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WhatsApp Radio "Post" Spectrum: Conflict, Capture, and the Rethinking of Broadcast Space

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Abstract

Broadcasting has historically been understood as a spectrum-based medium organised through the territorial transmission of radio signals. Yet under conditions of conflict and media capture, the organisational practices associated with broadcasting may increasingly be reproduced through alternative communication infrastructures. This article examines the emergence of WhatsApp radio in conflict-affected Mali, where political pressure, declining media independence, and widespread mobile connectivity have encouraged journalists and audiences to organise the production and circulation of news through encrypted messaging networks. Drawing on long-term digital ethnographic observation of Fulani WhatsApp groups, computational analysis of shared visual material, documentary research, and field engagement with journalists, community members, and WhatsApp administrators, the article addresses two questions: how are organisational practices traditionally associated with broadcasting reproduced through WhatsApp under conditions of conflict and media capture; and what does the emergence of WhatsApp radio reveal about the changing organisation of broadcasting beyond the electromagnetic spectrum? The findings show that, although WhatsApp radio operates through digital messaging infrastructures rather than conventional broadcast transmission, it reproduces key organisational characteristics historically associated with broadcasting, including scheduled news bulletins, editorial gatekeeping, recurring programming, and audience expectation. Comparing these practices with earlier forms of pirate broadcasting and other adaptive responses to communicative constraint, the article argues that WhatsApp radio represents a form of post-spectrum broadcasting in which broadcasting is defined less by transmission technology than by the organisational practices through which public information is produced, curated, and circulated.

Keywords

broadcasting; conflict; Mali; media capture; pirate radio; post-spectrum broadcasting; WhatsApp radio

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1. Introduction

In conflict-affected Mali, information circulation has become intensely contested as media institutions operate under political pressure, weakening editorial independence, and declining public trust (Allegrozzi, 2026; de Bruijn, 2025; de Bruijn et al., 2025). Competing claims of propaganda and manipulation have contributed to fragmented information ecologies in which authority and credibility are continually disputed, while legal restrictions and security-based narratives increasingly constrain independent journalism despite the formal appearance of media pluralism (Anonymous et al., 2026). Under such conditions, the central question is not simply who controls media institutions, but how the public functions of broadcasting are sustained when conventional broadcasting infrastructures become increasingly constrained.

This article examines these developments through the concept of media capture, understood as the progressive restriction of media independence through political, regulatory, and coercive influence rather than through direct censorship alone (Dragomir, 2024; Schiffrin, 2018). Under conditions of media capture, the challenge is no longer simply maintaining access to the airwaves, but preserving the organisational practices through which broadcasting fulfils its public information function. Historically, broadcasting has been organised through the allocation and regulation of radio spectrum, with struggles over communicative authority centred on access to frequencies, transmission power, and broadcasting licences (Strużak et al., 2016). Even pirate radio, while challenging state monopolies, continued to operate within this spectrum-based system by appropriating frequencies outside authorised regulatory frameworks (Coyer, 2007; Robertson, 1982). Yet the rapid expansion of mobile internet and encrypted messaging platforms has created new communication infrastructures through which public information can circulate independently of conventional broadcast transmission. Rather than competing for access to spectrum, these infrastructures rely on networked social relationships and digital platforms to sustain the production and circulation of news.

Understanding this shift requires moving beyond territorial conceptions of broadcasting towards theories of networked communication and socially produced space. These developments raise important questions for media and communication studies because broadcasting can no longer be understood solely through territorial spectrum and signal coverage, but increasingly through the infrastructures and organisational practices that enable public information to circulate.

This article addresses that gap by examining the emergence of WhatsApp radio in conflict-affected Mali. Mali provides a particularly valuable case through which to examine these questions. Radio has long been the country's dominant source of public information, while the combined effects of protracted conflict, political instability, and media capture have placed increasing pressure on conventional broadcasting. The rapid growth of mobile technologies has transformed how information is produced, shared, and consumed, particularly in contexts where conventional media infrastructures are weak or politically constrained. Among mobile messaging platforms, WhatsApp has attracted particular scholarly attention. Research has demonstrated its importance across journalism, political communication, education, health, humanitarian response, and crisis communication, leading many to characterise WhatsApp as a communication infrastructure rather than simply a messaging application (Boczek & Koppers, 2020; Dodds, 2019). Unlike open social media platforms, WhatsApp combines encrypted, mobile, and group-based communication, making it valuable where other media are constrained or disrupted (Trauthig et al., 2024).

Research on conflict reporting shows that journalists increasingly rely on messaging applications to communicate securely with sources, verify information, and continue reporting where physical access is impossible (Christensen & Khalil, 2023). Studies of conflict-affected communities similarly identify WhatsApp as a key channel for emergency information, coordination, and everyday communication (Shapira et al., 2022). Despite this breadth of scholarship, WhatsApp has been conceptualised as a messaging or news distribution tool. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how messaging platforms may reproduce organisational practices traditionally associated with broadcasting, particularly where conventional media infrastructures are constrained by conflict and media capture. Mali provides an important case through which to examine these dynamics.

