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The structure of news in Community audio Towers

Abstract

This article draws attention to the current sensational modernist conceptualization of news as conflict and prominence to argue that news among the poor be understood as activities happening in a village. Findings obtained through observation at two Community Audio Towers (CATs), plus ten key informant interviews with Uganda's CAT stakeholders at community and national levels, suggest that the global media logic, supported by massive media structures that dictate what news is, finds no relevance in critical local news methodologies. Using the Critical theory, this article concludes that the counter-ideological events redefine the concept of news from conflict and prominence obtained through professional news making cultures to whatever information the village members take to the towers.

Introduction

The news text is made up of abstracts (within the headlines and leads), intros, attribution, balanced sources and the event or story itself (Bell 1991). These are sliced down into hard and soft news events based on the pace, length, tone and gravity of the event or themes, focus and style (Reinemann et al. 2011). Due to the neo-liberal influence that soaks all aspects of our lives by promoting competition as the most significant element of human relations (Monbiot 2016), news is now what happens in the private and public lives of the elites (Kisuke 2004) reemphasized by the mainstream media's journalistic professional culture and media organizations' working model (Doudaki and

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Spyridou 2014). To respond to the influence of the global neo-liberal economy, the mainstream media logic, the 'assumptions and processes for constructing messages' (Altheide 2004: 294), has in fact changed 'from reflecting the 'day's news' to covering more 'news as it happens' (Cushion et al. 2015: 866).

The question: *How do events become news?* was ably answered by Galtung and Ruge more than 50 years ago when they described the structures that coordinate to capture 'news'. These 'non-personal indivisible entities' or structures include

> the journalist in the field in the news-sending country, the local press agency bureau, the district bureau, the central bureau of the press agency, the district bureau on the receiving end, the local bureau in the news-receiving country, the news editor in the receiving newspaper, the layout man […].
>
> (Galtung and Ruge 1965: 65)

Although the above structure described how foreign news events are negotiated, it represents what in many nations is referred to as the news structure responsible for news, which, in a global village today, is a combination of both local and international events as a result of domestication of foreign news (Alasuutari et al. 2013).

Two elements of news are being highlighted at this point. The first element is the meaning or the nature of news in the mainstream media emphasized by journalistic professional cultures, while the second is the structure that is responsible for news that is well ranked, leading to a fixed and almost predict- able design of text in the mainstream media. This article argues in the coming sections that the above global/structural news settings and meaning have no room in non-competitive slow events that occur in an isolated village occu- pied mostly by illiterate and semi-illiterate poor people. This argument is made with a presentation of the nature of CATs' news and the description of the 'structures' that are responsible for such local news in a small media platform. Using the Critical theory (explained below) as a basis, the article concludes that the counter-ideological voices from the village person only receive space in small community media platforms such as Community Audio Towers (CATs).

Theoretical framework

The Critical theory introduces the idea of power to argue that influence from media text is perpetrated by a few well-placed individuals who want to maintain their social, political and economic status (Fourie 2007; Fuchs 2010). Coming from the works of Karl Marx, Critical theory addresses the influence of text/rhetoric (in media), perpetuated by 'structural inequalities' in contemporary society (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010: 141). In practical terms, what the elites consider as social, economic or political debate becomes the same lens through which the rest of the people understand reality because the 'class which has means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production'(Marx and Engels 2006: 9). The ideas of the few elites who own/influence the media become acceptable among the general population as truth by means of indoctrination or ideology. Gramsci (2006) notes that, actually, for the elites to maintain this ideology, there has to be a well-established structure in order to gain acceptance from the majority

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on various issues. Consequently, the majority fail to answer the question of what is important in their lives without being influenced by what the elites tell them is important (Marcuse 1964). Critical theory can well explain the struc- tures behind the mainstream news set-up mentioned above and the influence that such news wields on the community person. By castigating the dominant ideology, the theory helps to support alternative counter-ideological news avenues that are community based, intended to influence affairs at a local level. Such news avenues include local communication efforts or small media platforms such as CATs, which are described below.

