

PiMA

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Who Participates? Audience and Participants in Interactive Shows

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PiMA Working Papers

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The project, jointly funded by the ESRC and DFID (ES/J018945/1), focuses on expressions of 'public opinion' in broadcast media via new information and communication technologies (ICT) such as mobile phones in Kenya and Zambia. PiMA examines the political implications of such interactions in the two African countries, with a view to drawing conclusions of wider significance to practitioners and policymakers.

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Abstract

To develop insight into the nature and significance of audience engagement in interactive radio and television shows in Kenya, this paper examines 'who participates' in interactive media in Kenya drawing from a combination of household survey data collected in two constituencies, interviews with serial callers, and interviews and observations at a number of radio stations and one television station. The paper explores the extent to which media interactivity has widened and deepened political participation in Kenya, and some of the reasons why. It first examines the demographics of who calls and texts in to interactive shows, with a specific focus on the gender of participants. It then turns to a more in-depth examination of the characteristics of 'serial callers,' individuals who regularly and frequently participate in these shows. In so doing, this working paper reveals inequalities and constraints on participation in interactive media, with those who participate tending to be young men with money and with modest level of education. Those who participate most frequently are also found to be motivated by diverse factors, including personal fulfilment as well as a desire to represent the interests of others in their communities.

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, the rise of digital media appears particularly important to citizen-state relations and broadcast media in Kenya, dramatically altering how people communicate and access information through, for example, interactive radio and television shows. Interactive broadcast media have expanded opportunities for public communication not only for the elites who wield power but also for ordinary citizens whose voices are often not heard in traditional media. Citizens, irrespective of where they are located, can use mobile phones to call in to radio and television current affairs and talk shows to give voice to political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal (PESTEL) issues that concern individual citizens and their communities. To contribute to wider insights into the nature and significance of engagement through digital interactive media in Kenya, this paper examines 'who participates' in interactive media in Kenya drawing from household survey data collected in two constituencies, interviews with serial callers, and interviews and observations at a number of radio stations and one television station. The paper explores the extent to which media interactivity has widened and deepened political participation in Kenya, concentrating on who participates and who does not participate in interactive shows and why.

The paper relies on multiple strategies of primary information gathering during a period of 18 months, from March 2012 to March 2014. The sources included three radio stations, *Radio Nam Lolwe*, *Radio Citizen* and *Koch FM*, one television station, *Citizen TV*, as well as focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews and randomised household survey data from two constituencies, Seme and Ruaraka, in Kisumu and Nairobi counties respectively.¹ Information from these sources was used to analyse who participates in interactive media, in particular, political talk shows.

The paper is organised into three major sections. Section one examines the general demographics of participants in interactive shows drawing from survey and interview data. Section two focuses on gender dynamics around audience participation in interactive shows, considering both the nature of women's participation in interactive shows and potential explanations as to why their participation varies from men's. Section three examines the phenomenon of frequent participants in interactive shows, referred to as serial callers and texters, analysing their demographic characteristics, access to stations and reasons for participating.

Demographics of Interactive Media Participants

Wider scholarship has noted the active use of digital media for political mobilisation in comparison to the traditional media in Africa (Mwesige 2009; Onyebadi and Kalyango, 2011). Advancement in digital communication has facilitated opportunities for widening and deepening participation in interactive media. Most important is progress made in incorporating digital communication into television, radio and internet broadcasts, among others. As discussed in this section, the younger generations who are most knowledgeable with information technology seem to be the most active in interactive media.

The socio-demographics of those who were most likely to participate in interactive radio and television shows can be summarised as those with money, time, education and those who are relatively young. By age, participation was higher among those above the age of 35 years in the urban constituency (22.86%) and higher among those aged 18-34 years in the rural constituency of

¹ For a detailed description of the survey design and methodology, see Mudhai, Abreu Lopes, et al., 2014.

Seme (28.79%). Gender also seems to inform engagement with interactive shows; we found more men (at 90.9%) than women (at 88.9%) listened to interactive radio shows. Our findings indicate that the majority of survey respondents who had participated in television or radio shows had at least attended junior school. Regarding economic status, wealthier people tend to be more likely to participate; this relationship was linear in Seme and not Ruaraka constituency. The survey findings on income indicate that those who have participated have modest form of income, allowing them meet the cost of participating in interactive shows.

These findings are corroborated with information obtained from observations in radio and television studios. More men than women were observed to participate by calling or sending texts to the stations. In *Radio Citizen* for example, in 24 programs monitored and observed, hardly did female participants exceed 10% of total participants at any given time. However, a presenter from Radio Nom Lolwe, a station based in Kisumu, noted that more women participated in interactive shows on social issues. He argued that the time that the show aired mattered; for example, noting that women tended to participate more often in mid-morning shows when they were finished with regular household chores (Juma, 2014).

Media practitioners had different perspectives on who listens, watches and participates in interactive shows on radio and television. Practitioners appeared to want to depict how inclusive interactive shows are. However, survey data reveals a gender bias in favour of male participation in interactive media. Perceptions of the inclusivity of interactive media among hosts is aptly captured by one *Citizen TV* host, who commented:

I'm glad that we have a mixture of people from rural and urban places. You know finding a guy texting all the way from Turbo and the issue we are discussing is about how people were affected during the post-election violence and this guy is able to contribute. Then you have people from Nairobi and it goes across gender. ... From both genders people are contributing, and also from the young and the old ... (Mburu, 2013)

