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Community Journalism networks - voices from the village

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All blogs

Community Journalism networks as a method of enhancing news and programming on commercial radio in Africa

Africa's small private radio stations have a huge rural audience but are often located in regional cities and large provincial towns. They invariably have limited financial and human resources. This restricts their potential to effectively report on the issues and interests of their core rural audiences.

The UK Department for International Development's ENABLE2 project has worked with a small commercial radio station in Kano, Northern Nigeria. The project is testing a low-cost 'community journalism' model for rural reporting: a network of volunteer rural journalists.

This blog post explains the 'community journalism' model and explores its early successes and challenges.

The huge importance of radio in rural areas

Private radio stations in Africa have mushroomed since the mid-nineties. Even though TV has also grown, radio broadcasts remain immensely important to local communities, local governance and particularly to rural communities.

Despite radio's importance in rural areas, it can often be detached from the realities of day-to-day living in rural communities. The mass media news and programmes

are inevitably urban-centric. They focus on the views and opinions from individuals who are within close proximity to the radio stations themselves.

Radio stations often take rural audiences for granted. Even those who recognise their importance struggle to effectively reach out to more remote communities.

The problem of infrastructure and limited resources

In Nigeria, as in much of Africa, the challenge of reaching out to rural audiences and effectively providing them a voice is exacerbated by poor road infrastructure and the limited human and financial resources of radio stations.

Mobile phones have alleviated this to some degree. But distant conversations on often poor-quality phone lines are no real substitute to journalists investigating issues and recording interviews and debates in the field.

Some donor-funded projects have compensated for this by sponsoring programming that effectively pays radio stations and journalists to move out of the studio and into communities. Such field-based programmes have more depth and quality. They highlight issues that are unlikely to be covered in studio-based programming.

But these programmes inevitably end when donor sponsorship ceases. Radio stations move back to studio-based and urban-centric coverage. The reality is that most radio stations in Africa struggle to sustain programming that involves substantial rural coverage and field-based programming inevitably becomes limited to easily accessible locations.

Radio station sets up field-based reporting on business and agriculture

The ENABLE2 project had clearly recognised this rural news reporting challenge. Over a six-year period the project supported the set-up of numerous radio programmes that focused on the field-based reporting of business and agriculture.

These programmes had proven both popular and sustainable. But all had the weakness of being limited in their geographic reach. Journalists and production staff were provided with limited finance and time to travel out of the studio. They inevitably gravitated towards reporting the issues that they found within their own locality.

ENABLE2 worked with Freedom Radio Kano to test a new way of creating news and radio programmes – a community journalism network.

A community journalism network

The model Freedom Radio Kano is testing draws on a global trend in how the media creates content: the growth of 'citizen journalism'.

Traditionally, professional journalists alone decided what should be reported as news, and how it should be reported. More recently, mainstream media have begun to use contributions from ordinary citizens to augment professional journalists' news and current affairs coverage.

The view that only trained journalists can be contributors to professional media has therefore been eroded. The 'community journalism' concept is an application of the 'citizen journalism' model - ordinary members of the community effectively contribute to professional journalism.

Individuals within communities are identified and provided with rudimentary training and supported to use their smart mobile phones to enable them to become on-the-spot reporters. These volunteer, rural-based journalists become part of the network of reporters for a radio station. They actively cover the communities in which they live and highlight topical issues from rural areas without the cost and time that would be incurred by professional journalists travelling to these areas.

The ENABLE2 pilot, which began in January 2017, involved two main activities.

> Assisting the partner radio station to identify and train 44 community journalists (29 men and 15 women) covering 15 communities.

> Helping the radio station to establish a system to manage and utilise the community journalists' reports.

ENABLE2's support was light-touch, with the radio station deciding how to incentivise the community journalists and manage the reports.

As the number, depth and quality of the rural reports grew, the station increasingly recognised their value, establishing a dedicated community journalism editing desk. The station began to use community journalists' reports in two of its existing programmes - a business and agriculture programme and a general interest and current affairs programme - and on their daily news bulletins. Freedom Radio also established a dedicated programme for community news - Muryar Karkara (Voice of the Community).

Reporting proactively and reactively and using modern technology

The community journalists record interviews on smart phones and file the reports to the radio station via WhatsApp; sometimes writing out rather than voicing the reports. They liaise with the community journalism editor who advises the

community journalists on how to balance and improve quality before the reports are packaged for broadcast.

The community journalists file reports both proactively and reactively. Proactive when they identify newsworthy issues independently. Reactive when the radio stations ask the journalists to report on an issue or event or investigate an issue further.

Reports resulting in local government action

The Community Journalism network has unearthed a rich vein of rural issues and stories. And with this, a group of young women and men with skills and the will to report news from their communities to radio stations in the city.

Their reports are not only informative. They have resulted in action being taken by local government and state authorities for the benefit of the communities. For example they have:

> highlighted the problems of poor road infrastructure - when roads damaged by floods are not repaired, it is difficult and dangerous for farmers and traders to transport goods to markets

> highlighted problems in access to drinking water and pushed for action towards resolving the issue by the Rural Water and Sanitation Authority

> reported on the flooding of farmland and roads due to inadequate drainage,e resulting in action by local governments to repair drainage infrastructure

> reported on shortcomings of a local government built hospital, where staff were not turning up for work, resulting in the hospital being investigated and much-needed community health services being improved.

The sustainability of community journalism

After nine months, there is clearly significant support for the community journalism network among the Freedom Radio's senior management and editorial team. But is community journalism potentially sustainable and cost effective for a commercial radio station to operate?

The community journalists are incentivised primarily by social capital rather than financial gain. By being a community journalist, their profile and standing within the community is significantly enhanced. The radio station therefore ensures that its network of community journalists is not an unsustainable financial overhead.

For Freedom Radio, sustaining the network requires only modest travel and communication costs. The benefit of the network is clear to the radio station's

management and marketing staff. The network means that the station is more relevant to a large rural audience, by cost-effectively covering breaking news and events in rural areas.

ENABLE2's work in Nigeria will come to an end in November 2017 and time will tell whether the community journalism model will develop and grow. The pilot has proven very promising as a potential sustainable model for rural news and programming.

There will be challenges in ensuring that community journalists remain motivated without becoming an unsustainable burden on the station. But starting with non-fee based incentives and building on this is certainly the most effective foundation to build from.

Women's participation in a socially conservative region

Finding approaches to ensure the participation of women is also a challenge in a socially conservative region where women are restricted from travelling alone or speaking with men. This was a challenge encountered in the initial recruitment by the radio station and ENABLE team.

Encouraged by ENABLE2, the radio station specifically targeted the recruitment of women. By locating recruitment exercises within the rural communities, women did not have to travel far from home to participate in the recruitment process.

Women community journalists have remained as committed as their male counterparts; since launching in January 2017 no community journalist has dropped out.

Whereas many media houses struggle to generate enough original content, the challenge for Freedom Radio's editors is in managing the high quantity of reports. Some of the best reports are being filed by women community journalists. They have found ways to operate effectively and provide unique and important insights into rural issues from a woman's perspective.

For more information: contact Helen Bassey-Osijo

› ENABLE's manual on how to set up and manage a community journalism network (PDF)
› ENABLE2 website

Other blogs from ENABLE2:

› Few market systems programmes work with the media. Are we missing out?
› Influencing Government: five top tips