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Promoting information-sharing in Ghana using video blogging

by PRINCE DEH

Introduction

A new wave of opportunities has been presented by Web 2.0 tools.¹ Websites have been transformed and the web is now being used in new and different ways to reach out to people of all races and identities. A video blog – also known as a vlog for short – is one such next-generation web application.² This article reflects some experiences of using vlogging as an information-sharing and advocacy tool for development in Ghana.³

The Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) uses information communication technologies (ICTs) and Web 2.0 technologies as a leverage tool to share information and knowledge with its membership and audience. GINKS has been popularising the concept of vlogging in Ghana and elsewhere because of how the tool can help promote information- and knowledge-sharing using free or low-cost Web 2.0 tools on the Internet, with the potential to reach a wider audience with minimal cost.

Vlogging is a process of making and publishing videos on the Internet with the intention of sharing information. Like

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blogs, video entries are relatively short discussion pieces, which aim to share information and trigger debates about particular issues. Entries are displayed in reverse chronological order, where people can comment on the videos and share their ideas, stories and information, linking to other bloggers online and creating new conversations.

The vlogging process requires little specialised expertise, which makes it relatively easy for beginners to learn how to do. It does require the use of computer, Internet and video technologies, so a level of literacy and language skills are required. However, vlogging relies less on these skills than written blogs. Vlogs can help to present stories in a relatively simple and attractive format, making information more accessible, particularly if the story is short and interesting. The videos that our members contribute include sharing information and reflections on good practice in their different areas of work. Most of the videos we record are interviews with people and groups who have ideas about good practice about ICT4D they want to share and which we think will benefit at least one of the stakeholders of our network.

¹ For a definition of Web 2.0, see glossary, p.123 and overview, p.8 (this issue).

² Here, video blogs are referred to as ‘vlogs’. For a definition of both ‘blog’ and ‘vlog’, see glossary, p.121. See also Blogging p.106 (this issue).

³ Visit our vlog online: www.ginks.blogspot.com

Examples of interviews uploaded on the GINKS video blog.

The screenshot shows the GINKS website interface. At the top, it says "GINKS ICT4D stories in Ghana". Below this, there are two video posts. The first post is titled "Interview with Mr. John Aware at Focus Group Meeting on Community Information Centres (CICs), Tamale, 25th March 2009". It features a video player with a play button and a progress bar. Below the video, it says "Posted by ginks at 9:53 AM 0 comments". The second post is titled "Interview with Mr. Musah Mohammed Muntala at Focus Group Meeting on Community Information Centres (CICs), Tamale, 25th March 2009". It also features a video player and says "Posted by ginks at 9:35 AM 0 comments". To the right of the posts, there is a sidebar with sections: "Who are we?" (describing GINKS as a network established in 2003), "Links to Local ICT4D Blogs" (listing "ICT for Fun"), "Past Stories" (listing interviews from April 2009, March 2009, 2008, and 2007), and "Online Album" (showing a group photo).

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The network is a diverse group of people with different backgrounds, who use the information shared by the network to improve productivity and livelihoods. Members range from stakeholders in the ICT industry, rural development, environmental protection, agriculture, health, gender and youth. Though an open forum, it encourages targeted discussions to meet the needs of particular groups. Thematic forums create specialised spaces for members with a common interest to share experiences across the country.⁴ GINKS regularly receives feedback and comments from its members on how beneficial they find the information shared in this way.

The GINKS website is used to share information on ICT4D in Ghana.⁵ In partnership with BusyInternet (a cyber cafe and Internet Service Provider in Ghana), GINKS also publishes a monthly newsletter about ICT4D called *Cyber Series*. The network also publishes the *iConnectGhana* newsletter, which remains the topmost media devoted to news on ICT4D in Ghana. Additionally, there is a GINKS DGroups email mailing list with over 430 subscribers, which offers a platform for engagement irrespective of physical location.⁶ We also encourage our members to share their experiences of development work with the network by producing short video blogs which are then uploaded to our online blog.

About the GINKS network

The network was founded by a group of 15 organisations in partnership with the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD). GINKS aims to create a platform for institutions and individuals to promote dialogue and share experiences in order to help maximise the potential of ICT tools for socioeconomic development. Before this, ICT professionals, decision makers and advocates in Ghana had very few options for linking up with other colleagues to share information about best practice and lessons learnt, or to network and discuss issues that related to the evolving ICT industry in Ghana.

The GINKS network is an open forum, which helps to bring together individuals and groups who are interested in information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D). Since its official launch in October 2003, membership has doubled from approximately 200 to over 500 members. GINKS offers innovative ways for information and knowledge-sharing among ICT professionals and decision makers on ICT4D across the country. Its aim is to fill the knowledge-sharing vacuum by creating both online and offline spaces where discussions can be held, lessons can be shared and best practices transferred to promote ICT for development in Ghana.

How do you make a video blog?

When creating a vlog about a particular issue or topic, vloggers need to consider what type of information they want to share and how to present it. Recorded video segments are normally five minutes or less – similar to the length of written text you might find on a blog. This helps to keep the videos concise and interesting to watch. It also helps to keep video file sizes small and manageable, both to upload and view online. In our experience, a good format is to record an individual or group interview, e.g. telling a story or illustrating their working practice for a particular issue.

In recent years, the technology required to produce a vlog

⁴ For example, the GINKS-Tech Forum focuses on technical issues and GINKS-Women&ICT4D focuses on gender issues related to ICT4D.

