

The Media in Haiti: Internews' Efforts to Enhance Coverage and Build Capacity in Post-Quake Haiti

by Yves Colon

Inside the studios of Magic 9 radio station, it was business as usual on Jan. 12. "School's Out," one of the station's most popular programs, was about to sign off.

In a recording studio, reporter Robenson Sanon and several colleagues were putting the finishing touches on a campaign that potentially promised a bright future. It was nearly 5 p.m., when the walls inside the three-story building on Delmas Road began to shake. Sanon reacted immediately, telling everyone to lie down. In response to his command, some slipped beneath desks while others dived under any small crevice they could find. These people were lucky to have Sanon around; without his quick thinking, more than a dozen people inside the radio station would have died that afternoon when the earth rumbled and the ceiling crashed down.

Reflecting back on his heroic moment, Sanon said he remembers the turmoil they faced when they finally escaped the rubble. All around him, people were running up and down the street screaming, "Jesus is coming!" "It's the end of the world!"

It was chaos. He said he was covered with blood and dust, and yet his first thought was to find a pen and a notebook so he could tell the world what had happened.

It's been a month since one of the biggest events in the history of Haiti. Like most, Sanon sometimes sleeps outside for fear of the next tremor, yet he continues to show up for work early every day, pants and shirts personally pressed. Instead of heading to Magic 9, he now works for a humanitarian radio program set-up by Internews in Haiti. Like in many other disasters, this nonprofit organization has established emergency radio operations in Haiti by providing local stations with 15-minute news programs that allow them to continue broadcasting.

The Internews program was on air just a week after the earthquake and was widely distributed to 27 commercial radio stations in Port-au-Prince. Although some radio stations were able to continue broadcasting, many of the stations lost more than just a studio. Jacques Desrosiers, President of the Association of Haitian Journalists, said more than a dozen of his colleagues lost their lives that day, most of them from radio, after being crushed by falling concrete and support beams while doing what they loved.

Now Haiti stands at a turning point in history. Because of the devastation the earthquake left behind, time is now measured in "before" and "after." Before the earthquake, there were more than 40 radio stations broadcasting in Port-au-Prince, many of them, including Magic 9, had their own newsroom and avid listeners. Radio has always been popular in Haiti because a majority of the population cannot read or write, therefore relying on Kreyol-language broadcasts to stay informed about world and local events.

After the earthquake, most of the stations had been hit, and some newsrooms had been completely destroyed. Like Internews studio, which had now set up operations in a bedroom, radio stations were forced to broadcast from homes, the backs of pickups or even front yards. It had only been a week since the disaster, so the smell of dead bodies under the rubble of buildings continued to consume the air, making some reporters and technicians too afraid to go back inside.

Even a month later, some radio stations are still broadcasting from makeshift studios, while others are struggling to stay alive from lack of advertising income. Without advertising income, some stations could no longer keep as many employees, and therefore had to let go a number of good reporters. Other journalists and DJs have scattered or left the country, while some are working for the UN mission's radio station in Haiti.

"It is really difficult to keep the operations going," said Radio RFM Owner Rotchild Jean-Francois, who had to let go all 15 of his reporters. He now is the only journalist filing stories for the morning news show.

Despite all the challenges radio stations are facing, every program makes a difference for its listeners. The Internews' show reaches nearly 1 million people who have been left homeless in the city. The show provides valuable information to these listeners, telling them when more help is coming, when rice is on the way, or where they can get needed medical care. This kind of broadcast is not the usual programming found on Haitian radio stations, but since the earthquake, they have become less of a jukebox and more of a public service.

One of these journalists contributing useful information is Kettia Marcellus, who worked for a Canadian cooperation project before the earthquake but has now become the female anchor of Internews' *Enfomasyon Nou Dwe Konnen*. Her voice has become familiar to thousands of people who listen into the station every day, or sometimes even twice or more a day. Ironically, before the earthquake Marcellus couldn't get a regular job at one of the 25 radio stations in this city, but now her voice is all over the FM spectrum.

Marcellus knows firsthand the impact these programs are making on the lives of Haitian citizens. On her way home one day, she overheard a conversation between two men discussing a tent. One man was telling the other that he was pitching his tent a different way tonight. He had heard on the radio the best way to pitch a tent, and so he decided to follow their advice and set his tent up in that way.

After hearing this conversation, Marcellus realized it was her voice that had told him how to do it. That was the moment she realized she was changing radio in Haiti, she said. Like Sanon, she is making a difference in the lives of the Haitian people who live under tarps and tents in more than 300 makeshift camps around this city. She was giving listeners' useful information, "news you can use," in the aftermath of this tragedy, and therefore she was helping them survive and build a new life.

Before the earthquake, radio was mostly background music, with a few minutes of news that consisted of readers, tear-away wire service dispatches and little original reporting. Most of the advertising pie was divided among the top 10 stations, with the rest fighting for small neighborhood ads that will put diesel fuel in the generator and the name of the owner on the air.

After the earthquake, the inadequate division of advertising still remains a problem, but the role of radio stations has completely transformed. Now, people rely on the broadcasts of journalists to tell them where to get help, food and shelter, the basic and most necessary needs of any human being. Radio stations are now a tool of survival and not merely background music for everyday life.

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