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Assessing the Effectiveness of Radio in Promoting Information Literacy on Governance: A Case Study of Radio Phoenix

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Abstract

The role of electronic media in promoting information literacy on governance remains underexplored in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Zambia, where radio is one of the most accessible and trusted platforms, its potential to enhance governance literacy and civic participation warrants attention. This study assessed the effectiveness of Radio Phoenix in Lusaka, Zambia This was a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, combining questionnaires with in-depth interviews of CSO experts, Radio Phoenix staff and listeners. Data were analyzed both statistically and thematically, with triangulation offering insights into how the station disseminates governance information, engages audiences, and reflects media practitioners' perspectives. Findings showed that although FM radio was widely accessed (89.6%), engagement with Radio Phoenix was low, with only 19.8% tuning in daily and less than (40.6%) participating in interactive programs. Strengthening participatory mechanisms such as call-ins, SMS, and social media is therefore essential to increase civic engagement. Access to governance content was also low (15.6%), with many listeners finding the topics overly technical. Simplifying content and linking it to trending issues would help make programming more inclusive and appealing. Finally, while trust in the station appeared high, concerns about credibility, language barriers, and age-related differences in content preferences revealed gaps in inclusivity. To address these, Radio Phoenix should adopt transparent editorial policies, collaborate with fact-checking organizations, and expand into digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and podcasts to reach wider and younger audiences. Radio has strong potential to strengthen civic participation. It is important to improve accessibility, simplify content, and increase audience engagement to be effective at promoting governance information literacy.

1. Introduction
1.1 Background

Electronic media have become an essential tool in shaping modern society, transforming sectors such as politics, education, business, and healthcare (Akakandelwa & Walubita, 2017) [3]. Its platforms include traditional radio, television and new media, which include social media, among others (Hanan, 2018) [14]. Its capacity to reach large and diverse audiences in real time has made it a powerful means for communication, education, and civic engagement. Radio is known to be one of the oldest electronic media and has the potential to reach numerous listeners with various messages, such as governance and civic affairs (Johnson and Rajadurai, 2020) [18]. Governments, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and media institutions around the world have increasingly adopted various electronic media platforms to share information, mobilise public participation, and promote literacy on various governance issues (Mukosa *et al*., 2022) [27]. Promotion of information literacy is a critical area for democratic participation and national development (Lee *et al*., 2020) [22].

Information literacy on governance refers to the public's ability to access, interpret, critically evaluate, and apply information related to political systems, civic responsibilities, policies, and rights in a way that enhances their meaningful participation in governance processes (UNESCO, 2022) [39]. Information has become a fundamental component of development planning and governance, as it empowers individuals to participate effectively in decision-making and hold leaders accountable (Matsilele *et al*., 2023). Without relevant and accessible information, national development plans and democratic ideals often remain aspirational (Mukosa *et al*., 2022; Achmad *et al*., 2021) [27, 1].

Globally, electronic media have been successfully utilised to foster civic participation and mobilise political action. In the United States, for example, a report from the Pew Research Centre (2023) on key facts about radio listeners and the radio industry, about one in eight Americans listen to the radio, with nearly half (47%) listening to news and civic affairs. In Asia, radio continues to serve as an important source of information; in Bangladesh alone, there were 6.18 million radio listeners in 2016 (Rasmin, 2022) [34]. Meanwhile, in Europe, 79.8% of adults in Ireland listened to the radio daily in 2024, with weekly listenership reaching 90.2% among those aged 15 and above, according to the Joint National Listenership research (2024) [19]. In Africa, radio remains the most pervasive form of electronic media, reaching at least 75% of households according to UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (2022). South Africa alone had more than 100 radio stations by 2018, with an estimated radio audience of 89%, while Tanzania reported a listenership of 83%, emphasising the influence of radio in promoting civic engagement and raising awareness. In Zambia, the use of electronic media has been on the rise, largely driven by the proliferation of internet access, mobile devices, and media liberalisation (Matsilele *et al.*, 2023). The BBC Media (2024) [6] research findings on the impact of local radio on young Zambians' participation in civic life showed that one-third of young people aged 14–34 was reached by any of the Radio Waves governance programmes.

