

---

# New Media Technology & Activism



Cyber Dialogues in Zimbabwe

*Credit: Gender Links*



## Impact of Social Media on Journalism

By Glory Mushingie

### Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between social media and mainstream media. It discusses examples of how social media such as blogs sometimes complement or compete with traditional media in ways such as highlighting important events or issues that mainstream media misses or chooses not to explore, for example, such as those that relate to gender, thereby providing alternative voices, in that respect. The article also examines speculations about whether or not social media is indeed to an extent changing the way traditional publications/media operate, and also shows the similarities and differences in the way the two mediums behave, as well as the future of traditional media as social media emerge at a fast pace. It poses the question - will mainstream media withstand the dynamism of social media?

### Key words

media, technology

## An information hungry world

The desire to have access to a host of relevant content is increasing in today's society, as people all over the world seek information by which they can make decisions. People want to be up-to-date with the goings-on around the globe, so that they do not remain behind in terms of opportunities, or are caught unawares in the event that a calamity occurs. In response to this desire, there is a considerable amount of information being generated in society, especially through new technologies such as the internet. Increased access to information fuels an even greater desire for more information about what is happening locally and globally.

While information generation and distribution has in the past been a preserve of players in certain professions such as journalism, today we see people that have never even seen the inside of a journalism classroom or newsroom developing content and sometimes commanding extremely high responses and attention from information fanatics who give feedback to their content. Content is being developed and distributed on the internet through virtual spaces such as blogs and this content varies from photos, to videos and music among others. This has come to be known as "social media."

## Definitions of social media

There are various ways in which scholars, the media and others have defined social media. Buzzlogic Inc (2008) defines social media as "Web content such as blogs and wikis, created by individuals or a collaboration of individuals," saying that often social media content is intended as the starting point for larger conversations. The Chattered Institute of Public Relations (2007) defines it as, "the term given to websites and online tools which allow users to interact with each other in some way, by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests."

Blogs are perhaps the most known examples of social media, but the term encompasses many more platforms. More people are resorting to logging-in (on the internet) for information and entertainment, with virtual spaces such as Facebook seeing a lot of people signing up for fun, hooking up with old allies and even seeking possible employees, in the case of employers.

## Blogs Vs. mainstream publications

With the advent of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as the computer, internet, cell phones and all these internet applications, among other tools, many publications around the world are now claiming online presence by uploading the content of their print publications, or even broadcast content from radio and TV, onto their websites.

In addition, a significant amount of news and extra information is placed on individual and organisation blogs, creating a wide hub of information online. Audiences have the choice to either acquire the information from the blogs or even the news organisation's websites. When it comes to generation of news articles, bloggers too often produce news articles, some of which get more than adequate and positive feedback. Some segments of the media have observed that the industry has lost its monopoly on the news, because of the use of the internet (Gillmor 2006).

Now that it's possible to publish in real-time to a worldwide audience, a new breed of grassroots journalists are taking the news into their own hands. Armed with

**The different forms of social media** (icrossing 2007)

**Social networks:** these sites allow people to build personal web pages and then connect with friends to share content and communication. The biggest social networks are MySpace, Facebook and Bebo.

**Blogs:** perhaps the best-known form of social media, blogs are online journals, with entries appearing with the most recent first.

**Wikis:** these websites allow people to add content or edit the information on them, acting as a communal document or database. The best-known wiki is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that has over 2 million English language articles.

**Podcasts:** audio and video files that are available by subscription, through services like Apple iTunes.

**Forums:** areas for online discussion, often around specific topics and interests. Forums came about before the term 'social media' and are a powerful and popular element of online communities.

**Content communities:** communities which organise and share particular kinds of content. The most popular content communities tend to form around photos (Flickr), bookmarked links (del.icio.us) and videos (YouTube).

**Microblogging:** social networking combined with bite-sized blogging, where small amounts of content ('updates') are distributed online and through the mobile phone network. Twitter is the clear leader in this field.

laptops, cell phones, and digital cameras, these readers-turned-reporters are transforming the news from a lecture into a conversation. Anyone can produce the news, using personal blogs, internet chat groups, email, and a host of other tools.

For example, blogs were used to transmit information about what went on during the Iraqi war in 2003, and sometimes what the blogs highlighted did not reflect in the mainstream media, hence blogs provided alternative voices during the war.

An example of such a blog is Colby Buzzell (2004), who wrote about his experience during the Iraqi war, highlighting among other events the explosions in Iraq and how the United States army responded to that. The blog provides the reader with a different picture of what happened as the author writes in a more personal, narrative and descriptive way, which many people find easier to follow.

The honesty of this kind of writing makes readers want to resort to blogs from time to time in search of information, especially when it seems as if the mainstream media is not covering the issues thoroughly. This, to some extent, leads to some people thinking or suggesting that social media is overtaking traditional media and that maybe, in the future, the relevance of real journalism would be reduced.

In *We the Media*, nationally acclaimed newspaper columnist and blogger Dan Gillmor tells the story of this emerging phenomenon and sheds light on this deep shift in how news is made and consumed. Gillmor shows how anyone can produce the news, using personal blogs, internet chat groups, email, and a host of other tools. He sends a wake-up call to newsmakers – politicians, business executives, celebrities – and the marketers and public relations people who promote them. He explains how to successfully play by the rules of this new era and shift from "control" to "engagement."

Gillmor makes a strong case to his fellow journalists that, in the face of a plethora of internet-fuelled news vehicles, they must change or become irrelevant. Journalism in the 21st century will be fundamentally different from the Big Media oligarchy that prevails today. (Gillmor 2006).

### **Social media as a possible 'fifth estate'**

The growing dependence on social media by segments of society has partly come about because some people feel unsatisfied by the way the traditional media covers issues. Other people think the media either ignores important issues and usually concentrates on political issues or is biased in some areas of its reporting, and therefore resort to publishing their own ideas and

problems, among other issues.

Some people think getting the information from blogs that are not restricted by publishing codes means they get the story as it is and not censored in any way. In her 2003 Harold Wolpe lecture, Jane Duncan stated that "another journalism is possible," even in the face of an increasingly convergent and commercialised global media. Quoting delegates at the conference on media and globalisation at the World Social Forum, Duncan refers to the emergence of a "fifth estate," alternative media networks created by social movements in order to remind the traditional, commercial media of their societal responsibilities. New social movements worldwide, according to Duncan, are also busy reclaiming the traditional media.



