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The Emergence and Growth of Vernacular Radio in Kenya:
A case study of radio having a positive economic impact

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Abstract

The research traces the emergence of vernacular radio in the gradually evolving Kenyan media scene and its potential to bring economic benefits to listeners who have been linguistically excluded for tens of years from information via the mainstream radio. Historically, radio in Kenya used only two languages: English and Kiswahili.

Using as a case study of one vernacular radio station called Ramogi FM which broadcasts in the Dholuo language (spoken by the third largest ethnic community in Kenya), the paper traces how the radio channel has grown from a regional to a national reach and is now able to reach Dholuo speakers in the diaspora with online availability, and whether it has had a positive economic impact- on its audience.

The paper examines how the gradual growth of the vernacular media has had various positive impacts on the household economy of its audiences who have for a long time been excluded from news items, commercial advertisements and other programmes rich with information that have the potential for positive changes in their economic lives.

There are two main ways this has happened:

1. A lot of these impacts come from the broadcasting of educative programmes related to economics and business, talk shows with accomplished entrepreneurs and promotions that create cash prizes never accessible previously to this new audience.
2. Vernacular media has also employed hundreds of journalists who broadcast in the vernacular languages as well as those who work in other production or technical related areas.

In addition, musicians who have previously been receiving limited air play from the mainstream media and suffering low popularity and low income have also received a major boost to their business. Having a channel that plays their music over and over again has both provided greater popularity for them and an economic bonus from concerts and sales of albums.

The research also examines how more vernacular radio stations can be used to champion socio-economic and cultural transformation as well as promote peaceful co-existence in the ethnically diverse Kenya.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter One.....

i) The background to radio broadcasts and the emergence of vernacular radio in Kenya

ii) Broadcast media.....

iii) The need for vernacular media.....

Chapter Two.....

The case of Radio Ramogi: programming and economic impacts...

Chapter Three.....

Challenges Facing Vernacular Radio in Kenya

Conclusion and recommendations.....

References.....

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth in the media sector in Kenya since independence has been lauded as key in the social-economic and political transformation of the country. The growth was significant in the last two decades largely due to the liberalisation and privatization of the economy and the media sector.

Despite numerous developments in the media sector, radio remains the biggest source of news for a majority of Kenyans. This is largely because radio is affordable and reaches even the remotest parts of the country. The cost of buying and running radio sets is low. What is more, even cheap mobile telephones have radio facilities. This means that the dual mobile phone-radio handsets are becoming ever more popular not only among rural people but also among young people who are increasingly attracted to it for its entertainment and new programming trends.

However, the radio landscape has been predominantly characterised by broadcasts in the two main languages (English and Kiswahili) which excludes a majority of the less educated and rural based audiences whose understanding of the two languages is either limited or not practical. Attempts to provide local languages with limited radio air-time from the national government-owned broadcaster, KBC, for approximately four hours daily, divided into two segments, did not satisfy these audiences' needs. The timing was either unfavourable or too short to make programmes with significant impacts for the approximately eight local languages covered at the time (Kikuyu, Dholuo, Kipsigis, Kuria, Kisii, Luhya, Kamba and Meru). The liberation of the airwaves in 1990 led to the establishments of several radio stations which have risen to a current total of 158. Of these, 54 are FM radio stations dedicated mainly to broadcasting in 19 local languages.

The population which have for many years been excluded from mainstream communication has been the biggest beneficiaries as information relevant to their social and economic wellbeing has been democratised causing various changes in their economic lifestyles. The five major ethnic groups whose population make more than 70 per cent of Kenya take a major share

of these stations with each having between 3 (Luhya) and 8 (Luo) radio stations. Royal Media, a private media company, leads in this field with twelve FM radio stations broadcasting in various local languages: Inooro (Kikuyu), Ramogi (Dholuo), Mulembe (Luhya), Musyi (Kamba), Muuga (Meru), Changei (Kalenjin), Egesa (Kisii), Wimwaro (Embu) Vuuka (Maragoli), Sulwe FM (Bukusu), and Maa FM (Maasai)

Other vernacular FM stations include Kass FM, Kitwek FM (Kalenjin) Coro FM, Timau Radio and Kameme FM (Kikuyu), Radio Nam Lolwe, Radio Lake Victoria, Mayienga FM and Kewi Radio (Luo), Star FM (Kisii), West FM (Luhya) and (Kikuyu) Mbaitu FM (Kamba), Kaya FM (Agiriyama), Minto, Kitwek (Kipsigis), and Anguo FM (Taita).

The Media Council of Kenya estimates that these vernacular stations now command 42 per cent of the total radio market share (Media Council Annual Report 2014). This is a growth from what the BBC (BBC World Service Trust 2007), in 2007 had estimated at 27 per cent of the radio market. Moreover, the vernacular radio stations keep increasing not only their number of listeners, but also their reach in the country, which has expanded from being concentrated in the areas dominated by speakers of their languages of broadcast to national and international scales using the internet.

Advertisers keen to maximize their returns on investment have increasingly spread their spending to the regional vernacular stations which are popular in part because they cover local issues and news in a way that national broadcasters cannot. The growth of these vernacular radio channels have come with various challenges including their choice of content, the professionalism of their workforce and the demographic dynamics of their target audience. The challenges have seen them fall into a lot of problems and they have been sometimes accused of hate speech and lack of morals.

The first chapter traces the background to the development of Kenya's media industry before and after independence and the developments that specifically formed a basis for the sprouting of vernacular media. Chapter two will examine the case study of one of the vernacular radios in Kenya, Ramogi FM and how its programming and its establishment has had an economic

impact on both listeners and associates. The FM broadcasts in Dholuo, the third largest ethnic language in the country, and has a national coverage including broadcast online which reaches to even those outside the country.

