



Editorial Notes

Exploring Radio, Convergence and Development in Africa¹

Allan Thompson

When it comes to media in Africa, radio is still king. But the dramatic increase in mobile phone penetration on the continent is ushering in a significant change in interpersonal communications and potentially a change in the conventional broadcast medium of radio.

-
- 1 The Radio, Convergence and Development in Africa (RCDA) program was led by Professor Allan Thompson of Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication, who worked closely with research mentors Dr. Mary Myers from the UK and Prof. Joshua Greenberg from Carleton as well as research associate Heather Gilberts, a doctoral candidate in Communication Studies at Carleton. David Smith of Okapi Consulting also provided advice on the project, in particular an assessment of the work of grant recipients. This introductory note to the guest-edited issue of Nokoko was compiled by Allan Thompson, drawing upon the contributions of other RCDA team members.
 - 2 The concept paper by Dr. Myers can be found at: http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/ICT4D/Radio_and_Development_in_Africa_concept_paper.pdf
 - 3 See: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/08/zimbabwe--no--justice-->

And yet, the penetration and democratization of the means of communication that has accompanied this growth has had a substantial but as yet largely under-researched effect. This convergence of different information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the domain of radio and development – be it through radio phone-in shows, listening groups or field interviews – is growing at a rapid pace.

Several years ago, officials from Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) met at a crossroads (London’s Paddington Station to be precise) to discuss how best to devote more attention to the role of traditional radio in Africa as an important ICT. From that discussion grew an effort to examine the nexus between radio and other, newer ICTs and how they might be impacting upon development in Africa. Later, UK-based media consultant Mary Myers produced a concept paper,² setting out a strategy for a research program in the field.

In 2009, Carleton University’s Centre for Media and Transitional Societies was selected to establish and administer the Radio, Convergence and Development in Africa (RCDA) research program. The CMTS put together a project team and then conducted a brainstorming roundtable in Butare, Rwanda to seek advice from experts on the research program design. A public call for statements of intent by researchers drew in more than 150 submissions. Of those, 50 applicants were invited to submit a full proposal. In the end, 16 research projects were selected for funding by the RCDA program, which produced a significant body of research by a network of nearly 30 researchers, most of them Africans, based in Africa. Over and above their formal research reports, together, their RCDA body of work comprises nearly 20 journal articles and book chapters, ten

2 The concept paper by Dr. Myers can be found at: http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/ICT4D/Radio_and_Development_in_Africa_concept_paper.pdf

web publications and podcasts and a dozen conference presentations.

This special issue of *Nokoko* features a cross section of some of the work of the RCDA project, including two peer-reviewed articles by project researchers, four extensive case studies and one field note on preliminary research on so-called sidewalk radio. The issue is rounded out by a book review by Professor Tokunbo Ojo of York University, an edited transcript of a panel from the recent conference of the Canadian Association of African Studies on the subject of ICTs and convergence in Africa, and a personal tribute to Chinua Achebe, who is not only widely viewed as the “Father of African Literature” but also worked early in his career at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. The Achebe tribute was submitted by Nduka Otiono, a former postdoctoral fellow and Senior Research Assistant to Professor Achebe and currently a Banting postdoctoral fellow at Carleton University’s Institute of African Studies.

The starting point for the research by the RCDA teams was the assumption that radio – especially when it is local, independent and participatory – can be a positive force for development. From there, the point was to ground-check the phenomenon of the convergence of traditional broadcast radio with newer ICTs – particularly mobile phones and the internet – and to ask ‘what does convergence mean on the ground.’ For the various research teams this meant different things: for some it meant looking at whether rural African women equipped with mobiles are better able to participate in the development process; for others it entailed looking at diaspora populations and the extent to which convergence affects their engagement in the politics and development of their home countries; for others still it entailed asking questions about the quality of radio production of a developmental nature when new ICT tools are used and whether or not radio stations are able to tell better stories with enhanced interactivity. These are just a few of the themes covered by the 16 teams.

