

DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING READING COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA: A MULTIMEDIA APPROACH

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present an optimistic perspective to the on-going debate on Nigeria's poor reading culture by proposing a community-based innovative model. The model--The Multi-Media Community Reading Model--is a scholarly renovation of the African concept of community learning which encourages group approach to storytelling. Three concepts: Orality, Community and Convergence are the building blocks with which an attempt is made to take advantage of radio stations, television stations, virtual communities, online forums and online book clubs to encourage an interface between a waning culture and an emerging one, between a weak reading tradition and modernity. It is recommended that pilot reading communities should be introduced by universities and governments, using some identified online and offline communities as demonstration communities. Some Nigeria-based online book clubs are also recommended as possible experimentation platforms.

Keywords: Reading, Community, Innovations Participation, Multi-Media Model, Convergence, Nigeria.

Introduction

Before the arrival of missionaries to Nigerian communities, learning was not a matter of reading and writing. It was largely informal and characterized by what scholars now describe as orality, a concept that stands for the passing of information by oral storytelling. Parents, teachers, community leaders as well as opinion leaders all employed this method to achieve desired communication objectives in their communities. The coming of missionaries with western education, therefore, marked a turning point in the mode of education delivery throughout Nigeria.

From Henry Townsend's publication of Nigeria's first news paper in 1859 to the present day, the idea of establishing a stable reading culture in Nigeria has been a difficult task. In a letter written about 150 years ago, Townsend told a friend that it had been "difficult" to get Nigerians to seek and secure information by reading (Duyile, 2004). His challenges and those of others, who have attempted to promote a reading culture in Nigeria, stem partly from the fact that Africa's information and knowledge-sharing culture is rooted in orality, and human beings are known to generally resist change, even inevitable ones like reading.

It is common knowledge that members of academic communities and other marginalized communities in Nigeria lack reliable means of feedback to media messages beamed at them or against them through public and commercial media. So when the universities of Lagos, Ibadan, Ilorin and others received community radio license and began to broadcast, the

expectation was that they were going to typify the ideal community radio. But reports from these institutions indicate that only the Unizik FM owned and operated by the Nnamdi Azikiwe University community is trying to involve staff and students in station management and programming (We hope we are wrong). Others have been hijacked by university authorities thereby continuing to marginalize students and some members of staff.

It has been argued that one of the reasons for the establishment of community media in developing countries is to address the imbalance suffered by marginalized communities (Opubor, 2012; Pate, 2008). In the Nigerian context, where many have also argued that many communities (even in urban areas) are marginalized in terms of radio programming, the coming of digital media, especially mobile digital media, offer some flexibility because the energy requirements are often easier to meet.

As this argument rages, technological advances present opportunities for reading and learning through the conventional media, the Internet, mobile devices and applications. The advent of talking books, especially presents to African learning communities something we could describe as the missing link between orality and modernity. How to marry the old with the new for the development of a virile reading culture in Nigeria is the objective of this paper. In his article published in *The Book: A World Transformed*, Kyomuhendo (2001:42) posed the questions "Do we want to reinstate Africa's orality? Or can the book strike a balance between new technological trends and Africa's oral traditions?" He also came close to proffering an answer to his own question when he wrote in the same work:

We cannot block 'development'. What we can do is popularize the book. But to make the book more appealing and accessible to African people and others, I believe the definition of reading must be enlarged to include listening and sharing... the onus is on us all (Kyomuhendo, 2001:41).

From the foregoing, it seems obvious that the onus is really on Africa's academic community to provide the research basis for any possible balance between Africa's undying interest in orality and her increasing interest in technological trends of the day. Rather than reinstate the oral traditions in a "tales-by-moonlight" fashion, which may not be so easy today, we are challenged to find a middle ground between tradition and modernity. The advent of e-publishing and e-books has also prompted other scholars to raise similar questions. Among them is Portella (2001:10) who asked: "The question arises as to whether instant communication is bound to blur every instance of collective identity, to reiterate but a single message, or rather to aid the further expression of multiple identities, through the eventual development of such devices as automatic translation?"

