Ethnic Media and Rural Development in Kenya

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Abstract

Kenya has seen a rapid expansion in the number and popularity of Ethnic FM Radio stations, among the reasons for this are: the liberalization of the airwaves and the relaxing of broadcasting monopolies by the state. The aim of this paper is to analyze the contribution of Ethnic Media to the development of the rural communities. The paper seeks to demonstrate the linkage between Ethnic FM Radio Broadcasting and community development at the grassroots level. The findings of this study indicate that Ethnic Media influence community development in Kenya by facilitating grassroots-level participation through different developmental programmes that have positively contributed to changing the rural people's ways of life. The stations produce 'local content' in the 'local language', thus giving people a chance to contribute their views on the programmes relevant to their needs. These include programmes on farming, health, environment, and business. Such programmes feature experts, professionals and opinion leaders who address numerous developmental topics.

Keywords: ethnic, development, community, media, fm, radio

1.1 Introduction

Ethnic Media in effect is a form of public-service broadcasting that serves an ethnic community rather than the whole nation. Ethnicity is a much debated term. Its roots lay in the Greek word ethnos, which means nation or people. Ethnicity generally refers to a community of people who have a common culture, history, language, and religion. Commonality along all these dimensions, however, is not a prerequisite for someone to belong to a particular ethnic community (Riggins, 1992). Ethnic identity is a form of social identity. It is a way individuals put themselves and others into categories(Turner, 1982), and it has three distinct dimensions: (a) self-identification as a member of a particular ethnic group, (b) knowledge of the ethnic culture, and (c) feelings about the behaviors that demonstrate belonging to the ethnic group. Knowledge of the ethnic culture means that someone has an intimate understanding of traditions, beliefs, priorities, values, and norms.

People develop their ethnic identity in the process of everyday life, as they come into contact with people who speak a different language, have a different cultural and historical background, and (or) have different religious beliefs. Ethnic identity, therefore, is a social construction that is the result of a dynamic process played out through communication (Anderson, 1991; Lieberson, 1985; Staino, 1980). As social constructions, ethnic identities are fluid, change over time, may disappear, fade, and resurge.

Ethnic Media in Kenya is at the heart of everyday practices that produce and transform ethnic identity, culture, and perceptions.

Ethnic Radio stations in Kenya like Kameme FM that broadcasts to the Kikuyu ethnic community, Mulembe FM that broadcasts to the Luhya ethnic community, Ramogi FM broadcasts to the Luo ethnic community, Muga FM broadcasts to the Meru ethnic community and Kass FM that broadcasts to the Kalenjine ethnic community among others are some of the vibrant ethnic media in Kenya.

Numerous studies document mass media impacts on public opinion and the agenda of policymakers (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). People depend on the media for vital information that will help them understand what is going on around them and to make informed decisions about their lives. This is especially true when they feel that a situation is ambiguous or there is a crisis of some sort (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach, 1998). Both in times of crisis and otherwise, Ethnic Media educates and orient newcomers to their new community and its resources, and also teach more subtle rules about correct behaviors and what the new society values.

The media plays a crucial role in facilitating information; and radio remains the predominant and most important form of media for most Kenyans particularly in the rural areas. Due to its low costs in production and distribution as well as its advantage of being an oral medium, radio is the medium that includes the 'poor and marginalized'.

Ethnic Media is designed to be based within and produced by the community, tailoring media to specific cultural backgrounds. It also gives voice to local people by allowing their own issues and demands to be broadcasted thus overcoming language obstacles, illiteracy and issues of cultural exclusion. As Girard notes, "It speaks the language and with the accent of the community" (Girard 2000)

The media occupy a key site and perform a crucial role in the public representation of unequal social relations and the play of crucial power. It is in and through representations, for example, that members of the media audience are variously invited to construct a sense of who 'we' are in relation to who we are not, whether as 'us' and 'them', 'citizen' and 'foreigner'. By such means, the social interests mobilized across society as marked out from each other, differentiated and often rendered vulnerable to discrimination. At the same time, however ethnic media can also serve to affirm social and cultural diversity and, moreover provide crucial spaces in and through which imposed identities or the interests of others can be resisted, challenged and changed.

