

Analysing a Rural Community's Reception of ICT in Ghana

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INTRODUCTION

The *Fiankoma Project* was a development awareness (DA) initiative run by the Video Educational Trust aiming to link the small rural community of Fiankoma (Ghana) with people and institutions in Brighton UK through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). People in both settings produced accounts of their lives using digital media that were turned into a Web site for cultural exchange and development education. A parallel research project *Understandings of education in an African village: The impact of information and communication technologies*¹ studied the effects of the intervention on the Ghanaian community, seeking to gain the perspective of rural Africans on ICT and development and particularly education. Ethnographic and participatory methods enabled the research to achieve an unusual perspective on these issues (Thomas & Ahmed, 2004; Chambers, 2003).

The research drew on data collected by Fiankoma Project workers as well as the mostly Ghanaian researchers in the *Understandings* team. "Data chains" were used to make more explicit the moves from field experience to textual outcomes. Visual material often formed the first link in the chain, prompting reflection on the issues of interest and a stimulus for dialogue in the shape of informal interviews. The chain was continued by discussions between insider and outsider researchers of the previous links, interpreting existing data, and generating narratives derived from researchers' experience and understandings of the context. This linked with other data to guide further lines of inquiry (see Pryor & Ampiah, 2004 for a full methodological discussion).

Fuller accounts focusing on educational issues in Ghana are published elsewhere (Pryor & Ampiah, 2003; Pryor, 2005, forthcoming). This article discusses ICT and development issues, reporting on attitudes before the intervention, describing the approach to using digital media and its effect on attitudes towards community development. This is analysed and placed within an emergent framework for considering how ICT use might impact beneficially on rural people in disadvantaged contexts.

BACKGROUND

Before intervention from the Fiankoma project, villagers had little experience of electronic media, but paradoxically these were having a profound effect. Inexperience was due to the remoteness of the village and its lack of electricity, in itself a point of contention. Some months previously the village elders had proclaimed a levy to bring electricity to village. Any sum of money is difficult to find in rural Africa, but the levy appeared to be well within people's capacity to pay. The researchers conducted a ranking exercise, which confirmed that most people in the village considered electricity to be the one thing that would most improve their lives and bring economic benefits. Nonetheless, many had refused to pay. Interview data suggested that reluctance to pay was due not to poverty, but because of the weak social fabric of the village. Fiankoma is not a community to which its occupants owe allegiance, but a settler community. People live there because from the 1930s onwards, they or their parents left their homes to carve out farms in the forest. Despite many years residence, people felt more connected to their places of origin. Their attitude towards the electricity fund was reflected in their reluctance to contribute to anything locally—including the schools that their children attended. Recent work suggests that this situation is common in Ghana and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa with rural-rural migration leading to less stable populations than has been thought the case (Litchfield & Waddington, 2003).

Villagers' most frequent encounter with electronic media was radio mainly used for music. FM reception was poor and AM output did not use the local language. This also confined TV viewing mainly to infrequent Akan language soap operas and soccer matches. In a village of some hundred households up to five TV sets were in use at any one time, run from car batteries that had to go by taxi to be recharged. Nonetheless, everyone watched TV occasionally, although few had any power over what and when. A traveling video showing Nigerian action-packed blockbusters, high on violence especially towards women, played to quite large audiences. During the project the village elders banned these shows, which were seen as corrupting the young, an action validated by

Leach, Fiscian, Kadzamira, Lemani, and Machankanja (2003) who report boys' claims elsewhere in Ghana that sexual molestation of girls took place "to practice things in films" (p. 37).

The village had no telephone, few people had used one, though they knew about them from television, and it was placed very low in the ranking exercise. Computers were unfamiliar, as they did not feature in televised dramas. Although the senior secondary school syllabus includes some "hands on" experience, the few students who attended reported that this had failed to materialize. Very few had heard of the Internet.

Attitudes and understandings are ultimately more important than hardware and infrastructure issues (Leonard & Dorsey, 1996). Villagers' reactions to the project's work yielded important insights about their image of ICT. It had been anticipated that understanding the purpose of the project and the notion of cultural exchange would be problematic, so much effort went into explanations. Nevertheless two misconceptions surfaced.

The first, that the project was to provide development aid, occurred throughout the fieldnotes and was dominant in interviews. Development and its outcomes are familiar concrete ideas, whereas cultural exchange is abstract and unfamiliar. Moreover the very idea of cultural exchange presupposes experiences of a cultural "other," which is difficult to grasp for people whose experience of other cultures is hazy. "*Obruni*" (strangers, white people) might be benevolent, but that they wished to learn from villagers was incomprehensible. Recognising a power differential between the two parties, where difference in wealth was a key distinguishing feature, good intentions could only be assured by some material benefit accruing from the exchange (Nelson & Wright, 1995).

Second, screenings of work in progress provoked worry about how the images might be used. Some felt that the "*Obruni* wanted to make a mockery of the inhabitants of the village."² Another view of malign intent, the idea from animist religion that *Obruni* would carry away people's spirits, may seem remote from the realities of modern technology, but in some respects it is close to the truth. The tourist gaze does not flatter developing countries, and affords no control to the subjects (Linnekin & Poyer, 1990). Images are created and removed from sight with no "come back." The "spirits" can be edited and used without reference to those portrayed. This "régime of representation" stereotypes the subjects, "classifies them according to a norm and constructs the excluded as 'other'" (Hall, 1999, p. 259). In global news media Africa is largely absent but when covered is usually seen negatively (Hawk, 1992) and Africans' poverty is explained "with reference to their own cultural lack" (Stevenson, 1999, p. 138). The media's construction of Africa func-

tions to perpetuate feelings of Western superiority and provides legitimisation for existing relations of dominance (Borgartz, 2002). Until recently this issue only surfaced for Africans who migrated to the North. However, with the reach of media extended to remote villages, people are exposed to a romanticised picture of global culture, yet do not see their own realities reflected.

In summary, although people were passive consumers of electronic media on a very small scale, these were affecting their cultural attitudes. Television and video gave a window into a more sophisticated and attractive urban world, mostly the cities of West Africa (cf., Lewin, 2000; Hall, 1998). ICT development was at best irrelevant for most people. At worst it reinforced the divide between them and the urban elite.

Faced with these problems, the methods used by the Fiankoma Project are significant. A document was produced, spelling out the approach in the form of 12 rules (see www.fiankoma.org). The Fiankoma Method recognises that technology is less important than knowing what to do with it and conceptualises this in terms of enabling people to publish their own information and represent their own lives. The Web site was designed with its audience in mind, a process facilitated by having actual partners. A wide range of media, especially low tech, such as drawings and scrapbooks, enabled more people to participate actively. As far as possible, editorial responsibility was given to groups of people to help them explore cultural commonalities and differences. They were encouraged to respond to each other's contributions and find equivalence, so simple reproducible activities were favored. Humor and media conventions worked well and provided a safe context in which to look at problematic issues. Using ICT in development awareness required allocating time for making materials, viewing work from the other community and reflective discussion. The Web site was seen as something to be used rather than just created and the strategy for use included opportunities such as guest books, public events, and competitions.

EFFECT OF THE INTERVENTION ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

When the Fiankoma project Web site was running, researchers returned to the village to collect more data and a group of villagers was taken to the city and introduced to computers. The session ended with browsing the Internet, especially the Fiankoma Web site.

Reactions were very positive, especially when people saw their village and themselves on the computer screen. The experience was intended to provoke thought about how computer technology might impact on their lives in

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