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Creating Connections: Exploring the Intermediary Use of ICTs by Congolese Refugees at Tertiary Educational Institutions in Cape Town

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ABSTRACT: The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been seen as a boon for groups that occupy a marginal position in the mainstream commercial media or that have limited access to such media. ICTs such as the Internet have optimistically been seen as potentially providing a communicative space where community movements, activists and social interest groups might share information more freely and with fewer of the space limitations and distribution problems than in traditional media. In the South African context, one such marginalised community is the refugees from other African countries who have made South Africa their home. Several opinion surveys and research projects into the representation of refugees in South African media have raised concerns about how refugees are treated in the mainstream media. Against the background of such problems, one could ask the question of whether the benefits that new media technologies have proven to hold for other marginal groups will also apply to refugees. If this is the case, how do refugees use new media technologies to their benefit, and how should this usage be theorised? This article seeks to explore these questions through a study of a specific South African refugee community, namely the Congolese refugee community in Cape Town. The article presents both preliminary indications of the uses of ICTs by this community and initial theoretical reflections on these findings.

Introduction

Several opinion surveys and research projects over the past decade (e.g. Crush & Williams, 2001; Dodson, 2001) have shown that public opinion in South Africa is "deeply xenophobic" (McDonald & Jacobs, 2005: 300). Most recently, a study of print media (McDonald & Jacobs, 2005) in the Southern African region has reaffirmed previous findings that, while some positive shifts have been occurring, print media is still largely anti-immigration. In South Africa, specifically, mainstream media coverage of issues related to refugees and immigrants from the rest of Africa has been overwhelmingly negative (Media Tenor, 2002). Such misrepresentations and stereotyping of, and prejudiced assumptions about, refugees and immigrants have led to widespread distrust of the traditional media among refugee communities (cf. Kabeya-Mwepu & Jacobs, 2003).

The mainstream print media might not, however, be the last recourse for refugees and immigrants. The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been seen as a boon for groups that occupy a marginal position in the mainstream commercial media or that have limited access to such media. ICTs such as the Internet have therefore raised hopes of serving as a new media "commons" – where community movements, activists and social interest groups may share information more freely and with fewer of the space limitations and

distribution problems than in traditional or mainstream media (Agre, 2002; Alia, 2004: 59; Arnold & Plymire, 2000; Kidd, 2003; Lax, 2000; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Rheingold, 2003; and in Southern Africa: Mason, 2001: 96; Struwig & Conradie, 2003; Wasserman, 2005).

This article seeks to investigate the question of whether the benefits that new media technologies have proven to hold for other marginal groups will also apply to refugees. If this is the case, how do refugees use new media technologies to their benefit, and how should this usage be theorised? These questions are explored through a study of a specific South African refugee community, namely the Congolese refugee community in Cape Town. The article presents both preliminary indications of the uses of ICTs by this community and initial theoretical reflections on these findings. The article differs from the majority of studies on the media and migration in Southern African in that it employs an ethnographic approach to canvas the views and experiences of refugee community members themselves, rather than approaching the issue through an analysis of media texts.

Literature review and theoretical assumptions

While there is no single definition of new media, particular technologies such as the Internet and email should not be seen in technologically determinist ways, but rather analysed according to the ways and contexts in which they are used (Jones, 2003: 1). This article thus considers the social context in which ICTs are used as being of the utmost importance when investigating how refugees make use of new media technologies to serve their interests and fulfil their needs. This links with the assumption that audiences are not passive receivers of media texts but can actively interact with them and create meaning communally within social contexts. Further, the view is that audiences can even take collective action against meanings produced by media (cf. Croteau & Hoynes, 2000: 261 ff.). Examples of such action already taken by the refugees in Cape Town include the production of documentaries broadcast in the mainstream media, and the development of their own print media outlet – a newspaper titled *Fugee*, published through the Western Cape Refugee Forum (Kabeya-Mwepu & Jacobs, 2003). This study further explores such agency on the part of this community by investigating community members' use of other media forms for the purpose of community building.

An interesting theoretical development in the study of new media technologies is that old communication theories are revisited to explain the way in which people interact with these new media forms. One such theory that has been revisited to study the use of the Internet by groups with special interests is the "uses and gratifications" approach, originally developed in the 1940s and 1950s and elaborated upon in the 1960s and 1970s (see McQuail & Windahl, 1981: 75). From this perspective, users of new media technologies are seen as active subjects, using media for specific needs, to fulfil requirements not satisfied by other media (Lister *et al*, 2003: 184).

