

TECHNOLOGISING THE VILLAGE AGORA: HOW TELE-CENTRES SET UP IN RURAL AREAS INSERT THE GLOBAL IN THE LOCAL

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This article is based on a study conducted against the backdrop of ongoing national ICT policy formulation in Zimbabwe. One point of consensus in the national debate captured in the E-readiness Report (2005) was the all too evident urban/rural digital divide across all sectors of the economy ranging from Education, Agriculture, Commerce, Health etc. The fact that country statistics for most countries in Africa show the rural populations as greater than urban populations logically justifies prioritizing the concerns of the rural population in any pro-people policy. However, most debates on the digital divide articulate the divide in terms of levels of communications infrastructure and tele-density differentials between rural and urban areas or between developing countries and the developed world. Questions of how these new technologies tend to reconfigure communities across new spatio-temporal boundaries, resulting in new forms of presences and absences, inclusions and exclusions call for more rigorous action research of many different ICT initiatives already on the ground in many parts of Africa. Drawing empirical evidence from the work of the Open Knowledge Network's ICT project in Zimbabwe this paper draws lessons with policy implications for dealing with the digital divide between the rural and urban areas within developing countries in terms of the nature and volume of content, language and direction of information flow.

Keywords: digital divide, e-readiness, glocalisation, ICT, intermediaries, local language, Openknowledge Network, telecentres, Zimbabwe

While to say the true word is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone. Consequently, no one can say a true word

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alone – nor can she say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. (Freire, 1996, p. 69)

Zimbabwe has been witness to few but largely uncoordinated efforts to bring the benefits of the digital revolution to formerly unconnected rural communities. Most of these efforts were Civil Society Organisation (CSO) driven initiatives in different parts of the country. It was not by accident that most of these initiatives begin at about the same time from the late 1990s, experience growth spurts around 2003 and plateau between 2004 and 2006 before they begin a downward turn courtesy of the World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) process. Some notable projects that came up during this period included the Mulonga.com project established in the Zambezi valley along the northern border of Zimbabwe to focus on strengthening the culture and language of the Tonga people by giving them a web presence. The other ones were the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) and the Open Knowledge Network implemented by Southern Alliance For Indigenous Resources (SAFIRE) a local NGO specializing in livelihoods projects based on sustainable management and utilization of natural forest products. They work with rural based small-scale agrarian communities in various parts of the country but mainly in the southeastern parts of Manicaland province. The government on its part had also embarked on an ambitious project of establishing parliamentary constituency information kiosks across the breadth and length of the country. Market driven initiatives remained firmly based in urban centers where the markets for Internet services were viable.

This paper singles out the Open Knowledge Network (OKN) project cited above for a more detailed analysis mainly because of its rural focus. The OKN came to Zimbabwe in 2004 after having been piloted in other countries such as India, Kenya, Senegal ostensibly in a rhizomatic expansion of a network structure linking up community nodes in a horizontal communication loop across the South. The OKN experience in Zimbabwe could provide a microcosmic model of the challenges and pitfalls as well as opportunities associated with attempts at extending the benefits of Internet technology more widely to marginalized communities in rural settings. It points to some preliminary conclusions about possible trajectories a technologised village agora might take.

SOME THEORETICAL POSTULATES ABOUT THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

From Capitalism to Informationalism

In proclaiming the advent of the global village, information society theorists of the technological determinism school may have attributed to new information and communication

technologies (ICTs) more power to reconfigure the social world, yet have underestimated the shaping influence of human agency and ideology. The world's concern with widening and deepening global chasms bear clear testimony to the fact that the ICTs remain far from being ideologically innocent tools for unproblematic social, economic and cultural integration across space and time. Dirlik (2003, p.13) holds a less optimistic view of the globalising influence of the digital revolution and warns that:

The world may be reconfigured, but the reconfiguration takes place under the regime of capitalism which continues to reproduce under new circumstances, and in new forms, the inequalities built into its structuring of the world.

