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JMS Honours

**MEETING ON THE HIGHWAY:**

A look at Highway Africa conference as a network and site for the development of social capital(Questionnaires: Research report).

I hereby declare that this essay is my work. I have acknowledged all other authors’ ideas and referenced direct quotations from their work. I have not allowed anyone else to borrow or copy my work.

Signature: l.mwilu Date**:** 3 November 2008

**Executive Summary**

1.1 Context

This report comes out of a research project conducted at the Highway Africa conference held from September 8 to 10, 2008 at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. Using delegates to the conference as respondents, the research explored the impact of Highway Africa conference as a network and site for the development of social capital. Working within the framework set out by network social capital theory, the research investigated whether networks are made and maintained in and out of the Highway Africa conference. It also investigated the depth and width of these networks, their strength and what social capital is being gained by delegates if any. This was done with the view to map linkages formed at the conference, to see who is connecting with whom and for what reasons. The great impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) cannot be denied. In fact Highway Africa has made it one of its main focuses since inception (Berger 2008). This research sought to establish how these technologies have helped. It looked specifically at the Highway Africa conference which is the offspring of Highway Africa as a whole. Judging by its many contributions to African journalism, the project was assumed to be fertile ground to find out if these networks germinate in and outside the conference.

1.2 Overview of findings

The research established that networks are being formed at the Highway Africa conference and social capital being gained. Delegates use the conference to learn more about ICTs and the latest advancements in this area. Some also use it as a training ground; the place where you not only get ideas but the necessary training to carry them out. This opportunity, it emerged, is not only being utilized by media workers but other institutions such as NGOs as well. Some delegates see and use the conference as their link to the rest of the media in Africa; a way of staying in touch with the rest of the continent in terms of information flows. Francophone and Lusophone delegates mentioned language as a barrier that generally confined their networks to a few countries. This concern, however, was not shared by Anglophone delegates who listed Francophone countries as some of their top connections. The research also established that the conference is being used as a meeting place for other business (e.g. headhunting potential employees) as it is seen as bringing together some of the best brains in African journalism. The connections being made generally go across the continent but are evidently most dense within regions i.e. SADC is connecting most with SADC, West Africa with West Africa etc. Of special note is South Africa where all the respondents had their most contacts in South Africa. The majority of respondents mostly connected with neighbouring countries and almost always with South Africa as well. It also emerged that the conference itself has such a high reputation among the delegates that merely being associated with it was enough reason for them to participate. Overall, there was general expression of interest in the conference’s topics i.e. ICTs and Citizen Journalism, and an overwhelming need to grow a network with like-minded people from other parts of Africa. Gaining a news contact in another African country and sharing experiences and ideas towards a common goal for African media development were some of the most recurrent reasons for networking.

2. **Objectives**

The Highway Africa conference is “the flagship of the programme, [a] forum for critical reflection on journalism, media and technology and a celebration of Africa” (Highway Africa: 2008). At the beginning of the research, we were aware that the conference has been a valuable networking site for the delegates that attend but what we were unsure about was whether its potential for creation of social capital via the sustenance of networks was being realised. The research was conducted with the knowledge that there have been past as well as ongoing studies evaluating the value of Highway Africa. This particular research, however, took a whole new approach and sought to map the linkages formed at Highway Africa conference, to assess the depth and width of these networks and how they are maintained. With the understanding that a network does not necessarily equate to social capital (Berger 2008), the research sought to establish whether delegates use the conference to gain social capital and the specific forms this (social capital) takes. The research also sought to find evidence that networks are not only being created but maintained at the Highway Africa Conference. Moreover, the study sought to situate the role of ICTs in this network and explore whether these networks simply exist within the conference or whether they swell out into the industry.

This research was therefore conducted to broadly:

* Analyse the media networks that exist between African nations
* Analyse the value Highway Africa contributes to networking
* View the potential social capital between delegates at Highway Africa and whether it actually occurs.
* Explore whether ICTs play a role in the creation, growth and maintenance of networks at the Highway Africa conference.