Previous studies of the use of ICTs in African contexts (e.g. Wasserman, 2005; cf. Nyamnjoh, 2005: 16) have also suggested that new media technologies are used in a way that recalls the "two-step flow" process of communication, where information is passed on by community leaders or representatives, or via community organisations, to other members of the community.[1] This theory, originally developed in 1944 by Paul Lazarsfeld *et al* to theorise voter behaviour, holds that media messages influence opinion leaders, who then pass on these messages to other segments of the population. Thus social relations become important in understanding how the media influences society (Gripsrud, 2002: 49-50). Judging from Nyamnjoh's remarks, this type of communication flow can be seen in a number of African societies and can be related to cultural values and material circumstances that make people more reliant on other members of their community (2005: 16):

Although connectivity in Africa is lower than anywhere else in the world, local cultural values of solidarity, interconnectedness and interdependence...make it possible for people to access the Internet and its opportunities without necessarily being directly connected. In many situations, it suffices for a single individual to be connected in order for whole groups and communities to benefit. The individual in question acts as a relay point (or communication node) linking other individuals and communities in myriad ways...

This might suggest, as do other examples in Africa, the need to revise some of the theories regarding Internet communication as they are formulated in other contexts, to make provision for a less individualised form of communication. In place of many-to-one, many-to-many or one-to-many (cf. Burnett & Marshall 2003: 47), the mediatory aspect in some African communication contexts suggests something to the effect rather of one-to-one-to-one, or one-to-one-to-many. This theoretical assumption also underpins this exploratory investigation.

Research questions and methodology

Following on the above, the research questions that this study wishes to answer, are:

- What are the most important uses to which ICTs, especially email and the Internet, are being put by Congolese refugees in Cape Town, South Africa?
- Can the process of two-step flow communication between individuals and communities, which has been noted in Internet use in other African contexts, also be seen in the way that Congolese refugees in Cape Town, South Africa, use new media technologies?

The research was conducted in a qualitative fashion, based on interviews and participant observation within the community. The interviews and observations were conducted by the

1 One example of this is provided by Richard Koman (2003: email communication on Global Knowledge for Development Email List, Gkd@phoenix.edc.org), who notes the Ugandan example of community radio stations offering an email service to rural listeners. People can email one another care of the radio station and, at a designated time and at a small cost, the station will alert everyone who has received an email.

second author of this article, himself a member of the refugee community in Cape Town and thus able to conduct interviews in the subjects' native languages and against the backdrop of his own experience. The research community was limited to Congolese refugees currently studying at tertiary educational institutions in Cape Town. This group was chosen partly on the basis of convenience and access, but also on the assumption that these individuals are more likely to have access to computers and the Internet, and would therefore be both more able and more likely to function as intermediaries between the Internet and their respective communities. Interviews were conducted on the condition that respondents would be granted anonymity, so as to guarantee their safety and to create optimum conditions for them to provide information without fear of political reprisals. As Adams (2001: 5) reminds us: "Whether real or imagined, the peril of hit squads is an issue that the refugee community does not take lightly".

Findings

None of the 31 respondents[2] interviewed indicated that they had used the Internet before they came to South Africa as refugees. Their introduction to the Internet's possibilities are therefore also linked with being refugees, which may account in part for the priorities they set for Internet use – one widespread response being that the type of news most in demand by Internet users as well as by their communities on whose behalf they search for information is political news. One of the key uses of the Internet by the refugees interviewed, therefore, seemed to be the creation of a link to events in the country of origin. That these events are predominantly political can perhaps be expected, considering that the political turmoil in the Congo was the main reason for the refugees fleeing that country. The failure of the South African mainstream media to provide refugees (and South Africans) with adequate information on the political developments in the Congo has been an impetus for the refugees to turn to new media technologies. One respondent put it this way:

I am not happy with the South African media. It seems to me that the news is reported only according to their own agenda. Most of the time I do not get what I need, what is really happening in the DRC. They report only if there is war in some parts or if the president of the RSA meets with Congolese. But...daily life is not reported. The only way I use to stay tuned to the Congo is the Internet. I am lucky to be allowed to use it for free at the university. I cannot refuse to read news for my friends as well.

Then there are also language barriers, which make the South African media inaccessible to refugees:

2 Respondents were provided with a list of questions posed to them in French by the second author. Interview notes were made in English and, in places in this article, have been edited for grammar by the authors. Answer sheets and interview notes are available from the authors.

