Why Radio Matters

Making the case for radio as a medium for development

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"In the societies of the bottom-billion the key media are probably the radio channels" - Paul Collier, economist, 2007

Radio is everywhere

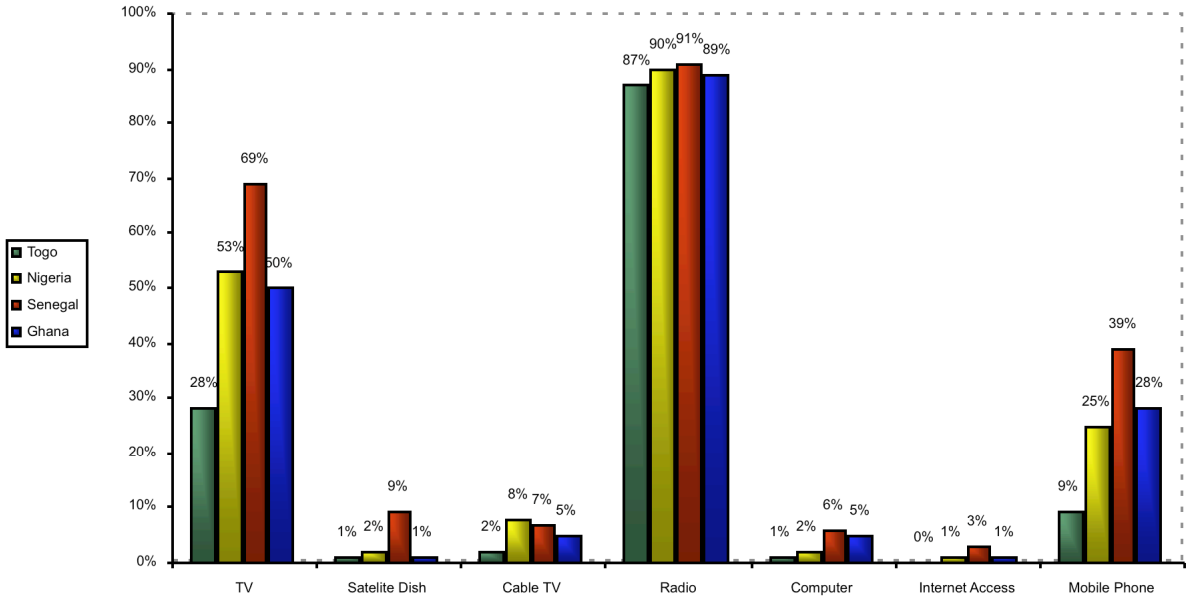
Radio is the most widespread mass-medium in the developing world. It is affordable, easy to use and ubiquitous. The airwaves in Africa, Latin America and Asia are now buzzing with thousands of channels bringing news, music, chat, sport, education and discussion to local people in their own languages in a convenient format, when and where they want it. Small battery-operated transistors often costing no more than $10 US dollars can be bought in almost any market-place or corner shop. Not only are radio sets portable and affordable but they overcome the problem of illiteracy and electrification. Radio sets are found everywhere, from the mountains of the Andes to the plains of Zimbabwe.

This paper shows how radio is an invaluable tool for reaching and involving the poor and marginalised in development efforts: how radio can save lives, provide vital information to prevent disasters, allow the oppressed to find their voices and identity, hold officials accountable and provide education, information and news to the most far-flung corners of our globe. Radio has seen a renaissance in the developing world over the last 20 years. Where once there were only large monolithic state-controlled broadcasters, there are now high numbers of small-scale FM stations almost everywhere, thanks to more liberal regulatory environments, and to the falling cost of technology. It is now possible to set up a small 40 watt FM station for under $4,000 US dollars. Where conditions are right, radio stations have mushroomed. In a study of media by the BBC World Service Trust, it was found that local commercial radio grew in sub-Saharan Africa by an average of 360 percent between 2000 and 2006 and that community radio had grown on average by a striking 1,386 percent over the same period[1]. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) there are now over 150 community radio stations when there were only ten in the year 2000 (BBC WST,2006). In the poorest areas of the globe, radio is the medium of choice, far outstripping other mass-media in terms of audience numbers. For instance, in West Africa

[1] Statistics for 11 countries for which consistent data were available: Botswana, Cameroon, DRC, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.

radio ownership dwarfs all other communication equipment, including TV and mobile phones as the chart overleaf shows. In Africa in general between 80% and 90% of households have access to a working radio set.

West Africa: Equipment ownership (Balancing Act, 2008)



In Latin America and Asia, generally speaking, radio is slightly less popular than TV, but is nevertheless an important source of information and news. In Peru, there are as many as 1,691 FM stations, and 75% percent of urban Peruvians listen to the radio daily and 92 percent listen to it at least once a week (Intermedia 2010). In Pakistan radio continues to be a crucial conduit for communicating with Pakistanis in rural areas and less economically developed provinces. Specifically, in the rural areas of the Baluchistan province, 46 percent of respondents said they listen to the radio at least weekly, rivaling rural television viewership at 47 percent (Intermedia 2010).