Chapter three will delve into the challenges that these radios go through in their bid to disseminate information and programming in the various languages in the ethnically diverse country with 42 tribes and in the wake of accusations that they are used to fan ethnic hatred, an increasingly sensitive issue in the country at the moment.

The paper concludes with a summary of the observations made and recommendations on how this special and rapidly growing media can be used to further the mission of economic transformation in the various communities who are engaged in various economic activities and need fresh information and new skills to better their productivity.

This study seeks answers for the following three research questions:

- i. What are the factors that have facilitated the emergence and growth of vernacular radio in Kenya?
- ii. How has vernacular radio programming helped in uplifting the economic lives of its listeners who have for many decades excluded from information and public discourse?
- iii. What challenges do vernacular radio face in the rapidly modernizing media and does it pose any threats in the socio-political landscape of the ethnically diverse Kenya?

Methodology

To answer question ii), I examine three programmes regularly broadcast on Ramogi FM, which provide economic and business information to the audience. These are:

“*Tich Tire*” meaning ‘work in progress’. This mid-morning show every weekday hosts successful entrepreneurs and allows for phone-ins from listeners who ask questions related to the topic discussed by the invited entrepreneur.

‘*Ohigla Manyien*’ which translates as ‘a new boiling pot’, a programme on modern technologies used in improving the ease of running businesses like the use of digital payments,

mobile banking and the internet to make work easier in the business circles. Listeners also call in to ask questions as well as contribute.

Finally, I will consider "*Pur gi Pith*", a programme which talks about farming and livestock rearing.

I describe the content of these programmes, interview the producers and the editors about the achievements of the programmes, and interview a small selection of the audience to these programmes as to their views on how helpful these programmes have been to improve their lives or livelihoods.

CHAPTER ONE

The background to radio broadcasts and the emergence of vernacular radio in Kenya

In Kenya, the history of radio is closely tied to the political and economic interests of the colonial and the post-colonial governments. The nationalist movement, the Mau Mau war, the 1952 Emergency and the commitment of Her Majesty to give Kenya independence influenced colonial policy towards media and the development of radio broadcast in the country before independence. The colonial government's dominant perception of the press was always that of an unnecessary evil that deserved close supervision and control. This for a long time did a lot to suppress media expansion (Mieke 2009). Initially, the white settler owned press was merely a vehicle for disseminating government information to the citizenry, and especially the white settler communities. The same trend was picked up by the post-independence regime. Government had a tight grip on media ownership and control.

This scenario was replicated in many other parts of Africa. Radio outside the state owned systems has been a development of the late nineties. As late as 1985, there were less than ten independent radio stations in the entire continent. Newspapers were not left off the hook.

Print media was scarce and niche oriented especially in the era where literacy levels were still very low. The early missionaries only introduced literacy aimed to equip their new Christian converts with the ability to read the Bible. This early print press was largely comprised of religious writing. Two other church publications followed the Taveta Chronicle, published by the Missionary Society in 1895 and Kenya's older known print publication: Kikuyu News produced by the Church of Scotland and Wathiomu Mukinyu published by the Catholic Church, which also launched Rafiki Yetu.

The first non-religious print press in Kenya is The Standard, which began life as the African Standard, a Weekly published in Mombasa in 1901. The venture started by an Asian trader Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee was sold four years later to serve the interests of the white settler community, who moved it to Nairobi, turned it into a daily paper, and renamed it the East African Standard. The colonial powers were still keen on controlling and influencing the

development of the media in Kenya. More print papers emerged from the Africans who aimed to use the media as a tool to fight for independence especially from the mid-1920s.

By 1946, close to 20 independent newspapers, mainly by African nationalists, had emerged to assist in agitating for independence. The newspapers included Jomo Kenyatta's *Muigwithania*, (launched in 1928), Oginga Odinga's *Ramogi* and *Nyanza Times*, and Paul Ngei's *Uhuru wa Mwafrika*. Among the pioneer titles was *Tangazo*, published by Harry Thuku in 1921. All the African newspapers were banned barely a decade later after the colonial government declared a state of emergency in Kenya in 1952. After the state of emergency was lifted in 1960, the ban was also withdrawn as it became clear that the independence of Kenya was inevitable.

i) Broadcast media

Kenya's broadcast media has a long history stretching back to 1927 when the colonial government set up the first English radio broadcasting, which served only whites and Asians. It went on air in 1928. This was the first wave of radio broadcast reforms. The British East African Company used the medium as a tool for relaying services to the expatriate community as broadcasting was minimal and rarely tailored for the local population. Later, World War II meant that African relatives needed to be informed about their relatives recruited into the war and so some content began targeting this segment of the population.

In 1953, the African Broadcasting Services (ABC) was established carrying inclusive broadcast content to the local Kenyan communities. Major African languages (Dholuo, Kikuyu, Kikamba, Kipsigis, Nandi, Luhya, and Kiswahili) were used at different times of the day and night. In 1954 the Kenya Broadcasting Service (KBS) was established with regional stations in Mombasa (Sauti ya Mvita), Nyeri (Mount Kenya Station), and Kisumu (Lake Station). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service started broadcasting in Kiswahili in 1957 (BBC, 2009). After 30 years of colonial rule, the second wave of radio broadcasts began after the country attained independence in 1963. Radio was still heavily characterised by government control or referred to as public radio.