Cats

CATs are 'made up of powerful speakers hoisted on top of 10 to 20 metre bamboo or steel poles. Regular programmes are broadcast at specific times of the day over the loudspeakers' (Tabing 2000: 84; Semujju 2016a). '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: 84), as he detailed how Tacunan Audio Tower, in the Philippines, works.

Although the CATs in Asia retain the community radio model of survival by being funded by non-government organizations such as FAO and UNDP, in Uganda, the CATs are started and maintained by village members, who pay as low as half a dollar for their village information to be aired (Semujju 2016b). This information ranges from a lost cow to health, education and secu- rity, on top of commentary from the announcer (Semujju 2016a, 2016b). The CATs defined in this article also differ from those used in Maoist and Stalinist regimes of Europe and Asia (Fanby 2009; Kristof 2011), which were fixed in each home, as the former are started and run by village members while the latter were run by the state to transmit propaganda, a role that in Uganda currently is played by some FM and AM stations.

Location of the Study

The research for this article was carried out in Uganda, a country in East Africa. Uganda is the 21st poorest country globally (Global Finance 2015). Uganda struggled to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), specifically, in the area of eradication of poverty. The biggest proportion of Uganda's population (33.5 million out of 35 million people) lives in rural and semi-urban areas and they subsist on agriculture (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS] 2014). These are the people who use CATs mostly. In terms of the communication infrastructure, the political influence that led to the closure of four FM radio stations in Uganda in 2009, on top of several other challenges such as illiteracy, poverty and poor infrastructures, had reduced access and participation in media (Nassanga 2009) as other radios self-censored their content to avoid closure. The relationship between radio and CATs, however, is a complementary one and dates back to the 1950s, when radio had just started in Uganda. Because the radio signals were only relayed in the capital city, content was recorded on tapes and taken to other parts of the country using loud speakers (Gariyo 1993). This practice, which is the precursor of narrowcasting, shows how CATs are used to fill the gaps that radio leaves. From the 2000s, CATs have been used for village local information that radio does not pay attention to, such as a community member's lost cow. People resort to CATs to share local information, which also defines 'local' to only mean what

is happening in one village. The mobile phones and CATs, on the other hand, are not mutually exclusive. The operators of the CATs use mobile phones to receive information from community members, especially during emergencies.

Methodology

The data reported in this article were collected from two locations. These are the areas of Nyendo (rural) and Nassuuti (semi-urban) in Uganda. The two areas are in two separate Ugandan districts of Masaka and Mukono, respec- tively. The rural location is 120 km from the capital while the semi-urban is located within 20km. The choice of the locations and which CAT to use was 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 that the researcher used to choose the sample size were that the two CATs were distinct from each other, meaning that they served communities that are different economically. The economic factor influenced purposive sampling since some of the arguments made in this article are that the usage of CATs saves the communities from incurring any expenses of buying radio batteries.

For the key informant interviews, Sherry and Marlow (1999) note that there is no specific number as long as whatever number you have inspires you to obtain the intended information. Kumar (1989) more specifically notes that the number usually ranges from fifteen to 35 interviews. But Mossman and Mayhew's (2007) extensive study of the first-hand experience of the Prostitution Reform Act in New Zealand by sex industry workers used 73 qualitative interviews, while Kim et al. (2004) used only nine interviews for their study of sociocultural factors and organ donation and transplant in Korea. From the above studies, the key informants for the study were ten, selected based on responsibility and knowledge of CATs. These were selected among the announcers of the CATs, district information officers (one for each district in which the research area is found), information and communication officers from both the Ministry of ICT and the Uganda Communications Commission (the government body that manages media and communication infrastructures).

The above key informant interviews helped to inform the data that were collected through observation that was carried out for ten days (divided between five days at each tower). The observation included watching the announcers work with the gadgets in the CATs 'newsroom', watching the village members interact with the announcers and listening to the towers early in the morning and in the evening.

