

## **Introducing Community Audio Towers as an alternative to community radio in Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

Community radio started as an alternative to commercial media. The need for an alternative was clear, with many societal voices unrepresented, indicating the domination of the means of mental production by a few. This article presents two communities in Uganda that use Community Audio Towers (CATs) as an alternative to community radio, and examines why the communities prefer the use of CATs to 'mainstream' community radio. Using data collected through observation at two sites in Uganda and 10 key informant interviews from major communication stakeholders, including Uganda's Minister of Information and Communication Technology, the article presents findings indicating that CATs are self-sustaining, with no NGO influence, and they redefine news to mean local emergencies and occurrences, while having no structures (horizontal/vertical rhetoric) as they are started and run by one community member. The challenges of the new alternative media are also discussed.

### **Keywords**

Community media; community radio; Community Audio Towers (CATs); communication for development; Uganda.

### **Introduction**

This article seeks to broaden the notion of community media by introducing Community Audio Towers (CATs), channels that are started for emergencies and other local information in rural and semi-urban communities. Drawing on existing alternative media theories, the article argues that CATs redefine news from the mainstream understanding of news directed by news values to local information delivered to the towers, mostly by concerned community members. Such 'news-making' behaviour also differs from community radio news-gathering practices in Uganda, which include the use of volunteers and staff who earn very little money. The article therefore describes the nature of information that CATs help different community members to circulate, and examines how this information is disseminated.

Theoretically, we can think about community media in the four ways articulated in two separate volumes: Carpentier, Lie and Servaes (2001) and Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008). The four theories are summarised below. First, community media are those media that identify a segment in a country and promote self-management, access and participation for the people within the segment (Carpentier, Lie and Servaes, 2001). Such media are governed by a group of community members who also participate in the activities of their media. In relation to Uganda's CATs, access and participation can be identified while management is done by one community member.

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Second, community media can also be understood as those media that promote an alternative (opposite) service to that of mainstream media. The understanding of community media as alternative is confrontational with mainstream media due to the fact that community media define themselves by castigating what mainstream media do. Specifically, four main areas can be compared between the alternative and the mainstream: size, where the alternative is small and specific while the mainstream is large and homogeneous; ownership, where mainstream media report to state and commercial establishments while the alternative report to self-managed community groups; structure, where mainstream media are vertically organised with professional hierarchies while the alternative use local knowledge to manage their horizontal set-up; and content, for which the mainstream media carry the dominant discourse while the alternative are counter-hegemonic. A few characteristics of community media that are explained here also fit into the observation data about CATs – for example, CATs are both non-government and non-commercial. They are counter-hegemonic in a way that information that is aired comes from the bottom of the communication circle where power and money have no place in the decision-making process (Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2008). In relation to structure, however, CATs are started and run by one community well-wisher, and have no community management groups as the above theory suggests.

The third approach explains community media as a civil society (or as part of the civil society). In this way, community media engage the media's role as the fourth estate and provide a platform where the other three estates (executive, legislature and judiciary) are kept accountable to the community. This, and the fourth approach, which explains community media as a rhizome for linking all sections of society together through communication, are not well reflected in CATs. Besides, CATs would never afford to confront established authority in growing democracies (as the third approach suggests) where platforms that are critical of government policies are shut down. The second approach too suffers from a major problem of being adversarial with the mainstream media, which hide behind political, commercial and military power in growing economics. In the end, mainstream media dictate what discourse dominates the public (including community) sphere (Carpentier, Lie and Servaes, 2001; Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2008). Although some parts of the theory fail to explain CATs, the theory helps this article to locate CATs within the subject of community media and to identify weaknesses within existing theory.

Other community media descriptions that help to build on the above theory include radical media because community media try to resist the influence of the oppressive social political order in which people find themselves (Downing et al., 2001). Downing and colleagues (2001: v) clarify on radical media that they are 'generally small-scale and in many different forms that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives'. In this reference, community media or radical media are understood as a direct opposite of the mainstream media. Such classification of community media, which is Marxist and Gramscian at the least, acknowledges the fact that dominant media will always propagate dominant ideologies that are also hegemonic in nature, and so stifle representation. The radicalism of community media comes as a way of insulating the voiceless against such influence, in the end creating relevance for such media.

