another private radio station located in Kampala) – were considered reliable sources of information regarding issues on Lake Victoria:

> *Through the Victoria Voice radio programmes, we are able to learn about the issues concerning our lake. Our Saturday meetings and Radio Katwe are also very informative channels and have provided us with rich information on, for example, the best way to fish and to preserve fish.* (fishmonger at Kasenyi landing site, FGD)

The above views indicate that while radio is a key channel of information in relation to environmental crises on Lake Victoria, it works in combination with other local channels and community initiatives. Community-based local initiatives as spaces to discuss and interpret the Victoria Voice, however, can also serve as sites for challenging the programmes – even those programmes that may have useful and/or positive insights. For instance (and as the next section establishes), the lakeside communities may be driven by concerns about poverty, and human and political rights, in addition to their lived experiences, culture and identity. Thus, community-based local initiatives may arguably not be environmentally related all the time. Nonetheless, the local contexts, routine habits and practices of the lakeside communities on Lake Victoria were important influences in how they interpreted the Victoria Voice radio programmes.

Perceptions and interpretations of the Victoria Voice radio programmes

Drawing on cultural studies perspectives, the following findings are guided by the thesis that the way audiences negotiate and interpret these issues, shapes their subsequent use (in a sustainable way) and management of environmental resources. The diversity of perceptions and interpretations of the crises on Lake Victoria (as framed in the Victoria Voice radio programmes) amongst the lakeside communities can be understood in a variety of ways. However, for most of the fishers and fishmongers, the interpretation of these issues relates to the prevailing conflict of interests in the programmes, the discourses articulated by the voices represented, and the positions of the key informants/participants or sources of information in the programmes. Perceptions and interpretations of the programmes are also formulated in respect of issues of inclusion and exclusion, the political economy of the fishery resource, the 'tragedy of the commons' (see Berkes 2000, 52) and what one fisher at Gaba beach landing site described as '*political blaming and intimidation by the authorities over our resources*'. Several respondents described the focus and emphasis of the documentaries as being on the use and abuse of the natural resources within

the Lake Victoria basin, on the competition for the fishery resources in Lake Victoria, on government protectionism of these resources, on government incompetence, and on cover-ups in addressing the issues and the suffering of 'the poor'.

The respondents repeatedly expressed their frustration that the programmes targeted them, but excluded their views insofar as the environmental situation on the lake is concerned. According to one focus group participant, calling the series Victoria Voice, alludes clearly to the voice of the lake and to the voices of the people on the lake – the lakeside communities or any persons living in its vicinity and frequently interacting with it. That the situation could be recounted by outsiders was considered 'inappropriate' and was deemed to ignore many issues, especially when it came to finding solutions to problems. The respondent argued:

> *I think the Victoria Voice programme producers relied so much on outsiders rather than speaking to us. These people know very little about the situation and the conditions here. They know how to talk on radio, all right, but they don't know what is happening on the landing sites and on the islands. Tell me how an outside expert such as environmental manager living in Kololo [an upper market residential area of Kampala for the affluent] can talk to Ugandan radio listeners ... telling them what is best to do or not to do in 'our wetlands'. We know these swamps better.* (fisherman at Mulungu-Munyonyo Beach landing site, FGD)

Although a few respondents, particularly at Gaba and Kasenyi landing sites, acknowledged the representation of ordinary people's voices in the Victoria Voice programmes, they also expressed disappointment that the producers focused on interviewing other communities on far-off landing sites and islands, whose views were not representative of the 'real [general] issues affecting the fishing communities on Lake Victoria as a whole'. Other respondents observed that most of the sources interviewed in the programmes were advocating their personal interests. One fisherman at Gaba beach landing site pointed out that all the participants (informers) in the programmes (i.e. local/ordinary people as well as the elite and CBS reporters) had interests to protect with regard to the programmes: '*our colleagues [fisher folk, farmers and city dwellers] were protecting their position to access and utilise the resources for their basic economic survival and livelihoods*'. He further pointed out that the experts (on environmental matters) were also concerned about the sustainability of the lake. A deeper analysis of these texts in a related study (see Jjuuko and Prinsloo 2014) indeed established that the experts (scientists and subject-matter specialists in environmental management) articulated a discourse of environmental protection, particularly the sustainability of Lake Victoria and its environs. Similarly, the politicians and industrialists endorsed modernisation and corporate investment.