Findings

The way in which CATs receive the above news shows what level of structures (if any) they are made of. There are only the announcers and the various individuals taking information to the announcers. These individuals may come from different ends of the communication circle (top or bottom) as the table above indicates. Both announcers noted that the below news comes to them from various village members who are concerned about a certain situation in the village or who have personal or family concerns that they want the village to know (Henry Lwanga, Nassuuti FM presenter, interview, 21 July 2014; Joseph Mugerwa, Presenter, *Voice of Nyendo*, interview, 9 July 2014).

'Apart from village members coming to me with news, I get other news while

Event	Source	Origin
Child who wandered off from his/her mother's shop or home	Mother	Bottom
Cow that escaped from the kraal or zero-grazing pole; lost keys; lost identity card	Cow owner; someone affected by the cow; key owner; identity card owner	Bottom
Death of a village member	Family/village member	Bottom
Village member's CV	Owner	Bottom
Village sports competition	Sports club fun or participant	Bottom
Village member thanking whoever attended the burial of a loved one	Grieving family member	Bottom
Reflections from the day's news	Announcer	Bottom
Education: 'Please take children to school'	Announcer	Bottom
Heap of rubbish that the village members need to take care of	Announcer	Bottom
Immunization; malaria meeting/distribution of free mosquito nets to village members; new HIV/Aids counselling centre opening up	District information officer/ Community Development Officer	Top
Caution about the status of security in the village; warning against village justice after the village beat up and killed a suspected thief; Local defence council meeting	Police; Village chairman	Top

The table above shows the nature of village news at two CATs in Uganda.

Table 1: The nature of news in CATs.

walking within the community' (Joseph Mugerwa, Presenter, *Voice of Nyendo*, interview, 9 July 2014). 'During an emergency, someone could call me to give me the information' Lwanga recalled before adding, 'or ideas that I see when I walk within community'. The nature of news in CATs is so local that balance and fairness are not even necessary attributes at the village level as one of the announcers asked 'who would claim a village member's death based on a lie?'(Henry Lwanga, Nassuuti FM presenter, interview, 21 July 2014). The other observation was made by the village chairman of Nyendo (where the rural tower is located), noting that 'this information or news as you call it, is about us and no one else. One might think of us as selfish for seeking information about our own village. However, one might also think about those outlets that give us news about other villages or other people as careless' (John Ssendago, Chairman Local Council One, Nyendo Village, interview, 8 July 2014).

After gathering information, the announcer writes it down again in a clear handwriting so that it is easy to read out on air. The announcer ranks the information according to importance, where death and robbery/or another event (happening in real time) takes first place. Although information reception is

free, village members pay for their information to be aired if they have money. The price ranges from less than half a dollar to four dollars

maximum (in the rural area). If it is an emergence, the news will go on air whether or not the village member has money. 'Some people come with no money but the look on their face can tell you that they are in danger, like some- one whose child is missing. In that case I do it without any exchange of money'. The police and local council announcements are read without any charges. The CATs are switched on two times a day. They are switched on at 6:30a.m. And then at 9:30p.m. However, anytime of the day or night, a CAT may be switched on if there is an emergency. In case a village has more than one CAT, as is the case in Nyendo, then an agreement is reached between the announcers.

'We narrowcast in turns between me and the other CAT announcer so that we don't confuse the community'(Joseph Mugerwa, Presenter, *Voice of Nyendo*, interview, 9 July 2014). In terms of form or technology, CATs in Uganda use four horn speakers: each speaker faces a different direction, sending information to approximately 3km, depending on the time and the weather. Other gadgets include an amplifier, a microphone and a CD player.

Discussion

Three major elements can help to explain the nature of the above CATs news. These are locality, affordability and inclusivity (as opposed to elite news, which excludes some village members). CAT news is local and thus it is in the dialect used within the village (Kibuuka 2014). The advantage of this is that all the village members can understand the information. Radio may do this too but sometimes it uses experts who explain complex ideas in the official language (English in Uganda's case) (Carpentier 2001: 210). Such experts are 'an obstruction to people-centred processes' (Manyozo 2010: 266) and, as the critical theory notes, they embed an agenda into the news with aim of main- taining their power. Community radio may use local experts (such as model farmers) who use local languages, but this hierarchy of credibility (Atton and Wickenden 2005), which assumes that the influential people are the ones who are ever asked to participate in radio programmes, goes against the idea of voice for all. This is an additional challenge for (community) radio and a posi- tive attribute of CATs (Semujju 2016a). Local news that has been created using local resources is accessed and understood by everyone.