In terms of operationalisation, community media fit the 'alternative' description because they are not about professionalisation and do not strive to create professional bodies, and they stay away from economic influence (Atton, 2001). Therefore, the word 'alternative' comes from gaps created by the existing means and so the suggested alternative ought to have an 'alternative' behaviour to challenge the status quo. The original 'alternative' challenges mainstream activities (Howley, 2002), while its audiences are participatory, since everyone wants to get involved in the process of news production and distribution (Deuze, 2006). This implies that the content is

produced by someone within that community, and the scope of information does not go beyond the boundaries of that community (Rennie, 2007). The above are the requirements by which community radio in Uganda has failed to live.

There are three community radio stations in Uganda: Kagadi-Kibaale Community Radio and Radio Apach, located in the West and North of Uganda respectively and serving the surrounding geographical areas, and Mama FM, which is interest-based and located in the capital city. All the areas served by the three stations have several CATs. Mama FM, for example, broadcasts to Mukono district, the semi-urban district where one of the CATs described in this article is located. Masaka district, where the second CAT is located, does not receive signals from any of the above community radio stations, although the district has eight commercial radio stations located within its boundaries and hundreds of others sending signals from other districts. While CATs narrowcast events happening in one village, radio stations focus on a wider scope, which includes broadcasting English football (Kagadi-Kibaale Community Radio does this), which is not relevant to the local village.

### **Challenges of community radio**

While the name might be 'community media', the problems that these media face – such as having no clear and favourable policy guidelines and economic hardships – make it difficult to follow the community media philosophy. This may cause the bottom-up model to appear as a top-down approach in practice (Kivikuru, 2006). Due to success stories of community radio in several parts of the world, this article stresses that the failure of community radio could be unique to Uganda and a few other countries, especially in the Global South. Community radio suffers from the lack of a special licence, little political influence and a lack of participation. In Uganda, participatory media (community radio) preside over non-participating communities (Semujju, 2013). The reasons why people do not participate vary from political influence to poverty and media illiteracy. Elsewhere on the African continent, Tsarwe (2014) refers to South African community radio as alternative media that gave a voice to the black marginalised majority during the apartheid era. South African community radio also suffers from a lack of participation and engagement due to poverty and marginalisation (Tsarwe, 2014: 305). While the Ugandan and South African cases do not represent all countries that use community radio, they do represent two different economies in the Global South. The poverty problem mostly influences community radio activities in two major ways: first, community radio is expensive for a local person to start; and second, poverty forces communities to abandon radio sets because the sets require constant replenishment of batteries. This weakens information reception and participation. Using technology that is appropriate to the economic capability of the community therefore helps to circumnavigate those shortcomings. The platform that communities use in Uganda, which is elaborated below in detail, provides access without having to burden community members with the expense of buying batteries or radio sets.

### **Community Audio Towers (CATs): An alternative to community radio?**

CATs are 'made up of powerful speakers hoisted on top of 10- to 20-metre bamboo or steel poles. Regular programs are broadcast at specific times of the day over the loudspeakers' (Tabing, 2000: 84). Gaviria (1996) records CATs being introduced in the Philippines as a multi-channel approach to development communication by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and that this was so because the CATs had been successful in Thailand. 'Very early in the morning, just as the sun rises, the music from *Tacunan Audio Tower* filtrates with an echo through trees and plantations, providing company to peasants as they work over their crops,' notes Dagron (2001: 85). Started by the FAO towards the end of the 1980s, CATs would use 'two microphones jacked into a Karaoke

playback system connected to 20-watt' and 'four or six cone speakers mounted on small towers' to narrowcast social development programs to the community, as Dagon describes.

