

Mobile phones join the rural radio mix

Ken Banks, IDG News

A little over a year ago I found myself sitting in the San Francisco offices of an international humanitarian NGO (non-governmental organisation). Their main focus at the time was a major human rights treaty, and they'd invited me along to discuss how they might go about mobilising rural communities to lobby their governments to ratify it. There was clearly great potential for this to become a mobile phone-based initiative, and they wanted me to help them understand how text messaging – and my [FrontlineSMS](#) platform in particular – could be of use.

So, it came as something of a surprise when I recommended they looked more closely at rural radio instead. Although I'm a great fan of mobile technology, it isn't by default the best tool for reaching out to rural communities. Radio – far from being outdated and irrelevant – remains a powerful, relevant and far-reaching medium. Unrivalled, in fact.

Radio stations have existed in Africa long before many of its countries reached Independence. Over the last twenty to thirty years, however, liberation of the airwaves in many of these countries has opened the door to a new wave of radio stations – commercial or privately owned, community owned, and even restructured public stations. This expansion has opened many new and exciting opportunities.

In 1993 Trevor Bayliss, inventor of the [wind-up radio](#), first realised their significance while watching a television programme on HIV/AIDS in Africa. Radio had a reach unmatched by any other communications technology, and they were being hailed as a key weapon in HIV/AIDS education. But there was a problem. All radios at the time needed either expensive batteries or mains power to operate, putting them out of reach of many of the people the education programmes were trying to reach. Immediately after the programme ended, Trevor went to work on a prototype for a device which was later to become the wind-up radio (it has since been updated to include a solar panel and become more widely-known as the "Freeplay radio").

The reach of rural radio networks in the developing world, combined with the continued adoption of solar powered and hand-wound radios by consumers, make them a valuable tool in the ICT4D (information and communication technologies for development) field. According to DFID, the British Government's Department for International Development, "Radio has the ability to reach more poor people simultaneously – and at a relatively low cost to both producer and consumer – than any other communication technology currently available".

Despite the excitement, radio clearly has one drawback – that listeners have no way of interacting real-time with the programmes. In an interesting twist, mobile phones might well be the perfect technology to help solve this problem.

Sheila Huggins-Rao is the Program Coordinator of the African Farm Radio Research Initiative (AFRRI), a project of [Farm Radio International](#) which is studying the effectiveness of interactive radio programming on improving agriculture and food security issues for small holder farmers in Africa. Funded by the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#), AFRRI currently works in five African countries – Mali, Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi – where country teams work with different community, public and commercial radio stations – along with research organizations, NGOs and government departments – to help farmers receive and share information about their crops and farming practices. In total, AFRRI works with 25 radio stations and over 100 communities across these five African countries.

Not surprisingly, Farm Radio International is excited by the potential of mobile technology. According to Sheila, “The rapid expansion of the mobile industry across Africa has introduced new and innovative channels for communicating and sharing information remotely. It is only recently that the potential in combining these two powerful tools is being realized”.

One of AFRRI’s main research objectives is to explore how new technologies – mobile phones and MP3 players, for example – increase the effectiveness of radio as a sustainable, interactive development communication tool. To meet this objective, Farm Radio International is exploring the many ways farmers could engage in radio programming through their mobile phones – everything from calling into radio talk shows, being interviewed over the phone by a broadcaster, or even sending text messages to radio stations to ask questions during a live show, and receive and send market prices for crops.

Newer mobile phones present further opportunities. Sheila continues, “Internet access and other audio/video features could help farmers better communicate with their extension agents (agriculture specialist assigned to work with farmers), who can then address their challenges in a more timely and effective manner”. AFRRI is currently documenting the use of ICTs both in the rural radio sector and by farmers in each of the communities where their research is being conducted, and will soon begin to test out more advanced use of mobile phones with radio broadcasting.

Farm Radio International is not alone in their interest in the mobile/rural radio mix. Bill Siemering is President of [Developing Radio Partners](#) (DRP), an organisation committed to building vibrant, participatory communities through the development of financially and editorially independent media services. Given Bill’s background – almost forty years in media and community radio – DRP has a strong focus on rural radio. They have more recently widened their scope to explore the benefits of mobile technology, particularly in health.

DRP’s latest project – the “Ideas Network” – seeks to transform the quality and quantity of health information for those who need it most by linking radio with SMS messaging in low Internet environments. The rationale behind the project is a simple one. People need information about how to prevent sickness, and people who are ill need to know what to do. DRP imagines a scenario where a villager or farmer with a mobile phone can text in symptoms of their sickness and the radio station relay this to health worker, who replies by text or on-air. As stations gather texts on certain diseases, they will be able to pick up trends and feature both short information spots about these diseases.

According to Bill, “One of the goals of the Ideas Network is to share more widely successful examples of effective health programming. For example, women created Radio Bubusa in the Democratic

Republic of Congo to improve their knowledge around health and rights issues. As part of their communication efforts, they developed listeners' clubs, who use solar powered radios. These clubs provide a platform for discussion on issues raised in the radio programmes and are giving villagers the space to talk about taboo subjects and challenge traditional norms, one of the unique strengths of radio".

Clearly rural radio and mobile technology are a potent mix. Independently, both are making significant contributions – both directly and indirectly – to the communities they seek to serve. Together there is every chance they could achieve yet more.

Ken Banks, founder of [kiwanja.net](http://www.kiwanja.net), devotes himself to the application of mobile technology for positive social and environmental change in the developing world, and has spent the last 15 years working on projects in Africa. Recently, his research resulted in the development of FrontlineSMS, a field communication system designed to empower grassroots non-profit organisations. Ken graduated from Sussex University with honours in Social Anthropology with Development Studies and is currently working on a number of mobile projects funded by the Hewlett Foundation. Ken was awarded a Reuters Digital Vision Fellowship in 2006, and named a Pop!Tech Social Innovation Fellow in 2008. Further details of Ken's wider work are available on his website at www.kiwanja.net