From the findings of all these research projects several overall patterns emerged clearly. First, radio and other ICTs are indeed converging and merging at an ever-increasing rate, all over Africa – and beyond. Mobile phones, especially, are playing a critical role in the daily experiences of Africans today. Various teams found that most radio stations on the continent have embraced computers and digital editing to some degree and even the smallest rural stations in the poorest and more remote areas of, for example, Sierra Leone or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, now have talk-shows incorporating listeners' phone calls on a regular basis. Second, where radio stations have embraced new technologies there are signs that they are offering an enhanced service to their listeners that contributes directly to better outcomes in terms of health, livelihoods and other developmental challenges.

However, the convergence process is happening slowly and is still subject to the well-documented digital divide. For instance, in Burkina Faso and Benin only eight percent of radio stations stream their audio content on the internet. We can contrast that with the vastly better equipped country of South Africa, but even here, as a team led by Last Moyo of the University of Witwatersrand found, the old disparities governed by geography, income and gender still prevail and affect access to ICTs and, disproportionately, access to radio. The urban and commercial radio stations – normally the richer ones – are tending to embrace the internet and other convergent technologies much more than the poorer rural and community-type stations, which therefore reinforces the disparities of access for rural populations and minority language-users.

Clearly the potential for participatory radio programming is greatly enhanced by the spread of mobile phones. For instance, in Northern Ghana a third of the population sampled who had ever called in to a radio station claimed to have called in to ask a question or to seek new knowledge, which indicates the potential power of participatory radio for development. But, again, the research

teams show that cost is still a great obstacle for many – especially for women and for rural people.

In Northern Ghana one of the research teams found that barriers to participation were much more profound than just access: women and girls with low educational levels were much less likely to call in to a radio station than men and boys of a similar income and educational level, even though they said they had the means to do so. This points to serious gendered self-confidence issues.

Another ‘reality check’ is that convergence will not necessarily be the magic wand to increase audiences, because of significant problems related to standards of journalism. Looking at evidence from a study of the Great Lakes diaspora by researcher Nestor Nkurunziza, we can see that despite having relatively easy access to a range of radio stations from their home countries that have now become available via the web, Rwandans, Burundians and Congolese in Belgium and Canada still tend to turn to international broadcasters like RFI, BBC and VOA for news about their home region because these sources are deemed more reliable.

In Zimbabwe and South Africa, Last Moyo’s team also found that radio stations were unable to exploit the full potential of new media to enhance coverage of local news, not for want of the technological tools, but more often because they were understaffed and operated on shoe-string budgets. Furthermore, there is often a lack of institutional support within newsrooms for integration of new technologies in terms of newsgathering, such that innovative uses of new technologies by journalists are often limited to only a few isolated individuals.

Newer technologies such as mobile phones and Frontline SMS may be tools for involving more women in participating in or benefiting from radio programmes of an educational or developmental nature. But – as was found in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – there are very few radio programmes offering attractive or relevant programming to women in the first place. Thus, the solution is clear-

ly not a technological one but a matter of old-fashioned gender-sensitive journalism training and incentives for broadcasters to address the information and educational needs of rural women and girls.

The RCDA research papers and case studies featured in this special issue of Nokoko touch on a cross section of the research themes explored by the RCDA program.

The work of Wallace Chuma, from the University of Cape Town, illustrates that the interplay of radio and mobile phones can even play life-saving roles. In his article, "The Role Of Radio and Mobile Phones in Conflict Situations: The Case of the 2008 Zimbabwe Elections and Xenophobic Attacks in Cape Town," Chuma looks at xenophobic and election-related violence in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Chuma sets out to examine the role of radio and ICTs in the context of violent and life-threatening situations and, additionally, to explore ways in which selected local radio stations, which covered the violent events, appropriated new ICTs to enhance their work. The methodology concentrated on qualitative interviews in Zimbabwe and Cape Town, South Africa, as well as archival and contemporary material. The findings show that mobile phones were by far the most used media in both countries during these violent events. Mobiles played a key role in keeping the victims and perpetrators informed. As regards radio, pirate stations were also important sources of information in Zimbabwe, but in South Africa it was found that local/community radio could be declining in influence. Chuma found that the majority of radio stations in both Zimbabwe and South Africa did not appropriate new media to the extent that they could have, at the time of the violent events in 2008.