Within the four-system theoretical framework (Carpentier, Lie and Servaes, 2001), we can identify existing differences between CATs used in Uganda and those used in the Philippines. The Philippines' CATs connect government to villages and are funded by both the United Nations and local governments. The Ugandan CATs are funded by individual contributions from community members who have something to say to the rest of the community, without any government or NGO influence.

## Uganda

To be able to contextualise the findings presented in the next section, it is important to provide some background about the country where the study was carried out. Uganda is located in East Africa, and is the 21st poorest country globally (Global Finance, 2013), a factor that is crucial in understanding the popularity of CATs. The World Bank (2014) notes that Uganda is a low-income country (LIC) with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of US\$506 and an economy growing at the rate of 5.2 per cent. While agriculture employs 66 per cent of the working population, jobs advertised in the public service decreased from 80 per cent of the total civil service job advertisements in 2010 to 49 per cent in 2011 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The total number of all people working for government in 2011 was 275,149. The country's population stands at 35.4 million people (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Some 49 per cent of that population is below 14 years of age. Although life expectancy is 53 years, the infant mortality rate is 76 per 1000 live births. The maternal mortality ratio stands at 438 deaths per 100,000 births (WHO, 2014). The literacy levels, on the other hand, stand at 79 per cent for men and 66 per cent for women (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

In the area of media, the free-market model has created two conglomerates: the Vision Media Group and the Nation Media Group, also known as the Aga Khan group. Alongside all these developments, however, political influence has also been growing. For example, the Media Sustainability Index (2008) reports that the editor-in-chief of the government newspaper, *New Vision*, was fired by the government for what President Museveni called 'constant negative reporting from our own paper'. In other cases, the state uses force to assert its position. In 2002, the offices of *The Monitor* (labelled as the opposition newspaper) were invaded by security operatives who confiscated mobile phones and vandalised newsroom computers (Balikowa, 2006).

In 2009, the government moved to ban critical live-talk shows on radio through the Broadcasting Council, citing ethical misconduct in the manner in which the shows were conducted (Lumu, 2010). The following year, Central Broadcasting Service FM, Radio Two, Radio Sapientia and Ssuubi FM were taken off air. Once those four stations were turned off, there was self-censorship in the public sphere. To avoid being switched off too, other stations stopped criticising the government on policy matters. This political influence and several other problems, including illiteracy, poverty and poor infrastructures, reduced access and participation in media (Nassanga, 2009). This fear resonated with community radio too, as communities resorted to using CATs.

## How CATs are defined in Uganda

Research on CATs in Uganda is minimal. Therefore, this section describes CATs using interview and observation data from the field. CATs in Uganda use the following technology: horn speakers (about three or four) hoisted on top of long dry poles next to a small room in which there is an amplifier, a microphone and a CD player for playing music. The horn speakers, each facing in a different direction, send information for approximately 5 kilometres, depending on

time and weather conditions. Responses emerging from the key informant interviews show that some interviewees, including the district information officers, define CATs as area-local platforms that help to localise information dissemination and reception. They note that CATs help communities to stay in touch with information within the community, and that the fact that they exist is a clear indication that there was a communication gap they needed to fill. 'There was a need to disseminate information, which is why CATs came in to fill that gap' (Nyombi Thembo, interview, 24 August 2014). Additionally, another informant called CATs 'mini-FM stations that address a local issue' (Godfrey Kibuuka, interview, 20 August 2014). Each of the CATs visited had one presenter, who was also the owner. Both presenters said they lived within the same communities – something that inspired them to start CATs. The rural CAT presenter said he studied up to primary school level and had never studied any information/communication-related courses. The semi-urban CAT presenter said he studied up to senior 2 (when he was about 14 years old). On the other hand, the CAT 'newsroom' is smaller than a king-size bed. Information-processing takes place in this small space, which has a table on which the gadgets, including a microphone that is hidden in a box, sit.

