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More accurate images of developing countries — the potential of local radio

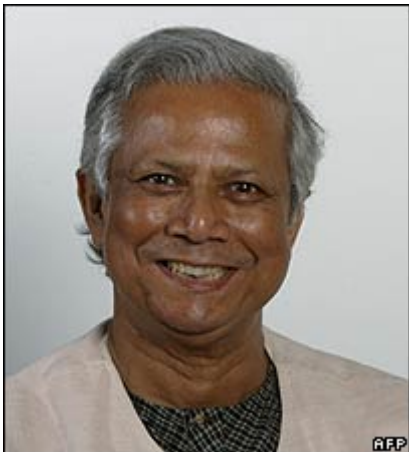
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Introduction

To many people, the notion of local radio is that it provides parochial information for our parents and grandparents. This is an image that I still often have to counter with my own contemporaries in their mid-thirties who don't immediately see the importance of local information in their own lives until there is a road blocked, or bad weather and schools are closed. In many ways, it's not until a disaster or tragedy happens, that people turn their focus and attention to what's happening.

In many respects we are all like that. Working or studying or rearing a family in our own little worlds without having the time or even taking the time to look around. It's at disaster time that the media become the focus for the information and it's dog eat dog for many organisations who need to meet that demand instantly.

Most recently our attention is on the Nobel Peace Prize and the positive image that portrays about one man's efforts to champion the poor.



Muhammad Yunus was “really delighted” by the award. On the other hand we see Madonna and Angelina Jolie and their focus on Malawi and Ethiopia.

Local radio in Ireland began really in 1929 when the then Irish Government decided to look at putting Irish radio into homes. Up until then you had to rely on the likes of Marconi to invent the means to capture and transmit sound. Up until the 1960s the Irish airwaves were dominated by one station, until a few people began experimenting and copying progress from abroad. In urban areas, choice began to appear on the dials. It was sporadic, inconsistent scheduling, and had poor presentation.

In 1979 the youth station 2fm was launched and in the 1980s there were rumblings in local areas as legislation loopholes began to appear and local business people recognized the commercial potential. This meant a threat to the national stations who put pressure on the Irish Government to get the local pirate stations off the air and, if they did, the pressure came back from the ground to license them.

Local commercial radio stations throughout Ireland consistently battle for ratings with national and public broadcast stations who enjoy higher revenue and license fees. However, hands down, the majority of local stations attract more listeners per quarter hour than the national broadcasters.

Local stations continue to win national and international awards for programmes despite the competition from more resourced stations.

While the focus is on attracting listeners and advertisers, programme people like me focus on the content. News and current affairs, music, entertainment and sport all form part of every schedule. I have a very romantic view of radio and the magic that gets it into the homes of millions of people on a daily basis. As a radio station, our messages are sent via technology from a studio to transmitters on mountains and maybe onto filler transmitters in lower lying areas and, while these are necessary, they are also barriers to get over as communicators to make sure they do not play a part in minimizing the effect of the message.

We send many messages and, like other radio stations and media organizations, KCLR 96fm has a responsibility not to sensationalize, to have high editorial standards and to respond conscientiously whatever the demand. Just like the BBC, which has a worldwide service in radio, television and one of the most used websites in the world, they recognize that there are many core areas to which they must adhere from a broadcaster's point of view.

In the *BBC Corporate Social Responsibility Report 2003/2004*, Mark Thompson points to this aim to be a 'responsible organisation', with its main purpose being 'To enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain'.

As broadcasters we have an obligation to be fair and represent issues and people correctly. This BBC report goes on to outline the BBC standards:

"Our audiences rightly expect the highest editorial and ethical standards from the

BBC. Due impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC — our programmes must be accurate, fair and reflect diversity. Audiences must be able to trust the integrity of BBC programmes. We respect privacy — intrusions have to be justified by serving a greater good.”

Most broadcasters strive to imitate this model and give people being represented a fair crack of the whip. For the purpose of this paper, we are looking at how local radio can bring this ethos to developing countries reportage and coverage.

How can a small local radio station compete with the likes of the BBC or the Murdoch’s of this world? In many instances we can’t as in the case of covering ‘disasters’ — it’s very expensive and, in most cases, consumers are demanding pictures, updated regularly.

Christopher Bryant of the BBC has written on mass communication and the changing face of technology. According to him:

“We are still in an information rich and information poor society where the dominant single source of news worldwide is television ... In the last four years, three ways of transmission have been used: satellite, cable and terrestrial. Very soon another TV will be wide-spread: digital TV. At that time the gap between information rich and information poor people would be even more visible and dramatic. Thus broadcasters must take note that the reporting of disasters both in the provisions of information to ordinary citizens and in the way they report news and current events all around the world that not everybody will be able to receive every piece of information.”

