



They set up Africa's Voices, a project they piloted in eight sub-Saharan countries, and which involved working with nine local radio stations to develop discussion topics for phone- and text-ins. Through Africa's Voices – now a spin-out social venture – the team learned what did and didn't work in interactive talk shows.

Crucially, they discovered they could not focus solely on political shows, and that interactive radio shows work differently, providing insights about people's worldviews that are hardly captured through social science questionnaires. "It's the fact that people get socialised into participating in discussion that has broader political effects," Srinivasan explains.

“These shows are social spaces, and it is the way they are convened that makes them vibrant and generates real discussion. You have to work with a format that engages people and encourages participation. People don't just want to answer 'yes' or 'no' to a question. They want to be recognised, give their views – and they hope the presenter will read their message out on air and perhaps greet their mother.”

But the talk show's dissimilarity from established social science methods presented the researchers with a major challenge: how do you accurately analyse thousands of text messages in myriad local languages?

Given this is a big data, as well as a social science, challenge, Srinivasan decided to use an ESRC Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) pilot project to build a new partnership with IBM Research - Africa. Opened in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2013 IBM Research - Africa is the company's 12th global laboratory and the continent's first commercial technology research facility.

“It is a commercial research lab but they are interested in solving what they call Africa's grand challenges: healthcare, education, human mobility, public safety, financial inclusion, agriculture, energy, water and sanitation,” says Srinivasan.

With IAA funding, CGHR's Dr Claudia Lopes travelled to Nairobi to work with a local language radio station and IBM Research - Africa. Using company's computing expertise to tackle the big data challenge, the IAA project also allowed social scientists at Cambridge to share their academic perspective with IBM.

“IBM Research - Africa is a serious commitment to addressing social, economic and other development challenges using computing, so being part of it in its early stages is a chance to shape the lab's way of working,” she explains. “The impact is far greater than our collaboration, it's about changing the way they think.”

And although the impact of IAA project is still evolving, Lopes believes the research could have far-reaching practical applications.

“The devastating ebola outbreak occurred while we were working in Nairobi, so we were able to have detailed discussions with organisations in Sierra Leone about using interactive radio shows to gather vital data about people's views and misconceptions about the disease.”