3. **Administrative Information**

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4. **Methodology, conceptual and theoretical framework**

Interview-administered questionnaires were used as a method of data collection (questionnaire attached as Appendix 1). The researchers read out the questions to the respondents and wrote down the responses. This was done to allow respondents with a limited knowledge of English, i.e. French and Portuguese speakers, participate by reading out the questions to them and letting them ask for clarification where they did not understand. For francophone respondents, the method also allowed them to switch to French if they thought they would express themselves better. The other reason was to ensure that all questionnaires were filled in; this would have been difficult to manage if questionnaires were handed out because that would have created the possibility of some of them not being returned.

A total of 39 questionnaires were circulated to delegates from different parts of the continent. For analysis purposes Africa was divided into three regions namely SADC, Central and North Africa and West Africa. Some countries had more respondents than others because they had more delegates and were therefore more accessible. The breakdown of the 39 respondents was: 16 West Africa, 16 SADC and 7 Central and North Africa.

There were two parts to the questionnaire; qualitative and quantitative. Both parts were structured and designed partly with the notion in mind that “active networks can constitute a resource, where people can get results that they would not achieve working alone” (Field in Berger 2008:9). Highway Africa is a “professional network sharing broadly similar goals and norms about what it means to be an African Journalist with an interest in ICTs and Information Society issues” (Berger 2008: 18). The conceptual and theoretical framework of this research therefore focused on network potential in Africa. The research investigated whether Highway Africa as a network is a space where new networks can be created.

The research investigated whether the Highway Africa conference as a network impacts on social capital (Berger 2008: 20). “Highway Africa organisers and donors/sponsors intuitively hope to create this stock by their involvement in the project” (Berger 2008:23).

5. **Participation by research subjects / Ethical considerations**

The questionnaires were interview-administered by the research team. The researchers obtained the list of delegates to the conference and used it to find out which African countries were represented. We used this to look for respondents that would help us have a sample that was as geographically representative as possible. Based on this and gender, we identified our respondents and sought their consent beforehand. In order to allow them an opportunity to give informed consent, information on what the research project is about, which is basically mapping the linkages formed at the conference, was communicated to the respondents including what was required of them. Confidentiality was assured especially to those who requested anonymity; the only personal information the researchers were asking for was country of origin and profession i.e. NGO, Media, Corporate, Academia etc. Although it was not a requirement, some gave their full names as well.

6. **Data Collection/ Piloting**

The data was collected over the duration of the conference with the first day being used to pilot the project. The filled-in questionnaires from the research team were put aside and data aggregated according to gender and geographical regions e.g. Southern Africa, West Africa etc. Analysis of data from the pilot showed repetitions and gaps which led to the questionnaires being re-structured; some questions were re-phrased and others removed. The answers given did not fit with our objectives and the reason, it was realised, was that some question were not clear enough. After the re-structuring, the respondents spoke more to our objectives and for that reason the data from the pilot was not included in the final analysis.

7. **Data Analysis**

All the 39 filled-in questionnaires were separately analysed and dominant themes identified and further analysed. Certain trends, some unanticipated, emerged and these have been reported in the findings. For analysis purposes, the respondents were grouped into three regional categories namely Central and North Africa, SADC and West Africa. Of the 39 respondents 24 were journalists, 4 from NGOs, 3 were public relations people, 3 academics, 3 corporate/ management and 2 from media councils.

8. **Gender Considerations**

Women have increasingly become active in assuming responsibilities in journalism all over the world (Africa in this case) and the research attempted to interrogate evidence of that fact within Highway Africa as a hub of African journalistic networks. The research sought to establish whether they were well represented (i.e. equally represented as compared to men) and thus considered by this network as valuable assets who have information and knowledge about ICTs relevant to media and journalism in Africa to share.

Are they included or their voices heard in the debates that take place at this conference or are these debates dominated by the patriarchal discourse? Are they part of network establishment or seen as potentially valuable contacts for collaborative further action?