Cyber Dialogues allow people to discuss issues across borders

*Credit: Gender Links*

Increasingly, non-commercial media are on the agenda of social movements internationally. Free speech radio and television stations are being established as spaces for non-commercial journalism and a new layer of emerging grassroots media is springing up (Duncan, in H. Wasserman, 2005). Wasserman (2005) further quotes Duncan as having suggested that social movements in

South Africa for instance, are increasingly producing their own media to further their causes:

She mentions newspapers and newsletters springing up, and suggests that micro-radio be further explored as a vehicle by these movements. Duncan does not mention the possibilities that the Internet might pose for South African social movements, although she does refer to Indymedia, an alternative media network that uses the Internet to great effect. Indymedia ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)), an international network of non-commercial journalists that also has a South African branch, similar networks like Civicus – an organisation distributing information about civil society activities to more than 4,500 subscribers all over the world (Civicus 2003) – and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), a network linking other NGO networks, have used computer systems to amplify local struggles at relative low cost and with high speed across a global support system.

#### Advantages of social media

The nature of social media is that it tends to be more interactive as opposed to traditional media. Some of the best characteristics that make social media more interactive compared to traditional media include: participation, openness, conversation, connectedness and community (icrossing 2007):

- *Participation*: social media encourages contributions and feedback from everyone who is interested. It blurs the line between media and audience.
- *Openness*: most social media services are open to feedback and participation. They encourage voting, comments and the sharing of information. There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content – password-protected content is frowned on.
- *Conversation*: whereas traditional media is about broadcast (content transmitted or distributed to an audience), social media is better seen as a two-way conversation.
- *Community*: social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively. Communities share common interests, such as a love

of photography, a political issue or a favourite TV show.

- *Connectedness*: Most kinds of social media thrive on their connectedness, making use of links to other sites, resources and people.

Icrossing (2007) observes that social media has become a big issue and the number of users is increasing rapidly with about “110 million blogs being tracked by ‘Technocrati’, a specialist search engine, up from 63 million at the beginning of the year [2007].”

An estimated 100 million videos a day being watched on video sharing website, YouTube2. More than 200 million profiles created by users on social network MySpace3 (icrossing, 2007).

This to a large extent shows that indeed social media is commanding a significant amount of attention from viewers/audiences in society, especially a civil society that feels that the traditional media is not doing enough to represent issues that they stand for, a good example being the issue of gender equality and equity, and surrounding issues.

#### Representation of gender issues

The traditional media has for some time been condemned for the manner in which they have represented gender in their reporting. In parts of Africa such as Southern Africa, the way the media reports on gender issues is perceived as being biased, stereotyping the female gender and using women as objects of advertising, among other examples.

And so, civil societies in the Southern African community could be able to generate their own content that represent gender more positively, and in a manner that they see fit, through the creation of blogs, online discussion communities, etc. Virtual communities in cyberspace make it possible for such groupings to gain social power and consolidate their cultural identities in spite of societal constraints or geographical borders by producing and circulating their own knowledge (Arnold and Prymire in Wasserman 2005)

### **The gap between the two – disadvantages to social media**

Is there enough reason to state that social media will indeed replace or eclipse traditional media? Some articles and papers that have come close to evaluating the way publications such as magazines will progress state that not much change will be made to magazines. Others observe that as much as individual-generated content such as that on blogs narrows the gap between blogs and mainstream publications; there are still differences that make these two entities in the information world independent of each other. On top of that, some argue that the lack of controls and professionalism around social media will limit its influence on traditional media.

Research associate at the Project for Excellence in Journalism, David Vaina (2007), attempts to provide an example of the different views/perceptions between blogs and mainstream media:

According to William Dietrich, a writer with the Seattle Times Sunday magazine, the sacred purpose of the newspaper reporter 'is to fulfil an essential function of our democracy not just by disseminating information but also by analysing it, detecting patterns, spotting trends, and increasing societal understanding.' Indeed, bloggers may generate a more democratic Public Square, but can they facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how political events are most likely to evolve, the Old Guard worries and wonders. In other words, Mill might not be enough.

As much as social media offers a platform for more alternative voices/views, and articles presented about different issues, much of the information that is produced refers so much to particular interest groups such as politics, environmental issues, etc.

Having browsed through the internet, this author has not found adequate fair reporting on some of the issues, such as "gender," that are perceived to be under-reported or misrepresented by the traditional media. What exists when it comes to gender representation by social media are online discussions as opposed to real articles.

Also, as much as traditional media is condemned as being insensitive when it comes to reporting about gender issues, unfortunately social media, blogs in particular, which come close to journalism (by way of producing articles similar to the way newspaper/magazines do it), have to date not done much to surpass traditional media in reporting gender. In fact, blogs are also culprits in misrepresenting women.

An example is that while the traditional media exercises some form of censorship (either imposed or self-censorship) and will not, for instance, publish or broadcast material that is generally perceived to be offensive, such as nudity and vulgar language, some blogs upload such material online because they are not controlled. Individual bloggers choose to publish what they like and not all of them are responsible enough to avoid putting "offensive" content on their blogs or on their virtual spaces.

Therefore, although there may be close relationships between the ways journalistic pieces are done in mainstream media and social media such as blogs, the difference in practice between the two is likely to secure the continuous existence and credibility of traditional media.

Further, for African countries, where there are still many illiterate people who can not read or even access the internet due to inadequate infrastructure for ICTs and costs, dependence on mainstream media will continue for some time.

### **The influence of social media on traditional media**

Despite the advantage of credibility that the traditional media has as the "watchdog of society" and/or fourth estate, we cannot rule out possibility that it (the traditional media) has felt the pressure that has been brought about by social media. The fact is that as a result of this scenario the traditional media is mounting up its performance, so as to increase its visibility and presence in society and virtually.

Traditional media entities are currently visiting blogs, online discussion groups, etc., to see what is new that they can borrow from, in order to generate ideas for

news articles or find ways in which they could engage with their readers more – through making provisions for feedback, for example, and other workable practices carried by the social media.

From time to time, mainstream media relies on information generated by these blogs to get story ideas for future articles. No matter the extent to which the information on blogs is factual, Thomas Johnson and Barbara Kaye (2004) observe that it still sets a platform on which trained/professional journalists begin to discuss issues presented:

Conversely, although journalists may perceive bloggers as 'wannabe amateurs, badly in need of some skills and editors,' they increasingly rely on blogs for story tips, information and access to stories from media throughout the world. Further, while many political blogs are written by armchair observers spouting their views, many journalists and some news organisations like MSNBC, host their own blogs.

