As-Swat Shabab
Cyber Media and Moroccan Youth

Abstract

Street smart communication technologies (blogs, podcasts and vlogs) are creating new opportunities to engage youth in participative and pluralistic media in Morocco. Using tools readily available to them, this project will engage young Moroccans in producing multimedia content for the Internet. Based out of Tanmia's community Internet access centers and using innovative low cost hardware donated by the US Corporation GENESI and Sun Microsystems, the ultimate objective of this project will be to create a community based media platform that will play host to audio and audio visual programming with a Moroccan identity, that uses Moroccan Arabic (and other local languages such as Amazigh dialects), and that is designed with production values that appeal to Moroccan young people.

Project Justification and Background

Traditional mass media, radio and television, in Morocco have been extremely limited and state controlled for decades. There are two main television channels and a handful of radio stations. In May 2006, one new private television channel and ten new radio stations were created under the provisions of the 2004 law (no 93) overseeing the liberalization of the audio visual sector in Morocco. While these recent results should be welcomed as a sign of modernization of the sector, the total absence of civil society actors (NGOs and associations) and community run media is a sign of continued resistance to more complete freedom of expression. However, internal and external pressures to modernize the traditional state owned media companies are growing. Any effort to enlarge the engage civil society actors in community media could contribute to a real and historical reform whose positive effects would easily extend to neighboring countries in the region.

Such reform is a process that started at least a decade ago, when satellite television has made access to international media possible for a significant part of the population: in Morocco, there are today 2.5 million satellite dishes across the country, which corresponds to nearly one dish to every two or three families. Most Moroccans get their news and information from the big players of Arabic speaking segment: Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and Abu Dhabi TV.

Internet access is exploding in Morocco. Not only is the sector growing at one of the highest rates of the region, but also the vast majority of users (estimated 90%) are accessing the Internet using broadband connections (ADSL). In 2005, Morocco counted almost 4 million of regular Internet users. Cyber cafes, numbering between 1,500 and 3,000 across the country, can be found even in remoter,

more rural parts of the country. Moroccan youth flock to the Internet despite the expense of 5 to 10 dirhams per hour. The Internet content consumed by youth and others is predominately generated and hosted outside Morocco – 95% of Moroccan Internet traffic is international.

If expanded access to satellite television and Internet exposes Moroccans to the benefits of potentially alternative content, it also relegates them to the passive role of "content-consumers" in the globalizing market of information. With few exceptions, authentically Moroccan voices are largely absent in all forms of mass media. Darija (colloquial Moroccan Arabic) is the de facto language of most of Morocco, the language in which most young people think and speak outside the classroom, among friends, on the street, or at home. This sense of conflicting -- rather than complementary – language identification is blatant in each evening's TV broadcasting in Morocco, as a worker, witness, or passerby either expresses themselves in a rich colloquial discourse or struggles to remember enough Modern Standard Arabic grammar to speak a few sentences, only to be trumped by the interviewer's facile overlay of Modern Standard Arabic.

International media, although undoubtedly appealing to many of the younger generation, does not reflect local culture, traditions and sensibility. Possibly as a result, a form of cultural resistance is becoming more frequent and surprisingly strong among a growing number of young people[1], who often find themselves between the need to express their genuine will for change[2], and a lack of satisfactory models coming from abroad. In addition, the perception that forces outside Morocco seek to dominate the economy, the culture and the agenda for political reform has driven some to advocate for less openness, less integration, and to justify slower, less radical change. Arguably, the unleashing of local voices has the potential foster deeper and more radical changes than access to foreign content would do. And yet, these voices, young voices in particular, are largely silent in the media.

Internet unquestionably represents an underutilized or even unexplored tool for reaching out to young Moroccans with information, especially information delivered via audio formats such as real time streaming ("webcasts"), stored streaming audio files, or mp3 downloads delivered directly or through RSS feeds ("podcasts"). Cyber media is an extremely low cost solution when compared to the costs of radio. Moreover, access to Internet sites in Morocco is unregulated, unlike the licensing regulations that govern electronic broadcast media, making the threshold of start up low.

The experience to date of Tanmia.ma, a highly successful web portal designed to strengthen the capacity Moroccan civil society organizations proves that Internet based media can be a powerful platform for social communication and mobilization. The portal, online since October 2004, attracts over 5,000 visitors daily from all corners of Morocco and its audience is still growing. Built using the best and latest open source content management technology, the site is highly interactive – over ¾ of its content is proposed by its users online. The site has served as a platform for information exchange, diffusion of capacity building resources, alliance building, debate, and advocacy activities. Within the development community, it has become a national point of reference for up-to-date

[1] « Grande enquête sur les jeunes d'aujourd'hui », l'Economiste, March 2006.
[2] Fatema Mernissi, « Les Sindbads marocains. Voyage dans le Maroc civique », ed. Marsham, Rabat, 2004

information about the sector. One of its most attractive characteristics is that it is intended and perceived as belonging to the greater community while the managing NGO, Tanmia.ma assures the quality of information and adherence to its internal editorial policy. Democratizing access to information and to **information channels** is what makes Tanmia an instrument of reform.