The communities attest to a degree of relevance of the Victoria Voice radio programmes, as they provide information on issues concerning Lake Victoria in addition to other aspects of their livelihood. The fact that the series was produced in Luganda, one of the local languages understood by all the target audiences, influenced their comprehension of the issues raised in the programmes, and impacted

their ability to interpret them. The programmes are widely acknowledged for alerting the Ugandan public to a multitude of issues concerning crises on Lake Victoria, and to other environmental aspects within Lake Victoria basin as a whole. As such, the communities' understanding of the environment has shifted in relation to the way they use natural resources – from assuming a given, unproblematic source, to recognising that the lake requires human involvement to ensure its sustainability. One respondent noted:

> *The programmes on CBS radio enabled me to understand that sustainability is a key factor when it comes to environmental resources. I need to be considerate for not only the resources I consume, but how I use them and when to consume them. Lake Victoria is not just about the fish we obtain from it, but it is also about the way we interact with it and how we are able to share these resources with others in harmony*. (fishmonger at Kasenyi beach landing site, FGD)

Interpreting the focus of the Victoria Voice radio series, one fisherman at Gaba beach landing site questioned the reliance on expert knowledge as a dominant source of environmental information in these programmes:

> *... the programmes' focus is not on us. The reporters go to the Fisheries Ministry where they find officials wearing ties, driving Pajeros and Prados [four-wheel drive vehicles]. Many of them even don't know what the lake looks like [the situation on the lake]. They ask such a person, 'Sir what is the state of the fisheries resources in Lake Victoria?' In response, the official would pull out a file and open a report sent to him from his junior and reads out how fish are being caught with illegal nets, are being over-fished by local communities, etc, etc. He doesn't talk about the large commercial boats and the unfair competition facing the local fisher folk. This is not completely accurate. Such information should be supplemented with our views as people who mostly interact with the lake.* (in FGD)

That the radio programmes – intended to be the voice of the people – should continuously reinforce the voices of the powerful in attributing responsibility for the environmental degradation to the communities, was interpreted as constituted by issues of power, injustice, inequitable government, economic drives and the rhetoric of nature management. This, it is argued, grants lakeside communities little or no control over the resources at a critical moment of their lives, where, according to one fishmonger at Gaba beach landing site, '*Lake Victoria is steadily changing from its cultural nature*[4] *to an economic entity*'.

The respondents also recognised how the interests of the powerful were being served by the Victoria Voice programmes. A fishmonger at Gaba beach landing site contended that the programmes are constructed in a way that makes '*us objects of intimidation by the rich*'. This respondent was specifically referring to the voices of government officials, subject-matter specialists and scientists used in the programmes to blame them (communities) for the consequences of more powerful political and economic actors:

> *Take for example Sudhir and Bassajjabalaba,*[5] *who have repeatedly abused the environment through their factories, yet the Victoria Voice does not talk about such people, but rather use these so-called experts to lecture to the desperately poor and politically weak fisher. 'Don't catch fish here or there, don't encroach on swamps.' Meanwhile, the rich are building factories in swamps*. (a fishmonger in FGD)

The above criticisms levelled against the Victoria Voice radio programmes, in representing and constructing the issues on Lake Victoria, indicate that the audiences are not naïve but rather that they recognise the power relations embedded in these programmes. As the above respondent put it, the programmes shifted their focus from the obvious causes of pollution (i.e., the many industries located on the shores of Lake Victoria), and instead pointed fingers at local communities while claiming to be concerned with environmental management, conservation and protection.

The roles of the 'experts' were scrutinised by the respondents and found to be contradictory. Cited were two programmes on wetlands which seemed to promote both their exploitation and their conservation. According to one fishmonger at Kasenyi landing site, '*CBS reporters should have disentangled such diverging and confusing views and claims. They should have also simplified complex ideas for us*.'

The authoritative voices of environmental 'experts'/scientists was another point of contention among respondents. They contended that these experts, facilitated by the programme producers, were insensitive to social conditions and the current wave of poverty in which people are 'finding it difficult to survive on a daily basis'. Here reference was made to one particular programme that focused on the growing of *cocoyam* in wetlands. It was observed that the producer seized on scientific claims that 'the yams were unhealthy for human consumption', to emphasise the effects of pollution and argue a position advocating the eviction of *cocoyam* growers from the wetlands. According to Charles Ssonko (interview, April 2008), it

> *was naïve of the producer to assume that the authoritative account of environmental health hazards associated with the yams presented by a 'mere' research team might go unchallenged and are not likely to be interpreted as evidence of risk amongst people who struggle to find food on a daily basis. This is insensitive, especially when these poor people are hardly surviving.*

The lakeside communities also disagreed on the challenges underlying Lake Victoria. They felt that the number of episodes representing the real challenges on the lake was insignificant, as opposed to those representing '*political rhetoric that blames the ordinary communities for the state of affairs on Lake Victoria*', stated Mutyaba (interview, April 2008):

> *If you don't raise issues of the fish factories which sell dirty bones [by-products] to the people to eat, if you don't highlight the agents who sky rocket the fish prices, then you are not representing the real issues and voices.*