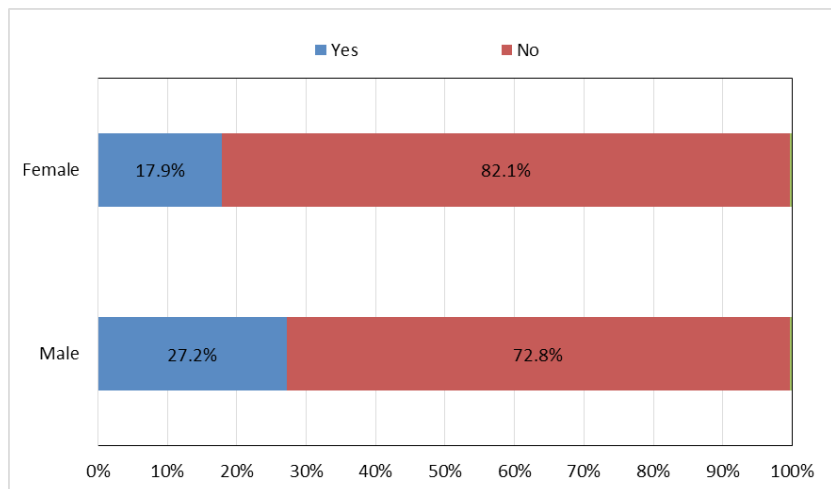
There was some disagreement among hosts about who participates in interactive shows. While some of the selected stations had a national coverage it was the opinion of one host from *Citizen TV* that residents of Nairobi more often share comments to the station (Mburu, 2013). Another presenter was of the opinion that the shows are always open to all and does not in any way segregate or favour any particular demographic (Luchivya, 2013). The idea that interactive shows are open to all is informed by the uncertainty of the broadcast audience and the increasing accessibility of mobile phones for calling and texting in Kenya. As an open space, anybody with the means to call, SMS (short message service) or write to the station can make use of the opportunity to express him or herself. However, this fails to acknowledge costs involved and other variables that inform individual participation in interactive shows. Among media practitioners interviewed there is no agreement about what motivates those who participate in interactive shows, investing some of their time and resources. However, there is a general consensus among media practitioners who were interviewed that regular participants in interactive shows are those who have perfected the art of contacting stations.

Participation of women in interactive shows

Inclusive citizen interaction with the media is important for development. It enables citizens to express their opinions on issues of common concern, and to contribute to public debates, including providing input into policy-making processes. In particular participation of women in development, including in the media, has been of concern to development practitioners. Our household survey, station observations and interviews in Kenya reveal that although there has been liberalisation of the media sector resulting in an increase of media outlets, there remains low levels of direct citizen interaction with interactive media across rural and urban areas, and across gender. There are also more audience members who listen to interactive programmes but do not directly engage with the programmes, and more women compared to men seem to fall in this pool.

This study probed gender participation in relation to interactive media, and both women (88.9%) and men (90.9%) were found to watch or listen to shows on radio or television that allow them to contact the stations. However, in contrast, the survey findings show that more men (27.2%) than women (17.9%) participate in shows that allow them to contact stations as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Have you participated in any radio or television shows that allow you to contact them?



The performance of women was equally poor compared to men in respect to participation in interactive talk shows focused on current affairs. Table 2 shows the different type of shows that survey respondents engaged with, among those who indicated they had participated in interactive shows (Table 2).

Table 2. Participation in different types of shows in radio or television

	Male	Female	Total
Music	48.8%	37.5%	44.5%
Religion	31.3%	18.8%	26.6%
Competitions and quizzes	25.0%	43.8%	32.0%
Shopping	6.3%	10.4%	7.8%
Current affairs/politics	46.3%	16.7%	35.2%
Women’s programme	13.8%	16.7%	14.8%
Farming programme	22.5%	18.8%	21.1%
Development programme	32.5%	18.8%	27.3%
Cultural programme	11.3%	4.2%	8.6%
Relationship and lifestyle advice	21.3%	6.3%	15.6%
Other	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Comparatively, men participate more often than women, with very few women participating more than once a day. Men tended to participate more frequently in shows about current affairs and politics, with the greatest proportion of those who participate doing so between once a day and once a week (26.8% of those who participate, versus 15.0% of women who participate), followed by between once a month and once a year (Table 3).

Table 3. How frequently have you participated in ‘talk shows’ specifically about current affairs and politics?

	Respondent gender		Total
	Male	Female	
More than once a day	8.9%	7.5%	8.3%
Between once a day and once a week	26.8%	15.0%	21.9%
Between once a week and once a month	19.6%	5.00%	13.5%
Between once a month and once a year	14.3%	17.5%	15.6%
Never	30.4%	55%	40.6%

Gender differences, in particular in respect to programme preferences, have been noted in literature. Morley (1986) notes differences between men and women in multiple aspects of how person relates to television, including which shows are preferred and the amount of time spent watching television. Morley finds that women's viewing is often disrupted and accompanied by other household tasks – the only time women are able to enjoy watching programmes is either when the house is asleep or when they are away from home. With regards to women's participation in the media sector in Kenya, a presenter echoed this sentiment, suggesting that there tended to be more female contributors between 10am and 1pm 'because I think at that time their men are at work and probably they [women] are at home listening to more radio than the men, so they can contribute more' (Juma, 2014). This quotation could be linked to norms concerning women's roles in Kenya, which tie them to household responsibilities when members of the household, including children, are not at home. Regardless, the timing of women was limited compared to men.

The theory of multiple roles of women is one plausible explanation for women's limited engagement (Morley 1986). This disruption is a reality in women's multiple roles, and might explain why they do not actively engage in interactive calling- and texting-in to shows, which consumes time and requires the individual to concentrate on the live discussion and debate. A female participant identified a twofold challenge that women face in engaging interactive media, asserting:

The first thing, you know, [is] most women are afraid, the second thing is that household chores have become very many on the side of women, like they are in the kitchen, looking for food, so really commitments are a lot and the little you get you would prefer to budget it on foodstuff. So it is a little strenuous to call because of budgetary constraints. But men would see it differently and save money so as to be able to call. (Serial caller no. 10, 2013)

Our household survey found that those who participate in interactive shows most often do so by calling, among both women (66.1%) and men (74.2%) is most often through calling, followed by sending SMS. Social networking sites are used by only 6.7% of men who have participated, and no women surveyed. While these percentages may look small, they show that fewer women participate in interactive media as compared to men. Nevertheless, it could be argued that women still participate passively by listening to radio and watching television, more than men.