Despite the evident opportunities of electronic media, several challenges continue to hinder the effectiveness of electronic media in promoting governance-related literacy, especially in developing countries (Lee *et al.*, 2020) [22]. These include unequal access to technology, varying digital literacy levels, language barriers, and infrastructural limitations (Simutanyi, 2020) [37].

Radio Phoenix, in Zambia, stands as one of the country's leading private radio stations, with a broad listener base and a strong presence across electronic platforms, including FM radio, online streaming, and social media (Cunliffe-Jones *et al.*, 2021). However, little is known on how effective these efforts translate into increased information literacy on governance among listeners. It remains unclear whether electronic media such as radio help to raise public awareness, encourage civic participation, or influence attitudes toward governance issues. Moreover, internal institutional challenges and audience-level barriers may limit its potential impact. Therefore, this study seeks to assess the effectiveness of electronic media in promoting information literacy on governance within the Zambian context.

1.2 Statement of the Problem
In Zambia, radio continues to be a dominant medium, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, where stations such as Radio Phoenix are widely listened to and trusted for news and public affairs programming (MISA-Zambia, 2021). Despite its popularity, questions remain regarding how effectively radio promotes information literacy among the public on governance issues (Boshoff, 2024) [7]. While platforms like Radio Phoenix offer talk shows and current affairs programs aimed at civic engagement, it is unclear whether these efforts translate into improved public understanding, critical analysis, and participation in governance processes (Simutanyi, 2020) [37].

The absence of documented literature on the impact of radio programming on governance raises concerns about whether radio is merely used for broadcasting information or is actually contributing to the development of an informed and participatory public (Cunliffe-Jones *et al.*, 2021). Without clarity on how different segments of society experience and engage with governance-related information on radio, efforts to use radio as a tool for civic empowerment risk not being aligned with the needs of the audience (Lee *et al.*, 2020) [22].

This research, therefore, seeks to assess the effectiveness of radio, specifically Radio Phoenix, in promoting information literacy and governance in Zambia. By situating the Zambian case within global and regional contexts, this study aims to contribute to broader discussions on the role of radio in fostering informed and active citizenry in democratic societies.

1.3 Objectives
1.3.1 General Objectives
To assess the effectiveness of radio in promoting information literacy on governance with a focus on Radio Phoenix.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives
1. To investigate the target audience's level of usage of Radio Phoenix as an electronic medium.
2. To examine the governance-related information literacy levels among Radio Phoenix listeners.
3. To explore audience experiences regarding the effectiveness of Radio Phoenix in enhancing their understanding of governance issues.
4. To measure the strategies employed by Radio Phoenix in promoting governance-related information across its platforms.

1.4 Research Questions
1. What is the level of usage of Radio Phoenix as an electronic medium among its target audience?
2. What is the level of information literacy on governance among Radio Phoenix listeners?
3. What are the experiences of Radio Phoenix listeners on the effectiveness of the station in enhancing their understanding of governance issues?
4. What strategies does Radio Phoenix employ across its electronic platforms to promote governance-related information?

1.5 Theoretical Framework
This study is guided by two interrelated media theories: Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Media Dependency Theory (MDT). These frameworks provide a conceptual lens through which to assess the effectiveness of electronic media and enable a holistic understanding of both audience behaviour and radio influence in the governance information system.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), developed in the 1940s and expanded in the 1970s by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, views audiences as active participants who choose media based on specific needs such as information, entertainment, or social connection (Katz *et al.*, 1974). In this study, UGT helps explain why Radio Phoenix listeners engage with its platforms, such as FM radio, online streaming, and social media, for governance-related content, focusing on their motivations, usage patterns, and

expectations. The theory guides the assessment of whether the station effectively meets audience needs and enhances their information literacy on governance issues.

The second theory is the Media Dependency Theory (MDT). It was introduced by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur in 1976 and suggests that the more individuals rely on media to meet their needs, the greater the media's influence on their attitudes and behaviors, especially during times of uncertainty (Ball-Rokeach *et al.*, 1976). In this study, MDT helps assess how Radio Phoenix affects its audience's understanding and use of governance-related information. It emphasizes the role of media credibility, access, and content quality in shaping information literacy and civic engagement, while also highlighting the station's institutional role in promoting governance awareness.