⁵ See: www.ginks.org

⁶ DGroups is an online home for groups and communities interested in international development. See: www.dgroups.org

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has become simpler to use and more affordable, requiring comparatively less resources and training. The minimum tools you need to make a vlog are:

- a video camera/camcorder⁷;
- a computer with video-editing software;
- an Internet connection;
- a blog account/space; and
- an online video account/space.

Once the interviews have been recorded, the raw video is then downloaded onto a laptop or desktop computer and edited using various video-editing software programmes, which are either free or low-cost and also easy to use.⁸ Before posting a video to your vlog website, it is also important to ask someone else to watch it. Asking someone to give you constructive feedback can help to make sure that the video is clear, informative and interesting. It is also useful to transcribe the audio speech into text before you upload it and to also upload this text to accompany the video version.

After editing the video, it is then uploaded onto a video-hosting website on the Internet.⁹ We use the GINKS BlipTV space from where we share the video by linking it to the GINKS blog.¹⁰ From here, you can then share your videos with the public. We announce new video links to the GINKS network. Like any other blog, the GINKS vlog also has a feature for members to comment and share ideas.

Challenges for vloggers

The challenges of vlogging are interlocked. The major challenge is connectivity and access to the Internet. In the developing world, this is one of the main hindrances to sharing information and knowledge. Where there is access, it is too

⁷ At GINKS, we use a digital camera and also mobile phones which have a built-in camcorder.

⁸ We have used e.g. Apple's iMovie, Final Cut Pro and Windows Movie Maker.

⁹ YouTube, BlipTV and Google Video are all video-sharing website where users can upload, view and share video clips. See www.youtube.com, <http://blip.tv>, and <http://video.google.com>.

¹⁰ See: www.ginks.blogspot.com

Box 1: Vlogging – an example from practice

The GINKS has used vlogs to capture some interesting experiences from a two-year research project that the network undertook with a community in rural Ghana in collaboration with the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC). The project explored how to enhance information- and knowledge-sharing among underprivileged communities in Ghana by defining mechanisms and tools to generate and disseminate relevant local content using appropriate and acceptable ICT formats.

As an important component of the research, GINKS worked with rural women farmers to use video to document and capture their stories, as they talked about how to cultivate various food crops, process the end products and how to find customers for their products from within and outside their local area. These videos were edited and copies made available to other members of the community at an information and resource centre in the village that GINKS helped refurbish.

expensive for the ordinary citizen to buy. People can access the Internet using cyber cafes, but these can only be located in Ghana's big cities. Accra alone accounts for about 60% of cyber cafes in Ghana. Mobile phones which allow you to connect to the Internet are still too expensive for Ghanaians living in rural areas to afford – however, the use of mobile phones is steadily rising. As both the handsets and call tariffs are becoming more affordable, this may be less of an issue in future (see also Samii; Karamagi and Nakirya, this issue).

Because producing video blogging requires minimum technical skills, we have found it is a useful tool for the network to use when working with communities in rural development contexts. Yet it must be said that these communities have not themselves started vlogging. It is still a tool left in the hands of those that have the resources and connectivity needed to vlog. However, the proposed Community Information Centre (CIC) project may well help in bridging the rural-urban digital divide and provide better Internet access to Ghanaians throughout the country. The CIC project was initiated by the government in partnership with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to help extend connectivity to all parts of Ghana. These centres will be equipped with an Internet connection, at least five computers, printers, scanners and fax machines. Every district of the country is expected to be provided with one CIC. Although this will improve access to both the technologies and the Internet, there are still challenges to consider, such as how many people will be able to access and use the CICs facilities in practice and how practical it is for people to travel to and use them.

There is also the challenge of getting people to share valuable information and knowledge. We need to develop ways

of demonstrating the social, political and cultural benefits of sharing information. We have simply not mastered the culture of documenting best practices here in Ghana. Maybe people have not realised how important it is. This is gradually changing with the influx of new, more affordable technologies. As the use of the tools for development purposes continues to grow, sharing information is more and more regarded as a tool for nation-building.

Lastly, the equipment used for vlogging is still a luxury for most people in our part of the world. It is not common to see people with digital cameras – and those who do may not have the Internet access to be able to vlog successfully. What makes Web 2.0 tools thrive is the availability of Internet connectivity. In the absence of that, Web 2.0 – and video blogs – simply cannot exist for those without. So it is important to continue to use low-tech communication methods and techniques, which are more accessible to those who do not have access to the technologies.

The future of vlogging

Web 2.0 tools such as vlogging have the potential to become an important advocacy and information-sharing

tool. The question remains of how to extend the benefits of Web 2.0 tools much wider and beyond the scope of Ghanaian cities. The CIC example is only one approach – and it is imperative that government makes conscious efforts to ensure that our rural folk get onto the information highway.

However, it is important to remember that the benefit of this and other Web 2.0 tools to the rural poor – who form the majority in Ghana – depends largely on the issues of connectivity and access. If people are better able to access and share relevant information elsewhere and by other means, they are more likely to use other, more appropriate solutions instead. So it is important to use a combination of approaches to sharing information, both online and offline.

We do believe that vlogging can be used as an effective advocacy tool, helping to project and amplify the voices of the rural poor. We also continue to work towards achieving our aim of bringing information and knowledge to all – and many more rural communities have stories to share with the larger public. Vlogging has the potential of making an impact on policy – if there is clarity in the message being conveyed to both policy makers and the media.

CONTACT DETAILS

Prince Deh
Email: papalenzd@yahoo.co.uk