Chapter 6
Innovative Use of ICT in Namibia for Nationhood: Special Emphasis on *The Namibian* Newspaper

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ABSTRACT

Namibia was under colonizing and apartheid rule for more than a century. In 1990, the country declared its independence, and since that time, great strides have been made in linking its rural communities into a national communications grid that was previously inaccessible to them, often leapfrogging traditional landline telephone technologies with universal cellphone service. In addition, one newspaper, The Namibian, has been innovatively using newer communications technologies to maintain its historic role of nation-building. This study explores the use of SMS via cellphone and a traditional national newspaper in creating a sense of national identity that transcends geographic distances and a legacy of economic/political barriers. The cell phone messages made it possible for the rural communities who have been left out of discussion relating to issues of development to be included. Like the old slogan, "information is power," this chapter illustrates that the lives of some rural area dwellers have improved as a result of a technological gadget, the mobile phone.

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INTRODUCTION

In most of the developing world, where colonial footprints still linger, the uneven distribution and access to infrastructure has led to an unequal participation in national conversations. The uses of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are making a meaningful impact on everyday lives, even in nations without rural technological infrastructures. ICTs are mitigating the gap between urban and rural population, which are often stratified and allow for both to inform and affect national governance.

Namibia offers an instructive example of how the use of an "everyday" ICT helps empower rural populations. This chapter examines the ways in which ICTs have enabled a national newspaper to be more successful in empowering rural populations. For 25 years, *The Namibian* has been the liberal voice of Namibia. Today its use of Short Message Service (SMS) from readers, both urban and rural, gives them voice in developing nationhood in Namibia. *The Namibian*'s use of SMS exemplifies the effective use of ICTs to allow local, rural populations to participate in larger collective units (Eisenstein, 1983), ensuring that their interests, concerns and propositions are given a voice.

Historically, newspapers have played a vital role in the development of the modern nation. In fact, as Finnegan (1988) observes, many of the economic, social, religious, political characteristics of the modern world are built on the foundation provided by print. One important impact of the technology of the printing press was the rise of national literatures, printed in the local language, which were a vital force in the development of nation states (Eisenstein, 1983). In developing countries such as Namibia, however, newspapers largely remained under the control of colonial powers and were used as instruments of colonialism rather than for nascent nationalism. Furthermore, in countries with cultures strongly grounded in the oral and tribal ways of knowing, the medium of print tended to destroy the existing sense of community and social integration (Ong, 1982). The advance of ICTs changed both these factors dramatically. In the case of Namibia, ICTs allowed a geographically dispersed people to have a voice in national issues through letters to the editor of *The Namibian* newspaper; as well as a medium that drew people together.

While SMS generally serves to connect dyads and groups of friends, they also can, due to the affordability, unite people geographically removed from each other by merging geographical infrastructures and technology (Ito & Okabe, 2005). When SMS is used in conjunction with a more traditional print medium like a newspaper, it becomes an ICT that provides a vital link to people who would otherwise be disenfranchised from having a voice in nation building.

The Infrastructure, Technology and Nationhood in Namibia

A historical context is necessary to understanding the current role played by SMS in nation building in Namibia today. Before achieving Independence in 1990, the majority of Namibians were not only unable to participate in the national dialogue, but also had limited options for receiving daily national news, particularly, for the people in rural areas. This happened due to a series of historical events. For example, the policies and laws enacted by colonial Germany and the apartheid laws of South Africa after the First World War, had irrevocable effects on the country and ensured that Namibia was segmented as a means of control. Segmentation worked hand-in-hand with exclusion from the technological infrastructure to create a population that was too dispersed and isolated to unite in nationalism. Consequently, Namibia today is a sparsely populated country with a population of 2.2 million people.

As can be seen in Table 1, the majority of the population resides in rural areas. Additionally, the ethnic groupings and population patterns continue