The research project attempted to have an equal number of male and female respondents and what emerged was that the women that were there, although many in number, represented only a few countries. The men on the other hand, were fairly spread out in terms of countries of origin.

9. **Projected Utility and Impact**

In terms of value, this research should be useful for improvising or fine-tuning the conference itself in terms of planning, budgetary allocations, workshops/seminars, constituency allocations (students, media practitioners, academia, etc), and also a useful foundation for further research and development studies in future.

The findings would be a useful barometer in unearthing previously unknown or disregarded issues. Thus, it would draw attention to the potential weaknesses of the structure of these networks, so that they can be improved in future conferences.

The research findings should also be useful in the *restructuring* and *reprioritising* the goals/objectives of HA as whole and specifically for future conferences. Simply put, it would serve as a catalyst for a possible overhauling of the HA concept in order to give it more value by making it more effective, efficient and beneficial to the African media landscape.

In a nutshell, this research should be useful for the following:

* Highway Management can use the findings to improve the creation of social capital/networks or to enhance the sustainability of these networks.
* It would be a useful tool to rectify past mistakes in the organisation of the conference in terms of creating a conducive environment where intra-networks function properly—a goal of the HA conference. The research findings stand as a good foundation for further research.
* These research findings can serve as feedback to all interested parties.
* The overall standard/quality of the conference itself stands a chance of being improved.
* It is useful as a sensitisation material for participants within the HA network to focus on the primary objectives of the conference itself and the advantages of social capital.

Impact

These research findings could serve as a wake-up call for HA management and participants. There is a chance that participants would have a change in attitude in terms of networking and taking advantage of the conference itself in establishing sustainable communication lines with new and old participants.

10. **Evaluation of research / description of sample / overall findings**

The research revealed that by creating a meeting place for African journalists, the Highway Africa conference enables the formation of media networks between African countries. This is of great importance because without a platform and starting point these networks would not exist. A good number of respondents pointed out that Highway Africa allowed them opportunities that they normally would not get. These opportunities are in form of training, sharing experiences and getting ideas on how to improve, and gaining contacts that are mutually beneficial; learning from experts and meeting people who are normally inaccessible.

According to Field, “active networks can constitute a resource, where people can get results that they would not achieve working alone” (cited in Berger 2008:9). This is what Highway Africa is to a lot of delegates.

“Social Capital theory is an approach which lends itself to analysing the significance of Highway Africa in terms of costs and especially the benefits of the project” (Berger 2008:20)

The research revealed that delegates do benefit from Highway Africa in different ways and social capital definitely occurs among delegates.

What emerged were differences in reasons first for attending the conference and second for networking. Some respondents had no reason for attending the conference except that they were invited, and others saw their mere presence as the most valuable contribution to the conference. Some did not see networking as a priority and indicated that meeting people from other African countries would not be a bad idea even though it was not something they had thought about. These responses were in pointed contrast to those of other respondents who attended the conference because they were interested in learning about ICTs and Citizen Journalism and were also very keen to meet people from other African countries for synergies (mutually advantageous connections). They also indicated what they considered their most valuable contributions to the conference and these were very varied but included such reasons as ability to critique the conference structure and content and suggest improvements, ability to share experiences that would give ideas to others such as making professional videos on a mobile phone, teaching others how to create and maintain a blog or educating others on different forms of journalism such as peace journalism which is not widely used in Africa. There were also some that felt the conference was an opportunity for them to share their views on different issues and be heard such as their objection to the term citizen journalist. They felt it was not right for “just anyone” to be called a citizen journalist because some people had invested money, time and effort into “real” journalism training and could not share the title with unqualified people.

Respondents were asked to name the top five African countries where they had made the most contacts through Highway African and from this the research team found that the connections were largely regional with just a few crossing regions. Although South Africa had the most respondents naming their most contacts as being from South Africa, many other respondents mentioned South Africa as a top connection. There was a strong connection between Francophone countries with only a few connecting to Anglophone countries.