During the formative years of independence, radio broadcasting was chiefly intended for social and economic development (Bourgault, 1995). Towards the end of the '70s, the political focus was geared towards consolidating the country into a one party state and radio became a crucial

political machine. Political content took centre stage. Two main languages dominated the radio broadcast, English and Kiswahili, but broadcasting hours were few and limited. At midnight, a national anthem was played and studios closed until the next morning.

Kenya holds a special place in the history of privately owned radio in the entire continent as Africa's first form of community radio was established there. The Homa Bay Community Radio Station was set up in the western part of Kenya in May 1982.

This station in essence was not only an experiment in decentralisation of structures and programming but also an effort to gain experience in the utilization of low-cost technology for broadcasting. It was mainly focused on the Kenyan communities living along the shores of Lake Victoria. It was an initiative by the Kenyan government and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with considerable autonomy from the government 'voice' like in the traditional state media. The radio would soon be shut down by the Kenyan government two years later as the government kept a keen eye on any radio broadcast following a coup attempt.

The rebelling soldiers had held a radio journalist at the then Voice of Kenya (VoK) and ordered him to announce that the then president Daniel Arap Moi had been overthrown. The government was not willing to take chance with any other radio broadcast not under their full control. The liberalization of the airwaves started in 1991, albeit in an unstructured and uncoordinated manner and went on – grudgingly – over the years. Several legal reforms led to the present liberalised airwaves that the country enjoys with 138 radio stations on air.

The Attorney General set up the first Task Force on Press Law in 1993 under the chairmanship of veteran journalist Hilary Ng'weno to review and make recommendations on a comprehensive legal framework for the exercise of freedom of the Press and the development of dynamic and responsible print and electronic media (Mbeke 2008). Two years later, the task force submitted its report to the Attorney General, but the resulting two Bills, The Kenya Mass Media Commission Bill (1995) to regulate the operations of the mass media, and The Press Council of Kenya Bill (1995) for the registration of the Press Council of Kenya, failed to capture the spirit of the Task Force. A legal lull on the matter followed until Moi's final term in 1998.

Just as the colonial government lifted a ban on local newspapers three years before Kenya gained independence, Moi was only four years away from retirement, which explains his soft stand on the liberalised airwaves. He was willing to let go and this was the trigger for the third wave of radio. The present reforms have disrupted all the traditions of government control and use of the mainstream languages with 52 vernacular radio stations now on air broadcasting a wide range of content as well as promoting the active engagement of listeners.

The Need for Vernacular media

The demographic dynamics in Kenya came into play to give birth to the emergence of vernacular radio as soon as the airwaves were freed. A need developed to use the “officially ignored” indigenous languages spoken by the majority of those with lower levels of education or no education at all. Radio as opposed to print media which still required literacy or Television which would be quite expensive to establish, was best suited to use vernacular language.. To this largely rural and less formally educated part of the population, the official languages are secondary languages which are very remote from their immediate needs and daily living (Orao 2009).

A majority of Kenyans (67 per cent) still live in the rural areas where two dynamics exist: higher illiteracy levels and low levels of connection to electricity (less than 30 per cent on average according to Kenya’s Rural Electrification Authority). This makes this audience tend towards using radio, which is a cheaper gadget to acquire and power, as their main source of information. The low levels of literacy (44 per cent according to the data from KNBS 2010), means these people need a radio medium that speaks in their mother tongue to put them on a par with the rest of the country as far as the information flow is concerned.

The mainstream media in Kenya for many years (as discussed earlier) largely used either English or Kiswahili in their broadcast. For this reason, it was not possible for the largely rural population to participate in public discourse and public affairs which are conducted in the official languages. The language handicap results not only from what James Orao, a tutorial fellow at the Department of Linguistics and Languages, German Studies Section, at the University of Nairobi calls the Kenyan "Tower of Babel" with its more than forty indigenous

languages (Orao 2009), but also from flawed national language planning and language policy. This led to a large section of the citizenry missing much of what goes on in the public.

The vernacular radio emerged to serve this population as the mainstream local radio stations that broadcast in the official languages also failed to quench the thirst for local music performed in the vernacular. Presenters in these stations continuously found it hard to play songs done in these local languages without appearing to be ethnically biased. Fans of this musical genre were also left out. In the year 2000, Jane Kimotho pioneered the vernacular radio scene by setting up the Kikuyu-language station Kameme FM, which quickly established itself as one of the most popular FM radio stations in Nairobi and its catchment area. Targeting the Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu in Nairobi and around Mt. Kenya and parts of the Rift Valley and Eastern provinces, the station had an audience brought together, in part, by a common language, but equally by disaffection with mainstream news media and the new urban Kiswahili- and English-language FM radios.

The station was primarily a commercial enterprise, but it had the backing of the government, which had hoped it could eventually be used as a new gateway to reaching an important political constituency, the Gikuyu Meru Embu Association community, then broadly at odds with the Moi who was looking forward to hand over power to 'safer' hands than to those who did not share his political ideology. Today there is a large variety of commercial, state-run and community based local language stations on air. The one and half decades since the year 2000 has seen an average of four vernacular radio stations set up annually.

Mr Kipnyango Seroney is among the founders of Kalenjin Radio, Kass FM. He says there was a highly unsatisfied need to incorporate the local populations into the information network that the mainstream radio never met. He says since Kass was founded in 2005, there has been a huge transformation in the social, cultural, economic lives of its target audience including those living abroad, since Kass FM is also available online with an office based in London.

“We have bridged the gap between those at home and those living overseas as we discuss issues relevant to our home counties depending on our experiences in many parts of the world. We hold topical debates every Saturday and the people at home call in as we interact and even

allow them to send greetings to their loved ones abroad. The informed citizens in many occasions then begin to place demands for better services especially to their devolved governments and we have seen many changes happen. As professionals living abroad, some of us at times identify investment hot spots with potentials to transform the lives of the local people economically, all thanks to the fact that there is a vernacular radio on air,” Mr Seroney said in an interview with the researcher.

