

## **If Community Media is the Answer, What is the Question?**

---

**Alfred E. Opubor**

NEW AFRICA INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

Harare, Zimbabwe

The idea of community has been problematic for Africans in the post-colonial period. In the politics and economics of nation building, attempts were made to build societies that were broad-based, with centralised political power and authority and homogenised institutions, so as to emphasise commonalities and to incorporate disparate cultures in an effort to create 'national unity'. In so doing, the goal was to de-emphasise differences, ignore particularities and specificities, and minimise or even proscribe any tendency that was likely to question the political orthodoxy, including the expression of dissent or minority opinion.

Since the 1980s, there have also been attempts to build institutions beyond the nation state, employing the notion of 'community' in an expanded sense. Although the East African Community did not last, the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, has passed its silver jubilee. And the Southern African Development Community, SADC, is approaching a second decade, and there's talk of an African Economic Community for the 21st Century.

All of these processes of incorporation, of building ever larger political and economic units, have tended to by-pass the ideas, opinions and direct contributions of the majority of our citizens, even in countries where they were supposedly 'free' to express themselves on such matters.

But these are truly interesting and contradictory times. Most of the time, the 'people' appear to have acquiesced in the decisions made by their governments and other leaders on their behalf. But from time to time, they have erupted with clear statements of disagreement or dissent, often with violent reactions to centralised instructions and arrangements. Many of the differences and specificities which nation builders wanted to wish away seem to persist; and they persist just where people find themselves, where they live their daily lives, in their communities.

Many Africans do not feel they live in their nation, they know they live in their communities. It is there, in their communities, that they seek to find work, to raise their families, to cure their sick, to grow old and die and be buried. Many of them from rural areas have been forced to migrate from their original communities, to seek jobs, education and fortune elsewhere, to try to become part of new urban communities. And even then, they often migrate from neighbourhood to neighbourhood in the cities where they find themselves.

Thus, in linking community and media to discuss community media, it is important that we do not marginalise the 'community' in favour of the 'media'. It is for this reason that this keynote address raises the question: If Community media is the answer, what is the question?

This is probably not the time for definitions. At the dawn of the 21st century, we all think we know what 'community media' are. With the popularisation of community radios, community newspapers, magazines, newsletters and other publications, we do indeed know about 'community media'. Or do we? The bottom line in discussing community media is an understanding of the nature of the community which underlies media practice, access and ownership.

Today the notion of community has a strong non-physical connotation; so that it is possible to speak about 'virtual' reality and virtual communities. But in spite of the new information and communication technologies, 'community' still retains a strong physical reference to people in geographic proximity, with frequent, if not continuous, contact. People who share certain cultural attributes have access to certain resources of social organisation and common institutions, resulting in common basic beliefs.

Among other things, a human community is built on the exchange of initiatives, information and meanings in the process of defining, creating and maintaining a

group identity and interests for survival within a specifiable geographical and/or cultural space. A community thus creates, and is also created by, a community communication system, which includes the various communication roles (and their actors/performers), needs, and resources available to the individuals and sub-groups which make up the community.

Community media should be viewed then as elements of a community communication system. They serve as instrumentalities for role performance and resource utilisation, for responding to the communication needs of individuals and institutions within the community. These needs are diverse and often require different modalities of expression and satisfaction. It is within the framework of a community's communication system, therefore, that its media should properly be identified and created. It may then emerge that appropriate media are multiple channelled rather than single; and that community media should, realistically, be multi-media.

---

### **Lessons Learned**

Twentieth century approaches to community media development have been dominated by exogenous definitions of communities and the imposition of narrow media-based solutions to the cultural, communication and survival problems which communities face. For example, the general objective of this seminar

falls within the context of several projects and activities initiated by UNESCO and other UN agencies and many international non-governmental organisations and donor agencies in assisting in developing such media which give different social groups, particularly the more isolated and disadvantaged, a chance to participate in development strategies and have access to communication resources at the local level<sup>1</sup>.

