Mobile reporting as a child abuse detection tool

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The concept of mobile reporting, combined with community reporting is changing the way we perceive previously ignored local issues. While they hardly make it into mainstream media, they are now flooding into the cyberspace and the blogosphere thanks to the Web and the mobile phone technologies. The power of the mobile phone in the context of community reporting approach resides in its simplicity, both through the ordinary tools used by reporters – the phones which almost everyone knows or owns by now – and through the reporters themselves, who are members of the community being reported about. In this presentation, I want to highlight how one issue – child abuse – is being 'naturally' captured and documented by mobile reporters following a training offered by Voices of Africa Media Foundation in various Africa countries. The capturing is 'natural' in the sense that, viewed locally, the abuse is tolerated, justified, or even approved by communities, who do not perceive them as abuse. The idea is to draw the attention of political leaders and decision makers, who mostly rely on mainstream media, the ones known for neglecting non-profit generating local issues. In this paper, I want to deal with three main points. In the first place, I will conceptualise mobile reporting combined with community reporting in the light of existing theories on culture convergence and participatory media. Secondly, I will focus on one case, child abuse, which our reporters have covered spontaneously. In the end, I will discuss the potential impact of this way of approaching local news on local leadership and politics.

First, let me explain who 'We' are. We are Voices of Africa Media Foundation, a charity based in Haarlem, in the Netherlands. We aim to empower local journalists and any other talented young men and women willing to explore the field of journalism and new media. The Foundation started in 2006 but the training project started in 2007 and has so far covered six countries: Ghana, Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa. A kick-off training ended two days ago in Kampala, Uganda, where 4 reporters will be trained in the coming six months. The training comprises three aspects: a face-to-face kick-off workshop by myself, or any of our regional coach; training manuals both in the form of magazine and DVD; and online coaching. The latter aspect consists in viewing reports made and uploaded by the trainees, and making comments via e-mail. Myself

and other professional Dutch journalists working for renowned organisations in The Netherlands provide the comments.

The most interesting part is the approach we have decided to follow: mobile community reporting. I understand mobile reporting as gathering audiovidual news materials, that is images, interviews, and other audio material, using the mobile phone, on the one hand, and, on the other, editing these materials into a relatively short report suitable for Web publication. Combined with community reporting, this concept implies that the local community becomes the central factor in the entire process: the reporter is a member of the community, speaks its language or dialects, knows its issues, in short, knows the community and is known by the community; the community constitutes the framework in which the reporter operates. This means two things: that the topics are relevant to the community, and that the community's views are given priority. In other words, mobile community reporting is an approach to journalism whereby local news is covered by locals, from a local perspective, and using tools [phones] that are not intimidating to the locals.

The familiarity with the technology and the devices used is crucial in this process. This is what French philosopher Jacques Derrida once said about what I call the Big Camera: 'When the process of recording begins, I am inhibited, paralyzed, arrested, I don't "get anywhere" [*je "fais du sur-place*] and I don't think, I don't speak in the way I do when I'm not in this situation'.[1]Before him, another philosopher, Roland Barthes, had made a similar remark with regard to photo cameras. He had remarked that whenever he knew that the camera objective was aimed at him, whenever he felt that he was being photographed, he would fabricate another body for himself, he metamorphose'.[2] For him, the best photograph is the one that is made without the knowledge of the photographed subject, which many professional photographs would largely agree about.

What any journalist is looking for, is spontaneous and genuine views from his sources. The question then would be: If Derrida and Barthes, two of the greatest thinkers of the last centuries, were destabilized by the video or photo camera, what about local villagers in a remote Africa village? In other words, shall we expect spontaneous, unstaged images and views with a Big Camera? What if that camera is held by a stranger to the community, who does not even speak your language, let alone understanding your culture and daily preoccupations. All these elements, among many others, are among the key characteristics of

mainstream media. The result is that before appearing before the 'stranger' and his translators, the villager will first put on his best cloths, clean the courtyard of any thing he does not want the stranger to film, watch his mouth while answering. I am not mentioning here the crowd of people who will be surrounding the reporter of positioning themselves behind the interviewee to get a chance to be filmed as well. These factors are disturbing and turns the report into an artificial end-product.