### Conclusion

Against this background, it could be safe to suggest that as far as the development and distribution of information is concerned, people will never again rely on only traditional media to acquire information. They will continue to resort to consulting individually generated content (social media) such as blogs and this shows that social media is indeed playing an important role in alternative information provision to society.

However, the two types of media are currently operating from two different parameters and are unlikely to threaten the existence or originality of the other. Bloggers do borrow data from the traditional media, and vice versa, but differences occur when it comes to the way the two generate, distribute, receive and perceive information.

Social media content mostly thrives on opinions, while trained/professional journalists are said to uphold some ethics, thus rendering traditional media more reliable, compared to social media. Perhaps this also points to an additional need to understand and promote social media literacy.

If there is some change to talk about in the way publications are operating because of the emergence of social media, one thing that comes to mind is that social media is mostly being used as a reference point for further research and development of articles by mainstream publications. While social media is here to stay, so is traditional media, but the future will likely see continued melding of the two.

### References

- Buzzell C.** (2004) 'My War: Killing time in Iraq', [www.blogger.com/profile/](http://www.blogger.com/profile/) (last checked by author January 2008)
- Buzzlogic Inc.** (2008) 'Terms and Definitions: Social media', [www.buzzlogic.com/resources/documentation/terms.php](http://www.buzzlogic.com/resources/documentation/terms.php) (last checked by author February 2008)
- Chartered Institute of Public Relations** (2007) 'CIPR Social Media Guidelines. CIPR', [www.cipr.co.uk/socialmedia/](http://www.cipr.co.uk/socialmedia/) (last checked by author January 2008)
- Gillmor D.** (2006) 'We the Media', [www.amazon.co.uk/We-Media-D-Gillmor/dp/0596102275](http://www.amazon.co.uk/We-Media-D-Gillmor/dp/0596102275) (last checked by author February 2008)
- Icrossing** (2007) 'What is social media? An e-book from icrossing', [www.icrossing.co.uk/ebooks](http://www.icrossing.co.uk/ebooks) (last checked by author February 2008)
- Johnson T. and B. Kaye** (2004) 'Wag the blog: How reliance on traditional media and the internet influence credibility perceptions of weblogs among blog users', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* Vol. St. No 3: 4
- Vaina D.** (2007) 'Newspapers and Blogs: Closer than we think?', [www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/070423\\_vaina/](http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/070423_vaina/) (last checked by author January 2008)
- Wasserman H.** (2005) 'Connecting African Activism with Global Networks: ICTs and South African Social Movements: Africa Development', [academic.sun.ac.za/journalism/wasserman.htm](http://academic.sun.ac.za/journalism/wasserman.htm) (last checked by author February 2008)

### Writers Bio

Glory Mushingi is a Zambian freelance journalist and columnist working with various media organisations, both locally and internationally. She specialises in ICT reporting and other development issues and has won awards in this area, the last one being in November 2006 as 'Top ICT journalist in Africa'. A member (including holding leadership positions) of various media bodies in and out of Zambia, Glory is currently pursuing a Masters program in International Journalism at Cardiff university in the United Kingdom.



**Social Networks for Social Change: YAHAnet Goes Live**  
By Bronwen Low, Michael Hoechsmann and  
Claudia Mitchell, McGill University.



**Abstract**

Research points to the need for youth participation and leadership in HIV and AIDS prevention and education strategies. Internationally, youth-based organisations are drawing on the creativity and expertise of young people in arts-based initiatives aimed at promoting awareness, opening dialogue on issues such as on gender and sexuality, and discouraging stigma. YAHAnet is a webtool that supports and creates a virtual community of youth organisations around the world dedicated to using the arts and popular culture to address HIV and AIDS; it uses the internet's capacities to disseminate information, but also the emerging social networking aspects of the "Web 2.0" online environment.



**Key words**

arts, HIV/AIDS, technology, youth

"WE have to be the change we want to see in the world:' Young people should develop a global campaign for a culture of peace through their organisations and networks and use all forms of the Media to promote human rights and the respect for human dignity as fundamental values of the dialogue and establish a joint project of 'MEDIA FOR YOUTH.'" (UNESCO General Conference Youth Forum 2005)

Nowhere are these words from the fourth UNESCO youth forum more pertinent than in relation to the ways in which young people can be positioned as protagonists

in addressing issues of HIV and AIDS. HIV and AIDS is recognised as a global crisis, particularly among youth, with half of all new infections world-wide affecting young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNAIDS 2006). Concomitantly, especially in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, there is often an overarching sense of AIDS fatigue. As one group of disadvantaged black youth just outside of Johannesburg expressed a few years ago, "AIDS, AIDS, AIDS, that's all we ever hear---we are sick of AIDS." Testament to how distinctly situated people's relationships are to the disease, another group from a more privileged private school about 20 km away



lamented, "AIDS, it has nothing to do with us. We are sick of AIDS" (Mitchell & Smith 2003).

Recent work on health promotion in the area of HIV and AIDS suggests the following. Unless youth are given a more significant voice in participating in policy dialogue about their own health and sexuality, and in producing and disseminating locally relevant and gender sensitive messages, prevention and awareness programmes organised "from the outside" (i.e., by adults, donors and so on) are doomed to failure (see, for example Ford, Oddalo & Chorlton 2003). Thus, an overarching concern is the place of youth engagement in keeping young people hopeful and "alive and on board" as a strategy to ongoing involvement and awareness of prevention, treatment and care.

Such a position recognises that although young people are prone to risk behaviour and may fall victim to an invincible attitude that says, "it can never happen to me," they are simultaneously more likely to believe that *they* alone can make the change that will make a difference. Given the context, audience, and tools to communicate with, young people have proven over time the capacity and determination to speak out and make change (Hoechsmann & Low 2008). A vital alternative, then, to adults developing messages, campaigns, and prevention programmes directed at youth is to tap into the "let's do something" creativity of young people themselves through drama, drumming, chanting, forum theatre, hip hop, storytelling, puppetry, collage, graffiti, photography, video documentary, radio, writing, new media and so on (Gould 2004). As Eli Demanya of Salvage International (a Ghanaian non-governmental organisation that responded to the survey described below) argues, "We believe that the youth are not so ignorant. They know their problems and even have innovative ways of solving their problems. The challenge is that there have not been avenues for them to express these things." Critical across these various interventions is the engagement of young people as cultural producers in one way or another: whether writing their own prevention messages through graffiti, using photo-voice to tell their own stories of stigma, producing documentaries about getting tested, or performing their own dramas about sexuality and relationships.

