

## ALTERNATIVE MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN AFRICA: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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There is a myth that new media technologies will drive progressive social change.

Clay Shirky, in his book *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations* expresses this perfectly:

“We are living,” he writes, “in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action ... Most of the barriers to group action have collapsed, and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done ... These changes will transform the world everywhere groups of people come together to accomplish something, which is to say everywhere.” (Clay Shirky, *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*)

But what Shirky misses is that social change is actually driven, not by technologies, but by ordinary people being able to exert an authority over their own experience and, through common actions, developing the courage to determine their own destiny.

In fact we live in a world in which we already have the technological ability to feed, clothe, house and liberate the full potential of everyone on planet earth without causing its environmental destruction, without putting up with mass rape and murders – such as we currently witness in the DRC (and indeed in all civil crises) without wars, oppression, racist and xenophobic attacks on so-called ‘foreigners’, or the threat of extinction through genocide. That is all technologically possible. But just because humanity has the potential to do all this, will it happen? Will it hell!

What is rarely acknowledged about technology, and what historical experience demonstrates, is that in a divided society technologies will tend to exacerbate existing social differentiation. The haves will use

technologies primarily for their own benefit, usually at the expense of the have-nots. That is more usually the rule rather than the exception. But that should not surprise us: technology is after all essentially only a manifestation of social relations. That tendency to exacerbate and amplify existing social differentiation is, in some sense, 'inevitable' - *unless that tendency is actively and consciously countered by the have-nots.*

That is not to say that we shouldn't, like Shirky, be excited and enthralled by the liberating potential of new technologies – especially of new media technologies. But the liberating and democratic potentials of technologies will only be realised when they can be used by, and serve the interests of, the mass of disenfranchised citizens.

In this era of the hegemony of neoliberal ideologies and associated social and economic policies, people are increasingly being turned from being citizens into becoming consumers. Power and influence is increasingly determined not by the principles of 'one person, one vote', but rather by an individual or group's purchasing power and wealth. This is perhaps more manifest in the media than perhaps in any other sector.

And in times where ever greater numbers of citizens are being thrown on to the scrap-heap of history through growing unemployment, declining living standards accelerating corporate accumulation, and a growing food crisis created by speculation on basic foods as commodities, an ever increasing proportion of people become effectively disenfranchised as they lose their purchasing power and their ability to keep body and soul together.

And in an era of globalisation, characterised by:

- unprecedented capital accumulation on a world scale;
- unprecedented control of productive capacity by the few;
- declining capacity of democratically elected governments to determine economic and social policy in the face of economic, political, and often military pressures to comply with the wishes of the global elite; and
- unprecedented growth in the gap between the rich and the poor;

what role can 'alternative media' do to provide or help nurture an alternative?

In 1997, Fahamu was established with a view to contributing to developing and nurturing such an alternative in Africa – the building of a progressive pan African movement - by exploiting the potentials of new media technologies.

In this presentation I would like to share with you some of our experiences in trying to develop media for social change in Africa over the last decade. This has been an experience of thrills, successes, failures and frustrations, yet also full of constant surprises and paradoxes. Perhaps the greatest paradox has been that, in contrast to conventional publishers who are desperately clambering over each other in a drive to move from print to electronic media, we find ourselves going in exactly the opposite direction – from electronic to printed media.

### **Developing learning materials for human rights and advocacy**

Let me start with a little history of how we got to where we are today. Probably like many of you here, Fahamu was born out of a romance. That romance was created in the 1990s by developments in ICTs and the spread of the internet. We thought we would be able to support the growing number of civil society organisations and movements concerned with human rights and social advocacy in Africa by exploiting the opportunities of the internet. At the time, we believed that putting content on the internet was all we really needed to do. It is embarrassing today to admit this naivety. But that is how it was. We applied ourselves with gusto and enthusiasm to this venture.

But before long, we realised there were problems with such an approach. In 1998 we conducted two surveys – one in Kenya, and the other in eight southern African (SADC) countries (the latter supported by IDRC). We interviewed some 120 organisations, and visited the premises of some 70 organisations. Our aim was to investigate the training needs of human rights and advocacy organisations as well as to see how they were using the internet. This was with a view to seeing whether we could develop distance

learning courses specifically for these communities.