1.2 Review of Related Literature

Development Communication

Development Communication has evolved in parallel to the main development approaches over time. It's 'modification' can be traced to the general development thinking from a top-down, linear paradigm to a more participative, bottom-up thinking. While the concept of Communication for Development had already appeared in the 1960s, the prevailing modernization theory served as the dominant paradigm, also for Development Communication (Waisbord 2001). In those years its theorists saw nothing more in a communication process than a message going from sender to receiver (Lasswell 1946). The schools of thought were dominated by behaviour change models, holding the view that problems of development are rooted in lack of knowledge and that providing people with information will be the solution to foster development (Servaes 1996).

This thinking was led by 'diffusion' studies (Daniel Lerner 1958, Wilbur Schramm 1964). Daniel Lerner and Wilbur Schramm have been the main theorists of this phase, promoting development strategies with a strong "pro-media, pro-innovation, and pro-persuasion focus." Emphasis was placed on media technology as channels and indicators of modernization and development in the current time definition (Waisbord 2001). Even more influential became the "diffusion of innovations" theory inserted by Everett Rogers (Rogers 1962/1983). He stated that innovations diffuse over time according to people's stages, distinguishing between early adopters of innovations and those who are slower in adoption, which he assured to be the majority of development countries populations. According to this view of a transmission bias he can be traced in one line with Lerner and Schramm (Waisbord 2001).

While the modernization paradigm was the predominant paradigm in Development Communication throughout the 1960s and 1970s the field already began to split in the late 1960s. A second approach arose within the field that challenged the information and behavior centered theories, stepping towards a rather participatory view of communication. The strongest critiques evolved from the dependency paradigm, led by Latin American social scientists and informed by critical and Marxist theories.

Their main argument was that underdevelopment in 'Third World countries' is the consequence of the western world's development and as such not merely an internal problem of the countries itself (Waisbord 2001, Servaes 1996). This growing perception also influenced the field of Development Communication. The awareness arose that countries needed their own information channels, based on their own cultural backgrounds and demands.

In the same line of critiques another branch of thinking emerged known as participatory approaches. One crucial aspect of top-down modernization theories was that they did not consider the demands and beliefs of people themselves and did not include them into the process of project implementation. Consequently, communities would not feel a sense of ownership of programs and 'innovations' imposed from outside (Jacobson 2004). In contrast, participatory theorists recognized that it was exactly this lack of participation, the inclusion of local knowledge and sensitivity to cultural diversity and the contexts which caused the failure of many development processes. The crucial step forward referring for the meaning of communication was that communication was no longer seen as mere information transmission but as a 'process of creating and stimulating understanding as the basis for development' (Waisbord 2001). The conviction arose that there is no panacea of development but that development should be endogenous to a society and it should thus originate from values and perceptions of the society, based on participatory, democratic decision-making processes (Fraser, Restrepo-Estrada 1998).

While the concept of Participation in Development emerged on the development agenda in the 1970s, there were different meanings of participation within the development community. The currently prevailing belief, adopted by UNICEF in 1990 and broadly accepted in recent development circles is that participation only succeeds by actively involving people in the processes and over the decisions influencing their lives. This crucial aspect criticized that people will only consider changes as relevant if they can make their voices heard and be able to directly participate. Otherwise, it has been argued that people will feel less ownership over the process and will be less ambitioned to invest and participate in the long-term (Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada, 1998).

While early thinking and action of Development Communication took place in the framework of the modernization approach, current Development Communication has adopted a participatory way of thinking that led to the recent Participatory Development Approaches including Participatory Communication as one crucial instrument for development. The current view on communication is a fundamental two-way, interactive and participatory one, emphasizing the process of communication such as the exchange of meanings and the relationships communication is able to create (Servaes 1996). The shift in development thinking has opened the door for a much broader role for communication than under the former paradigms and made steps to leave behind the dominance and neglect of people's backgrounds and demands.

Those participatory development approaches have also influenced changes in the way media is used in development to include people into the process of 'media making'. In this coherence Ethnic media moved into the focus of development processes (Fraser, Restrepo-Estrada 1998). The current aim of Development Communication is the removal of any constraints to pave the way for a more equal and participatory society (Huesca 2002, Servaes, Jacobson and White 1996).

Participatory Development Communication

Predominantly two major approaches of Participatory Communication influenced the sector of Development Communication since the emergence of participatory models. These were the dialogical or critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and the ideas of access, participation and self-management articulated in the UNESCO debates of the 1970s (Servaes 1993). Both approaches involve the notions of access and participation as the core ideas of a normative theory of alternative communication. Freire, in his 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1968) stresses that many political and educational projects have failed because they have been designed from the implementers' 'view of reality', not considering and involving the people to whom the programs have been directed, except as mere objects of their action (Freire 1968: 84).The idea of Development Broadcasting, stems from this participatory school of thought, particularly the 'critical conscious' model of Paulo Freire.

