Photograph: Jon Riordan

Take women and radio:
add new media

Mercy Wambui was awarded a Digital Vision Fellowship by the Reuters Foundation to spend time at Stanford University proto-typing the use of ICTs in a developing country. Wambui chose to work with the development Through Radio (DTR) project, a concept that gives women's groups a national voice in Sierra Leone's post-war reconstruction.

Traditionally, radio broadcasting has functioned as the machinery of African government propaganda to citizens. This top-down approach came under heavy challenge during the wave of calls for democracy in the 90s. Discussions on media reform, liberalisation of the airwaves and deregulation of telecoms fuelled civil society interest in media for development.

In East Africa for instance, community media projects begun to mushroom in the mid- to late-90s, largely due to efforts supported by Amarc and the Community Media Network of Eastern and Southern Africa. Communities began to set up radio stations and determine the broadcast content based on development priorities agreed upon through participatory processes.

Yet, while community radio stations generally meet the communication needs of most communities, the audience typically remains those living in the radio station's vicinity. DTR on the other hand is a community-based initiative that seeks a much broader audience.

In the absence of media ownership, the DTR

How to make a digital diva

By Amanda Singleton

It is difficult to get reliable statistics on women's ICT usage, especially of the Internet, in developing countries.

Standard indicators are not disaggregated by sex, and available data is not very reliable or comparable. However, it is quite clear that numbers are small and distribution limited.

Most women Internet users in developing countries are not representative of women in the country as a whole, but rather part of a small, educated urban elite. Also, most use it at work as a production tool and not as a tool of communication to create and exchange information.

Despite the emphasis of policy makers on getting women connected, the issues of access and control go beyond connectivity.

A series of factors, including literacy and education, language, time, cost, content, geographical location of facilities, social and cultural norms, and women's computer and information search and dissemination skills, constrain women's access to information technology. In some cultures women are not permitted to have face-to-face contact with men, or are expected to stay at home, or are isolated in restricted living facilities.

It is obvious how ICT will empower women living in such cultures. Distance education and e-commerce will be significant. Secondly, technology itself is socially constructed, and ICTs are viewed in a gender-specific context much as a physician is often culturally construed as masculine and a nurse as feminine.

Women today are still often socialised towards non-technical careers, and in technical careers which demand a high level of ICT skills, pay inequality often exists.

Inequitable allocation of education and training resources often favours boys and men. For governments with the political will to develop and implement national programmes of educational gender equity, ICTs can be invaluable.

ICTs will always be a bridge too far if the issue is as basic as not having electricity in the home. If the question of poverty is not resolved, women's empowerment in the digital age will never happen. Women who are low-income or living in poverty have a desperate need for information and contacts that can assist and support their efforts to build their way out of poverty. Web sites, email and electronic bulletins facilitate knowledge-sharing and make it possible for women to be in contact. Even a simple telephone can make a major difference.

Digital empowerment is the responsibility of the private sector and forward-thinking governments. Extension of infrastructure such as wireless and satellite is crucial. Emphasis needs to be placed on common facilities, such as telecentres, phone shops and other forms of public access. Women need to be ensured easy, safe and affordable access to ICTs. Efforts must be made to increase the number of girls and women studying IT-related subjects. In terms of policy formulation, women advocates and activists need to be involved whenever global, regional and national policy formulation is taking place. The basic premise of the gender digital divide is marginalisation of women. Lack of access to ICTs is a microcosm of existing gender relations in society.

Much work in the area of gender sensitisation is needed to raise awareness of the power structures that are rooted in culture and the economic system that dominate the world today. The African Information Society Initiative seeks to ensure that by the year 2010, "every man and woman, school child, village, government office and business in Africa can access information and knowledge resources through computers and telecommunications". At the same time, Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (an ambitious agenda for reducing poverty and improving lives) is to "promote gender equality and empower women". The revolution of the future is about knowledge. How can women, and all they have to offer, be excluded from this?

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concept gives marginalised groups the opportunity to form partnerships with existing community and/or mainstream radio to get their voices heard on issues pertinent to their development.