Combining the two theories offers a balanced understanding of how audiences interact with media houses such as Radio Phoenix. UGT explains that listeners actively choose media to satisfy their need for civic information, while MDT shows that the more, they depend on a trusted source, the more influence it has on their knowledge and participation in governance. Together, these theories help this study explore both audience behavior and the radio's role in shaping governance literacy, making the approach well-suited for a mixed-methods design.

2. Literature Review
The This chapter reviews global, regional, and national literature on the effectiveness of radio in promoting governance-related information literacy, aligned with the study's specific objectives.

2.1 Radio Usage Levels
Globally, radio remains widely accessed and trusted for news and civic information (UNESCO, 2020; 2022 [39]). Reports such as the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2025) and the Audience Trends Radio Report (2025) [5] show high weekly and daily listenership. Studies in Africa (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019 [40]; Matsilele *et al.*, 2023; Heywood & Yameogo, 2023 [15]) confirm that radio remains the most accessible governance information source, particularly in rural areas, though young urban audiences increasingly consume digital and social-media-linked radio content. Additional African studies stress the importance of local languages, content relevance, and infrastructure reliability in shaping listenership (Onyenankeya, 2022) [29]. In Zambia, Phiri (2012) [31] found low engagement despite awareness of Parliament Radio. Overall, the literature shows radio remains dominant, but integration with digital platforms is increasingly crucial to reach diverse audiences.

2.2 Governance Information Literacy Levels
Globally, media and information literacy (MIL) is recognized as essential for navigating digital environments, especially due to misinformation risks heightened by crises such as COVID-19 (Boshoff, 2024; Potter, 2021; Hobbs & Mihailidis, 2019) [7, 32, 16]. However, most MIL scholarship and interventions focus on the Global North, with limited emphasis on governance-related literacy and minimal attention to African realities. Although Africa is the fastest-growing mobile market (Boshoff, 2024) [7], MIL remains poorly institutionalized (Cunliffe-Jones *et al.*, 2021). African studies demonstrate creative digital media use but show limited governance-specific content. Evidence from Kenya (Maina *et al.*, 2025) [23] and Malawi indicates that radio improves knowledge when paired with facilitated discussions and local-language storytelling. A 2024 African review (Boshoff *et al.*, 2024) [8] concludes that passive exposure to broadcasts does not develop lasting literacy skills without structured engagement. In Zambia, significant gaps remain in understanding how electronic media contribute to governance literacy, making the present study necessary.

2.3 Audience Experiences on Radio Phoenix's Effectiveness
Globally, citizens rely on electronic media for governance information, but perceptions of credibility vary with literacy, trust, and political context (Aslam *et al.*, 2023; Flanagin *et al.*, 2020) [4, 12]. Structured interactivity—such as moderated discussions and expert follow-ups—improves understanding (Rusmana *et al.*, 2024) [36]. African studies reaffirm radio's accessibility and importance but highlight challenges of bias, misinformation, limited representation, and unequal literacy (Wasserman *et al.*, 2018 [41]; Okocha, 2024). Trust strongly influences whether listeners act on governance information (Bouraima, 2025) [9]. Effectiveness also depends on linking information to actual pathways for civic action (Adegbola, 2019) [2]. Zambian studies (Mambwe *et al.*, 2025; Ndawana *et al.*, 2021) [24, 28] show mixed perceptions of media credibility and differences in understanding linked to varying access and literacy levels. Hence, exploring Radio Phoenix listeners' subjective experiences remains necessary.