Explaining gender imbalances in participation in interactive media

More widely in scholarship, gender disparities in participation in the use of new communication technologies have attracted debate and research. The nature and extent of women's use of newer communication technologies has drawn divergent views in scholarship. Looking outside of Kenya, Hilbert (2011) notes that some authors claim that women are technophobic and that men are much better users of digital tools, while others note that women are enthusiastically embracing digital communication. Other works, for example Vital Wave Consulting (2010) have noted that women are not benefiting much from technology. Molyneaux et al (2008) in a study of posting and engaging through YouTube noted that more men (50%) than women (13%) engaged with YouTube. Men also were found to know more people who had visited the site than women. This notwithstanding, Molyneaux et al (2008) found that women still perceived themselves to be members of a YouTube community. The feeling of belonging to a digitally-mediated community without active engagement requires further research in respect to interactive media. In some instances, as found in our study, women use other people's voices to contribute to public issues. In an interview with a regular female participant on a morning talk show in Kenya, she explained that she normally contacts a regular male participant rather than call in directly because she perceives he is better connected and better able to air her views on the radio:

I like him [the male serial caller] because most of the time when I have a problem, maybe it is a problem that is supposed to be heard by people, I go to him because he is the best connector. I am not connected. (Serial Caller No. 10, 2013)

A number of factors, including lack of infrastructure, connection costs, computer literacy and language skills have been noted in wider scholarship to contribute to women's marginalisation in access and use of digital communication technology (Hafkin and Taggart, 2007). This notwithstanding, the situation of women cannot be generalised. Women seem to select which shows to engage in, including topic and time, as revealed in the findings of this study, which indicates that women are more likely to engage in particular topics. On the other hand, more women were found to participate in the midmorning show that handles topics ranging from lifestyle and relationship. This finding is further corroborated by a case study of the low income settlement in Mathare, Nairobi, which indicates that women rarely engage in civic issues but use digital communication technologies for online services such as withdrawing and transferring money, buying air time, paying bills and purchasing goods (Mitullah, 2013).

Looking outside of Kenya, women's selective engagement with digital platforms has been noted in other studies. Gray (1992) argues that women choose how to engage, including using a 'calculated ignorance' approach. In this study, women are found to choose not to learn how to programme VCR, lest it become yet another job for which they become responsible within the household. Although this might be viewed as a strategic act of resistance, it can be perceived by others to indicate that 'women are useless with technology' (Gray, 1992).

The limiting factors to gender engagement, and the contentions surrounding gender engagement, do not negate the fact that women and men appear to have different preferences and engagement with interactive media. Our survey of who listens and participates in interactive shows reveals that participation in interactive radio and television shows is time consuming. This can be problematic for women who have multiple roles. Furthermore, our findings indicate that engaging in interactive media is costly, a fact which is often heightened for women, who are often in low paying economic activities, and have other household and livelihood responsibilities. Among survey respondents, participants estimated a minimum of 10 Kenyan Shillings per day is required to participate in an interactive show.

Putnam (1995a & 1995b) notes that interactive media, particularly via television, occupies time that people would otherwise spend engaging in civic and political activities. Others (Norris, 1996; Shah, Macleod and Yoon, 2001) criticise Putnam, arguing that it is not the time spent watching television that matters but the content of specific media which influences civic and political participation. According to our survey findings, women seem to face both challenges. The topic of discussion appears to have an effect on women's participation. Approximately 34% of respondents (male and female) felt that current affairs and politics discussions are not of interest to women and contribute to their lack of participation in current affairs and politics. Other reasons suggested for women's lack of participation were a lack of access to radio and television sets, phones and computers (16.9%), the fact that women are busy and have no time (15.3%), and the allegation that men in the community discourage women from participating (11.2%) among others (Table 4).

Variables such as age, marital status, education, employment status and religion can help to make sense of gender dynamics around who engages in interactive media. We found the majority of those who indicated they had ever watched or listened to any shows on the radio or television that allow them to contact the stations were between the ages of 18 to 34 years, of which the largest proportion were between 25 and 35 years old. Although the numbers are lower in other age brackets, watching and listening is visible even in the age group above 64 years.

Survey findings were corroborated with interviews with media practitioners, audience members and donors. One guest on the *Radio Citizen* morning show, Jambo Kenya, suggested:

...there are several underlying issues that might give you a guide of more men than women, one of them being access and control of media especially equipment like a radio in the household. Access and control of the gadget determines usage. (Kiama, 2013)

An analysis of what informs participation by men and women thus reveals the importance of the topic of discussion and time constraints on women's participation. However, we found no significant difference between women and men in the reasons they give as to why they think women participate less in shows on current affairs and politics. More male (39.4%) than female (28.4%) respondents noted that the topics are not of interest to women; while more women (18.4%) than men (11.9%) noted that women are busy and have no time for engaging in interactive media, as demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Why do you think women don't participate in shows about current affairs and politics?

	Male	Female	Total
The stations / guests discourage women from participating	2.5%	3.7%	3.1%
Men in the community discourage women from participating	11.1%	11.3%	11.2%
Women have less access to radios, TVs, phones or computers	16.7%	17.1%	16.9%
The topics being discussed are not of much interest to women	39.4%	28.4%	33.8%
They are right not to. The discussions are foolish	1.4%	1.1%	1.2%
They are right to. It's not a woman's place	3.9%	5.8%	4.9%
Women are busy / Have no time	11.9%	18.4%	15.3%
Women do not like politics / No interest	3.6%	2.9%	3.2%
Women have no money / Have no airtime / It is too expensive	7.2%	8.9%	8.1%
Fear / Intimidation	4.2%	3.4%	3.8%
Women do participate	1.7%	1.1%	1.4%
Women are naive / Ignorant	1.7%	0.5%	1.1%
Women are not aggressive	1.4%	0.5%	0.9%
Male chauvinism / Men disregard women / Disrespect women	4.2%	1.8%	3.0%
Don't know	19.4%	23.7%	21.6%
Other	2.2%	3.4%	2.8%

While the difference is not statistically significant, the fact that more women than men list a busy schedule as a reason for not participating in interactive shows support works of scholars such as Morley (1986), discussed earlier, who have argued that gender affects all aspects of an individual's relationship to television. There are those who view the low level of female participation in interactive shows as tied to cultural and religious factors; noted by one regular participant in *Radio Citizen* programme interviewed:

... you know women from the biblical stories, Koran, Islam or Christianity. Women are not meant to be leaders, in fact it is true and that is why...you know this is something which is natural...let us say 75% of the population are women, why can't we not get a women president, it is because they don't see themselves as leaders. (Serial Caller No. 22, 31 October 2013)

A presenter at one radio station, based in western Kenya, suggested that men also act as gatekeepers of women's engagement with interactive shows. It is men who initiate contact to the station, contribute and then later on introduce their wife to talk to the station. To this particular respondent, 'there was no way a woman could make a call to station in the husband's presence without his consent' (Oketch, 2013).

As reflected in Table 4 and reinforced in our interviews, the topic of discussion, access to radios, television sets, phones and computers, a busy schedule, and discouragement by men within the community are major factors limiting women's participation. Linguists and sociologists have raised similar views on what affects women's participation. For example, some sociologists note that women tend to focus on more social-oriented activities, whereas men focus more on task-oriented activities than women (Carli, 1984; Wood & Rhodes, 1992), whilst linguists have argued that women's talk is generally oriented toward maintaining relationships and developing intimacy (Eakins and Eakins, 1978). These conclusions are, to a large extent, informed by biased social context.