In the same work in which Potella posed this question, he explained that plunging the book into the cyberspace may become the beginning of its salvation and this is especially true in the African context. The statements present the uncertainty with which many view the future of the book, especially in countries like Nigeria. But more important than this is that it also elevates the issue to the level of debate, a debate to which this work is attempting to contribute. With such questions begging for answers, it becomes logical that any attempt to provide an answer should begin with an explanation of the concepts relating to the present,

past and future of the book and reading in Nigeria. It also makes sense that we should explore old and new media (for reading programmes), especially since they have been blamed by scholars as a major obstacle to the reading projects springing up in various parts of the country.

Conceptual Clarification: In this work “community” refers to people in a geographic or virtual proximity, experiencing frequent, if not continuous, contact, sharing certain cultural attributes, accessing certain common resources and beliefs (Opubor, 2012). If we accept, as Opubor argues, that appropriate media for each community should grow from its communication systems, it follows that Nigeria’s learning communities accessing multiple media channels should be targeted of those multiple points.

Theoretical basis for proposing a media-based model

Theoretical assumptions for the Model are based on the Media Convergence theory, the Technological Determinism theory and the Democratic-Participant Media Theory. The media convergence theory was proposed by Henry Jenkins to describe the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the co-operation among multiple media industries and the migratory behaviour of media audiences, especially those who search for entertainment. The theory explains that a whole range of technologies enable audiences to receive, re-circulate, archive and use media content, often in ways different from the traditional ways of engaging with and consuming media content (Jenkins, 2008).

Media convergence is conceptualized as an aspect of cultural convergence. In this context, it is assumed that media will generally continue to evolve to the point where users trying to access a programme will be in position to select which of several platforms to access it through. It is built on the concepts of synergy, collective intelligence and participation. In fact, it is based on ten assumptions borrowed from the media convergence theory (Jenkins, 2008). These assumptions include: presenting important aspects of a story/message through multiple channels, synergy across multiple media platforms, providing different points of entry accessible to various segments of the audience, strong centralized information management or good collaboration among facilitators and among community members and making room for user-created content and horizontal interactivity (Toschi, 2009). Each medium/platform is made to do only what it does best for the segment of the audience it serves best. Thus a book may be accessed in print, on radio, on television, the Internet and mobile devices.

Toschi (2009) cited the example of the British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, which is already taking advantage of media convergence to extend the reach of the programme *Doctor Who*. The corporation combines mobile technology, podcasts, games, vlogs, fiction websites and targeted spin-offs to promote the programme which was originally designed as a television show.

Technological determinism: This theory, according to Potts (2010) proposes that the most significant cultural and social effects of media derive from the intrinsic properties of the media themselves. He, however, explains that the impact of digital information and networking should provoke a reconsideration of all the theories often classified as medium theories, the oldest of which is the technological determinism theory proposed by Marshal McLuhan in the

1960s. Its antecedents in western thought have been identified either in support or in criticism of its controversial claims.

The basic assumptions of the theory are: The message of any medium is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs; that each new medium of communication alters the patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance (McLuhan 1974: 27); that this affects the individual engagement with the medium; that the technology of any medium will affect the cognitive functions of those who use it, thereby causing inevitable change in culture; and that some media have hot properties while others have cool properties which help to affect the cognitive functions of the users. The birth of the internet and its globalizing influence has given impetus to arguments in favour of technological determinism.

Democratic-Participant Media Theory: The democratic participant media theory argues that the existing bureaucracy, commercial cartels and professional hegemony in media systems should be broken down to guarantee wider access for members of communities. This theory is increasingly becoming useful among scholars in communities where people are generally dissatisfied with the degree of liberty and social responsibility provided through existing media.