The CATs news comes from a channel that is run by a village member. Being run by one of their community members is an added advantage of the validation of the channel by the community, something that makes them feel powerful (Manyozo 2007; Semujju 2016b). Theories of power suggest that having power (a feeling that one is powerful) 'increases the tendency to approach and decreases the tendency to inhibit' (Anderson and Berdahl 2002: 1362). By considering themselves powerful (or lucky) for having a platform among them, the community members develop a need to communicate but if they have no platform, they withdraw and continue with their ordinary life, leaving the powerful who have the means (mainstream media) to tell them (the village members) what reality is. However, if it is a local member who runs the platform, as is the case in CATs, the tower becomes easy to approach and the feeling that 'if one of us can communicate, I can communicate too' develops. Village members thus get to define their own reality, and negotiate and interpret life on their own terms.

Being local also helps to challenge the western media paradigm of reporting conflict and scandals (Shamsuddin 1987). This challenge is important because the western news values, for example conflict, oddity, prominence

and several others (Kisuke 2004), when applied to Africa, leave so many events and issues untouched. Values such as prominence isolate the community people who are not famous, even when such people have something to say. The mainstream media alternative is to go to the two communities and cover conflict (whenever there is one), prominence (whenever a prominent person goes to the community) or whenever communities face natural disasters. Even then, the report is always about such passing events and not the village. If not the above, then the two communities receive information about celebri- ties, gossip and news from other areas around Uganda mostly through radio and TV. If the media are supposed to be a mirror in which society is reflected (Nassanga 2008), communities always receive images of other communities in their mirror from the mainstream media. CATs news reverses such a 'foreign' influence and localizes content to suit the village interests.

Such local news helps a village member to survey the world around him or her (Tai and Sun 2007). The intention is to understand what is happening in the person's surroundings. The CATs mainly announce what is happening in the village. The timing of the news also increases listenership and usage. Whenever the tower starts to narrowcast, it means there is an important message for the community. The timing signifies more importance if the CAT is switched on at a time when it should not be. This implies an emergency and most times it might be danger. The ideology that the mainstream media carry as the critical theory notes (Fuchs 2010) is prevalent in several practices such as timing, where primetime news is labelled serious and all powerful people want their (dominant) ideas to be conveyed at such a time. There is no fight over time from anyone at the CATs. Being located within the village means that the towers can serve all the members without resorting to competition. In fact, sometimes when there is no information from the village, the towers are switched off for one or even two days. This also minimizes the costs of running the towers, which is another way to avoid bringing in external sponsors and government adverts.

The influence of government and commercialism has no place in such local news. The self-actualization gained when village members collect their own news leads to empowerment. Empowerment 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 of 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 stake- holders to initiate the communication process. The process of empowerment is multi-layered from individual actualization to small groups and finally to the entire community (Williams and Labonte 2007). CATs, from the above explanation, appeal to the first layer of empowerment, by providing information access to the individuals. The ability that the community members have to initiate a message stresses the usefulness of empowerment and it alludes to communities having power and ability to communicate (Melkote and Steeves 2001). Compared with the mainstream media such as newspapers, such content is assigned special space under the letters-to-the-editor section. This arises from the fact that ordinary people are not familiar with journalism values such as ethics (Nassanga 2008), something that leaves communication as a preserve for a 'chosen' few journalists. On the contrary, CATs news is gathered by local people irrespective of those people's economic, education level or expertise. Such an arrangement embraces article 29 of the Ugandan Constitution, which gives every person a right to seek, receive and impart   information.