The stations are sustained by various financial sources with many relying on the sale of advertisements while others are donor sponsored. There have not been cases of shut downs or failures, which is an indication of the high success rates of the vernacular radio in the country.

Twelve of them are run by the Samuel Macharia-owned Royal Media Services (RMS); KBC runs five vernacular stations and two vernacular regional services. The Communication Authority says more local language stations are awaiting licences. The vernacular radios are especially popular in rural areas, with a majority of listeners being older than 30 years. Major towns have since joined the listenership due to more rural-urban migration and the expanding reach of the radio stations to larger areas. The radio stations are even accessible online, which helps to capture those in the diaspora as well.

Head of Vernacular Radio at Royal Media Services, Mr Fred Afune says the population which has been largely locked out of information due to the language barriers have literally been ‘kept in the dark.’

“Imagine someone who cannot get to know of this new product that can ease their businesses or farming, someone who is not aware of how other regions have done a certain task in a simple, efficient and less expensive way, or someone who does not know a certain road has been opened. All facets of life are influenced by information and if you look at this in an economic way, information has driven real change to the listeners’ livelihoods,” he said in an interview with the researcher.

CHAPTER TWO

A case study of a radio having a positive economic impact: Ramogi FM

i) Ramogi FM overview

As a tool that has for a long time been used to address different population needs, the new access to information through radio is a big boost to the use of communication-based strategies that address social, political, economic, and cultural issues of different populations through increased information access and participation. Using the power of radio, many societies have been able to stimulate social change.

Vernacular media in Kenya is fast gaining popularity. According to the Ipsos-Synovate 2011 study, top radio broadcasting languages by time spent listening are Luo (28 per cent), Kiswahili (26 per cent), Kikuyu (25 per cent), Kalenjin (24.8 per cent), and Kamba (22 per cent). Local-language radio audiences spend at least three hours per day listening to the broadcasts. Local language stations have gained in popularity because people believe that community media directly address the concerns of the audiences, as opposed to national media that may have little or no content touching on the issues that affect them.

As of October 2015, 138 licensed FM radio stations were on air according to Kenya's Communication Authority data. Ramogi FM forms part for the 54 that broadcast in languages other than English and Kiswahili, the country's two official languages. Also known as Radio Ramogi, the radio was ranked second among vernacular radios with the widest listenership according to the Media Council Report on The Performance of Vernacular Radio Stations in Kenya (2011). It broadcasts in Dholuo, a vernacular language spoken by the third largest local language group.

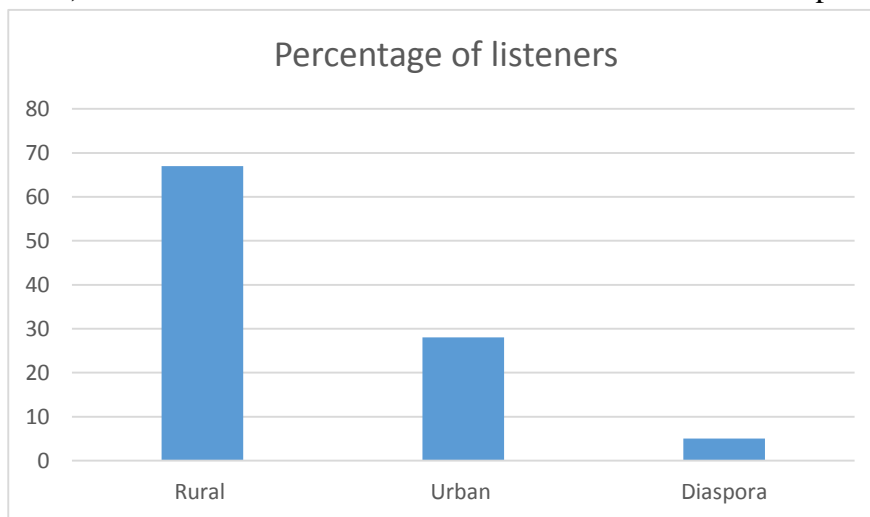
Started in 2003 and owned by Media entrepreneur Samuel Macharia, the radio runs in a typical day and night programme format with eight shows tailored for specific moments during the day. The businessman had earlier established a Swahili Radio station in the mid-90s and experienced difficulties from the oppressive KANU regime. The radio station then picked up

very well in the late 90s and Macharia saw a huge opportunity in the untapped vernacular media scene.

Following the liberation of the airwaves in 1998, many radio stations that emerged continued the old legacy of using the two official languages. A huge proportion of (especially) the majority rural population were literally left out of the information network as they had difficulty or total inability to understand either or both the official languages. Radio remained the primary gadget for access to information, and so the decision was well within the strategy to democratise information as the 24 year regime of President Moi was entering its sun set phase.

The stations' listeners have for a long time included the rural communities with access to radio but with time and after its expansive reach into the urban areas, the audience has changed into a demographic mix. The station's depth of coverage on local issues around the Luo dominated Counties in the Western parts of Kenya and the attachment the new urban elite still has with their rural homes has helped in the acquisition of this new audience niche which it says has hit more than 1.5 million.

ii) The Radio station can now be received live in most parts of the country and online



via

<http://www.ramogifm.co.ke/>. This has simply made the station able to reach a global audience with the Luo in the diaspora having the opportunity to tune in to the programmes in their vernacular language. There is a continuous 24 hours engagement via social media as the audience places comments, requests and sometimes interactions with the programme participants and presenters. Its programming diversity has been developed over time with the changing audience

mix and competition from other emerging vernacular radio stations broadcasting in the Luo language as well.

iii) A typical Day's Programming

The radio runs 24 hours a day with programmes varying slightly during weekends and holidays. At 5.00 in the morning, the station opens with a programme called Ramogi Kogwen. This is a Luo word that typically translates to the "Dawn". Most African culture emphasises a brilliant beginning in the morning as a determinant to how the day and the week looks like, so the programme is meant to cheer up listeners for a brilliant day.