Driven by noble intentions to spread the benefits of 'development' and, more recently, to promote indigenous development and enhance local ownership of development outcomes through 'empowerment' and 'participation', these 'activities and initiatives' have often not been based on a conceptual or practical foundation arising from a community communication system view point. Their inadequacies demonstrate the need for interventions based on a community communication strategy. Oepen suggested a decade ago that community communication:

is a process of horizontal and vertical social interaction and networking through media regularly produced, managed and controlled by or in close co-operation between people at the community level and at other levels of society who share a socio-political commitment towards a democratic society of countervailing powers. As the people participate in this process as planners, producers and performers, the media become informing, educating and entertaining tools that would also make non-privileged and marginalised people think and speak for themselves, not an exercise in persuasion or power. In such a process, the entry points for communication interventions have to be sought in the communities' learning methods, cultural expressions and media forms. (Emphasis added)<sup>2</sup>

The community media created in the 20th Century have generally been single-channel media, responding to technical and instrumental orientations, favouring hardware above software, and emphasising technique over process. Their impact has usually been evaluated in terms of the achievement of standardised 'improvements' in sectoral target areas such as agriculture, health, population, literacy, and poverty alleviation.

However, within these approaches, a number of experiences have provided lessons which should assist the development of a community communication strategy in the future, hopefully one that is more responsive to context-specific strategic communication system needs of the relevant communities, and therefore possibly resulting in the creation of 'community multi-media'. Oepen's list of 'functions' to be ascribed to community media, 'independent of the type of media or the type of people involved', provides a useful basis for the development of such a strategy.

---

### **Whose Community, Whose Media?**

To move into the future with a new agenda, it is necessary to ask new questions, which may lead to new answers, or to find new answers to old questions. But the old answers are certainly not needed to new questions, as they seem to be somewhat discredited. Rather, a community communication system approach to community media development should proceed from a basic understanding of the nature and needs of the community, in communication terms. A needs assessment survey of the community should attempt to answer at least the following questions:

1. What information is needed to define the parameters and details of the community's communication system? What components need special attention? Why?

2. How is this determined?
3. What media does the community already have?
4. What media does it want?
5. What media does it need?
6. What media can it afford?
7. What media channels or combinations would meet the community's needs?
8. Who can make what media available to it, at what cost, for what purpose?

Undertaking a needs assessment of the community's communication system, through a participatory, 'ethnography of communication' methodology, should provide answers to the first six questions. The last two questions should be the focus of discussions between the community and external partners interested in providing community media resources to meet identified priorities. Whether the community is physically contiguous or whether it reflects a dispersed communal group with common characteristics and interests, these questions are still valid and can yield required information.

In this kind of process, participatory research becomes an important first step in the decision about whether or not additional media are required to meet the needs of the community communication system, and what specific media are required. This could lead to results far different from the usual situation of donors and NGOs proposing a radio station or video facilities or rural printing press or desktop publishing or Internet facilities for the community, because these facilities fit into their community media development programme.

It may well be that the community's view is that it requires more than one, even all of the above facilities, to solve specific communication system and contextual development problems. The community and its external partners may then engage in a prioritisation process to determine how to meet the needs and perhaps involve other partners who are able to contribute some of the media components required.

It may be, for example, that what is required is participatory theatre and the strategic need becomes how to facilitate performances in particular areas of the community. But it may also be that the area of need identified is that theatre performances, already in existence in the community, could more effectively be extended through regular radio drama, which would then be the community media input actually required by the community communications system. These answers are not always obvious without a consultative process and relevant analysis.

The next steps in this process, and a possible result of ethnographic communication research, would be several strategic scenarios for developing a community's communication system. Sensitive investigation will usually reveal that a community is not necessarily homogenous, in terms of interests and points of view. An important question may then be how to have more inclusive media through providing more diverse opportunities for community communication. This may mean intervening in communication system elements, including media. Non-media considerations could include, for example, the notion of attracting new voices into community communication, involving more active participation of women and the elderly. This may not require creating a new medium or channel, but rather providing access for new sources of information within existing channels. But again it may require acknowledging and using new communication channels more adapted to the interests of the groups whose needs are to be addressed.

In *The Myth of Community*, Gujit and Shah<sup>3</sup> have shown how participatory development models have involved flawed processes and inadequate tools from the point of view of gender analysis and the handling of gender issues and differences within communities. Their insistence that participatory methods and inventions often obscure the interests of women is a salutary *caveat* to underline the need for situation-specific research. In fact, the development of community media should be based on a community communication strategy. That strategy should seek to provide answers in support of the communication needs and objectives defined by the community.

Many existing projects for the creation of community media have indeed undertaken research to determine the various aspects and operations of the media to be established. Such studies have been usually long on socio-cultural and economic background, usually related to the development 'problem' to be solved, but generally short on the communication background and profile of the community which should be the basis of the choice of functional media, from an endogenous point of reference.

