The role of community radio stations in enhancing rural development; a case study of Kass FM

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Communication and ICT is a crucial component in realization of vision 2030, radio has played a key role in dissemination of information to mass audience. Since time immemorial, mass media has played a vital role in passing information on development issues both locally and internationally. This paper was aimed at assessing the role of community radio stations in enhancing rural development. The paper sought to identify the main contributions of KASS FM radio in the development of rural areas, the study also aimed to establish the appropriate adjustments in editorial policies of KASS FM radio in helping to promote development related programmes in rural areas. Despite some weaknesses in radio programming and the mode of interaction with the rural people, the findings of this study showed that the rural communities are better off today than in the old days when FM radios were non-existent. KASS FM has come up with different developmental programmes that have positively contributed to changing the rural people’s ways of life. These programmes include farming, health, marital values, environment, cultural issues, human rights, democracy, religious teachings, peace and reconciliation. Such programmes feature experts, professionals and opinion leaders who address numerous topics of interest to the community. The local people participate in the production of these programmes through letters to the editor, and phone-ins, among others. Programmes such as political talk shows, which feature in KASS FM, has become one of the most important ways of community participation. The interpretation and conclusions are based on the empirical data analysis and the theories of development advanced by international development communication scholars, as presented in the paper. The study ends with some recommendations on how KASS FM can best serve the interests of the poor people in rural areas, and helps improve their lives.

Key words: Development, Communication, KASS FM, Radio, Rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The last twelve years have witnessed a rapid evolution of the broadcasting industry in Kenya. The trend is largely as a result of the forces of globalization, especially liberalization, privatization and the free market economy touted by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other multilateral institutions since the late 1980s. In Kenya’s case, the number of radio stations has increased from only one state-owned channel, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), by 1993, to over 148 radio stations by December 2011.

After the liberalization (sometimes called de-regulation) of the airwaves, which removed state monopoly of broadcasting in 1992, several players, including businessmen, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), churches, foreign donors and Kenyans living abroad, jumped into the fray to start or fund FM stations. Apart from Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, which operates on Frequency Modulation (FM) and covers the entire country, all the stations are Frequency Modulation (FM) radios broadcasting mainly within smaller communities and have narrower outreach. Although Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, first launched in 1954, still broadcasts in different languages including the two national languages – English and Kiswahili – it has lost much of its audience to FM radios which have captured local niches through popular music and humorous DJ presenters. The use of local languages is another reason why FMs are very popular to the communities.

The cultural context of a given place is very important during communication or information for development.
Change within any society depends in part on the members’ willingness to abandon certain cultural traits in favour of new ideas or ways of life (Hendy, 2000). Culture is a significant factor in any process of development, and the media is an agent of cultural evolution. There is a correlation between the media and culture, and as McQuail puts it, “every aspect of the production and use of mass media has a cultural dimension” (McQuail, 2005).

Media as a tool for social change

Media has enormous impact on any society; the only disparity is on whether the media-induced changes (especially on culture) are good or bad for the community. It is also a question of how long it takes for media products to cause change in the lifestyles of people. Some of the schools of thought about the media-society relationship, and the impact of media content on people.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized a purposive sampling technique which was directed toward obtaining a certain type of listeners in a population since they were thought to be the key informants and hence it was them who had the necessary information. This method was used to obtain data from people in the area under study. The study population consisted of the residents of Wareng district whose population is approximately over 100,000 and a sample of 100 people was drawn from the population.

For logistical reasons, this sample was appropriate because of its heterogeneous characteristics and as a replica of the residents of Wareng district. Published sources were meant to collect secondary and interviews were used to collect primary information from listeners. Published records were reviewed and data/information obtained was collected and used as appropriate. Such materials include research journals, conference papers, textbooks, project reports, government documents, and development plans. Information collected were mostly utilized in chapters covering introduction, literature review and subsequent areas covered by the study that provides information on role of community radio stations in enhancing rural development in Kenya.

The study used interview as a primary source of data collection, which is a process of communication or interaction in which the subject or interviewee gives the needed information verbally in a face-to-face situation. Interviews were used to effectively collect useful information that required to solve/explore problems. An interview was a major foundation of this study and refers to information that was generated to meet the specific requirements of the investigation at hand. The primary data collection instruments were sets of interview schedules for listeners of KASS FM.

The interview schedules consisted of questions that were in a structured format, and in a sequence that sought to address the objectives of this study. With this in mind, and as Koul (1988) points out, it was crucial to think aloud and anticipate what information was needed to ensure that relevant questions were asked.

