

Impact case study

Amplifying Africa's voices

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Africa's airwaves are abuzz with debate and discussion. Now, Cambridge researchers are pioneering new ways of harnessing the political power of radio and text messaging to give citizens greater say in how their countries are governed

The internet has revolutionised how humans communicate. But across Africa it is the mobile phone combined with radio – a technology invented more than 100 years ago – that is transforming the continent's communications' landscape.

Like the internet elsewhere, radio in Africa has developed radically over the past quarter of a century. Once the preserve of state broadcasters, which used radio to preach to the masses, today's broadcast sector is brimming with local radio stations broadcasting in local languages.

But whereas mass media in the 20th century foreclosed public debate in the west, in Africa local language radio is often a vital and vibrant public space, a space that Cambridge researchers believe could contribute to the continent's development and governance.

"Successful development and responsive governance depend on the input and active involvement of citizens, yet the voices of ordinary Africans are not heard enough," says Dr Sharath Srinivasan of the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR). "So Africa's remarkably rapid digital revolution, especially the spread of mobile communications, combined with the ubiquity and popularity of radio is a significant opportunity."

As a result, he and his colleagues at CGHR have been examining how radio phone-ins and text-ins could impact public debate, public opinion and the ability of citizens to hold authority to account: "Suddenly there are spaces where people can get relevant information and within which they might even participate. This is a new phenomenon. The question that interested us was what are the political implications of these new expanding spaces of discussion, debate and voice?"

And for Srinivasan the question is one of more than academic interest. "This is a fascinating area of social science research, but we have also tried to understand the applied dimension: what happens when technology is received into different contexts; how is it used; and what opportunities are there to enhance the use of these new tools?" he asks.

Funded by the ESRC, the UK government's Department for International Development, the Cairns Charitable Trust, the Isaac Newton Trust and the Alborada Trust, over the past four years the CGHR has looked at how local radio stations could use FrontlineSMS – a text message system not dependent on internet access – to open up a dialogue with their listeners.

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 the 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 the 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."