

The rise and fall of educational radio in Zimbabwe: The forgotten medium and technology

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Abstract

Popularly referred to as “schools broadcasts” during the 1980s, educational radio in newly freed Zimbabwe was at the threshold of transformation into interactive radio instruction (IRI). This paper analyses the developments relating to educational radio in Zimbabwe since the late 1980s. In it, I refer to the unpublished descriptive qualitative surveys I conducted during 1989 and 1999 using questionnaires, interviews, and confirmatory observations. I hope that this will prove helpful to other countries, particularly so-called developing countries that are still using educational radio, in warding off any retrogressive forces that may lead to the collapse of the service. Zimbabwe itself could revive this once popular technological practice. The 1989 study showed that about 10% of the schools implemented the educational radio programme. About ten years later the situation had not changed significantly, as revealed by the findings in the much larger and more rural province of Mashonaland East in 1999. Now, just over a decade on, there is hardly any educational radio programme to speak of in Zimbabwe. The paper makes some recommendations that may lead to the revival of educational radio in Zimbabwe, perhaps enhanced with modern computer technology.

Introduction

Authors such as Chandar and Sharma (2003) are able still to remark in the third millennium that educational radio offers a range of opportunities, and constitutes a viable medium for effective pedagogical and geographical outreach. It is also generally accepted that educational radio can offer educational services at low cost. This seems to counterbalance the view of educational radio as being antiquated and

semi-obsolete. Beukes argues that educational radio still has a use in supplementing printed texts in Namibia, and in overcoming a number of problems militating against education and training in that country. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the Asian Development Bank (1999) concur by suggesting that radio is the most accessible of all the media, and that most people can be reached through radio, in even the poorest countries, at relatively low cost. This confirms that educational radio, wherever it is or may be applied, still has enormous potential in the context of educational delivery.

A careful analysis of old research papers and reports (cf. Jamison & McAnany 1978) reveals that not much has changed over the decades with regard to the characteristic functional features of educational radio, including (a) the improvement of the quality and relevance of education, (b) reduction of the cost of education, and (c) the overall facilitation of access to education. Ko-yun Chen (2003:1) acknowledges that “broadcasting radio is a vital mass communication medium tightly connected with the everyday life of the general public and highly associated with social, political, economic, cultural, educational, technological, and entertainment developments”. Educational radio therefore still has an important role to play in the modern e-era.

The intended contribution of this paper

This rather historic article attempts to provide a condolatory review of the apparent demise of the once famous and popular schools’ broadcasts radio service in Zimbabwe. It should encourage people to mourn the great opportunities lost whenever and wherever existing educational radio technology is allowed for whatever reason to collapse. This paper relies extensively on the findings of the decade time-lapse study findings of 1989 and 1999 as the radio schools broadcast service began to succumb to forces of destruction. Yet, as recently as 2006, Keulder (2006) was able to re-confirm earlier beliefs that radio offers enormous opportunities to the education and training sector in Namibia, showing that two-thirds of the people listened to the radio every day for between five and seven hours. There are many countries, developing countries in particular, that are reported to be using

educational radio, whether directly or in multimedia format in alignment with computer technology. This message of caution is directed mainly at these countries.

The Zimbabwean experience

It must be remembered that educational radio has a long history in Zimbabwe, dating back to as early as the 1940s. Butler (1951) notes that “since the introduction in 1942 of schools broadcasting in Southern Rhodesia [Zimbabwe] there has been a steady development of this service to which in 1948 was added the now wider Visual Education Service”. Another important milestone was reached in 1982, when on 4 October Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation’s (ZBC) Radio 4 was officially commissioned as an educational channel by the Minister of Information, Posts and Telecommunications. Edington (1980:2) commented: “Radio 4 was born out of the decision by the Prime Minister, the Honourable Robert Mugabe, in April 1980 to invite a team of broadcasters from the BBC to advise him on how the ZBC could increase and develop its contribution to the government’s programmes of national development”. Further to this, in 1998 the minister claimed that “radio transmission now covers 95% of the population while television reaches 60%” (Zimbabwe Government 1988). Friend et al. (1980:1) state that “radio has been used for instruction since the early 1920s and has found increasing use in developing countries”.

I conducted a survey in the Greater Harare Province in 1989 and in the Mashonaland East Province in 1999. Both surveys aimed at assessing the degree to which the educational radio programme was being implemented in the primary schools.

This period was marked by the harsh socio-economic upheavals that shook the entire socio-economic fabric of the country and continued to plague the country virtually until the present, although the horror reached its highest point during 2007 and 2008.

Many sweeping changes were necessary in almost all sectors of the economy, including education and the national broadcaster, whose Radio 4 channel used to be

reserved for educational programmes, including the schools broadcast service. The channel was commercialised.

