



ICTs and radio in Africa: How the uptake of ICT has influenced the newsroom culture among community radio journalists

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the influence that new ICTs and Computer Mediated Communication is having on the newsroom cultures among community radio journalists in Africa, especially the use of mobile phones and the internet. The discussion is based on findings from a research study that investigated the impact of ICTs on community radio using regional case studies from three African countries – Mozambique, Uganda, and Mali. We argue that the integration of ICTs impacted journalism practice positively as it improved information gathering, processing, distribution, storage, and engagement with the communities, particularly through the use of mobile phones and the internet. However, the synergy with rural community radios that tend to be located in remote areas is yet to be felt in the three countries. While the community radio stations in semi-urban areas or those situated in areas with fairly good infrastructure have better capacity for integration of ICTs and their sustainability, the rural-based community radio stations are greatly inhibited in their integration of new ICT due to lack of the electricity or regular power supply, the high fees charged by the service providers (internet and telephone), as well as the high cost for the ICT equipment, maintenance expenses and operational costs. The article calls for more support for infrastructural development to rural-based community radio stations to close the rural–urban gap and to enable the journalists working there to benefit from ICT integration like their counterparts in the semi-urban and urban community radios.

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1. Introduction

Community radio initially envisaged a geographical community, where people interacted closely. The community radio is community-based; should not be run for profit but for social gain and community benefit; it should be owned by and accountable to the community that it serves; it should provide for participation by the community in program production and in management (AMARC, 2003; Lewis, 2008; Megwa, 2007). Community members participate as planners, producers and performers and it is the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community (Bonin and Opoku-Mensah, 1998; Carpentier et al., 2003).

With the advent of new ICTs, the concept of “community” has been redefined and is no longer tied to a geographical locality. There are now global networks or virtual communities, where people can talk to each other as if they were in one geographical community. This is often through the new digital media that are used in talk show and discussion programs that have been popularized on many radio stations in Africa, including community radios. Through the use of mobile phones and

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the internet, for example, the locally based community radio parameters have now expanded as they offer services to wider audiences across countries and regions, so the communities have become both local and global or what has been termed as glocal (Hudson, 2006; Lewis, 2008; Megwa, 2007; Nassanga, 2009a). The integration of new ICT into community radio acts as a window for the community to look outward, without losing track of its immediate realities (Pringle and David, 2002).

For many African countries, integration of ICT within community radio stations is transforming journalism practice and the services these stations are offering to their communities (Dralega, 2009; Hughes, 2003; Mabweazara, 2011; Manyozo, 2009; Megwa, 2007; Nassanga, 2009b; Obera, 2007). The assumption here is that there is universal access to new ICTs and that all radio stations and communities are benefiting equally. However, there is a tendency to overlook issues of geographical coverage of the infrastructure and the quality, cost of service provision, operational costs, and other related social cultural and economic factors. There is need to go beyond the assumed universal access and interrogate the assumption that the ICTs have redefined traditional newsroom culture everywhere by examining the technology in relation to people's capacities to receive, process, use and transmit information (APF, 2008; Rice and Webster, 2002; Gumucio-Dagron, 2003).

This article discusses the impact of new ICT integration in journalism practice. It is based on the survey comprising community radio journalists, editors and station management committees of seven community radio stations in Mali, Uganda and Mozambique. The questions of interest that the paper addresses are: which ICTs are accessible and how are they applied by journalists? How is the use of digital media platforms by journalists? How have new ICTs been used for community engagement? What are the challenges to capacity and sustainability of ICTs?

2. Literature review

Key to the discussion on how ICTs have influenced newsroom cultures and practices or program production processes in community radio is the concept of participation that is partially rooted in the participatory development communication studies. With public media and private media largely operating in a uni-directional information flow, community radio has easily found a niche in the creation of multidirectional participatory communication involving the local communities who are treated as citizens, rather than consumers (Dralega, 2009; Downing, 2007; Gumucio-Dagron, 2003; Manyozo, 2007). Traditionally, a community implies the notion of a big family with close ties, bound by a collective identity, with identifying group relations. Community access and community participation are key defining factors that must be considered in assessing the impact of the new digital media on community radio performance (Carpentier et al., 2003).

Although the convergence of digital media with community radio has in principle increased the level of community participation by using mobile phones to create interactive public spheres, new ICTs penetration and connectivity in communities is double-edged. On the one hand, it can dissolve distances and extend social experiences beyond localities thus offering a wider glocal perspective (Tomlinson, 1999:30). On the other hand, ICTs have made it possible for audiences to have multiple platforms through which they can participate. This can potentially fragment local communities as audiences partake in the new convergent and divergent platforms (Waisbord, 2004). For example, Moyo (2012) argues that new ICTs on radio are strategic in the creation of civic agency. Using the case study of Radio Islam, Moyo argues that the internet and mobile phones are democratizing the arena of cultural citizenship because of the extension of the boundaries of the cultural public spheres where geographic and communities of interest are able to participate. He contends that community radio as a cultural space was becoming a cosmopolitan space of cultural netizens, who could appear like they are geographically fragmented, but are in reality symbolically connected in ways that enrich the cultural inflows.

The integration of new ICTs with radio has decreased the significance of time and space in social interaction (Tomlinson, 1999:154) and therefore, participation in community radio has been enhanced by these technologies. Since journalists act as intermediaries between the media and the communities (James, 2004; Mansell, 2009), it is vital to investigate how the ICTs have been applied to enhance participation by communities (Tacchi et al., 2009) and how the possibilities of bridging the digital divide have been applied (Girard, 2003). Given the convergence of traditional radio with ICTs, the very definition of radio is changing, whereby it is no longer just traditional radio producers that create content. In most radio stations across the world, there is now some level of practice of citizen journalism and parajournalism, where the ordinary community members have been empowered to participate by sending in stories, calling in to give their views, and giving comments on policies thus challenging the hegemonic control on content production by journalists (Gordon, 2012).

Institutions like UNESCO and Commonwealth of Learning (COL), have been working jointly on developing mobile-friendly audio visual content generated by community media in developing countries. Theoretically, the changed work environment means that journalists' style of work has also changed from the typical unidirectional information flow to more participatory communication between journalists and their audiences. This is through audience-based program production, participatory talk shows, public debates or through audience phoning to give feedback. Encouraging participation in content creation is beneficial as it ensures that the content is locally meaningful and should lead to positive social change. A useful example is the e-Tuktuk project that was used by the Kothmale Community Radio in Sri Lanka, where a mobile mixed media platform that integrated a laptop, printer, telephone, loudspeakers, and data projector in a three-wheeled auto-rickshaw was used to involve communities in participatory content creation. Among others, this creative engagement included digital story-telling, which enabled communities to share experiences (Tacchi et al., 2009).

From the study of newsroom practices in Zimbabwe, Mabweazara (2011) found that the mobile phone technology had acquired new meanings and appropriation, whereby due to its pervasiveness in everyday life, it had facilitated the blurring

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