Community Audio Towers in Uganda

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Abstract

While community broadcasting has been documented for aiding development in the Global South, communities in Uganda engage in narrowcasting and share information using Community Audio Towers (CATs). This challenges our understanding of communication for development media since CATs employ both the one-way and the two-way approaches to ensure survival. Among the crucial areas of CATs that have not been attended to by academic scrutiny is the issue of how CATs sustain themselves financially. To cover that gap, the CAT processes of information gathering, processing and dissemination, are discussed below. The discussion comes from data collected using 10 key informant interviews to show how CATs, platforms that are economically non-viable, are able to survive in myriad economically-oriented media systems in Uganda. Implications of CATs for local community development are herein highlighted.

Introduction

This paper considers a platform called Community Audio Towers (CATs) that is used in Uganda by rural and semi-urban communities to share local information. CATs are non-commercial, non-governmental horn speakers run by community members to share local information, factors that classify the towers as community media (Tabing 2000; Dagron 2001). Their ability to provide access, participation and self-management (Mtimde 1998) helps the communities that use them to access information that economically and politically influenced state and commercial media neglect, like information about a community member's lost child/cow, a local sports competition, etc. The main interest of this paper stems from the fact that CATs are sustained by communities of poor people. How such poor communities manage to fund CATs, this paper argues, is a viable funding model that can be adopted by small community media. Before the paper discusses funding of CATs, however, the location of the study is described to help the reader understand the economic status and other socio-cultural attributes of communities in which CATs operate. After the description of the country where data were collected, the paper discusses the idea of narrowcasting done by CATs (Dagron 2001), as opposed to commercial broadcasting, which is extensive (Chae and Flores 1998) and aims at maximising profits. This prepares ground for a description of CATs before the findings are presented.

Location of the Study

The research for this paper was carried out in Uganda, a country in East Africa. The research setting here helps the reader to understand why Uganda is moving towards CATs while the rest of the world is embracing digital media. Uganda is the twenty-first poorest country globally (Global Finance 2013) and it struggled to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), specifically in the area of eradication of poverty. When radio was introduced in Uganda in 1953 (Lugalambi 2010), it was seen as a way of carrying information that could facilitate people out of poverty (Semujju 2013a). The state solely took this responsibility of providing information until the 1990s. In 1993, liberalisation in Uganda created a gap for private ownership of information distribution centres (Chibita 2010). As competition set in, political programming increased, and, in 2000, there was an explosion of hybrid broadcasting carrying participatory programming through live radio public debates, locally known as "*Ekimeeza*", which means a round table (Nassanga 2008). The debates were a platform for social, economic and political opinions.

In 2009, the government moved to ban the above debates through the Broadcasting Council, citing ethical misconduct (Lumu 2010). The following year, in 2010, Central Broadcasting Service FM, Radio Two, Radio Sapientia and Ssuubi FM were switched off-air. Once those four stations were switched off, other stations, to avoid being switched off too, stopped criticising government on policy or any other matters. This political influence and several other problems, like illiteracy, poverty and poor infrastructure, reduced access and participation in broadcasting (Nassanga 2009). As a result, people resorted to CATs to share local information, which also redefined "local" to only what is happening in one village.

CATs have been given very little attention academically. Most importantly, in Africa, there are other smaller community media in other countries that have received more attention than CATs. For example, in Kenya, puppetry, community theatre, audio listening groups and participatory videos are used as community media (Wanyeki 2000). CATs are used by agricultural communities in rural Ghana (Chapman et al. 2003). In Asia, although CATs serve poor communities, they are established by NGOs, after which government takes over funding of activities (Tabing 2000). Theoretically, the Asian CATs are media that serve a specified community (Howley 2010), but they lack the unique community media characteristic of being non-governmental (Carpentier, et al. 2001; Bailey et al. 2008), something that takes power away from the community. Addressing CATs in Uganda therefore helps to create an understanding of how poor communities negotiate meaning using the means at their disposal. Additionally, this assessment also helps to contribute to the scholarship of CATs as a form of community media. The Ugandan case could also help to show the nature of news in marginalised communities.

Before explaining what CATs are, the idea of narrowcasting is discussed below in order to help the reader to understand the kind of service that CATs give. Since narrowcasting has not been defined much in communication for development literature, the historical review below uses studies from different disciplines to create a working definition of narrowcasting for community media (CATs).

