

SHEDDING LIGHT ON AUDIENCES



The African AudienceScapes project taps into **InterMedia**'s special expertise in audience measurement. It looks at audiences' habits from a development perspective but some of the survey's findings make interesting reading for broadcasters too, as InterMedia's research analyst **David Montez** reports

International development organisations, like international broadcasters, want to understand the media and communication habits of their "audiences" – the people on the ground whom they aim to help. Critical information about health care, farming practices, sanitation and other development issues won't travel far unless it is delivered in an effective format and via a well-targeted conduit, be it radio, TV, cell phones, friends, colleagues or otherwise.

DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

InterMedia created the AudienceScapes project (www.audiencescapes.org) to apply our two decades of expertise in

“**The multiplier effect of word-of-mouth networks and opinion leaders can even be felt within media industries**”

audience measurement to the needs of development. So far, the AudienceScapes research program has focused on Africa – specifically, Kenya, Ghana, Zambia and Tanzania – with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Our nationally representative surveys track general use of media and communication technologies, personal communication habits, and information-gathering patterns related to a few key topics: health, agriculture and personal finance issues. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews with policymakers provide an outline of the information ecology at the policy level.

Of course, audience measurement is nothing new for most global broadcasters. But the

AudienceScapes survey research approach integrates a few development-specific elements that can be of value to the broadcasting community. Notably, it sheds light on how word-of-mouth communication patterns potentially can boost the impact of a given broadcast programme or channel. In other words, what happens to broadcast information once it is viewed by an audience member? AudienceScapes can give broadcasters a better understanding of their reach beyond simple listenership or viewership rates.

The fact is, some viewers and listeners tend to play more prominent roles than others in word-of-mouth networks and thus can have a greater impact on the

attitudes and opinions of their fellow citizens. Such "opinion leaders," identified in the AudienceScapes research using basic statistical regressions, are of interest to development organisations as key local partners or "champions" in project efforts. This group was defined primarily by how frequently they said that they are consulted by others for opinions and advice on ("very often" or "daily") important news events, as well as their own measure of how many people come to them to help interpret news and information.

SIMPLY PRIMARY SCHOOLING

In our 2009 Ghana survey, opinion leaders for general news and information were rather demographically distinct. These hubs of word-of-mouth activity were more likely to be men (for example, for general news topics, 64% were male vs. 49% of the total sample population) and well-educated. However, a little over a quarter of opinion leaders only had a primary school education, indicating that one's status as an opinion leader is not necessarily dependent upon formal education. While news opinion leaders generally tended to be young to middle-aged, those in rural areas included a notably higher percentage of leaders in the 60-plus age category. This may reflect a rural bias toward traditional systems of authority, which attribute more value to knowledge gained by senior members of the community.

The multiplier effect that word-of-mouth networks and opinion leaders can have on the spread of information can even be felt within media industries often thought to be more limited in scope. For example, in our 2009 Ghana survey, only about 18% of respondents said they are weekly newspaper readers. However, 34% of Ghanaian opinion leaders said they read newspapers weekly, suggesting that print

stories can make their way orally through the community, well beyond those who actually read them.

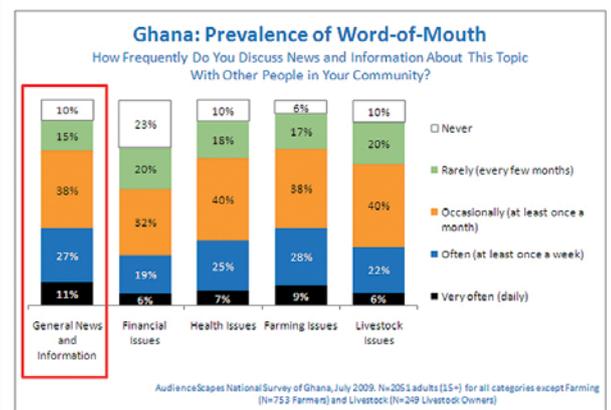
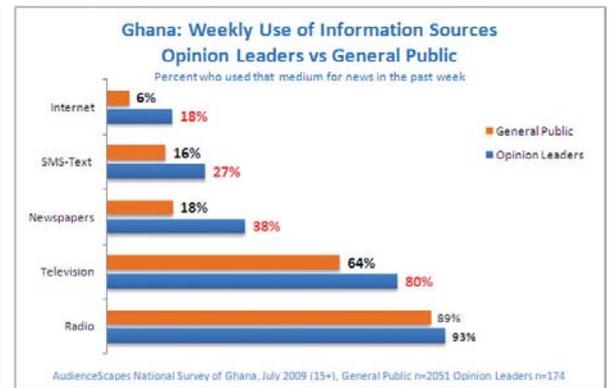
News opinion leaders overall were more likely to be regular consumers of both traditional and new media. This is particularly evident in rural areas where some 53% of news opinion leaders said they watch TV daily, while only about 30% of all rural residents said they watch daily. A partial explanation for this difference is simply access, as some 65% of rural news opinion leaders have household access to a TV, 20 percentage points higher than the rural sample as a whole. This increased level of media access allows opinion leaders to be privy to information the average rural Ghanaian would not otherwise know.

OPINION LEADERSHIP

InterMedia continues to tweak the opinion leadership questions used in the AudienceScapes surveys to not only better understand word-of-mouth networks, but also to help us gauge the indirect reach of broadcast outlets.

For example, in a 2009 survey conducted in urban Laos, InterMedia used exploratory questions on opinion leadership, knowledge of current affairs, and word-of-mouth news dissemination to identify respondents who fit the categories of "community news broker" and "local opinion leader". It became clear that large chunks of some radio outlets' listenerships were made up of such people, suggesting that their audiences were more prone to discuss and disseminate news in their communities. Note that in some cases, these same outlets' numerical reach was relatively low.

Traditionally, the success of international broadcasters has been measured by standardized consumption rates. However, as we look deeper into media environments, particularly those



that have shown to have complex word-of-mouth networks, these measures only tell part of the story. AudienceScapes and InterMedia are continuing to use innovative statistical measures to help development practitioners better understand how information spreads throughout a society. International broadcasters would do well to follow this example not only as a means to identify their audience, but also to help measure the full extent of their reach. ■