

Centre for Media and  
Transitional Societies

Carleton-led research project on radio in Africa releases findings at Johannesburg event  
Radio, Convergence and Development in Africa researchers present at Radio Days conference  
hosted by Wits Radio Academy in Johannesburg

**Johannesburg, South Africa** – The findings of a major research program called Radio, Convergence and Development in Africa (RCDA) are being released this week at the Joburg Radio Days conference hosted by the Wits Radio Academy.

Carleton University's Centre for Media and Transitional Societies (CMTS), in collaboration with Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), established the research program to examine the impact of convergence between traditional radio and new information and communications technologies (ICTs) in sub-Saharan Africa.

The project is led by Prof. Allan Thompson from Carleton's School of Journalism and Communication and colleague Prof. Josh Greenberg is one of the project mentors. Heather Gilberds, a PhD student in Carleton's Communications program, is the project's research associate.

Allan, Heather and project mentor Mary Myers (a U.K.-based media consultant) are unveiling the project's findings at the Joburg Radio Days conference in a presentation today. Project researchers are presenting their findings during various panels throughout the week. Radio Days is an annual conference hosted by the Wits Radio Academy at the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg. This year's event - held July 27-29 - explored whether radio is a medium in the twilight of its life, or one that is able to reinvent itself for a converged environment.

When it comes to media in Africa, radio remains the dominant mass medium but other information and communications technologies are growing exponentially and complementing traditional radio.

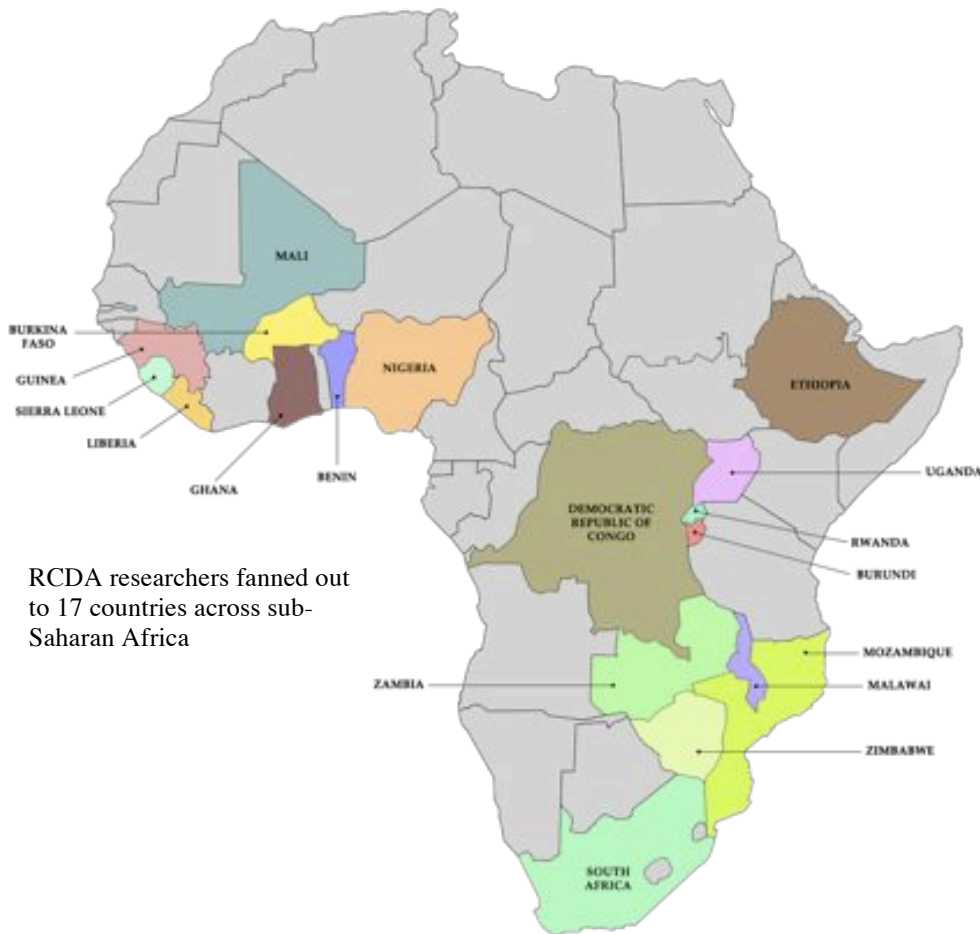
Researchers fanned out to 17 countries - from Burkina Faso to Zimbabwe - and covered many different technologies, including Freedom Fone, Frontline SMS, mobile phones, e-mail and Internet, digital editing and production and of course old-fashioned hertzian radio transmission.

The focus of the RCDA project has been to support African researchers and research organizations to produce rigorous and analytical social science research findings on how the purposes and functions of traditional radio in Africa are influenced by new ICTs.



The overall objective of the project was to build a body of research evidence on radio and its integration with various other communications technologies in order to understand the social, economic, political and policy issues that are relevant indicators and proxies for development in Africa. But a key project aim was also to establish and foster a network of African researchers in this field and to not only disseminate their research findings, but to promote further research in this area.

The starting point for the research by 16 teams was the assumption that radio – especially when it is local, independent and participatory – can be a positive force for development. From there, the point was to ground-check the phenomenon of the convergence of traditional broadcast radio with newer ICTs – particularly mobile phones and the internet – and to ask ‘what does convergence mean on the ground?: Is it emerging as a force for development in Africa?’



