Chapter 9
Innovative Use of ICT in Namibia for Nationhood:
Special Emphasis on *The Namibian* Newspaper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 cell phone service. In addition, one newspaper, The Namibian, has been innovatively using newer communications technologies to maintain its historic role of nation-building. This chapter showcases how SMS via cell phone and a traditional national newspaper has 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. Although the study unveiled 11% of their participation as opposed to 30% of the rural populace, this is a step forward bearing in mind that the rural areas have a history of being

passively involved in everything that is being done. They have been, and continue to some great extent to be content to receive decisions made for them by outsiders including political leaders. Mobile phones have come as empowerment for them. Like the old slogan, "information is power," this chapter illustrates that the lives of some rural area dwellers have improved a result of a technological gadget, the mobile phone.

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 paper 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.

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