This article addresses two related research questions:

> RQ1: How are organisational practices traditionally associated with broadcasting reproduced through WhatsApp under conditions of conflict and media capture?
>
> RQ2: What does the emergence of WhatsApp radio reveal about the changing organisation of broadcasting beyond the electromagnetic spectrum?

Drawing on long-term digital ethnographic observation of Fulani WhatsApp groups, computational analysis of visual material shared within those groups, documentary research, and interviews and field engagement with journalists, community members, and WhatsApp administrators, the article examines how news is organised, circulated, and consumed through WhatsApp. It first reviews scholarship on mobile messaging platforms, broadcasting, and media capture, before introducing the Malian context and research methods. Sections 4, 5, and 6 then examine the organisation and practices of WhatsApp radio before Section 7 situates these findings within earlier forms of adaptive broadcasting and develops the concept of post-spectrum broadcasting.

2. Radio in Mali: The Context

2.1. Broadcasting Under Media Capture in Mali

Since media liberalisation in 1991, radio has occupied a central position within Mali's communicative landscape. The expansion of private, religious, and community stations alongside the state broadcaster Office de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision du Mali created one of West Africa's most vibrant radio sectors, extending access to news and public debate well beyond urban centres through local-language broadcasting (Heywood, 2024; Konaté, n.d.; Mbodj-Pouye, 2021). Community radio has been particularly important for rural and non-literate audiences, combining locally relevant information with participatory discussion in oral formats that reflect everyday communicative practices. Listening itself is highly social, frequently taking place in *grins* (tea groups) where news is collectively discussed and interpreted (Bondez, 2013).

In parallel, the infrastructure through which radio content circulates has evolved. Increasing access to low-cost smartphones and mobile internet has enabled broadcasters to extend programmes beyond the FM spectrum through platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, while journalists increasingly draw on digital networks for sourcing, audience interaction, and the circulation of news (Cissé, 2022; de Bruijn

et al., 2025; Heywood et al., 2023). As Cold-Ravnkilde and Sylla (2024) argue, these developments form part of a wider "crisis ecology" in which handheld digital technologies reshape how information is produced, shared, and consumed in conflict-affected settings. This shift is significant not only because it changes how news circulates in Mali, but because it raises broader questions about whether broadcasting's organisational practices can persist when conventional broadcast infrastructures are constrained.

These changes have coincided with a marked deterioration in Mali's media environment. Although broadcasting continues to be formally regulated by the Haute Autorité de la Communication, successive military governments have increasingly shaped media coverage through broadcaster suspensions, cybercrime legislation, restrictions on international broadcasters, and pressure for more "patriotic" reporting (Konaté, n.d.; Reporters Without Borders, n.d., 2022, 2024). International broadcasters including RFI, BBC Africa, and Deutsche Welle have faced suspensions, further narrowing access to independent sources of information (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.).

2.2. WhatsApp and the Reorganisation of Broadcasting in Mali

WhatsApp was introduced in Mali in 2015 as conflict spread into the country's central regions. Following the resurgence of Tuareg separatism in 2012, the conflict evolved into a prolonged crisis characterised by jihadi insurgencies, intercommunal violence, displacement, and military intervention (Lecocq et al., 2013; Thurston, 2024). Military coups in 2020 and 2021, followed by the withdrawal of French forces and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, coincided with growing insecurity and restrictions on independent media (Human Rights Watch, 2022, 2026). Violence restricted journalists' physical access to conflict-affected areas while displacement fragmented communities and increased demand for timely, trusted information about events occurring far beyond the reach of conventional reporting. Official media increasingly prioritised state security narratives, creating a widening gap between official accounts and the everyday experiences of communities affected by conflict (Anonymous et al., 2026).

Conflict in central Mali also became increasingly intertwined with ethnic identities, particularly those concerning the Fulani, who were frequently associated with jihadi insurgencies despite the far more complex political, economic, and historical drivers of the conflict (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; Sangaré, 2019; Thiam, 2017). As trust in institutional sources declined, family, community, and ethnic networks assumed greater importance in circulating and verifying information. Against this backdrop, WhatsApp emerged as a vital communication infrastructure for displaced populations and conflict-affected communities to maintain social ties and exchange information about violence, security, and everyday life beyond the reach of state media (de Bruijn & Sangaré, 2026). Its encrypted, group-based architecture supported relatively secure communication within existing communities, making it well suited to conflict, displacement, and media capture.

3. Methodology

The empirical basis for the article combines ethnographic observation, literature review, and online research, observing how people in Mali use WhatsApp and social media offline and on digital platforms.

These observations are part of ongoing ethnographic research on the relationship between conflict and the digital environment that started in 2012. We approach online and offline environments as an entangled whole through which everyday life is lived (van Dijck, 2013). Rather than following a predefined systematic qualitative design, our approach involved exploring the online and offline lifeworlds of people experiencing war as a social condition (Lubkemann, 2008) in which people create "social and cultural worlds that are most meaningful to the everyday practice of warscape inhabitants themselves" (p. 29). One such everyday practice was searching for information to navigate the warscape, increasingly through WhatsApp.