In their article, "Getting on the Same Wavelength: Communicating Livelihoods Information and Innovation in Rural Uganda," David Musiime and Ed Pauker, from BBC Media Action, explore intersections between the needs and information sources of farmers, the role of radio, and the promise of new ICTs in relation to liveli-

hood programming in rural Uganda. The article summarizes research utilizing a mixed methodology of focus groups, interviews, and content analysis of radio programming and reports that there is a gap between the preferences of farmers when it comes to learning about livelihood issues and their current sources of information. It also notes that commercial media have done a generally poor job covering livelihood issues; this is due in part to commercial pressures, but also a lack of knowledge on the part of reporters and strained relations with policymakers and scientific experts. And despite the proliferation of mobile phone use, the vast majority of farmers (women in particular) do not use new ICTs to locate or share livelihoods information. The article points to the need for a more coordinated effort on the part of policymakers, NGOs and media organizations to produce information in a way that reflects the current needs and capacities of farmers.

Musiime and Pauker also demonstrate that the challenges facing farmers are vast and cannot be resolved by improved communication alone. Uganda, like much of Africa south of the Sahara, has the potential to produce food for its own use as well as a surplus for export. This is currently not the case in Uganda, nor is it in most countries below the Sahel. Any research aimed at improving food production is important. This study identifies key weaknesses which prevent Ugandan farmers from increasing their production. Perhaps the single greatest weakness is the inability of National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) to extend their services to those who need them most, namely rural women who do the bulk of agricultural work. To expect NAADS to improve its service delivery without external help is a recipe for failure. The researchers have clearly identified the strengths and weaknesses of each actor involved in the information chain which reaches farmers.

The case studies in this special issue are drawn from research conducted in Northern Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria and a regional study looking at Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.

Naomi Ayot documents the work of a research team led by Henry Gidudu in Northern Uganda, which found that by adding automatic SMS texting to radio campaigns about HIV/AIDS prevention, more of the audience was prompted to come forward for counselling and testing than did as a result of the radio campaign alone. The research team involved a partnership between the African Farm Radio Research Initiative (AFRRI) and CAP-AIDS Uganda. The project was called *The Role of Radio and ICT on HIV/AIDS Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) - Seeking Behaviour in Atanga Sub-County, Pader District, Northern Uganda*. The study used a before-and-after design, using a participatory radio campaign to encourage local people to go for voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) for HIV/AIDS at local clinics. The AFRRI research was done in close cooperation with CAP-AIDS, Radio Mega FM, in Gulu, and local health services. The radio campaign was supplemented with SMS reminders and encouragements to take up VCT services. The results show that there was a significant increase in uptake of VCT services due to the radio campaign. When SMS texting was added to the campaign there was a further marked increase in the numbers of listeners availing themselves of VCT services. Among women, the introduction of SMS support to the radio campaign seemed to cause three times more women to come forward for VCT testing than the increase caused by radio only. This strongly suggests that when conventional radio is paired with a new ICT such as SMS texting (in this case Frontline SMS), the results can be very positive. Using controlled samples, this research has clearly demonstrated that a combination of SMS interaction between clinics, popular radio stations and the local community effectively increases the number of people going for testing while at the same time reducing occurrence and transmission of disease. Radio stations with the highest listenership in the region were chosen, and tested models of SMS delivery developed by Farm Radio International were put into practice – in other words, there was no need to re-invent the wheel for research purposes.