The Freirean Perspective

The current, predominant form of Development Communication, namely Participatory Development Communication (PDC) received high contribution from the theory of Paulo Freire.

The perception that Development Communication cannot change people but that it can only support them to change themselves is the centre of today's practices of employing communication technologies and strategies as part of rural development interventions (Manyozo 2004). Freire's argues that positive outcome of educational or political programs can only be generated by respecting the "particular view of the world held by the people".

The intention of his model is to prompt the individual to critically reflect on his or her own living conditions and problems. By this he premises "the right to participation and emancipation regarding social, cultural, and historical reality" as a fundamental right for everyone (Servaes 1996). Freire believed in people's ability to learn, to reflect dominating social, political and economic contradictions and consequently to be able to take actions against those oppressive elements in their lives. This is what he calls 'conscientization'.

According to Freire, in the process of 'conscientization', men begin to single out elements from their 'background awareness' and to reflect upon them (Freire 1968: 70). Stemming from his practice and theory of dialogical education he holds the view that dialogue leads to ongoing processes of reflection and creating awareness, resulting in action. He underlines mutual, horizontal dialogue between the people and between the 'oppressed' and other instances as the encounter in which reflection and resulting action is addressed to the 'world' that is meant to be transformed, to be developed (Freire 1968: 77).

By this Freire goes beyond his educational model and suggests a role of media in developing countries. His conscientization model "was designed to bring about new conditions by breaking through a culture of acceptance and silence and encourage active participation as a subject" (Richards 2001). By emphasizing the crucial importance of dialogue he points to the core importance of communication for learning and creating awareness.

Ethnic Media in the Context of the Globalization of Media

Ethnicity and geography clearly affect and are affected by each other. This relationship is referred as geo-ethnicity (Kim, Jung, & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). This term emphasizes that no two communities can be assumed to be the same, even if they seem very similar from the outside. Ethnicity cannot be considered without geography, and geography cannot be considered without ethnicity. The interaction of geography and ethnicity is the key to understanding the daily experiences and needs of ethnic communities, and the media that serve them.

Recent years have seen a strong trend towards the globalization of media. Colossal media enterprises of a commercial nature have been formed and increasingly spa the globe with their programmes. However, audience research has shown that people prefer to listen to programmes with their own cultural orientations rather than those imported from others.

While some people argue that globalization of the media disrupts local cultures, others state that global media intensifies the consciousness of the world as a whole and is therefore beneficial. They see global media and local media (ethnic media) as complementary, each forming important functions that the other cannot. By definition, global media need to attract large audiences for their advertising content. Thus, they broadcast programmes that attempt to satisfy a common thread of sensitivities among large numbers of people using banal entertainment formats. The lack of variety in programme orientation is, therefore, generally attributed to the "self-censorship" of the market, which uses entertainment as the sole criterion for selection. Ethnic media works in the cultural context of the ethnic community it serves, it deals with local issues in the local language, it is relevant to local problems and concerns; and its aim is to help the community to develop socially, culturally, and economically. This is not only in contrast with global media operations; it is also in contrast with centralized urban-based national media, even of a public service nature, for they are often remote from the realities of rural communities and their needs.

How Ethnic Media Influence Community Development in Kenya

Ethnic media perform important roles that help in community development including the promotion of local identity, character and culture, Ethnic media provides programming that is particular to its ethnic community's identity and character. It relies principally on local content. It includes outside news and events that have a special interest or implication for its audience.

Community culture includes artistic expression through local music, dance, poetry, theatre, and story telling, these are featured strongly by most Ethnic FM Radio Broadcasts. Local performers are encouraged to go on air, uninhibited by considerations of the 'professional standards' they may have acquired from the mainstream media.

The value of content and 'localness' usually outweighs formal quality and 'professionalism', through this should not be used as an excuse for sub-standard technical production.

Local language and expressions are the raw material that feeds ethnic media. They are the cement of cultural diversity which is as important for the successful future of humanity as biological diversity. This enhances the development of the ethnic community.

Ethnic Media act as mobilizing forces by providing members of more established ethnic communities a kind of social barometer. They offer an understanding of the current relationship between the ethnic community and the broader society. They identify points of contention, and offer a venue for the ethnic community to debate the issues at hand and come to a consensus about the best course of action. In the issue resolution process, ethnic media serve as mobilizing agents.