The novelty that mobile community reporting has brought, is that the attitude of both the interviewee and the reporter will remain natural. Nothing will be hidden, no translator will be needed, no crowd will hinder the process, because both the reporter and his tool are known to the community. The result is that issues that were previously invisible in mainstream news receive a place.

One question that is likely to rise with regard to this approach is the following: if the community serves as the reporting framework, both as the subject and the source, how will viewers have insights from experts, and government officials? This question could be answered in two ways: firstly, mobile community reporting does not exclude relevant sources from outside the community. The regional veterinary is a relevant source for a reporter covering a story on a strange disease decimating cattle in the area. However, it is not an indispensable source. It is not even the first source. The first source should be the community members, who would perhaps blame the spirits of the deceased members of the community, but who will allow the reporter to bring out both the issue and the impact of it. Whatever the veterinary says will make sense if one knows what the matter is in the eyes of the locals. Secondly, it could be said that even without the official or expert insight, the story will still be a story that could be complemented at a later stage, in a series of reports on the topic. The Web allows to link all these related topics, allowing any interested viewer to discover all the aspects of the story.

Another question could be about the objectivity of reports, since reporters are already members of the community they report about. If any tribal conflict erupts, for instance, will, the reporter be neutral and let the two sides express their views? That question is a hot one for mainstream journalists as well. Is objective reporting possible at all? In his book *Media, Mission and Morality*, journalism scholar John Merrill answers that

A report may be truthful but not objective. It is always incomplete, although its

facts may be accurate. Even the story of a speech that includes every word the speaker says is non-objective in its incompleteness. Gestures, facial expressions, thoughts not spoken, tongue-in-cheek statements, and the like are all part of the "story of the speech" and go unreported.[3]

Other media scholars add that many other factors, including commercial interests prevent objectivity in professional journalism. They also point out that the fact of choosing an approach, one interviewee rather than the other, leads to a story that would have been different if different sources had been used.[4] Discussing this issue from a philosophical point of view, Derrida stresses that journalists can never escape ethnocentrism:

In the news, "actuality" is spontaneously ethnocentric. One excludes the foreigner, at times inside the country, quite apart from any nationalist passion, doctrine, or declaration, and even when this news [*ces "actualités"*] speaks of "human rights". Some journalists make laudable efforts to escape this law, but, by definition, it can't be done enough, and in the final analysis it is not up to the professional journalists.[5]

Writing about *The Power of News*, Michael Schudson, another media scholar, also remarks that ethnocentrism is the most ordinary thing in journalism: 'Of course a woman reporter is more likely than a man, other things being equal, to see rape as a newsworthy issue', he wrote.[6] One could then add that it is more likely that a reporter affected by famine will most likely make a report about famine; that a reporter whose brother or sister is HIV-positive, will make reports denouncing discrimination against HIV patients.

In my view, ethnocentrism is even the motor of mobile community reporting. In this respect, one trainee made a report in his village near Arusha, Tanzania, showing a how wild pigs and monkeys had destroyed maze plantations. The reporter showed villagers who mounted guards in the farms to protect chase away the pigs. This report was most likely possible because the reporter too was affected. Perhaps the farm was his father's. No official or expert is interviewed, yet it's an interesting story. Another reporter from Douala, Cameroon, made a report on how a factory polluted an entire area with chlorine, which caused deaths among villagers, whom he interviewed. Most likely a friend of relative of his was suffering from this pollution as well.

For the purpose of this paper, I want to focus on reports that dealt with children. I want to argue that the aspects I mentioned above – community as framework and source, and familiarity with the reporters and their tools – helped to a lot in getting these reports done and uploaded. A reporter from the Mara Region in Northern Tanzania filed a story in late August 2010 with the title: 'Tanzania: Kids in hard labour during school time'.[7] In this story, Mugini shows children in school uniforms, carrying firewood. He interviewed a few of them who said that the firewood was meant for their teachers' private use. The kids openly told the reporter, in Swahili, that the work was hard and unpleasant. Let's suppose that the report had been done by the Tanzania government-owned TV station. The crew would be easily detected as intruders in the village. The news of their presence and their big cameras would spread, and the crowd, including the teachers and the parents, would pour into the village central square to discover those strangers and their intentions. The kids would no longer have a chance to voice their views, since their teachers' presence would prevent them from doing so.

