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Transforming Communities: Community Journalism in Africa

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Small countries linked together by a rich heritage characterise Sub-Saharan Africa. International media coverage of these countries over the last 20 years highlights the growing pains and struggles these nations have experienced (and continue to experience) as they developed from colonies to become independent self-governing nations in the world order. Within countries like Swaziland, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Lesotho, Malawi, and Zimbabwe citizens are struggling to create connections with one another and to resolve local, national, and international issues. They struggle to create community.

The mass media have indeed made our planet McLuhan's 'global village'. The media have a significant role to play in each of our lives. They are the conduits that improve social interaction, help develop citizens, and promote their engagement in identifying and solving local, national, and international concerns. Yet, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the change is glacial. New efforts in transforming the citizenry are seen in the growth of community-based media. These new mechanisms for change, however, are not enough without a paradigm shift in the process of journalism.

This paper highlights changes in the media landscape of Sub-Saharan Africa and possibilities for increased citizen empowerment and social interaction to help transform lives and communities.

From Developmental Journalism to Civic Engagement

Community journalism encourages journalists to address the basic value and principles of traditional journalism in light of democratisation, social change, and community empowerment initiatives. As such, community journalism is an extension, a maturing, of development communication efforts that began many decades ago to help nations grow and to assist in 'the rapid increase in the productivity of society' (Schramm 21).

In a very simplified sense, early developmental initiatives were an attempt to provide money as an intervention to developing countries so that they could engage in projects to improve societies and economies. It was evident very quickly that money itself was ineffective in bringing about change due to inefficiency, lack of experience, and corruption. The evolution of developmental initiatives led donor countries to operate more projects and provide materials to be used in development rather than cash. But a dependency between developing and donor countries was counter-productive in bringing about permanent improvements. Without the transformation of people into a community, there was no commitment and efforts were neither sustained nor new efforts initiated.

Daniel Lerner (1958) found evidence that societies can change through the apparent influence of mass communication. Schramm (1964) further advocated the use of media because they had the ability to enhance development and social change. Citing three great communication tasks—as

watchmen, as participants in the decision process, and as teachers—he said the media were able to: broaden horizons, focus attention and raise aspirations, create a climate for development, help change attitudes or valued practices, feed interpersonal channels, confer status, enforce social norms, and help form tastes (Schramm 127-144).

The belief that radio, television, and newspapers could be used by the central government of a country to help build a nation was not only very important but also a misunderstood concept. Governments in developing countries interpreted this to mean that they could take control of the media and that they would use their authority to tell the media what was important to tell the people. This top-down approach disenfranchised the people and the media. As a result, growth or change was temporary or non-existent.

Nation building, through development communication, occurs as the result of people, not of government. No matter how much the government tells the media to develop people, if people don't want to develop, they don't—and nations don't develop. This is where the theory and the practice of development communication collided. Media were often used to support a government agenda instead of being used to create cooperative ventures, to support the people's agenda, or to integrate efforts into developing a community identity.

Improvements in literacy, health, poverty, education, and political awareness are all elements of nation building, of people building. While governments of developing countries acknowledge that these issues are important, it was probably the government's heavy-handed control that caused the lack of media support of initiatives in developmental communication.

UNESCO, in their report on the New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO) about democratisation of the media indicate, that it is a matter of human rights, the right to communicate is an extension of the advances toward liberty and democracy. "Extension of these communication freedoms to a broader individual and collective right to communicate is an evolving principle in the democratization process" (UNESCO 215). Democratizing the media cannot be simply additional facilities. It means broader access to the media by the general public, "the free interchange of ideas, information and experience among equals, without dominance or discrimination" (UNESCO 216).

When the media is democratised, it serves the people and people then use the media to obtain the information they are interested in so that they can improve their daily lives and their community. In order for that to happen, the people must participate in determining the focus of the media. There is not necessarily a hierarchy in this process. Journalists are not above the people in this regard. They are servants to, or partners with, the people of the community. All people are considered equal and central to the purpose of the media. In order to do its job properly, the media may have to go far outside of urban centres to reach all of the constituencies that they are to serve. Reporters must cover rural and urban areas, know how the people feel, and share information that is important with the citizens of the community. It is the use of information to achieve greater participation of citizens that is essential to their growth, empowerment, and sustainability. These are laudable goals and are important to both nation and community self-determination and self-improvement. These are the goals that journalists should strive for in their daily work; this is the link between developmental communication and community journalism today. Relationships must be forged between the media and the citizens as equal participants in this entire process. The focus is to be less from the mouthpieces of business, industry, and government and a more citizen-centered approach to developing stories by editors and producers as well as reporters in the field. The print media or broadcast station, regardless of who owns it, will become more integral to people's lives and more integral to the community.