Ethnic media create a diversity of voices and opinions on the air, through its openness to participation to all sectors and people in an ethnic community. Some discord is present in all ethnic communities; they are not the peaceful, harmonious groupings that outsiders may idealistically imagine. Discord may be caused by differing interests, by differing linguistic or religious backgrounds, or even by some ancient feud. The acknowledgement of conflict is necessary for democracy and for democratic communities. Through an understanding of why conflict exists, communities can understand themselves better and pave the way to resolve conflicts. A function of Ethnic media is to try objectively to air all sides of a discussion, without itself taking sides.

Ethnic media provides a diversity of programmes in a variety of formats and styles. For example, roundtable discussions, reportage, interviews, call-in programmes and live broadcasts of meetings in the community. Audience preferences are taken into account in deciding what formats are most suitable.

The content also covers a wide rage of topics, again in accordance with the expressed desires and needs of the audience. Content is mainly determined by the lifestyles and livelihood of the ethnic community and by the problems it faces. In rural areas, themes such as health, farming, fishing, environment, credit, marketing of produce and small-scale enterprises, usually feature prominently, but always set in the context of the ethnic community's actual situation.

News broadcast may also focus on different types of content. They may cover only local events and issues, or they may include national items that have local relevance, or they may even broadcast national and international news per se in the case of a remote Ethnic community with no access to other media channels.

Ethnic media encourages open dialogue and democratic process. The ancient Greeks, who invented democracy, conducted their political debate in public. All those who wished could be present at the meetings to listen and voice their views. Sheer numbers of people make this impossible today, and for this reason, democratic process has become distant from ordinary citizens. Typically, once politicians are elected, their contact with their electorates is limited, and they go about their tasks without much further consultation or debate with them.

It is a function of Ethnic media to provide an independent platform for interactive discussion about matters and decisions of importance to its community. This is in keeping with the decentralization process now being implemented in many countries including Kenya, a purpose of which is to bring democratic decision-making closer to the people concerned.

However, for social and economic progress to take place, democratic processes cannot start and finish in the community. They must reach into the government and private institutions operating in the community, as well as to policy makers and authorities at the local, regional, and even national level. The public debates aired by the Ethnic media will certainly be heard by locally-based staff of government and private institutions, and the radio's content should be relayed by them to their superiors. This lays the foundation for development initiatives that are responsive to the community's felt needs and possibilities. In sum, the core of democratic process is the ability of people to hear and make themselves heard. Ethnic media provides the forum for that to happen.

Ethnic media promotes development and social change in the rural areas. People in poor communities tend to be fatalistic about their situation. They will all have individual perceptions, but development cannot take place on the basis of these. What is needed is a collective perception of the local reality and of the options for improving it. This can only be achieved through internal discussions within the ethnic community about its situation, the causes, and possible actions for improvement.

Ethnic media provide a perfect platform for internal discussions and for reaching a collective perception of the situation. Specific problems can be analyzed, remedies discussed, and those most affected - or who can help with the solution - mobilized to collective action. Anti-social behavior by minorities in an ethnic community can also be modified by exerting pressure from the majority.

Promote Good Governance. In poor ethnic communities, local authorities and politicians can easily take advantage of citizens, either individually or as a group, in part because the marginalized and oppressed have no way to complain. Ethnic media help people obtain their just rights by giving them a platform to air their grievances. And through playing a community watchdog role, it makes local authorities and politicians more conscious of their public responsibilities. Broadcasting of discussions, or questions and answers, between members of the ethnic community and local authorities on some issue is a technique that is often used. Another technique is to broadcast live the discussion of local government meetings.

Ethnic media encourages participation, sharing of information and innovation. Participation is a key word in development circles, but it is not always appreciated that participation and communication are two sides of the same coin, for when people communicate about their situation and about options for improving it, they are in effect participating. And they are also laying the foundation for collective action in which they will participate. Ethnic media encourage participation by providing a platform for debate analysis, and the exchange of ideas and opinions

In addition, ethnic media allows for the sharing of information and innovation. For example, one family or group in an ethnic community may have solved some problem that is common to many other people, such as obtaining farm credit from a bank. A broadcast account by them explaining how they went about it and the procedures required would be the stimulus for other families to do the same. Another example might be providing information about a farmer in the area who had multiplied seed of an improved vegetable variety and was willing to sell it.