Oreoluwa Somolu, of the Women's Technology and Empowerment Centre of Nigeria, submits a case study of her project "Radio for Women's Development: Examining the Relationship Between Access and Impact." The project utilized survey and focus group research to explore how radio and newer ICTs (mobile phones and social networking sites) are used by urban Nigerian women and their potential for enhancing development efforts. The case study shows that there is a dearth of programming devoted to women's issues, and that women would like to see more programs that take up issues directly relevant to their lives. Nevertheless, despite this limitation, radio remains dominant as a source of news, education and entertainment, and women regularly apply programme content in their daily lives. The case study also demonstrates that while some women use mobile phones to engage with radio content, very few are using Internet-based platforms such as social networking sites to respond and contribute to their favourite programmes. The findings are being used to develop recommendations for improving radio content in a way that speaks to the unique interests of women and as a way of increasing their engagement with and contributions to programme content.

Perhaps most interesting in Oreoluwa's study is her naming of the elephant in the room – radio *is* an ICT. These days, it is not just a receiver. Radio is also an alternative power source, it is a phone charger, it is a source of light and, when combined with mobile phone use, it becomes an instrument for two-way communication. Taking this a step further, the mobile phone increasingly incorporates a radio receiver within its software, making the mobile phone/radio instrument often the only piece of electronic communications equipment most people on the continent will ever own or even use. Closely linked to this is the finding that Facebook is increasingly being used by women to talk about programmes they have heard on the radio and to comment on the radio programme's Facebook page.

Such interaction has, according to Oreoluwa's research, produced positive results in the community. For example, frustrated with the lack of electricity in a certain part of Lagos, women called a radio station to complain, and shortly afterwards a transformer was delivered. This is a simple example of convergence leading to improved quality of life. Although Lagos has a healthy and competitive radio environment, programme content is still targeted largely at men. Oreoluwa's research found that women, understanding the power of technology, would appreciate more content that would improve their lot in life, notably ICT instruction programmes, career development, education and business. She concludes that radio is one of the most important sources of information for women, as well as being a companion.

Frances Fortune and Cindy Chungong, from Search for Common Ground, provide a case study from their research in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia focused on Frontline SMS and community radio. They explore whether recent improvements in radio broadcast coverage and SMS technology increase women's access to information and provide them with a platform that adequately meets their needs. Some 300 women were surveyed in each of six sites in three countries, two radio stations each in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The study finds high rates of regular listening among women and also high levels of mobile phone access or ownership. There is a strong correlation between education and higher social class and participation in radio programmes through calls or texts. The study finds that Frontline SMS has the potential to improve listener interaction but the project did not have enough time to prove this conclusively. The choice of countries is interesting and pertinent – three fragile economies located in post-conflict societies. Although more often than not the bread winners, and carrying out the bulk of manual labour, women in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea are relegated by men to positions of secondary importance. Fortune and Chungong set out to discover why women are not participating more in

community radio and how new technology might be able to change this. Notably, they found that most women are not participating in radio programmes for a myriad of reasons. The research suggests that increased texting between radio stations and listeners would provide more money to phone companies, hence providing leverage for consumers to demand lower tariffs.

Kennedy Kubuga led a team of researchers from the BoldSteps Foundation in Northern Uganda and submits a case study: "Radio and Mobile Telephony - The Gender Factor." Kubuga and his team used focus groups, questionnaires and interviews in their study. Focus groups were conducted with 76 women who belong to development associations. Kubuga concluded that because rural women entrepreneurs are often left out of questionnaires, focus group discussions were ideal for collecting their views. The study examined more than 500 completed questionnaires and also relied on seven interviews with radio station managers and disc jockeys.

Kubuga made a remarkable effort to attain gender balance – no simple feat on a continent where women are often relegated to second class citizen status, even in countries where equality is guaranteed in the constitution. Perhaps most importantly, Kubuga's research quantified several beliefs concerning rural radio that are generally only supported by anecdotal evidence:

- Radio tends to be more important and have a greater impact in rural areas;
- Level of education is directly linked to participation in radio programmes (with the use of cell phones) – participation rises with rise in education level;
- It is clear that where local radio operates, there tends to be less conflict;
- Women are undoubtedly listening to programming, but, apart from the education factor, also limit their participation due to the cost of calls.