According to Folarin (1989:30), "It reflects public reaction against the commercialization and monopolization of privately owned media and against the centralism and bureaucratization of public broadcasting institutions, established according to the norms of social responsibility".

The theory contends that greater attention should be given to the needs, interests and aspirations of media consumers in the community, and that emphasis in media ownership and operation should be on pluralism, decentralization and localism, and that horizontal communication and feedback should be encouraged. It also contends that the mass media are too important to be left in the hands of professionals. New media seem to, now, effectively put part of media power in the hands of community members.

To the extent that media convergence supports users accessing media through several available platforms and technological determinism specifies that some of the choices will be determined by the nature of the available media (eg mobile) the two theories provide grounding for the argument of this paper.

Filling a gap with the multi-media model

Scholars argue that digital media and other media including analogue and digital radio are drawing youths away from books. Delich (2001:37) affirmed this in these words: "it is true that digitization could bring to every home a virtual library that exceeds any individual's capacity for consultation and absorption. This phenomenon is spreading throughout the world...". The above statement inadvertently also explains that we can infuse book content into those digital media such as digital radio. Aymard (2001:139) argues that the recuperation of oral tradition actually began with the invention of the printing press in Europe and the subsequent "recuperation of the oral tradition by scholarly literature, which often precedes its being made available through books, illustrated or otherwise to a large audience, thanks to

simplified editions...". In other words, he is arguing that each phase in the metamorphosis of the book brings something positive to the reading culture of the people. To that extent, he thinks that the metamorphosis of the book in the present era would logically bring an accompanying metamorphosis to the reading culture. This determinist perspective is held by other scholars too.

While these scholars eulogize new developments in book formats and reading techniques, Del-Corral (2001:147) argues that the new technology-mediated book device may not be able to take the place of reading out the words and hearing them paint pictures in human minds. He stated: I always say that there is nothing more interactive than the act of reading, and faced with those who say a picture paints a thousand words, I believe that a word paints a thousand pictures. As extreme as this view might seem, the positions of several scholars appear to support it.

Portella (2001:10) is of the view that the current, seemingly inevitable interface of traditional book publishing and modern media provides an opportunity to "compare the role of written expression that Plato considered indispensable to genuine debate". He thinks that reading out the content of a book to an audience conveys a certain force that enriches the communication experience. In the same vein, Bauman (2001:16) argues that the setting of a community reading experience leaves its imprint on the story told. He said "storytelling fed on shared audience experience and in turn fed into it. The setting of the conversion could not therefore but leave its profound imprint on the story told" This determinist position seems to lend credence to Kyomuhendo's concerns about taking advantage of Africa's communal life in education and literacy programmes. His argument is that African societies, including Nigeria, "traditionally place a high premium on communal life than on the idea of individualism that is implicit in the solitary reading of books...Africans still tend to mind each other's business and to do things together"(Kyomuhendo 2001:41).

Okpala (2009:99) recommends that reading can be promoted effectively in Nigeria through the provision of mobile libraries, collective reading platforms and reading clubs. According to her, "An excellent way to improve reading is to read and be read to". It is much easier to take advantage of mobile devices which are already available with youths and adults than to provide mobile libraries. She also recommends the promotion of reading in Nigeria through the:

World Wide Web pages/sites for children and young people; one of the aims of which is to promote reading, often through games, discussion, activities, listening to stories (through real audio) and 'reading along' with the pages on the screen (Okpala, 2009:101).

Findings by Ogum (2004) indicate that radio, home video and other new media devices draw readers away from printed books. In a more recent work, Christopher (2009:135) argues, as did Baran (2002), that new technologies allow seamless alteration of sound and pictures and make way for communication to be presented in a non-linear way and in an easily accessible digital media. Since, according to her, "many books come with CD-ROM and some are available on CD-ROM ... incorporating features that tend to draw readers away from books",

it may not be a bad idea to find ways of passing book contents through some of the mobile radio media and online radio to which they are drawn.