The Educational Technology Centre (ETC), which was the section of the Ministry of Education charged with the responsibility for developing educational radio, had to undergo drastic transformation, so much so that the institution had to operate without well qualified and experienced staff at the senior and middle management levels. Vyas et al. (2002:19), Perraton (1978), Higgs and Mbithi (1977), Daniel and Marquis (1983), Moore (1983) and Stewart (1983) nevertheless caution that educational radio is most effective when implemented by trained facilitators. At the schoolroom level, in response to one of the 1999 research interview questions, one teacher warned that teachers needed training, “otherwise teachers will just switch on the radio and leave it”. Such training was inconceivable at the time, and as Burke (1976:9) would argue, “most of those who are now in important decision-making positions in education and development were not educated by radio”. This might have been targeted at political policy-makers who would not see value in educational radio. But Wedell (1986) blamed the external funding agents of the educational radio projects in the developing countries. He suggested that the problem of non-use of educational radio lies in the way or manner in which educational radio projects are initially introduced: the idea of self-help or self-responsibility or even “do it yourself” had not yet found root in the developing country political leadership.

For example, while in Nicaragua IRI achieved some success during 1974 to 1979, in Kenya it wound down soon after the donor left. In Swaziland the programme suffered a similar fate. In Zimbabwe the intended introduction of IRI never got further than the negotiating table. Much, it can be argued, rests on the attitude and seriousness of the benefiting country.

It pained me to see the once thriving educational radio in Zimbabwe moribund, destined for either irreversible oblivion and obsolescence or, I hoped, only a state of temporary hibernation. I could not believe it, and experienced the deepest denial. But it did happen, and I wonder who is next in line, and where? I hope not where the technology is flourishing. Lu Min-chun (2003) reports: “NER [National Educational Radio in Taiwan] has since 1999 digitized its program production to increase

efficiency and value in the process and has established a diversified database.” Ko-yun Chen (2003) suggests that NER should naturally re-position itself to keep up with the times and make continuous improvements. In Zimbabwe the picture was quite the opposite, and educational radio eventually fell into disuse.

Evidently, very little research and evaluation work was carried out in Zimbabwe concerning all these diverse forms of educational radio services. Hungwe (1987) lamented that in Zimbabwe “research on the use of media has been scanty”. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that modern and future research regrettably tends to place more emphasis on the more exciting computer-mediated educational technologies.

The structure of the educational radio service

As it existed, or was supposed to, the educational broadcast service in Zimbabwe targeted all primary school pupils, all teachers, and even more important, the Government Correspondence School, which offered a specific service to farming and mining area communities, and is now the only remnant of educational radio in the country. As mentioned earlier, the ETC was the responsible authority charged with the production of all school radio programmes, which were then submitted to ZBC for transmission.

The 1989 and 1999 studies

In both studies, qualitative and quantitative data was collected from school principals and teachers through questionnaires, formal interviews and radio lesson observations from about 10% of the schools. The data was analysed, interpreted, and presented using simple descriptive statistical procedures.

In both studies, the data collecting instruments focused on raw data in the following seven categories:

- general demographic and personal data to obtain a sense of who the respondents were in terms of gender, age, position held at the school, qualification, and experience;

- the value of educational radio – relevance and importance;
- actual application or use of educational radio – awareness, access, and use;
- the teachers' training in the use of educational radio – pre- and in-service;
- educator attitudes towards educational radio at all levels – teachers, heads of schools, and education officers;
- the common challenges encountered in educational radio – availability, electricity, and technical skills;
- respondents' own, freely expressed opinion.

The interview and lesson observation schedules served as counter-check and confirmatory procedures to the questionnaire data.

General comments

There were a few open-ended questions tucked in at the end of the questionnaire in each case so that the respondents could express themselves freely and highlight any crucial issues that might have been missed by the structured items of the main questionnaire. A few selected comments deemed representatively useful have been inserted unedited under relevant headings.

Challenges affecting the implementation of educational radio

- Most administrators are anti the programme.
- Never had time to use radio.
- Timetables not sent to rural schools. We have to ask from school in growth points.
- Reception at some places is very poor, this inhibits the running of the lessons.
- Lack of training in the use of ER.
- Overcrowding when trying to listen to ER.
- Appealing to only the auditory sense.
- Poor management of educational radio.

Other topics you think should be included

- We would like to see an educational TV programme. Our children look down on sound only. They want pictures.
- I cannot comment because I don't know what is there or not there. We have no radios at our schools.
- Not aware of the present ER programmes.

Existing programmes that should be removed

- ❖ The programmes are educative and sufficiently suitable for the grades.
- ❖ Bumburwi school is not attending to radio lessons because they are not in possession of a school radio. The radio set was stolen some years ago.
- ❖ All the programmes produced are good only too short a time is available on the programmed lessons.

Teachers' contributions that can make educational radio more effective

- To be involved in the main process of producing of ER programmes by working in conjunction with AVS.
- They should give pupils chance to attend to the radio lessons.
- Inservice courses should be introduced so that teachers are abreast with new technology and teachers should present some of the programmes on a rotational basis.
- Heads of schools should make ER compulsory on the school timetable and should supervise teachers on ER.
- Teachers should make follow-up activities on ER lessons.
- Teachers must treat ER like any other lessons.
- Teachers should develop a positive attitude to ER.
- Teachers should teach students to like the ER lessons.
- To encourage parents to buy radios for their children at home.