Our engagement with WhatsApp groups developed progressively rather than through a predefined sample. From 2017, when WhatsApp became popular in Mali, access developed through family, friendship, and research connections relating to Fulani communities. Although we concentrate on groups that are majority Fulani-oriented, this is not exclusive to one ethnic group. All communities in Mali have embraced WhatsApp as an important channel to exchange important news events. As the groups are often organised in relation to family and friends, ethnicity is an important organisational vector.

Access to WhatsApp groups was established organically through our existing social networks. Our participation arose through our roles as family members, community members, and friends within these networks. This daily interaction in the groups constituted a form of participant observation. When we became interested in WhatsApp platforms for our research, we (re)negotiated access through group administrators who acted as gatekeepers and were informed of our role as researchers. Apart from our daily interaction in WhatsApp groups, we started to follow six groups more systematically, along with our offline networks whose administrators were known to us. These groups varied in orientation, from conflict-related information to promoting ethnic identity in times of crisis. During observation, we collected screenshots of relevant exchanges and discussions and retrieved basic information about the groups from the app, including the number of members, membership history, and geolocation from "group info." Given our focus on radio-style broadcasting, we limited our analysis to closed groups, excluding private exchanges and channels easily accessible by invitation. We also engaged with the bulletin producers to understand how news was produced. We observed the growing influence of news bulletins appearing within our WhatsApp environment. Recognising these as an emerging shift in media production, we interviewed media makers (citizen journalists) and owners of what we refer to as WhatsApp radios.

We complemented the qualitative approach with computational methods to understand the wider context of the WhatsApp messaging. Six groups were analysed quantitatively, with messages extracted using open software and securely stored via Leiden University's Surfdrive before transfer to a protected research drive. The corpus covered eight months from March to October 2025. Ethics approval was granted by Leiden University.

The resulting corpus, retrieved from six WhatsApp groups, formed the basis of our computational analysis using natural language processing. The WhatsApp messages comprised mostly audio and visual content. Audio analysis would require more sophisticated computational processing, which was beyond the scope of this study. Using topic modelling, images were grouped according to visual similarity, allowing us to identify recurring themes and the relative presence of topics such as violence and news circulation. This complemented the ethnographic findings across a larger dataset. Although WhatsApp provides end-to-end encryption during transmission, this does not remove ethical responsibilities concerning participant privacy,

informed consent, or the potential identifiability of individuals through contextual information. These considerations informed all stages of data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Because the research was conducted in a conflict-affected environment where participants could face security risks, precautions included removing identifying metadata, excluding sensitive operational discussions, securely storing materials, and carefully considering whether illustrative quotations could increase the visibility of particular individuals or groups. To protect the safety of our informants and group members, we have anonymised group names and used pseudonyms for interlocutors. Where necessary, we edited quotations to reduce the risk of identification without altering their meaning. Quotes have also been translated from French by the authors. Geographic locations and names have been omitted where they could enable participants or groups to be identified.

4. WhatsApp Network Dynamics

This section examines the functioning of the WhatsApp platform and its growing use during the conflict. We argue that particular features of the platform have made it especially suited to conditions of insecurity where access to information is crucial. If a country's established main media are no longer perceived as providing "honest" information, alternatives will be sought. WhatsApp enables information to circulate privately through encrypted, closed groups difficult for outsiders to access. In Mali, this has contributed to perceptions of WhatsApp as a safe space for sharing and receiving information (de Bruijn & Sangaré, 2026). A crucial feature is its audio function. Many people living in conflict-affected areas have not attended school and are semi-illiterate. Audio therefore offers an important way to participate without relying on written text, in contrast to more text-oriented platforms such as Facebook and X. WhatsApp has a strong visual language, attracting attention to messages and giving them an emotional element (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Maseko & Siziba, 2026). During panel discussions in Mali in March 2022, participants identified these characteristics as contributing to WhatsApp's rapid growth in Mali since 2017.

The groups we participated in ranged from family and village networks to associations and community subdivisions, including separate groups for women, men, or donors, with many users participating across multiple overlapping groups. While WhatsApp increased group limits from 256 to 1,024 members between 2019 and 2023, anecdotal evidence suggests that some community networks extend into the thousands across linguistic and regional communities.

WhatsApp groups function through relationships of trust, with administrators managing membership and monitoring what participants post. As the three Mali-based administrators of AB, a group created by Fulani youth, explained in November 2019, they established the group in July 2016 because information circulating on other platforms did not adequately reflect realities in conflict-affected areas. They also wanted a space where Fulani youth could exchange information without the presence of elders. We became members of the group and observed the administrators actively managing participation, including removing unfamiliar mobile numbers and asking members not to circulate false information. Following the coup d'état in August 2020, the group's dynamics changed: conflict news became less prominent, and political discussion was avoided. One administrator (private exchange in October 2021) explained that they suspected government actors had infiltrated the group. Attempts to verify members' identities proved difficult. As a result, the focus shifted from reporting violence and injustice against Fulani communities to charity activities and youth

employment advertisements. Administrators attributed this to fears of infiltration and surveillance, making sharing "forbidden" information increasingly risky. Since late 2025, however, some members have again begun posting about violence targeting Fulani communities (Bruls & de Bruijn, 2025).