Without disagreeing with Abiodun-Ekus and Onukaogu (2009) who recommended that government should pay more attention to and put more funds into reading culture promotion, it might not be out of pace for stakeholders to, first, take advantage of the over 100 radio stations in Nigeria provided primarily by governments and the campus community radio stations springing up all over the country.

The Problem

This work is predicated on the observation that community broadcasting discourse in Nigeria and some other countries seems to emphasize only rural communities to the utter neglect of other marginalized, voiceless communities such as student communities in University campuses. The neglect is such that campus community radio stations licensed in Nigeria have been generally hijacked and controlled, sometimes for commercial purposes, by university authorities. Not even the trend of students migrating to online entertainment media and social network communities is considered enough reason to introduce internet-enabled programmes or to use learning programmes to re-direct their attention to reading using the FM campus stations.

The main task of this paper, therefore, is to highlight this development, describe the multi-media innovations which university authorities, governments and media scholars need to take advantage of and to propose a model for implementation. The model is based on a multi-media arrangement involving FM radio stations, television stations, online broadcasting websites and offline reading centers, book clubs and forums. To accomplish this objective, the study will answer the following questions:

What is the theoretical basis for proposing a technology-based model for learning communities?

Does the literature present any gap which may be filled with the model?

Is there evidence of existing conventional stations, internet platforms and reading clubs/forums to support the proposed model?

Do we have a critical mass of potential reading community members to support a new reading model?

How would the model be implemented to make it viable? Would the model be viable?

Methodology

To produce evidence of the existence of the necessary media infrastructure that may support multi-media delivery within defined learning communities, examination of official records was made. The search provided data on the population of people involved in formal education at various levels in Nigeria but failed to provide substantial data for existing communications infrastructure and virtual communities. Thus, a second instrument, observation guide, was designed to collect information from websites. Two researchers were made to search the World Wide Web for data on: list of Nigerian University communities that have radio broadcasting license, Nigerian radio stations rendering online services, list of

online communities, clubs and forums in the education sector. Over 224 websites were visited over a period of two months. Data collected are presented in the next section.

Is there evidence of existing conventional stations, internet platforms and reading clubs/forums to support the proposed model?

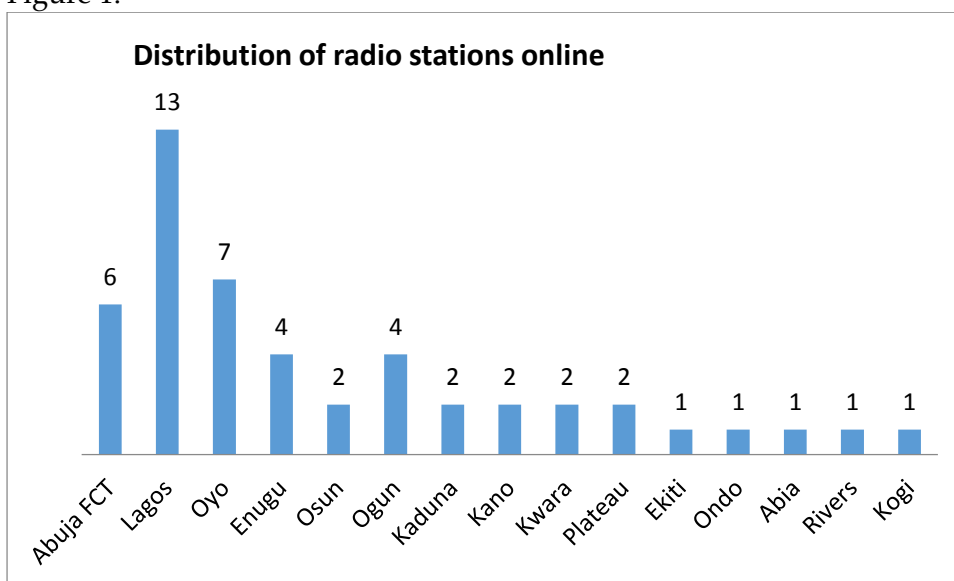
Online radio platforms are springing up in almost all states of Nigeria. There are over 100 radio stations in Nigeria, and 49 of them have online presence, which implies that they are in position to collaborate with the 28 campus stations listed. In the Lagos area alone, we have 13 radio stations which are currently distributing some of their programmes through the internet. In Oyo State, we have seven, Abuja Capital Territory 6, Enugu State 4, Ogun State 4. Osun, Kaduna, Kano and Plateau have two each while Ekiti, Ondo, Abia, Rivers, Kogi all have one each. This brings the total number of stations to 49 and the total number of states to 15. Below is a list of FM Stations, Internet platforms, clubs and forums presented to support the proposition:

Table 1: List of Universities with Campus Radio License

University Name	License Year	Location	Name of Radio Station
University of Lagos	2002	Akoka, Lagos	UNILAG103.1FM
University of Nigeria	2007	Nsukka	-
Nnamdi Azikwe University	2007	Awka	UNIZIK94.1FM
Obafemi Awolowo University	2007	Ile-Ife	-
Ahmadu Bello University	2007	Zaria	-
National Teachers Institute	2007	Kaduna	-
Auchi Polytechnic	2007	Auchi	HILLSIDE94.1FM
Madonna University	2007	Okija	MADONNA93.3FM
National Open University of Nigeria	2007	Lagos	NOUN105.9FM
Cross River State University of Science and Technology	2009	Ogoja	-
Federal University of Technology	2009	Minna	SEARCHFM
Igbinedion University	2009	Okada	-
Bayero University	2009	Kano	-
University of Port Harcourt	2009	Port Harcourt	-
Rivers State University of Science and Technology	2009	Port Harcourt	-
Usman Danfodio University	2009	Sokoto	-
Akwa Ibom Polytechnic	2009	Ikot Osurua	-
University of Ibadan	2009	Ibadan	DIAMOND101FM
University of Jos	2009	Jos	-
Babcock University	2009	Ilisan Remo	-
University of Ilorin	2009	Ilorin	UNILORIN89.3FM

Federal University of Technology	2009	Akure	FUTA93.1FM
Lagos State University	2009	Lagos	-
University of Abuja	2009	Abuja	-
Caritas University	2009	Enugu	CARITAS98.7FM
Kaduna Polytechnic	2009	Kaduna	-
University of Uyo	2009	Uyo	-

Radio distribution networks platforms are also springing up online. Details are presented in Figure 1:



Online book clubs, reading communities and forums are growing rapidly. The university-based forums may be accessed through their individual sites or through universitiesofnigeria.com. A list of 12 is presented in Table 2:

Table 3: Online Communities, Clubs and Forums in Nigeria

Rainbow Book Club	unnforum.com	Naijareads.com
Naijapals.com	nigerianbestforum.com	Nigerwives forum
eportal.oauife.edu.ng	Altitude Book Club	myschoolcomm.com
lautech.edu.ng.	nairaland.com	uniben.edublog

Is there a critical mass of potential learning community members to support a new reading model?

Information made available by *internetworldstatitics.com* (2019) indicate that there are over 44 million internet users in Nigeria while the National Bureau of Statistics (2008) stated that there were about 33million candidates in the three tiers of Nigeria’s public educational system in 2007. A breakdown is presented: University student population---689,981;Polytechnic student population---272,038;College of Education Student population---351,519; Mono-technic student population---4,146; Secondary student population---6,536,038; Primary student population---24,422,918. These figures do not include about half a million teachers engaged at

the various levels of the school system and millions of pupils in private schools. These figures suggest that the critical mass needed for the adoption of the proposed reading model has been attained.

In other words, learning communities like ABS (Enugu) *UniAir* radio programme for distance learning students could stream their programmes online to extend the reach and make the content timeless. Book content is delivered over the World Wide Web direct to the reader’s computer or device (webcasting), or may require downloading (podcasting).