For the various research teams this meant different things: for some it meant looking at whether rural African women equipped with mobiles are better able to participate in the development process, for others it entailed looking at diasporic populations and the extent to which convergence affects their engagement in the politics and development of their home countries; for still others it entailed asking questions about the quality of radio production of a developmental nature when new ICT tools are used and whether or not radio stations are able to tell better stories with enhanced interactivity. These are just a few of the themes covered by the 16 teams.

From the findings of all these research projects several overall patterns emerge clearly: First, radio and other ICTs are indeed converging and merging at an ever-increasing rate, all over Africa – and beyond. Mobile phones, especially, are playing a critical role in the daily experiences of Africans today and can even play life-saving roles as, for instance Wallace Chuma found in his research when he looked at the xenophobic and election-related violence in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Various teams found that most radio stations on the continent have embraced computers and digital editing to some degree and even the smallest rural stations in the poorest and more remote areas of, for example, Sierra Leone or the D.R. Congo, will now have talk-shows incorporating listener's phone calls on a regular basis.

Second, where radio stations have embraced new technologies there are signs that they are offering an enhanced service to their listeners that contributes directly to better outcomes in terms of health, livelihoods and other developmental challenges. For instance, in Northern Uganda, one of the team's found that by adding automatic SMS texting to radio campaigns about



HIV/AIDS prevention, more of the audience was prompted to come forward for counselling and testing than they did as a result of the radio campaign alone. In Ghana, Paschal Atengdem found that there was potential for better targeted agricultural advice for rural radio audiences with the addition of a technology called Freedom Fone, which allows farmers to use their mobile phones to call in and hear programs they missed earlier.

However, the convergence process is happening slowly and is still subject to the

RCDA grant recipients and mentors met in Kampala in December, 2010

well-documented digital divide. For instance, in Burkina Faso and Benin only 8 per cent of radio stations stream their audio content on the internet. We can contrast that with the vastly better equipped country of South Africa, but even here, as Last Moyo's team found, the old disparities governed by geography, income and gender still prevail and affect access to ICTs and disproportionately to access to radio. The urban and commercial radio stations – normally the richer ones - are tending to embrace the internet and other convergent technologies much more than the poorer rural and community-type stations – which therefore reinforces the disparities of access for rural populations and minority language-users.

Clearly the potential for participatory radio programming is greatly enhanced by the spread of mobile phones. For instance, in Northern Ghana a third of the population sampled who had ever called in to a radio station claimed to have called in to ask a question or to seek new knowledge, which indicates the potential power of participatory radio for development. But, again, our research teams show that cost is still a great obstacle for many – especially for women and for rural people. In Northern Ghana one of our teams found that barriers to participation were much more profound than just access: women and girls with low educational levels were much less likely to call in to a radio station than men and boys of a similar income and educational level, even though they said they had the means to do so. This points to serious gendered self-confidence issues.

Another ‘reality check’ is that convergence will not necessarily be the magic wand which will increase audiences, because of significant problems related to standards of journalism. Looking at evidence from Nestor Nkurunziza’s Great Lakes diaspora study, despite having relatively easy access to a range of radio stations from their home countries that have now become available via the web, Rwandans, Burundians and Congolese in Belgium and Canada still tend to turn to international broadcasters like RFI, BBC and VOA for news about their home region because these are deemed more ‘reliable’.

In Zimbabwe and South Africa Moyo’s team also found that radio stations were unable to exploit the full potential of new media to enhance coverage of local news, not for want of the technological tools, but more often because they were understaffed and operated on shoe-string budgets. Furthermore, there is often a lack of institutional support within newsrooms for integration of new technologies in terms of newsgathering, such that innovative uses of new technologies by journalists are often limited to only a few isolated individuals.

Newer technologies such as mobile phones and Frontline SMS may be a tool for involving more women in participating in or benefiting from radio programmes of an educational or developmental nature. But – as was found in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – there are very few radio programmes offering attractive or relevant programming to women in the first place. Thus, the solution is clearly not a technological one but a matter of old-fashioned gender-sensitive journalism training and incentives for broadcasters to address the information and educational needs of rural women and girls.

In conclusion, convergence between traditional radio broadcasting and new technologies is certainly a reality in Africa and, in many places its potentials are beginning to be realised. However, the benefits in terms of development gains are yet to be clearly and conclusively demonstrated.

The RCDA project team will look for every opportunity to disseminate the results of the research program. In the proposal call itself, applicants were encouraged to include in their submissions a proposed strategy for the dissemination of results. Indeed, some projects made dissemination a cornerstone of their work.

A number of grant recipients took part in an RCDA panel at the 2011 conference of the International Association of Media and Communications Research (IAMCR) held in Istanbul. In addition to the RCDA panel, several grant recipients made separate presentations.

RCDA grant recipients were also encouraged to submit a paper to be considered for publication in an upcoming guest-edited issue of Nokoko, a peer-reviewed, online journal published by the Institute of African Studies at Carleton University. Nokoko is an open-access journal promoting dialogue, discourse and debate on Pan-Africanism, Africa, and Africana.

Grant recipients continue to receive support from the RCDA team and project mentors in their efforts to seek out other opportunities to disseminate their research findings in academic fora, conferences and in academic journals. Rather than producing a conventional print publication, the RCDA has opted to produce a comprehensive online final report on all aspects of the project to be produced in the form of an interactive PDF, which will feature links to video testimonials, photo galleries, audio recordings and all relevant project documentation. Copies of each of the individual research reports will also be available on the website of the Centre for Media and Transitional Societies - [www.cmts-cmst.org](http://www.cmts-cmst.org).

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