Other WhatsApp groups build on communities and relationships of trust already established offline. For instance, we belong to groups bringing together members of extended families, including relatives who had fled the region because of insecurity, allowing them to remain in contact and share information about the whereabouts and well-being of family members. Other trust-based groups grow out of offline associative life. One brings together members of an association of Fulani from the Seeno. Such associations can span regions and be divided into smaller WhatsApp groups according to membership or social group. The creation of WhatsApp groups based on offline trust networks can also have a social purpose, organising aid for displaced family or village members, or supporting people who remain in conflict-affected areas where state assistance is absent or inadequate (cf. de Bruijn & Sangaré, 2026).

WhatsApp groups also play an important role in constructing a pan-Fulani identity. The Fulani are dispersed over a vast geographical area, from Senegal to Ethiopia, and WhatsApp groups reflect this geographical reach. The association Tabital Pulaaku, established in Bamako in 2000, is one such pan-Fulani initiative, bringing together Fulani communities from across Africa and the diaspora. Its activities extend online, including through large Facebook groups. WhatsApp groups have developed alongside these initiatives and, given increasing violence against Fulani communities in West Africa, some have taken on a more militant role in defending a pan-Fulani identity. PP, for example, describes itself in its WhatsApp status as: "PP is a pan-African association promoting Fulani language and culture around the world. May God help the Fulani people ✊."

Although WhatsApp groups are closed and encrypted, information still moves across platforms, with WhatsApp groups sharing content from Facebook, TikTok, X, television, and radio, while media outlets also draw on material circulating through WhatsApp networks. Because users often belong to multiple groups, information moves rapidly between them, while group membership and functions also evolve over time. Research elsewhere in Africa similarly highlights the rapid and often uncontrolled circulation of information, including misinformation, within networked publics (Arnaudo, 2017; Resende et al., 2019; Schoon et al., 2020; Wasserman, 2018). The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* identifies WhatsApp as an important means of accessing news across parts of Africa and the Global South (Newman et al., 2023).

Despite this wide circulation of information across and beyond WhatsApp groups, the groups themselves remain relatively difficult for state authorities to monitor. Communication occurs within encrypted and semi-closed group structures governed by Meta rather than national authorities. This makes WhatsApp harder to control than more public-facing platforms such as Facebook. As AB demonstrates, groups may still be infiltrated through membership. States can, however, disrupt access indirectly through internet shutdowns or restrictions on mobile connectivity. Mali's media environment is therefore increasingly hybrid, with WhatsApp and radio drawing on one another's communicative characteristics. While radio has long crossed borders through shortwave and satellite transmission (Hendy, 2013), WhatsApp extends this reach through networked mobile circulation unconstrained by broadcast range or territorial spectrum. Its circulation is nevertheless bounded by group formation, administrator control, selective membership, and trust.

5. WhatsApp Radio and the Circulation of Information

The computational analysis examined visuals shared across six WhatsApp groups identifying as Fulani communities. The groups had different aims: two promoted Fulani culture and language; two others focused on a specific area in central Mali; the fifth sought to present a "real" account of how the conflict affected Fulani communities; and the sixth reported more broadly on violence in central Mali and Burkina Faso.

The visual topical analysis identified one group in particular (bottom left in Figure 1) to be what we describe here as WhatsApp radio. We identified a large number of logo-visuals. These included logos from official news agencies such as RFI Fulfulde alongside those of citizen journalists. Their names often reflect their purpose, referring to Fulani unity, explicitly identifying themselves as radio, as in Radio Mubarak Pulaku, or using *kabaruuji*, the Fulfulde word for "news." They often featured phone numbers, names, and pictures of the main (citizen) journalist. In most cases we observed that these "logo visuals" were followed by an audio news bulletin. They therefore functioned as programme announcements, signalling daily or weekly broadcasts and reproducing a key temporal convention of broadcast radio: the scheduled timeslot (Neumark, 2006). These are not simply audio files distributed through WhatsApp; they adopt some of the temporal organisation and practices of broadcasting. Neumark (2006) describes the radio timeslot as involving a particular time of day and a fixed duration, distinguishing scheduled broadcasting from audio available on demand. The same visuals appeared across all six groups, suggesting cross-posting by users and coordinated distribution by radio producers.