The very use of concepts such as 'task-oriented activities' for men reveal a serious bias largely informed by patriarchal theories and tendencies which view household domain chores as non-tasks – not work. Over time, the context for women's participation has been changing and a number of assumptions are no longer operational. Ongoing and focused gender research is required to identify contemporary and practical gender dynamics in interactive media.

The factors found to limit women's participation are varied; addressing them requires different interventions. Ensuring appropriate topics, for example, suggests the need for a two pronged approach, with media houses developing programmes that resonate with women, while at the same time encouraging and facilitating women's engagement in shows on current affairs and politics. For instance, a presenter at *Radio Citizen* indicated that they dedicate Thursdays specifically for women to make calls to the station (Njogu, 2013). This is aimed at increasing the participation of women in interactive shows. The limited exposure to current affairs and politics marginalise women and limit their participation in policy debates, which are important for efficient gender sensitive service delivery and development.

Access to television sets, phones and computers is an obstacle to both men and women, and has a poverty dimension. These are devices that require resources and have in the past been viewed as luxuries in Kenya reserved for the wealthy. In recent years, these technologies have become more accessible in Kenya, a country that has embraced digital platform as a policy for governance for effective development. The Government of Kenya asserts it is committed to ensuring that all operations migrate from analogue to digital platform. The Kenya Vision 2030 (Second Medium Term Plan 2013-2017) includes plans to set up digital villages to provide opportunities for Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) (Ministry of Devolution and Planning, 2013). Such interventions are aimed at cushioning those who cannot afford digital technological devices, although their benefit to women remains questionable, since women are likely to less frequently visit the digital village hubs as compared to men. One of the participation bottlenecks noted in our study is women's busy schedule, which prohibits them from engaging in interactive media. Having digital devices at home as opposed to accessing the same in digital village hubs located away from the household is comparatively better for women. This has potential of saving time, enabling women to combine their multiple responsibilities, and remain engaged in current affairs and politics irrespective of their location, albeit with household disruptions.

Discouragement by men, which also materialises as a constraint to women's participation in current affairs and politics, is a social issue informed by persistent patriarchal tendencies in society. Current affairs and politics are largely viewed as public domain for men while the private domain largely within the household is preserved for women. These hang-ups have been a major constraint to women's participation, and informed affirmative provisions for women in the 2010 Kenyan Constitution. The latter has enabled a number of women to occupy electoral seats reserved for women. This withstanding, it is not known whether the Constitutional provisions have affected women's engagement in other forms of citizen participation, for example, interactive media.

In general, cost and a fear of not getting through to the station are found to be dominant factors contributing to lack of participation in current affairs and political talk shows among both men and women, according to our household survey results. Cost was noted by 59.5% and 61.6% of male and female respondents, respectively, to limit participation, while not getting through to the station was identified by 36.6% and 30.3% of male and female respondents, respectively. Other important factors included being busy, that the message would not be read, and lack of interest among others (Table 5).

Table 5. What two reasons hold you back most from participating more in such interactive current affairs and political talk shows?

	Respondent gender	
	Male	Female
Nothing	6.6%	5.0%
Cost	59.5%	61.6%
I will not get through	36.6%	30.3%
My message will not be read out	8.7%	7.1%
I don't speak the right language well	1.2%	0.9%
There is no point, they won't answer my question	3.3%	2.2%
There is no point, they won't solve my problems	5.4%	5.3%
Concerns about criticism from family / friends / colleagues	2.7%	2.2%
Concerns about anonymity / repression	1.2%	1.2%
Busy	9.0%	7.7%
No Phone	2.7%	8.0%
No Interest	6.6%	10.2%
Do not have their contacts	0.9%	1.9%
Other	4.5%	3.7%

Engaging in interactive media is a costly affair. It does not only require access to digital communication devices, but also financial resources for airtime. The communities covered in the survey belong to middle lower and low income groups who have to balance livelihood needs and extra financial commitments such as spending airtime on current affairs and politics. Many of these communities use their airtime to engage in 'must do' social and economic businesses such as communicating with family and friends as well as transacting through M-PESA, a Kenyan mobile money transfer service.

Another related constraint on participation among men and women surveyed is the fear of not getting through which almost equally affects men (36.6%) and women (30.3%). Calling the media houses is a time-consuming task, which requires persistence. Interviews with serial callers and focus group discussions revealed the difficulty of accessing media houses. Those who manage to access and interact tend to call several times. Others noted using multiple mobile phones. Although such strategies might increase one's chances of his or her calls being answered, few citizens can afford to have and use more than one mobile phone. Our study reveals that some citizens do not own mobile phones but have SIM cards, and occasionally borrow handsets to make necessary calls or to check whether any message or alert on money transaction has been relayed to them.

Our study also probed the opinions of survey respondents on who they think those who engage with interactive media speak for. Most of those who responded to the question noted that they think those who contribute speak 'for everyone in the community'. This response did not vary much between men (73.2%) and women (69.4%). Other responses included: they speak for themselves, with men and women scoring 21.6% and 25.5%, respectively. A few others noted that audience members who participate on air speak out for those who bring them complaints and ask them to speak on behalf of particular people, as indicated in Table 6.

Table 6. For those who participate, who do you think they speak for when they call in / contribute?

	Respondent gender	
	Male	Female
They speak out for everyone in the community	73.2%	69.4%
They speak out for particular people who bring them complaints and ask them to call	11.3%	7.1%
They just speak out for a particular group of people	8.2%	8.2%
They just speak for themselves	21.6%	25.5%
Others	0.0%	0.0%

A further probe into what sort of people the respondents thought participated in interactive shows identified a sense that they tended to be 'those with money', 'those with time' and 'men' as reflected in Table 7. There was no major difference in how women and men responded to this question.

Table 7. What sort of people do you think participate in these shows the most?

	Respondent gender	
	Male	Female
Those with money	42.4%	48.9%
Those with time	37.9%	34.0%
Those with education	15.2%	13.7%
Those with public speaking skills	7.2%	5.4%
Those who know staff at the station	2.1%	2.3%
Those involved with politics	5.1%	5.1%
Those of a certain tribe	2.4%	0.9%
Those of a certain religion	0.9%	0.6%
Those who speak a certain language	1.5%	1.7%
Men	22.7%	21.7%
Women	3.9%	5.7%
Older people	4.2%	4.3%
Younger people	15.8%	13.1%
Those who like the sound of their own voices	1.5%	4.9%
All people	2.4%	1.4%
Other	6.6%	5.4%

Table 8. Overall, do you think that interactive talk shows have had a positive or negative impact on your community?