On a world scale the same North/South dichotomies which contemporary capitalism etched still endure and in different localities the rural poor remain excluded, marginalized on the fringes of the global village. In the information society, Castells (2000) theorizes, information rather than capital becomes the key factor of (knowledge) production and access to it and control of information networks defines the new contours of power relations in society. Communications technologies allow for the annihilation of space and act as purveyors of globalization; changes the relationship to space and time. And, while he explains that networks are not a new form of social organization, they have become a 'key feature of social morphology'. The role and function of place-based institutions like the nation state gets transformed in the face of new socio-political aggregations and disaggregations, new unities and fractures beyond the confines imposed by geography as people acquire new citizenships defined by categories of belonging other than the nation state. While capitalist accumulation and expansion globally posed serious threats to the finite resources in the biosphere, informationalism as a mode of production is characterised by predatory tendencies on weaker species of an equally limited pool of cultural diversity. Old bases of exploitation and marginalisation and erasure are replaced as whole communities lose more by incorporation than by exclusion.

Guadamuz (2005, p.13) argues for a conceptualization of the digital divide in terms of content more than anything else. He maintains that:

Even if the problem of access to the Internet was miraculously solved tomorrow and large sectors of the world's population were able to get online, some questions would still remain. What awaits the people of the developing world once they connect to the Internet? Is the content relevant to their needs? Who owns the content? And most importantly, will they be able to understand any of it?

To the above list of questions could be added yet other questions. What is the language of the Internet? Will they be permitted to talk back? There are still outstanding obstacles that

remain to be cleared beyond a concern with connectivity and making the hardware accessible. The cost of the advance of the network society is often calculated in terms of the number of what some critics have termed linguicide, the mass predation of languages and all the indigenous knowledge systems, and the diverse cultural experiences they represent. The fact that English and few other European languages dominate the internet bodes ill for cultural diversity in the information age. The problem of content is made worse by the predominance of English as the language of choice for content online. According to a study of online content conducted in 2000, more than 68% of all indexable documents were in English and yet only a tiny fraction of the world's population had attained sufficient levels of proficiency in English to be able to benefit from such content. Guadamuz, (2005, p.14). ICT projects that simplistically attempt to address the digital divide by uncritically introducing the internet to local communities have often disingenuously inserted the local into the global resulting in new forms of dependencies and new forms of passive consumerism and the disempowerment and alienation of recipient communities.

Trosow (2002, p.21) posits the view that theorizing the information age has followed two distinctively different trajectories. One school privileges an ontological and epistemological perspective of the post-industrial societal arrangements as a given and an unavoidable consequence of the advances in information and communication technology with no bearing at all with the historical past. The other school of thought argues in the tradition of the critical school and rejects the instrumental theory of technology in favor of the normative theory that views technology as reflective of other social, cultural, economic and political relations. Rather than privilege technology as an independent determinant of other social processes, it is seen as but one of several mutually dependent factors that influence social change. It also rejects the view of the information age as in sharp rupture with the industrial past. Commodification of knowledge is viewed as a reflection of the logic of capitalist relations and as an outgrowth of global restructuring of production with a free market fetishism. ICT projects reflect one or other of these conflicting theoretical pole positions in the manner in which they are structured to operate. The OKN (2004-2006) project in Zimbabwe is discussed here as a case in point of how ICT project configuration and implementation in Africa often bear some unmistakable traces and imprint of either or both of the above theoretical positions.

A Northern Solution in Search of a Southern Problem

The idea behind the OKN can be traced back to the G-8 Kyushu-Okinawa Summit in July 2000 which first launched the Digital Opportunity Taskforce (*dot.force*), a collaboration among government, international organizations, industry, and the non-profit sector, to examine concrete steps to integrate the various efforts to bridge the international digital