Local examples of learning communities’ clubs and forums include: Reading centres created by different groups (e.g) Niger wives Reading Club Centre, Lagos), Online Book Clubs (Altitude Book Club, and Rainbow Book Club), Reading Forums such as Naijareads.com, Learning Communities such as student communities in campuses, Distance learning communities.

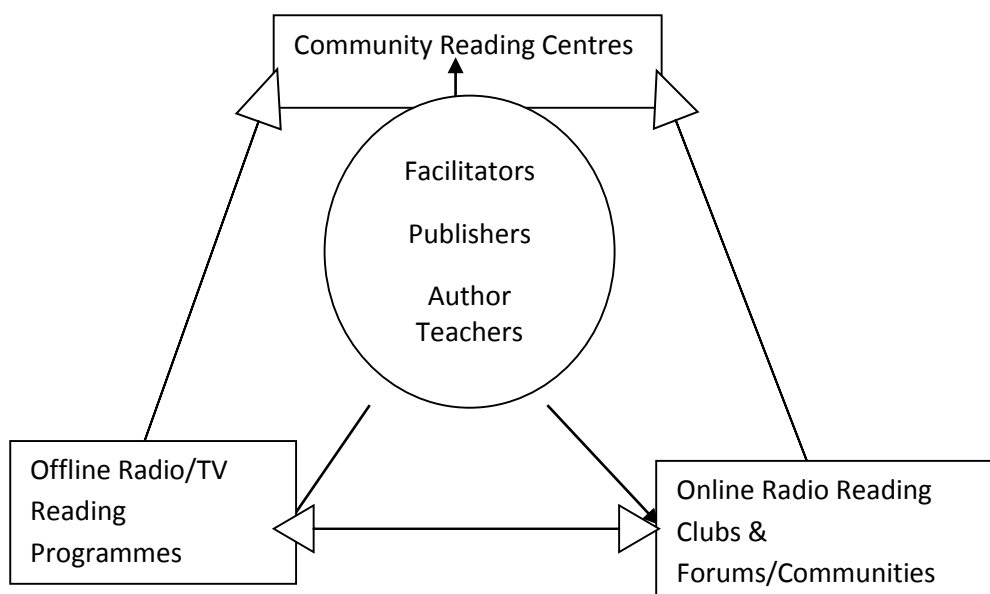
How will the reading model be implemented?

The Multi-Media-Community Reading Model (MCRM)

To accomplish the objective of finding a point of convergence for tradition and modernity, it might be appropriate to go from the popular (new media) to the unpopular (reading). Telephone handsets with radio and internet reception devices have become the order of the day. And if they are drawing youths away from books, does it not make sense that we can pass the book contents to them through these media?

Radio and television have been popular channels for the dissemination of popular music (popular culture) in Nigeria, and reading has been anything but popular culture in the country. The argument of this paper, therefore, is that the unpopular (reading) should be channelled through the media that are now popular among the youths. This idea of marrying the modern (radio, internet) with the traditional community storytelling and event-based listening is close to what Olorunnisola& Amadi (2007: 35) described as “hybridity.”

On the strength of this argument, we present the Multi-media Community Reading Model, MCRM:



The Community Reading Model (CRM)

Explanation of the model

The diagram presents the three pillars of the model in a tripod arrangement and facilitators in the middle:

Community Reading Centres: Taking a cue from the numerous English premier league viewing centres across Nigeria, it might be possible to establish reading centres in tertiary institutions, prominent secondary schools and libraries where registered members of the community gather for public reading and discussion of selected titles, Reading sessions, as the arrows indicate, can be recorded and disseminated through TV channels and FM radio, or streamed through online radio stations and forwarded to various online forums, reading centre members and other people.

Community Reading Programmes: Reading sessions can also be originated by radio stations or any of the facilitators and made available online and to members of reading centres who may access the reading sessions through their telephone sets with radio and internet connectivity.