As cultural producers, working to be directors of their own stories and destinies, youth have the potential to create an international community of youth activists with a tremendous capacity to address HIV and AIDS as a global phenomenon. At the same time, recent developments of the participatory functions of the Web 2.0 (the newer, more interactive functionalities of the internet) and its social networking functions can harness this energy and create forums for the sharing of information, tools, and experiences. In recognition of this vast potential, a network of educators has responded with the creation of YAHANet ([www.yahanet.org](http://www.yahanet.org)), a webtool designed to draw together and support youth organisations around the world dedicated to using some form of the arts to address HIV and AIDS. Funded in part through the Culture and HIV Division of UNESCO, YAHANet is a partnership involving McGill University, the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change, University of Kwazulu Natal, and GAAP (the Gendering Adolescence and Aids Prevention project), University of Toronto.

### Tapping the Potentials of the Web 2.0

It might be said that the World Wide Web came of age when the social networking and data aggregating functionalities of the Web 2.0 platforms came into widespread use early in this new century. Naming "you" the Person of the Year for 2006, *TIME* magazine expressed the significance of the transformations to culture enabled by these new technologies and afforded by new creative uses of these tools:

It's [2006] a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before... It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes... We're looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation, and it's just getting started, as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy... (Grossman 2006, 14).



Youth produced media, such as photography, enables young people to share their own stories.

*Credit: Centre for Visual Methodologies*

Prior to the Web 2.0 innovations, the internet was an effective multimodal communications vehicle, but not yet a revolutionary new vehicle for the collaborative production and dissemination of cultural products and forms. The transformation from the early versions of the Web to Web 2.0 was an evolution from a reading Web to a reading and writing Web, here understood to include all forms of multimodal cultural production. The new interactive properties of communication technology afforded by Web 2.0 innovations have enabled a corresponding shift in cultural development towards participatory forms. As Jenkins et al. (2006) point out in the MacArthur Foundation white paper, "interactivity is a property of the technology, while participation is a property of the culture."

In this new participatory environment, so-called "social networking" increasingly captures the imagination of youth worldwide. Regardless of its past in community activism, the term social networking has become the adopted and adapted term that describes web sites

where people typically post a personal profile with the goal of sharing it with others. MySpace and Facebook are basically virtual online scrapbooks, and YouTube is an online sharing site for streaming video, either home produced or media industry produced clips, old and new. While it is important to recognise the roots of social networking in other participatory forms, forums, and cultural practices, there is nothing wrong with celebrating the revitalised conditions for sharing enabled by new technological platforms. There is a tremendous range of social networking sites, some of which mobilise affinity groups and some of which enable cultural practices. Affinity groups might take the form of specific demographics (aboriginal people, women of colour, residents of a small town or village, etc.) or people with shared interests (fans of a television programme, adherents to a spiritual movement, etc.). Cultural practices sites centre on shared activities (hobby sites, activism sites, profession sites).

A common denominator across social networking



Expression comes in many forms

Credit: TIGXpress Project

sites is a commitment to connecting with others to increase a virtual sense of community. The virtual relationship is very real to the participants despite the mediation of distance and technology. While there are privacy settings on v-log and blog sites that can limit who will be able to view or read a posting, this just means the poster is selecting to “narrowcast” to a limited audience. For the most part, only the number of internet users limits the audience setting for a given post. Youth are reading widely and writing to broad, often unknown audiences. Outside of one’s local community and affinity groupings, the potential audience for a given piece can be limitless, albeit arbitrary. Moreover, many people can participate, even some who are differently abled and others without economic privilege. The learning curve involved for participation is modest. As learning economies rather than structured learning environments, social networking sites function through emulation and peer-to-peer support. There are no manuals to read, nor classes to attend. Pedagogy is just-in-time and task-oriented. Learning is networked, involving multiple learners with varying levels of expertise at multiple nodes, united by shared interests and goals.

### Enter YAHANet

YAHANet - the Youth, the Arts and HIV and AIDS Network - was officially launched at the UNICEF Unite Against AIDS Concert held in Montreal in conjunction with World Aids Day events in December 2007. The site serves a number of different functions. It is a resource of materials both on the various art forms being used in addressing

HIV and AIDS, along with areas of particular concern to organisations working in the arts (writing funding proposals, carrying out monitoring and evaluation). It also includes basic information about HIV and AIDS such as issues related to gender, stigma, and voluntary counselling and testing. Additionally, it holds a data bank on over 300 organisations with an online presence working in the area of the arts and HIV and AIDS, gallery space where individuals or groups can post their creative productions, and an interactive section called Test Your Knowledge. Under development is a section on the homepage that will feature a particular group or project. In addition, central to the focus of this article, a social networking function enables individuals and groups to become part of a virtual community of artists and activists.

YAHANet builds on research carried out between December 2005 and March 2006, by a McGill team of faculty members, interns, and graduate students. We assessed the emerging community of youth groups in the field of arts-based approaches to addressing HIV and AIDS. After studying over 300 organisations with an online presence, in 45 developing and industrialised countries, it became clear that the groups use many creative approaches to HIV and AIDS prevention and education. We developed a typology chronicling details about each organisation and the kinds of approaches used. This included drama and performing arts such as forum theatre, street theatre, puppetry, dance, and storytelling; hip-hop culture and its facets of DJing, MCing, break-dancing, and graffiti art; photo-voice; radio documentary and drama; television; collaborative video and video documentary; writing and publishing magazines, newsletters, poetry, books and novels; and, visual arts such as painting and billboards; and websites.

The original research was followed up with a survey sent to many of the groups chronicled in the typology, which elicited responses from 47 individuals and organisations (the process also benefited from conversations with participants at the “HIV and AIDS - The Creative Exchange” workshop held in Nairobi in March 2007). The main objective of the survey was to find out more about each organisation, and to assess what each might look for in a web-based tool. To meet the latter objective we asked, “What sort of web-based tool do you think

would be most useful?" and "What kinds of things would you want it to include?" Interview respondents were very enthusiastic about the idea of a web-based tool that could help support the work of youth-based and youth-serving organisations using arts-based and participatory methodologies in HIV and AIDS prevention and education. Many offered detailed feedback on what kind of tool and functions would be of use. It became evident that these groups really wanted a community forum that would help to further their work.