Ramogi Kogwen rolls into a breakfast show that keeps the audience informed about the happenings of the night and briefs about the previous day's news. Newspapers are also reviewed in brief to give listeners what is covered in the major print press.

"Lots of commercial activations, music, tit bits, half hour of both local and international sports news, business news with Milton Ochieng', Lak chogo comedy with Bon Okello and Josephine Adhiambo and also Akirikiki by Ajo Mbuta and Nyauyoma," the radio station notes in its website.

At 8.am there is Ramogi Baraza, an interactive talk show on current affairs with studio guests. Listeners are invited to call in, comment and ask questions. From 9.15 – 10am, music winds up the first programme punctuated by the civic education tips branded 'Ombulu e teko' which discusses electoral topics including voter awareness and citizen education on rights to accountable leadership. The subject of elections is highly regarded by the community whose political leaders have been involved in active politics since pre-independence Kenya but has not had one of their own ascend to power.

A mid-morning show named 'Wang' Onyango', a Dholuo word for mid-morning, follows the early morning show. This is a session packed with music and housekeeping tips targeting the family units. Modern and popular Luo music gets played to entertain the mid-morning audience. The music is punctuated with health related discussions surrounding eating habits and beauty tips dubbed 'odiechiengwa gi laktar' which loosely translates to 'our day with the doctor in the house'. Health awareness, hygiene, beauty talk, and cookery are offered to the listeners. The show later looks into emerging technology called '*Pinywa masani.*' The audience has a chance to give their opinion on the prevailing technological advances and their

influence on their social lives. It winds up with a segment dubbed “Tich Tire” translating to ‘work in progress.’ The audience call in to say what economic activities they are involved in and offering short pieces of advice to people.

The Donse (Dance Dance) programme follows this mid-morning show playing popular music. It’s a music segment that ‘links generations to generations’.

The musical show contains a mix of all genres of music ranging from the latest Lingala and Benga hits as well as greetings. The other segment within this segment is called “donse check-up time.” It allows the listeners a moment of sharing their tune-in locations. The show has at the initial stage another popular comic moment ‘*keth nyingi to iger dendi* (spoil your image but build your body) which talks about funny food and eating mannerisms.

At 3.00 pm, there is an afternoon show with news, sports update, mind games and a great music mix. The plot in this segment is designed to run through to the time many people leave their various work places, farms, and other locations after the day’s activities.

Just before 6.00 pm, the *Angi’ch* welo programme, named to literally mean ‘visitors’ time’, begins. This is when visitors who had travelled all day would arrive at their hosts’ homesteads.

During the first two hours of this segment, not much music is played because a lot of commercial advertisements and paid announcements are aired. It is one of the most lucrative segments in advertisements. The segment is packed with news commentaries, business news, a repeat of the comedy ‘*lak chogo*’ (meaning ‘laughter is inevitable’), and sports news.

After 10.00 in the evening, a cultural show winds the evening up with panel discussions on traditional cultural topics. Traditional beliefs and mannerisms are discussed by elders invited into the studio who act as mentors to listeners actively involved through call-ins. The programme is not only meant for moral counselling but is also a crucial link between the modern Luo people and their cultural ties. The debate dubbed ‘galamoro’ translates as ‘legislature’ as it basically discusses traditional laws and customs. Such a show is also meant to capture the elder’s perspectives of the changing times. Music is also played and listeners call in to present scenarios and seek advice.

From Tuesday to Thursday, a new segment ‘Ohigla Manyien’ which translates to a ‘new boiling pot’, seeks solutions to challenges and enlightens the audience through very incisive

debates sometimes with opinion shapers as guests. It addresses both social, economic and political issues related to the Luo. It runs till midnight. Music then takes over after midnight with most of the selection done earlier by the listeners through text messages and social media.

iv) Public engagement and funding

One common feature in the programming is that listeners are always encouraged to participate. All the programmes allow call-ins at specific times; SMS and social media are left active all the time.

Josephine Sirega presents the weekday mid-morning show and says interaction is not only a key measurement of a programme's popularity but also of its depth of reach. "We encourage so many callers most of which we may not have to play on air because we love interacting with our listeners. With the huge mobile penetration in the rural areas where feature phones make up the larger percentage, calling and SMS is their best bet, and we have to open up for them. Callers whose voices are heard on air also feel strongly attached to the radio station and the programme in particular, even arresting their attention to the message being passed across," she said in an interview

Ramogi Radio started under the larger conglomerate of the Royal Media Group that owns a Television and other radio stations depended on funding from the mother company. Here advertisement revenues have grown with advertisers in Kenya now diversifying into the vernacular media.

Head of Radio at RMS Fred Afune could not readily divulge numbers due to commercial reasons but was able to confirm that the radio is now 'sufficiently sustainable'. The reliance on reporters from the TV and the main Radio arm to gather news, as well as the use of correspondents who are usually not very expensive to maintain in the rural areas, may explain why the burden of financial sustainability has not been a key challenge for the radio station. National and international news is simply translated from the scripts in the mainstream Citizen TV and Radio owned by the parent company.