What makes CATs worth studying is the fact that they are self-sustaining, with no influence from non-government organisations or community management committees, as community media have been understood to be. CATs are funded by individuals with very little money, which explains why narrowcasting takes place at specific times of the day. The CATs have no structures (not even the horizontal structures found in other community media). They are established and run by one person.

### Methodology

During the study, the researcher listened to the towers for 10 days, divided between five days at each tower. Such observation reveals some insights into how CATs disseminate information. Data were collected in two communities at two CATs: One (Voice of Nyendo) is rural, located 120 kilometres from the capital, along the Southern Uganda route, while the other (Nassuuti 'FM') is semi-urban, located about 21 kilometres from the capital along the Eastern Uganda route. This choice of CATs was made randomly, intended to represent the usage of CATs in Uganda, which is mostly rural and semi-urban. The location choices were made purposively because purposive sampling 'allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested' (Silverman, 2005). Some of the features useful to this study included the fact that the two CATs were distinct from each other, serving different geographic communities with different economic profiles. The economic factor influenced purposive sampling, as the research was interested in how communities used CATs as an economically efficient way to access important local information, compared with the cost of buying relatively expensive radio batteries.

The study used 10 key informant interviews, which provided information that was crucial in supporting the observation data. Sherry and Marlow (1999) note that there is no specific number of informant interviews to conduct, provided the interviews elicit the intended information. Kumar (1989) more specifically notes that the number usually ranges from 15 to 35 interviews. Mossman and Mayhew's (2007) extensive study of the first-hand experience by sex industry workers of the *Prostitution Reform Act* in New Zealand used 73 qualitative interviews, while Kim, Elliott and Hyde (2004) used only nine interviews for their study of sociocultural factors, and organ donation and transplant in Korea. It is appropriate for this project to select 10 key interviews on the basis of responsibility and knowledge of CATs. These were distributed as follows: two CAT presenters (one from each tower); five district and national media and communication/information officers (two district information officers, two experts from Uganda Communications Commission and the Minister of Information and Communication Technology); two village chairpersons (one from each

village with a chosen tower); and one district legal officer. The legal officer's views helped to understand the districts' legal position on CATs. This qualitative method was useful in obtaining information from samples selected purposively in order to have an in-depth engagement about the CATs.

Additionally, observation and field notes were crucial in revealing some information that other methods could not, such as describing the atmosphere under which events were happening during the study. Observation was important for this study because CATs are a little-researched concept in Uganda. This technique helped the study to describe the scene of what was happening at the CATs in order to give the reader a vivid picture of how CATs work. Observation included listening to both towers every morning and evening for 10 days (five days at each tower), and carefully observing what the near-by residents were doing at the time of the narrowcast. This was intended to provide information on whether or not people stopped their work for a few minutes to sit and listen to the tower or continued to work as the tower narrowcast the information. Other studies in media and communication that have used a similar method note that participant observation helps to introduce the researcher to the daily life or social world of the people studied (Lapsansky, 2012; Kong, 2015).

## **Findings**

### ***CATs' information-gathering***

The fact that the 'newsroom' structure of CATs deviates from the norm of having an established team of editors and reporters with divided responsibility changes the way information-gathering is done at CATs. Most times, instead of walking to where the events are (as in radio), information finds the presenters at the towers. This is made possible by the fact that coverage of issues is normally restricted to events happening only within one village. Any member who has a concern knows perfectly well where the CAT is located. The information is usually delivered in person by a concerned community member, though other times the community member may use a mobile phone to alert the presenter of an emergency. The presenters said that mostly when community members used mobile phones, they were reporting an emergency like a theft, a fatal accident or a lost person. One of the presenters said that the trick when speaking to someone by phone was to get as many details as possible about the situation (Lwanga, interview, 21 July 2014).

Besides personal delivery and mobile phone calls, the information broadcast through the towers is obtained through direct contact with the presenters whenever they walk through the community. The Nassuuti FM presenter, for example, said that since he does not stay near the CAT, whenever he is coming from home to the tower, people stop him and tell him what he should put on air (Lwanga, interview, 21 July 2014). 'Sometimes it might be a suggestion from a concerned citizen that theft is rampant so there should be a warning to the community to be careful and beware of thieves,' Lwanga said. This information is normally accompanied by examples of whose home was invaded by thieves and the impact of their actions.