Questions sought to solicit answers to all the research questions that had been formulated. Saravanal (1992) corroborate this when he says that the main purpose of an interview as a tool of data collection in a survey is to gather data extensively and intensely. Interview was thus preferred for the survey of KASS listeners’ views on the station as set out in the objectives of the study.

Data analysis involved synthesizing of information obtained through the above mentioned methods of data collection into a coherent description of what was observed or otherwise discovered. Conclusions were then drawn to form the interpretations and views of the respondents. The responses given by various respondents were tabulated into simple frequency tables and other descriptive representations in order to facilitate inferential interpretation by the researcher and present a visual outlook of the results of the study.

DISCUSSIONS

The contribution of KASS FM radio towards bringing peace after post election violence in 2008 was emphasized by respondent who were interviewed. For more than four years now, KASS FM has been running peace and reconciliation programmes targeted at bringing peace and reconciliation in the country. KASS FM radio station, in collaboration with peace champion like Non-Governmental organizations and church leaders have been participating on peace and reconciliation programmes.

Cultural awareness was another fundamental finding of this study, although not a programme on itself, the use of Kalenjin language was highlighted as an aspect of cultural development. The use of elderly presenters was another thing mentioned as good for cultural development. These elderly presenters like Arap Tanui (Tos talpis iman!) (Is it decent) are said to be well-versed with the norms, values and traditions of the local community.

Some respondents also said the language contributes to “preservation” of the local cultures, like knowledge of the origins of local clans, traditional artifacts, and certain important cultural practices which would otherwise be extinct.

Although young people cited that they prefer ‘modern’ pop music, R and B, Jazz, and other Western lyrics, the older generation (40 years and above) are always enchanted by the local songs, including old ones which
Table 1: Cultural awareness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social values</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural language and awareness</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Health education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>No. of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

bring back their “good old days”. But that is not to say that the young generation is totally opposed to local language songs; but rather that they want less of it and more of the Kiswahili and English language music.

Out of 78 questionnaires that were administered to the residence of Wareng District, 55.2% agreed that KASS FM fosters cultural language and awareness among the residence while 25.6% said that the station instill social values to listeners and only 19.2% agreed that KASS FM play music that encourage development and recognize the artistes (table 1).

To promote local artistes, KASS FM has scheduled times for local music and local artistes to appear in the studios, during which they speak about their songs. KASS FM run a programme every Saturday from 10.00am to 12.00pm dedicated to local musicians who go to the studios and talk about how they managed to come up with their songs, and the deeper meanings of their lyrics. This process helps to inspire other people, especially young ones, who may emulate and start performing or composing their own songs.

Health education

Society can only develop when people are healthy, and the media have a responsibility to help people live healthily. Along this line, KASS FM have programmes during which medical doctors appear in the studios to talk about general or specific diseases, their causes, symptoms and how to avoid them or where to seek treatment.

The doctor can choose and base his topic of discussion on any “disease of the week”, depending on either letters sent in by the audience, or any current health problem or concern to the community. The topics that keep coming up include reproductive health issues among others. The fact that KASS FM radio station has health programmes reflects the ranking of health as very significant to the community. As a factor of development, human health is very important.

Among the respondents, 81% agreed that they tune into health education and the teachings are useful to them in their daily lives. On the other hand 15% said they do not listen to health education and some cited that the programmes at times are boring and the diseases being discussed are irrelevant. Only 4% said they are not sure if they have listened to health education (table 2).

Farming Information

The relevance of radio in the promotion of rural agriculture and helping people improve their peasantry lifestyles was dominant on respondent who were interviewed. The interviewees however observed that KASS FM is not giving ‘enough’ airtime for farming information because much of the airtime is used for political or entertainment programmes.

There are two types of farmer programmes on KASS FM radio – one is paid for by the institutions, NGOs and government departments interested in promoting different components of rural agriculture. These ‘interested parties’ have their agricultural field workers who go on radio to encourage the farmers to grow certain crops which have better markets. They also give information regarding how to sell the produce.

The other type of programmes are those initiated by the radio stations themselves to update farmers about market prices, new crop varieties, or the market demands for certain crops.

Farming information is relevant to the community of Wareng District, and Kenya as a whole, because the majority of people are peasants who live in the rural areas and survive on subsistence agriculture. So they need to be guided on what crops are beneficial, both for household consumption and sale. The agricultural experts and radio stations partnership is good because it
helps to drive home the right messages for the farmers.