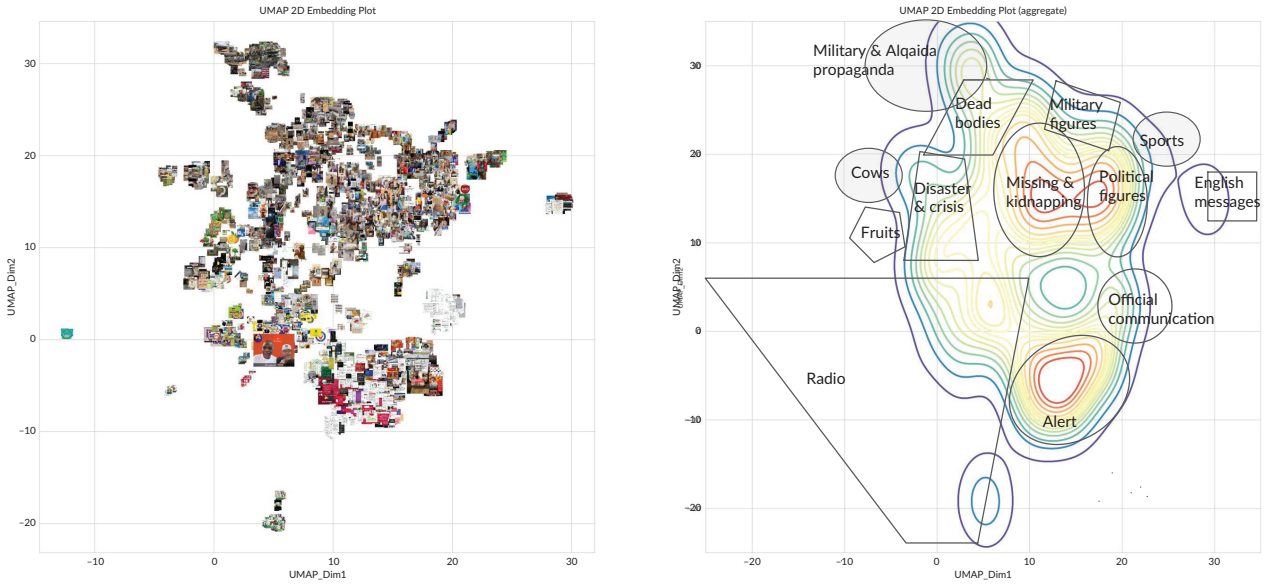


Figure 1. Topic modelling of visuals in six WhatsApp groups, based on a corpus collected (March–November 2025).

These findings indicate regular news bulletins in WhatsApp groups providing regionally specific news not covered by traditional radio, which was subject to state control. The prevalence of these bulletins suggests a demand among Fulani audiences for this form of community-focused news. Other platforms such as Facebook were already circulating conflict-related information before WhatsApp became widely used in Mali around 2017. The public Facebook group Kisal, which presented itself as an observatory of the conflict,

invited people in conflict regions to report atrocities. As central Mali became the epicentre of violence and Fulani communities were increasingly associated with the jihadi insurgency, Kisal positioned itself as a source of "correct" information, although it was later accused of pro-Fulani bias (Togola & de Bruijn, 2023). However, these earlier platforms were public and came under government scrutiny. Furthermore, they were largely text-based, limiting participation for non-literate populations. WhatsApp changed this through audio messaging, visual communication, and encrypted group structures. During a workshop in Bamako in April 2021, a WhatsApp group administrator stated:

> With WhatsApp, anyone can speak, share information, find out what's going on, and join in discussions. All you need is a phone with an internet connection to communicate with the world. That's why we illiterate people say that WhatsApp came to Mali to save non-French speakers. Here, unlike with Facebook, you don't need to be able to read and write French to use it. It's the app that's given us a voice, the voiceless, on the internet. And our voices need to be heard, of course, when it comes to communication and taking part in debates. (Cissé, in press)

People in the conflict areas increasingly sent audio messages about atrocities to relatives in Bamako and elsewhere, who redistributed them through WhatsApp groups. These groups became real-time alert networks reporting violence across the regions while video messages enabled attacks to be followed almost as they unfolded through WhatsApp. These practices began to resemble radio: Audio information is gathered, redistributed to dispersed audiences, and circulated regularly through established networks. Over time, some of these practices became more organised, with scheduled bulletins, identifiable producers, and recurring audiences. It is this organisation, appearance, and circulation that leads us to describe these groups as "WhatsApp radios."

6. The Birth of Fulani WhatsApp Radio in the Context of Violence in Mali

To examine how WhatsApp radio emerged and developed under conditions of conflict, displacement, and media capture, we focus on one example within Fulani WhatsApp communities. This section draws on our long-term engagement with these groups, both as researchers and as community members, which enabled regular contact with the "radio makers," both in person and through WhatsApp calls. Although the radio makers agreed to be interviewed, we anonymised them.

The first forms of WhatsApp radio emerged from the experiences of the Wouwarbé, a Fulani subgroup living along the central Mali–Mauritania border and heavily affected by early intercommunal violence. Between 2016 and 2017, they faced repeated attacks from Bambara militias linked to traditional hunter groups. Following a 2016 meeting with the Fulani organisation Tabital Pulaaku, the association Dental Wouwarbé was established. Its adult and youth branches became active in Bamako, denouncing the violence, supporting displaced families, and creating WhatsApp alert groups restricted to their own community. Others quickly followed, with WhatsApp groups functioning as alert systems tracking militia movements across central Mali and Dogon areas where Fulani communities faced displacement and violence. One Fulani commentator later described this as "a very difficult time for the Pulaaku" when he began posting on WhatsApp. Recalling the May 2016 violence in Malémana, he stated that "dozens of Fulani had been killed…by Bambara militia who were, in fact, their neighbours." He went on to say:

> I'd just sold one of my plots of land and had the money in my pocket. News of the incidents was circulating on WhatsApp. That's how I ended up buying a smartphone and started following the news. Together with friends and acquaintances, we set up a WhatsApp group which we named 0011. And I was appointed as spokesperson. It all started from there.