The argument thus far is that the choice of media is a variable to be determined with the community, rather than pre-determined by exogenous interests and priorities, no matter how well meaning. It may help to clarify whether community media are media in the classic sense or whether they are techniques and technologies for responding to community communication needs.

## **Future Directions**

The establishment and expansion of community media in African countries are still confronted with a number of problems, which will need to be addressed in the 21st Century. Therefore, several question areas need to be considered, including that of policy, regulation, research, training, and sustainability.

---

## **The Policy Question**

Community media are governed by the general communication/media policy environment prevailing in each country. While there has been an increase in the number of countries favouring media pluralism, and therefore more receptive to new media initiatives, including establishment of new community level initiatives, there is still ambivalence about the regulatory and legal situation of many of these initiatives, and the technologies which propel them.

In Mozambique, for example, there is on-going discussion about the nature of community radio stations and how they should be established and run, within the liberalised media environment, where the state monopoly has been abolished. Radio stations, established by the Institute of Social Communication with funding from UNICEF and UNFPA, in Xai-Xai and Licunga, are referred to as 'community' radio. But it is not clear if they are more than radio stations that cover a geographical area around these towns. In what sense are these 'community' rather than 'local' stations? Is it because they are non-governmental? In what sense are they 'owned' by the community?

Radio Xai-Xai was founded in 1995. It was the first community radio station established after the government freed the airwaves in 1990, which, in theory, allowed anyone to broadcast. It was therefore the first radio station to be independent of the state monopoly on broadcasting which had existed until then. It has two community-based committees, one for administration, the other for programming. Some members of the committees work at the station almost daily. The general understanding is that the station is a keeper of information, which is to be transferred to the community, and that the community should be trained to take control of the station. These ideas are to be formulated into operational guidelines. It remains to be seen to what extent such guidelines can be formulated at the national level and to what extent local variations are necessary and possible.

The project is supported by the Institute of Social Communications (ISC) Delegation based in Quelimane, some two or three hours drive away, with funding from UNFPA. According to a recent report:

The station participants all had an understanding of the radio station as an instrument of community development and of participation in governance and production as important principles. This vision was not written down and varied from person to person. Through a visualisation process, a mission statement and set of objectives were developed. The station has nine staff members and nine community collaborators who produce programmes. Three staff are paid by the state. The remaining staff are paid when funds are available. Everyone accepts that when there are no funds they cannot be paid.<sup>4</sup>

Other countries in the Southern African region will also need to grapple with these definitional and policy questions while in some countries, such as South Africa and Namibia, the realities on the ground have confirmed the mission and character of community radio stations. But even there, there are various definition and operational procedures. David Lush, quoting Guy Berger<sup>5</sup>, presents some of the definitional issues posed in the South African experience including questions related to target audiences, ownership and programme orientation.

In the context of examining the scope of community media, several attempts at organised theatre performances have been labelled 'community theatre'. For example, in Zimbabwe, over 200 member organisations have bonded together to form the Zimbabwe Association for Community Theatre (ZACT) which recently celebrated 10 years of existence. Its main objective is to promote and encourage indigenous culture through theatre. ZACT seeks to create employment for school leavers in the rural and urban areas. It also aims to promote indigenous culture through the electronic media.

A community theatre process which involves planning, problem identification, research analysis, story, scripting, rehearsals, workshop, performance, community action and evaluation guides ZACT's work. In this process, members of the community are expected to participate. According to ZACT, community theatre groups have staged productions on conscientisation, community health, AIDS, the impact of the economic structural adjustment program and gender issues.

One common feature of community theatre is that it is participatory. It is unlike conventional theatre where people act on stage and do not talk with the audience. In community theatre, the artists talk, laugh and ask the audience questions. There is a

lot of interaction between the audience and the artists. During the pre-testing and evaluation stages of the production artists involve the communities.

Does community theatre fall within the definition of community media? How can the development of community media include community theatre in a systematic and forward-looking manner?

Community publishing may be another example of a community media initiative in Zimbabwe. This is defined as a method of development communication which builds up the confidence, analytical skills and creative capacities of grassroots development workers and community leaders, by involving them in the planning, writing, evaluation and distribution of books. The community-publishing programme is countrywide. It has community publishing teams in each district, with teams at village level in some districts. So far the programme's impact in the urban areas has been minimal since it has been a rural-based initiative. For eight years, the community publishing programme was housed in the Ministry of National Affairs. It is only recently, in 1995, that a new organisation has been formed called Africa Community Publishing and Development Trust, which was started with money raised by the staff of the former Community Publishing Programme.

