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I wanted to talk from a personal perspective about two great transitions that have happened over my time of working over the last 30 years or so in supporting independent media. In both radio has played or is playing a critical role.

The first transition was from authoritarianism to democracy, and the second is taking place now from democracy to – well something else.

When I started working to support independent media in 1984, the vast majority of people on the planet received their information from one source – their government. And they received it mostly through one medium – radio. This applied not only to the communist bloc – including China, Russia, Eastern Europe, but the vast majority of countries in Africa and Asia as well where broadcasting remained a state monopoly.

That changed in the 1990s. Radio was a central player in the greatest transition I have lived through – that of a world mainly characterised by authoritarianism and state control of information, to one mainly characterised by democracy and freedom of information.   It was for large part of humanity not telephony or the internet that initially characterised and help drive the opening of democratic space in this transition – it was the liberalisation and democratisation of radio.

I was working for the Panos Institute at the time which both supported and documented this liberalisation especially in Africa in the 1990s, and some of the effects it was having on politics, society and development. The developments seemed intoxicating in their potential. It was not simply the transition to a more competitive and accountable political landscape. It was a transition to people claiming their own space, shaping their own agenda, generating solutions to their own development challenges. And it was the transformation of a medium – radio - which had been a one to many, centre to periphery vertical communication model to a many to many horizontal one. We witnessed the explosion of community radio in Senegal and Nepal, the democratic vibrancy of Ekimeeza – public discussions – in Uganda.

Radio was a central player in the democratic boom that characterised the 1990s and beyond. Commercial radio was a principal driver of democratic culture, responding to people's needs as it needed to sell advertising and for a while, at least as far as I could see, commerce, technology, community and politics all seemed to be driving in similar directions of really delivering voice, accountability and freedom.

Then came the Internet and for much of the first decade of this century it felt as though the digital optimism and inherently democratic and networked character of the new technologies would march hand in hand with traditional media – radio and increasingly television. Combined, they created an extraordinary transformative force towards greater democratisation, greater decentralisation of communicative power, the opening up of communication systems. While radio took a lower profile in the 2000s but in fact the number of radio stations, especially in many fragile states, grew more quickly than at any other time in history. In Afghanistan for example the number of radio stations grew at 20% per year throughout this period reaching 175 by 2010.

By 2010, the role of radio seemed to be increasingly peripheral. The democratic transformation was increasingly characterised by developments such as the Arab Uprisings and the apparently liberating energy of social media and access to satellite television. Radio use was still widespread, especially in resource poor setting and in the kinds of fragile states where organisations like mine worked, but the surge was coming from mobile and television.

And now we are in a different transition. For the past decade or so, we've been documenting in our research and analysis at BBC Media Action a transition from an essentially democratic media and communication sphere to an increasingly co-opted one, a sphere less characterised by an incentive to serve a public and more by the need to communicate a perspective, an agenda or a message. It's not a return to the past where a single government exerted monolithic control, but a pluralistic co-option – sometimes congregating around a central power structure – but exercised through often opaque, complex and difficult to track trends. And a lot of this co-option can be seen through the story of radio.

Take Nepal, once the shining international beacon of community media, a country that today boasts more than 450 community and commercial FM radio stations. In a policy briefing we published late last year based on interviews in the country, it revealed a story of radio stations more often serving the local power holder than the community. "Community media starts with prayers, followed by the news from Kathmandu, followed by a programme on gender rights sponsored by an NGO in New York, followed by a discussion programme reflecting a narrow range of voices, all the while fawning over the musclemen who own the station" said one well known commentator in the country. Real community radio stations still exist but they are under growing pressure – both financial and political and that pressure is most intense where politics is most intense.

Or Kenya, which in the 1990s was in the vanguard of opening of public space with radio liberalisation at its core. But by 2007, it was the commercial local language media – what some called community radio – that was most heavily implicated in driving ethnic hatred and violence that caused more than a 1,000 deaths and half a million people forced from their homes.

Or Afghanistan where we published a policy briefing in 2012 on the challenges of transition where a country where the FM spectrum is saturated in Kabul with the number of radio stations is now characterised, especially in rural areas, by radio increasingly often falling into the hands of warlords, extremists and other powerbrokers.

Media landscapes have been changing from an essentially democratising force characterised by the opening up of public space, to an increasingly fragmented and fractured and often polarised one. Much of this fragmentation of the public sphere has been driven by social media and new technologies, but a less acknowledged story is the linked fragmentation of more traditional media, both radio and television. And this fragmentation prompted by the explosion of both old and new media has been accompanied increasingly by a fracturing of media as a combination of politics, technology and economics has led to communication coalescing along different sides of the fracture points in society.

These fractures can be political, religious, ethnic, or intergenerational. We are in the midst in the West of a set of debates around echo chambers, fake news, filter bubbles, post truth and all the other vocabulary that besets our informational angst, but in many respects these issues – and their political effects – have been playing out for longer in countries where politics has always been fragile, and where the interplay between fragmented, fractured politics and fragmented, fractured communication spaces is more immediate and impacts often more profound.

Which brings me to the question of, if we are on a transition away from a democratic media space what are we on a transition towards, and what is the relevance of radio to that transition? Who knows but I know one of the greatest challenges – if it's accepted that our information spaces are more fragmented, and are more fractured, and more polarised then perhaps our central challenge is how to enable communication across the fracture points in society, to enable dialogue between people who disagree with each other, not just agree with each, to enable people who are different from each other – politically, religiously, ethnically, culturally, generationally – to engage, argue and ultimately try to understand each other, rather than shout or ignore each other. I am not convinced the online space is a great place for that kind of dialogue to take place, but I am convinced that radio might still be.

I don't think radio has a future because it is somehow immune to the technological transformation that we are living through, but I think it may be an outstanding relevant medium for our times not as an instrument of control, nor simply as an amplifier of voice, but as a platform for debate and dialogue.

It became largely accepted in media and communication debates in recent years that we were living through a technological transition from analogue to digital. I haven't thought that for quite some time. I think that blinds us to what is really happening which is a transition in our human relationships, and in our political relationships. It isn't just digital that is shaping that, but a whole panoply of communication as well as political and social changes. But ultimately, if as humans we want to have a politics which enables people to talk and try to understand people with whom they disagree, to talk to and engage people who are different from them – we need the most appropriate technologies that can enable that to happen.

It seems to me that radio continues to be one of, of not the most appropriate means of enabling that to happen.