Apart from the above information-gathering methods, there are also times when the presenters get ideas from the events they see while walking through the community on their ordinary business. On such occasions, the presenter – being part of the community – may see an issue that they consider to be a community concern. When asked to list some of the issues, Joseph Mugerwa (interview, 9 July 2014) named a heap of rubbish that the town council did not remove on time; pupils who wandered around instead of going to school during school time; and several others, ranging from education to social and health matters. The presenter's effort is normally put in for the sake of advising. The Voice of Nyendo presenter commented on the personal opinions that he might add after various observations in the community, and said that 'these opinions have to be in line with acceptable social norms within the community in order

to avoid the ideas coming off as radical and irresponsible or even taboo' (Mugerwa, interview, 9 July 2014).

### ***Prioritising news on CATs***

The method of processing CATs' information is as unique as the information-gathering process. After receiving information – especially information that has been brought to the presenters at CATs sites – the presenter writes down the details in legible handwriting so the information is visible when it is read out on air. After collecting all the information to be narrowcast for the morning or the evening, the presenter then decides what should come first and which item deserves more emphasis. When asked what determines what story should come first, the Voice of Nyendo presenter said stories that relate to suffering – for example someone losing a child or a loved one – would come first. 'Most times,' he said, 'such stories are emergencies.' In the event that no direct human suffering has occurred that day, then lost property would take precedence. As for which stories are emphasised, the announcement of someone thanking the village for attending the burial of a loved one would not be as detailed as an item about a child who is lost in the community or a lost cow.

The other observation was that during information-processing, some community members pay for the information they want presented on air. This rule applies to all situations, apart from emergencies that include thieves, a fatal accident that has claimed a village member, police announcements about the current status of security in the community (or any other police announcement) and local council announcements. The price for information varies from tower to tower. Mugerwa, the Voice of Nyendo presenter (interview, 9 July 2014) said that community members pay between half a dollar and four dollars maximum, but in the local currency. He also said that sometimes the situation calls for him to understand the economic status of someone who is in trouble. 'Some people come with no money but the look on their face can tell you that they are in danger, like someone whose child is lost. In that case, I do not charge them. There have been cases when individuals found their children and came back after days and gave me money to show their appreciation' (Mugerwa, interview, 9 July 2014). The prices at the semi-urban CAT were no different from those charged by the rural CAT (Masaka), although the semi-urban presenter said it was common for some people to come in and give him more than four dollars for a job well done (Lwanga, interview, 21 July 2014).

### ***CATs' information dissemination***

Every day, there are two narrowcasts: at 6.30 to 7 a.m. and then at 9.30 to 10 p.m. This routine changes when there is an emergency. The rule also applies if police have something to say, if thieves break into someone's house or place of work, or in other emergencies. As in radio broadcasts, CAT presenters begin by greeting listeners, identifying the name of the CAT that has started to narrowcast and telling the community the location from which the tower is narrowcasting. On the first day of observation at 6.30 a.m., Voice of Nyendo, the rural CAT, had lost-and-found announcements, local sports competitions that would take place that week, a death announcement, an announcement thanking those who had attended a recent funeral for a recently buried member of the community, Eid Day special adverts and lost children; the broadcast ended with music. The evening narrowcast followed the same format.

