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Youth Media in Nigeria
Lee Rother, PhD
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This past March, I spent three incredibly rewarding and challenging weeks in Western Nigeria introducing Media Education to hundreds of primary and secondary students and their educators in numerous schools. My experiences in Nigeria came at the invitation of the *Youth for Technology Organization*, and Martins Akpan; the co-coordinator of Teens Resource Centre and producer of a community cable program titled *TEENSWORLD* on MCTV. This experience could not have been made possible without the generous funding and encouragement of *CHUM TV*, *The Canadian Association for Media Education Organizations (CAMEO)*, headed by well known Media Education pioneer and host of *Scanning the Movies*, John Pungente, SJ and the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board administration, in particular Mr. Giordano Rosa, Director General, Ms. Johanne Brabant, Principal of Lake of Two Mountains High School, Saverio Mirarchi, Project Coordinator and Steve Bletas, Chairperson. I am deeply appreciative of the support of these agencies and individuals.

Wood for rent

A makeshift sign outside a small lumberyard reads 'Wood for rent'. Somehow this sign says it all. I expect to see poverty but am unprepared by the extent of the destitution that confronts me through the bus window. I am traveling from Lagos, my starting off point, to Owerri, a nine-hour bus ride through countless hardship towns and villages.

At each stop men, women and children swarm the bus in a vain attempt to sell foods and water to the passengers through the bus windows. They chase the bus in a vain attempt to sell their produce. Watching them, I am afraid that the children or women who are carrying babies on their backs will slip under the wheels of the bus. These are my first images of Nigeria.

91% of Nigerians live, or perhaps a better word is survive, on less than \$2 USD a day; the gross national income per capita is \$900 USD, statistics which both depress and anger me since it does not have to be so. The fact is that the Nigerian nation has wealth in the form of black gold – oil. The United States gets almost 7% of its oil from Nigeria. And it is not only oil that is rich here. One of the locals told me that a discarded fruit tossed into the fertile earth would immediately begin to grow into a tree. As in many countries in Africa, the wealth often fails to reach those who could use it most.

Staring out the bus window, an aching feeling comes over me. Why would anyone living amongst all this poverty be interested in listening to me pontificate about the impact of media in our lives and importance of Media Education, when just making it through the day is a challenge? What will teachers think when I tease them by showing off my state of the art lap top and video camera when paper, pen, books, proper desks, and stable electrical power are scarce? Why would Nigerian teachers even consider Media Literacy when Nigeria has the fifth largest number of illiterates in the world? And yet, if we ignore for the moment (admittedly a difficult task) the challenges presented by poverty, cultural and social taboos, corruption, lack of basic resources and/or infrastructures and so on, in many ways educators and students in Nigeria were very accepting, dare I say more accepting in some ways of what I have to say than many educators to whom I have spoken to back home. What the Nigerian education system lacks in terms of the basic resources, financing, and training, they make up for in enthusiasm. Unfortunately my own experience has taught me that enthusiasm and, indeed, idealism do not often translate into reality.

Owerri Digital Village: Day One

Arriving in Owerri, I am met by two young men. One of them introduces himself as Bibi, the other merely as Bibi's friend. They drove me to the *Owerri Digital Village*. We turn off the main street into a dusty road. It turns out that the Village is comprised of a series of connected rooms. Bibi introduces me to Maureen, the on-site director; she is not much older than Bibi. We make our greetings and I am led on a brief tour of some of the rooms in the Village.

DRAFT

The rooms are quite small. The walls are bare except for the odd, fading poster. There is little furniture. I am taken to the 'computer room' where I will work with the youth. The desks, about ten of them, are arranged in a u-shape. On each desk is an old PC. The rooms are very hot. The windows do not open. The only air circulation comes from an overhead fan, which seems inadequate even for the small room. At the front of the room is a blackboard, or at least something that serves as a blackboard. While waiting for the youth to arrive I decide to use the time to check out the computers. They have the usual Microsoft applications but not surprisingly, no video editing programs. As I work on the computers the electricity goes off.