divide. It is instructive to note at the outset that from its inception the OKN perfectly fits into the old development template involving the North diagnosing the problem of the South, prescribing a suitable technology determined solution package and then exporting it to the South ready made. Of course, it was not before extensive research and consultation had been conducted in selected southern countries between 2000 and 2002. The problem was how to bridge the digital divide that separates the industrially backward and informationally poor Southern countries horizontally from each other and vertically from the industrialized and information rich North. In more specific terms, the problem was how to integrate the South into the emerging information society. ICT projects had to be designed to address different aspects of the digital divide. Some projects focused on increasing the diffusion and penetration of the technology itself particularly the Internet, by improving the 'last mile' connectivity network infrastructure. Other projects focused on helping Southern governments come up with ICT enabling policy frameworks. This has led some development commentators to raise the concern that technology is increasingly determining the solutions sought to development problems. It would appear Rozendal (2003) makes a clear distinction between a top-down and a participatory approach to ICT project formulation and implementation, which to a certain extent characterized the OKN project orientation. Such initiatives, Rozendal (2003, p.5) argues, make the assumption that:

a clearly defined problem and an organizational change require a result-orientated approach. For the design of the new organization, project management has to use universal rules and methods. These methods start by determining a clear objective and the design of abstract models of the future situation. Emphasis is laid on the output of the changing process. The process is mostly coordinated from the top, using centralized and highly formalized decision-making procedures.

In a founding document, *The Open Knowledge Network (OKN) a proposal for local content creation and exchange*, the OKN's architects, Armstrong, Cranston and Holmes (2002) stated its main purpose as that of promoting: 'both the creation and the exchange of local content as widely as possible across the South. Local content development is closely tied to human development, and the ultimate goal of the OKN proposal is the empowerment of local communities.'

The proposal viewed the OKN not as a fixed model, but a suggested approach that could respond in flexible ways to the different information needs of different southern communities. Recognising the diversity and richness of initiatives to collect and disseminate local content which already exist in many parts of the South, the proposal represents an attempt to 'join up the dots', in order to increase the capacity and impact of those efforts which are already in place. It is best thought of as a framework or dynamic to link and support information initiatives among poor and marginalized communities through shared standards

and values: local content, local people, local languages. It is important to note the top-down condescending logic of project design apparent in the way OKN came to be implemented in Zimbabwe as in other Southern countries. The project design was influenced by action research findings conducted elsewhere (India, Kenya, Senegal) where the OKN had been successfully implemented and was running. No prior research had been conducted on the Zimbabwean context. Instead, the baseline survey leading up to the development of the logical framework and monitoring and evaluation instruments was conducted simultaneously as the project was being piloted. Far from strengthening or supporting existing information initiatives, OKN activities on the ground celebrated the new technology as coming to supplant the traditional modes of information sharing. Instead of providing communities with the capacity to engage in deliberation on local issues at a local level the digital technology, the project ruptured the participating communities and orientated them away from the local to the global. From a sociological perspective, Wellman and Hampton (Otis and Johanson, 2004) describe this tendency as a paradigm shift-taking place in our society:

in which people and institutions are no longer connected primarily by geography, but are instead living in networked societies. Nowadays people usually have more friends outside their neighbourhood than within it, and may have kin spread throughout a country, or the world. The advent of the Internet is accelerating a change that has already been set in motion, and is becoming an infrastructure of social networks.

Through the OKN internet platform a Shona speaking communal farmer in Mutambara area gets exposed to useful technical information written in Kiswahili by a small scale farmer in Kenya on pest control and organic farming techniques to increase agricultural yield or to an article written in Hindi by an Indian Market Gardener. He too might contribute valuable content in his own local language but in the absence of a lingua franca the OKN mostly succeeded in celebrating linguistic diversity at the cost of communication and effective networking across language and territorial boundaries.