What this revealed for us was that any dreams we had of putting learning materials on the web had to be shelved. Although most of the organisations had internet connections, their use of the internet was more or less confined to collecting and sending emails using store-and-forward POP3 accounts. With the exception of organisations in South Africa, very few organisations browsed the web or carried out online searches. Almost none had subscriptions to email lists (discussion lists, information lists and so on). And in 1998, of course, things like RSS feeds were yet to be developed as ubiquitous tools for information gathering. When we asked why so few were accessing information on the web, the consistent message that came back to us was: connections are slow and frustrating; telephone lines were poor; and the cost of browsing was really expensive because the ISPs were charging by the minute.

Of course, the underlying fact was – and is – that bandwidth in most of Africa is limited, and poor telecommunications infrastructure meant browsing is a frustrating exercise. (I have just come here from Kenya where, in a downtown hotel I stayed at, the average time taken to load a low-graphical web page was in the region of two-minutes - excluding those occasions when the browser simply timed out. So this situation is still current.) And as access to the web is charged by the minute, costs of browsing can be remarkably high.

This knowledge forced us to reconsider how distance learning courses could be developed without participants having to access the web. Our first experiment in developing such materials was to produce materials on CDROM that contained PDF files. This was the approach taken with our early CDROMs, including 'Writing for Change' which we developed in collaboration with IDRC. Unfortunately, the degree of interactivity that could be built in using PDF is limited.

Our next, and what became our standardised approach, was to use Macromedia's Director to develop interactive materials that were then rendered on CDROM. This approach allowed us to build a high degree of interactivity – a range of self assessed questionnaires, multiple-choice questions, scripts that allowed the construction of

complex tables based on user inputs, writing and sending of assignments to course tutors, and interaction between participants via email, and so on. The CDROMs also contained a library of documents and literature in PDF format.

This approach was extensively tested and evaluated, and proved to be both popular and judged by external evaluators to be highly effective. Once refined, we have since developed a wide range of 13 distance learning courses in collaboration with the University of Oxford, University for Peace, Article 19, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN System Staff College and the Association for the Prevention of Torture and others.

To be able to use the materials we have developed requires access to computers and to email. Sounds simple, no? But the problem is that most activists doing these courses have fulltime jobs: they had to work while doing the courses. And as they were required to do about 10-14 hours of work a week on the course, inevitably they have to do their studying with the CDROM in the evenings and at weekends. However, very few people have computers at home. And it is often not safe – especially for women – to remain in the office late, or to stay out late at an internet café. And in addition, their line managers were not always willing to let their staff have time off to do their studies during work time.

At one level, this project proved to be a great success. Although the reaction of participants (more than 1000 people have participated in our courses) to learning using these interactive CDROMs has been overwhelmingly positive, in virtually every course evaluation, participants requested that in addition to the interactive materials on CDROM, they wanted to have everything available in hardcopy – as printed text.

So the question that comes up: supposing that instead of using interactive CDROMs, why not just produce the materials as small books that include exercises and interactions? And given that they could still use email as a way of communicating and interacting with each other and their course tutors, there would be, in principle, no real disadvantage – provided that the course books were well designed and provided opportunities for the participants to interact

and to engage and draw from their own experiences. Why go to all the trouble of producing complex technological tricks on CDROMs when we could just as easily publish the courses in book form? Would not well-designed pedagogical material in print form be as effective for learning?

There is much to be said for going in this direction. Many have pointed out to us that broadband access is about to take off in a significant way in Africa. When that happens, perhaps we could go back to our original romantic notion of making materials available online on the web. In anticipation of this, we have already started putting some of our course materials online. However, what we fear is likely to happen is that much of the bandwidth will be hogged by elite institutions and by the middle classes messing about with video streaming and online games, so we are not over optimistic about growing access to the internet by ordinary citizens.

But another factor militates towards moving to using the printed word. As we increasingly engage with members of social movements and grassroots activists who have limited access to computers, the printed word is decidedly much more accessible. To continue down the CDROM route might be to exclude such people from accessing the courses, thereby enhancing the digital divide.

In developing the CDROM-based materials, we were conscious of the need to think ahead in an environment in which technological advances were rapid. All our content is currently stored in XML format, allowing for repurposing with ease. We have investigated how this material might be made available on mobile phones. For the present, however, we have abandoned thoughts of doing so until such time that the cost of mobile telephony comes down significantly. We still need to conduct field trials to see whether in fact, is it really is realistic to expect people to spend hours reading on screen and whether there would be any significant advantage over using printed text? As the saying goes, 'development would be easy if it wasn't for people'. I may be being cynical, and I hope that the next session may provide a Damascene experience with regard to the use of mobile phone technologies for learning.