Self-help and small-scale investments

Poverty and lack of income came up famously in the study. Although participants said they still need more information, tips and guidance on starting up and sustaining small-scale businesses, they commended the KASS FM radio for providing some useful information in as far as micro-credit schemes are concerned.

According to the response from the questionnaires administered, 88% agreed that KASS FM air business programmes which are very effective in terms of teaching entrepreneurial skills. On the other hand only 9% said the programmes are ineffective and only 3% were undecided if the programme was effective or not.

KASS FM often brings into the studio experts who talk on a wide range of subjects, including savings, starting up small businesses, and proper records keeping. Some people with ‘success stories’ are also invited to the radio to motivate other people with testimonies of how they have managed to expand their businesses (table 3 and figure 1).

Political awareness and democracy

Politics normally provides the hottest news for the media and the public alike. So promotion of political awareness and democracy has become one of the top agendas of KASS FM. From the interview discussions, it emerged that people are generally interested in politics, more than anything else. For instance, during political talk shows, there is usually a much bigger number of listeners than during other programmes. During these live programmes, invited local or national politicians are put to task to either explain government initiatives, or a new public policy or action.

In many occasions, the first one hour of the programme is for the guest to make an overview of the topic; with the moderator (usually a journalist at the station) interjecting at some points to ask questions, seek clarifications or keeps the speaker in focus. The last one or two hours are for phone calls or SMS messages from the audience, to which the guest (or guests) is given time to respond.
From the interviews that were carried, it emerged that people have gained some democratic insights from the political talk shows. Some respondents said they had never thought ordinary people have the right to challenge political leaders. "It feels good to hear a minister or Member of Parliament answering questions fired by ordinary people, and promising to follow up issues raised by a caller," said an interviewee.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussed different programmes presented above may not be the only development-oriented programmes. But at least they give a fairly broad scope of the kinds of developmental programmes running on KASS FM radio. Some of the programmes, like the religious ones, peace and reconciliation, and cultural awareness have had direct impacts on the community.

KASS FM has also been able to promote local singers and dramatists, as well as raise community awareness on the need to nurture indigenous knowledge. Other radio programmes such as farming and self-help projects have been able to stimulate rural development by providing useful information on loans, and tips on how to start or improve income-generating projects.

The news programmes have greatly improved the flow of information in the rural areas; while the programmes about human rights, family values, democracy and political awareness, have raised the level of understanding about those issues.

Other programmes, like environment alert, and health education, may not have directly contributed to tangible development, but they have helped to raise public knowledge and observation of the prescribed codes of behaviour. This is good for communal development.

Some of the genres were stimulated by the developmental goals of the radio, and therefore are closely related to some of the development-oriented programmes in the first section of this chapter. For instance, cultural awareness was responsible for the music, dance and drama genre; talk shows were stimulated by the need to broaden public awareness on politics and democracy; expert programmes and special interest groups were kindled by the need to serve specific interests of the public; news genre was stimulated by the need to provide useful factual reports as opposed to opinion.

All the staff, especially managers, editors and reporters, should be given some form of training on some development journalism. The government should come up with a "minimum wage" law to ensure that the FM radio workers get not less than a certain amount of wages/salaries. More women should be encouraged to join the radios, either as reporters or editors. This was boost gender balance in programming.

KASS FM radio should find ways of encouraging more ordinary people and grassroots leaders to take part, either as guests or contributors, in the talk shows, phone-ins and other programmes. KASS FM radio should introduce pre-recorded talk shows for rural people who are unable to take part in the live talk shows. This was involving journalists going out to the grassroots to seek and record people’s views on any topical issue. The recorded debate is then broadcast on air, say once or twice a week. This is an alternative form of community participation.

KASS FM radio should look for some form of sponsorship from NGOs, local government, institutions or companies whose agendas are connected with rural development in general or specific programmes. This was probably reduce advertisements as the radios was get money they need, and thus give more time to such sponsored developmental programmes. The government should introduce affirmative action in favour of community and community FMs. This could be done, for instance, by exempting rural-based community radio stations from paying taxes like Value-Added Tax (VAT), or charging them subsidized license fees.

To promote local and national identities, the government should come up with a national policy that local content constitutes not less than 50 per cent of all FM radios’ daily programming. Local contents are programmes, drama or songs produced by the local people, in the local language, sometimes using locally made instruments, and aimed at promoting local themes, ideas or causes. KASS FM radio should introduce programmes for persons with disability, children, and other interest groups whose special needs are poorly catered for under the current spectrum of programmes.

REFERENCES