Glocalisation as a Counterpoint of Globalization

While the idea of globalization is often associated with notions of homogenizing cosmopolitanism, the term glocalisation has been suggested to describe a counterpoint backlash to the negative hegemonic aspects of the concept of globalization. For Sullivan (2006) the contemporary notion and phenomenon of glocalisation does not only conjure up a collapsing of temporal and spatial scales to produce simultaneous experiences and productions of macro and micro. It also combines with a post-dualist imagining that is suggestive of a dynamic situatedness in both the local and the global. She further explains that this is related largely to the fact that the communications technology facilitating the recently

accelerated pace of capital colonization also has made possible an exponential increase in the ability of geographically dispersed local social movements and networks to connect with each other. By facilitating the sharing of ideas and experiences, the planning of events and actions, the generation of independently produced media regarding events and issues, and the reinforcing of psychological strength from the knowledge of not being isolated, technology has played an enormous part in permitting the emergence of a social movement that, while diverse, is indeed global. The OKN ideal of emphasising the creation and sharing of local content both locally and globally on the Internet came closest to interrogating the assumptions of globalism and contributing to glocalisation. Local communities reach out to other communities beyond their spatial and temporal boundaries without losing their own identity in the process by being equal participants in digital conversations which Internet technology makes possible. In its design, the OKN would also provide an antidote to the more negative aspects of informationalism and its implied death of local cultures and mass linguicides as envisioned by pessimistic observers.

OKN – BRIDGING THE CONTENT DIVIDE: LOCAL PEOPLE, LOCAL LANGUAGE, LOCAL CONTENT

As Ballantyne (2002) points out, the worldwide Open Knowledge Network project was informed from the beginning by a realization within the group of eight (G8) most industrialized community of nations that even after crossing the technology divide, Third world populations would still find the content on the World Wide Web alienating. Language issues and contextual relevance and ownership restrictions would present new barriers making the content largely inaccessible to them. There was perceived danger that unmitigated access to 'foreign' globalised knowledge would fast turn people of the South into a consumptariat with an addiction for distant and potentially irrelevant information. More worrying perhaps, developing countries were being 'invaded' by foreign ideas and values with a potential to undermine or overwhelm local cultural heritage and economic livelihoods.

In a seminal study that may well be code named the OKN testament of faith, Ballantyne (2002) arrives at the conclusion that:

If we are serious about the use of ICTs as an empowerment tool – so poor people can shape decisions that affect their lives, so they can grasp economic and social opportunities, and so they can deal with misfortunes and disasters, then this foreign content must be matched by the expression and communication of local knowledge that is relevant to local situations. To a large extent, this means that ICTs need to be conveyors of locally relevant messages and information. They need to provide opportunities for local people to interact and communicate with each other, expressing their own ideas, knowledge and culture in their own languages.

Implicit in the notions of ICTs as tools of empowerment is the idea that content issues matter just as importantly as the technology itself. Such concerns resonate with the issues discussed in the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates of the 1980s. It awakens architects of digital solutions for development challenges and international development policy experts to the fact that the volume, velocity and direction of the flow of content still matters as much post-digital revolution as they did in the one-to-many mass communication model of the industrial capitalist society of yesteryear. By promoting user-generated content, the OKN as a network can be argued to meet the architectural design to challenge the dominant paradigm of source – receiver relationship between North and South. Much content on the Internet had been hierarchised with the most valuable content originating from the North, packaged mainly in English, commoditised and insulated from free access by proprietary license, (Trosow, 2002). ICT for development orthodoxy emphasized on pushing external content at people living in poverty. Many initiatives offered one-way transfer of information (usually from the global to the local level) but failing to promote genuine two-way knowledge sharing (Talyarkhan, 2004).

Key to addressing the content gap in the information society would be to develop ICT strategies that promote local content generation and dissemination. In short, instead of using ICTs as mere conduits or megaphones for globalising Northern perspectives on Southern realities, they should be used to give voice to local content by local people in local languages, where local content is defined as 'the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community – where the community is defined by its location, culture, language, or area of interest', (Ballantyne, 2002).