In February 2007, with support from USAID/ALEF and UNICEF/UNFPA, Tanmia.ma launched an online platform for citizen podcasting, "Marocains, à nous la parole." The platform hosts the guide "Podcasting A-Z" which contains practical advice on how to download, listen to, produce and diffuse a podcast. The site (http://podcast.tanmia.ma/) likewise includes a directory of national and international citizen podcasting sites and a space for hosting locally produced podcasts covering Moroccan social and economic development themes. The guide is being used by the Association Tanmia to train civil society actors to produce their own podcasts, starting with teachers and youth leaders associated with the USAID/ALEF project and the UNICEF/UNFPA "Jeune en Action" project.

With support from the Moroccan Social Development Agency and MEPI, Tanmia opened a Community Access Center (CAC) in Salé in November 2006 and will open a second center in Temara by April 2007. The Association seeks to build a model (for later expansion) for a value added Cybercafé that offers the community around the center the benefits that Tanmia.ma is known for in the virtual dimension – a place for exchanging information freely, networking, and learning. Currently, the center in Salé attracts youth in large numbers, mainly for traditional cyber café services – Internet access, basic computer training, and document reproduction. With this project, Tanmia will apply its expertise gained creating and managing its civil society portal to creating a youth oriented and youth managed, community portal based out of its CAC. The new model of Tanmia CAC is a new media learning lab and cyber café.

Genesi and Sun Microsystems, two US corporations are supporting this project through the donation of low cost computing technology. The Genesi EFIKA boxes linked to a centrally managed Sun server will be deployed in the Tanmia CACs in Salé and Temara. The donated equipment will be configured in a client/server set up. The central server, hosted by MTDS Morocco as an in-kind contribution to the project, will be powered using open source applications that support project activities. The equipment and technical support offered by these companies will add an additional layer of innovation to the Tanmia CAC and will engage participating youth with Open Source technology.

Project Description

DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVE:

To contribute to the development of pluralistic media in Morocco, through the participation of youth and civil society organizations in new media.

Immediate Objective 1 : Create a community based media platform that will play host to audio and video programming with a Moroccan identity, that uses Moroccan Arabic (and other local languages such as Amazigh dialects), and that is designed with production values that appeal to Moroccan young people.

Immediate Objective 2: To promote audio and audiovisual content production and publishing in Morocco by young people and civil society organizations in Salé and Temara using the Tanmia Community Access Centers as a base.

Phase One –Identifying Partners, Surveying Youth, Establishing an EFIKA network

4 months

Phase one will be focused on identifying project partners, direct beneficiaries and community needs. The phase will feed the design of the community media platform, its editorial line and marketing strategies and will engage the community in the project using participatory needs assessment techniques. The assessment phase is important not only for planning the community media platform but is important in creating a sense of community ownership for the project that is crucial in the second phase (content production and attracting an audience) and for developing a business plan. Phase one will be conducted in Salé initially but will be repeated in Temara once the second center is operational.

It is important in the initial phase that the project contacts a wide variety of players in educational settings, local nongovernmental organizations, and diverse socioeconomic and linguistic venues, so the viability of community media can be assessed from several points of view. Pilot training sessions, round table discussions, survey research and interviews will be conducted, some using the same Web data gathering and MP3 technologies that form the core of the project, and the results of these investigations will be available to interested parties and synthesized in analytical reports.

In collaboration with UNICEF/UNFPA Tanmia will be delivering podcast training to youth engaged in community needs assessments know as "Jeune en Action" in the Rabat/Salé/Temara areas and later may provide training to UNFPA's Jeune pour Jeune program. These activities are school based and will allow Tanmia to engage in school youth in the project.

Tanmia's traditional partners are local civil society organizations. The CAC in Salé has already played host to one round table for local associations to exchange and reflect on development priorities in the Salé community. At least one additional round table will be organized on the theme of community media; in particular youth oriented local associations will be invited to attend and provide their input on what kinds of information the platform should feature and how to create synergies with existing projects in the community. The Moroccan Social Development Agency is a co-funder of

the Salé and Temara CACs and its local partner networks will be informed and invited to contribute to the project.

Tanmia will constitute a team of Salé young people and engage them in surveying community youth in a variety of settings: after-hours classrooms, NGOs, youth centers (dar shabab), and cybercafés. Before undertaking their mission, the survey team will participate in Tanmia's podcast training (currently a 5 day workshop) to be funded by existing MEPI funds. The survey activities will engage young participants on the technologies available to them for media productions while soliciting their ideas about the types of content that interests them the most. Pending the results of the survey, the kinds of audio products that are anticipated to be hosted on the new platform will not only be news and information focused, but will provide an important space for music and entertainment.

Also during Phase 1, computer equipment donated by Sun Microsystems and Genesi will be installed in the Salé and Temara CACs. The equipment configuration consists of a centrally hosted server (hosting contributed by MTDS) and ten "flat clients." Powered by open source applications, the client/server set up using Genesi energy-efficient EFIKA boxes is a way to set up a low cost cyber café networks. Genesi will contribute it technical expertise and community of software developers to experiment with innovative computer applications that will support project activities.

Phase 1 Deliverables
Report on Partnership
Report on process and results of Youth Survey
EFIKA network established

Other partner contributions

Sun Micro Systems: T1000 Server
Genesi: 10 EFIKA boxes, technical assistance
MTDS: Server Hosting
MEPI: Training workshop for youth survey team
Moroccan Social Development Agency and MEPI: Other Equipment, CAC rent, CAC manager salary