Introduction

The rural community of Macha, Zambia has implemented an array of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), as part of a holistic, respectful vision to inspire people in rural communities to reach their collective and individual potential. Macha is a deep-rural chiefdom, based in Zambia's Southern Province. The environment is typical resource-limited rural setting, with community members living in scattered homesteads, with very little infrastructure and a subsistence lifestyle. The vibrant local culture can be characterized within the classical African concept of Ubuntu. It is governed through traditional structures, involving community leaders as chiefs, (senior) head men, and others.

The need for Community Radio was verbalized for the first time in 2003. The Government of the Republic of Zambia granted a construction permit in 2005. After many interactions and inspections, Vision Community Radio Macha received official broadcast license January 2011. This ICT platform complemented the arrival of internet (in 2004) and mobile phone (late 2006). As few radio signals reach the remote areas, the radio signal on 92.9 MHz reaches an area with a diameter of about 140 kilometers, covering at least four chiefdoms and reaching a potential 150,000 people.

On a literacy scale, Macha is a mixed environment, with medical, agricultural, educational and juridical entities that (partially) utilize writing. However, in the larger area community members have little exposure to texts and living in primary orality. As such, the rural areas around Macha represent a highly residual oral society.

The official language of Zambia is English. It is used in official communications. In daily interactions, indigenous languages are commonly spoken. Chitonga – or, shorter, Tonga - is the primary language in the Macha area. Although the language is written, Tonga does not have a literature base. Consequently, many people in the community do not use any writings, nor are in contact with written words, and expect orality to be used in daily affairs. This cultural precept hampers non-discursive practices. Further, material disadvantages like unavailability of reading materials and lack of paper and pens or formal business structures hamper the use of writing. The older generation, who provides for community leadership, insist on the primacy of orality in Tonga culture.

Background
Authors are involved with the introduction of Information and Communications Technologies in the rural community of Macha since 2003. Continuous work consisted of much community interaction according to the Macha Works! Model (Van Stam & Van Oortmerssen, 2010). Consecutive sound-boarding resulted in a humanized expression of technology that aims to translate local customs and activities to facilitate local, national, and international interactions and dissemination.

Vision Community Radio Macha is an independent society, enshrined in the Macha community. Its leadership and operations are fully supported by the community without outside operational assistance. The community built the impressive studio facilities. National experts assisted as for the engineering aspects. The radio operates with a team of five full time associates and four volunteers. They trained an other sixteen persons in specifics of community broadcasting.

**Programming involving the Elderly**

The need for a community wide platform for interaction was recognized during two unrelated community surveys – in education and health - on community needs in 2003. During the community meetings to discuss these surveys, it became apparent that a platform for community wide interaction was missing. One of the proposed ways forwards was to start a community radio station. Subsequently, the community charged a team of local volunteers. The team performed a specific and targeted survey in 2004. Volunteers spoke to different people of different age groups on what kind of radio programs they would envision. Most elderly persons mentioned the need to transmit information on culture and intangible heritage as it can shape the future of their children. Also many young persons mentioned the need for cultural information. Comments included “culture signifies where we come from”, “there is no future without history”, and “without knowing our culture a person does not have a future”.

Further investigations as to come to more specific needs, and a proposed content of the radio station, unearthed the strong desire to amplify the voice of the cultural custodians as enshrined in elderly people. Older people are not readily accessible and dying out. ‘When a person dies, a library burns’. Especially with the introduction of new cultures and interactions beyond cultural borders, possibly leading to boundary crossings, establishment of a cultural beacon in the community was deemed urgent.

The community embraced Vision Community Radio Macha right from the start. Community acceptance became evident during times of interruptions of broadcasts during periods of technical difficulties. At those times, community delegations visit with adamant requests for restoration of service and programming.

Much experimentation took place as to the programming of the radio. The first regularly established content became quickly one of the most popular programs at Vision Community Radio Macha. It is “Butonga Tutabusowi”, which means “We do not have to forget Tonga traditions”.

The program emerged by itself unaided. It did so by elderly organizing themselves to facilitate the activity by establishing a committee. The committee then came to the radio station, and stated its wish to start and facilitate a proposed program to discuss intangible cultural heritage. Subsequently, the radio station trained four committee members in how a radio station works, and explained its specifics like the use of microphones, etc. The radio provides the airtime and studio facilities. A radio associate introduces the program and assures the sound quality engineering.