The above views reiterate the need for these programmes to consider the larger political economy driving the fishery industry in Uganda, and to recognise the forces behind some of the actions of the local communities, who may be influenced by the increasing demand for fish to believe that if they do not catch the pre-mature fish, it will be caught by others anyway. This interpretation is a response to what has been referred to, in fisheries studies, as the 'tragedy of the commons', which is about a

> divergence between individual and collective rationality; since the resource is fugitive [sic], the fish you do not catch today may be caught by someone else tomorrow. There is little incentive to conserve the fisheries resource, as opposed to catching as much as possible. But since each fisher operates with the same rationality, the users are caught in an inevitable process that leads to the destruction of the very resource on which they all depend. (Berkes 2000, 52)

To this end, it can be argued that the Victoria Voice radio series was interpreted by the lakeside communities as having condemned the poor to continuing injustice, even while the name (Victoria Voice) had suggested '*a promise to advocate for social justice*' (Ssonke interview, April 2008). That the environmental discourse around resources such as Lake Victoria is contested by competing constituents, is hardly new. The environment, as Anderson (1997) argues, has become a political battle ground of a quite particular and complex sort. On the one hand, the environmental crises and problems on Lake Victoria are constituted as parts of global, national and local discourses or, as Beck (1992) puts it, epistemic communities. On the other hand, there is a growing panoply of actors who engage in environmental management, regulation and government. However, as cultural studies posits, people make sense of such issues by drawing on their prevailing socio-cultural contexts. For lakeside communities on Lake Victoria, such contexts include local knowledge, routine habits, everyday experiences and community-based initiatives and, to some extent, cultural values. These, as established in this article, are the factors that influenced and shaped perceptions and interpretation of the Victoria Voice radio programmes.

Audience participation as an approach to improve environmental radio programmes

This last section of the article draws on the respondents' proposals of the role they believe radio should play in addressing the crises on Lake Victoria. In so doing, I seek to argue for the need to redefine the discursive practices of media institutions in the coverage of environmental issues, in order to expand the focus and accommodate further issues, information sources, relevant points of view and equal representation. How various media contents not only inform but engage their audiences is increasingly becoming an important question for media research, for entrenched in it are broader debates about citizenship and democracy, the formation of publics and a strengthened civil society (Allan et al. 2000), and about how people

may be politically, socially and environmentally engaged in the future, with its rapidly changing and uncertain media landscape (Lester 2010).

This study has already established that, through Victoria Voice (and other media channels) in Uganda, the environmental crises on Lake Victoria were given attention. The question, however, is whether audiences were actively engaged. It is useful here to draw on Lester's (2010, 165) suggestions on how the media can engage audiences to participate in matters of public interest:

> In differing ways, media invite their audiences to respond emotionally; to feel outrage, sadness, fear, shame [...] helpless, empowered. Some responses may be accompanied by a desire and capacity to act. [...] Sometimes, the invitation may be more direct; participate in a poll, register a vote, donate money, call this number.

Given the theoretical understanding of audience participation delineated earlier in this article, this investigation takes into consideration the views of the lakeside communities as crucial in arguing for the participatory approach in the production of environmental radio programmes.

Views of the lakeside communities on audience participation

For the lakeside communities, participation could begin with input on some of the key considerations in programme production. Such considerations may include selecting the topics and settings of the various scenes; selecting informants and contributors (from within their communities) and, at times, influencing the formats of the programmes. As one fishmonger at Gaba beach landing site observed, this could introduce a different perspective to the representation of crucial issues:

> *If the government really knew what was going on here, if they heard our side of the story, then maybe the situation would have been told from a different angle [...] the programmes are supposed to be our voice – they should ask us to identify the issues to report on and even the formats the programmes can take. Styles like songs and drama can be very interesting. Imagine if the drama depicts people caught fishing with poison – and they are punished in a demeaning way, who can forget such a scene!* (in FGD)

Because scientific information and knowledge are complex, the communities suggested that producers should always consult the audience to establish whether such issues were properly comprehended after airing the programmes. The need to listen to the locals and make their voices heard rather than relying heavily on scientific knowledge and experts, was proposed as a way of ensuring more efficient participation and greater public understanding of the issues. This study proposes that ordinary people and scientists with expert knowledge should be brought together (to engage with each other) by a non-partisan person – in this case, a programme producer or a reporter who is able to frame the context and the nature of debate thoughtfully. However, Charles Ssonko (interview, April 2008) argues that representing competing

voices in the programmes is not enough; rather, the voices and/or positions should seek to speak to each other to develop shared understandings:

> *The problem is that journalists are more interested in the educated. Yes, these scientists have researched into these issues but they don't have the real solutions to the problems, because they spend so much time in the laboratories and not with the environment. It is unlikely for them to know everything that goes on here. [...] these scientists are paid by government, so they are likely to twist their reports so that they fit with what government wants. But if you bring us together on one table, we can give them our points of view that are based on our lived experiences, as they engage us with their knowledge based on their laboratory findings*.