The atrocities against Fulani communities between 2018 and 2019 pushed many young Fulani in central Mali to use WhatsApp for information sharing and reporting. Early contributors were often former Qur'anic students literate in Arabic. One of the best-known contributors began conducting interviews after violent incidents in the Inner Delta, building a trusted network of informants. These interviews featured eyewitnesses who had fled attacks, returned to destroyed villages, or sustained injuries themselves. WhatsApp group members increasingly demanded such detailed accounts to better understand unfolding events, and after major incidents, users across multiple groups repeatedly requested his broadcasts, even without knowing his name. Individuals who adopted this alert function increasingly acted as local "journalists," presenting themselves as *la voix pour les sans-voix* (a voice for the voiceless). They produced audio messages, sometimes over 20 minutes long, combining eyewitness accounts with commentary and analysis. Often displaced from the conflict regions, they relied on trusted contacts in central Mali for information. Their broadcasts were promoted through branded visuals and logos, which our computational analysis found to be widespread across WhatsApp groups, developing into structured "news bulletins."

A further stage in the development of WhatsApp radio was the emergence of structured "news bulletins" that combined multiple information sources rather than relying solely on eyewitness testimony. These resembled the conventional radio news bulletin, described by Bell (1982) as a scheduled and compiled form in which multiple items are brought together for broadcast. One widely circulated example, the NN bulletin, emerged in August 2020 following the collapse of a ceasefire agreement in the region where the radio maker lived. Its logo appeared frequently across the six WhatsApp groups analysed computationally. Initially focused on local security incidents, the bulletin later attracted regional, national, and international audiences. Its stated aim was to inform populations living with violence and insecurity because, as its creator explained, "an informed person is a person forewarned in times of war." Alerts circulated through the network enabled civilians to flee areas threatened by militias locally known as the *fila fa donso* ("Fulani-killing militia"). Over time, this developed from the circulation of individual eyewitness accounts into a more organised news production practice. The producer gathered information from multiple sources, selected and compiled it into a bulletin, and presented it as a regular broadcast. This resembles what Bell (1982) calls the multiple-sender character of radio news, in which information passes through different actors and stages before reaching the newscaster. Since 2020, the bulletin has evolved from collecting eyewitness testimony after violent incidents into a form of daily citizen journalism. Initially broadcast each evening at 21:00, it later moved to between 22:00 and 23:00 as the volume of information increased, with Sunday subsequently becoming a non-broadcast day. It was first shared with one WhatsApp group and then redistributed by the producer and other users across affiliated and unaffiliated groups. Alongside news, the creator attracts paid advertisements and announcements.

The increasingly restrictive political climate under military rule, combined with threats from Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin against journalists, has encouraged greater caution around politically sensitive reporting. Following major incidents, the creator of the WhatsApp radio systematically monitors radio broadcasts in multiple national languages and seeks translation support where necessary. He also receives

calls and voice messages from contacts reporting from different localities. Before including information, he attempts to verify it through additional local contacts and often highlights contradictions between accounts rather than presenting a single authoritative version. The bulletin's content has increasingly diversified, combining news reporting with paid advertising (travel agencies, traditional therapists, and marabouts), opinions/announcements, notices of lost animals, searches for missing migrants, and greetings exchanged through sponsorship or loyalty schemes. All are broadcast in exchange for payment. Between these advertising segments, usually placed at the beginning and end, the bulletin covers local, regional, national, Economic Community of West African States, and international current affairs.

The bulletin is among the most widely circulated WhatsApp audio programmes, and its creator is widely regarded as one of the most credible journalists within these networks due to his restrained and seemingly authentic style. Other journalists often publish bulletins after his programme has circulated, supplementing or commenting on information first reported by NN. Many Fula-language audio bulletins are therefore perceived as extensions or repetitions of NN's reporting. Based on circulation across groups we know, its audience likely reaches hundreds of thousands. Unlike more openly partisan programmes, which may criticise the government or jihadist groups and risk removal from WhatsApp groups, the NN bulletin is rarely excluded from circulation networks. The growth of this WhatsApp bulletin, together with its cautious handling of sensitive information, has strengthened its reputation as a trusted news source. It attracts large audiences, beyond Fulani communities as well, seeking information about insecurity and violence while also generating income for its creator through advertising and announcements.

Our findings indicate that WhatsApp radio in Mali exhibits organisational characteristics that distinguish it from voice notes and informal messaging. First, communication is structured around regular programming schedules, with NN's nightly 21:00 bulletin establishing predictable listening routines and encouraging audiences to anticipate news at specific times. Second, editorial gatekeeping remains central. Rather than circulating freely through decentralised networks, bulletins are produced and distributed by identifiable administrators who control group membership, moderate discussions, curate content, and determine the timing of publication. Third, these initiatives develop recognisable institutional identities through consistent branding, including distinctive logos, programme titles, and bulletin formats, creating continuity and reinforcing credibility among audiences. Finally, audience engagement extends beyond the passive receipt of individual voice notes, with listeners regularly sharing, discussing, and anticipating subsequent bulletins as part of an ongoing programme of news production. While these characteristics emerge within a different technological infrastructure from broadcast radio, they suggest that organisational practices traditionally associated with broadcasting can be reproduced within a platform-based environment. It is these organisational continuities, rather than technological equivalence between WhatsApp and radio, that form the basis for the discussion that follows.