2.4 Strategies Used by Radio Phoenix to Promote Governance Information
Global and African evidence emphasizes deliberate social-media integration, cross-platform engagement, and analytics-driven communication strategies as essential for extending radio's reach (Karttunen, 2017; Radelius, 2017) [21, 33]. Capacity-building initiatives for journalists, such as UNESCO's (2017) [38] program in Bangladesh, demonstrate that strengthening MIL among media personnel improves dissemination of governance information. African initiatives from community radio to fact-checking and data journalism highlight the value of local languages, digital tools, and MIL education (Iqani, 2019; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019) [17, 40]. However, persistent constraints such as political interference, lack of coherent strategies, and weak integration between traditional and digital platforms limit impact (Cunliffe-Jones *et al.*, 2021). In Zambia, Radio Phoenix employs interactive programming but faces challenges in fully integrating digital platforms (Gondwe *et al.*, 2020; Kakumbi & Phiri, 2022) [13, 20]. The literature indicates a need for stronger, more systematic platform strategies.

3. Research Methodology
Research Design
This study adopted a **convergent parallel mixed-methods research design,** in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation. This design was appropriate because it enabled the study to combine measurable patterns of media use and governance-related literacy with in-depth insights into audience experiences and institutional practices. The integration of both data strands allowed for

triangulation, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings and providing a comprehensive understanding of how Radio Phoenix promotes governance-related information literacy.

Target Population
The target population consisted of adult Radio Phoenix listeners residing in Lusaka, Radio Phoenix staff involved in content production and dissemination, and Lusaka-based Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) engaged in governance advocacy. Given the absence of a formal listener register, the accessible population of listeners was drawn from four geographical clusters North, South, East, and West Lusaka using public spaces such as markets, shopping centres, and bus stations as contact points. Radio Phoenix staff and CSO representatives were included to provide institutional and stakeholder perspectives on governance communication strategies.

Sample Size
The sample size for the quantitative component of the study was determined using Cochran's formula for an infinite population, which was appropriate due to the absence of a complete sampling frame for Radio Phoenix listeners. Using a 95% confidence level (Z = 1.96), a margin of error of 5% (d = 0.05), and an estimated population proportion of 6.7% (p = 0.067) based on Rware *et al*. (2021), the calculated sample size was approximately 96 listeners.

For the qualitative component, the sample size was determined based on the principle of information richness and data saturation. This included three Radio Phoenix staff members, three representatives from Civil Society Organisations, and between six and ten Radio Phoenix listeners drawn from different geographical clusters within Lusaka.

Sampling Technique
For the quantitative component, a cluster sampling technique followed by simple random sampling was used to select listeners, ensuring geographic representation and maintaining the principles of probability sampling. The sample size of 96 listeners was determined using Cochran's formula for an infinite population. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was employed to select key informants, including three Radio Phoenix staff members, three CSO representatives, and between six and ten listeners drawn from the four clusters to ensure diverse perspectives.

Data Collection
Data were collected using structured questionnaires for the quantitative strand and in-depth semi-structured interviews for the qualitative strand. The questionnaires captured demographic characteristics, patterns of Radio Phoenix usage across FM, online streaming, and social media, as well as perceived knowledge and awareness of governance issues. Qualitative interviews explored participants' experiences, perceptions, institutional strategies, and challenges related to governance information dissemination. All interviews were conducted with consent, recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically.

Data Analysis
Quantitative data were analysed using STATA version 14, employing descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and percentages) and inferential tests, including chi-square tests and correlation analysis, at a 95% confidence level. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, involving transcription, coding, categorisation, and theme development aligned with the study objectives.

Triangulation
Findings from both strands were merged during interpretation to enable triangulation and comparison across data sources.

Limitations
The study acknowledged limitations related to its geographic focus on Lusaka, reliance on self-reported data, and potential sampling constraints. Despite these limitations, the methodology provided robust insights into the role of electronic media in enhancing governance-related information literacy.

Ethical Considerations
Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Permission was obtained from Radio Phoenix, and the study adhered to the Zambian Code of Ethics, upholding principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, confidentiality was maintained, and no harm or coercion occurred.

