

Omega Radio: A Personal Reflection on Listening to the Voice of Hope during Namibia's Liberation Struggle

Simon Namwandi INDONGO*

Ministry of International Relations and Trade, Namibia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a personal memoir and scholarly reflection on the significance of Omega Radio during Namibia's liberation struggle. Widely accessed in northern Namibia through short-wave transmission, Omega Radio served as a medium through which local communities followed both regional and international news. Of particular importance were the BBC Africa Service, the Voice of America, and the Voice of Namibia. The latter, operated by SWAPO from Lusaka and later Luanda, provided authentic accounts of the liberation movement and countered official state narratives.

Drawing on personal experiences and existing literature, this study highlights how radio listening became an act of political awareness, conscientization, sensitization, reliance, and hope. The seemingly ordinary portable set, fondly known as "Omega Radio" (or *ofunguna/okakwatamawi* in Oshindonga), with its simple dials and well-worn speakers, was a source of empowerment. As a child, I recall my father listening to Omega Radio daily. I would sit beside him at the fireplace, listening to the voices that shaped our understanding of political developments—voices that slowly nurtured consciousness and conviction.

This study examines the pivotal role of radio communication during Namibia's liberation struggle, with emphasis on Omega Radio and other broadcasting stations that influenced political consciousness. Radios became lifelines of information, transmitting international, regional, and liberation messages to the indigenous population of then South West Africa. While Western outlets such as the BBC, Voice of America, and the South West Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SWABC) presented competing narratives, liberation movements relied on the Voice of Namibia and UNITA broadcasts from Jamba, Angola, to counter propaganda and mobilize support.

This paper further explores the dual role of Omega Radio: as a channel of state propaganda and as a medium that inadvertently facilitated access to alternative broadcasts, which carried messages of hope to Namibians under apartheid. The study situates these experiences within broader scholarship on communication and resistance in Southern Africa, underscoring the enduring role of radio as both an instrument of propaganda and a vehicle of liberation.

INTRODUCTION

During the era of apartheid, when censorship and repression dominated the socio-political landscape of South West Africa/Namibia, access to reliable information was not merely a convenience—it was a lifeline. Amid fear, surveillance, and political uncertainty, a modest yet powerful device provided connection to the outside world: the Omega Radio.

I vividly recall the period between 1984 and 1985, etched in memory as a turning point. The apartheid system seemed unshakeable, yet the spirit of resistance grew stronger with every clandestine pamphlet, whispered conversation, and broadcast that slipped past the regime's iron grip. Historically, radio has been a formidable instrument of political communication, particularly during conflicts. In Southern Africa, both liberation movements and colonial regimes used radio to influence public opinion, mobilize support, and undermine

adversaries. For Namibians, Omega Radio symbolized the tension between official narratives and alternative voices. Listeners navigated frequencies ranging from the BBC, Voice of America, and Radio Moscow to the Voice of Namibia in Lusaka and UNITA's broadcasts from Angola. This paper offers a personal reflection on listening to Omega Radio, while situating its importance in Namibia's liberation struggle and broader regional discourse.

Purpose of the Study

1. To document the lived experience of listening to Omega Radio during Namibia's liberation struggle.
2. To examine its dual role as both an instrument of propaganda and a gateway to alternative narratives of resistance.
3. To contribute to scholarship on the intersection of media, war, and liberation movements in Africa.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to historical memory and scholarship in three key ways:

1. Preserving personal testimony of how ordinary Namibians engaged with media during armed struggle.
2. Expanding literature on propaganda and counter-propaganda in Southern Africa.
3. Providing insights into the resilience of listeners who transformed state-controlled communication into a source of hope by seeking alternative voices on the airwaves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on radio in liberation contexts emphasizes both its accessibility and political impact. Tudesq (2002) stresses radio's reach in African rural societies, while Ellis (1994) highlights its strategic deployment during wars of liberation. In the Namibian context, Dobell (2000) notes South Africa's use of Omega Radio to dominate the information environment, countered by the Voice of Namibia, which offered alternative narratives. Saunders (2012) observes that international stations such as the BBC and VOA reinforced the legitimacy of the Namibian liberation struggle by reporting on human rights abuses and United Nations debates.

Propaganda studies (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015) further illustrate how authoritarian regimes exploit media to shape perceptions, while audiences often resist or reinterpret such messages. Omega Radio epitomized this duality: designed as a vehicle of psychological warfare, it unintentionally encouraged Namibians to diversify their listening habits and seek trusted liberation-aligned sources.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, combining autobiographical narrative, oral history, and archival research. Such a multi-pronged approach is necessary because the history of radio listening during Namibia's liberation struggle is not only documented in formal archives but also preserved in lived memories, community practices, and cultural narratives. The methodology is therefore both personal and collective, situating individual testimony within broader historical processes.

Autobiographical Narrative

As the author, I draw directly on my personal experiences of listening to Omega Radio in northern Namibia during the 1970s and 1980s. These memories are treated as primary data, capturing the immediacy of radio listening under conditions of political repression. Narrative fragments include recollections of community gatherings around the radio, the emotional resonance of SWAPO's Voice of Namibia broadcasts, and strategies used to avoid detection by security forces. Following Ellis & Bochner (2000), this autoethnographic approach acknowledges subjectivity while situating personal memory within collective history.

Oral History Interviews

To complement personal reflections, oral testimonies were collected from individuals who also engaged with Omega Radio and the Voice of Namibia during the liberation period. Participants included men and women from Kavango and Ovamboland regions, representing different generational cohorts. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to narrate freely their experiences of listening, interpretation, and transmission of information within households and communities.