The bubble-babble on the Internet in foreign languages was pretty much like listening to an oracle or a prophet who spoke riddles about great things to come in tongues without the help of an interpreter. The challenges however, for wider dissemination of local content stem from the very fact of the local nature of local content as defined above. Local content propagated via the OKN Network ended up being so context specific as to render its universal application and appeal to a global audience irrelevant. Documentation of knowledge in local languages also limited its accessibility beyond a small language community, and diminished its use-value to non-speakers of the language. The OKN's focus on local content creation was itself built around the mistaken assumption that local content would be by virtue of being local superior and more preferable to foreign content found on the Internet. Information inequalities between North and South on the Internet was the problem the OKN was designed to address taking the necessity for an Internet technology as a given. Its logic was to reconceptualise Southern development problems in terms of how they fit into a preexisting technology and not vice-versa. Such valorization of Internet technology meant prior research needed only ask the 'how to' technologise local communication spaces and not the 'what for' question. Baseline surveys had to be done to establish the quantitative differences between extant foreign and local content and their comparative value on the Internet before the OKN

intervention. The problem was how the existing traditional place bound and context specific face-to-face communication initiatives could be adapted to the new digital technologies. The Zimbabwean experience with the OKN project discussed below sufficiently demonstrates some of these contradictions and challenges.

THE OKN PROJECT IN ZIMBABWE

The Open Knowledge Network (OKN) was piloted in Zimbabwe by OneWorld Africa through a local implementing partner the Southern Alliance For Indigenous Resources (SAFIRE) a local NGO which specialized in promoting sustainable livelihoods through conservation farming techniques among rural agrarian communities. The project was jointly funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID), Information and Communication for Development (ICD), Catalysing Access to ICT in Africa (CATIA) and OneWorld International. It was initiated at five project sites located in largely rural farming communities. Information Centres called Access Points (APs) were established, equipped with a minimum of two PCs with a dial-up Internet connection, a printer, a notice board and a world space radio receiver for downloading digital content mainly from OKN website and other free channels transmitted via satellite. At the SAFIRE Hub two Knowledge Workers with extensive knowledge and experience in the media and communication sector were employed to coordinate documentation activities at the APs as well as editing, tagging and channeling content from APs via the OKN web page to the Chennai Hub in India which was responsible for content syndication. The project was organized around a multistage network structure. At the coalface were the APs manned by field officers known as community reporters or informediaries. The field officers provided a vital interface between the information communication technology as a content creation and sharing tool on the one hand and members of the community, most of whom had not used a computer before and would have found it near impossible to participate in local content creation and dissemination via the internet unassisted.

In Zimbabwe however, Community Reporters had to be called by the term, Documentalist Field Assistants (DFAs) to avoid falling foul of the registration requirements of the Media and Information Commission (MIC) which required, in terms of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (2002) (AIPPA), that all media houses and practicing journalists need a government license to operate. The OKN project came to Zimbabwe against a backdrop of a political clampdown on media and communication spaces in the whole country. Privately owned independent media houses were being closed, and any communication initiative outside the government-owned and -controlled ones was held in suspicion as meant to further imperialist sponsored regime change agendas. In its architectural design the OKN challenged the traditional notions of a local community as defined by

geographical contiguity. New 'local communities' defined by interest and spanning other categories of belonging and identity were made possible. Local APs were networked with each other through the country Hub and the country Hub was networked to peer Hubs in other centers across the South to form a global OKN community of interconnected micro-communities of Hubs and APs communicating with each other and sharing as partners in the knowledge economy.