The popularity of CATs news can be argued from an economic point of view as well (affordability). Other media such as Television for example, require that, first of all, one buys a TV set. The amount needed to buy one TV set is equivalent to the amount that could enable the purchase of over 90 small radio sets in Uganda (Kiwala 2015). The current price for a 32-inch digital TV set is $ 343 (for the Hisense brand), which is the cheapest, and $ 386 for the Sony brand, which is the most expensive on the market (Kiwala 2015). Radio, on the other hand, apart from the fact that several mobile phone brands have FM stations, costs about $4 (this price is for a radio set as small as a mobile phone). From June 2015, the government switched broadcasting (TV first) from analogue to digital and so people with TV sets had to buy digital TV sets or keep their old TV sets and buy digital set-up boxes. Each of the two options costs more than most of the respondents earn in a month, which is between $29 and $40 (Uganda's minimum wage stands at shs 6000 [$1.71] a month [Nassaka 2015]). The implication for content such as news is that those who have no money cannot access news. Within the areas where data were collected, many people did not have the means to own 'fancy' gadgets as several of them are still struggling to buy their first TV set.

In addition to the differences in information gathering, processing and dissemination between CATs and media, CATs also differ from media in the use of affordable technology. Affordable technology means information is available at any time when it is needed. For example, the few gadgets that CATs use can still be used when electricity goes off because they consume little fuel (Joseph Mugerwa, Presenter, *Voice of Nyendo*, interview, 9 July 2014). By doing this, CATs increase information access among less privileged people. However, the 'dark side' of this cheap technology is that information can be lost, especially if a CAT is narrowcasting during a storm, and yet in 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, besides, the CATs would not act as a warning system, something that the mainstream media do. This is because CATs do not have experts to read through neces- sary data, which tend to be expensive sometimes and technical, to warn of any possible natural disasters.

In comparison with newspapers, CATs bring in the idea of inclusivity as an explanation for local news prioritizing. Reading of newspapers requires literacy and since some people in the areas where the CATs are located are primary and secondary school dropouts (29 per cent in Mukono and 43 per cent in Masaka), this also is not an option. The national education picture from the 2014 census notes that seven million Ugandans have never been to school. The people who cannot read therefore are left out by elitist media such as newspapers. CATs therefore remain the source of local news for people in such a condition. Education or lack of the same has to do with issues of complexity in a way that if an idea (in this case a communication channel) is complex, the rate at which people accept its use will be low (Rogers 1995). Although Everett Rogers criticized his own transmission model of how innovations spread as in western countries (Singhal and Obregon 2004; Manyozo 2010), the low education levels in Uganda and the low penetration of ICTs cannot be a coincidence. For example, currently, out of 35 million people in Uganda, six million people use the Internet while seventeen million use mobile phones (UBOS 2014).

Implications

The biggest implication of CATs news is that such information redefines our understanding of the concept of news. In CATs, news means anything happening in the community. News is information that any individual community member brings forward. In the mainstream media, there is a commonality of news values that centres on conflict, oddity (bizarre) and prominence (Cushion et al. 2014). 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 prioritize him simply because he is the chairperson. Similarly, CATs do not follow the President of Uganda if he has passed by the community, although if the government or the police asked the towers to announce that the President would be coming, the towers would. Otherwise, the community members can get such national information from radio. However, if there was a community concern from or about the President's visit, the CATs would pick the issue up. News in the mainstream media has structures that include the news editor, news reader (radio and TV) and the journalist who traverses the field in search of news. CATs only have the community and the presenter. Apart from having different contents for news, therefore, CATs news does not come from the structures that radio, TV and newspapers have.

Challenges of cats

CATs are not licensed and for this, the government considers them illegal and subjects them to closure whenever there is a complaint from an individual community member (Mukasa 2014; Nsimbe 2014). Although this has not happened to the two towers sampled for the study, it creates fear among the rest of the CATs (John Ssendago, Chairman Local Council One, Nyendo Village, interview, 8 July 2014). Besides fear, the owners of the towers cannot make long-term plans with threats of illegality looming over them. This pending closure can impede further innovations in CATs. Keeping CATs on tenter- hooks is one way that the government uses to stop them from violating other people's rights (Mukasa 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). This is another reason why CATs avoid political content, in addition to the fear that the government will shut them down for having no license.