There is more focus given to the news relevant to areas occupied by the bulk of listeners and which in normal priority would miss out from the main radio channels.

v) Positive economic impacts of the programming

This section selects a few programmes and examines how they have made an economic impact on the target audience who were previously locked in the information dark room thanks to the language barrier. Close to 70 per cent of the Luo speakers still reside in the rural areas. Like all the other communities therefore, radio is their key source of information, education and entertainment.

The community which largely occupies the regions around Lake Victoria and parts of Western Kenya are mainly fishermen and farmers. The poverty rates according to the Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey 2014 ranged between 40-49 percent in some regions. The lakeside region has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates (13.4 per cent) according to the National Aids Control Council report 2013, and higher than the national prevalence rate of 6.1 per cent. Malaria forms yet another health challenge for the region.

Ramogi Radio was launched in 2004 with these challenges already in place. The figures showed in the previous paragraphs were obviously worse then. Betty Oketch is a long serving radio producer at the station. She says the Royal Media Services commissioned several surveys into the region to understand their demographic spreads including where the Luo are in other parts of the country as well as the various needs they have. Some surveys involved taking information from Dholuo speakers about the issues where they wanted to be better informed.

“Mobile phones were not as many as they are now, so we went to find out physically and documented all the aspirations and economic challenges they face before we made our programming strategy including when to air what programme and with particular emphasis on relevant content,” she said in an interview with the researcher.

One such relevance of content was to change the economic tides of the people in their traditional economic set ups like fishing and farming as well as introduce new concepts with considerable economic benefits to the people. The mid-morning show “Tich Tire” every weekday hosts successful entrepreneurs and includes phone-ins from listeners which ask questions related to the topic discussed by the invited entrepreneur. The entrepreneurs are identified from various areas, and include especially those with life changing stories and those from humble beginnings to inspire listeners to start ‘from scratch and still make it big in

business'. Peter Obare is a listener based in the Narok County (Rift Valley). He is a tailor from Oyugis (in South Nyanza) who left to seek greener pastures in the early '90s. He says after listening to the programme on the need for savings and banking, he was able to access a loan from a local bank and expand his tailoring business to employ eight other young men from his village into the trade.

"I had very poor record keeping skills and never thought about banking as a means to save and later access loans. My joy is now seeing these people send money home many times a week, meaning that I am fighting poverty which is a big challenge in my village. I listened to the radio guest who explained how he started from road side sales of sweets and biscuits and later water, until now he owns a bar in the City – I got very inspired," Mr Obare said.

Betty Oketch says such stories are many as the interviewed entrepreneurs are sometimes facilitated to go and talk to listeners who express need for mentorship even though it is usually not very easy to find.

Another radio programme that has had its share of a positive economic impact is called 'Ohigla Manyien'. The 30 minutes programme delves into modern technology used in improving the ease of running businesses like the use of digital payments, mobile banking and the internet to make work easier in business circles. Listeners also call in to ask questions as well as contribute.

Kenya's growth towards digital business has been gradual with internet penetration at 63 per cent as at June 2015; the country's mobile penetration has hit the 90 per cent mark. Technology is defining business trends and this programme is basically meant to prepare listeners to embrace the digital dividend that this new platform brings as they seek to scale up economic benefits from their business activities. A topic relating to how technology can enhance business, including how mobile money payments can enable ease of doing business, is discussed.

Business and technology experts are invited into the studio as listeners ask about the new digital trends relevant to their businesses and the ones they can use in their various economic engagements. Anne Anyango, who produces the programme, says that apart from driving the

agenda of technological enlightenment in a manner that the ‘villagers’ who are always locked out of the tech trends can comprehend easily, there is always a tendency to find relevance for the programme towards giving economic value to the listeners.

“We talk about marketing using a mobile phone, online via social media as well as carrying out online enquiries on various issues ranging from health, education and even business. Listener feedback is very important in this programme as we are able to identify their areas of challenges and react to them in our programming,” she said in response to questions from the researcher

The digital enlightenment extends to yet another programme which concerns one of the economic mainstays for the Luos, farming. “Pur gi Pith”, which translates to farming and livestock rearing, talks about new agricultural methods and the use of smaller pieces of land to get maximum yields. Use of chemicals, livestock health as well as agribusiness is widely discussed. Experts are brought into the studio and listeners are allowed to call in, send texts as well as use social media to ask questions and contribute in the programme that runs Thursdays and Sundays.

“We noticed most farmers in the region even carry radio sets as they go to their farms and thought that will be a great opportunity to address their various possible needs on better farming techniques. We have partners who sponsor some of the programmes and assessments are carried out to determine just how much impact the programmes had on the listeners,” says Ms Pauline Atieno who produces the programme. She said there are many situations where the economic use of land and new farming methods have transformed the lives of the farmers. They also get to learn about the price of various farm products which enable them to determine where they can sell for maximum returns.

Dan Owili, who is a regular listener to the programme, has since taken up farming as a business on his two acre farm located in Muhoroni, Kisumu County. He says after listening to the success stories from other listeners who call in to share experiences and being told how farming can generate income, he chose to abandon his manual labourer job at a nearby sugar factory.

“We had been farming for merely subsistence purposes and whenever we had to sell, traders would come to buy them here and take advantage of our ignorance of the prevailing prices and hence compel us to sell on their own terms. Now we know the prices and we have an informed

bargaining power. I am so happy finally it is being explained in a language I fully understand because previously, my radio was just for music and news which I barely grasped because I did not go to school to learn English or Kiswahili,” said the man, who is now in his late 50s.

