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Knowledge Societies for All: Media and Communication Strategies

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Africa has been portrayed by the media as poor and powerless. But media have a role to play in the process of empowerment. Media can enable the people to challenge the powers that be and question the direction they are taking. Information technology can be used to destroy the 'poor and powerless' myth. It can also mobilize a community for empowerment and social change.

In mystic Zanzibar, where I come from, in the popular media image, we find a romantic little sleepy island where dhow frequent the coast, a thriving trading community of the Indian Ocean flourishes, and time stands still. Legend has it that they once played the flute in Zanzibar and people danced on the shores of Lake Victoria. Zanzibar then had a maritime economy without the use of technology as we know it today. Globalization then functioned with its own cultural diversity and thrived with the peoples' knowledge-based society with its own communication channels.

As peoples, we are not ordained by nature to be propertied and propertyless. The land was created for us to live on and bear the fruit of it through our labour. Nature did not intend us to be people with money and property on the one hand, and people with nothing but their labour on the other hand.

Before we discuss media and communication strategies in enhancing knowledge, and this conference is appropriately happening in the wake of WSIS, let us first discuss a fundamental issue- **that of equity of access**. Presently, we are posed with the issue of digital divide. Within our national boundaries we have those who do have access to technology and those who cannot access as they do not have the power of capital. Then we have the north and the south. There is a gap and it manifests itself in the form of a digital divide within the communication systems that we have presently.

We start from a premise and assumption that information and communication technology (ICT) has the potential to greatly enhance the building of a knowledge society. Once we are in agreement with that assumption, then we look at how to enhance and promote the use of ICTs to that effect.

People are generally hungry for information and want to communicate – it is a curiosity that transgresses all races, classes and cultures. In time immemorial stories have been told of the land beyond. The most famous of them

all in our region is Alif Leila u Leila – Thousand and one night. It brings mythologies of the land beyond and imaginations of the unknown. It is this curiosity that has led men and women to the moon and gave us the fables of Ibn Batuta.

Then we had the colonization era heralded by the voyages of “discoveries” of Marco Polo , David Livingstone etc. etc. This era’s information was relayed in a concerted and targeted manner making sure that the colonizing and the colonized retained the power structure in place. Information has always been managed as it is a source of power and control in shaping our thinking.

It is then pertinent for us to create an enabling environment for communication for the sake of knowledge which in turn challenges power. The use of ICT in the media and communication has flourished and spread like wild-fire. ICTs are used for media, entertainment, businesses, communication and almost everything – even dating!

Macro-policies which used to take time to reach the South can now be put on the internet and transmitted globally at the touch of a button. We are in an era in which policy makers could be facing a harder time if those in the global community who are committed to positive change became more organized. This ‘cyber-culture’ of information exchange and networks, if invested in, has the potential in effecting change. During the U.N. decades, information through the net played a pivotal role in mobilizing forces of change over issues of violence against women, human rights etc in my part of the globe.

Demand for information is there but what is lacking is the ‘enabling environment’. What would an ‘enabling environment’ mean for a fisherman in Zanzibar, for example?

- 1) To answer the above question we have to look at the value of information – other than quenching a curiosity, what VALUE does that information have for him/her? This is above the cost element. For example, when mobile phones came to Tanzania, the analysts suspected that they would not flourish as much due to the limited spending power of the people. With a cost of a call at \$0.50 (at that time), it was too expensive compared to the minimum wage of US\$40 per month. They could not be further from the reality. To date, we have 3.8 million cellular users in a population of 35 million – that’s more than 10% of the population having cellular telephones. It is because it brings VALUE to their lives. For example, a telephone call costing US\$0.50 may have saved a trip to the village with a cost of US\$5. Therefore, if there are any ICTs available, the information that they avail must be **VALUABLE**.

The determinant of whether information is VALUABLE is content. Content varies for different interests. For example, the Tanzanian Media Women’s

Association (TAMWA) used the content generated during the United Nations (UN) Decade to access information which was then translated and used in mobilization of society on violence against women's issues as did the human rights based associations. **Content** became a primary driving force for these organizations to invest in technologies that would enable them to access information at a speed that they desired. This in turn became a catalyst for other upcoming non-governmental organizations in the early nineties to invest in the ICTs in the case of Tanzania. This was when nascent organizations needed international backed resolutions to mobilize national issues.

