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DEEJAYING ON THE FARM

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Once upon a time the rat went to seek advice from the chicken, the goat and the cow on how to avoid the trap which was set up in the house by the woman. They all told him: “That’s your problem – deal with it yourself”. But when the woman died from the wounds which were inflicted by the snake that was caught in the trap, it was the chicken, the goat and the cow that were slaughtered to feed the mourners. The rat then concluded: “I guess the trap was not meant for me”.

When farmers go searching for quality information it is often a bit like asking the chicken, the goat and the cow for help. In 2008, when I started to go out to villages in Malawi with a mobile video van to screen agricultural videos, I noticed how hungry farmers were for information. It was exciting to watch them get new knowledge, although it was not always possible to show the videos at the right time of the year.

Some explained to us that they wanted to refresh what they had learned when they were working on the activity featured in the video.

Unfortunately, I could not leave the DVDs behind. Even if I could have, the farmers did not have the equipment to view them. As a video team, we thought that if farmers could not remember what they watched, that was their problem. We were not unsympathetic but there was little else we could do for them.

As time went by, I noticed that the agricultural videos were not becoming as popular as I had expected. Many organisations turned to radio to disseminate messages. They thought it was a waste of resources to invest in making videos, and that posters were good enough for farmers. Eventually, my video team was disbanded.

This was a big disappointment and not what we had expected. How could things have gone wrong given the early enthusiasm of farmers? We loved our video van but apparently it wasn’t enough. Maybe we needed to think about new ways to make sure that farmers got their own copies of agricultural videos.

But by the end of 2011 other changes were happening. Computers had become cheaper and many people could afford to buy second-hand computers. Village youth started to get some bright ideas. Teenagers and twenty-somethings who could borrow a couple of hundred dollars (often from an older brother) began to open what they called “burning centres” which were often nothing more than a PC on a table in a small room.

The young men (and nearly all of them are men) proudly called themselves “DJs”. They attracted new customers, villagers who were eager to get Malawian music videos, and movies from Hollywood, Bollywood and even Nollywood. For a few coins, the customers can get their flash discs, or the memory cards of their



A new business emerges in Malawi, uploading entertainment videos for villagers on their cell phones.

cell phones filled up with films to watch at home, in cities and in rural areas.

At the same time, mobile phones have dramatically dropped in price. There has been an influx of cheap GSM phones from China. These have basic internet access and a memory card slot, so they can play back audio and 3gp videos offline. This is good enough for the latest films, music and any video, in fact. What this means is that rural farmers can now watch films together. The phone may have a small screen, but this is a big improvement on what was previously available to them: nothing.

These possibilities are opening up new business innovations. Two years ago, I started wondering whether mobile phones could be used to distribute agricultural videos. With the support of Access Agriculture, I went around the burning centres with my colleague Jeff Bentley to explore the possibilities.

The DJs can go to the nearest town or city to get the entertainment films, or the DJs can stay home and get films from friends or travelling sales people. The DJs buy a DVD and “rip” it (which means that they copy the files onto their hard-drive, where they can be copied for customers).

The DJs had mixed reactions to our visit. A few were not sure if their audience wanted agricultural videos. After all, the youngsters only had experience selling movies and Malawian music videos. But most of the DJs thought that their customers would like the learning videos.

To set the idea in motion, we gave 37 Access Agriculture videos in Chichewa to DJs, for free. Since then, some

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of the DJs have been phoning me to ask for new titles. I keep telling them that as soon as we have translated new videos I will let them know.

Earlier in 2015 I went to enlist new DJs and to distribute more videos. The DJs I met in 2014 were excited to share their stories about how farmers have used the videos.

Today there are 96 DJs in Malawi distributing videos on rice, chilli and how to fight Striga. Each DJ was given 15 DVDs. They can copy the DVDs or convert them to 3gp format (for viewing on cell phones). I asked the DJs to write down the details of the agricultural video clients. With this information, I would like to track the number of farmers who obtain the 3gp videos.

With a cheap \$10 GSM phone that has a micro SD card, farmers can buy agricultural videos in 3gp format from the DJs for as little as 5 cents. During the evening they can sit around as a family and watch these videos. This has also allowed farmers to re-watch the videos at the proper season of the agricultural calendar.

As someone who believes in knowledge management, I am continuously researching how people can find the right information, at the right time and in the right format. I came across the website freebasics.com, an initiative by Facebook to provide free internet on mobile phones. It is working hand-in-hand with Malawi’s two major mobile operators TNM and Airtel. I can foresee DJs downloading these videos onto their cell phones directly from the AA website and selling them to farmers.

We are all in this world together, and the farmers’ poverty is our problem too. We can be foolish like the chicken, the goat and the cow, or we can all find ways to share our ideas.

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