4. Results/Findings
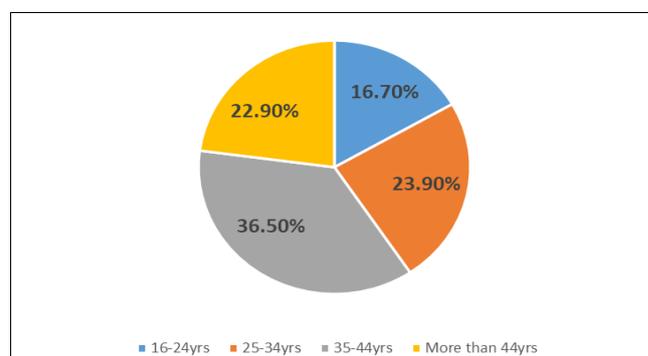## 4.1 Presentation of Research Findings

Table 4.1.1: Respondents' Age

The study had a total of 96 participants, thereby yielding a 100% response rate. The following are the categories of the respondents according to age: 35-44 years scored (36.5%), followed by 25-34years (23.9%), more than 44years (22.9%), and the least being 16-24years (16.7%) as shown in Table 4.1.1.
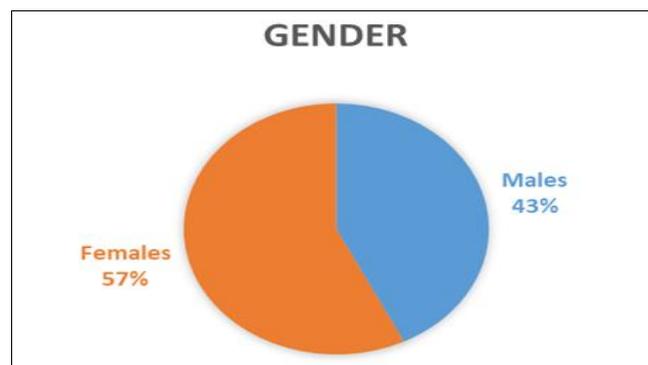
Figure 4.1.1 shows the gender distribution among respondents. Results show that males (57.3%) were slightly more than females (42.7%).

Table 4.2.1 shows the frequency of listening to Radio Phoenix. Results show that (37.5%) of the respondents rarely listen to Radio Phoenix. However, this was followed by 33.3% who listen to Radio Phoenix 2-3 times every week, and 19.8% who listen to Radio Phoenix daily. Only 1% never listened to Radio Phoenix. This shows that primarily, almost all the respondents listen to Radio Phoenix, but at varying times.
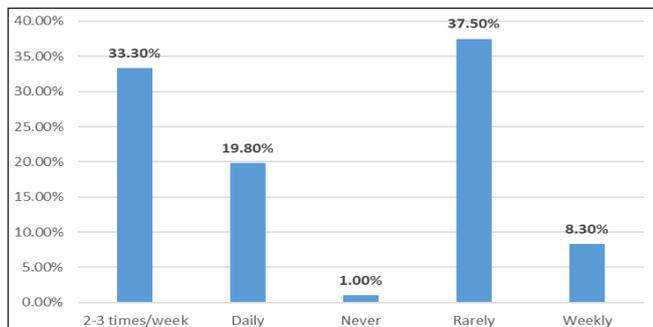
Table 4.2.1: Frequency of listening to Radio Phoenix among respondents

Table 4.4.2 shows platforms used to access Radio Phoenix content among the respondents. It can be seen that the most used platform was the FM radio (89.6%), followed by online application (8.3%), and Facebook (2.1%).
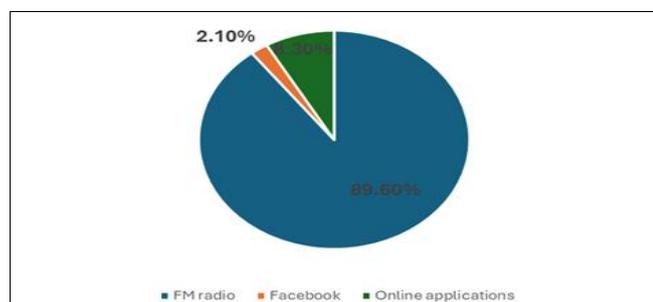
Table 4.2.2: Platforms used to access Radio Phoenix content among respondents