The situation is different now as civil society organizations have emerged with defined identities and issues to mobilize around. The lack of local content is the issue now. I would say that 97% of information accessed in Tanzania today is foreign in nature. This is the challenge for organizations and peoples who believe in equity as an issue in society.

When South Africa had an embargo imposed on it by the international community, access to the global internet was very expensive. As a result, and due to facilitation by the authorities, a 'South African' internet had grown impressively and hosted the majority of the information accessed by its nationals. This means that the information is made for local consumption and therefore relevant and the cost of connectivity goes down as connection to the global internet is minimal. So much so that most South African ISPs have a tariff structure, even in the post apartheid era, where the costs of local and international bandwidths are different and you can buy accordingly.

- 2) The other issue we have to pay attention to is literacy, language and use-ability

The mobile phone flourished because everyone knows how to talk and they do not need to talk a certain language. The spread of ICTs for media and communication very much depends on the literacy of the people who will access the information.

A much higher level of knowledge is needed, but this is not to say that the readers have to be fully literate as a pre-condition. There is a tele-centre project in India that is designed for people who have very low literacy levels and it relies heavily on the point-and-click function and uses graphics and sound functions extensively. These are ways to make access available more widely as well as to build a starting point for self-teaching.

Language – ICTs are usually centered on text. Reading text means that other than being able to read, you need to be able to read in the language

that the information is in. Among the Zanzibari community globally, there is a website where proverbs in Kiswahili language are created and exchanged. It was started by an individual who put the latest kanga (local traditional cloth) design on the web so as to create a market for his shop.

Kanga is a cultural cloth used on the east coast of Africa by women and men for every day use from the cradle to the grave. It is a form of traditional communication that women use in a culture of silence. Every kanga has a philosophical saying drawn from Swahili culture.

The sayings depicted on the cloth are punchy, suggestive, sharp or reflective, depending on the mood of the woman who is wearing the kanga. A kanga saying “Karibu wangu muhibu” , “welcome my love” communicates a strong morale boost to anyone, let alone to the man for whom it is being worn. Or a man may give a kanga to his wife at the birth of their child, saying “titi la mama ni tamu” “Mother’s milk is the best”. In so doing, he portrays his feeling that he would like his wife to breastfeed – but he can only express a feeling and not a demand.

But messages on the kanga can also be quite sharp such as “nyuki mkali kwa asali yake” “the bee fiercely guards its honey”- A strong warning message from the woman wearing the kanga to another woman who she suspects is fooling around with her husband. A kanga displayed response by the girlfriend could be “Na tule asali tumwache nyuki na ukali wake” “let us enjoy the honey and leave the bee with its sting!”

Very soon those who accessed the website began to debate on the writings of the kanga and from this emerged a creative forum of new proverbs which could go onto the next kanga production. Manufacturers began to visit the sites and get their proverbs to print on the next kanga design for free and it was generated by consumers of the product! Cyberspace provided the opportunity for a vibrant cultural community to build its creative wealth of sayings and debates in Kiswahili globally by accessing the internet.

3) Affordable access

A big consideration is the cost of access. Cost of access relates to the cost of bandwidth. In Tanzania, a MEG (shared) of bandwidth costs an average of \$3,000 per month while in the US it would cost a home user \$50 for the same. As a result, cost of bandwidth is much higher and the quality of service – that is the speed – is much lower as ISPs combine users in the same bandwidth pool resulting in congestion, in an effort to survive.

Presently, one such intervention to respond to the above is the AfyaNet-healthnet in Tanzania. The concept is the creation of AfyaNet as a

facilitator for service provision for health facilities and projects. This would allow a 'consortium' of users to buy bandwidth collectively and share a larger pool of available bandwidth. This would enable them to receive the service at a much cheaper rate as well as to receive a service that is appropriate and much more beneficial to the overall objectives of the facilities than what is currently available on the market.

AfyaNet as a group, will represent its own members and be a bargaining block of users in relation to the purchase of bandwidth from commercial providers. In addition, AfyaNet will form a hub around which the 'members' can exchange knowledge and network on many other aspects apart from mere connectivity issues. It will also form the nucleus of innovation for different ICTs that can be researched and developed for deployment among its members. Thereby, not only addressing the cost issue, but forming a 'knowledge society' around which there will be mutual benefits to all. In unity there is power is the message of this project.