	Respondent gender	
	Male	Female
Positive	80.3%	85.4%
Negative	3.7%	2.4%
Both positive and negative	16.0%	12.2%

Amidst perceptions of the skewed participation in interactive shows, interactive media was viewed positively by men and women, each scoring 80.3 and 85.4% respectively (Table 8). A positive perception of interactive media is important for the development of this participatory space, which has raised some controversies. For instance, tentatively, we observed that media houses have their own silent methods of censorship that exclude and restrict some voices. We found a number of reasons used to justify restrictions on participation, including national media laws and regulations and media in-house protocols.

The participation of serial callers and texters in interactive media

During a period of more than three months of station observation and monitoring, we observed the prevalence of some regular callers who repeatedly participate in interactive shows. These regular participants, otherwise referred to as 'serial callers'², perfected the art of having their opinion aired notwithstanding challenges in accessing the stations, and having their opinion acknowledged and shared live on air. Making sense of this practice of 'serial calling' includes examining who serial callers are, the issues they discuss, whether other listeners recognise them and how they perceive themselves.

We were keen to understand the motivations behind serial callers' regular participation on live talk shows. To accomplish this, a number of serial callers were identified through review of programme archives, live monitoring off-studio and in-studio observation of talk shows in each of the selected stations. A database of texts sent to *Radio Nam Lolwe* was also used to run frequencies on participation levels and identify individuals who regularly texted-in to talk shows. In addition, a focus group discussion was conducted with a purposively selected group of this station's agents who were also regular callers and texters, and had been called in to the station's Kisumu premises for a meeting. Selected serial callers and texters interviewed were most often approached via the stations, and interviewed either face-to-face or over the telephone. A participant was qualified to be a 'serial caller' or 'serial texter' if he or she had participated roughly five days a week during the period of fieldwork. For *Radio Citizen* a total of 24 serial callers were identified, and 12 were interviewed. On *Citizen TV*, three serial callers were identified and one was interviewed. We interviewed three out of six serial callers to *Koch FM* who were identified. At *Radio Nam Lolwe*, 17 serial callers and texters were identified (five from SMS database frequencies done at a later stage of the project) with six interviewed, individually or in a focus group discussion. In total, 22 serial callers in the four sampled stations were interviewed. In addition, radio and television programme hosts and show guests were interviewed about their activities and aims, and the workings of the programmes, including in relation to serial callers and texters. In order to understand and put into context the dynamics of serial callers and calling, this section first outlines the demographics and nature of serial callers and texters. This is followed by a discussion on access to interactive media, representation and political engagement.

Nature of serial callers

The age and gender of those identified as serial callers ranged from 22 to 54 years with more than 80% being men. Very few women were identified, which corroborates survey findings on lower level of female participants in interactive shows. The professions of serial callers varied from formal to informal employment, the majority being artisans, for example tailors and cobblers (both commonly referred to as *fundi*), small-scale farmer and business entrepreneurs. All those interviewed had completed primary level education, some had dropped out of secondary school and two had a college education. The residential location of serial callers varied between stations. Among serial callers to *Koch FM* and *Radio Nam Lolwe*, identified serial callers resided within stations

2 'Serial caller' in this paper refers to a person who during period of studio observation and monitoring had his/her opinion aired more than five times between Monday to Friday. Participation could be either through phone calls or text message.

frequency coverage zones of Korogoncho and the City of Kisumu and its environs, respectively. For *Radio Citizen*, which has national coverage, the majority of identified serial callers resided in rural areas. The demographics of serial callers appear to align with other interactive shows participants as evidenced in the survey results. Serial callers, and participants in interactive shows generally, tend to be young, educated with modest income.

Understanding serial callers

Serial calling and texting is a new area of research with origins tied to the expansion of the media space, in particular the popularisation of FM radio stations in Kenya, which focus on a variety of topics. Digital media have enabled serial callers and texters to engage on public issues while remaining relatively unknown. Many use pseudonyms, initials or first names. Prior to the launch of FM stations and interactive broadcasting in Kenya, the engagement of serial callers was largely limited to relaying information, especially greetings to friends and loved ones, through the radio stations.

One-way engagement with radio has since changed. Serial callers' voices are heard across a variety of topics, ranging from social, political to critical policy input. In a number of programmes, serial callers have an opportunity to engage guests, hosts and the general public on issues of everyday life. In some occasions they argue with hosts and guests, challenging them, for example, concerning service delivery and related accountability.

Observations and interviews reveal that serial callers and texters can make some political mileage by voicing community concerns and representing larger community voices. Consequently, serial callers' voices should not be perceived as an individual act of civic engagement but need to be understood broadly, bringing out the different driving factors of engagements. A study done in Ghana (Selormey, 2013), quoted in the *Herald* newspaper, indicated that politicians use serial callers to make their cases heard. However, this is not the full picture of serial calling in Kenya. Our study reveals that serial callers are driven by many factors, including the desire to voice community concerns.

A number of community members interviewed view serial callers as representing 'community voices', a fact which was corroborated by our household survey findings in which a significant percentage (18.9%) indicated that those who participate in interactive media are seen to speak for community, or for particular group who bring them complaints and ask them to call (2.4%) or just a particular group (2.2%). Although the survey did not probe whether these participants were also seen to be serial callers and texters, they still reinforce a perceived link among survey respondents between participation in interactive media and political participation.

Serial callers engage through call-in/text messages to radio and television programmes across diverse topics. Serial callers in Kenya were found to exploit opportunities provided by interactive media by engaging in the topics being moderated by radio and television hosts, or by calling-in/texting to raise issues of concern in their respective communities or to request a song. Often, concerns raised by serial callers in the shows observed focused on service delivery issues, such as the state of roads and bridges, and educational, health, traffic and road safety concerns. The positive role of interactive media was acknowledged by almost all serial callers interviewed. In reference to one radio station, a serial caller to *Radio Citizen* noted that 'the station has revolutionised things' and he did not want to miss any of the interactive programmes (Serial caller no. 7, 2013).