The disincentive to being an easily affordable communication platform is that no one scrutinizes who should start a CAT. In such a way, whoever starts a CAT decides what content he or she receives from the community and what content will never be heard. Not every topic is developmental for communities. In fact, some information can stir hatred and conflict among members in the communities. There should be some guarantee that whoever manages a CAT ensures against certain practices. There is no check point for how long the person starting a tower has been living in the village, whether or not he/she subscribes to the village values and tradition and how he/she intends to help the community by starting a CAT. The problem here can arise from the fact that Uganda has 52 dialects and each dialect represents a separate culture. For example, staple food can vary from region to region in Uganda. Where people among the central Uganda enjoy eating grasshoppers, people in the Northern and Eastern Uganda detest them and instead   eat   wild   poultry,   along   with

various types of food that those separate tribes call their staple food. If anyone can start a CAT, how will a new person from a different region advice on diet and how it impacts health, without being influenced by previous knowledge of the same issues? The selective processes (exposure, perception, retention) have already been found to be responsible as a mediating factor among soap opera audiences on diet issues (Dutta-Bergman 2006). What would the case be among CATs' audiences not only on diet but on several other contentious issues? While some of these questions are beyond the scope of this study, future CATs research should attempt to answer them.

CATs have no code of ethics. Ethical concerns have been raised in academic circles when in the early 2000s radio stations aired live talk-shows in which all people (including non-journalists) participated live or using mobile phones. The ordinary people who did not understand journalism ethics could not be held responsible if they made some unethical statements on radio for personal gains (Nassanga 2008). Similarly, if CATs narrowcast wrong information, there is no way their operators can be held accountable using a media and communication checklist since they are not registered to provide that service. This lack of accountability may result in irresponsible communication on the part of the CATs.

Setting no requirement for starting CATs maybe dangerous for the community, considering the fact that CATs are loud. This was the major prob- lem cited by almost all people who participated in the study when asked about the main problem of CATs (apart from the two announcers who are also owners). If anyone is free to start a CAT, there will be no control over the noise. The other aspect about noise is related to human rights in that noise violates human rights. Village members have a right to live in a quiet and peaceful environment to enable them to think and progress. The solution so far is that the communities that have CATs regulate them using local village committees. Some villages (in Luwero district) convene and spell out rules for CATs to follow. This is based on the idea that it is better to live with the noise for a specified amount of time in a day than receiving no local news at all. Each CAT in the above example is given time for narrowcasting and it is up to the community to specify for how long. CATs therefore are answerable to the community and not anyone else.

The other fundamental issue that challenges CATs, although it is a challenge that has been raised from radio studies, is whether or not mere expo- sure to radio (or CATs in this case) without understanding whether or not the community recalls anything that the channel broadcasts is enough to say that a channel can create changes in people's lives (Starkey 2002). More CATs studies are necessary therefore to understand recall and other issues such as participation in more detail. Previous studies about radio, a channel that was used the most for local news before CATs, indicate that not everyone has access to radio and that not everyone participates in radio (Semujju 2014). In community radio specifically, for example Mama FM in Uganda, challenges such as lack of participation, in addition to poor accessibility and sustainability, have been cited (Musubika 2008).

Conclusion

This article has introduced the structure of news in CATs by describing the nature of information aired by CATs referred to by village members as news and the structures that help to support that kind of local news. The

contrast has been made between mainstream media news, which is based on gigantic technical form, structure and professional news making practices, and the local news collected by the community members themselves. This article used data collected from ten key informant interviews and observation at two CATs in Uganda to argue for locality, affordability and inclusivity as explanations of why community members engage in CATs news. Some of the challenges of CATs identified include the fact that the towers have no license, which places them on a collision path with the government, complaints about noise and lack of a code of ethics for the announcer and the village members who manage information. This article concluded by calling for more studies to investigate recall and several other issues that are still unknown in terms of CATs.

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