The aim of the OKN project, that of seeking to promote both the creation and the exchange of local content as widely as possible across the South, supported by a range of different information and communication technologies (ICTs) fitted well into SAFIRE's own overall framework and goal: 'To empower rural communities to enable them to make more informed choices for a better livelihood' (SAFIRE brochure 2004). The pilot phase of the OKN project ran from May to October 2004. During this phase, five Access Points were set up Nyamazura, Mutambara, Galaupole, Ekowiza and Tongogara Refugee Camp. The important selection criteria used by SAFIRE to grant AP status to a center were convenience of location for public access by community members across age and gender differentials, nearness to electricity and telegraph line supply grids and the condition that SAFIRE had already established its presence in the area and was implementing ongoing livelihoods projects with the target community. Three out of the first five APs were located at rural schools and training institute. The other two were one at a refugee camp and the other in a high-density suburban area. The expansion phase followed from November 2004 to June 2005. Activities undertaken were the finalization of setting up existing APs, continuing to test and implement the OKN software and sustainability strategies as well as diversifying information generation and dissemination strategies. The period beyond June 2006 to the end of that year was the weaning off period when project activities were supposed to be continued without external funding from donor partners. The new focus was supposed to concentrate on up-scaling and mainstreaming the OKN activities into all projects being managed by SAFIRE regional offices and partner organizations in OKN such as EKOWISA (E-Knowledge for Women in Southern Africa), Fambidzanai Permaculture Centre and Seke Rural Home Based Care. However, financial viability challenges dictated serious structural changes in the way the OKN was to be carried forward. Digital documentation of content had to be discontinued altogether by end of 2006. SAFIRE had no budget line to retain DFAs on a full salary as before, so they left and had to be replaced by less experienced volunteers. Although AP Management Committees had been set up, they were not yet adequately resourced to take full responsibility for all operational costs associated with the APs in their communities. To capacitate such local structures for effective takeover would have needed longer incubation periods than were provided for in the quick fix project timelines of project donors.

COMMUNICATION VALUE

Evidence collected through project monitoring and evaluation instruments suggested that communities around APs rated as most important the fact that the OKN platform enabled them to also publish and share their own stories as well as read stories contributed by people who were known to them, people they could relate to and also in their own language. SAFIRE's own project performance appraisal report based on M&E data indicate that by the end of the pilot phase, project output measured in terms of local content contribution on the OKN website though significant in terms of numbers was still a mere drop in the ocean in comparative terms. The range of subjects covered was also limited to covering developmental issues around environment, conservation farming, health and HIV/AIDS issues, local but politically safe news, gender equity issues etc. In fact, there was a standing injunction from SAFIRE management against publishing political content through the OKN. The term political content itself was never explicitly defined and it was left to the discretion of Knowledge Workers to interpret it as they saw fit. The upshot of it was that even at the height of the widely discredited Government programme code named Operation Drive out Trash or Operation Murambatsvina, which resulted in many urban slum dwellers being displaced to rural areas, not a single story was published through the OKN even though people living around APs were equally adversely affected. When asked why they did not write stories about the effects of Operation Murambatsvina on people's livelihoods the DFAs indicated that they thought that was political. This strong aversion by OKN staff to any story that could remotely be interpreted as political need to be considered against the background of political polarization tensions and recrimination within the larger Zimbabwean body politic at the time. No Community Based Organization wanted to attract unnecessary government attention, which any story mildly critical of government policy was bound to do. Thus, instead of providing fodder for discussion on matters of public concern to the AP community, what was often written and published on the OKN bordered on the trivial.

The result was that the project failed to generate a critical mass of interested participants beyond the immediate communities around the APs themselves. It also failed to establish linkages with important sources of locally relevant content like government departments, which continued to sideline the APs and to rely on their traditional channels for information dissemination through mostly word of mouth. An illustrative example was when the District Administrator for Chimanimani District had to drive all the way from his office in Chimanimani town to Mutambara village, a distance of more than 60 kilometers, to personally announce the planned visit to the area by the Vice President of the country. Word had to be sent through the Agricultural Extension Officers of the area for traditional leaders to convene at an agreed venue so the DA could come and address them on the necessary preparations for the Vice President's visit. The DA was aware of the existence of the AP at Gonzoni Primary

School but never once thought of channeling information intended for the community through it. The failure to get government recognition as a credible channel through which to disseminate official information to communities around the AP seriously undermined its importance as a source of valuable information. Official announcements from government is valuable information in that it affects citizens' lives and therefore is by that virtue highly sought after. Throughout the piloting and expansion phases of the project, the OKN in Zimbabwe never once attracted content from government bureaucracies. Is it any wonder then that the AP never established itself as a forum for serious deliberation on matters of common concern for the community members? The kinds of articles published through the OKN were those of a politically harmless nature, the how-to type and recipes on various often very petty agricultural subjects or health matters not suitable as triggers of any serious social conversation.