Local radio stations report on the news of the day and, where there are little or no budgets, we have to be more creative. Where I work, we broadcast a weekly multicultural programme, presented by Ade Oke from Nigeria who lives with his wife and family in Carlow. I’m very proud of the fact that as a small station we ignore the commercial pressure of just providing mainstream pop music based programmes and broadcast a programme full of music from around the world, issues affecting the changing multicultural society and provide a platform for discussion and debate. This programme ‘The Rainbow’ has already won a national MAMA award and is only on air two years.

Ade is a great believer in making contact with different groups dealing with multicultural issues, embassies and special charity organizations within and outside our direct radio franchise area, no matter what time of the day or day of the week. The rationale behind the programme presented in English is that it not only has to be relevant to the different cultures listening, it also strives not to ghettoize the foreign nationals. It endeavors to include everyone again, linking local and global. It’s a passion like this that makes local radio work. It was with Ade Oke that I made my most recent visit to Uganda to record a series of programmes called ‘Against the odds — living in poverty with a disability.’

News matters in a very ordinary way. We all want to know about the weather, traffic, what’s on in the cinema or the theatre. News helps us to make decisions as a nation, as

consumers, as members of families and society in general. This is why news is so vital. While KCLR 96fm can't compete by sending reporters and programme makers in times of disaster to developing countries, I believe this is a strength and an opportunity to be worked on rather than a weakness. Covering disasters following drought or famine or natural disasters requires a specific type of talent and resources.

As Christopher Bryant (Chief of the European Section of the BBC) points out:

“One of the great tendencies is to show humans as victims of natural disasters rather than heroes of their own lives. If journalists keep on doing that, particularly in countries of the developing world (Africa, South Africa), it will perpetuate an image and an impression that will maintain them in poverty.”

The BBC tries to adopt exactly the same standards, ethics and guidelines for the moments of national celebration that it would for moments of national sadness or mourning. It is necessary to underline these fundamental principles that must apply and three little rules:

- always respect people' dignity, never present people as victims;
- do not depart when the story has lost its excitement for the rest of the world; it is important for the broadcaster to stick with the story even six months later;
- always be even more rigorous in moments of extreme excitement; professional integrity is of utmost importance when sensational events are concerned.

Two years ago Kilkenny was buzzing as a result of a small group of people who worked tirelessly with Fair Trade to award Fair Trade town status to our medieval city. We covered their fundraising events, put forward their ideas through the news and talk programmes, but as a programme maker I wanted to do more. I applied to the Department of Foreign Affairs, with the support of Fair Trade Ireland, for help to travel to Guatemala to produce a documentary on a small cooperative of local coffee farmers. As I manage the programmes department in KCLR 96fm, it's easier to divide my duties out with presenters than to replace someone on air for two weeks. I researched the topic, checked out all the sites on Guatemala, discussed the travel arrangements with one of my colleagues who had traveled to South America with her San Salvadorian husband and so had many different views of life out there.

The picture presented of Guatemala on some internet sites was one of a dangerous place to go unaccompanied, with chat rooms filled with horror stories. That was not my experience.

I've witnessed different types of poverty. As a student trying to pay rent it can seem like you are very hard done by, with small grants and a high cost of living. I've seen different types of poverty in Ireland, while working on various political campaigns around the country. I've traveled to Belarus where people have become environmental refugees in their own land due to radiation fallout from a neighboring country. And a different type of poverty again in South America. It's all relative to the circumstances — whether the poverty they are experiencing is environmental, economic or political.

Poverty can be difficult to portray to an audience without the use of visual pictures. I believe you have to be sensitive to the people you are portraying and that while I may have digital television, running water and en-suites at home, the fact that the people I'm staying with or working with in a small town like San Lucas in Guatemala haven't these luxuries, doesn't make them inferior or require my pity. In many ways you can be blinded by the comparisons with home and forget the reason for the programme. You have so many issues to deal with when you travel to somewhere different, that it is important to keep your focus.

You quickly learn to adjust to the pace of life, to the roles of the different people in the society. Having studied sociology and being a strong independent woman, you are confused when faced with women who are abused physically and mentally; rearing children while the husband takes two or three wives; left alone with children as a result of the husband having drunk himself to death; and you wonder why they remain in those situations. In cases like these, you can't afford to subject your own morals and beliefs. You have to trust the systems being put in place by organizations and hope that the empowerment experienced by many millions in the West will at some stage trickle through. You focus on their strengths as individuals and do not portray them as victims.

One of the people from Fair Trade I worked with on that trip had the difficult job of getting the local cooperative to undertake planning. Something as basic as sitting down and putting together a timeline for their different projects is something the coop needed a lot of assistance with, something we take for granted. The difficulty is that when you work with a group of people who rely on one crop each year to make their money, they are not used to planning beyond day to day existence.