The youth gradually arrive. There are six females and one male, ranging in age from fifteen to eighteen years old. I begin by introducing them to some of the key concepts of Media literacy, with an emphasis on 'media constructs reality'. I then present them with my idea of having them create mini-documentaries focusing on a topic of their choice. Some of them ask if they can do a power point instead of a video. We eventually decide to form two groups, one video the other digital pictures.

The group suggests 'living conditions' in Owerri. I push them to articulate what is meant by living conditions at the same time considering their message and audience. They want to convey to youth in other countries the hardships that people face at a medical clinic in a nearby village. During our discussion the electricity fails for the umpteenth time in the last two hours. We decide to call it a day, which suits me fine as I am still acclimatizing to the high heat and humidity.

Day two

The agenda for the second day was to review the concepts, learn something about camera work and an introduction to movie. Unfortunately, soon after we begin the session the power goes out. Although it is daytime the room is dark and perhaps worst of all, the fan has stopped. As this is only my second day in the country the heat and humidity start to make me feel very uncomfortable once more.

An hour goes by and still there is no power. I think about the rare times when the power goes out back home and how upset we get, unlike here where a complete day without a power failure would probably make the evening news. It occurs to me that perhaps there is power back in my hotel room. I invite the group to come to my hotel room. I figured that even if the power were off there too, there would still be ample natural light. I must admit that I was also thinking that when the power returned so would the air conditioning.

Day three, four....

The next week is spent videotaping and taking digital pictures at a medical center and at the central market. Bibi brought one of the PC's to my hotel room, which is turned into a production studio.

The next several days go by quickly. The youth, Bibi and Maureen have spent each day editing their pictures and videotapes in my hotel room. While the youth learn the equipment and software quickly, two computers is a drag on the time. As I expected my time in Owerri is too short. While I managed to accomplish most of my objectives, introducing Media literacy concepts and production work to the youth, there is no time to put finishing touches to their Imovie and power point.

Leapfrogging technology

I visited several schools in the countryside just outside the city of Owerri. In the first school literally hundreds of children and teens are crammed together into a large cement block room where I am to give my inaugural presentation. A light wind blows through the empty spaces in the walls that serve as windows though I doubted that the children dressed in clean, stuffy uniforms benefit from it. There are no fans which makes sense since there is no electricity. The lack of electricity also means that I need to be careful about not running out of power on my laptop during my presentation. In any event, I don't see how I can project images to the children sitting at the far end of the room since understandably there is no projector.

The teens do not seem to have textbooks, at least any I could see, though many have little notebooks that remind me of the kind I used in elementary school forty years ago. I am not even sure that each child has a pen or

DRAFT

pencil. I am glad that I went to my local dollar store before coming to Nigeria and purchased a variety of colorful pens and pencils. These are treasured items to students and teachers here as they are in other developing countries I visited in the last few years. Looking at the plainness of the room, my concerns of the day before that no one would be interested in what I have to say are reinforced.

And yet, my presentation went better than I had hoped. The children and teens were subdued but responsive to my questions, comments and even laughed at my attempts to make the tone a little less serious. Two hours later we drive off to the next school. Whereas the first school was comprised of a series of small ground level joined rooms, this school is two levels and the rooms are no less bare and cluttered. Electricity here is also non-existent. Peering into one of the small, cluttered classrooms in which desks fill the room wall to wall, I am suddenly embarrassed that I complain about the lack of curtains in my classroom back home.

Ironically it was in these schools that I learned my first lessons about the state of technology in this part of Nigeria.

At each of the schools I visited in Owerri, I asked the students how many of them had cell phones. I wanted to take back the question as soon as it left my lips. Looking around at the cramped, windowless, bare classroom, it seemed a ridiculous if not rude question. In fact, almost all the teens, and even some of the children, claimed to have the latest model of cell phone. While I did expect that some kids would have a cell phone, I did not expect it to be the majority.