The following day, it was the same format except that the CAT started narrowcasting at 6.32 a.m. and stopped at 7.13 a.m. with announcements, followed by music until 7.20 a.m. when the morning narrowcast was done. There was no new information given. It was as if the previous evening's announcements had been recorded, except this time there was more emphasis. After the narrowcast on the second day, two community members came in to give the presenter information that he would narrowcast in the evening. The third person came to

inquire when his information was going to be narrowcast. The evening of the second day had specifically information about the dead, lost children (who wander off from mothers busy doing housework or working in a retail business) and property. This format ran across the week, with each announcement lasting between two and three minutes. Most notably, both CAT presenters said that community members had started complaining about the noise during radio news broadcasts. 'Since then, we try to follow radio news schedules. We try not to interrupt the 9 p.m. or 7 p.m. news.' On the issue of noise in areas like Nyendo, where there are two CATs located in one area, the presenter said, 'We narrowcast in turn between me and the other CAT operator so that we don't confuse the community with noise.' He said that a meeting had been held and both presenters had allocated each other times to start.

## **Discussion**

CATs' information-gathering can be explained as a process that empowers the community members to start the communication process aimed at reaching out to other members within the same community to achieve what Forde, Foxwell and Meadows (2003) refer to as cultural empowerment. This is when individuals are able to manage their social, economic, political and other aspects of life through information access, participation and acquisition of some skills and knowledge about how to move themselves forward (Cox, 2014). It is an idea that comes from the fact that community members do not have to wait for any external stakeholders to initiate the communication process. The process of empowerment is multi-layered, from individual actualisation to small groups and finally to the entire community (Williams and Labonte, 2007). From the above explanation, it is clear that CATs appeal to the first layer of empowerment by providing information access to the individuals. The ability that community members have to initiate a message stresses the usefulness of empowerment in understanding the communication benefits, and alludes to communities having the power and ability to communicate (Melkote and Steeves, 2001).

By comparison, other media charge for space and airtime; since the charges are high, only advertisers and government can get space. The individuals are relegated to call-in time that is far from prime time by such commercially minded media (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Under the economic model of information in media, content generated from ordinary people is subjected to a lot of criteria. In newspapers, for example, such content is given special space under the letters to the editor section. This comes from the fact that ordinary people are not familiar with journalism values like ethics (Nassanga, 2008), which leaves media communication as a preserve for a 'chosen few' journalists. In order to compete with the existing 273 commercial radio channels, community radio in Uganda (there are three community radio channels in the country) have adopted a commercial model. In contrast, CATs' information is local, and is available regardless of the person's economic, education level or expertise. This arrangement embraces Article 29 of the Ugandan Constitution, which gives every person a right to seek, receive and impart information.

Data from key informant interviews also reveal that the combination of CATs and a mobile phone helps to speed the process of narrowcasting (Nakanwagi, interview, 19 July 2014). Narrowcasting can utilise the new technology among communities because CATs do not have dedicated news teams that gather information. In mainstream media, such a combination has promoted a new form of journalism called mobile journalism (MOJO), where reporters are at liberty to work on their smartphones and produce stories, regardless of the previous limitations of space and time (Nassanga and Semujju, 2015).

In CATs, the function of the mobile phone is different. Community members call in at different hours, sometimes at night, and mostly when there is danger – for example, thieves terrorising a neighbourhood. The combination of mobile phones and CATs helps to bring the



community together against different vices, and to prepare the communities for emergencies. It is relevant to mention, however, that – unlike in the West where ‘users prefer text messages instead of physical appointments’ (Ley et al., 2013: 816) – the usage of mobile phones by the majority of people in rural and semi-urban communities in Uganda is still for voice calling because of educational and economic factors. Text messages are cheaper but one has to be fluent in writing a language. Therefore the CATs-mobile combination talked about above does not use the same text model as the one in the West. In fact, the data indicate that more people walk to the tower instead of calling, as calling applies mostly when there is an emergency.

CATs also use information-processing to put together the information obtained from the community in a manner that allows the presenter to read easily as they narrowcast. The use of handwritten notes taken as community members tell the presenter what happened makes the work of the presenter simple. The presenter does not have to worry about computers or not knowing how to use one. While studies have cited the relevance of ICTs like the mobile phone to African newsrooms because the ICTs allow the journalist to manage space and time (Nassanga and Semujju, 2015), CATs manage well without most ICTs (apart from the mobile phone, which is only used for information gathering but has no place in producing or broadcasting the information). This is because CATs’ information is local, and no research is needed. The complexity of the internet, computers and recorders, and the cost of purchasing them, can thus be avoided.