The participatory approach to the production of environmental radio programmes, particularly on Lake Victoria, is not without challenges. Many of the hindrances to attaining this goal can be located both within existing community structures and in general challenges facing media institutions. The most obvious obstacle is that participation (by ordinary people) might not meet the criterion of community representativeness and might only include a small proportion of members. More so, the various community members do not wield equal power – some have more authority to establish agendas than others, who are relatively powerless.

Input by audiences into decision-making relating to the various aspects of production, as proposed by the respondents in this research, can also be challenging. This is mainly because audiences lack professionalism or specialist knowledge in radio production, and are not familiar with the sets of production practices of media institutions, three of which are discussed here: 1) news and programme production is usually influenced by various constraints, ranging from advertising pressure, editorial policy and ownership to stylistic conventions, news cultures and limitations of time and space; 2) media institutions are complexly differentiated according to style and genre, patterns of ownership and control, news values, and the types of audience they reach; 3) the participatory approach in programme production is dependent, in part, on the existence of media which provide broad access to information from varied sources, and which equip and encourage people to raise and debate issues and develop public opinion (Melkote and Steeves 2001).

Constraints abiding, participation has been argued to provide opportunities for public debate, whereby the sharing of knowledge becomes the norm rather than the exception (Wynne 1996). For this study, community participation in the production of environmental radio programmes is viewed as an active response to various engagements with the issues on Lake Victoria, with the potential to bring to the fore the shared nature of the concerns (and the act of joining) by all key stakeholders. As Peter Dahlgren (2009, 81) reminds us (albeit in a political context), participation must be 'more than simply a feeling one has, it involves some "activity", without which engagement itself will at some point dissipate'.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored how the audiences on three landing sites on Lake Victoria, Uganda, perceived and interpreted the Victoria Voice radio programmes that sought to highlight crises on the lake. The analysis has established that the perceptions and interpretations of these issues were, to a great extent, influenced and shaped by the prevailing socio-cultural contexts of these communities. While they attest to the relevance of the programmes in providing information on issues concerning Lake Victoria, and other aspects of their livelihood, the radio programmes were also interpreted as largely reflecting the interests of powerful social actors, the inequitable economic imperatives supported by government, and the rhetoric of nature management, which to a considerable degree condemn the poor to continued injustices. The communities were also concerned that their views, positions and voices were inadequately represented. They thus advocated for an approach that would address their most pressing concerns, would include their voices and generally involve them in the production process. This is what the present study conceived of as the 'participatory approach'.

In support of the lakeside communities, this study argues for an audience-participation-based approach in the production of radio programmes of a public interest nature, such as those dealing with the crises on Lake Victoria. Participation, in this sense, is understood both as people's contribution to the programmes as information sources and as contributors to the production process; in identifying the targeted community/audiences' needs and interests. In this way, the programmes are likely to stimulate dialogue and participation. Further, I propose that the notion of community participation in the production of environmental radio or similar media texts be improved by restructuring the framing practices of the media. This can also be enhanced by clearing the boundaries between the communities' issues related to social structure and aspects of scientific knowledge, by recognising that neither is neutral. This article revealed many examples from the community's testimonials that traditional barriers between scientists' and ordinary people's conceptions of knowledge were reproduced in the Victoria Voice programmes. Also, scientific claims were not only represented and constructed as formal and normal, but were framed in rhetorical rather than empirical terms. As Irwin (1995, 172) suggests, much depends on developing a truly 'citizen science' and rejecting the privileging of the former over the latter through an extension of voices of the 'peer community'. Needless to say, the success of applying this approach to radio programming will also depend on various internal and external discursive factors of news media institutions.

NOTES

1. Prices in supermarkets in Uganda are higher than at outdoor markets.
2. The name Philly is a slang expression used in reference to the late Ugandan singer, Philly Bongole Lutaya, who died of Aids in 1987. By the time of his death, the artist's emaciated body had no flesh on its bones, hence the application to the fish carcasses.
3. The term 'Radio Katwe' connotes an unofficial but vibrant channel of information which communicates facts through gossip and rumour.
4. Fishing activities in some communities in Uganda often involve the intergenerational transfer of knowledge from father to son, and contributes to sharing and social bonding within the family and community.
5. Sudhir Ruparreli and Jasser Bassajjabalaba are prominent business moguls in Uganda who own several industries that have been implicated in environmental degradation in the country.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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