Online- Reading Clubs, Forums and Virtual Communities: There are existing book clubs online (Rainbow Book Club, Altitude Book Club) and numerous forums and social network sites which the facilitators can take advantage of by streaming the reading sessions and playing the video when available. Such online clubs can also be originators as the arrows show. In other words, any member with a handset, radio set or television set, internet access to radio/ tv programmes is a potential participant.

Facilitators (Publishers, Authors and Teachers): These are in a better position to facilitate reading programmes by hosting, producing for TV and radio stations, forwarding to online stations, forums, clubs etc. They play the role of change agents by kick-starting the programme, selling the idea to radio stations, online book clubs, forums and libraries and coordinating community activities.

Membership Procedure: Facilitators and other change agents will be expected to promote the reading arrangement of the communities through school the mass media website, posters, e-mail and handbills containing information on: subscription or registration procedure, and participation modes. Membership should be by registration either online or offline.

Possible Networking Partners: Reading Association of Nigeria as change agents, Campus Community Radio stations, Rainbow Book Club, Attitude Book Club, Nigerwives Club, Naijareads.Com, Campusheat.com, Nigeriauniversitiesforum.com etc.

Participation Modes: Four modes of participation are proposed. They are:

Online Classes: Text content class (by e-mailing of PDF, HTML files).

Audio contents class (by streaming, podcasting).

Video contents class (by digital versatile disc format, offering audio and video).

Offline FM Radio Class

Mode – Audio only

Equipment needed – Telephone handsets, radio set, computer

Programme Frequency – Weekly

Offline TV Class

Mode – Audio and Video

Equipment needed – TV sets, mobile phone and devies.

Programme frequency – weekly

Offline (Brick and Mortar Community) Class

- Group live Reading and Discussion (to be recorded for distribution)
- Group listening to radio reading and discussion
- Group watching and discussing of TV reading emanating from another source

Equipment needed – Radio TV sets.

Frequency of Meeting – Weekly for class

Book Nomination Procedure: Books will be nominated by coordinators and facilitators, volunteer authors and the participating members through the online feedback button.

Awards and Prizes: To encourage and motivate members, there should be prizes and awards for the best reviews submitted by members. The event will also be recorded and distributed to all those who could not attend the offline award ceremony.

Viability of the model: With the following points the proposition is justified: Nigeria has enough radio and television stations to support the model but lacks sufficient number and variety of local educational programmes on these stations. These radio stations would be interested in such projects if well executed and supported. The number of Nigerians accessing the internet has increased to 43 million according to figures made available on the website of *internet world statistics.com*. There is no doubt that a huge number yet to access the internet but the above figure is sufficient to sustain any reading programme that is properly executed. In addition, radio has fairly good penetration in the rural areas and so is telephone handset.

Finally, with commensurate commitment from the change agents, it may be possible to secure advertisements for the Multi- Media Community Reading Model. Some of the online clubs and forums will jump at a reduced rate just to secure this potential patronage. Publishing houses authors, manufacturers of stationery, printers and educational institutions are possible sources of advertisement. Registration/ membership should be free.

Conclusion

From the proposed model and the literature from which it grew, we can safely conclude that avirile reading culture can begin to take root in the near future if concerted effort is made by governments, publishers, managers of radio and television stations, libraries, schools and other agencies committed to the promotion of reading in Nigeria. In other words, technological convergence is the answer to the question of poor reading culture in Nigeria

But available technology is useless if not adopted. All stakeholders should, therefore, join hands to take advantage of radio infrastructure in Nigeria to achieve this purpose.

Recommendations: Campus radio stations should be compelled by law to introduce learning programme relevant to university curricula. They should begin to network with existing online radio stations which students have been assessing. They should network with online book clubs and other online communities in their programming. Ultimately, the campus stations should introduce websites where their learning programmes could be streamed. Attempt should be made to use this combination to reach distance learning students and other students and members of Nigeria's academic community

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