The term narrowcasting was 'coined in 1929 by Jack L. Cooper, with the intention of producing African-American radio content grounded in respect and balance that would instill racial pride within the local African-American audience' (Isaksen 2011, 760). Narrowcasting later took on different roles in radio, TV, business and, recently, in the internet and wireless world. Narrowcasting is the targeting of specific niche audiences (Smith-Shomade 2004). Citing Eastman, Head and Klein (1985), Smith-Shomade (2004, 73) notes that narrowcasting is done 'by attempting to reach a demographically or psychologically defined group that the established services do not serve or by challenging the existing services for their audiences.' The basis of established services, compared to the corporate idea of maximising profit through narrowcasting, resonates with this paper and, just like Smith-Shomade (2004), this paper argues that narrowcasting in development communication can reach out to communities that are not a target of big commercial media because they do not have buying potential. As broadcasting sends information to wider heterogeneous audiences, narrowcasting does the opposite. Information is disseminated on an even smaller scale than that of community radio, to one village which might be economically and socially homogeneous.

Chae and Flores (1998) introduced what they called market breadth, which is a general approach where television channels send out information to as large an audience as possible, and market depth, which they explained as a situation where television tries to appeal to certain specified audiences. Market depth is a form of narrowcasting. Normal broadcasting is extensive, while narrowcasting is intensive, and it (narrowcasting) makes TV more attractive (Chae and Flores 1998).

Priestman (2004), along the same lines, studied narrowcasting in radio and internet, concluding that the act of segregating audiences warranted a question that needed an immediate answer of what radio was, because the changes brought by the internet had not been accounted for in the original idea of radio. Priestman noted further that the internet is changing the way we look at audiences by being an avenue for narrowcasting and by creating content that can only be consumed on demand, as opposed to audiences consuming everything. Priestman and Chae and Flores' studies help this paper to relate issues of breadth/depth of the communities served by CATs (Chae and Flores' study) and content demand or relevance to the receiving community (Priestman's).

And yet other studies conclude that we have now moved a step from narrowcasting to "My-casting" (Young 2004). If radio and TV gave us broadcasting and cable TV gave us narrowcasting, the internet gives us my-casting due to the fact that individuals make their own information and publish it without having to worry about the rules and regulations that govern media conglomerates today (Young 2004). The current paper does not refute Young's (2004) claim, except that it (this paper) argues that while Young notes that narrowcasting might be outdated in broadcasting due to developments in technology, in community media there is a need to consider narrowcasting as a concept that describes CATs.

Narrowcasting has also been discussed in wireless communication, where whoever is connected to the wireless network gets an advert on his/her mobile device (Bellas 2005). What matters to the advertiser is that wireless is free in public places like airports, big supermarkets, bus parks and recreational centres. Anyone who has a smartphone or computer becomes a target of such unsolicited advertising. While this type of narrowcasting uses the same principle discussed in this paper, what attracts this paper to Bellas' (2005) work is that his study reveals that some people have rendered such narrowcast adverts useless because the adverts have nothing to do with them. This is one of the issues that CATs must resolve. Apart from Bellas (2005), Albanese (2005) studies internet narrowcasting as an alternative to TV advertising. 'Unlike "broadcasting", which transmits the same message to all locales, "narrowcasting" targets the distribution of multimedia content to specific venues and permits a network operator to change the content at one locale or the entire network' (Albanese 2005, 41). This paper uses Albanese's (2005) work to state that narrowcasting n is most dominant in internet technology on the one hand and in TV on the other.

'With radio, individuals from groups not communicated with directly on mainstream media outlets may gain gratification from a radio format narrowcast to their group'(Overby and Barth 2006, 458). However, broadcasting's commercial interests always interfere with the common journalistic good of voice and representation. Narrowcasting then becomes necessary if the area within which it is done is considered by broadcasting as commercially non-viable (Tabing 2000). Although radio has been identified before as an instrument for political narrowcasting because it allows for 'a more nuanced targeting of audience' (Overby and Barth 2006, 456), in Uganda, radio, including community radio, fails to fulfill this purpose. CATs get their relevance by narrowcasting to a single village, creating information access for whoever lives in the village.