## **Pambazuka News**

Let me turn now to one of our most fascinating experiences with alternative media – experience that have their origins in the surveys we carried out in 1998 that I mentioned earlier.

One of the results of carrying out the survey was that we started getting emails from organisations asking for help. They would explain that they were preparing research and campaigns on a particular topic and needed our help to do online searches for relevant materials. Others would send us documents and reports about campaigns and research that they had conducted, asking if we could disseminate the materials to others who might be interested. Naturally, as an act of solidarity, we said yes. Then came the deluge. As more and more people sent us requests and materials, the more difficult it was to service them. One Friday afternoon we made the fateful decision. Instead of dealing with these requests one at a time, why don't we devote some time each week to doing systematic research on the internet for relevant material on a range of topics, and make this available to whomever requested. We needed to keep up to date with such material anyway, so why not share it. So that's what we did.

But instead of just sending out summaries and URLs of what we had found, carefully categorised under different subjects, let's also include an article providing analysis or commentary on an important topical current affairs issue. Let's provoke some reflection and thought about the world around us, about why it is as it is, and what might be done to change it.

Our thinking was as follows: Could we develop an email based newsletter as a means to contributing to the growth of a progressive pan African movement that is committed to social change, that could be the basis for developing common actions across the continent to advocate for human rights and social justice?

Originally we had a list of about 300 people who told us that they were interested in receiving this newsletter. After a few months fitful starts, in December 2000, we launched what was to become known as 'Pambazuka News', a weekly electronic newsletter on social

justice in Africa.

We hadn't realised then that we were touching some kind of nerve or defining a niche that was in need of being filled. Within a year, we had 6000 subscribers. And the number of subscribers continued to grow to the current nearly 20,000. Over time, readers asked that we include other sections: the original 13 categories expanded to some 26. We were asked to include a readers letters section, a section for book reviews, a section on African literature and arts, a section on the growing number of African blogs. But the most interesting aspect was the growth in the number of contributors of articles, analysis, commentary and op-eds. Whereas in the early days we were scrambling to persuade someone to contribute an editorial, today we struggle to reduce the pipeline of articles awaiting publication below 20. We currently publish some 50 original articles every month from African academics, activists, writers, and others.

Because of our impecunious state, we have been unable to pay authors for their contributions. Yet we have published articles from more than 1000 authors from Africa on a wide range of issues. We have regular columnists and contributors. The English language edition currently comes out three times a week, while the French comes out weekly. And a month ago, we launched the Portuguese language edition. Our ambition is to publish an Arabic edition in the next year.

The newsletter is sent out as a plain text email to subscribers and at the same time the content appears on the website. Everything that we have ever published – some 48,000 articles, stories, commentaries and summaries of searches for each category – is also concurrently available on the website, freely accessible to all. There has been a lot of debate about whether it is sensible for us to continue providing free access. On the one hand, there is a potential for us to be able to raise much needed income from those wishing to access content stored on our database. On the other hand, given that the content is provided to us free, and given that we want to ensure that our primary constituencies who are unable pay should be able to access the content, we need to keep access to this content open and freely available.

We currently have nearly 20,000 subscribers. Reader surveys indicate that on average our subscribers forward the newsletter to about 10 other persons. We Our readership is likely to be around half a million. Content from Pambazuka News appears in full at AllAfrica.com, and articles from the newsletter appear on various other lists and websites, and hundreds of people subscribe to our RSS feeds.

The newsletter and its website has come to be considered, we are told, as the principal platform for analysis, commentary and discussion on current affairs and social justice in Africa and one where the voices of analysts, bloggers, academics, policy makers, artists, writers and activists in Africa will be found.

We have been genuinely surprised by the spread of Pambazuka News. We have spent, over eight years, probably no more than about \$200 in promotion and advertising. The bulk of our subscribers learn of Pambazuka News primarily from word of mouth or because someone forwards the newsletter or an article to them. People get to hear about Pambazuka News also through newspapers who take stories from us – and occasionally acknowledge the source (not all of them do).

So what accounts for the success of the newsletter?