Ironically, old technology in Nigeria, such as landline telephones, is being leapfrogged to newer technologies. My first clue came when I tried to use the telephone in the three different hotels in which I stayed over the three weeks. I could neither call out nor have calls come into my room. This was frustrating as I wanted to hear my wife and son's voices. However, I could contact them via Internet. When I told my acquaintances in Nigeria about this, they told me to use my cell phone. I told them I did not have one with me. They looked at me puzzled as if to say, 'so much for being a media expert'.

In fact, this leapfrogging of old to new technology is not really specific to Nigeria. I experienced a similar preference and proliferation of cell phones over landline telephones in Jordan, the West Bank and China. And like Nigeria, youth in these countries are some of the largest users of cell phones. I think it fair to say that many developing countries are experiencing the same technological phenomenon. It seems to me even more ironic when considering that the number of homes in Canada that rely on landline telephones vastly outnumber those which rely *totally* on cell phones.

The reality is that ICT industries are booming in Nigeria. Evidence of this can be found not only in the number of cell phones, but also in the countless telecommunication companies advertised in and around the cities. The booming ICT and telecommunication industry has also caught the interest of government and industry stakeholders in the country. At the *Conference on Bridging the Digital and Scientific Divide: Forging Partnerships with Nigerian Diaspora*, held in the nation's capital city of Abuja in July 2005, the following recommendations were made:

- Establish a national or regional fiber optic backbone and broad based infrastructures as a national priority
- Develop and provide ICT education
- Develop a national policy within a year for formation and legislation of integrated ICT
- Encourage local manufacturers of ICT hardware.

(*Vanguard*, March 26, 2006)

Name a Canadian actor

Ten days later I boarded the bus back to Lagos, where I continued my presentations in several more schools. In many ways the Lagos schools I visited resemble those in Owerri with some structural differences. Most of the schools in Owerri are one level, whereas those in and around Lagos have multiple floors. A lack of bare necessities is still a challenge here. Electrical outlets are available in all of these schools, although like those in Owerri, power is intermittent. Some of these schools have an aging video projector, which is puzzling since there do not appear to be computers. A video projector does make my presentations a little easier although I doubt

DRAFT

whether the students at the back of the room can see the images projected onto the back of the small poster that substitutes as a screen.

Television in Nigeria is a mixture of homemade and copycat productions of American TV such as a non-stop, 24 hours a day version of Big Brother. And while Nigeria has in recent years been developing a booming movie and broadcast industry, I saw no movie theatres or advertisements that would suggest that such an industry existed. Neither were there any advertisements for Hollywood type films. I decided to find out what impact Western mainstream media has on the youth at the schools I visited.

I asked the youth at the schools I visited in Lagos what they saw as the difference between Nigerian and American television and movies. 'Nigerian is cultural, American is more action', which under closer examination was a reference to violence. In most cases they indicated a preference for Nigerian media.

By playing media trivia pursuit with the teens in the Lagos schools, I learned something about their knowledge of national and international celebrities. I asked them to name five American and five Nigerian actors while I timed them. This proved not to be a problem. The fastest time for each category was under ten seconds, the longest twenty seconds.

The irony here is that when I ask students in and around Montreal to name five American and Canadian actors, naming American actors is of course not a problem; naming Canadian actors proved to be difficult if not impossible. Many Nigerian students either giggled or looked puzzled when I told them that their counterparts in Canada had difficulty naming Canadian actors. I tried to defend it by saying that Canada's close proximity to the United States makes it difficult to establish a truly Canadian popular culture. I am not sure they bought it; I didn't.

Thomas Adewumi International College

Not long after arriving in Lagos, my host informed me that we were going to *Thomas Adewumi International College* where I was to spend two days giving presentations to the students and faculty.

The school is located just outside the village of Oko, a six-hour arduous drive from Lagos made all the more adventurous since we traveled at night, something even the locals frown upon.

I should point out here that many of the public schools, if not most of them, include the terms 'international' and/or 'college' to their names. *Thomas Adewumi International College* is one of those schools. The school is located on 350 acres of beautiful land; some of it landscaped other parts untouched. The proprietor is a wealthy Nigerian industrialist. A CEO from Britain operates the school. There are several buildings including residences for the over three hundred primary and secondary students and seventy staff. There is a brand new primary school, a farming project, a computer lab and, of course, neat classrooms. Most of the students come from families that can afford to give their children a quality education away from the hectic cities.