Community Audio Towers (CATs)

Gaviria (1996) records CATs as being introduced in the Philippines as a multi-channel approach to development communication by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and that this was so because the CATs had been successful in Thailand. In 2000, Tabing identified other small community-based media, like blackboard newspapers (*Moalboal Times*), notice board newspapers, before adding that CATs

were also used in the Philippines. In Thailand, the use of CATs by the farming communities, receiving farming information and information from the health department, has long been noted (Tabing 2000). CATs are 'made up of powerful speakers hoisted on top of 10 to 20 metre bamboo or steel poles, with regular programmes broadcast at specific times of the day over the loudspeakers' (Tabing 2000, 84).

One year after Tabing's community media account, in which he gave the above details of CATs, Dagron (2001) wrote a report for the Rockefeller Foundation and identified the use of CATs. 'Very early in the morning, just as the sun rises, the music from *Tacunan Audio Tower* filtrates with an echo through trees and plantations, providing company to peasants as they work over their crops' (Dagron 2001, 84). Started by FAO towards the end of the 1980s, CATs would use 'two microphones jacked into a karaoke playback system connected to 20-watt' and 'four or six cone speakers mounted on small towers' to narrowcast social development programmes to the community (Dagron 2001, 85). Tabing (2002) later revisited the idea of CATs while talking about community radio and noted that communities either used radio or the towers and that although CATs were technically not radios, communities treated them like radio and that some communities actually created real programming on CATs. In Africa, Chapman et al. (2003) examined the rural agriculture extension programmes in Northern Ghana and noted that CATs are used in rural areas to send information to a radius of over three miles.

Theorising CATs

Using the community media theories advanced by Carpentier et al. (2001) and Bailey et al. (2008), CATs can be understood as small-scale media that serve a particular community. They do this by promoting self-management (they are started and run by community members), access (whoever is within the community gets the message without any commercial expectation or buying batteries) and participation (news or information is collected by the community members themselves). The size of CATs is small and aims at one village while the mainstream media (and indeed some community radios in Uganda) aim at a larger audience. In terms of structure, while mainstream media run a vertical structure with titles from chief editor down to the reporter, community radio adopt a horizontal structure. What separates CATs from community radio is the fact that even the horizontal structure does not appear. CATs are just simple platforms with one person managing information. Therefore, there are no structures to speak of. In terms of discourse, while mainstream media carry the dominant ideology, CATs, just like the rest of the community media family, carry counter-hegemonic ideas, to an extent that what makes news or what the community members forward as news may not make sense for a bigger media house. While theories of community media can help to explain CATs in part, there is need for new studies to identify specific theories that are unique to the operations of CATs.

Methodology

Sample size

The data reported in this paper were collected from two locations in two districts of Masaka (rural) and Mukono (semi-urban) in Uganda. The selected areas were: Nyendo (Masaka) and Nassuuti (Mukono). The rural location is found 120 kilometres from the capital while the semi-urban is located within 20 kilometres. The choices of location and of which CAT to use were made purposively, because purposive sampling 'allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested' (Silverman 2005). Some of the features that the researcher based the study on to choose the locations were that the two CATs were distinct from each other, meaning that they served communities that are different economically. The economic factor influenced purposive sampling as some of the arguments made in this paper are that the use of CATs saves communities from incurring expenses in buying radio batteries.

Purposive Sampling
The interviewees for the study were selected using purposive sampling. Key informant interviews were conducted. Sherry and Marlow (1999) note that there is no specific number of people required to be included in key informant interviews, as long as whatever number you have inspires you to get the intended information. Kumar (1989), more specifically, notes that the number usually ranges from 15 to 35 interviews. But Mossman and Mayhew (2007) used 73 qualitative interviews, while Kim et al. (2004) used only nine interviews. The key informants for this study were ten, selected based on responsibility and knowledge of CATs. These were selected among: the presenters at the CATs, district information officers (one for each district in which the research area is found), information and communication officers from both the Ministry of ICT (Minister of State for ICT) and the Uganda Communications Commission (the government body that manages media and communication infrastructures).

Presentation of Findings: The three processes of gathering, processing, and dissemination

CATs Information Gathering
The fact that CATs' "newsroom" structure deviates from the community radio/TV norm of having volunteers as editors and reporters with divided responsibility changes the way information gathering is done in CATs. These changes also influence how much resources CATs need to survive. Instead of walking to where the events are, as it is in community radio, information finds the announcers at the CATs. This is made possible by the fact that coverage of issues is normally restricted to events happening only within one village. Events that come from one village require fewer resources to collect. 'A community member who has a village concern knows well where the CAT is located' (Thembo, interview, 24 August 2014) 'There is no transport needed. The person just walks over to the tower. Other times, the community member may use a mobile phone to send information to the announcer' (Nakanwagi, interview, 19 July 2014; Naluwooza, interview, 12 August 2014). The announcers additionally noted that mostly when community members use mobile phones, they are reporting an emergency, like a fatal accident, a lost person or thieves.