Another story came in from a reporter in Tamale, northern Ghana, in late June 2010, under the title 'Tamale kids between labour and football'.[8] Part of the story shows the kids weeding. The interviewed child, 8 years, said that the parents were home, while the school going kid was working for money. Three months before, another reporter from Ghana had filed a story under the title 'Accra: Child labour persists despite laws'[9], in which a similar story was told. That same month, March 2010, another story came from Accra under the title: 'Roadside selling keeps kids away from school'.[10] There are many stories of this sort. What they have in common is that they were all made spontaneously, that is, the reporters themselves decided to make reports on that topic. I should mention that the training project has no editorial line that determines which topics should be covered. The sole editorial rule is that the topic should be relevant to the community and reflect the local perspective. Whether it is about the economic, or social situation or about health or agriculture, is not an issue.

[SHOW FILM: see how spontaneous the kids are in answering questions and try to put, in your mind, a stranger, carrying and strange device in his hand, in front of these kids].

The last point I want to handle is about the impact of this approach to local leadership and politics. Some would argue that the reports are not likely to be viewed even in the capitals because of poor Internet connectivity. I would say that in three years of training and with only about 40 people trained in 6 countries, the impact on local

politics and leadership could not yet easily be perceived. However, things are changing very quickly both on the side of the phone industry, as this latest release of do-it-all Nokia, with high definition camera shows, and within local communities, where participatory media are becoming more and more popular. In the near future, I would say, when one single country has let's say 1,000 mobile community reporters, and when every citizen, regardless his location and status has access to and is interested in social networking, then this time, democracy, human rights, and leadership in general, will have reached a new level. Africa will have entered a new era, in which the citizen will cease to be an passive consumer of the filtered news made from the capital, to become an active maker of reports that are accessible all over the world. Our task is to make sure that those reports make sense and reflects local realities on the basis of which leaders, development workers and other policy makers can plan their actions. I would conclude with Manuel Castells that the network society is already there but needs to be adjusted to local cultural, historical, and infrastructural situations.[11] In our opinion, mobile community reporting is one excellent way to adjust that network society and new-media-based journalism to local communities in Africa.

Biographic note:

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[1] Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television. Filmed Interviews*, (Cambridge: Polity, [1993] 2002), p.71

[2] Roland Barthes, *La chamber claire: Note sur la photographie*, (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 1980), pp.24-27

[3] John Merrill, *Media, Mission and Morality: A Scholarly Milestone Essay in Mass Communication. Volume I,* (Spokane: Marquette Books, 2006), p.27

[4] Edward Herman and Robert McChesney, The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism,(London: Cassell, 1997),pp.192-193

[5] Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, p.4

[6] Michael Schudson, *The Power of News,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 8

[7] Jacob Mugini, 'Tanzania: Kids in hard labour during school time', in *VoicesofAfrica.com*, http://voicesofafrica.africanews.com/site/Tanzania_Kids_in_hard_labour_during_school_time/list_messages/34361 (Accessed 7 December 2010).

[8] Psalm Mark Quao, 'Tamale kids between labour and football', in *VoicesofAfrica.com*, http://voicesofafrica.africanews.com/site/Tamale_kids_between_labour_and_football/list_messages/33122 (Accessed 7 December 2010).

[9] Kester Aburam Korankye, 'Accra: Child labour persists despite laws', in *VoicesofAfrica.com*, http://voicesofafrica.africanews.com/site/Accra_Child_labour_persists_despite_laws/list_messages/30340 (Accessed 7 December 2010)

[10] Francisca Nuvuor, 'Roadside selling keeps kids away from school', *in VoicesofAfrica.com*, http://voicesofafrica.africanews.com/site/Roadside_selling_keeps_kids_away_from_school/list_messages/30910 (Accessed 7 December 2010)

[11] Manuel Castells, 'The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy', in Castells, Manuel and Gustave Cardoso (Eds.), *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy*, (Washington D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2006: 3-21), p.6