Radio saves lives

In emergencies and disaster situations, radio is an invaluable tool. Innumerable lives have been saved through cyclone and volcano radio warnings, the world over. Although Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 tragically claimed about 138,000 lives, survivors will be warned about future cyclones primarily by radio: "*If another cyclone comes, we plan to run to the new concrete school… Our village is getting stronger with such things - almost everyone listens to the weather report on the radio now*." Daw Than Myint, 64, quoted by Oxfam (Oxfam 2010)

After a disaster has hit, and as survivors try to find lost loved-ones and to access food, shelter and medical aid, radio can be vital for reassuring, informing and preventing panic. For example, in the recent earthquake in Haiti (January 2010) wind-up radios shipped by a U.S. charity to St Antoine's School, 68 miles from Porte Au Prince, enabled teachers to access shortwave broadcasts and inform students about the situation: "*When the earthquake hit,*

the teachers cranked [their radios] up to glean what information the could. "After the earthquake, all the radio stations were off in the country," says Emmanuel Pressoir, the school's business manager "*the telephone did not work, even the cell phone. But with their radios, they could go on shortwave, and be informed*." A week later, when a 5.9 aftershock rocked the village and rumours of an impending tsunami stirred panic, the teachers were able to turn to their radios again' (Wall Street Journal, April 29 2010).

... and helps rebuild after disaster, trauma and war

Radio Programmes to Reduce Tsunami Trauma

The devastating tsunami that hit Indonesia and other countries in December 2004 killed thousands, but besides the physical havoc, the tsunami inflicted deep psychological scars on the survivors. In response to this UNDP supported a radio programme on Dalka FM to reduce the trauma in Aceh, Indonesia. "*The radio programme is part of our strategy to assist 13,000 displaced people. We have 30 counsellors who work closely with the community*" says Frida Kawulusan, UNDP. The trauma radio show became one of the highest audience ratings programmes in the region. Answatai, a 45-year-old woman, still living in temporary barracks after the tsunami, says: "*The most interesting topic I heard in the show is how to control our emotions. Now I understand why people like me get angry and what I can do about it.*" (UNDP, 2006)

Radio for Peace-building in DRC

In 2001 DFID made the decision to fund a UN radio station in the D R Congo as the peace talks were about to take place. Radio Okapi, was born out of an alliance between Fondation Hirondelle and the UN mission, MONUC. Hirondelle provided the content and kept an independent editorial line, while MONUC ensured security and a satellite-based transmission system that soon covered the best part of the DRC on FM and Short Wave. Radio Okapi is now widely credited for having helped unify the country, smoothed the political transition, and contributed substantially to free and fair elections: in a recent study by IMMAR[2], almost 36% of voters said that it was Radio Okapi that had prompted them to vote. Okapi has an estimated 25 million listeners and 27 local partner radio stations. Okapi is currently funded by UK, Canada, France, Sweden and Switzerland (DFID, 2007).

Radio educates and entertains

The following examples show compellingly how effective radio is in educating listeners and helping to bring about positive change.

Learning about new farming methods: Ghana, Mali and Uganda

In Ghana, Volta Star radio in the town of Ho has recently obtained some interesting results from a campaign to promote an improved rice variety to poor farmers. This new variety is called NERICA (New Rice for Africa) and grows anywhere, even in drier upland areas and offers better yields and shorter gestation periods than the traditional swampy rice, so is potentially very advantageous for subsistence farmers. Supported by Farm Radio

[2] Immar Research and Consultancy, 2006, *Etude Médias en RDC* Fondation Hirondelle: Lausanne.

International (FRI), a participatory radio campaign was broadcast in 2008 to explain and promote the new rice and answer farmers' questions about it. After the campaign the take-up of NERICA was so enthusiastic that government seed-banks could not satisfy the demand for the seed. It is clear that the high uptake of the seed was due to the radio campaign because the FRI team divided a control group from the main listening communities and found that there was 0% uptake among the control group, but up to 50% uptake among listening households. Afterwards the FRI team said: 'the sheer success of the campaign in Ghana created one of its main challenges… Input distributors [e.g. seed suppliers] need to be aware that a participatory radio campaign can cause a dramatic spike in farmer demand' (Farm Radio International, 2010:28).

In Mali, the same organisation, FRI, has been working with local radio stations on engaging radio campaigns to promote the practice of composting among poor farming communities. These radio shows not only feature agricultural experts, but farmers' own questions, local music and interviews with local 'early adopters'. The campaigns have been followed by a four-fold increase in the percentage of farmers adopting this practice (FRI, 2010). In Uganda, a similar radio campaign, this time focussing on popularising a new disease-resistant variety of cassava called *Akena*, obtained more dramatic results recently, with increases in acreage planted with improved cassava of up to 510% (FRI, 2010).