Figure 4.2.1 shows participation in interactive programs via Radio Phoenix. It can be seen from the results that 59% did not participate in the interactive radio Phoenix programs and that only 41% participated. This shows low levels of participation.
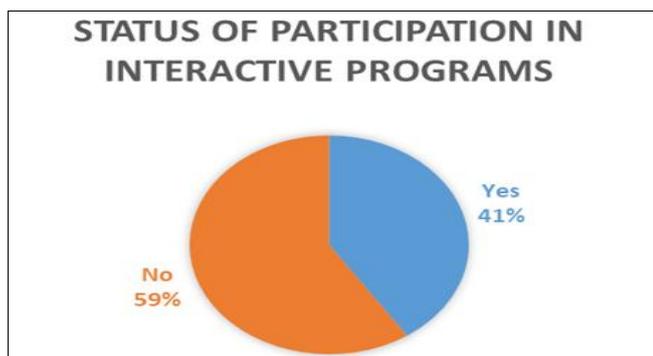

Fig 4.2.1: Status of participation in interactive programs among respondents

Figure 4.2.2 below shows the content mostly accessed through Radio Phoenix by the respondents. The most commonly accessed content was entertainment (53.1%), followed by news (20.8%), governance-related content (15.6%). Other content not frequently accessed included the Let the People Talk program (2.0%), community stories (1.0%), sports (1%), and road traffic content (1%).
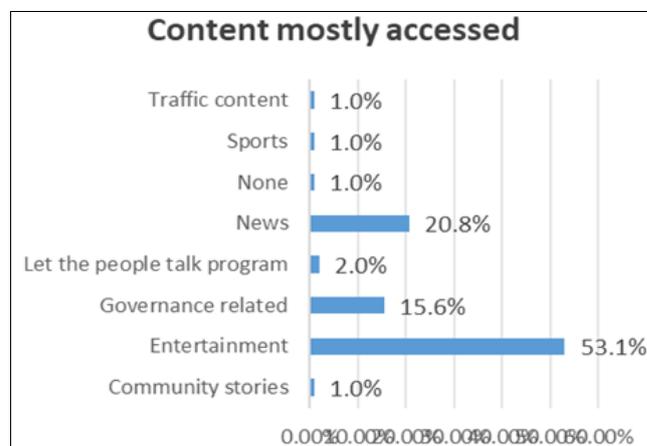

Fig 4.2.2: Content mostly accessed

Figure 4.2.3 shows the type of interactive programs the participants have ever engaged in. It can be seen that among the participants who have ever participated in an interactive program, the majority participated in community stories (55.2%), followed by the Let the people talk program (18.4%), and the local rhythm countdown. A few participated in music requests (5.3%), health matters (2.6%), elections (2.6%), and breakfast show (2.6%).
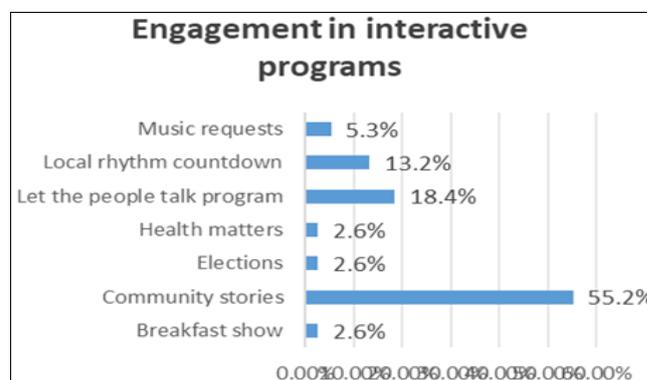

Table 4.2.3 below shows the relationship between demographic characteristics and the level of usage of electronic media. It can be seen that none of the demographic factors, such as age, gender, education, and employment status, were significantly associated with usage level.

Table 4.2.3: Relationship between demographic characteristics and level of usage of electronic media

Demographic characteristic	Level of usage of electronic media		
	Chi square	P-value	Significance
Age	12.84	0.38	*Not Significant*
Gender	1.42	0.84	*Not significance*
Education	10.82	0.54	*Not significant*
Employment status	18.61	0.09	*Not significant*