DTR goes a step further than traditional community radio operations and attempts to bring on board those with no access. The concept, more popularly known as "radio listening clubs", has evolved dramatically and progressed to a more dynamic process of interaction between rural women and policy makers.

Essentially, the interaction constitutes an ongoing dialogue that also includes input in the form of support and resources from NGOs and the wider development aid community.

Although DTR clubs may broadcast to local community radio stations, they mainly target policy makers and development actors who would typically not be easy to interact with, and who would most likely reside in the capital city.

DTR seeks to take local voices and perspectives further, and creates a sense of media ownership somewhat by proxy.

The issues aired on weekly broadcasts are first discussed, determined and agreed-upon by the communities, and not by the radio station producers and executives.

Jennifer Sibanda, of FAMW-Zimbabwe has been quoted as saying that DTR training programmes encourage women to become agents of change, and equip them with skills to help alleviate poverty, as well as to address issues such as the marginalisation of and discrimination against women.

Despite the growth of television and the Internet in Africa, radio remains the most advantageous medium due to affordability, widespread use and coverage for the majority of Africans. One radio for instance, can serve the needs of DTR clubs ranging from 10 to 80, with ease. In rural Africa, a DTR club goes a long way to bring women to the bargaining table of development processes and serves as the space for collective discussion and interaction on development perspectives.

DTR helps to resolve the problem of isolation faced by many living in rural areas. Further, the fact that it serves the needs of all – literate and non-literate – is proof of its usability.

DTR in Sierra Leone

As a result of the successes and popularity of DTR in Southern Africa, FAMW identified the Forum of Conscience (FOC) as the best suited NGO for collaboration on setting up a DTR project in Sierra Leone.

In light of the efforts to bring about lasting peace, the DTR set out to focus on reconstruction efforts as well as provide a channel through which women would voice their views on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process.

Currently, the DTR project in Sierra Leone has a presence in 30 communities in the north, the south and the eastern provinces. The groups range from 30 to 80 members of varying ages – approximately 14 to 60.

The unbalanced media diet

Pauliina Shilongo

Pat Made
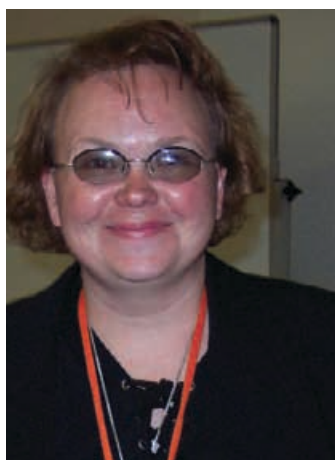
By Anthea Garman

When you look at the Southern African "media diet" served up for Africans to consume, you discover some curious things about the differential reporting on men and women.

Gender Links and the Media Institute of Southern Africa commissioned the Media Monitoring Project to do a major study of media production in the 12 SADC countries in the month of September 2002.

The resulting study is called the Gender Media Baseline Study and can be accessed online at www.genderlinks.org.za

According to Pat Made, Africa Director of Inter Press News Agency, and Pauliina Shilongo, a lecturer at the Namibian Polytechnic Media Technology Department, 25 000 news items were looked at. Of the 340 print and electronic production outlets in the 12 countries, 117 were surveyed. This included private, public, community and independent media. Foreign agency copy was also surveyed where it appeared in local media.

"We looked at the entire media diet," said Made.

The intention was to build a team across the region with the skills to undertake media monitoring and to compile enough material to use as a gender-awareness and advocacy tool.

What were the findings?

⬥ Of sources used, 83% were male, 17% female, with prominence given to men in authority. "There is a strong parallel here to the global study done in the year 2000 in 71 countries," Made said.

⬥ When women do appear they tend to be in the age group 25 to 40 and then they become "virtually invisible… before 24 they have no voice and after 50 they have no voice", Made said.

⬥ Women carry their "private identity" more than men, in other words women are identified as mothers and wives more often in public than men. The statistics are 11% of women and 2% of men identified in this way in the reports covered.