Lastly Ethnic media give voice to the voiceless in the rural areas. In many traditional societies, women and youth are virtually ignored in community affairs. But no country, county or ethnic community can change and develop equitably and satisfactorily without the active and informed participation of its women, youth and minority groups.
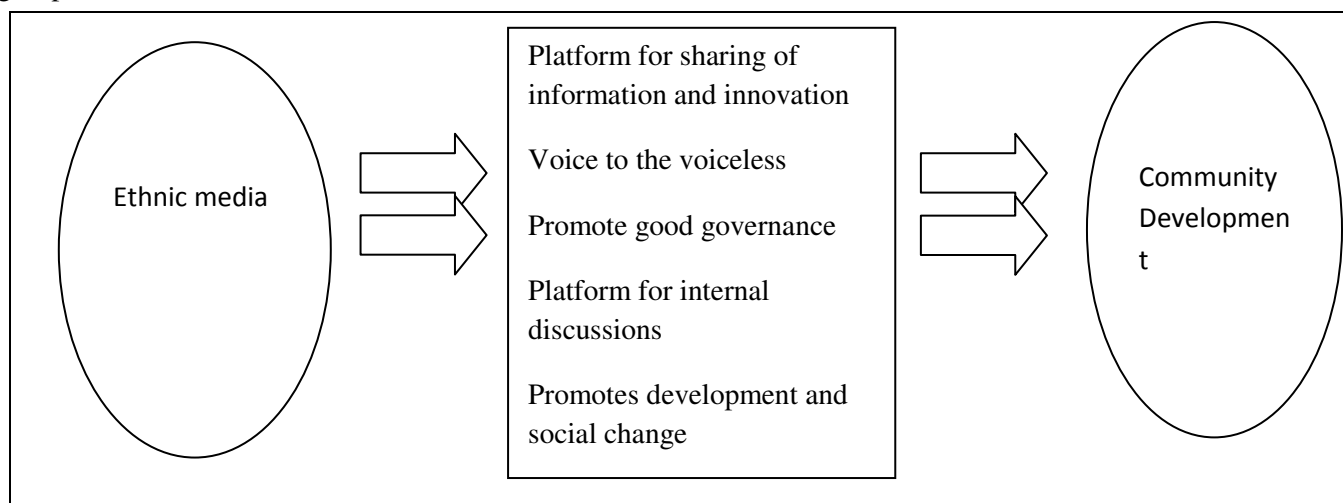

Figure 1. Presents the conceptual framework that seeks to visualize the relations leading to community development through Ethnic media in Kenya.

The systematic use of communication can be a key factor for change and development. It can help individuals, communities and whole societies to become conscious and introduce change in a democratic way. Communication serves as the basis for generating awareness, consensus building, creating participation in processes of change and development, informed decision-making processes, and for finding conflict solutions. It can help individuals to change their attitudes and their behavior patterns and introduce new ideas and practices into their lives that will improve their economic and social situation.

Ethnic media provides an opportunity for the marginalized groups in the community as active actors in the process of development communication. Since a shift in development thinking over the last decades recognized the relevance of program implementations which are endogenous to the perceptions and backgrounds of the persons concerned, this research was conducted in order to evaluate to what extent Ethnic media contributes to the development of its listening community in the rural areas.

The shift from top-down towards a rather participatory approach moved the relevance of Communication for Development high on the agenda of development thinking. This process changed the meaning of communication from a mere information transmitter towards a crucial tool for the creation and stimulation of awareness as basis for change. Since the need for own information channels, based on the peoples' cultural backgrounds and demands became recognized as essential for development.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn Ethnic media plays a key role in scoping out space for a type of media operation that is fundamentally different from any other form of media production; the emphasis is on extending communications rights to all members of the ethnic community while also focusing on the importance of equality of access and participation especially in the rural areas. Ethnic media insist on overt resistance to the commercialization of communication and the commodification of communities by refusing to treat them as passive anonymous 'audiences' or worse, mere targets for advertising. Instead Ethnic media insists on the power and importance of the local and the micro issues that are relevant to audiences and participants on an everyday basis. Ethnic media assumes responsibility for its actions, agendas and positions by remaining accountable to its constituencies. Thus, the interests served by Ethnic media are those of its Ethnic community. Ethnic media generates a sense of belonging for its listeners, that they are part of and connected to a bigger listenership; it creates the same feeling of community for the audience, who become part of a community of shared interest within the station; and it encourages a sense of identity for the Ethnic community served by the media.

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