Coffee is a commodity that is worth only a few dollars to the growers but millions to the world. Here is a short extract from the start of my documentary 'Trading Fair'.

Some people I met were poorer than others. Felippé has a proper house, with a vegetable and herb garden out the back but his success is as a result of living in the United States many years ago, before returning to his home town to use what he learned for the benefit of his people. He could have stayed where he was but he is a formidable character with a huge social conscience. One of his very worthwhile projects was recycling. This clip illustrates that when you have people who are motivated and forward thinking, sometimes the success of the work hinges on others not taking advantage. The key here is to continue to work in the face of adversity and to slowly show the people around you that you can make a change.

This documentary was broadcast on KCLR 96fm last year and Kilkenny quickly followed up with their final application and received their Fair Trade town status. While this documentary tied in with a local news story, the local and the global combining, it wasn't the reason for making it. The luxury of receiving funding towards this type of programme is that you are not under any commercial obligations to sponsors, you can pick the best time to travel when projects are in full flight and portray the people as they live normally.

Instead of inducing appeal fatigue with your audience, which is experienced at times of disasters, you are giving them a colour piece, an explanation of how and why they do things and in some way subliminally give listeners an account of the historic and political situation. You are not looking for anything in return apart from their attention.

This year once again, KCLR 96fm applied for funding through the Simon Cumbers Media Challenge Fund, partnering with Sight Savers International. One of the conditions of funding is that the programme or series of articles does not act to promote the organisation. In this case we used the contacts and their broad network of different disability groups to assist us with our research and recordings.

As mentioned previously, poverty takes many shapes and, for the able bodied it can be difficult enough. But faced with a disability — whether you have lost your vision or you were born with a physical disability — then you have much more to deal with. On top of that, if you are living hand to mouth with a large family and in a remote part of the country, it means you are putting extra pressure on a family that is already just about able to exist. As journalists and programme-makers, you have a responsibility to not only show the daily lives of these people, but you have an obligation to show why they are living in these conditions. The image of Uganda is one of war and a country crippled for eight years at the hand of Idi Amin.



“His tenure witnessed much sectarian violence, including the persecution of the Acholi, Lango, and other ethnic groups as well as Christians in Uganda. The death toll during Amin’s regime will never be accurately known. An estimate from the International Commission of Jurists is that it was not less than 80,000 and more likely around 300,000. Another estimate, compiled by exile organizations with the help of Amnesty International, put the number killed at 500,000. He gave himself the title ‘His Excellency President for Life Field Marshal Al Hadji Dr. Idi Amin, VC, DSO, MC, Conqueror of the British Empire.’

There was no question of us traveling to the north of the country where at the time fighting was still very active. However, the landscape still bears witness with empty trenches dug into the rural roads. The stories are varied and these are some of the clips from the six half-hour series produced.

Conclusion

The media is very important on many levels. It keeps us informed of local, national and international events, news, sport, politics, trends in fashion and society, and can enrich our lives on many levels. There is a responsibility on everyone involved that we present ourselves and others in a way that truly represents who we are. In many cases warts and all, but this doesn't mean that we distort the truth to suit our delivery.

While local radio may not be able to compete with large national broadcasters, we have a very important role to play in highlighting developing issues through general news and current affairs programmes, to special interest programmes on the schedule, and through special documentaries. It's important that financial concerns do not inhibit coverage. It's easier than some would think to pull together issues and concerns that affect local and global. Our changing technology in this industry allows radio to travel lighter and cheaper than our television counterparts.

The audiences listening to local radio are larger on a local scale than the audiences listening to national radio and we know this is fact, based on the quarterly JNLR listenership figures, the standard measurement used by all in the industry.

Funds such as the Simon Cumbers Media Challenge Fund allow small media organizations and those outside the business to team up and deliver true accounts of the many different developing issues. It's all about good quality radio but also about painting a true reflection of the many different countries and people who live there, many of whom now live as our neighbours. Preconceived images can distort the reality. Local radio is about much more than lost dogs and death notices. People may want news of the minute, but this type of programming produced by KCLR 96fm and others allows you to take a breath, show the audiences that the pace of life in developing countries, and that the issues affecting them are not what is represented in sound bytes.

Local radio is a powerful medium and tool in the right hands to draw attention to developing countries and their issues, without being tied politically, and has the potential to grow audiences who have a genuine interest in hearing how local journalists and programme-makers from their area can deliver the goods and compete with limited resources.

As Dale Carnegie said:

“Keep your mind open to change all the time. Welcome it. Court it. It is only by examining and re-examining your opinions and ideas that you can progress.”

Ends