In general, the web resource envisioned by our informants would serve educators and community-workers looking to initiate, develop, fund, assess, and revitalise programming, as well as youth who are looking for information and a place to share thoughts and feelings. This would be a site that would inform, support, connect, encourage, and advocate. Participants variously described their ideal web tool as a multi-faceted information data-bank, a showcase, a networking space, a community centre, a curricular resource, a source of inspiration, and a site for dialogue and artistic expression. We grouped these aspirations into four categories, and YAHAnet works to reflect each one.

#### *Information data-base*

Respondents asked that a good deal of the site function be to store a range of types of information, which could be regularly (and so easily) updated. A number of respondents expressed interest in knowing more about what others were doing, and in publicising their own work. For instance, Robin Opperman at Umcebo Trust (South Africa) suggested the site might be "something that directed interested people to our projects, so that they could come to know about us, support us and work with us." This need is met in part by the site's typology of existing organisations, individuals, and projects around the world. In our plans for the site, the typology will eventually be accessed and cross-indexed by elements such as region, type of art-based methodology, and funding source. YAHAnet also works to include other information survey respondents were interested in, such as: an up to date and comprehensive list of all of the research in the area; publication of conferences, events, and education opportunities; and, media clips, relevant news and data, and regional information (for some of

this, see site's "HIV and AIDS in the news" function). Many respondents requested directories of donors with web-links, and information about funding networks and entities, given the importance and challenge of securing funding. As Blendi Dibra, coordinator of the Albanian Youth Parliament, emphatically states, "we work in North Albania and there is a lack of information and we have asked for help several times for other qualified projects and also to support our work, but due to lack of possibility to exchange information and attract potential partners we could not do more!"



Caption: Youth are a vital part of addressing HIV/AIDS

Credit: Gender Links

#### *Show case*

The site's "gallery function" is a direct response to respondents who suggested the site feature a selection of projects which demonstrate some "best practices" and/or are case studies and that include narrative accounts of the programme contexts, methodologies used, experiences, challenges and lessons learned. For instance, Opperman hoped the site would highlight "a wide variety of projects, with lots of visuals, so that people can see the work almost first hand. We need to tell people about what we are doing, and inspire them to become involved." Christian Heppinstall of the Alaskan AIDS Assistance Association uses theatre as an educational medium. He expressed an interest in seeing and sharing photos of actors working. The gallery is a repository for images, video, and music, and site members are encouraged to upload relevant materials, which are "featured" on a rotating basis.

### *Educational resources*

Many respondents called for easily downloadable guides on working with youth using arts-based and participatory methodologies. Specifically requested were summaries of prevention strategies, brochures, samples of artwork, and streaming or downloadable video and audio resources. This call comes in part in response to shortages of materials in rural and developing contexts; for instance, Adaramola S. Emmanuel of the Emmanuel World Children Foundation in Nigeria highlighted the importance of resources which could be packaged into an audiovisual show for rural communities. Emmanuel Fonyuy of the TechCeFaCos Group would like information in a format one could "easily edit and develop in to a booklet to assist developing world countries such as Cameroon, which have just introduce Arts and Craft (as National Culture) in to their Basic Education School System and is on a poor stage due to lack of basic arts textbooks etc." The site's "tool kits" of facts on HIV and AIDS and on arts-based methodologies fulfil some of these needs, and can be downloaded as PDF files.

### *Networking and communication space*

The YAHAnet group – especially the youth interns who have been working on the project -- had a strong sense from the beginning that the web tool could offer an important space of sharing and connection for an international collection of groups doing their work in relative isolation. The process of constructing the typology of organisations around the world confirmed the widespread, grassroots use of arts-based, participatory methods in HIV and AIDS education, and a significant number of our survey respondents expressed the need for networking, communication, and exchange through online "discussion forums," "supportive clubs," and "chats." For example, Pilar Bobadillo (Asociació'97n de Comunicadores Sociales, Calandria) said, "Of course, we are interested on sharing our experiences and methodologies. One of our goals is to promote exchange of experiences, and methodologies in order to make synergy and improve the HIV and AIDS response, using information and communication technologies." Opperman of the Umcembo Trust is also interesting in directing interested people to their project, "so that they could come to know about us, support us and work with us."

Communication spaces were seen as necessary for young people as well as those working in organisations; Demanya, for instance, hoped the site could give youth the opportunity to "express themselves freely about their thoughts, fears and hopes on HIV/AIDS. There should be room for them to seek confidential counselling on environment pressures they are facing i.e. economical, social." The argument for the inclusion of this kind of 'free expression' space in the context of HIV and AIDS is compelling, for as organisations such as Lovelife in South Africa and yfm (a kwaito radio station in Johannesburg) have found, the "space" of AIDS is not one that is easily compartmentalised. Youth-friendly arts and new media initiatives can go a long way toward serving such a function.

The intention of YAHAnet is to combine the functionalities of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 platforms, part static resource library and part dynamic social network domain. The importance of developing and augmenting the social networking functionalities of the site became increasingly clear through our user testing process. In particular, the group of student interns at McGill working on the project made a strong case for the need for greater interactivity after they tested early versions of the site. They argued that over the course of the site's development online social networking sites such as Facebook and My Space had become ubiquitous in many settings and that their interactive potential should be incorporated into the project. Ultimately, it became apparent that much of what the survey respondents were requesting could be enabled through a "social networking" function, and that the success of YAHAnet in creating an online community depended on providing members a space to mount and share distinct profiles showcasing their work and identity. This, in turn, raised further questions about access and use given the material realities of emergent digital divides.

### **Bridging the Divide**

Many express concerns over digital divides that reproduce historic patterns of exclusion, concerns that we share. Furthermore, we acknowledge the challenge ushered forth by Jenkins et al. in the MacArthur white paper: Access must include instruction in the use of the new

tools and the opportunity to engage in the same type of play that the digital-haves engage in when learning a new platform or protocol. The notion that great repositories of information and knowledge should be created only to benefit those with access to digital networks and experience in their effective use, flies in the face of that which we hope to implement in this community-building exercise of developing and sustaining a network of practitioners and participants of arts-based and participatory methodologies for social change. And it is particularly troubling that one cannot advance participatory methodologies and practices without universal access to the tools that we wish to share.

As access continues to improve, we hope that resources such as YAHAnet are at the forefront of a meaningful engagement by marginalised groups with the rich potentials of the participatory Web. 2.0. Given the potential of Web 2.0 for creating meaningful international communities and partnerships, we remain committed to the possibilities of webtools such as YAHAnet, while cognisant of its current limitations, and to the need to continue working in the fight against HIV and AIDS from many fronts and places. In the words of survey respondent Okesandra Sluzhynska of the "Art anti AIDS" Foundation in the Ukraine, "There are no borders for AIDS. There are no borders for joint efforts to prevent it."

