Chapter 40

# ICT as an Engine for Community Participation:
## An Assessment of Uganda's Community Media

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses two issues prevalent in community media: Information communication technology (ICT) and Community participation. While several studies have explored community media and ICT in Uganda (Nassanga, 2003, 2009a, 2009b), the view that ICT has changed the way media operate to an extent of reversing the agenda-setting role to the listeners (McQuail, 2006, pp. 38-39; Straubhaar & Larose 2002, p. 386) needed investigation. Using Kagadi-Kibale Community radio (KKCR), the paper shows how ICT is spreading in one Ugandan region and the relationship that technology has with participation in community media activities. Findings show that there is need to redefine the relationship between ICT and geographically defined community media as usage of ICT is dependent on forces that still require decades to harmonize. The paper therefore suggests that an alternative to community media, herein called Basic Media, is best suited to match the communication patterns of a developing world.*

## INTRODUCTION

Although ICT eases the way people participate in media activities, the original models of study were designed based on the dominant paradigm that advocated for transfer of technology from the developed world to the periphery (Hamelink, 2001). Therefore, such a transfer did not cater for access to ICT for all among poor nations. Instead, it created a vertical ICT access pattern where control was (is) at the top (North/West/cities), while the bottom (South/villages/communities) remains underprivileged. For example, Uganda, which has over 34 million people, has 1 million internet users (Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), 2012). Mobile phone subscribers on the other hand are 16 million (UCC, 2012). This is testimony to what Sharma (2010) calls a divided world into 'highly developed, developed, developing, and poorly developed'. The view that

because of ICT listeners determine media agenda (McQuail, 2006, pp. 38-39; Straubhaar & Larose 2002, p. 386) is an over ambitious one when it fails to consider the number of people in local communities that can participate in community media and the realities of their daily lives like bad governance, civil wars, lack of capital to invest in hybrid ICTs, low literacy levels, lack of electricity and other disadvantages which are instead escalated by and have escalated the digital divide (Pringle & David, 2002). For any ICT-participatory initiative to foster development, it would have to be less prone to most but not only one of the above problems. That is the reason why the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2003) warns that ICT is not a 'silver bullet' to terminate poverty.

This paper therefore put the underlying problems facing ownership and access to ICT into perspective and tried to re-examine the effectiveness of ICT towards community participation. The intention was to see what effect ICT has on community participation in the developing world. That purpose was achieved by answering the following research questions: Which ICTs have been integrated in community media? How many people have access to ICTs in the community? How do ICTs influence participation? What are the challenges of ICT and community participation in community media? How can ICT be better utilized to enhance community participation?

Generally, the paper begins with a discussion of ICT and community participation, in which a basic understanding of the two concepts is given and the status of the ICT area in Uganda. The second part puts ICT and community participation into a theoretical perspective arguing that to understand that combination, the complexity theory has to be applied. The same part also provides an insight into the methods employed by the research to meet its objectives. In the findings, presented in part three, the paper shows that Uganda's community media is riddled with problems that cannot be solved within

a decade and this breaks the combination of ICT and community participation. Therefore, the paper concludes that alternative forms to community media may be used to achieve participation of communities. The paper introduces Basic Media as one of such forms.

## ICT AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

ICT is the technology used in conveying, manipulating and storing of data by electronic means. It includes, but not limited to: satellite, internet, computer, and digital storage devices (Hang, 2005). In the West, where there is more advanced technology, Williams and Carpini (2004, p. 212) say that, the growth of 'cable and satellite television, the internet and the World Wide Web, the availability of video cassette recorders and remote TV- controls', and so on, now define what Marshal McLuhan's 1953 article on Harold Innis (Peters, 2009, p. 16) and later in 1960 (McQuail, 2006, p. 36), called new media. In Uganda, with one in 12 people using the internet (UCC, 2012), there is a certain minority consuming media on-line especially print, as most newspapers in Uganda are online.

On the African continent, the United Nations is therefore embracing a move to help (or not) Africa to move from the agricultural to an information society. However, like the modernization theory in the past, the ICT policy has been questioned by several African scholars like Banda (2010) and Berger (2010). Knowing that there are mandatory efforts from the UN to digitalize African media (Berger, 2010), and yet the efforts are not consumer-oriented, raises questions. Digitalization in Africa needs to be taken with caution as most communities for which ICT is assumed to be beneficial are illiterate. It is possible that the UN's approach to slap a deadline on Africa to digitalize by 2015 is producer-oriented (Berger, 2010).

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