⬥ Who speaks on what issues? Men overwhelmingly speak for all humans even when gender violence becomes an issue. Only on the issue of gender equality do women get to represent themselves more often than men.

⬥ How do female parliamentarians fare? Although 18% of members of parliament in the region are women (31% in SA) they get quoted only 8% of the time.

Other findings according to Shilongo are that:

⬥ Gender equality is not considered newsworthy.

⬥ Men's voices dominate in all hard news categories.

⬥ The number of women reporters in the region is declining.

⬥ Subtle stereotypes abound and so do blatant sexist stereotypes.

⬥ "Gender blind" reporting continues with assumptions that men and women are affected equally by policy decisions, etc.

In subsequent discussions with editors, Made said, it becomes clear that they do not have editorial policies to guide gender-sensitive coverage. Training and retraining has become crucial in newsrooms.

"Who are the newsmakers? We need a paradigm shift to answer that question," she concluded.

See www.genderlinks.org.za for a wealth of further information and training materials which deal with the multiple facets of gendered reporting in Africa.

The club members comprise mainly widows, some amputees and others affected by the war in such ways as sexual slavery, loss of children and family.

The DTR offers a space for interaction and healing of wounds inflicted during and after the war. The women find strength in being a part of a group that helps to address the wounds that afflict them and where they can collectively focus on poverty alleviation priorities.

FOC acts as the overall facilitator and serves the DTR groups through a DTR co-ordinator. She receives the recorded audiotapes from the groups; types in a "manifest" which contains basic information on date, group, summary of discussion. She then hands them over to Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS) for editing and broadcasting.

Add new media

While the technical conversion processes are not necessary to understand or interpret content that is read, heard or seen in digital form, it is important to state that bringing in new technologies has implications and there are always nagging debates as to the added value of conversions from analogue to digital, particularly in the absence of adequate infrastructure. The why? how? and to what end?, are questions that have helped shape the process of introducing new technologies into the DTR in Sierra Leone.

The focus of the Reuters Digital Vision Fellowship was to explore the potential for new technologies in expanding the notion of DTR to a wider audience. If the voices of rural women can be put on a national policy-making table, can new technologies provide a channel beyond the borders for a global audience? Can content generated by women in the provinces of Sierra Leone be shared with other global communities? Consultations with the Forum of Conscience led to a visit in December 2002 to carry out a needs assessment.

The visit established that the DTR has brought in many changes in the lives of the members. By having a voice on SLBS, they have been assisted in implementing a number of major priority areas, such as establishing market centres; training and sensitisation on HIV/Aids and other health care concerns; discussions on human rights issues; police brutality; and gender-based violence.

A number of the groups are implementing skills-enhancement programmes on textile design, soap making etc. Some are marketing their products in the larger towns. Some groups have an adult literacy programme in process.

One of the biggest hurdles facing both the FOC team and the DTR communities is the lack of communications facilities. Mobile telephony is beginning to take root, and although available in the bigger towns, is yet to reach the rural areas. The most efficient form of communication between FOC and the DTR communities was through radio broadcasts.

At the time of the visit, Internet access for the majority was through private cyber cafés in Freetown. There was only one Internet service provider, Sierratel. The speed was generally excruciatingly slow, expensive and therefore prohibitive to the majority of interested users. Frequent power outages made computer use prohibitive as well. FOC has computers in all its offices, but has no Internet access and experiences frequent power outages.

Based on the needs expressed by the DTR women and further discussions with FOC, the agreed upon areas for collaboration and intervention by the Digital Vision Programme were to embark on digitisation of the audio and video content broadcast by the women and the testimonies for archiving and for dissemination. Further, a website would be developed to reflect the work of the DTR, FOC and to host the digitised audios.

By enabling the women's voices to go beyond traditional radio, the project is expected to link the concerns, hopes and aspirations of the DTR to the wider media and development aid community that may want to partner with the women.

An online record of their survival and progress will be available and updated constantly to reflect the changes and impact of the DTR on their lives.

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