

FOROBA BLON PLANS TO REVOLUTIONISE JOURNALISM IN MALI



'Foroba Blon' are words from the Bambara language. Together they signify a space where everyone has the right to speak and the truth can be told - but only respectfully. In a related context Community Radio stations in Africa are seen an essential, and often exclusive, source of information for people living in rural regions. They serve as information hubs, relay news, and share knowledge in the community.

However, due to poor infrastructure and other issues, interaction between radio stations and their listeners, as well as with journalists in the field, is very difficult. It is hampered by delays and challenges in the delivery of timely information.

The recent increase of the mobile penetration rate in rural areas is now offering new opportunities to involve all members of the community in the life of their community radio, and increase the quality of the service as well as the value of the radio.

Selected as a **winner of the IPI News Contest, 2011** Foroba Blon aims to exploit this new potential, and enable all members of the community, including those from the diaspora, to access and contribute to news and information on the radio.

A joint initiative from the **Web Foundation** (Geneva, Switzerland), the **VU University** (Amsterdam, Netherlands), and **Sahel Eco** (Bamako, Mali), this project is based on new innovative voice technologies that enable people with the simplest of phones to access Web-based information, independently of their reading skills, their language or their education level. It also enables community radio stations to access and broadcast live content stored on the Web, without requiring computers or Internet connectivity.

The Opportunity

The central goal of the project is to build a mobile-accessible voice news platform that enables journalists to deliver and retrieve news from remote areas; community radio stations to access, manage and broadcast news delivered by journalists and citizens, and individuals and organizations in rural areas to have access and contribute to news via more channels, through community radio stations or by directly calling the voice news platform itself.

The primary outcomes expected from such an ecosystem are enhanced opportunities for sharing knowledge across different geographically distant rural communities concerning domains of shared interest (e.g. agricultural innovation knowledge with respect to farmer-managed natural greening in the Sahel countries, an important area of current local and international collaboration).

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Another intended outcome is extended possibilities for interested people outside rural localities (including family members working elsewhere - more broadly, the diaspora) to have access and contribute to this news through the Web facilities provided by the voice news platform.

All of this requires a mobile-accessible voice and Web service platform for voice news that is open-source available for anyone, has been validated in the field and will be replicable in any region of the world, and an associated voice news service operating in Mali to validate the platform

The Road Ahead

Starting in December, 2011, the project team has been working on the design of the radio platform based on use cases and requirements that were collected with radio journalists from community radio stations in rural areas in Mali. These were validated during a field trip in February, 2012. The project team sat down with community radio professionals and presented the citizen journalism platform we are planning to design. We explained how the voice-based platform could improve the quality of broadcasts through better communication between listeners and presenters. The general idea was very well received, and we used the occasion to focus on many details, features and possible applications which will help us design the platform to suit the needs of most radio.

Analyzing the Landscape: Community Radio in Mali

In Mali, many community radio stations exist, some of them state-funded and connected to the national broadcasting service ORTM (Office Radio Télévision du Mali), and others privately funded or completely self-supportive. According to their business, funding scheme, size and location some radio stations do have computers and Internet, some have computers without an Internet connection and some do not have any computer facilities at all. All these radio stations are situated within the coverage area of mobile telephony.

The Malian community radios have many listeners and the radius of coverage ranges between 100-200 km. The radios create their own programs and broadcast local and regional news, music, informative programs, roundtable programs and paid announcements. Three radio stations are involved in the Foroba Blon project. These are: Radio ORTM Ségou, a state-owned radio station that has computers and a 2 Mbps fixed line (DSL) Internet connection. Radio ORTM Ségou broadcasts programs in French and Bambara, the most widely spoken language in Mali; Radio Moutian, in Tominian, an independent radio station whose funding is based on paid airtime for announcements and private gifts from third parties. Radio Moutian has a computer but no Internet connectivity. Programs are mainly broadcast in Bomu, a local language of the Tominian region; Radio Seno in Bankass, a station that is independent from the Malian state and has only analogue equipment. There are no computers, and no Internet connection, but the radio station has many listeners in the region around Bankass. The main language spoken here is Dogon.

The end-users or customers are usually NGOs that buy airtime to broadcast public announcements about informative and educational topics, such as agriculture and public health information. This type of service is usually based on fixed monthly subscriptions to airtime for recurring broadcasts.

Another set of customers are the non-commercial listeners from the region, who buy a few minutes of airtime and pay a broadcast fee per minute of airtime. The information is usually brought to the radio, or communicated via phone and subsequently written down on paper by the radio staff.

The third set constitutes journalists or trusted village reporters who phone in to the radio station with local news or interviews on a regular basis.

In the current workflow all incoming phone calls are attended to by a radio staff member and the information received is annotated in tabular form on paper. Listeners can also call in during a given time slot (one hour per week) and leave a short voice message (a few seconds only) as a reaction to a program that was broadcast on a certain popular

topic. These messages are named “letters to the editors” (LTE).

Radio Platform architecture

The proposed Radio Platform consists of a data store containing recorded voice messages and related meta-information. It has been proposed that the interface of the Foroba Blon radio platform be purely voice-based, allowing for new content to be added through a mobile phone. Users of this interface will be listeners from the region around the three pilot radio stations who only have mobile phones, without any access to the Internet. Their calls will be answered by the system with a pre-recorded welcome message in a local Malian voice inviting them to leave their message. For the sake of user-friendliness, the user interface and the dialogue for this category of users will be kept as short and simple as possible, since the expected callers will be unfamiliar with interactive voice response systems and may not respond to a complex computer-generated dialogue asking them to press buttons etc.

The second category of users will be the trusted reporters calling from the field. They will phone in and leave their spoken report for broadcasting. These users will have been previously registered, and their phone number, name, address and preferred language will already be stored in the radio platform. These users will be trained to navigate the voice-menu, and use the IVR system asking to press a button on the phone to confirm or answer a question about their current location, subject of the message, etc. The FB system will always answer the registered caller in his/her preferential language.

The Radio Platform will further provide a “normal” web interface, where Internet-connected end-users/customers will access and upload a voice message. Depending on their relationship with the radio station, they can log in to the radio-platform as either registered users such as NGOs, and trusted reporters, or as unregistered users. There will be an option to sign up and create a user account by registering one’s name, phone number, village and preferred language. Unregistered users can access former broadcasts since this is public information.

Ultimately, we want Foroba Blon to be a generic web-voice-radio platform, which will make it simple to integrate applications like citizen journalism services, or others (e.g., advertising or online archiving).