There are three terms that are used, often interchangeably, to represent this journalism concept: public journalism, civic journalism, and community journalism. All three terms have, as a common basis, the idea of the journalist as a member of the community gathering new stories for

the civic good...for the public good...for the community.

Community Journalism and Community Media

Community journalism is a process. It emphasises the important connection between the people of communities and their media—print and broadcast. Community journalism encourages journalists to address the basic value and principles of traditional journalism in light of new democratisation, social change, and community empowerment initiatives.

Community media is not interchangeable with the term community journalism. Community media refers to a media outlet that has its focus—and perhaps its geographic location and distribution—limited to a very defined local group of people or geographic target area. It often refers to a medium that is located in a local community to specifically serve that community's needs.

Community journalism can be described using a simple three-phase process (based on Charity; Gillis and Moore *Swaziland, Ears to the Ground*; Pew). These phases include: consciousness raising, working through the issue with the community, and issue resolution. While the resolution phase may sound like a final stage, it is just the beginning of actually solving problems and getting the community involved in solving their own challenges.

In the consciousness-raising phase, the journalist finds out what issues are of concern in the community. To do that, the journalist must become part of the community. The journalist connects to the citizenry, not just opinion leaders in the community. They need to learn: what the people think is going on in their community; what the people would like to know more about; and, how the citizens think they can make a difference and improve their lives.

In the second phase of working through issues, people have now identified—for the journalist—the issues. This can be thought of as a 'community agenda'. The citizens have given their input to the media and enlightened them on what is important in their community. From these issues, the journalist can begin to construct news stories that highlight the peoples' point of view of what is happening, or perhaps hold meetings to find out what the community would like to know more about, how they would like to see issues addressed, collect ideas, discuss ideas, bring government into the discussions, and see how they fit into the picture. This activity leads to the third phase of civic / community journalism: resolution.

Because community journalism is a process, the resolution phase leads back to the beginning of the process. In the resolution phase, news stories and projects may be completed. This may result in a resolution to the issue originally identified by the community. But other issues may have come to the surface during the reporter's work with the community. It is at this time that these new issues are taken back to the first phase and again worked through the process. The media provide a forum—where the public knows they are the centre—for the citizens to solve their community's challenges.

The Pew Foundation (1996) model for civic engagement segments the community into five groups based on their position in the community and physically where citizens communicate with one another. Journalists engage in public listening activities that include different locations and thus different groups of citizens to get a spectrum of opinions about the community's agenda. These segmentations include:

1. local officials and recognised leaders of society;
2. recognised opinion leaders in the community, not political figures, who represent constituent groups in the community;
3. people who congregate regularly in public places such as churches, community events, schools;
4. people in incidental places, on the street or at the market; and

5. conversations with people in their homes and about their private concerns.

When journalists consider public listening as an ongoing activity, the relationship between the media and their audience, the citizens, improves and has a positive influence on other community empowered projects. Simply beginning the process of community journalism and engaging in public listening events begins to change the traditional relationship between the media and the people. The community begins to influence the issues on which the media will report. The citizens begin to appreciate their ability to affect change in their communities. This impact is the root of citizen empowerment and improves social interaction within the community—the relationship of community members with one another as well as with the media.

A second impact of community journalism and public listening activities is on the journalists. By developing relationships with citizens, journalists begin to develop a community-centred approach to the way they write news stories. This paradigm change in the journalist will also lead to further public listening activities. This creates a challenge for the journalist. It also creates an engaged and empowered citizenry in the community who are interested and active in improving their communities.

Community Journalism Needs a New Ally

There is a general awareness that progress—development—comes with initiative and empowerment. However, a sense of community creates a force that neither individuals nor media can muster alone. Community journalism is that force. It gives a ‘voice to the voiceless’ (Communication Initiative *Idmatewa* 2). Scholars and journalists for years have espoused the overwhelming benefits of this new journalism. The Kettering Foundation, UNESCO, and others have repeatedly reported on the transformation of people and communities as a result of civic engagement. The Pew Center touts a basis for this engagement is civic or public journalism. Gillis and Moore (*Swaziland*) have reported successes in pilot projects in Southern Africa. Yet, all too often those successes are short-lived.

