

Exploring the role of citizen journalism in slum improvement: the case of ‘Voice of Kibera’

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Received: 15 October 2012 / Accepted: 7 February 2013
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Abstract This paper explores the role of citizen journalism in the improvement of slums through the Voice of Kibera (VoK) case study. To meet the research objectives, both qualitative and quantitative methods are applied. The study used content analysis, a survey and interview techniques. It concluded that citizen journalism in the VoK uses a participatory, bottom-up approach, with the residents taking a lead role in the production and consumption of news, and that it plays its part in improving the lives of people in Kibera, contributing to governance and processes of democracy. The core development values of participation and empowerment are central to this study, which examines how these values are being impacted on by information technology interventions in the communications area. The research also concludes that citizen journalism may be sustainable if it is financed, promoted, resourced with professional journalists, equipped with new technologies and citizens continue to participate. Lack of cooperation from the audience, finance both for the running of the project, salary and technical problems were cited as the major challenges of citizen journalism.

Keywords Slum · Citizen journalism · Sustainability · New media and technologies

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1 Introduction

Most developing countries have been troubled with slum problems. According to Lee (2010), the number of slum dwellers is increasing worldwide, and the slum dwellers are faced with problems such as poverty, criminality, insecurity, disease, unemployment and illiteracy that hold back the development of slums. Kibera, on the northern edge of Nairobi [5 km (3.1 miles) from the its centre], is the largest slum in Nairobi, and the second largest urban slum in Africa. The 2009 Kenyan Population and Housing Census of Kenya Report puts Kibera’s population at approximately one million, while various reports and studies estimate it to be between one or two million people (Perkins 2010). It is divided into a number of villages, including Kianda, Soweto East, Gatwekera, Kisumu Ndogo, Lindi, Laini Saba, Siranga, Makina and Mashimoni.

Although Kibera has been less than visible in the media, mapping projects such as the Map Kibera that counter that trend have been designed by the community and paved the way for similar projects (Perkins 2010).

Marshall McLuhan, founder of many modern conceptions around media and communications, has suggested that we get to understand the heart of things that we do or make through knowing their impacts on others. The ‘media’, whether they be technologies, language or artifacts, have impacts that are beyond their explicit being (Marchand 1998). Touraine (2000) makes the more explicit observation that ‘all forms of social communication produce change’. The Project’s start up documents show that the Voice of Kibera (VoK) Project,¹ the focus of this

¹ Voice of Kibera is a citizen reporting project based in Kibera, Nairobi. The project is an initiative of Map Kibera and uses the Ushahidi platform to aggregate and map reports.