Avoiding these expenses also helps CATs to avoid inviting sponsors who might take away the people-centred approach of information-gathering. As long as the information negotiated by CATs remains local, the need for technology like computers and internet is less apparent – unless one day the CATs decide to narrowcast beyond one village. Another need for such technology might arise when the CATs decide to include national or international information. However, this will defeat the purpose of a community platform, and thus reduce the time given to local issues, which is the reason why individuals are highly dependent on the towers.

While disseminating information, CATs narrowcast information at specific hours (between 7 and 7.30 a.m. and between 9 and 9.30 p.m.) if there are no emergencies. In relation to community radio, CATs occupy a very tiny slice of the community’s time. The timing of the CAT announcements therefore allows the community to listen to other channels of information in order to understand what is happening outside the village. The fact that CATs are more popular than radio means that people depend more on local information than information from outside their community. It is also important to note that the CAT is cheaper to start than a community radio, and also cheaper for audiences to access.

By giving the community local issues, CATs help individuals to plan their activities and attend to local issues – for example, village meetings, security awareness programs, burials and so on. This is in addition to the fact that information through CATs can barely be missed, since all individuals within the community have access. The idea of access to information was crucial when community radio was proposed to advance the developing communities, since it was powered by batteries (to solve the problem of a lack of electricity), easy to carry around and cheap (Ojebode, 2008). However, more recently it has been argued that the challenges of community radio – such as its dependence on NGO short-term financial resources and the lack of a clear legal stand, among others, deny access to the person waiting to receive information (Mezghanni, 2014). Therefore, in addition to helping the community in planning, CATs bridge the lack of local information gap created by the uncertainty and instability surrounding community radio in Uganda (Lwanga, interview, 21 July 2014).

CATs help community members to participate in government programs like immunisation, updating voters’ registers, the economy, health, education, environment/climate change, agriculture and others. As a whole, these are development programs, and radio participates in

them by using jingles, analyses, advertisements, live talk-shows and magazine programs (Ojebode, 2008). It is through understanding and participating in the above programs that the village can manage to fight disease and poverty, and improve its standards of living. The challenge with radio that is not faced by CATs is that working to implement all those methods costs a lot of money. Getting local 'experts' can be hard, since they are not full-time radio workers. Community radio has to fit in with their time and not the other way round. Jingles cost money and require expertise to make, while most radio programs have to have a sponsor (like an NGO in community radio) who pays for the space that a program will occupy. Under CATs, such big community challenges are always mentioned without charge.

Data also suggest that there is a redefinition of news. In CATs, news means anything happening in the community. News is information that any individual community member brings forward, and it is 'localised or community-specific' (Meadows et al., 2007: 2). In mainstream media, there is a commonality of news values that centres on conflict, oddity (bizarre) and prominence. The most prominent personality for CATs in the village is the village chairperson, and only in terms of announcing information for the community. CATs do not prioritise the chairperson simply because of their position. Likewise, CATs do not follow the President of Uganda if he passes by the community – although if government or police asked the towers to announce that the President was coming, the towers would do so. Beyond that is a matter for radio and other mainstream media. However, if there was a community concern from or about the President's visit, the CATs would pick the issue up. News in mainstream media has structures that include the news editor, news reader (radio and TV) and the journalist who seeks out the news. These same structures apply to Uganda's community radio. CATs only have the community and the presenter.

CATs encourage listenership by using technology that is affordable. This means that at any time when people expect a narrowcast, they will not be disappointed. For example, the fuel that the generator would use to run the amplifier and the other technology CATs use is very little and affordable (Mugerwa, interview, 9 July 2014), which removes the need for donor funding that affects community radio. In Tunisia, for example, community radio 'funding is usually limited to a timeframe that depends primarily on the donors' funding commitments' (Mezghanni, 2014: 687). CATs have an edge over community radio because they can operate without relying on corporate advertising revenue or NGOs with agendas.