A review of initiatives in community journalism (the term used for the exportation of civic or public journalism) in the region finds little permanent change in media efforts to change the status quo of the profession. The media, largely national in scope and government controlled or influenced in operation, still do business as usual. The issues are simple: monolithic structures do not easily change; government imposed initiatives do not integrate well with grassroots activism; and managers do not share the fields of experience that would enable journalists to re-engineer themselves as change agents for the people. Yet, repeatedly, it is found that a major shift in emphasis to smaller, geographically located, or community specific interest based media are being established.

Community media is the future of community journalism. ‘It is the basis for popular participation by the majority of people...[they] are able to articulate their development, cultural and socio-economic needs...’ (Appolus 12). When the delivery mechanism is integrated into the community and the business of journalism adopts the grassroots approach (Gillis and Moore *Swaziland*), the result is an empowerment that ‘provide[s] a service to the society [that]...attempts to influence public opinion, create consensus, strengthen democracy, and, above all, create community...’ (Appolus 14).

Community media and the process of community journalism share most of the same aims or goals: improve the community; provide for the participation of the disadvantaged; respond to the needs of the people; and provide information to assist the community in making their daily lives better. The problem with community media in meeting this agenda is that seldom does country legislation licensing such media, particularly the broadcast media, define the mission of this type of operation. Further, the media themselves take on traditional operations and programming designs that mimic the larger national or governmental media. Often, staffers at ‘...community

[media] rewrite stories from the newspaper' (FitzPatrick 9).

Community media is not business as usual. Just as a new design was needed to change the process involved in community journalism, the media themselves require reinvention or risk failure. Some problems the media are experiencing include: the lack of operating capital; little trained staff; scarcity of equipment; and especially the lack of ability to generate content and the reliance on outside productions. Few criteria are in place to define the public service mission connecting the media to the community.

A Design for Success

A workshop sponsored by the Namibia Non-Governmental Organization Forum (NANGOF) was convened to formulate a plan to reinvent Katatura Community Radio, which ceased to exist for many of the previously mentioned reasons. It was not integral to the community and so lacked support. A plan was formulated as a result of the group's deliberations and their review of the principles of community media and community journalism. It was designed as an outline for their initiative to move forward (Moore).

That plan is based on the following concepts:

- Community media is a business. It requires income, market share, identity, and a programming niche.
- Local citizen involvement in the media requires both paid and volunteer staff. Failures often result from relying completely on volunteer staffing (on-air personalities and reporters). Employees (station manager, news director, and programming director) carry the burden for planning, organisation, management, and training.
- The media is accountable to its community and should be owned and operated by a civic or special interest group within it. The South Africa Independent Broadcasting Authority issues community radio licenses only to geographic stations owned by the community or to special interest groups within a particular community (Wanyeki). A similar mission and licensing requirement is important to guide the operation of community-based media in other countries.
- Community oversight must be provided for two distinct aspects of the media: operations and content. In Mozambique, Xai-Xai Community Radio attempts to guarantee its accountability with two advisory management committees drawn from the people served: one for administration and a separate one for programming (Opubor).
- The media facilities, as well as the personnel, must be visible and accessible by the members of the community. If the media is out of sight, then it is not part of the community consciousness.
- Programming must serve a niche. While non-governmental organisations (NGO) and network partnerships can provide alternatives, the strength and sustainability of local media comes from citizen determination as a result of participation. The media is not to be a programming competitor with the larger, national media. Nor can the media rebroadcast or reprint stories for other media sources in the country.
- Planned interaction between the media and the community must guide all of its decisions for operations, development, expansion, change, content, and so on.

According to the Media Development and Diversity Agency of South Africa, community media associations in Southern Africa see the future brightly if issues of access, ownership, and control are addressed. The National Community Radio Forum wants these operations to be independent, non-profit, and diverse mobilisers of the community.

Significant community media initiatives are emerging throughout the regions. In Southern Africa independent newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and media production/syndication houses are tending toward local needs for growth and change in society. Yet, of all of the

initiatives, community radio seems to be the most widely developed in Southern Africa. 'Radio remains the most powerful mass media in the region, reaching hills and rural areas away from cities that television cannot' (Martin 12). Radio is cost efficient, has no language or literacy barriers, can be a direct expression of local oral culture and traditions, can be sustainable if managed properly, and its outreach can influence thousands of people (Dagron). Most importantly, the technology is relatively inexpensive, compact, portable, and easily located in communities throughout the country.