What we have done, I believe, is to help create a safe space for the development an alternative perspective on current affairs, politics and alternatives to the hegemony of neoliberal ideologies. Importantly, we have managed to develop a community around Pambazuka News that enables progressive African activists and thinkers to exchange experiences and express solidarity across borders and languages, and across sectors. As one of our contributors has put it: Pambazuka News is ‘bridging the gap that has been keeping scholars, activists and policy makers apart for too long.’ Another, Ike Okonta, put it like this:

“Pambazuka News has, in the short time of its existence, carved a niche for itself as an important forum where Africans talk frankly among themselves and reflect on the state of the continent and its place in the new global order. For far too long

Africa and Africans were pushed to the margins of global discourse. Others spoke for them, very often misrepresenting and distorting the reality to suit their own interests. No longer, and this is thanks to Pambazuka News ...”

Perhaps the most important factors for its success has been done is by enabling social justice campaigns to use Pambazuka News as one of their campaigning tools. We have published special issues of Pambazuka News put together by a number of coalitions and alliances, including the coalition on the protocol on the rights of women in Africa – Solidarity for African Women’s Rights (SOAWR). In addition to setting up an online petition, we facilitated mobile phone users to sign the petition by sending text messages. There is a sense of ownership of the initiative and expectations that the newsletter will serve their needs.

But I think we face a dilemma. Although the newsletter spreads virally through the internet and by word of mouth, we are still only going to reach a very small proportion of those whom we need to – mainly because less than 6% of Africa’s people have access to the internet. Futhermore, especially because reading on screen is never easy, our surveys indicate that more than two-thirds of our readers print out articles to read them. Given the widespread popularity of newspapers, is it time for us to begin producing Pambazuka News as a newspaper or magazine? It is not that we are short of content – more than 50 articles a month are published in electronic form. Would it be feasible to produce concurrently a printed edition of Pambazuka News? If so, how would we distribute it?

This touches one of the greatest challenges faced by all African publishers, and something that we have faced with the our inadvertent development into a publisher of books (in the last two years we have published nine books, some of which has arisen from repurposing content from Pambazuka News into book form). There is no single distributor of books for Africa. Excellent books, such as those on display in this book fair, may be available in the country of publication. They will probably also be available to readers in the west. But it is rare that such books will be accessible even in the neighbouring countries, leave alone available elsewhere on the continent.

And yet I believe that one of the things that Pambazuka News has demonstrated is that there is a real hunger for progressive pan African writing, content that is informed by the need for social change. The experience of publishers such as Zed Books has also shown that there is a market for progressive African writing. But all of us face the dilemma of how to get printed content distributed and accessible economically across the continent.

What can be done? All the books we have published have used print-on-demand technologies. While that has meant an advantage for us in that we don't need to tie up capital in printing and storage, the unit costs tend to be high. But is it not possible printing to be decentralised by establishing POD facilities in every country? The problem at the moment is that the cost of establishing such facilities remains high at the moment.

A major challenge faced in Africa is that book publishing and distribution of any serious scale is still largely monopolised by a small number of companies working primarily in the supply of textbooks to schools. Such textbooks are designed not to enable young people to draw on the experiences of the continent in bringing about social change, nor to make them agents of progressive social transformation, but rather to encourage a compliant consumer of globalisation. These are the only books that, because of the economies of scale, are available at affordable prices in most of Africa. Thus even in the conventional medium of book publishing, one can observe the amplification of social differentiation: the have-nots can only access one kind of book, the haves have a much greater choice.

### Reaching wider audiences

Over the last year or so, we have begun experimenting with developing podcasts as well as producing radio programmes. This work is still in its infancy, but we believe that we could bring to radio what we have done in electronic form in Pambazuka News. Time does not permit me here to speak about some of the experiments we have done with radio and the use of mobile phones for social activism. We are currently involved in developing, in collaboration

with the Tactical Technology Collective, a toolkit for mobile activism.

Let me end then by reiterating the point I made at the start. There is nothing intrinsically progressive or liberating about technology. On the contrary, in a divided society, technology has a tendency to amplify social differentiation. In a climate in which economic policies make the rich richer and the poor poorer, this amplification opens wider the cavern known as the digital divide. As we experiment and explore the potentials opened up by new media, we need to temper our enthusiasm with the thought that we may contribute to widening the gulf between the haves and the have-nots unless we consciously seek to counter that tendency.

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