Serial callers' access to interactive media

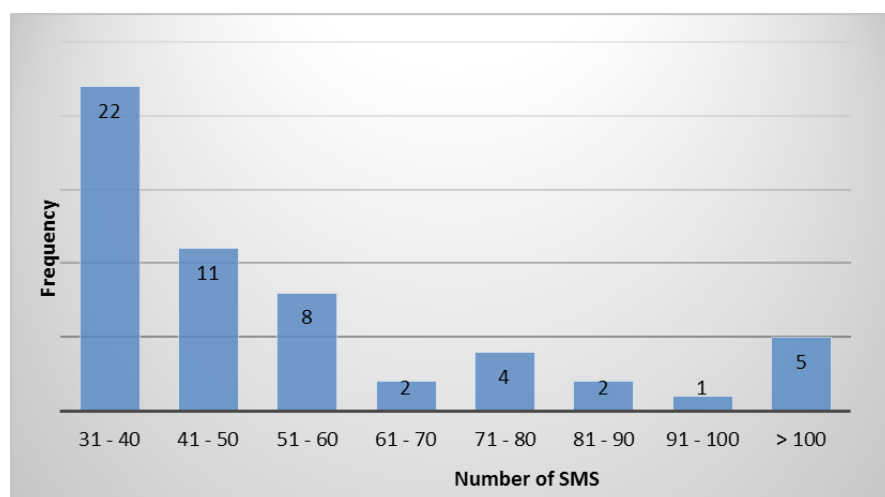
Accessing interactive media through call-in or text message remains a challenging task for citizens who wish to engage on public issues through interactive media. Our study reveals that it is even a challenge for serial callers who manage to access the shows, succeeding due to their determination and the use of multiple methods. Identifying these serial callers and understanding how they operate is important in the discussion of interactive media, which is viewed by one serial caller as 'a way of communicating with leaders and also solving some of the problems' (Serial caller no. 1, 2013).

Serial callers can spend many hours listening to radio and television, and make many attempts to access stations in order to report issues, share problems affecting their communities and contribute to discussions. A summary of participation in shows on *Radio Nam Lolwe* in September 2013 indicates that a total of 1,818 individuals sent SMS to the station, with contact per individual texter ranging from less than 10 to 114 messages sent per month (Table 9).

Table 9. Radio Nam Lolwe September 2013 Texters [SMS Senders] (all)

Number of SMS	Number of texters	Per cent (%)
< 10	1599	88.0
10 – 20	120	6.6
21 – 30	44	2.4
31 – 40	22	1.2
41 – 50	11	0.6
51 – 60	8	0.4
61 – 70	2	0.1
71 – 80	4	0.2
81 – 90	2	0.1
91 – 100	1	0.1
> 100	5	0.3
Total	1818	100

Out of the 1,818, texters, 781 participated only once a month during the month of September; while 185, 78, and 36 texters participated three, five and seven times in the month of September, respectively. As reflected in Table 9, the number of texters decreases as the number of SMS sent increases, resulting in what this paper refers to as serial texters. In total, the station had 55 serial texters who sent 31 to 141 SMS per month (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Radio Nam Lolwe September 2013 Serial Texters' Participation

The number of texters could potentially be higher if access to interactive media improved. In our household survey of Seme and Ruaraka constituencies, 33.5% of respondents assumed that their calls or texts would not go through, while another 7.8% thought their message would not be read, and therefore felt there was no need to participate. One serial caller noted the advantage of some stations compared to others in terms of access. Some stations queue calls and advise listeners to wait, while their airtime/credit is being consumed. This can discourage the callers from participating in interactive programmes (Serial caller no. 3, 2013). Another serial caller shared this frustration in accessing stations, noting that he relays messages and waits; if it is not read he relays another message and another, until one is read on air (Serial caller no. 5, 2013). He indicated it takes at least three attempts to access the stations. This serial caller also noted that his calls are rarely picked up; he only succeeded once and therefore prefers to relay SMS several times until it is picked and response given.

Challenges in accessing stations is accompanied by a perception among some audience members that serial callers may be known to station hosts, thus explaining why they are able to contribute on regular basis. However, interviews with station hosts and serial callers suggest that serial callers are determined individuals who persistently contact the station, in addition to devising methods of getting through. One *Radio Citizen* serial caller alluded that getting through lines depends on timing:

... If my SMS are regularly read out, it's because I already know how to time. I know if I send before a lot of SMS are sent, it will be read out. But if you delay in sending, the system will be jammed with a lot of SMS and it will be like a waste of time. (Serial caller no. 3, 2013)

The strategy of good timing is corroborated by another serial caller who asserted that he is not known to the station, contrary to what he perceives others might think. To quote:

... I told you, if you do not get the correct timing of this people, it is hard. Just as you have heard Madam saying, she thinks I am known to them. I am not known it is only the timing. Even in making calls it is just a matter of correct timing and the phone goes through. (Serial caller no. 12, 2013)

Accessing the radio stations is challenging to almost all callers. Some serial callers use both call-in and text messages until they get through, though the majority preferred to call. One serial caller to *Radio Citizen* and *QFM* preferred texting because he felt that text had to be delivered even if there is no response (Serial Caller no. 8, 2013). In contrast, another caller felt it was too time-consuming to compose a text message (Serial caller no. 13, 2013). The way that people compose short messages also means that someone can be misunderstood. Further, in some cases the text message is not composed in time, and by the time it is ready the topic of discussion has advanced or been concluded.

Similar to wider findings about barriers to participation, we observed the cost of calls and text messages to be a major challenge among serial callers. Most of the serial callers included in the survey spend between 30-100 Kenyan Shillings (0.30-1.15 US dollars) per day communicating to the radio stations. The amount used by each serial caller depends on the number of calls/SMS made, including repeat attempts. A male serial caller to *Radio Citizen* noted that money for airtime is a major challenge and, although calls are charged at 10 Kenyan Shillings per call/SMS, it might cost 50 Kenyan Shillings if one writes a long message (Serial caller no. 7, 2013). In order to manage this challenge, this serial caller notes that he 'tries to be on the point with few words'. To overcome monetary challenge, this *Radio Citizen* serial caller indicated that his family members contribute toward purchasing airtime for him for the purpose of calling the station.

Representation and political engagement

Representation and engagement in public affairs is an important aspect of democracy, but remains quite difficult to realise. In Kenya, liberal democracy provides for election of leaders every five years. However, leaders, once elected, are not necessarily perceived to effectively play their role of representation. This is the void which some serial callers and texters suggest they help to fill in Kenya, as noted by one serial caller who observed that interactive media provides 'a way of communicating with leaders and also solving problems' (Serial caller no. 14, 2013).