What this research did not establish was the reason for this bonding type of connection and whether or not it was good. As Berger (2007) points out “such inward-looking networks reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneity” and may also imply a level of network closure (ibid: 25).

The most recurrent reason for networking among delegates from SADC and West Africa was to have a local news contact in as many African countries as they could possibly manage. This, they said, would help them get stories from that country quicker and most importantly it would break their reliance on international media for African stories. I saw this as being well within the ongoing media debate on the need to have the African story told by Africans. It also indicated the amount of trust in fellow delegates who they felt would be a more accurate source of news than international media. Linked to the issue of trust was another development among delegates from four different countries (but within SADC) who had agreed to jointly set up a blog. This, for me, was an indication of the presence of social capital as Highway Africa is not just a network but one where participation, trust and reciprocity are present. According to Berger (2008) it is qualities such as these that add social capital to a network. Highway Africa is also seen as a platform to create and enhance a common African identity. This came through in some responses which expressed a desire to create “communities” with fellow African journalists as they were “one people” with “more similarities than differences”. Some felt that being associated with Highway Africa conference would build their CVs and improve their standing amongst fellow journalists and others felt it was an opportunity to meet “important and influential” people who would otherwise be inaccessible. Some academics pointed out that Highway Africa was a “one-stop shop” for all the latest issues in terms of research. It is a place where research ideas and up to date information can be obtained and this, they said, enriched their lectures. What was unexpected, for me, was one South African academic’s response that she attended the conference to headhunt foreign lecturers for her university’s journalism and media studies department. This is indicative of the confidence placed in Highway Africa as the meeting place of some of the best African media workers. It also shows that the conference serves different people differently. Related to this, one respondent indicated that she had been attending the conference for many years and identifying initiatives that her organisation can fund. She indicated that she was now looking at how her organisation (Oxfam) could play a more pro-active role and be part of future Highway Africa conferences. One NGO brought its staff to learn about citizen journalism and ICTs so that they could go and educate grass root communities on the same. This shows how much delegates benefit from the conference in terms of capacity building. What I have highlighted here are just some of the things that came up that proved that social capital is being created and the benefits being enjoyed by delegates. Benefits of social capital include “information flows, the influence potential of those in network with power, increases in social credentials, and reinforcing identity” (Berger 2008 citing Lin). These resonate with the reasons given by most respondents.

TRENDS: recurring themes according to regions

1. Topic interest: learning about ICTs and citizen journalism

SADC

West Africa

1. Meeting people and networking, contributing through experiences and ideas

SADC West Africa (same level)

Central and North Africa

1. Making news contacts in other African countries SADC West Africa (same level)
2. Meeting place

SADC

1. Common identity

West Africa SADC

11.

Apart from collecting data through questionnaires, I did some observation and picked up the following:

* Delegates appeared more relaxed and seemed to interact more outside the conference sessions. A specific example would be the tea breaks outside Eden Grove in between sessions where conversation was generally lively and mixed in terms of gender.
* There was general conversation on the shuttles to and from lunch although some people kept quiet and either read or just stared through the window. The conversations had more participants and were clearly louder on the shuttles returning from lunch than those going. This I imagined was because the conversations were continuing from lunch tables.
* Men and women seemed to interact generally but what I thought was worth noting was that men generally tended to keep to their age groups i.e. older men were more in the company of fellow older men and younger men were more in the company of younger men. Women, on the other hand, crossed all age groups.
* The tea breaks in between sessions were the only times I heard delegates discuss anything from the sessions outside the actual sessions. Here the mood was generally business like with a few people analysing conference topics while others wandered off and had their tea in isolated spaces.
* Francophone delegates generally stuck together during tea and lunch breaks and at evening events (dinners, receptions etc). They were probably not the only ones sticking together but they were the easiest to spot because they used French.
* The delegates were generally most relaxed at evening events; they mingled, talked and laughed a lot, a number of them left their usual groups (i.e. tea and lunch groups ) and some even danced.
* After evening events, lunch was where the most interaction happened; the delegates were generally relaxed, talked a lot and exchanged business cards.
* In the Eden Grove labs delegates were generally very quiet, doing different things; checking and sending e mails, sending stories, visiting news sites and chatting on face book.

