Why social media are (relatively!) insignificant in Africa

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In the beginning was the empire… British, French, Portuguese! Virtually everyone in Africa who today has significant access to information in newspapers, television, radio and now Internet had a parent or grandparent favoured by the power structure and education of the colonial government or missionaries. These form today what many in Africa call the ‘favoured governing elite’, now increasing their powerful influence and access to good education with each generation.

If not so favoured, you remained a peasant farmer scratching a living from five to ten hectares and even today you and your children at best have access to the generally wretched educational system in rural villages or urban slum areas. In a country such as Tanzania some 70 to 80% of the population live on less than a dollar a day.

In the African mega cities 50 to 60% of the men between 20 and 35 have no steady employment. In Lagos Nigeria most families live in one room and feel fortunate to share a kitchen and toilet down the hall. In African cities the small privileged elite lives along expensive boulevards while the masses are jammed into high density areas along back alleys. Most rural villages are far from decent roads.

In 2009 in Tanzania 50% of those who managed to finish primary school – many did not – failed the examination which would permit advancing to intermediate level. Some 80% failed the maths examination. These failures will swell the ranks of the unemployed because the few steady jobs available will go to those with secondary school or university degrees.

In all of this failure there is much evidence that local communities are ready to organize themselves to build and improve schools, medical dispensaries or set up small industries, but the government bureaucracy is far more interested in feeding itself and maintaining its power over people than in supporting the initiatives of the local community with the technical and financial resources that they control.

Small entrepreneurs find it enormously difficult to start a business because interest on loans is exorbitant, each bureaucratic step requires some payoff, and the marketing or technical advice is not available. The media, located at the cupola of society is generally oblivious of these problems. All this helps to explain why, in a country such as Tanzania with a population of 40 million, the total circulation of daily newspapers is only about 50,000, including the Swahili press. In the typical rural village not a single newspaper, magazine or other printed material is found and those who can afford a radio set and batteries will hear only a steady stream of popular music, adverts and snippets of relatively incoherent news.

In studies I have done with students, we have found that virtually no relevant information is getting through to ordinary people about health, agriculture, sources of income or other matters of importance to them. Countries such as Kenya may have a better educated population and better access to media, but still the majority of the inhabitants of a great city such as Nairobi live in violence-infected slums and only a privileged minority have real opportunities in life.

What all this means is that the child of a peasant farmer or of the urban semi-employed has almost no hope of equal opportunities in education or other basic human rights. This does not imply that the media are not struggling with truly heroic efforts to play a significant role in the political and economic development in their countries. And they do have, in my
estimation, an impact. It is important, however, to define the term ‘significant’. To be ‘significant’ means, at a first level, to play a role in opening up equal opportunities for education, good health, decent housing, employment and access to information that are fundamental human rights of all Africans.

At a second level, to be significant means facilitating an effective process of democratic decision-making that brings about equal opportunities in education and other areas of human rights. At a third level, significant means changing, as much as possible, the social structure introduced by imperial governments of a small governing elite privileged in education, easy access to positions of power, wealth and information, living in a global culture – and a mass of people in the relatively isolated ‘indigenous interior’ with little hope of realizing their basic human rights.

Community radio

Bearing in mind that newspaper circulation is low (it costs US$1 for a daily newspaper) and that in most cases licenses for commercial radio and television are given to trusted friends of the ruling party who can be counted on to support party interests, one form of communication which could go a long way toward solving the problem of isolation and lack of access to information in rural and urban lower-status communities is low-power community radio.

One of the obstacles to the multiplication of large radio stations is the expense of the equipment, the tendency to have a large broadcasting staff – which must be paid – and the cost of electricity. In contrast, community radio has only a small staff of three or four highly qualified ‘community animators’ which helps people from the local community work as volunteers in producing programmes.

Community radio usually broadcasts to the people in a 25-50 kilometre radius. The radio station typically is ‘owned’ by an association of all the community organizations representing all sectors of the community – women, farmers, market vendors, youth, tradesmen, health improvement organizations. The programming may be similar to other radio stations with news, music, call-in programmes, some radio drama except that the emphasis is on the local culture.

One of the models of community radio in Africa is Radio Ada in Ghana on the Atlantic coast about 50 kilometres east of Accra (Alumuku, 2006: 171-186). The station was pioneered by Alex Quarmyne, a native of the Ada community, but with many years experience with UNESCO in Africa and with a special interest in community radio. Before the advent of the community radio station, the Ada community of several million people, many of them fishermen, were typically isolated. Radio Ghana, the national radio, allowed only a half hour a day in the Ada language, the rest in English, which was not spoken or understood well by most of the Ada people. Alex Quarmyne and his wife Wilma found the funding to build the studios, but once going most of the financing came from within the local Ada community.

The day that I visited Radio Ada unannounced I found in the first studio area a group of young people reading through the national papers from Accra picking out news items of particular interest to the Ada people. In the second studio, another group of youth were selecting music to be played, much of by local musician groups in the Ada language. In the third studio a young Ada native studying drama at the University of Ghana was leading a group through a rehearsal of a drama program produced by local Ada young people.