Traveling around the cities and countryside I noticed that there were very few advertisements for multi-national corporations. The vast majority of the billboards promote local businesses and products, religious agencies and schools. The exception here is the local and international telecommunication companies. But not a sign of a Wal-Mart, Nike, MacDonald's, KFC, or Starbucks was anywhere on the horizon which may account for the lack of advertisements for multi-corporations.

With this in mind, I presented the students at the *Thomas Adewumi International College* with a graphic of an American flag in which the stars had been replaced with numerous company logos. The students recognized between eleven and twenty five of the logos.

Benetton advertisements, as many media educators are aware, are great stimuli for prompting exercises in reading/analyzing media texts. I showed the students one of these ads – the close-up of the white girl and the black girl. Almost everyone I present the advertisement back home reads it as the angelic (white girl) next to the devil (black girl). I decided to see how the students at *Thomas Adewumi International College* would not only read the ad but, considering that I was the only white person in the room (actually there was only one other white person anywhere in the area), how they would react. Not surprisingly, they read the advertisement exactly the same way as everyone else. And perhaps they were being polite but they did not show any real indignation by its racial connotations.

DRAFT

So what do the logo and the Benetton activity say about the impact and influence of Western media and conglomerates and the way that we read media texts across international and distant borders?

Conclusion

The challenges that confronted educators in establishing a foothold for Media Education in western industrialized countries, such as Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States, might be described as theoretical, conceptual, political and pedagogical. That is, if teaching about media in schools was to be more than just learning how to use technology, we needed to define exactly what it is that we were really trying to do. More so, we needed a coherent framework to guide us in our teaching about media. Fortunately we are blessed in the West with many English Language Arts and media theorists and practitioners like Masterman, Buckingham, Duncan, and Pungente who, even before we had a clear understanding what it meant to teach about media, were already laying the foundation for what we now refer to as Media Literacy or Media Education. Many of us in Media Education have, and continue to appropriate what these pioneers developed over the last four decades.

Today the challenges faced to Media Literacy in many schools in Canada and the United States might be thought of as public relations and marketing. That is, while Media Literacy is now mandated in curriculum across Canada, it is fair to say that many educators do not have a good understanding of Media Literacy. Indeed, mandating a subject or an approach does not necessarily guarantee implementation. Quebec is a good example of this. While Media Literacy is mandated in the Quebec Education Program (QEP), Quebec's new and massive reform to the education system, it is one of the least understood aspects of the reform.

The other challenge to Media Education is the conservative nature of the education system. For the most part, teachers still hold onto the notion that print is the dominant form of discourse. Many, if not most, educators ignore non-print texts in their teaching. What the education systems have not acknowledged is that while print is even more valuable today than ever before, print is no longer the dominant form of discourse in a multimedia world especially for young people. Still, there is no doubt that Media Education has made huge gains in schools in many parts of the industrialized world.

Imagine now the challenges that confront educators in developing and post-conflict countries, like Nigeria, who wish to establish Media Education. As is evident from the brief description of my three weeks in Nigeria, imagining the challenges in such settings is not that difficult. Indeed, it is not hard to picture how poverty, wars and ideology can be hurdles to incorporating curriculum that is socio-political in nature as well as potentially expensive. Even before conceptual and pedagogical questions can be addressed, Media Education in developing countries must deal with issues including access to, and participation in education, equity and disparities between boys and girls, regional disparities, rural/urban disparities, social disparities and student – teacher ratios. These are issues that we hardly, if ever, considered in the early years of Media Education – thankfully.

Finally, Arthur Ashe, the tennis legend stated, "From what we get, we can make a living; what we give however, makes a life." I would like to believe that my brief experiences in Nigeria and the Middle East is what Ashe meant. But to be honest, I am sure that I added more to my own repertoire about media, youth and education in developing countries by my visits than I may have contributed to youth and educators in Nigeria. For this I am very grateful to the hundreds of children, teens and educators who were my guides then, and my inspiration now.