*Acknowledgements:* We are particularly grateful to the team of youth interns at McGill University who have contributed so much to shaping YAHAnet: Akua Carson, Antoinette Davis, Caitlin Tanner, Caroline Boyajian, Erin Hack, Eszter Sipos, Hillary Wolfley, Jessica Jalsevac, John Murray, Julia Ross, Kaya Fjorgensen, Liz Wiseman, Madeleine Goerg, Marcus Beningo, Molly Moreau, Michaela Hardy-Moffatt, Naomi Lightman, Kaja Fjorgenson, Naomi Kramer, Abby Seiler, Nathalie Turenne, Oriane Lavole.

#### References

- Ford, N., D. Oddalo and R. Chorlton** (2003) 'Communication from a human rights perspective. Responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Eastern and Southern Africa', *Journal of Health Communication* 8: 519-612
- Gould, H.** (2007) 'What's culture got to do with HIV/AIDS', [www.healthlinks.org.uk](http://www.healthlinks.org.uk) (last checked by author February 2007)
- Hoechsmann, M. and B. Low** (2008) *Reading youth writing: "New" literacies, cultural studies, and education*, New York: Peter Lang
- Jenkins et al.** (2006) 'Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century', [digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS\\_WHITE\\_PAPER.PDF](http://digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF) (last checked by author March 2008)
- Mitchell, C and A. Smith** (2003) 'Sick of AIDS: Literacy and the meaning of life for South African youth', [http://www.unesco.takingitglobal.org/documents/YouthForum\\_EN.pdf](http://www.unesco.takingitglobal.org/documents/YouthForum_EN.pdf) (last checked by author January 2007)

#### Writers Bio

Bronwen Low is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. In her research she explores the implications and challenges of popular youth culture for curriculum theory, literacy studies, and pedagogy. She is currently working with community-based educators and activists in Montreal who draw upon Hip-Hop culture and media production in work with youth. She recently published *Reading Youth Writing* (Lang, 2008) with Michael Hoechsmann.

Michael Hoechsmann is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. His research interests are in the areas of media, new media, literacy, new literacies, youth, cultural studies and education. For four years, he was the Director of Education of Young People's Press, a non-profit news service for youth 14-24 <[www.ypp.net](http://www.ypp.net)>.

Claudia Mitchell is a James McGill Professor in the Faculty of Education and Honorary Professor in the School of Language, Literacies, Media and Drama Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her research interests include visual and arts based participatory methodologies, youth, sexuality and HIV and AIDS, girlhood studies, and teacher identity.



## Mobile Activism or Mobile Hype ?

By Firoze Manji

### Abstract

Technology offers many opportunities, yet the push to bridging the digital divide and harnessing the power of information and communication technology often neglects the very resource that is most central to development – people. Experience demonstrates that while technology may provide tools that people can use, it should not be over-rated as the solution to every problem. Based on two experiences using mobile phones in Africa to address women’s rights and social development, the key lesson learned is that mobile phones, like the pen or paper, are only as useful as one part of a strategy in which people must remain at the forefront.

### Key words

technology, mobile phones, poverty

## Mobile phones in context

Every time a new technology comes along, everyone swears this will bring about social progress. All kinds of amazing qualities are attributed to the technology. Those living in poverty - especially in Africa - are the justification for investment and spending huge amounts. We have seen this with the supposed values of the green revolution proposed by the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations (even though most of us suspect that Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) is but a Trojan horse for the entry for the use of genetically modified technologies). In addition, we have seen this with mobile phones. What would people do without the poor in Africa to justify their latest ventures!

Two experiences from Fahamu involving the use of mobile

phones in Africa show that the principle lesson learned about using mobile, or any other kind of technology, is that it is people, not technology, that make history. People bring about development as social progress.

### Case 1: Campaign for the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa.

In November 2003, the African Union (AU) adopted the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa at its summit in Maputo, Mozambique. This Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s rights was the outcome of some 10 years of patient work by the African women’s movement to establish an indigenous, organically developed Protocol that would advance the position of

women and provide some level of protection of the rights of women in Africa. However, to come into force, at least 15 countries had to sign and ratify the Protocol.

By March 2004, only one country had ratified - The Comoros. A number of organisations met in Nairobi to plan the development of a campaign around the Protocol. To support this work, Fahamu offered to run a series of articles in Pambazuka News. We also planned to publish special issues of Pambazuka News for distribution at the AU Summit in Addis Ababa. A call was made to establish a coalition to push for the ratification of the Protocol and in September 2004, the "Solidarity for African Women's Rights" was established comprising some 15 organisations.

To promote the Protocol, the coalition initiated an online petition to enable people to show their support of the Protocol. In recognition of the fact that, at the time, an estimated 80 million mobile phones were in use in Africa, and SMS was a popular means of communication, the

petition also included an option for people to sign by sending an SMS to a specified number. To promote the petition, the campaign included the production of leaflets, distribution of information via the internet and mailing lists, and through newspapers.

This campaign received a huge amount of publicity, mostly because of the innovation of the advocacy techniques. The campaign to get the petition signed included special issues and features in Pambazuka News, systematic articles in newspapers and patient lobbying at the AU Summit meetings, including the awarding of red, green and yellow cards to countries that had ratified, signed or failed to sign, respectively. So successful was the lobbying and advocacy work that by November 2005, two years after the initial adoption of the Protocol by the AU, the requisite 15 countries had ratified, and the Protocol came into force on 23 November 2005. This was widely hailed as the fastest ratification process of any international instrument in the history of Africa.

Technically, the creation of the system to log the calls was a relatively simple exercise. The SIM for the phone to which messages were sent was connected to a computer and the phone numbers and messages stored on the SIM were then transferred to a simple database. The originating country of the message was detectable from the country code of the sender's phone. Once the data was on a database, it was relatively easy to display the contents on a website.

The use of mobile technologies was not without its challenges. The number that people were required to call was not a simple number. There were no facilities for establishing a short-code number, and at the time, the only place possible to set up the system was by using a South Africa number.

This created a number of problems. The costs of SMS from some networks to this number were charged at a higher rate. In some cases, it was not possible to send a text message across a competitor's network. In addition, in other cases - for example, during the lobbying interventions in Addis Ababa at the AU Summit, it was not possible to send messages out of Ethiopia at the time as the Ethiopian government had not legalised SMS



Super connected?