---

## Regulation

With the introduction of the new information and communication technologies, especially e-mail and Internet services, opportunities for physical and virtual communities to communicate are enhanced. In addition to internal transactions the community and its members can reach and be reached by the outside world. These opportunities also raise question of regulation; but perhaps also transcend regulation.

Regulation is however very relevant to the promotion of community media precisely because it deals squarely with basic principles and issues concerning ownership, control and operation of broadcasting and other media. The following issues thus need to be addressed:

1. *Ownership*: who owns the airwaves? Do they belong to government through the people? Can individuals have private rights? If government regulates the licensing of broadcasting stations and the use of telecommunications, what considerations should be applied? How can private stations guarantee 'the public interest'? Should owners of broadcast facilities be allowed to own other

media as well? Can diversity be guaranteed in the ownership of broadcasting? Will commercialisation/privatisation of telecommunications permit affordable services in impoverished rural areas?

2. *Control*: who should control what in broadcasting and telecommunications? Does control involve only the power to issue and withdraw licenses? Who controls the content of broadcasting? What guidelines need to be established at the state level? Do local governments have a say? What is the possible role of citizen groups or civil society in the allocation of frequencies and in the operation of media institutions?
3. *Operation*: are broadcasting stations and other community media operations to be run as purely commercial organisations? What guidelines should be provided about commercial or non-commercial approaches, and the position of advertising? What technical specifications should be applied to the range of community broadcast signals? What editorial guidelines or general principles for guiding access and accountability should be established?
4. *Content*: what balance is desirable among various content categories? What percentage of programming should be entertainment, and what should be educational and developmental? What proportion of community broadcast airtime should be devoted to commercials and advertising messages? How much time should news and current affairs programmes occupy on what kinds of stations? How should special interests be catered for, e.g. those of children, women, rural dwellers? Should broadcasting stations editorialise? What categories of programme content should be proscribed?

---

### Research

Community media operations should be sustained by continuous research about the larger social environment for defining new issues, new actors, and new voices. It should also address the evolving needs of communities for new or different information about technical matters (health, jobs, politics, etc.) and enquire about the feelings of community members regarding media performance. And it should assess the effect of media on the community. This is the goal of classic impact assessment; and it might be directed towards assessing:

1. the flow of communications in the community (who says what to whom, how often);
2. community participation (what different individuals and groups are represented in media content production);
3. expression (what are people saying through the media through a sensitive qualitative content analysis of the feelings, moods, images, etc. conveyed through media and how they relate to community goals, etc);
4. knowledge (what information and ideas do the media convey and what do people gain as a result of paying attention to the media);
5. attitudes (what changes, if any, can be attributed to media and communication in the way people feel about themselves, their neighbours, their communities and the world ‘out there’).

The research relating to these questions should be participatory and need not be quantitative. But the extent to which it is continuous and involves different segments of the community as enquirers and suppliers of information, is the extent to which research as a cultural product can be demystified and indigenised for the community. It can also provide a basis for reorienting the operational content of ‘community’ media to make them more truly community based and owned.

---

## **Training**

Consideration needs to be given to who should be trained, and in what aspects. Most community media do not have, and probably cannot afford, people trained professionally in communications, journalism, marketing or other necessary skills. Often community volunteers have little more than enthusiasm and a willingness to learn.

Training in basic writing and production skills to enable the preparation of messages that are audible, legible and communicative will be required, preferably in the short term, e.g. in weekend sessions, and on-the-job. People already professionally trained will need help as to how to work with communities and with non-professionals people, without being condescending or permissive to the abandonment of professional standards.

A skills profiles of community media needs should be developed by communications trainers to see how new initiatives at the local level can be assisted. What infor-

mation and skills are needed to be able to successfully run a community radio, a newspaper or theatre? Case studies of on-going community media (successful or not) are crucial for developing such profiles which should be the joint product of community media practitioners, researchers and communications/journalism trainers. Appropriate training modules can then be developed around these case studies. Training should also involve ‘media literacy’ for community volunteers and other community members so that the media can be truly internalised and indigenised.