7. Discussion

7.1. WhatsApp Radio and Post-Spectrum Broadcasting

In conflict-affected Mali, where media capture has constrained independent broadcasting, WhatsApp has emerged as an alternative communication infrastructure through which news can be produced, scheduled, curated, and circulated. This adaptive process is not unprecedented. Throughout the history of broadcasting,

alternative infrastructures have emerged when access to conventional broadcast systems has been restricted. Pirate radio (Beveridge, 2020) provides one historical example using unlicensed transmission to circumvent state monopolies. Stations such as Radio Caroline in the United Kingdom and Radio Alice in Italy challenged state-controlled broadcasting systems by occupying frequencies outside authorised regulatory structures (Coyer, 2007). Their intervention lay in appropriating spectrum and reshaping who could gain access to broadcast space (Vogler, 2020). As Coyer (2007) argues, pirate broadcasting historically emerged through struggles over citizen access to the airwaves and opposition to state- or corporate-controlled communication systems. More recent examples show similar adaptation beyond pirate radio. Following the closure of independent radio stations in Burundi in 2015, exiled journalists from Radio Inzamba and Humura Burundi began producing scheduled radio news bulletins distributed primarily through WhatsApp, enabling audiences inside Burundi, refugee camps, and diaspora communities to access independent news (Esther & Thomas, 2025; Krüger, 2017).

WhatsApp radio represents a further stage in this trajectory. Unlike pirate radio, it does not occupy the spectrum and, unlike diaspora media, is not organised around territorial displacement or exile. Instead, it reproduces key organisational practices of broadcasting—including scheduled news bulletins, editorial gatekeeping, institutional identity, and audience expectation—within encrypted, membership-based messaging networks. The comparison is therefore not based on technological equivalence, but on their shared capacity to sustain broadcasting under conditions of communicative restriction.

The Mali case points to a different form of adaptation. Broadcasting no longer depends primarily on transmission towers, frequencies, or territorial signal coverage. Instead, as demonstrated in Sections 4 and 5, circulation is organised through platform infrastructures structured around group membership, forwarding practices, administrator control, and networked trust. WhatsApp therefore functions as more than a digitised extension of radio. While existing scholarship has largely conceptualised WhatsApp as a space of interpersonal communication, peer-to-peer sharing, or political discussion (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021), the Mali case demonstrates how the platform can support broadcasting.

7.2. Is WhatsApp Radio Actually Radio?

Although WhatsApp radio circulates through a digital messaging platform rather than spectrum-based transmission, it retains key features associated with broadcasting, including editorial organisation, scheduled programming, and orientation towards a collective audience (Hilmes, 2013; Scannell, 1986, 1996). What makes it recognisably radio-like, therefore, is not simply audio but how information is organised, produced, and circulated. WhatsApp radio separates these practices from conventional broadcast infrastructure, demonstrating how radio can be adapted within digital platforms.

As Scannell (1986, 1996) argues, broadcasting is organised not only through technical transmission but through temporal structures that create routine, anticipation, and a shared social experience among dispersed listeners. The scheduled bulletins identified here suggest that these temporal structures can persist even when broadcasting moves beyond spectrum-based transmission. Although programmes can be accessed asynchronously, the bulletins retain a strong sense of immediacy and collective relevance, particularly during insecurity or unfolding violence. WhatsApp radio thus preserves aspects of what Lacey (2013) describes as "listening publics," assembled through platform infrastructures rather than broadcast transmission.

Broadcast radio operates through one-to-many transmission, with its reach determined by spectrum allocation and signal coverage (Peters, 2018; Strużak et al., 2016). WhatsApp communication, by contrast, circulates through interconnected groups, forwarding practices, and mobile networks rather than territorially bounded transmission (Castells, 1996; Plantin et al., 2018). Information therefore moves through socially connected pathways rather than from a single transmitter. Yet this networked distribution is not fully horizontal. A relatively small number of producers and administrators exercise editorial control, membership is selectively managed, and bulletins are distributed in coordinated ways across affiliated groups. Producers cultivate reputations for credibility and authenticity comparable to trusted radio presenters or journalists. WhatsApp radio therefore combines networked distribution with forms of editorial authority organised through trust and selective circulation (Gillespie, 2018). This distinguishes WhatsApp radio from the circulation of individual audio files through digital platforms (Schoon, 2021). Its scheduling, recurring programme structure, editorial curation, and audience expectation constitute an organised broadcasting practice rather than simply audio distribution.