*Credit: GCS*



transmissions out of the country! These acted as real impediments to the campaign to solicit signatures to the petition via mobile phones.

Any e-mail user is well aware of the problems of spam emails, yet this is nothing compared to the phenomena of spam SMS. Many people appeared to have nothing better to do than to send - presumably at vast expense - spam messages to the phone number. In addition, there were those who took the opportunity to send abusive messages. Inevitably, there were those who sought to pour out sexual attacks on women and the women's movement. Originally, an automated system displayed all messages on the website, but it was soon apparent that this was not going to work: every message needed vetting and approval.

A facility was also available for people to be able to opt in to an SMS update. Those who subscribed to this service received regular updates via SMS about the latest achievements of the campaign.

The campaign got a huge amount of publicity because of the fact that many newspapers and magazines noticed the use of mobile phone technologies. There were newspaper articles, reports in magazines, interviews on radio and television. Fahamu got a great deal of publicity and recognition as a "pioneer."

When it came to evaluating the impact of this initiative, the question arose – had the campaign been a success. Yes, decidedly.

The question was then posed - what criteria do you use to evaluate the success of a mobile phone campaign? Do you count the number of messages received? Have you developed particular criteria for this kind of initiative?

The answer to this was as follows: in any initiative, you need to evaluate success in relation to the outcome that you were seeking at the start. The campaign did not aim to get many text messages; its goal was to persuade 15 governments to ratify the Protocol, which it did successfully.

The use of mobile phones for this campaign was strictly

a means to an end not an end in itself. In all, the campaign collected 3391 signatures to the petition. Of these, at least 10 came from organisations with membership in the hundreds, and one from an organisation that had more than 1000 members. However, only 454 of these signatures came via SMS. Thus, the total number of text messages was small.



Cell phones, another communication tool

*Credit: Colleen Lowe Morna*

The impact of the campaign had nothing to do with the number of SMS messages, but by virtue of the "news value" of the initiative. It proved, as expected, a successful way of getting attention to the campaign.

The important lesson learned is that had everyone else been using mobile phones for advocacy campaigns, the strategy would not have had as much publicity. Consequently, the impact of the initiative would have been much smaller.

### **Case 2: The UmNyango Project**

This project sought to explore the extent to which mobile phone technologies could promote and protect the rights

of rural women in the province of KwaZulu Natal (KZN), South Africa. It was carried out by a consortium of civil society organisations (CSOs) including Fahamu, Indiba Africa Alliance, Centre for Public Participation, Community Land and Rural Development Centre, Domestic Violence Assistance Project, Participatory Development Initiative, and Rural Women's Movement.

KwaZulu Natal is a province identified as having a widespread prevalence of domestic violence against women and a growing number of landlessness amongst women. Baseline surveys in five communities in the province showed that:

- more than 30% had witnessed domestic violence;
- 33% of respondents (all women) reported that they had been excluded from accessing and/or the control of land due to them;
- 54% had experienced conflict in their communities particularly around stock theft, land and politics; and
- interestingly, 83% of those living in these communities owned mobile phones, and 80% indicated that they know how to send and receive SMS.

The project established an SMS gateway through which messages could be distributed to all those enrolled in

the project, and it enabled every individual to send messages to the organisers and to the local paralegal officers where they needed assistance with regard to any incidence of violence or threat to their access to land.

The aim was to examine the potential of mobile phone technologies to:

- enhance potential for participation in regional national, provincial and local government initiatives, which impact on rural livelihoods and development (including receiving, amongst other things, relevant headlines from Pambazuka News);
- contribute to overcoming the patrimonial challenges that make the reporting of violence against women virtually impossible;
- enable women greater access to information on unconstitutional preclusion to land as well as land evictions and to allow them to report on such unconstitutional conduct;
- enhance participation in the early reporting of political tensions and violence;
- enhance access to justice; and
- test the feasibility of using podcasting technology to disseminate relevant information from Pambazuka News in IsiZulu



Rural women at one of eighteen workshops organised during the campaign.

*Credit: Anil Naidoo*

While all participants received training to use SMS, the majority of them were not inclined to use SMS to request information nor to report incidences to anyone. Instead, women chose to make direct contact with the paralegal offices in their location. They all knew about the help that they would be able to get from such offices because of a series of face-to-face workshops held during the course of the project. In fact, some 418 women and 316 men attended 18 workshops held in the area. There was a doubling of the number of cases, especially of gender-based violence, reported during the project period as compared with the preceding period, an increase that was not observed in the non-project areas of KwaZulu Natal.

In practice, the project found SMS to be prohibitively expensive, despite the fact that some level of subsidy was provided by the project towards the cost of SMS. There was no evidence that SMS led to any enhanced participation in local, regional or national government initiatives, and any such activity was attributable only to the workshop-based initiatives organised by the project. SMS was not used to report gender-based violence, and there was no evidence that it was used to improve access to information or to actions against preclusion of women from land, or in relation to any kind of conflict resolution. There was significant evidence that the project had an impact on access to justice, but no evidence that this was a result of any aspect of mobile phone technology.

With the assistance of CMFD (Community Media for Development) Productions, the project was able to run a workshop on developing podcasting during which 8 women developed a podcast based on their own ideas, interviewing, editing and broadcasting. However, this development had no relationship at all to mobile phone technology. It was a valuable experience, and our hope is that the women involved will have gained the confidence to develop materials for their own ends.

We had planned to examine whether SMS technologies could be an effective tool to enhance

political participation and to enable women to both report on and organise around domestic violence and land exclusions. However, our pilot project suggests that this is fraught with problems, especially in the context of the fact that this was not demand-driven by the communities that were involved, and because SMS technology as a tool is an expensive method of communicating.

Indeed, had the funds been allocated to supporting women in other ways to organise and seek redress, the outcome would have been more positive than if we had spent the effort and resources in setting up, administering and sending SMS messages.

Our recommendation would be that the use of SMS might at best be a complement to social organising rather than as the central part. This conclusion may not be very popular with those who want to promote the use of SMS, and that may be perceived in going against the current fashions about the “sexiness” of mobile phone technologies.

However, this pilot study does demonstrate that there is no substitute for human social and political organising, and technical tools are just that – tools. And to be effective in achieving social justice, the right tools need to be used for the right purpose. This pilot project has allowed us to learn these lessons empirically.

### **Why all this hype about mobile phones?**

Why are we not holding conferences about the role of the pencil in development? Or the role of paper? There is more evidence of social progress made by these humble instruments than all the information and communication technologies (ICTs) over the last 20 years.