Another factor that also worked against the AP becoming a true market place of ideas, a technologised village assembly was the fact that Internet content from the OKN website only could be downloaded through the World Space Radio at no additional cost at the AP. This meant that the AP offered a very limited fare of Internet content. Connectivity costs also imposed serious limitations on the possibility of community members using the AP facility in ways that directly responded to their information and communication needs. They could not for example, surf the net or use other search engines to conduct a general information search on the Internet. Members of the community could not open e-mail accounts to enable them to engage in personal communication with kith and kin within or outside the AP community. The donor funded community service project model also constrained the possibility of turning the AP into a commercially viable entity, which resulted in serious sustainability problems beyond the funding period. Thus when donor support ended in 2006 the OKN project had not established alternative sources of financing to support the original idea of generating and disseminating free content through the Internet. Beyond the physical capital in the form of Internet connectivity and the computer equipment at the APs the OKN project left very faint footprints among recipient communities in Zimbabwe.

The time horizons of the project were clearly too brief to allow for successful incubation and consolidation of such a project to have nationwide impact. The local implementing partner organization SAFIRE had hardly completed the setting up of Access Points let alone generating any meaningful volume of local content traffic on the Internet when the six months pilot phase had already elapsed and project evaluation reports were falling due to the project donors. However, major successes of the pilot phase were the translation of the source code for the OKN content management software into the two main local languages, (Shona and Sindebele) to make both the generation of content and interfacing with the computer in local languages possible (see Appendix for OKN News pages in Shona and Sindebele).

CONCLUSION

Cass Sunstein, in his book *Republic.com* (2001), expresses concern about the polarizing effects the Internet might hold. The Internet, as other new technologies, would dramatically increase the possibilities for people to hear 'echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others' (2001, p.49). He fears like-minded will seek the like-minded to talk with online. Likewise, Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson (1996, p.24) point to the fact that 'Internet users can seek out interactions with like-minded individuals who have similar values, and thus become less likely to trust important decisions to people whose values differ from their own'. The OKN project in Zimbabwe may very well be judged to have achieved very little to avoid the pitfalls alluded to above. By limiting the range of subjects to write on to politically sanitized topics on agriculture and livelihoods the project failed to meet the ideal of a true village agora. It did not even facilitate idle conversation let alone rational deliberation among community members. Beyond a concern with numbers of articles published in local languages, the OKN failed to present a viable alternative to the information avalanche that open unmitigated access to the World Wide Web presents with all its negative effects on cultural diversity. Governments everywhere constitute an important source of official information that affects local lives. The OKN project in Zimbabwe could have done better to engage with the government to gain its recognition and legitimation as a useful channel of information between citizens and their government.

Donor sponsorship of projects while critical and beneficial in kick starting and providing impetus to development initiatives in the South has often justified foisting exogenous agendas completely out of sync with local priorities. Its short-term planning horizon may not recognize or be able to address the multi-dimensional causes of poverty due to a narrow focus on donor objectives (Stoll et al., p. 2001). Trying to implement the OKN as a quick fix technical solution to existing digital divides both at a local and global level, divides that themselves were a result of centuries of cultural economic and political conditioning under colonialism and in the postcolonial era, could very well have been responsible for the serious long term sustainability problems soon after donor funding ended. The idea of an OKN in Zimbabwe held great promise of extending communication rights and a voice to originally marginalized groups. It succeeded in giving an Internet presence though limited to local communities in the South. However, an important lesson that can be drawn from the OKN project in Zimbabwe is that donor funded project is inherently short term and either pays lip-service to or fails to seriously tackle sustainability problems beyond the project plan. There are no inbuilt mechanisms to hold project donors accountable to their implementing partners or recipient communities during the tenure of project sponsorship much less so afterwards and it is often the local implementing partners like SAFIRE who end up with mud on their faces when projects leave white elephants behind.

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