The program is a weekly program with a length in the range of half an hour. Contents focus on culture and heritage in the local community. For instance, subjects have been courting, marriage, funerals, bathing, rituals, clothing, etc. The community committee decides upon the subject, and who will be present during the program. At least one person trained by the radio station is part of those present. As such, the committee assures a relevant, participatory, and interactive radio program discussing the cultural subject-at-hand.

Participants guard the program themselves. A typical program involves a panel of four people...
in the studio, gender balanced with two men and two women. Often, an old senior headman introduces the subject. Then the panel talks about the matter. This leads to advise and proposed codes of conduct for young and old in the community. After these introductions and positioning, the program proceeds to interact with listeners whom respond by SMS. One person gives his/her mobile phone numbers and reads received SMS out loud. These contain inquiries or additions and sometimes introduce arguments. SMS arrive from a wide spectrum of community members, young and old.

Discussion of discords and conflicting arguments proceed with a constructive attitude and shared concern. It aims for harmony and sensitization for hurtful impacts and change of conduct. It promotes mutual understanding, civilized dialogue and mutual tolerance. Participants are encouraged to take into accounts all sides of arguments, to make sense of them, and then come to harmonized outcomes as community based guidelines.

Community members are hungry for the program, as it is the prime way to learn about the local culture. The elderly people mention that without the radio station it would not be possible to have their voice heard at a large wide scale. Often, they explicitly acknowledge that folk tales and writings are not enough to describe the whole culture. And always gratitude is shown for the radio as providing a platform for elderly to make their voice heard and respected. During the programs, community members send communications of encouragements, often with wishes to have the program 'on air' more often in the week.

**Findings**

As per local culture, the radio station is much concerned how to connect the community, how to emanate respect and dignity, facilitate the sharing of opportunities, responsibilities and challenges, introduce visitors to the Macha community, implement participatory interactions, and interdependence. Its interactions interweave with daily existence and experience in its contextual reality. There are many regards for quality, and little regard for keeping time, or quantitative information.

Community members mention "it is an effective way to learn about the local culture". “Radio makes sure we have an understanding of how our forefathers used to live”, and “the program helps the community to reflect back to what was used to happen in the past”.

The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage refers to "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage"(UNESCO, 2003). These manifest mainly in domains such as oral traditions, including language as vehicle, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and traditional craftsmanship. Intangible cultural heritage is fundamental to human existence, it is knowledge and memory of human beings, which is continuously constructed and reconstructed in people's sense of identity established through social interaction(Yoshida & Mack, 2008). It is dynamic, evolving, and never static.

The radio program emerged not aided by formal deductive procedures, nor in pure logical form, but as a more practical thought pattern. It acknowledges and recognizes the need for the elderly to lead all aspects of the program, as in the local culture it depends on 'who leads and talks' to see what is true.

Information and Communications Technology allows for dynamism in interaction with local intangible cultural heritage. The radio program and involvement of the elderly are essential to amplify interaction with local culture and heritage. Community members confirm “the program enables us to abstract the good things and included them in the modern culture so it becomes part and parcel of our existence”.

Elder people comment that the radio program “makes them feel included, part of the community, and part of the modern world”. They testify that the radio provides a unique and complementary platform to be able to share the rich knowledge that they contain. The radio makes them feel included in education, and modern culture, and helps to overcome stigma
as unschooled.

The radio program is such a success, that the young people copied it and organized their own committee also. They facilitate a program that brings to the front many controversial subjects. Elderly people equally contribute to that program.

Conclusion

Community Radio is like a cloud that rains information over the community. It is a culturally accepted way of showering information over the community, especially when it is possible for the community to participate in the program via SMS. There is a specific and important area of involvement for the elderly in their customary role as heritors of intangible cultural heritage. In Macha their involvement is recognized and valued, and amplified by using ICT.

There is much room for research reviewing the effects of cultural specific social constructions like technologies, literacy and languages, and research methodologies themselves, in light of different cultural realities. Such studies are much opportune now internet and travel connects societies at an ever-increasing pace. New insights will enhance conceptualization of interactions, also through assessment of the fast growing transcribable multimedia repository of electronic data like these kind of radio programs by focus groups like participation of elderly in community radio station.

References


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