Bush Radio gave a voice to the voiceless as a clandestine anti-apartheid media. Today, as a leader in community radio, it holds town meetings for teens, there is HIV / AIDS programming, and productions on literacy, hygiene, health, and political issues.

A neighborhood health clinic established Radio Zibonele to focus on health education including nutrition, gender issues, human rights, women's and youth issues, family planning and HIV / AIDS. Local culture is promoted 'through relevant programs in tradition, local talent in music, praise and education' on Qwa-Qwa Community Radio (Communication Initiative *Qwa-Qwa* 1).

In Mpumalanga Province of South Africa, at Moutse Community Radio, the Rural Women's Movement, in spite of rejection of support by village chiefs, succeeded in establishing media for local community development. A similar success story is told in the Mangochi District of Malawi where the Malawi Media Women's Association operates Dzimwe Community Radio. The Namibia Media Women's Association actively works to establish the Namibia Community Radio Network and recently won a major concession for its effort when it was awarded space and facilities in the Parliament. The result will be the establishment of Constituency Channel, which is primarily television but will provide content for the radio members of the network (USAID). The group continues its efforts to establish new community radio stations in all six regions of Namibia.

With less than a year of experience in operation, Breeze FM in Chipata, Zambia (on the Malawi border) has scored major gains. Its private ownership but public service mission has made it a station of choice for listeners. In a survey conducted in July 2003, it was reported that the audience of the Eastern Province reached by Breeze FM is significantly larger than that of the channels of the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation, larger than channels of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, and larger than any other radio source received.

Although technology remains a problem (lack of telephone, electricity, Internet all plague many operations), access to these critical utilities is improving with the help of many donor agencies. Yet there are significant areas without them. Delivery and reception with constituents is compromised. Despite these problems, community media and community journalism are alive and well in Malawi. The Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) works to overcome such detriments with listening clubs.

MBC's Developmental Broadcasting Unit attempts to promote development by working with village volunteers to organise both radio listening events and recorded community feedback discussion forums called the 'Village Voice'. With support from the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, a project funded by George Soros, programs like 'Kanthu Nkhama' air both on national radio and on tape delivered to these clubs. Promoting freedom of expression, civic issues, hygiene and others, village discussion of the programs, along with recommendations for future topics is recorded and returned to the MBC development producers. Relevant information is often channeled to government agencies and NGOs for information and action; they also work to incorporate important topics into future programs to meet the villagers' needs.

On the surface, it would seem that if so many citizens are jobless, massive numbers do not have enough to eat, and incomes are but the equivalent of only several hundred U.S. dollars a year,

community media cannot be sustainable. Yet, in example after example, media that address and involve the grassroots, which integrate with the community, are successful. The Rockefeller Foundation Report 'Voice of the People' (Dagron) says that when people are dynamic actors in change that the process of development is assumed and appropriated by the people.

The dynamic involvement of the community in the operation of the media is the same paradigm for their involvement in community journalism. That is, community media is the vehicle, the operation, and the mechanism. Community journalism is the content, the programming, and the process. Together, integrated, they are linked to social interaction and empowerment. Wanyeki said, 'Community [media] is a two-way process...in which the communities participate as planners, producers and performers and it is the means of expression of the community rather than for the community' (2000: 30).

Here then is the convergence of mechanism and process. It is the answer to Opubor's question—what is community media?

Many Africans do not feel they live in their nation, [but] they know they live in their communities. It is there, in their communities, that they seek to find work, to raise their families, to cure their sick, to grow old and die and be buried. Many of them from rural areas have been forced to migrate from their original communities, to seek jobs, education and fortune elsewhere, to try to become part of new urban communities. And even then, they often migrate from neighborhood to neighborhood in the cities where they find themselves. Thus, in linking community and media to discuss community media, it is important that we do not marginalize the 'community' in favor of the 'media' (Opubor 12).

Conclusion

Community journalism and community media together are the recipe for transforming communities addressing the need for social interaction and civic engagement. This partnership of community journalism and community media provides necessary integration to promote community identity and development, and increase human potential. From social interaction and citizen empowerment, people find the necessary resources to take control of their daily lives, give shape to their future, and transform their communities.

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