### ***Challenges of CATs***

The 'dark side' of this cheap technology is that information can be lost, especially if a CAT is narrowcasting during a storm – yet at a time like this, information would be very important for individuals to understand what is happening to their fellow village members. This means that access to CATs' information under certain conditions can be challenging, and the CATs could not act as a warning system in severe weather events, which is something that media do. This is because CATs do not have experts to read through the necessary data, which tend to be expensive and technical, to warn of any possible natural disasters. The other fundamental issue that challenges CATs – although it is a challenge that has been raised from radio studies – is whether or not mere exposure to radio (or CATs in this case) without understanding whether or not the community recalls anything the channel has said is sufficient to say that a channel can create changes in people's lives (Starkey, 2002). More CATs studies are necessary to understand issues of recall and the impact on behaviour.

Data also reveal that CATs are not licensed for the type of activity they are currently undertaking, so the government considers them illegal and they are closed whenever there is a complaint from an individual community member (Mukasa, interview, 15 August, 2014; Nsimbe, interview, 12 August 2014). Although this has not happened to the two towers where

data were collected, it creates fear among the rest of the CATs (Ssendago, interview, 8 July 2014). Besides fear, the owners of the towers fail to make long-term plans when facing threats of illegality. This pending closure can impede further innovations in CATs. Keeping CATs on tenterhooks is one way the government stops them from violating other people's rights (Mukasa, interview, 15 August, 2014). However, closing a channel is not unique to CATs. This was made clear in 2010 when four radio stations were closed and General David Tinyefunza outlined one of the transgressions of the radio stations as 'hosting opposition' (Lumu, 2010).

The government workers at different levels (for example, national and district) were divided on CATs between what is legal and what is illegal (albeit useful). Some of them were for outright closure (those at national level who manage Uganda's communication body) while others (like the communication officers at district level, local area chairpersons) said that the CATs helped local people to get free information and express their opinions. This division means that the government has not studied CATs to know what it is dealing with – especially in terms of how useful or threatening the towers might be to existing power structures. This is also evidenced further by a lack of literature from Uganda on the subject of CATs. The idea to close CATs due to illegality is therefore unfounded, and will just remove locally initiated communication efforts. The better solution would be to regulate them. The other argument behind the closure is that some people are unhappy with the levels of 'noise' created by the towers when they are broadcasting. The dilemma for government is to create a policy that balances the noise and local communication needs.

## Conclusion

This article has shown community radio's strengths and weaknesses, and argued that the weaknesses are the reason why some local communities in Uganda are abandoning community radio to adopt CATs – an alternative that does not require payment for information reception. The article described CATs by showing how they gather, process and disseminate information. Generally, it reached the following conclusions about CATs:

- Information-gathering is done through direct contact with presenters by community members at the towers, within the village and on mobile phones (for emergencies).
- Information-processing happens without the use of sophisticated technology used by community radio, such as the internet, computers or recorders.
- CAT presenters instead use pen and paper, which does not require the presenters to have special technical knowledge to use.
- Dissemination of information takes place for 30 minutes in the morning and another 30 minutes in the evening. During the day or deep into the night, a CAT can be switched on if there is an emergency.
- The community definition of news is based on events that happen within one village, which is why radio is necessary to inform the community about what is happening in other villages around the country and internationally.

A distinct advantage of the audio towers is their ability to mobilise communities more quickly than radio – particularly on security, administrative, health and other issues. However, the CATs have challenges, as highlighted in this article, such as making every community member a compulsory listener and the fact that they have no licence, which forces government to declare them illegal. The article called for more studies on CATs to understand issues of recall, beliefs and attitudes, before claiming fully that what the communities use as an alternative (CATs) can be understood in development communication as a platform for development. More research will help to establish CATs as an alternative to community radio by harmonising the challenges they currently face.

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