The entertainment side of the vernacular media has similarly had an impact on the people who are involved in the entertainment industry. Mainstream media who used English and Kiswahili would rarely play their music and being successful in the industry required time and monetary investments to travel and popularise a new track. The musicians now have a platform to play their music, and in the last decade, there have been several music stars who make it fast in the competitive industry thanks to a channel to showcase their work. They also use the radio to promote their concerts which are even better paying than sales of music CDs since piracy is a serious challenge in the country’s entertainment industry. They also advertise through the vernacular media and popularise their performances.

Emmaculate Ouma, known by her stage name as Ouma de Emma, started singing in the late 1980s. She says penetrating the industry was quite hard because one required a bigger budget to market the music across the region. “The vernacular radio stations in Dholuo have made work so easy; we simply present a CD to the presenters and with a few airplays, we get so many invites to perform where there is more revenue to make. I have since employed an event manager; things got very good save for the piracy but with radio marketing we perform live and no one can impersonate me, you know?” the musician said in an interview.

CHAPTER THREE

Challenges facing vernacular radio in Kenya

Kenya's ethnic diversity and the subsequent connection between ethnicity and political ideologies since independence in 1962 has been the key negative aspect surrounding anything labeled ethnic, including the vernacular radio stations. Immediately before independence, constitutional negotiations held in London between Kenya's main political parties, KANU and KADU, agreed on a constitution with a devolved system of government centered on allocating land to their 'rightful' owners.

Daniel Branch, in his book *Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011*, wrote about the tension that emerged immediately after the independence constitution began operating. Local leaders oversaw the eviction of immigrants from other tribes who had settled outside their districts of birth.

Historical tags

The independence government had completed barely a year in office when it embarked on changing the constitution to remove the devolved system. Anything associated with a specific tribe acquired a negative label and the government was keen on dismantling them. The possibility of vernacular radio was unimaginable.

As we have already described, the Kenyatta and Moi governments retained close control over radio and the emphasis was put on national unity and on broadcasting in Kiswahili and English rather than in vernacular languages. The fear that vernacular media might be used for political purposes by the opposition and the loss of control of a key means of influencing opinion made the two presidents remain opposed to granting FM licenses to the private media.

Business man Samuel Macharia's request for a licence to broadcast in vernacular languages in 1999 was turned down. The then President Arap Moi claimed that Macharia's close links to leading opposition politicians meant they were merely seeking to be an opposition mouth piece.

History continues to haunt the vernacular radios which are split between developing less politically topical programmes and losing a section of their active audience, or risking the label of incitement from institutions in and outside government which increasingly scrutinize them.

Hate speech suspicion

In a survey of Kenyan broadcasting, the BBC referred to reports of the broadcasting of hate speech by a number of vernacular radio stations in 2005 and to continuing fears those vernacular stations “could influence ethnic tensions” (BBC, 2006). These fears appeared to be realised with the publication of a slew of reports in early 2008 that vernacular radio stations were playing a negative role in the violence following the elections.

For example, the Kenyan Human Rights Commission believes there is cause for concern over the language broadcast by some of the stations and there is evidence that in the past the vernacular stations (*Kass FM, Lake Victoria and Inooro* are named) have been responsible for “spinning information to support candidates and parties who are of the same tribe as their audience while openly castigating those who are not of the same tribes” (KHRC, 2008).

The UN-linked IRIN news agency reported that “inflammatory statements and songs broadcast on vernacular radio stations all contributed to post-election violence” and warned that the behaviour of vernacular stations was worrying given the role of RTLM in Rwanda. The agency cited Caesar Handa of Strategic Public Relations Research Ltd, who carried out media monitoring for UNDP, as saying that “there’s been a lot of hate speech, sometimes thinly-veiled. The vernacular radio stations have perfected the art”. Those singled out in the IRIN report were *Kass, Kameme, Inooro* and *Lake Victoria*. There has been a considerable change of tone especially after the post-election violence in 2008 which was partly blamed on the incitement by the vernacular radio as has been mentioned in the earlier sections of this report.

It is certainly the case that phone-in programmes and talk shows were repeatedly identified as the main problem areas whether with political or community leaders using them to incite violence or just ordinary Kenyans phoning in and giving vent to their fears or prejudices.

Joshua Arap Sang, who presented a morning call show called “Lene Emet” (‘what the people are saying’) on *Kass FM* during the elections and the violence, denies that his station broadcast hate speech; he said they were just broadcasting to their people (the Kalenjin) and explaining the situation to them in language they would understand. He is currently facing incitement charges at the International Criminal Court (ICC).

However, Ms Beatrice Oketch, a long serving producer with Radio Ramogi, points to the disadvantages of the close attention paid to programming dealing with politics. She says media managers in the vernacular radio are still keen on the politics as opposed to the economics in the programming. “We produce very good programmes on economics, health, agriculture, entertainment, education and many other topics but the radar is sharply cast on politics, and it then erodes the other work we have built. Attention is not well focused on these beneficial programmes at all, which is less motivating,” she says.

Audience demands and the market model

The unique audience who form a specific ethnic background and who are assumed to subscribe to a particular political school of thought presents a key challenge to those packaging political news on these radio stations.

Ishmail Nyakado who produces radio news for Radio Lake Victoria says they have to prioritise stories related to the Luo political kingpin, Raila Odinga. “When news begins and the highlights have no big story about the local political leadership, we are sure to lose audience to other stations and it’s challenging because our training on prioritizing news is quite to the contrary. This is however hard only on our political reporting or broadcasting,” he said.

Another major challenge for the vernacular media is the demand for more entertainment by the audience and the risk of excluding programming on development issues. The need to make a profit rather than meet their social responsibility is a big distraction to the budding radio stations whose full positive impacts are far from being realized.