Besides personal delivery and mobile phone calls, the information that goes through CATs is also obtained through direct contact with the announcers whenever they walk through the community on their personal business. The semi-urban announcer, for example, said that since he has no accommodation near the tower, whenever he is coming from home to the CAT, people stop him and tell him what he should put on air. 'Sometimes it might be a suggestion from a concerned citizen that burglary is rampant and that the community should be warned' (Lwanga, interview, 21 July 2014). This information is normally accompanied by examples of whose home was invaded by thieves and the impact of their actions. The information officers at district level said that they go through the same process when they want to communicate government programmes. 'We use the towers to inform or educate people in the community' (Nakanwagi, interview, 19 July 2014).

CAT Information Processing
After receiving information, the announcer writes down the details in readable handwriting so that information can be visible when he is reading on air. When all the information that would be narrowcast for the morning or the evening is collected, the announcer then decides what should come first and which one deserves more emphasis. When asked what determines what story should come first, the Nassuuti (semi-urban) presenter said that 'stories that relate to suffering, for example someone losing a child or a loved one, would come first. Some of these stories are emergencies' (Lwanga, interview, 21 July 2014). In the event that there is no direct human

suffering that day, lost property would take precedence. As for what stories are emphasised, the announcement of someone thanking the village for attending the burial of a loved one would not be as detailed as one about a child who is lost in the community, or a lost cow.

The other observation is that during information processing, some community members pay for the information they want passed on over the air. This rule applies to all situations, apart from emergencies, which include thefts, a fatal accident that claimed a village member, police information about the current status of security in the community (or any other police announcement) and local council announcements. The price charged for communicating paid information ranges from tower to tower. 'Community members pay an equivalent of half a dollar to one dollar maximum. Sometimes the situation calls for one to understand the economic status of someone who is in trouble (Lwanga, interview, 21 July 2014). 'Some people come with no money but the look on their faces can tell you that they are in danger, like someone whose child is lost. In that case, I do it without any exchange of money. There have been cases when these individuals found their children and came back after days and gave me money to show their appreciation' (Mugerwa, interview, 9 July 2014). The prices at the semi-urban CAT are not very different from the rural charges although the semi-urban presenter said that it is common for some people to come in and give him more than three dollars for a job well done.

CAT Information Dissemination

Every day, there are, mainly, two narrowcasts. These are between 6:30am to 7am and from 9:30 pm to 10pm. This routine is broken when there is an emergency. The rule applies also if police have something to say, or if thieves break into someone's house or place of work, and other emergencies. As in radio broadcasts, CAT presenters begin by greeting listeners, identifying the name of the CAT that has started to narrowcast and telling the community from which location the tower is narrowcasting.

Most notably, both CAT presenters said that community members had started complaining about the noise during radio news broadcast. 'Since then, we try to follow radio news schedules. We try not to interrupt the 9pm or 7 o'clock news' (Mugerwa, interview, 9 July 2014; Lwanga, interview, 21 July 2014). On the issue of noise in areas like Nyendo, where there are two CATs located in one village, the presenter said 'we narrowcast in turns between me and the other CAT announcer so that we don't confuse the community with noise' (Mugerwa, interview, 9 July 2014). He said that a meeting had been held and both presenters allocated each other time to start. If one CAT's time elapses when there has not been any narrowcasts, then the other tower automatically starts.

Analysis

CATs' frugal processes of information gathering, processing and dissemination can help to understand why they are able to survive financially. The information gathering behaviour is unlike that of commercial or community radio. For example, studies in Uganda have indicated that community radio does not have volunteers (Semujju 2013), as the case is in the Western community media set-up (Cammaerts 2009). Instead, Uganda's community radio uses journalists and non-journalists, who get paid very low salaries. Being a community radio means that it does not aim to make profits, but, since it has no volunteers, the radio must compromise its philosophy and look for money in order to maintain its workers. In comparison, CATs are fed with information by any member of the community who wishes to say something. When there is no community member with such a need, the towers stick to their normal routine of narrowcasting very early in the morning and late in the evening. Sometimes when the community members don't bring "news" for the towers, the CATs will not be switched on.