My English is not good and I am unable to follow all the news bulletins conducted in English on radio and on TV. The only source I have to catch up with news in my own language is the Internet. I come to the conclusion that most of the people who ask me to print them some extracts from the Internet are like me – they need something in French.

The assumption that individuals from refugee communities act as intermediaries on behalf of their communities to obtain information via the Internet and then share it with other members of the community was supported by the interviews. The majority of respondents indicated that their community (refugees in South Africa) expects them to pass on information obtained through the Internet, mostly on the topic of politics. One respondent, tellingly, likened his role to that of the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC):

Most of the people that ask me for news are not able to navigate themselves on the Internet. They cannot afford R10 per hour everyday. When they have some money, they do not ask me for news, but when they do not have, I become their "SABC"!

Another respondent reminded the interviewer of the Congolese oral tradition, and said that this also influences the way he uses the Internet to disseminate political news from the Congo to the refugee community in Cape Town:

Anything that is good can become even better when it is told to other people. Any political news means nothing to myself, it is for the community.

One respondent even commented on how material found on the Internet facilitated "offline" conversation:

I discovered the political map of my country on the Internet. I was so happy and decided to print it. I put it in my room. This attracted the attention of all my roommates and our visitors. Everybody needed to have one and I became the centre of news.

The fact that the theoretical framework of "two-step flow" of information from the media to opinion leaders, who then relay the information to their communities, is so applicable to the respondents in this study can partly be attributed to their role as budding intellectuals. As one respondent pointed out, his access to the Internet and his ability to use it made his immediate community dependent on him for information and instilled in him a sense of responsibility in terms of this role:

Since then [when he discovered the Internet],[3] I feel so guilty when I do not exercise my duty, I mean when I do not search information online. People who know me think I am a genius because most of them cannot explore the Internet; they in some way rely on me.

This was reiterated by a respondent who reported feelings of guilt when he does not have any news to report to the members of his community:

More people rely on me because I have free Internet access at university.

3 Authors' comment.

Another respondent noted a similar experience, adding that his role has changed since he arrived in South Africa as a refugee:

To be honest, I did not have political ambitions at home. But, as an intellectual, people ask me questions about everything at home. I started printing for them some articles from the Internet. If I knew that their demand could be so high, I would not have tried it anyway! But now, I continue telling people what they want.

For others, the Internet has become a way of continuing political work that started before they were forced into exile, like this respondent:

I was a political party member in my country. Being in exile in the RSA is the worst thing. I decided to be in touch with my party and share the information with other people. Most of the news I find on the party's website. I always send home some of our views here to let the debate go on.

The peace talks held at Sun City in 2004 were a recent political event of great significance for the Congolese refugee community. One respondent highlighted this summit as an opportunity to use the Internet for the benefit of his community:

...People tried to ask me questions about it [the Sun City summit].[4] *I realised that it was difficult, even being in South Africa, to get closer to the event and always be informed. But some of my friends told me that I could read most of the things on the Internet. Since then, I kept going.*

The intermediary role of students using the Internet and email also works the other way around, namely to provide information about South Africa to family and community members who remained in the Congo, as another respondent indicated:

To assist my family back home I realised that I could find out the exchange rate of the South African Rand and my Congolese Francs on the Internet. I always tell my community the rate all the time they want to send money.

The intermediary role played by Internet users extends in some cases beyond the altruistic motive of information sharing. The Internet also provides commercial opportunities for entrepreneurs alert to the needs of the refugee community, as one respondent pointed out:

We Congolese people have the best music in Africa, and among the best in the world. We are so proud of it and love it a lot. For me, the Internet is a business, as I can download the music, enjoy it and, most importantly, sell it. What a miracle! I get more visits because I sell music that every Congolese wants to hear. But nobody knows from where I get it. I cannot tell them, otherwise I will lose my business!

Not all the respondents were positive about the Internet, however. One respondent, claiming to use the Internet three times a week, mostly for research and political news, said:

4 Authors' comment.

I do not advise people to consider the Internet as a way of life. It makes people lazy... .

It is an oft-cited fact that use of the Internet is not gender-neutral. As is the case in the offline world, social constructions of gender also influence media use in the online world. As Lister *et al* (2003: 186) put it:

Within this landscape our individual experiences of networked communication are subject not only to the particular material circumstances of our identities (age, race, gender, class and place) but also to determining and limiting factors that emerge from wider forces.