Serial callers can represent peoples' voices in the midst of social and economic pressures facing communities. The study revealed that the issues which serial callers address are not only of interest to them as callers, but are also concerns that are shared by their respective communities. Our findings indicate that citizens have used serial callers to voice their concerns. One serial caller interviewed claimed the opinions that they share 'bring light to society' – through them the community can be heard. He felt that many in the society appreciate their role (Serial caller no. 6, 2013). They articulate the problems of the society and engage authorities, articulate grievances, give reports on what has happened, and make problems known to the leaders and the public through the media. In turn, one serial caller commented that they are perceived to be representative of the people – 'it is like they perceive me as their representative who can represent their views' (Serial caller no. 6, 2013). Another male serial caller similarly views himself as a representative of 'the people' who initiates change:

Mostly I think I represent people, because when you see us talking that way, there are times you see there is some change. So, one by one I see that the talking I do or we do make things to be done. (Serial caller no. 3, 2013)

Similarly, another serial caller highlighted the difficult environment within which he lives and how his engagement through interactive media has brought change in the area. He has addressed issues of service delivery, in particular, water, bridges and roads that had been impassable (Serial caller no. 7, 2013). This caller went beyond only voicing community concerns on air by also facilitating the signing of a petition; in the end, the roads were addressed. A serial caller to *Radio Citizen* corroborated this view of the effect of serial callers' activities, asserting that his engagement through the radio has helped his community (Serial caller no. 15, 2013). He explained that issues have been addressed and those who have 'bad behaviour are rebuked and corrected'.

Engaging in political processes through interactive media on behalf of the public can bring challenges for serial callers. One caller noted that he had been threatened by a politician when he talked about corruption relating to Constituency Development Fund (CDF) (Serial caller no. 4, 2013). He was told to stop raising issues on CDF. Nevertheless, while he admitted that his inputs do not 'put food on table' for the poor communities he advocates for, he voiced confidence that corruption can be reduced if it is addressed through the media, by invoking fear among those implicated, thereby improving livelihoods.

While some might infer that serial callers are agents of politicians, our study indicates this to be only partly true. Among our sample of serial callers, the majority were not keen to be actively involved in formal politics, with a few others (for example, serial caller no. 4, 2013) found themselves facing problems with politicians. A serial caller from *Radio Citizen* noted that he had never been approached by a politician, although he had met politicians when they came for a political rally (Serial caller no. 5, 2013).

The case of another serial caller from *Koch FM* was quite different. This serial caller had political ambitions. He indicated that listening and interacting through the media influenced him and he hopes to become a politician, either a councillor or a Member of Parliament (MP). He believed that he could address the challenges facing the area more effectively if he became a politician. However, he noted that this possibility depended on how audience members interpret his actions and contributions to radio. This particular serial caller from *Koch FM* also discussed his engagement with politicians, noting that, 'there was an MP who stood for CORD party ticket and I really drummed for him support to win the vote' (Serial caller no. 16, 2013). He indicated that politicians go to him, including those who are losing support, because he contributes to public discussion through interactive media. Popularity in radio shows appears to have contributed to making him a local celebrity. Another serial caller also viewed himself as a prospective politician, but did not belong to any party. He suggested that he 'subscribes to any party that serves the wishes of citizens' (Serial caller no. 15, 2013).

Contrary to these two serial callers, another serial caller to *Radio Citizen* had no political ambition (Serial caller no. 6, 2013). His vision was to work locally through non-governmental organisations (NGOS), educating the community. He explained that he is motivated 'to see people having their rights respected, their problems known and for society to abandon retrogressive practices'. The caller was categorical that he is 'not a politician but just a representative of the people – a clan elder who guides the clan on issues like development and many others'.

Serial callers interviewed share a common view that their participation in interactive shows has had a positive impact. When asked if their participation had resulted to a change on issues highlighted in television and radio, all of the serial callers interviewed had something to say. Apart from contributing to topics of discussions and placing requests, they highlight an influence on governance and service delivery issues. One serial caller commented:

I have seen it [participation on the radio] helped me and the residents of Kapsabet. There was a sewage which was flowing everywhere in Kapsabet. So in the morning, I forwarded the problem to Citizen Radio and that problem had been for a month, so the Municipal officers came and did all the repairs. So, I can say that 90% of what we say in the radio is heard and fulfilled. (Serial caller no. 22, 2013)

While every serial caller alluded to having contributed to a positive change on issues they raised over radio and television, it was difficult to establish whether indeed those changes occurred as a result of their initiatives. Show presenters also believed that hosting interactive shows had resulted in positive impact. As noted by a *Radio Citizen* presenter:

We have had several time traffic snarl-ups at Mariakani. We highlighted them and the traffic department and the Kenya National Highway Authority have come in and addressed the problem. We've highlighted about robbery cases, increase in crime cases and every time the police have taken the issue and addressed it. We talked about the deteriorating security situation in Trans-

Nzoia on Friday and saw over the weekend ...thugs raided a home and in a span of 10 minutes the police were there. I believe they heard what we were talking about. (Luchivya, 2013)

Our study also probed whether serial callers know other regular participants on interactive shows. Most of them seemed to recognise contributions of other callers and texters. Some indicated they had met other callers and texters, while others wished to connect to those they had not met. One caller to *Radio Citizen* had the opinion that participating in morning talk show had contributed to his recognition becoming a 'celebrity' of many as quoted below:

one way I have gained is, I think I have become a celebrity such that if I were to make a journey to Mombasa or Kisumu and decide to spend there, I can introduce myself to the shows as Paul Nangama and state my current location and I know people would crave to see me. Now, the first thing is that, I have become more popular and when I travel somewhere many people wants to meet me. (Serial caller no. 7, 2013)

The above quotation indicates that the serial caller feels fulfilled because of participating in interactive shows. Such serial callers express their views as well as community issues. Becoming popular and known appeared to be a common denominator among serial callers interviewed. The fact that some presenters recognise some serial callers indicates there is a relationship between hosts and callers.

Attitudes towards serial callers

Our survey findings indicate that respondents from both rural and urban constituencies have a positive attitude towards serial callers and interactive programmes generally. This view is shared by other informants, with some exceptions. Most hosts had positive attitude towards serial callers. It is possible this opinion is informed by their daily interaction with serial callers in the course of hosting programmes. Positive remarks are synonymous to hosts' perception on high quality contributions by serial callers in interactive programmes.