The need to communicate, therefore, comes from the community not the towers. This means that CATs do not have to pay for information. This takes away the economic pressure that currently stretches mainstream media and some community media (Nassanga 2009). However, there is another side to the idea of CATs receiving free information from the community. Sometimes the information brought may be anti-community/individual, since there are no guidelines on what information should be brought to the CATs. However, by running away from Western journalism models that demand objectivity and balance (Merrill 1997; Hills 2010), CATs are able to give a voice to the true voiceless, something that no other communication platform in the area could do.

The way that information is processed emphasises the fact that there is less money incurred to process content. In regular newsrooms, including community radio newsrooms, journalists use various software, computers and recorders, alongside several other gadgets, and efficiency, in this case on the job, depends on a level of understanding of these gadgets (Manyozo et al. 2012). The information processing for CATs only requires a book and a pen. By comparison, pen and paper are cheaper than computers, recorders, internet and similar other tools that community radio in Uganda uses. Establishing a single CAT unit, , which includes buying wooden poles, horn speakers, an amplifier, a microphone and a CD player, costs about $US 300. In comparison, acquiring a transmitter in Uganda to start a community radio costs $US 2857, and that is without the other technology needed for information processing and dissemination.

In terms of information dissemination, CATs are able to reduce costs by narrowcasting two times a day, as opposed to radio's 24-hour service. In fact, due to high costs, even Kagadi-Kibaale Community Radio (KKCR) broadcasts 18 hours a day. When electricity goes off, for example, KKCR is powered by a generator that uses 100 litres of diesel per day (Semujju 2013b). CATs on the other hand use less than one litre of diesel a day because they are switched on for one hour each day, divided between 30 minutes in the morning and evening. On the audience's side, CATs do not demand that listeners buy radio sets and batteries. In the end, the towers get a steady listening group that does not worry about expenses.

Implications for local communities

CATs, then, can be looked at as mobilising tools for individuals to participate in the development of their own areas, or even warning systems that can rally communities against dangers. This is real empowerment, which also comes by allowing community members to start their own communication process. The empowerment comes from the fact that community members do not have to wait for external stakeholders to initiate the communication process, because even the community members who do not have money can still communicate and let the rest of the community know what is happening in their lives. Data also point at a relationship between mobile phones and CATs, which makes information sending and reception quick, specifically in times of emergencies. Being cheap to run helps the CATs to stay away from inviting sponsors, who might take away the people-centred approach of information sharing. As long as the information negotiated by CATs remains local, the need for expensive technology like computers and internet is less apparent.

Data imply that CAT information is not actually slated to replace broadcasting news because they (CATs) do not give information that radio gives ("foreign" or outside the community information) while radio does not give information that CATs give. The two platforms act complementarily, since CATs narrowcast after primetime radio news and before the morning radio news. This implies that both channels obtain relevance in the community by giving specific information that is unique for each channel. In a way, the information gap that exists between

the outside-the-village information that radio gives and village information that CATs give is bridged.

Additionally, CATs redefine news. In CATs, news means anything that is happening in the community. News is what any community member says it is. In mainstream media, news is conflict, oddity (bizarre) and prominence. The most prominent personality for CATs in the village is the village chairperson, and only in terms of announcing information to the community. CATs do not tail him for coverage just because he is prominent. CATs look at every community member as prominent by giving him/her a chance to be heard.

Conclusion

This paper intended to show how CATs survive financially since they do not attract the kind of advertisers that mainstream radio and some community radio do. This was done by analysing how CATs gather, process and disseminate information. The analysis comes from data collected through qualitative methods. In general, the paper concluded that CATs are able to survive because they use very cheap technology that is easy to obtain compared to that of radio. The other factor that makes the CATs survive is that information comes from the community, to the extent that if community members have nothing to say, the channel remains silent. Some of the implications of this kind of communication channel include the fact that CATs redefine what news is (information that concerns people) while the circumference for the local is redefined as what is happening within one village. To reach out to various villages, government and development partners should use CATs, because radio centralises information that belongs to one community and sends it to whoever cares to listen to it in other areas. Notwithstanding the usefulness that data reveal, CATs still must solve the problem of noise and lack of legal and policy guidelines.

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