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Alternative locus for communication among grassroots communities. A Kenyan perspective

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Abstract

Grassroots communities in Kenya embrace the local communication platforms that promote knowledge and awareness of remedies for problems related to their existence. Typically, the fora enable members of the communities to participate in unique communication as they provide an alternative to mainstream media in terms of content, timing, language, presentation, and community involvement. The distribution of knowledge, skills, and leadership abilities through these media contributes to the advancements of local individuals and communities in general. These media, also empower communities through dissemination and exchange of development programmes. Accessing information enhances the livelihoods of local community members as it affords them opportunities to realize their socio-economic dreams and goals. Through community media, marginalized voices are heard. The concerned communities therefore secure opportunities to engage and contribute to the production of valuable information on crucial matters such as education, governance, peace, agriculture, entrepreneurship, poverty eradication, entertainment, community health, nutrition, and development in general.

Keywords: Alternative forum; Grassroots; community; Community media; Non-profit making

1. Introduction

Community media primarily functions as an alternative communication platform for local communities. According to UNESCO[1], community media are either independently or corporately owned or managed by the geographical community. A community is primarily made up of individuals who may live close to one another and interact with one, another. It usually refers to a group of people who live in a certain area and have similar beliefs; these groups are typically found in social units larger than a household. McQuail[2] defines community media as any form of media that is created and controlled by a community; either a geographical community, a community of identity, or interest. Community media are non-profit making and involve community participation.

Community media includes non-commercial radio and television stations, print materials, and cyber platforms operated by communities or non-profit organizations. Stations often air, among others, emergency alerts, health information, weather updates, regional music, performing arts, cultural exchanges, civic education, and other social conversations on the issues affecting the concerned societies. Community media, therefore, help in placing tools of communication into the hands of grassroots communities and enabling the marginalized, such as women and the youth. These groups are, generally, the poorest, underprivileged and highly vulnerable in most societies particularly in the global south.

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2. A Brief Overview of Community Media

Worldwide, community media is a phenomenon that exists in most parts of the globe including the developed countries in the global North such as America, and Europe, and the regions in the global South such as Asia, and Africa. Some organizations that support such media include the Alliance for Community Media (ACM) [3] and America's National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) [4] in the United States of America; the Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE) in Europe [5]; India's Sangham Community Radio [6] and Radio Mawet [7], and Cybermohalla Project developed in Delhi's slums [8]; EcoNews Africa (ENA) [9].

The paper delves into the community media landscape in Kenya in terms of their establishment and community activities. The paper particularly focuses on the KCOMNET (Kenya Community Media Network) including the RANET (Radio-Internet) stations and SIDAREC (The Slums Information Development and Resource Centre) programmes. As Al-Hassan, *et al* [10] assert, community media operate within its mandate in the social responsibility of providing community news bulletins, current affairs, sporting, culture, and health programmes. These community initiatives involve participation through community ownership, Community management, Community participation, and Community production. Windal, *et al* [11] observe that, when individuals share a common background and frames of reference, the situation affords opportunities to communicate and members of the group have access to information about their concerns. As Kungu [12] asserts, community radio has become a powerful alternative platform for bridging the communication gap for rural communities given the nature of the socio-cultural experiences, and economic and geographical environments in which the communities dwell.

3. Community Media Landscape in Kenya

Kenya has a considerable number of community-owned and managed radios across the country; both in rural and urban areas. Some of them include Mang'etele in Kibwezi and Radio Thome under the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) which focuses on improving the livelihoods of communities in the Kitui area. Other community radios include Namlowe in Kasipul Kabondo, Mwanedu FM broadcasts in Voi town and also covers Taita Taveta County, Shinyalu Telecentre in Kakamega, Ekialo Kiona Suba Youth Radio (EK-FM) on Mfangano Island, Sauti ya Maendeleo in Rarienda, Bondo community media, R-FM community radio station at Limuru, Mugambo Jyetu in Meru north, Baliti FM in Isiolo, Ata Nayeche FM in Turkana County, Wajir Community Radio (WCR) in Wajir, Sogoot FM in Njoro, Serian FM in Maralal town, Sauti ya Wanjiku in Laikipia County, Ugunja community resource centre in Siyaya and Radio Rameny in Migori, among others. Most of these radios produce and share content in their local languages. A study conducted by Kungu [13], at Kangema RANET Community Radio, found that 62% of the respondents in the survey preferred content transmitted in their own local language.

Community media has also flourished in Nairobi City and its environs, particularly in the informal settlements. This includes Radios slum TVs and community ICT centers such include Koch Fm was founded at the Korogocho slum of Nairobi to give the urban poor (youth) a platform to discuss issues that affect them and come up with possible solutions. The activities of Koch FM include a focus on human rights, government, health and environment, entrepreneurship, religion, sports, games, and child welfare. The Koch media is responsible for the production of Korogocho Google mapping. The map indicated important locations and amenities e.g. health centers, schools, public toilets, watering points, and biogas projects. This was aimed at linking Korogocho community with the social amenities available in the slum.