4.2 Discussion

The study shows that although almost all respondents listen to Radio Phoenix, their frequency varies, with some listening daily and others only occasionally. This pattern aligns with the theoretical framework, which suggests that audiences choose media based on need, convenience, and accessibility. The dominance of FM radio reflects continued reliance on easily accessible platforms, similar to findings in Russia and Finland. However, differences noted in studies such as Phiri (2012) [31] demonstrate that usage levels can vary depending on local contexts. The study also revealed no significant association between demographic characteristics and levels of electronic media usage, except that age influenced the type of content accessed, with governance and news content mostly consumed by adults aged 34–44. This aligns with UGT, which suggests different demographics seek different gratifications, consistent with similar findings in Saudi Arabia and Ghana. Respondents primarily used FM radio, while qualitative findings added the use of Instagram and podcasts, echoing sub-Saharan findings that social media platforms are widely accessed. Despite high access to Radio Phoenix, active participation in interactive programs remained low, supported by qualitative insights indicating that engagement tends to be passive. This is consistent with UGT and MDT, highlighting that not all gratifications require active participation and that audiences may remain dependent on one-way information. Similar patterns were reported in Mandevu and Mazabuka, where community voices were minimally included. CSOs were also found to play a meaningful role in promoting governance through radio and social media, echoing studies from Tanzania and Nigeria.

Findings on information literacy show that respondents best understood topics such as citizens' rights, the electoral process, and the constitution, while more complex areas such as roles of institutions, civic duties, and anti-corruption were less understood. This supports the UGT assumption that audiences select information they find most relevant and the MDT view that comprehension depends on the type of content provided. Although many respondents reported gaining knowledge from Radio Phoenix, a considerable proportion remained neutral, suggesting persistent gaps in understanding. Qualitative findings reveal that comprehension is shaped by daily relevance, while CSOs emphasized the need to simplify technical content. These patterns mirror findings from UNZA Radio and from rural communities in Zambia who often lack civic knowledge due to information barriers. Overall, while electronic media contributes to awareness, gaps remain, reinforcing the need for more participatory and simplified governance communication.

The study also found relatively high levels of trust in Radio Phoenix's governance content, though some respondents expressed doubt toward political content perceived as biased. This demonstrates both the strength and vulnerability of electronic media in governance communication. Consistent with UGT and MDT, trust and perceived credibility influence the audience's willingness to engage with information. Similar patterns appear in China, Egypt, and across Sub-Saharan Africa, where credible media sources enhance political knowledge and civic confidence. However, global research also shows that political polarization and perceived bias can undermine trust even in credible outlets, reducing their ability to improve governance literacy. African studies similarly note that impartiality and transparency are essential for public engagement, and that misinformation and media literacy gaps continue to challenge trust. The study further revealed barriers such as weak radio signal, limited time, language challenges, and high internet costs, which restrict the ability of audiences to fully benefit from electronic media. Such structural constraints reflect UGT's view that unmet needs reduce gratification and MDT's assertion that dependency decreases when access is limited. Similar barriers have been documented regionally, including cost of bundles, signal challenges, and language limitations.

Finally, the study found that Radio Phoenix employs several strategies to strengthen governance communication, including selecting trending topics, simplifying complex issues, and using social media to widen reach. These strategies align with UGT, as they enhance audience satisfaction, and with MDT, as they increase reliance on the station for governance information. CSOs also reported using analytics to monitor engagement and ensure inclusivity, further reinforcing collaborative approaches to promoting governance literacy. These findings are supported by research from Zambia and Uganda, where interactive formats and community engagement improved governance communication, although ethical and political pressures can still influence effectiveness.

Overall, the study demonstrates that electronic media, particularly radio, plays a meaningful role in promoting governance literacy, but challenges related to participation, comprehension, trust, accessibility, and structural barriers must be addressed to maximize impact.

4.3 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that radio stations such as Radio Phoenix play a significant role in promoting governance-related information literacy in Lusaka. They have a wide reach, mainly through FM radio. Listeners gain knowledge on topics such as citizen rights and electoral processes, yet there remains a gap in engagement with interactive programs. Trust in governance content is generally high. However, concerns about bias and challenges such as signal issues, cost of internet bundles, language barriers, and limited time affect effectiveness. Overall, electronic media has strong potential to strengthen civic participation. It is cardinal to improve accessibility, simplify content, and increase audience engagement to be effective at promoting governance information literacy.

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