The opening up of the airwaves in Ghana has been one of the most important contributing factors to participation and interest in local programming. Kubuga concluded that while rural women have an almost equal access to radio as urban dwellers, they contribute less content to radio. On the receiving side, urban dwellers depend less on radio for education and news. The implication is that, with radio's power to influence policy, urban dwellers are much more likely to influence policy and indeed content of radio. This is subtly relegating rural dwellers to the position of second-hand users of information.

A field notes section looks at some of the preliminary findings of Ethiopian researcher Elizabeth Demissie Dadiin a study called "Radio Trottoir and Political Communication in Ethiopia."

Demissie examines the role of 'sidewalk radio' in the Ethiopian public sphere. In particular, drawing on participant observation at sporting events, in cafes and pubs, and in cultural houses (*Azemari bet*), she examines how citizens share gossip, jokes, poems and other forms of "secret" communication as a way of discussing, debating and, frequently, mocking the political establishment in Ethiopia. She also examines how new ICTs, such as mobile phones and Bluetooth, are used in the transmission of old-fashioned *radio trottoir*, or sidewalk radio. The preliminary findings raise important questions about how citizens communicate in repressive countries where traditional media such as radio is widely understood to be a tool of government propaganda.

Ethiopia is a society where official voices other than the state are not tolerated. Finding any means to influence public opinion is a difficult and dangerous challenge. Demissie's research clearly indicates that Ethiopians are desperate for credible information and come up with creative ways to pass on sensitive information, especially in the form of jokes. Follow-up research could look at how examples of radio and convergence in other countries facing similar

information challenges might be applied to Ethiopia. Zimbabwe's fledgling pirate radio services might be a good starting point.

The RCDA engaged Okapi Consulting, in the person of David Smith, to interact with the members of the RCDA research network and to assess their work. Smith, who is an expert on radio and media development in his own right, was tasked with helping to gauge the contribution of the RCDA project toward building a research network and also to assess the capacity-building impact, particularly for the individual researchers. He interviewed virtually all of the grant recipients, and after reviewing their findings, came to this illuminating conclusion about the importance of regarding old-fashioned radio as an ICT:

Radio has, to a large extent, dropped off the radar of most of the traditional Northern funders. What they have forgotten or failed to recognise is *that radio is the original ICT in Africa, and the cell phone is its most recent add-on ICT* [emphasis in original]. Radio, convergence and development in Africa is, or at least it should be, how the cell phone is empowering people by allowing them to engage with the number one electronic purveyor of information and entertainment on the continent. To a large extent, most other ICTs are funneled through the cell phone, which is increasingly becoming the platform for everything – internet surfing, social networks, email, SMSs, video, photos and, of course, voice. As oral culture predominates in most of Africa, radio and the cell phone are simply extensions of the human voice; they are the electronic post office that functions while the traditional post office barely exists.

The overarching conclusion of the RCDA team was that convergence between traditional radio broadcasting and new technologies is certainly a reality in Africa and, in many places its potentials are beginning to be realised. But the benefits in terms of development gains are yet to be clearly and conclusively demonstrated.

That sentiment was echoed by three renowned African researchers who took part in a panel during the May 2013 conference of the Canadian Association of African Studies, hosted by Carleton University in Ottawa. Gado Alzouma (American University of Nigeria), Monica Chibita (Uganda Christian University) and Wisdom

Tettey (University of British Columbia) reflected on convergence and particularly the impact of mobile phones during a panel discussion entitled "Africa Communicating: Digital Technologies, Representation, and Power." All three acknowledge the impact of convergence, but contend that its import may not yet be fully understood. An edited transcript of their presentations rounds out this special issue of Nokoko, underlining the point that there is still much to learn about the impact of convergence on development in Africa.