During the interviews with Congolese refugees at tertiary educational institutions in Cape Town, gender differences did emerge in the responses. Most female students claimed not to use the Internet as a hobby as do men, but only to study. Most of them also denied involvement in politics or using the Internet to find political information – a marked difference from the male students' responses. But when asked if they act as intermediaries to send messages on behalf of others via the Internet, a number of the female respondents answered in the affirmative. One of them elaborated as follows:

I am afraid of being exposed to some sort of spies. If we talk about newspapers on the Internet, we may become an easy target for politicians...Here we should be focused on other subjects, which does not happen.

On the subject of Internet use, another female respondent had the following to say:

I hate politics and politicians. Reading news all the time can sometimes help people to hope and keep eyes on the future. But there is no hope because nobody can continue to hear and trust the lies. We must not communicate what we do not believe in. The most useful thing is to study and not to play games or look for boyfriends on the Internet.

This respondent did, however, indicate that the members of her community expect her to pass on information about politics from the Internet. This was reiterated by another female respondent:

Some people use the Internet for purposes that is of no help. Most people expect me to tell them what I find on the news. But the Internet is not a hobby for me. It is an instrument to boost my studies. I do not see why I should turn down such an opportunity and start reading all kinds of contradictions that my community used to hear.

However, one of the female respondents did indicate using the Internet for political purposes, both to retrieve information and to share it with community members – suggesting that hasty generalisations on gendered use of the Internet should be avoided:

I read news from home and share it with people here. I know the economic situation of my country and I am also able...to even vote in the next election, as I know most of the candidates from the newspapers I read and that we use to share.

The sharing of these messages with community members occurs via traditional word-of-mouth means, through social contact but seemingly also increasingly through the use of other new media technologies such as cellular phones. The interview responses indicate a widespread use of cellphones, including Short Message Services (SMS), to spread information through the community. This combination – of different forms of new media with older communication forms like oral communication – seems to illustrate Agre's (2002) theory of amplification; namely, that new media technologies build on and extend existing communication structures in communities rather than putting into place a completely new communication structure.

Conclusion

This exploratory research project seems to indicate that new media technologies like the Internet, email and cellphones serve an important function in the community life of refugees. Not only do such technologies enable people to stay in touch with events in their country of origin, but they also impact on the refugee community in their adopted country by creating a social structure for information to be relayed. This relaying of information seems to take place largely by means of intermediaries with Internet access. The process seems to be in line with usage patterns noted elsewhere in Africa, and seems to support the view that theories such as the "two-step flow" model of communication could be revisited to explain the use of new media technologies in these contexts. The combination of different media types by refugees to facilitate this "two-step flow" in turn underscores the theory put across by Agre (2002), albeit in a slightly different context, that new media technologies serve to amplify existing communication patterns within social structures.

Respondents' feedback suggested that such structures are also differentiated according to gender and, further, that existing power relations in the community are reflected in the use of new media technologies. More conclusive findings in this regard will require further research. As far as the uses and gratifications derived from the use of new media technologies by this group of refugees is concerned, it would seem that monitoring of political developments in their country of origin is the highest priority, followed by research for study purposes, and the exchange of social capital. The current study did not, however, quantify these uses and gratifications, and the above is based on a general impression formed by the qualitative responses of respondents.

This preliminary exploration raises certain focus points for further research. Such focus points could be to elaborate further on the range of uses and gratifications derived from new media technologies, as well as to explore further the power relations within the social group using these media. Further research should also be done into the development of tailor-made, new media networks within the refugee community itself.

It is hoped that this study has pointed to the need for further research into the uses of new media technologies within specific communities. This study does not claim any "scientific" or quantifiable generalisability – on the contrary, it wishes to suggest that an ethnographic approach, used here only exploratively, could yield valuable insight into the impact of new media technologies on communities. This type of research would be of importance in the future to help identify ways in which the communicative needs of refugees and immigrants may be met. Through understanding the needs and expectations of such communities, future researchers and service providers may be able to develop services aimed at improving their communicative abilities. Ultimately, such research will contribute to the empowerment of communities for whom the mass media has developed a blind spot. In the light of greater cross-border movement and the increasing exchange of people between South Africa and the rest of the continent, such studies may serve to help refugee and immigrant communities find their own voice in their new context, and appropriate the means available to make it heard. ❑

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