Henry Okoko, a resident of Kandege Village in Kisumu County, laments that in many cases the news segment of his favourite Radio Ramogi fails to translate voices from the main speakers with the result that listeners who are not able to understand fully the language may miss out. “I understand Kiswahili a little bit but if the story runs with the president’s speech not voiced over in Dholuo then it means those who don’t understand Kiswahili will miss out on what exactly the president said,” lamented the old man.

The same concerns were shared by a middle level manager at the same radio station who requested not to be identified. He said there are times when either the producer is simply unprofessional or lacks the human resources to do it. “Sometimes it is just out of little regard for professionalism, or the studio is not available, or we simply have no one to voice over and radio news is meant to be done fast. So we end up with a different language in between what is meant to be vernacular radio news which may be quite annoying to the listeners.”

Training and professionalism

Orao (2009) says inadequate professional training produces professionals that are ill-equipped for their onerous responsibilities. Journalists and editors do not fully understand the principles of conflict sensitive reporting or if they do, then they ignored it when it was needed most, for example during the January 2008 post-election violence.

Orao also argues that the Kenyan vernacular media suffers from system-wide weaknesses that continue to constrain its full potential. Generally, professionalism is low (especially among smaller media houses) and manifests itself through inaccurate reporting and in the lack of balance and fairness in treatment of stories.

Training in media ethics is either lacking or inadequate. As a result, corruption is pervasive among correspondents, salaried reporters, editors and even senior managers. There is a lack of basic investigative journalism knowledge and skills because of inadequate training and lack of support by media houses.

While one requires formal training in universities and colleges to become a journalist in either English or Kiswahili, in vernacular media where none of these formally taught languages are required, local comedians, musicians and sometimes people merely perceived as ‘talkative’ end up in the studios. The result is unprofessionally conducted broadcasts which are sometimes out of touch with the audience or any thought of their considerable socio-economic impacts. A student, Dickens Otieno, who performed in a secondary school drama festival in 2013 and got the attention of the president, is now a popular radio presenter at Ramogi FM.

Training that specifically relates to vernacular media broadcasting is not available in the journalism schools, and journalists employed are expected to apply the same principles taught for use in the official language broadcast when they join vernacular media.

Local languages are also fast fading with intermarriages, Western education and the rural – urban migration. The result is that foreign words have slipped into the languages, and there is considerable debate as to what is the correct version of one language as opposed to another. Finding who speaks the acceptable neutral dialect is also quite a challenge.

“Unlike English and Kiswahili which are taught in schools and we can simply see in your academic transcripts whether you passed or failed, the vernacular languages are neither taught nor examined. It means judging your competence is not very easy. We have to be very keen in doing that especially considering that some dialects are regionally biased,” says Jim Kariuki of Kameme FM, a Kikuyu radio station.

The professional clique in media also perceives vernacular media as ‘backward’, less learned and underdeveloped. A mid-level employee of Ramogi FM said that some of his colleagues who work for the English and Swahili Channels perceive them negatively as people who are less educated, who can only speak their vernacular languages. The social stigma is a big setback to those working in this new media.

Revenues and financial demands

Vernacular media which form part of a large conglomerate are financially safe like the case of Ramogi FM owned by the Royal Media services which runs 15 other radio stations and a TV channel. Those that are striving to stand alone are however weak and hardly expand beyond certain regions.

Due to low revenues, the working conditions in these vernacular radio stations are unsatisfactory. Newsrooms and studios are often congested with low occupational safety conditions. Journalists often lack basic tools of trade such as pens and note books, tape recorders, live mobile phones and transport for assignments.

Junior journalists (who are the majority) are poorly paid. The poor working conditions negatively affect the quality of work and the professional integrity of journalists. There is a link between low pay and rampant corruption among reporters and correspondents.

Most of them are poor, use outdated technologies and lack adequate expertise in both media and management. The community radios are increasingly becoming targets of political patronage and control owing to their influence as reliable sources of information for local communities. Another key challenge facing community radios is a hostile legal and regulatory regime that promotes unfair competition between commercial media and community media and does not offer any incentives for the growth of the sector.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The emergence and growth of vernacular media in Kenya is a phenomenon that ought to have happened earlier but regulative and political atmospheres did not allow it. The prolonged delay in allowing these media to develop has withheld crucial information of huge economic value to a majority of those who reside in rural areas where their languages are predominantly spoken and where literacy levels are low.

The vernacular radio is now pulling these people to the same level as others – from being locked out of crucial information, they are now becoming better citizens able to make informed choices. They are also enabling them to make better economic decisions, expand businesses and generally raise standards of living; but the move is gradual because poor penetration of electricity still means that using dry cells is a new burden to keep the radios on.

The media houses are grappling with the challenge of ensuring the right quality and relevant content to get to these listeners whose trust in the media runs at the national level of 48 per cent (according to the latest Synnovate polls in 2014). There is a need for support to these media outlets to be able to create content not necessarily driven by the commercial interests of advertisers but focused on changing the economic lives of the target audiences.

Training and professionalism as well as proper remuneration of the radio personalities involved will be key to achieve the scaling up of the positive economic impact that these vernacular radio stations can have on the listeners.

A careful look at the independence of some of the programmes that may be better tailored for maximum benefits to the audience reveals possible elements of interference from the commercial sponsors, who at times tend to demand the use of their products rather than objective practices which could lead to economic gains for the listeners.

The potential is still huge and it may take a while before the quality of the programmes change in a way that listeners will have no difficulties in following closely. I hope this will be a tip of a larger iceberg to create attention and enable the vernacular media to drive further economic changes in societies across Africa and the world.

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