4) Computers and infrastructure

Where most users in the west have the luxury of a personal computer and a broadband connection at home, a fisherman in Zanzibar will not be able to afford that. Cyber cafes however are a common phenomenon now in the remote areas of Tanzania for example. The important question arising is how the community's needs are served and who is the community?

In all my years of experience in media and civil society I have come to see the community as a contemporary force of social change that unsettles the status quo. The crucial element is the fact that information be used as a tool to better peoples lives. What is also crucial is that the participation of different people in communities should feed into a creative system of change which improves the livelihoods of all, and not only of the 'haves'. This is a challenge we face in the global realm of cyberculture which many groups are trying to build.

What is important then is for civil society to engage in policy issues so as to encourage easy and cheaper accessibility in their quest for building an enabling environment for community based groups and peoples as a whole. Affordability of access to internet then becomes of primary importance.

In our quest as civil society organizations and in order to build a knowledge based society for all, we have to be aware on a day to day basis of media and communication strategies which are:

A) Affordability of the International cost of bandwidth: here the communal use and building of knowledge societies such as in the case of AfyaNet- Tanzania

B) Local Infrastructure

- Lobby government to invest in infrastructure as it would do on roads, electricity and water. Make ICTs a 'public utility'.
- Furthermore, lobby governments to take an active part in promoting or facilitating connection to affordable international connectivity initiatives in a way that will reduce prices for end users. One such initiative is the East African Submarine System (EASSy) Cable that will connect Djibouti to South Africa and all countries on the East Coast of Africa.

C) Government Regulation

- Lobby government to have regulation that promotes the growth of LOCAL information generation and hosting while keeping flexible on the ability for providers to choose the best International connectivity options.
- Promote OPEN ACCESS. This will allow big players as well as small players to get access to connectivity and service with no restriction. Such a move breaks down a monopolistic and exclusive mode of business that is detrimental to ICT development in the third world. A case in point is the building of the SAT-3 cable in West Africa. The signatories to that cable were the incumbent telecoms operators, who should have been acting in the best interest of their nationals. Instead, tariffs remained restrictively high and participation was limited to the 'club members'. As a result, the existence of a fiber landing point in a country was irrelevant, at best. It is only now that discussions have started to make that cable more 'people friendly'

D) Information must be VALUABLE

- Local Information generation and hosting as a way to make an enabling environment for people to post information that is relevant to themselves. For example, if a son or daughter of a fisherman has access to a free hosting site at which she can host and update information related to fishing – such as currents, weather conditions and fish migration patterns, she would do so and soon all fishermen would be asking for this information. Similarly, a local fisheries agency may do the same as a service and to manage fisheries.

- Enabling trading over the internet – e-commerce whereby I gave an example of kanga on the east coast of Tanzania used in every social occasion as a cultural symbol globally to a community on the east coast of Africa and its diaspora outreach, thus creating a market.

E) Literacy, Language and use-ability

- In the Northern part of Zanzibar there is a group of youths who keep a turtle farm which is an endangered specie, as a hobby and as a passion. The turtle project was born when these youths discovered access to internet where they downloaded facts on how to feed these turtles and learnt about the environment in which they thrived best. They translated this into Kiswahili and are now using this information as an education tool for school children and they are linked to a local women's group on the east coast of the island who provide them with seaweed on which turtles feed and thrive. Language here was a crucial element besides the access which the NGO centre of which I was the executive director, provided so as to enable this group to thrive and enhance their capacity and environmentally sound and sustainable initiative within the community.

In conclusion:

To create a knowledge society through use of media and communication strategies, one needs to embed its development in the knowledge of that society. To enable its accessibility it is crucial to mobilize civil society to impact its government on policy issues like the open access model which strives to break the digital divide.

The new discourse emerging around information and communication systems in the civil society movement is action oriented rather than analysis based. Online newsletters like the Pambazuka, Associate Progressive Communication (APC), to name a few are all virtual and have had an impact in civil society to create knowledge on issues of communication strategies in our part of the globe.

Women, young people have been able to be part of the visible players in the discourse as source and consumers of information not only within but also without. It is a forum that avails civil society of the space to express their dreams and abilities in forms that are not limited and unique but also uncensored and diverse.

Technology and infrastructure are the basis of the process of empowerment in societies. To empower effectively via ICTs for the benefit of civil society is a challenge we must take up head on. Production of local knowledge on a par with the dominant knowledge is crucial in this process of positive change. E-engagement requires the demystification of the power of knowledge and the technologies used in dissemination of this knowledge through the media.

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