7.3. Fragmented Publics and Trust

While WhatsApp radio expands possibilities for communication under conditions of conflict and media capture, it also reshapes public communication in ways that may intensify fragmentation and polarisation. Unlike conventional broadcast radio, which addressed geographically dispersed but relatively open publics within a shared transmission area (Lacey, 2013; Scannell, 1986, 1996), WhatsApp radio operates through selectively managed communicative networks structured around trust, membership, and controlled circulation. Access depends not on signal reach but on inclusion within community-based groups. These groups are often organised through kinship ties, ethnic affiliation, locality, religious belonging, or political orientation. Communication is therefore reorganised through socially embedded networks rather than territorial broadcast coverage (Castells, 1996; Lefebvre, 1974/1991).

In Mali, Fulani-centred WhatsApp networks emerged amid violence and growing distrust of state institutions and mainstream media. These networks provided alternative spaces through which information about attacks and displacement could circulate when such experiences were perceived to be ignored or misrepresented within dominant public narratives (de Bruijn et al., 2025; Togola & de Bruijn, 2023). Yet, the same organisational characteristics that support trusted communication also contribute to more segmented publics. Many of the WhatsApp groups examined here emerged around Fulani identity and experiences of violence directed toward Fulani populations (Jourde et al., 2019; Sangaré, 2019). These networks enabled the rapid circulation of alerts, testimonies, and alternative accounts of events, often countering official narratives associating Fulani communities with jihadism or insecurity (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; Thiam, 2017). Membership-controlled groups, selective forwarding practices, and trust-based circulation can reinforce ethnically bounded interpretive communities. Under conditions of conflict, repeated exposure to violence-focused narratives, selective testimony, and emotionally charged audiovisual content may reinforce perceptions of collective victimhood, suspicion, and antagonism. WhatsApp radio therefore risks creating a form of communicative tunnel vision in which information increasingly circulates within socially and ethnically segmented publics. Similar concerns have been raised about digital communication in conflicts across the Sahel and other authoritarian or conflict-affected contexts (Yilmaz et al., 2025).

These findings reflect broader tensions identified in scholarship on encrypted messaging platforms which can enable alternative information sharing while also facilitating misinformation, polarisation, and fragmented public debate (Arnaudo, 2017; Resende et al., 2019; Schoon et al., 2020; Trauthig et al., 2024; Wasserman, 2018). The Malian case shows how these tensions extend into an emerging form of radio-like communication. WhatsApp radio therefore illustrates a broader paradox of post-spectrum broadcasting. Moving beyond spectrum-based transmission, broadcasting becomes less dependent on territorial infrastructure and institutional regulation but organised through gated networks shaped by trust, selective membership, and social relationships. Whereas broadcast radio historically assembled territorially shared listening publics, WhatsApp radio assembles geographically dispersed but socially bounded publics. Post-spectrum broadcasting therefore creates both new opportunities for communication under media capture and new forms of communicative enclosure.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that WhatsApp radio represents a reconfiguration of broadcasting under conditions of conflict and media capture in Mali. It demonstrates that the public information functions traditionally associated with broadcasting can be reorganised within a different communicative infrastructure when conventional broadcast systems are constrained. In response to RQ1, WhatsApp reproduces several organisational practices traditionally associated with broadcasting despite operating through a fundamentally different infrastructure. These include scheduled news bulletins, editorial gatekeeping, institutional identity, recurring programming, and audience expectation. Unlike pirate broadcasting, however, WhatsApp radio reorganises broadcasting within platform-based infrastructures organised through mobile connectivity, forwarding practices, and networked trust.

RQ2 asked what WhatsApp radio reveals about the changing organisation of broadcasting beyond the electromagnetic spectrum. The findings suggest that broadcasting can be understood not only through transmission technology and territorial signal coverage, but also through the organisational practices by which public information is produced, curated, and circulated. WhatsApp reproduces these organisational practices while reorganising their circulation through socially bounded and selectively managed networked publics rather than territorial coverage. It is this shift that we describe as post-spectrum broadcasting.

The article therefore contributes to scholarship on broadcasting, platform communication, and media capture by showing that broadcasting may be understood not only as a transmission technology but also as a set of organisational practices that can emerge across different communication infrastructures. The significance of the Mali case lies not simply in demonstrating the adaptability of radio journalism, but in showing how communities respond when conventional broadcasting cannot fulfil its public information function. Under conditions of media capture, WhatsApp provides an alternative infrastructure through which trusted news can be produced, scheduled, and circulated.

While this study focused on Mali, similar developments are increasingly visible across neighbouring Sahelian countries and merit wider comparative research. Despite limitations arising from the semi-closed nature of WhatsApp and the difficulty of mapping broader circulation patterns, the article demonstrates that WhatsApp radio represents an important and underexplored shift for radio studies, conflict studies, African media studies, and scholarship on digital communication more broadly. Crucially, the concept of

post-spectrum broadcasting suggests that broadcasting need not be understood solely through access to the electromagnetic spectrum. As conventional broadcasting faces political, technological, and infrastructural disruption, understanding how its practices migrate across new communication infrastructures is an increasingly important task for media scholarship.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data for the quantitative analysis were collected from WhatsApp and are not publicly accessible.

LLMs Disclosure

No generative AI or large language model was used to generate, modify, or interpret the study data.

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