---

### **Sustainability**

The cost of installing and operating community media is a basic problem for consideration. Disadvantaged and marginalised groups are defined largely by their lack of resources, and thus their inability to pay for and sustain services. Opoku-Mensah has observed: “We are all aware of the fact that ‘the people’ have no money, and are often the poorest of the poor. So why are projects which are designed to alleviate their isolation, marginalisation and voicelessness expected to become sustainable in an unrealistic time?”<sup>6</sup>

Several reasons for funding community media as a social good have been advanced, with suggestions as to how various resources could be made available to sustain them. The bottom line of these suggestions is the need for communication and information policies, at the national level, which are sensitive to the plight of poorer communities, based on an understanding of the ways in which access to information can help them bridge the development gap and achieve better lives.

Whether government provides the resources, or international donors and NGOs support them, community media are not likely to be sustainable from the point of view of the hosting/owning community. Is this inevitable? At the production as well as at the reception end, new technologies are beginning to introduce cost reductions which may make community communication and the media which service them more accessible and affordable.

A community communication centre might be an appropriate venue for combining the advantages of the various services with reduced costs. In this connection, Koning proposed that community media centres could serve the community by providing public education in media hardware, software, networking; public access to

media tools (cameras, microphones, and computers); and public access to media transmission systems (local television FM radio).<sup>7</sup>

He further suggests that the local community should own the centre and that priority be given to establishing them in rural areas as these are the main areas where human needs still need to be identified. Although Koning also suggests that donor funding, a public interest fund, and an enabling environment from government, would be necessary to support the capital intensive community media he has in mind, he reports also on the fund-raising activities of South African community media centres, suggesting that these could be a method of providing additional resources for centres.

Community broadcast receivers, telephones and reading rooms have been in operation in many countries for nearly two decades. They can now be joined by communal terminals for electronic mail. Some of the services provided by these facilities operate on a commercial basis, for people are glad to pay for a phone call and for contact with relatives through e-mail or other means. Such services can and are carried by media-related infrastructure. Might it not be possible to support 'classic' media operations through them? Within the media themselves, short personal announcements by individuals and social groups, advertising of community-level services by businesses and others, could provide modest but regular income for community media, without distorting their purpose, and in fact encouraging community members to see media as sources of locally relevant vital information. Perhaps such contributions may not guarantee sustainability to community media, but they may introduce an important ingredient in concretising the notion of ownership of the media by the community.

---

## **Conclusion**

The notion of community, which is central to the definition and development of 'community media', is still not generally agreed upon. However, an approach to community identification from an endogenous perspective, especially through an 'ethnographic' methodology, is a useful start to defining the communication profile and needs of the community, and thus identifying its communication system needs. This then becomes the basis for decisions concerning the kinds of media to be established, and their place within a community communication strategy. Questions related to policy, ownership, control, technical operations and technolo-

gy, as well as the possibility of sustainability can then be evaluated in the light of the understanding of the community, and its relationship to various media forms and modalities.

---

## Notes

1. UNESCO, Letter of Invitation to Regional Seminar on Promoting Community Media in Africa, dated 15 April 1999.
2. Oepen, Manfred, 'Community Communication: The Link Between the 'Old' and the 'New' Paradigm', *Journal of Development Communication*, Volume 1, Number One, June 1990, pp. 55-66.
3. Gujit, Irene and Meera Kaul Shah, 'Waking up to Power, Conflict and Process', in: *The Myth of Community*, Irene Gujit and Meera Kaul Shah, (eds.), London, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1998, pp. 1-23.
4. *Proceedings of the 1996 MISA Annual Congress and 'Community Voices Conference'*, October 6-13, Club, Mangochi, Malawi, pp. 8-20
5. Lush, David, 'The Role of the African Media in the Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights', in: *Towards a New Partnership with Africa: Challenges and Opportunities*, Adebayo Olukoshi and Lennart Wohlgenath (eds.), Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1998, pp. 42-67.
6. Opoku-Mensah, Aida, 'Should new communications technologies be considered as part of the new communications media?' *Proceedings of the 1996 MISA Annual Congress and 'Community Voices Conference'*, October 6-13, Club, Mangochi, Malawi, pp. 4-6.
7. Koning, Dirk, 'The role of Community Media Centre', in: *Proceedings of the 1996 MISA Annual Congress and 'Community Voices Conference'*, October 6-13, Club, Mangochi, Malawi, p. 7.