As pointed out by a *Citizen TV* presenter, a serial caller can earn the respect of a host if her comments are 'credible, respectable and a great deal of maturity' (Mwakazi, 2013). Along the same line, knowledge of current affairs could earn a serial caller a chance to have her/his opinion aired on daily basis. Other presenters express difficulty in understanding what motivates serial callers. In general, presenters and hosts paint a picture of serial callers as knowledgeable people who could afford to contact stations. They also negate the view that serial caller could be induced by a politician to make calls to champion their cause.

In contrast, some interviewees who were studio guests voiced misgivings about contributions of serial callers. They raised the view that serial callers might be hired individuals pursuing specific agendas. This is contrary to dominant views raised by serial callers and presenters. An MP interviewed on 8 April 2014 opined that serial callers are incentivised, especially during an election period, to support or discredit a politician's opponents. The MP could not understand how an ordinary man could be a regular contributor to a radio talk show, as illustrated in the following comment in which he dismisses a serial caller:

I know some of them, like there is a boy in my village. He would call anytime. I've been wondering, this a person who just rides a bicycle here at home ... [yet] they also call, to the extent that even the presenters know them, even by their voices, their names. [They know] where they are calling from and even before they start saying 'I'm so and so', already somebody is calling them by their name. (MP for Bondo Constituency, 8 April 2014)

Negative opinions toward serial callers were echoed by another politician who argued that whenever he is in-studio serial callers are invited to 'perpetuate local politics' on radio (MP for Seme Constituency, 2014). Based on this reason, among others, he explained that he does not engage media to talk about his role as an MP. In addition to negative remarks on serial callers there was another MP from the same region who had previously held a negative view of interactive shows. Still, over time, he suggests that he has developed the view that interactive shows can be run professionally and devoid of insults, provided one is grounded on issues under discussion.

Concluding Remarks

Interactive media has the potential to enable citizen participation. The expansion of digital technology has played a role in facilitating interactive media platforms where citizens might express themselves through radio and television broadcasts. This working paper has sought to examine the extent to which interactive radio and television shows in Kenya have deepened and widened citizen participation. Specifically, it has examined those who participate in interactive media, and their motivation and constraints.

The study finds inequalities and constraints on participation in interactive media. Our survey reveals that those who participate tend to be young people with money and with modest level of education. Our study further shows that men participate more than women. A number of reasons were raised to explain limited participation by women, specifically cost and challenges around access to the shows. Women, who have multiple roles, might have limited time to call and send text messages, and could be further marginalised as the interactive media sector thrives, unless mitigation measures are taken.

The paper also discusses the contribution of serial callers in interactive media. Active participation in interactive media serves various purposes depending on the caller or texter. These include self-fulfilment, representation, political exposure and political ambitions. We find serial callers are driven by divergent factors. While there is possibility that serial callers may be reluctant to reveal the fact that they are driven by personal and political reasons, evidence from our household survey corroborates the view that a number of factors motivate engagement by serial callers. Of importance is their personal fulfilment and ability to bring out issues that confront their communities, especially those affecting the marginalised and the poor, to the public domain. Despite varied opinions on the contribution of serial callers in interactive shows, our study reveals that the voices of serial callers can influence actions of public officials, and some responses and changes have been realised due to their actions. These changes are mainly indicated in the area of service delivery, and responsiveness of politicians and leaders to problems facing citizens in respective communities.

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Radio Presenters and Guests

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Kiama, P. (2013), Executive Director of Independent Medical Legal Unit (IMLU), guest on 'Jambo Kenya,' *Radio Citizen*, Interview by S. Mwangi, Nairobi, 8 July 2013.

Luchivya, F. (2013), *Radio Citizen* Presenter, Interview by S. Mwangi, Nairobi, 1 July 2013.

Mburu, W. (2013), *Radio Citizen* and *Citizen TV* Presenter, Interview by O. F. Mudhai, Nairobi, 16 October 2013.

Mwakazi, J. (2013), *Citizen TV* Presenter, Interview by O. F. Mudhai, 17 October 2013.

Nyikal, J. (2014), M.P. for Seme Constituency, Interview by O. F. Mudhai, Kisumu, 16 April 2014.

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Oketch, J. O. (2013), *Radio Nam Lolwe* Presenter, Interview by O. F. Mudhai, Kisumu, 5 September 2013.

Serial Callers Interviewed

Interviewee ID number	Description	Location, Date of Interview	Interviewer
1	Member, <i>Radio Nam Lolwe</i> Fan Club	Kisumu, 13 September 2013	O. F. Mudhai
2	Male serial texter, <i>Citizen TV</i>	Nairobi, 1 December 2013	S. Mwangi
3	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Nairobi 28 October 2013	S. Mwangi
4	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Nairobi, 27 October 2013	S. Mwangi and O. F. Mudhai
5	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Narok County, 23 November 2013	S. Mwangi
6	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Kilgoris, Narok County, 24 November 2013	S. Mwangi
7	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Narok County, 27 November 2013	S. Mwangi
8	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i> and <i>QFM</i>	Uasin Gishu County, 3 November 2013	O. F. Mudhai
9	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Kisumu County, 31 October 2013	S. Mwangi
10	Female serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Vihiga County, 31 October 2013	O. F. Mudhai
11	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Kakamega County, n.d.	O. F. Mudhai
12	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Vihiga County, 31 October 2013	O. F. Mudhai
13	Male serial caller, <i>Koch FM</i>	Nairobi, 20 November 2013	M. Maina
14	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Nairobi, 1 December 2013	S. Mwangi
15	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Nairobi, 28 October 2013	S. Mwangi
16	Male serial caller, <i>Koch FM</i>	Nairobi, 25 November 2013	M. Maina
17	Male serial caller (bishop), <i>Radio Nam Lolwe</i>	Focus group in Kisumu, 5 September 2013	O. F. Mudhai
18	Female serial caller, <i>Radio Nam Lolwe</i>	Focus group in Kisumu, 5 September 2013	O. F. Mudhai
19	Female serial caller, <i>Radio Nam Lolwe</i>	Focus group in Kisumu, 5 September 2013	O. F. Mudhai
20	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Nam Lolwe</i>	Focus group in Kisumu, 5 September 2013	O. F. Mudhai
21	Male serial caller (Pastor), <i>Radio Nam Lolwe</i>	Focus group in Kisumu, 5 September 2013	O. F. Mudhai
22	Male serial caller, <i>Radio Citizen</i>	Nairobi, 31 October 2013	S. Mwangi

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