The programs which attract the most attention in the community are those sponsored by different community organizations. The Ada community is situated on the sea coast and most of the men are engaged in fishing. When I walked along the beach the fishing boats, painted in bright designs, pulled up on the beach, were a colourful sight, but the life of a fisherman is
tough and risky. The program provides a great deal of information to build up the incomes from fishing, but the fishermen’s program over the years has taken up many of the major problems facing them, one of which is the danger of being lost in a storm at sea. Discussion on the radio of these problems led to the formation of an association which created a fund for the families of the fishermen lost at sea.

One of the most famous debates was occasioned by the program of one of the women’s organizations. A tradition developed in this fishing community that the men caught the fish and then sold them to the women to dry, process and sell. The women with their economic activity were responsible for the household expenses, including paying the school fees of the children. Over the years, the women felt that it was unfair that the men did not help with household expenses. This argument emerged in one of the women’s programs and then became a major community debate. In the process the men came on the radio to defend their side of the debate. In the end the men finally conceded that they should assume more of the household expenses, especially the education of the children.

At times Ada community radio rallies the community to defend the community’s economic interests. One of the major sources of income is the sale of salt harvested from the shallow lagoons where the ocean tides flow in and dries out. At a certain point political interests in the national government wanted to hand over the salt industry to a large multinational corporation. Through the radio station, the community stopped the loss of their industry to outside interests and found technical advice to improve their industry.

Radio Ada has been the forum for dozens of such community issues over the years. The radio stations raised the awareness that stagnant pools were breeding areas for mosquitoes causing malaria, the rights of women to hold public offices, the improvement of education, the problems of unemployment of the young men, the sale of products of local industries, the recovery of fertile farm land for agriculture from the swamps and the dredging of a small river flowing through the community to open up the transportation, even the reconciliation of family conflicts (Larweh, 2006).

In general, Radio Ada is an example of how community radio can break the isolation and information barriers faced by millions of lower-status rural and urban poor and enable them to have the same access to significant information as is enjoyed by urban elites. Other community radio stations in Ghana have equally interesting stories to tell. Radio Peace in the Winneba community east of Accra has been particularly effective in solving community conflicts. Radio Progress in the north of Ghana has been effective in defending the rights of women, especially the education of girl children. Today, a network of many other radio stations is expanding throughout Ghana with equally promising results.

Ghana, however, has particularly good community radio legislation. Some countries in Francophone Africa and South Africa also have favourable legislation and good technical support from organizations such as AMARC and PANOS. Unfortunately, in many other African countries such as Nigeria, political interests are blocking the expansion of community radio for fear that community radio might open up criticism of the notoriously corrupt and inefficient Nigerian governance.

Ghana also benefits from good advisors on how community radio can best serve the development of the people of rural and lower-status urban areas. In some contexts NGO interests are getting funding in the name of community radio but using this for their own interests, another example of the notorious ‘brief case’ NGO phenomenon in Africa.

On the whole one must conclude that the potential of community radio for helping the rural and urban poor to gain access to the information and communication they need is not being realized in Africa.
The primacy of interpersonal, oral communication in Africa

The modernization model of development communication placed great emphasis on the use of media, especially social or mass media, to broadcast messages out to audiences using forms of media campaigns to persuade people to adopt better agricultural, health or other recommended practices. This largely failed because the integration of a new practice seemingly as simple as adopting an improved variety of maize or an agricultural commercial crop implies the change of a farming system. Improved health practices such as the use of mosquito nets or boiling water may have ramifications in forms of life habits, the family economy, work routines and virtually the life system of people.

For those whose incomes are at the very margin of existence, a simple campaign slogan is not enough. One must talk over the issue and explore the implications in the language of one’s village in a way that enables one to reorganize one’s life and values to accommodate a practice that may seem to be advantageous. All practices are embedded in a culture with a world view and values, and any change of practice implies at least some degree of cultural change. Far more effective are communication strategies which are built around community-based organizations managed by local leadership. One of the best examples of this are networks of interpersonal relations dealing with the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Initially, it seemed obvious to national health planners, following the guidance of international health communication experts, that in something as deadly as HIV/AIDS, transmitted largely through sexual intercourse, it would be enough to mount a broadcast advertising campaign providing information about the effects of HIV/AIDS and the way it is transmitted to get people to change their behaviour. That approach, paying out millions largely to commercial broadcasters in Africa, largely failed. Instead, a strategy centered largely on interpersonal, oral communication has proved to be far more effective in the case of HIV/AIDS.

A recent study of community-based organizations in rural areas of Tanzania with a high rate of HIV/AIDS infection shows why interpersonal oral communication was able to break through the fear of stigma and social rejection (Joram, 2010). The first step in most cases was taken by a person who lived in the community and knew well the people, language and its cultural ways, but also one who had some training in community organization and the Freirian approach to consciousness raising through dialogical reflection.