Better health through radio in Madagascar and Tanzania

Radio can produce some impressive gains in the field of health as well. For example, in southern Madagascar, a 2007 study found that 89% of the rural population said radio was their source of information about HIV/AIDS (Metcalf et al., 2007). Addressing HIV/AIDS and other sensitive subjects such as gynaecological and fertility problems works particularly well on radio, especially when embedded in dramas such as soap operas. Drama can portray the psychological and social blocks that stand in the way of behavioural change, something that conventional communication methods - such as public service announcements or billboards - cannot reach. For example, '*Pilika PIlika'*, a radio soap opera in Tanzania (meaning 'busy' busy') has a regular audience of 5.5 million. Portraying the life and loves of ordinary people in the fictional village of Jitazame, this drama addresses many issues including sexual and reproductive health, child/parent relations, hygiene and sanitation, and TB. Research commissioned by the producers, Mediae, found that 85.0% of the respondents who listen to Pilika Pilika have implemented or undergone various changes in their lives as a result of learning's and knowledge gained from the radio programme (Mediae Company, 2010).

Radio empowers

It is significant that some of the most democratic countries in the developing world today — examples include Benin, Ghana, Mali and Senegal — all have private, flourishing FM talk radio stations. Of course, other media play a role too, as do civil society and other socio-economic factors, but in the words of the economist Paul Collier: 'the media… are the most effective forms of scrutiny. In the societies of the bottom-billion the key media are probably the radio channels…'. ' In most bottom-billion countries television is too limited to be the key medium; it is more likely to be radio. Thus among the checks and balances I would place keeping radio out of government monopoly control as vital.' (Collier, 2007: 147-8)

Radio Improves Governance in Malawi

In Malawi, the Development Communications Trust (DCT) broadcasts 'village voice' recordings from a network of radio clubs around the country, which report (among other things) on local-level delays, corruption, malpractice, and mismanagement by service-providers, including international NGOs, and local authorities and politicians. These problems are then broadcast on national radio (MBC), and the ministry, individual or organisation responsible is invited to reply on air in a context of a mediated dialogue with the community in question. The DCT says that 70% of radio club problems are resolved satisfactorily after they have been aired nationally. It is currently supported by UNDP, Oxfam and the Malawi national AIDS body (DFID 2008).

Maasai Radio in Tanzania

From the town of Terrat in Tanzania, Orkonerei Radio Service (ORS) broadcasts across a wide expanse of Maasai tribal lands, reaching Maasai pastoralists in their own language and on subjects that the Maasai are hungry to hear about: their own traditional culture, cattle-rearing, family and women's issues (including the controversial topic of female circumcision which is still very prevalent), and rights to land and forests. 'With illiteracy rates of an estimated 80%, radio has become the only realistic tool for social and economic transformation: people are talking together, recording their own music, re-vitalising their language and culture' (Lwanga-Ntale & Jallov, 2006). One Maasai elder is quoted as follows, during a recent evaluation: "*Most significant change? That we have our own radio, are updated in our own language and can communicate. You can say that it has given our identity back! Nothing less. And that changes all the rest!!!*" (quoted in Lwanga-Ntale & Jallov, 2006:1).

Radio is evolving…but is as popular as ever

In a world where so many gadgets and communication platforms compete for a market, radio is adapting and converging with newer information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Radio and ICTs in Pakistan and Haiti

On the listeners' side, radio is increasingly being accessed on mobile phones: for example, in Pakistan 30% of male listeners surveyed in 2008 said they had listened to radio via their phones. A recent example from the Haiti earthquake shows how radio and ICTs can compliment each other: SMS text alerts were used to direct injured survivors to functioning hospitals and to help search and rescue teams locate survivors; the number to call to access these text alerts were publicised on local radio. In addition to receiving critical news and information, Haitians could send, at no cost, text messages into the system. This ensured a stream of on-the-ground information of use to aid groups. The shortcode was publicised chiefly through local radio stations, including Signal FM, Melody FM, MINUSTAH Radio FM and Caraibes FM. The latter broadcast from the sidewalk outside its quake-damaged building, sucking power off a car engine (Large, 2010).

Through converging with services such as FrontlineSMS (a free software which allows text-messaging to large groups of people), now used in over 40 countries, radio can let listeners interact; be it through playlist requests, feedback / 'voting', or even sending in an urgent

announcement - there are many possibilities. Ways that radio dovetails with other ICTs include streaming broadcasts on the internet; reporting from remote places with mobile phones; and producing MP3 files and podcasts of their programmes. Radio, on its own or in partnership with new ICTs, is as vibrant and dynamic as ever.

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