Pamoja radio in Kibera slum in Nairobi has volunteer community broadcasters who are mostly the youth from the Kibera slum and its environs. Radio Pamoja addresses issues of environment, drugs, rights of women, community development, social issues, civic education, and peace. Kibera Film School run by the Hot Sun Foundation also works to promote the art of storytelling by training a new generation of screenwriters and filmmakers at the slum. The Hot Sun Foundation helps in developing the talents of the youth. e.g. in theatre, music, puppetry, dance, script writing, video, production, editing, and distribution.

In Mathare slums in Nairobi, the youth started a slum TV. The TV has become an avenue for the youth to express themselves and initiate dialogue within the community; for instance, in 2007 post-election violence in Kenya, Mathare slum youth captured scenes of violence and its aftermaths. These images have become a fundamental locale in the advocacy for peace, human rights education and reconciliation in the slum which is a multi-cultural environment.

Mtaani Radio in Riruta Satellite and Radio Domus in Ngong operate under the Koinonia-Kivuli community. This community was founded by Father Kizito Sesana; an Italian-Combonian missionary, journalist and philanthropist. The

Koinonia community owns youth radio, Print, and ICT programmes. The community focuses on issues relating to social justice and peace. It also seeks to promote integral human development and community life guided by the motto, “*We belong to each other*”, a call that appeals to community cohesion.

3.1. SIDAREC (The Slums Information Development and Resource Centre)

The Slums Information Development and Resource Centre (SIDAREC) has initiated a youth Technology Hub and resource center in Mukuru Kwa Njenga slum area of Nairobi, and other similar informal settings on the environs of the city. One of its establishments, for instance, is the Ruben FM radio station located in Mukuru slum. Community Radio focuses on helping empower and unite the residents of Mukuru Kwa Ruben community through education, information, and entertainment. The radio uses a popular motto ‘*Unganisha Jamii*’- loosely translated as “*unite the community*” [14]. Another area where SIDAREC community media has been established is the Pumwani- Majengo areas in Nairobi where Kijee TV and Radio operate. Among other resources and publications is the Habari ya vijijini tabloid. The community accesses a SIDAREC community library based at the centre.

3.2. KCOMNET (Kenya Community Media Network)

The Kenya Community Media Network (KCOMNET), is a voluntary alliance created by individuals, media professionals, non-governmental organizations, and community media organizations interested in development communications and community media. KCOMNET majorly aims at consolidating and strengthening the community media sector in Kenya. KCOMNET has, over the years, focused on Kenya's community media sector's expansion [15]. The Network provides a platform for networking with the general public, community media, and other media stakeholders. It also raises money for the development of community media in Kenya. Using various programming domains for community engagements such as policy lobbying, networking, content development, capacity building, and research. The organization acts as the umbrella network that supports and advances community media in Kenya. KCOMNET, for instance, has a newsletter dubbed, *Grassroot*, that offers incisive articles and analysis on community media initiatives and trends. The identity of this publication is a derivative of the realization that grassroots communities worldwide depend on community media initiatives as their essence. They provide information and aspirations of grassroots communities using a range of community media platforms, such as radio, newsletters, theatre, art, and music, among others.

3.3. RANET (Radio-Internet) radio stations

Community engagements in an alternative approach to communication with local farmers are being realized through RANET radio stations and Resource centres working with the Kenya Meteorological Department in the dissemination of hydro-meteorological and climate-related information. The RANET radio stations also provide versatile tools and technologies for engaging the concerned communities. The stations are mandated to interpret and air information on the climatical and weather forecasts, and issue early alerts on any looming catastrophes. Such Radio stations in Kenya include the Kangema (RANET) FM, Nganyi (RANET) FM in Vihiga, Kwale RANET FM based in Kwale, Oltoilo LeMaa (RANET) FM at Suswa, Bulala (RANET) FM in Budalangi area ad Garbatulla (RANET) FM in Isiolo [16]

4. Conclusion

Community media are quite distinct in their mission and focus and their impact is significant to the concerned societies. These media are non-commercial initiatives that target a unique populace, engaging and supporting the audiences to contribute to finding solutions for the issues affecting them. Since community media are owned, controlled, and produced by, for, and about communities, they are significant for fostering community advancement and for the sustainable preservation and promotion of local culture(s) and indigenous knowledge. This is because such media allow community participation in issues of concern by making contributions to important policy-making that impact their lives. The Programme has three main areas of activity. The media are therefore empowering communities to be in charge of their own communication. Organizations such as CBOs (Community-Based Organizations) and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) that work with community media primarily focus on organized efforts to use communication processes and media to bring social and economic improvements, largely for the grassroots communities. Community-based resource centers and telecentres support community talent and art such as theatre, creative writers, and musicians. Moreover, promoting community media gives the community a different platform to voice their ideas. Communities can consequently participate in discussions and developmental activities. Therefore, these media offer communities new horizons in communication through a range of interactive communication strategies by speaking with the audience directly in their languages.

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