12. **Recommendations/ Conclusion**

A number of participants saw the Highway Africa conference as an opportunity to learn about ICTs and Citizen Journalism. This shows the relevance of the conference’s topics to African media today and the interest they (topics) draw among the people the conference targets. This also means that Highway Africa conference is making a contribution to the African Information Society and consequently the continent’s revival. This is so because “media is a means to making Information Society policy (of which ICT policy is a central part) a powerful force for African revival” (Berger 2005). It is in “educating journalists and other media workers to better understand both ICTs and related policy issues” that African media’s hope of “ playing a full role in terms of relevant ICT-related policy agenda- setting or debate, and policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and review” lies. (Berger 2005). The delegates exhibited very different levels of understanding of issues, with some knowing a lot and others not having even a vague idea of why they were there except that they had to “replace a sick co-worker” or more commonly because they were invited. I saw this as a source of concern because for people to participate and contribute intelligently they have to be aware of what is going on otherwise they take out social capital without putting anything back. This I think could be remedied by stricter screening of participants or thorough education of what the conference (through literature) is about before they arrive.

What could also be done is circulate the list of delegates (to all delegates) before the conference so that people may have an opportunity to know who will be there and allow them to look for specific people depending on the issue they are most interested in. This could solve a concern that was generally raised by respondents who did not know who was there. This, they felt, could make them miss the opportunity of meeting people they have always wanted to meet even though they were also at the conference.

A kind of alumni network could be formed where past delegates remain in contact with the organisers and share what they are doing within the networks they formed at Highway Africa. If none of these networks last either beyond the conference or a certain timeframe, reasons for this could help organisers come up with measures that would strengthen the sustainability of future networks.

I am not sure if this is already being done but Highway Africa organisers could conduct a survey in selected newsrooms all over the continent to have an idea what journalists would like to learn or get out of a network. This would help the conference know which topics are relevant to journalists and which participants would not only learn from but also add the most to the discussions. This would be useful because the research showed that there were some delegates who had very specific needs such as hoping to learn how to run a blog in a small community that has very limited access to the internet.

Further research should try to establish why connections appear to be regional and why South Africa is considered such a top connection, is it by virtue of being the host (and therefore the majority and most accessible) or is this where the most social capital is coming from? Why did South African respondents name their top contacts as being from South Africa; does this indicate that they may not be getting as much out of networking with delegates from other parts of Africa as they seem to be putting in or does it simply indicate the beginning of network closure? Without focusing on South Africa exclusively, further research could investigate the extent to which bonding capital is occurring among delegates and how much “diversity as an asset for social capital” (Berger 2007:25) is being missed.

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APPENDIX 1 – Questionnaire

**PART 1**

On a scale one to three, please answer the following questions

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Questions** | **Agree** | **Neutral** | **Disagree** |
| 1) You interact with delegates within your profession  (e.g. NGO, corporate, journalism, academia etc) |  |  |  |
| 2) You will keep contact with people you have  befriended at Highway Africa |  |  |  |
| 3) You will share your experiences and training from  Highway Africa with your colleagues at home |  |  |  |
| 4) You network better with people of your own  gender |  |  |  |
| 5) The delegates that you meet are/will be valuable  to you or your career |  |  |  |
| 6) You find it easy to contribute to discussions at the  conference |  |  |  |

**PART 2**

Open-ended questions

1. Why did you come to the conference?
2. Is there a particular delegate you wish to speak with at the conference? If so, who and why?
3. What do you consider your most valuable contribution to Highway Africa?
4. Is gaining contacts from different African countries a goal of yours at Highway Africa? If so, what are your particular reasons for networking with delegates? If there is more than one please mention three.

**PART 3**

Please mention the top 5 countries where you have the most number of friends made through Highway Africa. Please indicate your country of origin.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.