Pencils and paper can be used to write tracts such as the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, The Wretched of the Earth. However, they are also used to write Mein Kampf. There is nothing intrinsically progressive about the pencil or paper. It depends on who uses it and for what purpose.



Ayanda Ngwenya transcribes interviews during podcast workshop.

*Credit: Deborah Walter*

The problem lies in the very nature of the question that is regularly asked: do ICTs or mobile phones contribute to “development?” The term development implies social progress, liberation of humanity from oppression. However, in practice, development has come to mean what real estate businesses mean by development: an opportunity for profiteering, where the haves get the benefits while the have-nots are driven further from the possibility of eking out an existence.

In that sense, and only in that sense, mobile phones have played a significant role in development – enabling a minority to get rich quick and the expense of the poor.

Mobile phones, after all the hype, are like pencils, tools for communication (although perhaps the pencil allows deeper reflection than the irritating ring of the mobile). Like all technologies, tools do not themselves do anything.

They are inanimate objects. Like all technologies, what effect a tool has depends who has control and what purpose it is used for. Tools have potentials for social progress as well as social regression. We need to focus on the power of those who have control over the technologies and question their use of these technologies. Technologies are not neutral: they reflect the power of those who have control of them.

There is a real need to question the values and morals of those who are obsessed about the role of technologies. For example, just as Mwai Kibaki organised what was effectively a coup d’etat in Kenya, the Daily Nation’s Andrew Limo wrote about “How electronic technology helped to boost election campaigns” ([http://www.nationmedia.com/dailynation/nmgcontententry.asp?category\\_id=25&newsid=113519](http://www.nationmedia.com/dailynation/nmgcontententry.asp?category_id=25&newsid=113519)). The article described in celebratory terms the amazing

contribution that technology had made - without any comment at all on whether the technology actually ensured proper monitoring of the electoral process. In practice, SMS was used widely to send out hate mail across the country. Here are examples of the kind of messages that were circulated at the time:

a) "We, as the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities, possess six million votes. You want us to be ruled by an uncircumcised people [Luo people] and go back to the jobless corner? Come out in large numbers to re-elect President Mwai Kibaki so that the country is not ruled by an uncircumcised man who will make the Kikuyus wear shorts. Circulate this message to five or more members of the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities. Your vote is the one that will prevent us from going back to Egypt."

(Received as an SMS, and written in Kikuyu)  
b) "Under Kalonzo's government, sex will be legalized and free."

(Received as an SMS, and written in Kikuyu)

c) "Why you should be in ODM! ODM women scream YAWA, YAWA, YAWA, in praise of NYUNDO while men in PNU are busy telling their wives to PANUA ile kazi iendelee (spread your legs so that work may continue). Women in ODM-K are so wet that their men keep asking WAPI WHIPPER! (where is the Whipper)"

(Received through SMS, written as it is, minus translations, targeted both at women as a group and also at PNU and ODM-K political parties)

d) "May God protect you from all the harms of the devil, including diseases, thieves, fleas, ticks, weevils, lice, bedbugs, and especially, ODM."

(Received as an SMS, written in Kikuyu, and sent through cell-phones)

e) "We as Kalenjin Community would like to inform the Kikuyu who live here at Solai (in Rift Valley) to immediately leave the farms you occupy or else we warn you that we shall attack you forcefully anytime."

(Received at EMRC as a leaflet, written in Kiswahili, and signed as "Jamii ya WaKalenjin" (Kalenjin Community))

Source: Kenya Human Rights Commission: Violating the Vote: A Report on the 2007 General Elections

used mobile phone technologies for people who witness acts of violence in Kenya in post-election period. Individuals are able to report incidents that they have seen, and it appears on a map-based view for others to see. This has been a really valuable and successful initiative. However, its success has been a function not so much of the technology, but more importantly of the fact that the initiative came from those who have an intimate connection with the human rights and other social activists who trust Ushahidi and with whom they have a common agenda. In other words, this initiative has worked because of the underlying social relations ... or put it another way, the technology was essentially a manifestation of those underlying social relations.

The widespread availability of mobile phones in Africa epitomises the neo-liberal agenda of privatisation. From the 1980s, the international finance institutions, accompanied by the chorus of "donor" agencies, imposed upon African countries a set of economic and social policies that became known as structural adjustment programmes, the heart of which involved forcing the state to disinvest from public services, and selling of the commons to the private sector. From the early 1980s onwards, there was almost no state investment in health, education, agricultural development, housing, roads, infrastructure and communications. The developing telephone infrastructure was a major victim of this, with old and decrepit infrastructure that the state telecommunications industry had falling into further decline over the following 20 years. Having reduced the market value of such services, the structural adjustment programmes ensured that the private sector could buy these off at rock bottom prices. The way was then open for the private telecommunications sector, with the emergence of mobile phone technologies, to be the principal supplier of telecommunications.

There are those who would argue that mobile phone companies are progressive because they have enabled communications where there is none. These same people worship the market place as the ultimate tool for social progress. There is much hype about the number of mobile phones available in Africa – said to be currently in the region of 120 million. However, this figure is more

in need of an explanation than explaining anything itself. It says nothing of the gender distribution nor indeed about the class distribution. It is common amongst the middle classes of the both urban and rural populations to have two or more mobile phones each.

The reality is that what is developed and who gets access to what is determined not by social need but by the voracious appetite for profit. What all these debates side step is that there is no democratic control over the use or access to these technologies. In the neoliberal age, citizens are gelded to become only consumers. They influence the market only as consumers. The extent of their influence is determined primarily by their power to consume. And of course, the have-nots, by definition don't have the power to influence. All the basic gains of the centuries of struggles for democracy where decisions are made on the basis of one person one vote, not on the basis of how much wealth one owns, have

been reversed. Neoliberalism has returned us to rules of the old order where those with wealth get the vote, the rest of us become mere spectators of history.

In capitalist societies, all technologies have the potential for magnifying and amplifying social differentiation. It is only through the imposition of the democratic will of citizens can this inherent tendency of technologies be overcome. Mobile phone technologies are no exception. Our studies have shown that there is more hype than impact with respect to the role of mobile phone technologies and social progress for the most disenfranchised.

#### Writers Bio

Firoze Manji is director of Fahamu - Networks for Social Justice ([www.fahamu.org](http://www.fahamu.org)) and co-editor of Pambazuka News ([www.pambazuka.org](http://www.pambazuka.org))



Community communication in Sharpeville, South Africa.

*Credit: Trevor Davies*