Special attention was paid to gendered dynamics (e.g., women's role in gathering children to listen, men's role in relaying political updates) and intergenerational differences (e.g., youth interpreting broadcasts with greater political fervor compared to elders seeking reassurance). This oral history method follows the work of Portelli (1991), who emphasizes the interpretive richness of memory as historical evidence.

Archival Research

Archival materials were consulted in Windhoek (National Archives of Namibia), Pretoria (South African Defence Force archives), and Lusaka (SWAPO archives). These included government communications, military reports, and external press coverage on Omega Radio. Additionally, documentation from international sources such as United Nations debates and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) transcripts provided comparative perspectives. Archival triangulation allowed for a critical comparison between official propaganda and the alternative narratives remembered by listeners.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is informed by critical media and cultural studies. Stuart Hall's (1980) theory of encoding/decoding provides a conceptual lens to understand how Namibian listeners did not passively absorb Omega Radio's broadcasts but actively decoded them in opposition to their intended meaning.

John Fiske's (1989) notion of audience resistance further illuminates how marginalized groups transformed state-controlled media into an opportunity for political empowerment. James Scott's (1990) concept of "hidden transcripts" is employed to explain how clandestine listening created spaces of subaltern political expression beyond the surveillance of the state.

Reflexivity and Limitations

As both researcher and participant, I acknowledge the limitations of memory and subjectivity. To mitigate these, triangulation across personal testimony, oral histories, and archival records was employed. While oral testimonies enrich the study, they are also shaped by retrospective reinterpretations of past experiences.

This paper therefore treats memory not as static fact but as dynamic historical evidence—a crucial resource in reconstructing under-documented dimensions of Namibia's liberation history.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study highlight the historical and contemporary importance of radio as both a tool of propaganda and a voice of liberation. To ensure the preservation of this legacy and to draw lessons for present-day media environments, the following recommendations are proposed:

Archival Preservation and Digitization

- Establish a National Liberation Radio Archive in Namibia, dedicated to collecting, digitizing, and curating surviving recordings of Omega Radio, Voice of Namibia, and other liberation-era broadcasts.
- Implementation strategy: Collaborate with the National Archives of Namibia, universities, and international partners (e.g., UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme) to secure funding, technical expertise, and training for digitization projects.

- Digital access: Develop an open-access online portal where digitized recordings and transcripts are available to researchers, educators, and the public, ensuring preservation beyond physical limitations.

Oral History and Community Engagement

- Systematic oral history projects should be initiated to collect testimonies from those who lived through Namibia's liberation struggle, with emphasis on gendered experiences (women as information keepers, youth as political interpreters).
- Implementation strategy: Train community researchers and students in oral history methodologies; integrate community radio stations as platforms to broadcast and discuss collected testimonies, making history accessible to local audiences.
- Intergenerational dialogue: Organize school and university forums where elders narrate experiences of clandestine listening to younger generations, fostering a living archive of liberation memory.

Integration into Educational Curricula

- Curriculum development: Incorporate media and liberation history into Namibian school and university syllabi. Modules could cover topics such as propaganda, resistance, and media literacy.
- Implementation strategy: Collaborate with the Ministry of Education and Namibian universities to design teaching materials that combine archival recordings, oral testimonies, and critical media theory.
- Contemporary application: Use historical lessons to strengthen critical media literacy in the digital age, enabling youth to identify and resist propaganda, misinformation, and digital manipulation.

Engagement with Critical Media Theory

- Future studies and teaching modules should explicitly integrate propaganda studies and audience reception theory.
- Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model can be applied to show how Namibians reinterpreted state-controlled broadcasts.
- Comparative audience studies (drawing from global cases such as Polish resistance radio under communism or the use of radio in Latin American liberation movements) could strengthen Namibia's positioning within international media resistance frameworks.

Regional and Global Comparative Perspectives

- Namibia's radio experience should be studied alongside other Southern African liberation movements — Radio Mozambique (FRELIMO), Angola Livre (MPLA), and the Voice of Zimbabwe (ZANU-PF) — to highlight patterns of solidarity and resistance.
- Implementation strategy: Encourage regional academic collaborations (e.g., SADC universities, African Union cultural heritage initiatives) to conduct comparative oral history projects.
- Global framework alignment: Situate Namibia's case within broader global media resistance traditions, such as anti-colonial radio in Algeria or exile radios in Latin America, to underscore its universal relevance in struggles against domination.

In summary, by combining archival preservation, oral history projects, educational integration, critical theory engagement, and comparative perspectives, Namibia can both safeguard its liberation memory and contribute to international debates on media, propaganda, and resistance. In today's digital age, these initiatives not only preserve the past but also provide vital tools for confronting the challenges of misinformation, disinformation, and digital propaganda.

*Simon Namwandi Indongo is a certified Veteran of the National Liberation in Namibia, a former PLAN combatant, and a former student activist. He is currently serving as a diplomat. The views expressed in this article are solely his personal reflections and experiences and do not represent the official position or perspective of his employer.

CONCLUSIONS

Omega Radio was simultaneously an instrument of control and a paradoxical source of empowerment. Although designed to disseminate apartheid propaganda, it underscored the importance of alternative voices, thereby reinforcing Namibians' determination to resist domination. Radio listening, therefore, was not a passive act but a conscious exercise of agency in the pursuit of freedom.

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