This catalyst person, such as a practical nurse living in the community, perceived the effects of the virus in infected persons and was deeply moved. The first communication steps were taken at a very quiet, personal level with persons who may have sensed their positive status, but were afraid to discuss it openly because of the fear of social rejection and need to change especially patterns of sexual relations. But gradually this interpersonal dialogue with infected persons with some leadership capacity changed attitudes, and small groups with names such as ‘Hope for Life’ emerged.

These leadership groups of HIV/AIDS positive persons proved to be by far the best communication agents because they could demonstrate in their own lives the benefits of getting tested, beginning the necessary medical treatment and adopting a new diet, and living a relatively happy, normal life in spite of life-changes necessary for responsible interpersonal and sexual relations. This quiet, interpersonal counselling proved to be of great importance informing persons of responsible measures, but leaving them free to choose among the well-known ABC (abstain, be faithful, condomise) methods.

They also led discussion among young, high risk groups. Leaders went out into the remote villages to speak about the need for testing and brought along portable testing
equipment. The groups set up testing centres, introduced the equipment for monitoring health, made sure that medical supplies were available, started gardening projects needed to improve diets, got community leaders to back their activities, set up orientation programs for the community on how to overcome stigma and social rejection, and a host of other support systems.

In one case they discovered that the local hospital was embezzling government funds granted to deal with HIV/AIDS and the local doctor was selling medical supplies that were to be given freely, so the organization established relations directly with national offices for these supplies. The organizations brought in various services for training courses and other orientation. In some cases, the organization established relations with international agencies in Europe for funding of testing equipment.

These CBOs preferred to use the local, indigenous communication methods such as the local musical groups, choirs or locally produced videos because these used a language understandable and enjoyed by the people. In a few cases, the CBOs became the distribution agents for the Fema magazines and booklets published in Dar es Salaam, taking them out to remote villages and using the materials as the basis for interpersonal discussion.

In this study of the role of CBOs and interpersonal networks, part of the inquiry focused on the use of radio or other mass media, but there was no evidence that the local radio stations provided any significant information on HIV/AIDS. The state broadcasting network has had soap opera type of programs that have been shown to be effective in raising consciousness about HIV/AIDS, but this study did not reveal any influence of these programs.

Of course, the real miracle of communication in Africa is the ability of the mobile phone companies to make telephone service available even in remote areas for relatively low prices. Few people are without mobile phones. Mobile phones are increasingly important, in economic transaction, political campaigns and getting technical information for health and other areas of life improvement. For example, farmers are using mobile phones for the sale of perishable items such as fruit and vegetables to truckers taking produce to urban markets (Molony, 2009).

Usually, however, the initial relationship with a trucker is made by direct interpersonal contact so that the marketing agents can know well the kind of farmer that is involved. With a relationship established, a farmer may continue to sell through a mobile phone call. In many ways, the mobile phone tends to reinforce the interpersonal, oral communication in contrast to the use of social media.

To summarize – why the social media are relatively insignificant?

Virtually all major analyses continually repeat that what plagues Africa are the corrupt, unresponsive government service bureaucracies which have their origins in the colonial bureaucracies set up more for the purpose of imperial control than to provide services to the indigenous African populations. Colonial governments had no sense of accountability to the indigenous African population. The main motivation for getting a job in a government and increasingly in professional positions was and is the secure income, not public service.

The media are full of critiques of the bad public services, especially the newspapers, and there is clear evidence that the continual revelation of corruption and inefficiency in the press does influence public opinion. Young, better educated Africans are increasingly critical of bad governance and want a change. But these better educated users of news media are few. When election time comes, the same corrupt, inefficient political leadership is re-elected again and again. The reason is that the readership of the critical news media is relatively small, and the mass of voters are part of clientelistic networks that are mobilized by the
political bosses in the hope of getting some small personal favours if not genuine public services.

Except for a few countries such as Ghana, where a democratic culture is more developed, civil society – made up of professional associations, human rights groups and labour unions – is relatively weak. The better educated Africans or sectors with strong critical awareness do not have the organized capacity to influence better governance or make concerted efforts to improve public services. The tendency is the proliferation of private education, private medical services, private everything – which only the wealthier can afford. The masses of the poor must suffer the consequences of irresponsible and unaccountable public services. The poor are not served by the social media and cannot influence them in any way.

The most effective providers of health and education services in rural areas and among the urban poor are Community Based Organizations and the interpersonal networks of concerned persons who are motivated to make needed information and services available. Although there is great potential in community radio and in the educational radios operated by some churches and NGOs, in not a few countries, traditional political parties are blocking the expansion of these media services for fear that they will raise the critical awareness of the people and spell the end of their political control.

As oppressive as the present power structure is in Africa, there are no strong liberation movements among students, in the churches or in more radical political movements. The only long-term hope for reform is a gradual rise in educational standards and growing awareness of the need for the rationalization of public services, including the services of the media.

References

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