

New strategies old medium

By Theresa Swinton



Patricia Litho (left) and
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Cheaper than most other media and able to cross language and literacy barriers, radio is still the best medium for transferring information across media and developing and educating rural communities.

"Radio's efficiency is proven and well documented. Its accessibility is unquestionable and the remotest of areas can have access to radio," says Patricia Litho from the Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA).

"Marginalised communities can and do access radio even when they do not own sets, and essentially these communities rely on radio for health and political information."

Because of the impact and accessibility of radio, various organisations promoting new technologies have found it necessary to integrate radio and ICTs, and projects and telecentres have been established in an attempt to improve access to information and education.

The DTR (Development Through Radio) project is an established project in Sierra Leone which uses radio to reach marginalised female communities. It has been set up in conjunction with Stanford University and Reuters Digital Vision 2000.

DTR has established 30 community-based radio clubs which meet weekly. These clubs have a membership of between 10 and 80 women and children, varying across the age spectrum. The aim of these groups is to discuss issues which are relevant to their own communities, record the discussions and then broadcast them on Sierra Leone Broadcasting Station, the national radio station.

"Radio is the best form of communication in Africa. It is cheaper and communities do not need to be literate in order to feel the impact of the message," says Mercy Wambui, Communications Officer for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). "It enables these communities to resolve their isolation as they have no other access to information and no stable infrastructure."

The Universal Service Agency (USA) and International Development Research Centre (IDRC) have set up numerous telecentres across Africa which incorporate new technologies and radio. The USA provides access to ICT services through three types of telecentres: standard telecentres, telecentres in school cyberlabs and telecentres in multipurpose community centres. These centres have been established as tools to enable communities to establish and improve an ICT infrastructure of e-health, e-education, e-business development and e-government.

In South Africa 73 community telecentres and 30 schools cyberlabs have been set up in underserved areas. Out of these 73 community telecentres, 48 are functional with a 65% success rate.

In Uganda, telecentres in Nakaseke, Nabweru and Buwama have been established and funded by Unesco and the IDRC. These telecentres are integrating new

Continued on page 24





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Continued from page 23

technology with components of community radio. Radio Apac and Radio Kagadi are at present establishing telecentre components to their stations.

Before opening a telecentre, various criteria need to be considered by the USA and IDRC; the needs of a community, long-term prospects for economic sustainability and the location of the telecentre.

Once the telecentres have been established and have various community groups which have a financial stake in the telecentre's operation, the USA monitors the successes and failures of the centres which can be incorporated into future development.

“Radio is looked at as a point of authority, and many times you hear people from rural communities say ‘it was even said on radio’, so to them radio is authentic and can be relied on for proper information,” says Litho. “It is central in community development, and success stories on fighting epidemics and accomplishing political campaigns can be attributed to radio.”

In the DTR project in Sierra Leone, the radio clubs record their discussions in Krio, the national language, and the recordings are edited down to 22-minute slots. “Their experiences are unique and the concept of this project is to let the women tell their own stories and discuss their own experiences. We are using new technology in a reverse cycle of journalism. The women and children speak about their own experiences.

Journalists do not come into the communities and interpret for them,” says Wambui.

Although DTR is a community-based initiative, it has an audience which is broader than its own geographic area, and reaches other communities in Sierra Leone and West African countries along its borders. In the same way telecentres are giving information access to the communities in which they are situated and to a larger audience, specifically friends and relatives of those living in the community.

The telecentres are both a means of communicating with family and friends as well as an educational and developmental tool. The ultimate aim of these centres is to give and improve the skills, information and links that the community needs to develop a sustainable infrastructure.

“The context of these projects is the absence of media ownership for marginalised groups, so in order to reach these communities a partnership has to be set up between communities and the existing media,” says Wambui.

“These communities now have access to policy makers and through this simple and rudimentary education these communities are developing skills which will enable them to live in a sustainable way in the future,” says Wambui.



A manual for community radio news

NewsFlash, an independent news agency servicing radio stations, has decided to put to paper the advice they've been giving out over the years through their training programmes. Henning Coetzee, NewsFlash editor, with support from Sanlam, the company that runs community media awards every year in South Africa, has authored a practical guide for compiling news reports for community radio stations. The guide ranges from the very practical components of finding news and reporting it through to the bigger ethical issues and controversies. For further information contact Coetzee on editor@newsflash.co.za or call 27-21-4221212.