Interviewed heads of schools

- Since I came here I have never seen this timetable.
- We have no radios so we do not use ER.
- We do not discuss ER. That programme is not undertaken here.
- E.O.'s and D.E.O.'s never talk about ER.
- That topic has never been discussed at cluster meetings.

- We started talking about it after receiving your questionnaire.
- ER has never been on NAPH meetings agenda.
- The Farm does not help.
- We don't talk about ER because none exists. We should reintroduce ER in the school.
- People talk about it but do not do anything.
- It is necessary to have workshops on ER. ER must be promoted. I have never seen a workshop on ER during my teaching career.
- We concentrate on professional issues at NAPH.
- We have forgotten about ER because of shortage of time.
- Teachers need refresher courses to be able to use ER effectively.
- ER is not timetabled because we have no radios. It is not compulsory.
- I have no previous training in ER.
- ER is very useful simply because it brings a new teacher in the classroom.
- ER is never on the agenda of cluster, zonal, district, or NAPH meetings.

Interviewed teachers

- I did not receive any training in ER.
- I have not been supervised using ER by those above me.
- I for one would be willing to use my own personal radio in the classroom.
- I have attended only one workshop at Beatrice in the late 1980's by AVS.
- ER should be taught as an orientation for new teachers. They don't get this at colleges.
- I used ER only when I was a student teacher. I had no pre-service training in ER.
- Teachers would use ER if it was timetabled and made compulsory.
- ER is an activity which does not fit in well in our timetable. It may fit in the infant timetable.
- Our supervisors put emphasis on other areas not ER. We have no time for ER.
- Training in ER should start at college.
- We are only encouraged to use ER but not compelled to.
- We last used ER in the 1980's. But it has vanished with time.
- I only used ER when I was doing my B.Ed. assignment.

Teacher training college lecturers' interview comments

- It depends on the individual lecturer's interest and ideology over ER, but we deal with general AVA issues.
- I understand it used to be done, but has since been discontinued with the phasing out of Management to which it was attached.
- One of us has recently attended a workshop which also looked at ER. We expect him to report on this.
- No one has given it a serious thought.

All these remarks reveal some of the main causes of possible collapse of educational radio in any country. Issues such as these should be attended to promptly if a disaster such as this is to be averted.

Teacher education and educational radio

Some interviews were held with lecturers at the primary teachers colleges in Harare to find out how these institutions were or could be involved in the development of educational radio. It was evident that issues such as educational radio and educational video/television were not accorded the prominence they deserved.

It was also evident from some of the lessons observed that the teachers were primarily using their own instinctive and common-sense skills in the application of educational radio, and not applying any professional training.

Conclusions

The findings led to the following conclusions:

- a) The use of educational radio in Zimbabwean primary schools was on the decline and needed urgent revamping.
- b) Research on educational radio in Zimbabwe was not as rich as it should have been.
- c) Many teachers did not view educational radio as an educational tool, and instead mistook it for a syllabus academic subject.

- d) Teachers received very little, if any, initial or in-service training in the use of educational radio.
- e) The curriculum used at teacher training colleges did not attach great value to educational radio and possibly to educational technology in general.
- f) The attitude of teachers towards educational radio was generally poor for a variety of reasons. This applied to other educationists and related professions.

Recommendations

Research on educational technology in general needs to be supported and improved in Zimbabwe, just as in any other developing country. There is an urgent need to positivise, as it were, the general attitude of educators and educationists at all levels.

National and local budgets must allocate adequate funding and other human resources to the development of educational technology.

The distribution of radio resources and other non-computer-related resources should be carried out along similar lines to those applied in the provision of computer resources nationwide.

The ETC in Zimbabwe should be empowered to institute cost-recovery measures on its various services so as to make it self-sustaining and to encourage its clientele to treat its services with greater respect.

It is also important to review the curricula used at teacher training colleges and universities of education with a view to ensuring that aspects such as educational radio and video-mediated education are well supported.

Teachers must be encouraged to develop a more positive attitude towards the use of educational radio as well as other non-computer-technologies related media.

The national rural electrification programme should be expanded and speeded up so as to ensure easy access to electricity in even the remotest corners of the country.

The use of solar and locally generated electricity must be encouraged for the rural communities.

Zimbabwean educational radio must be revived and made to operate in collaborative partnership with computer-assisted education.

Summary

In this paper I have endeavoured to discuss various issues relating to the development of educational radio and its ultimate demise in Zimbabwe. Some useful suggestions have been advanced in order to persuade other interested stakeholders to carry out further research in the subject area.

Acronyms and definitions of special terms and expressions

Cluster: A group of schools situated fairly close together in an area or zone that work together for the development of education.

Growth points: These are business or service centres in the rural area that are developing toward attaining village town or full town status.

AVS: audio visual services

DEO: district education officer

EO: education officer

ER: educational radio

ETC: Educational Technology Centre

NAPH: National Association of Primary Heads

NER: National Educational Radio

ZBC: Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation

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