

Visibility: towards a communication Strategy for UbuntuNet Alliance

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Abstract

This paper describes the role of communication in an organisation, with specific focus on UbuntuNet Alliance. It examines the various tools that the Alliance has used over the past 5 years to communicate with stakeholders; and the current consultative efforts to develop a Communication Strategy. The paper also examines the stage of development and uptake of communication tools in the member NRENs.

Organisations have objectives that define their existence and what they aim to achieve. They also have strategies that guide how the objectives will be achieved and tools used to achieve them. To ensure that there is proper and effective coordination and the surrounding community is well informed and aware of the activities of the organisation, communication is paramount. Effective communication requires effective strategies complete with coherent plan of actions.

Soon after the idea of establishing UbuntuNet Alliance was conceived, and the Founding Board of Directors in place, three mailing lists were set up at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Sweden. One was for the Founding Board, the second for established and emerging NRENs and the third was for the broader UbuntuNet Community. The NRENs list soon included key contacts in East and Southern Africa, while the Community list grew at a high rate as more people worldwide interested in research and education networking in general and in Africa were added to it.

The website, launched in March 2006 received visits from across the world. In May 2008, when NUANCE, the electronic Newsletter of UbuntuNet Alliance: Network, Collaboration, Education was launched, the Community list morphed into the NUANCE distribution list. Fliers and brochures describing the Alliance were also distributed by hand at events across the region.

Today, the communications landscape has changed and social networking tools are dominating in passing short messages to audiences. While communicating with stakeholders, gaps have been identified as some communities still do not know research and education networking and UbuntuNet Alliance as an organisation. This has challenged the Alliance to develop a thoughtful and comprehensive communication strategy, which will lead the communication and

dissemination activities to propel successful change and ensuring the involvement and understanding of all stakeholders.

The Communication Strategy identifies 13 target audiences that UbuntuNet Alliance must reach out to. Seven channels of communication have been laid out and 12 tools will be used to reach the audience. The increasing role of social networking media has been recognised and appropriate tools will be incorporated. The communication strategy will lessen the barriers between its existing member NRENs and the research and education community they serve.

Key words: Communication Strategy, Communication channels, Feedback, social media, NREN

1. Introduction

UbuntuNet Alliance posits communication, dissemination and outreach as important tools for its development as well as for the general understanding of academic networking in Africa. Effective and strategic use of such tools has the potential to enhance the impact of UbuntuNet Alliance's activities and image among all stakeholders. Since the establishment of the Alliance in 2005, a significant amount of effort has been put in achieving and maintaining a well informed community. Central in these efforts was the website and email lists for communicating with member NRENs and the general community. A major step was taken three years ago when the e-newsletter, NUANCE was introduced in May 2008. The number of subscribers has been increasing steadily over the years. Fliers, brochures, posters, emails, conferences and meetings have also been used to reach out to member NRENs as well as to all stakeholders.

Recently, however, it has been observed that there is a low level of understanding of general research and education activities, especially among prospective infrastructure users, policy makers, regulators and telecom providers in the region. There is an increase in activities in UbuntuNet Alliance as the organisation increases its operations and more services are delivered to the community. A well informed community of stakeholders is a key to the success of the Alliance. It has become obvious that a more focused communication strategy is of paramount importance to achieve sustained progress. A strategic and formalized communication and outreach process will ensure proactive and thorough dissemination of information. This will help to maintain broad support for UbuntuNet Alliance activities as well as deepen the general understanding of research and education networking among governments, regulators, private sector, researchers and the general public in Africa. The Alliance Communication Strategy has been developed to achieve this.

2. The Nature of UbuntuNet Alliance

UbuntuNet Alliance as a regional organisation aims at providing regional connectivity for the research and education community in eastern and southern Africa through NRENs. The NRENs are the ones that coordinate research and education networking activities at national level in their respective countries. They relate directly with the user community – the researchers, lecturers and students – which are the ultimate beneficiaries of the Alliance.

The Alliance's regional nature means that it needs to interact with different telecommunication and connectivity providers, governments, regulators, and many other stakeholders – all in different environments. They all must have a clear understanding of the role of the Alliance in facilitating communications for scientific and research collaboration. So far, the Alliance has maintained a well-informed community of NRENs and is in constant touch with them. Contact is also made with Regulators and Governments. However, for the picture and cycle to be complete, all stakeholders must be reached. As the network rolls out and services are becoming available to the users, it is increasingly crucial that the end-users and all other stakeholders know what UbuntuNet Alliance is about.

3. Communications to date

3.1 The current status of UbuntuNet Alliance's communication

Over the years of its existence, UbuntuNet Alliance has made tremendous efforts to build and maintain communication with the member NRENs and the community at large. Different tools and channels are used to reach out. Currently the following are used:

- **Mailing lists**, to communicate internally and with member; NRENs. The lists were launched almost immediately after the establishment of the UbuntuNet Alliance in 2005. Currently there are 5 mailing lists: for the Board, NREN CEOs, NREN CTOs, NREN community, and the one for the newsletter.
- The **website** is updated regularly and is used to reach out to the general audience. It was launched in March 2006 and now receives an average of 2000 visits a month. It provides up to date information about the Alliance, events and activities happening with the NRENs community.
- **NUANCE**, the monthly electronic newsletter was launched in May 2008 and is one of the major tools used to reach out to the community. It carries articles and stories from and about African NRENs; from other regions and general research and education networking.. The newsletter is sent to about 1500 recipients by email and many more access the web version. In April 2011, the French version of the newsletter was launched and analytics indicate that about one-third of web readers read the French NUANCE. Translations are available up to September 2010.
- **Fliers, brochures and posters** are also used to disseminate quick information. These printed tools have proved to be very useful at conferences and meetings and have been handed out to people. People take them home and to their offices and can refer to them anytime they need. These tools are updated regularly whenever there is an event,
- **Word of mouth** stands out and shows commitment. At the UbuntuNet Secretariat in Lilongwe (Malawi) people frequently walk in to find out what the Alliance does. Printed material (e.g. fliers, brochures) are always available to increase the understanding of the people.
- **Presentations** are made at conferences and meetings. The Alliance receives invitations to make presentations at conferences. Such opportunities help in spreading the word about. Often, one or two comes to the presenter for more information after the presentation.

- **Mass media** communication such as newspapers is not left out. The Alliance has made some progress in working with the media houses for features. A number of articles have appeared in print as well as online media. One of such appeared in one of Malawi's daily papers, The Nation, after the AfricaConnect project kicked off. The press release of the AfricaConnect project appeared in tens of websites and generated a lot of interest from all over the globe. Occasionally, NUANCE articles are picked by other recognised online news services such as Balancing-Act Africa.

The Communication and Dissemination Intern stationed at the Secretariat in Lilongwe pulls together all the activities.

3.1.1 Challenges faced

The dissemination and communication activities put in place have achieved a great deal of result. At international level, among peer organisations, among development partners, etc UbuntuNet Alliance is known as a partner and a key player in Africa. However, some challenges have been met, most important being two as follows:

- In producing NUANCE, one of the aims has been to showcase what member NRENs are doing as a way of increasing awareness. To achieve this, regular input from the NRENs is required, however this has not been easy as NREN people are busy with other activities.
- The second challenge has been to grow to the readership of NUANCE. Currently, as indicated earlier on, NUANCE is distributed by email to about 1500 readers. This number has been reached primarily through conferences and meetings. It is not easy to grow readers and keep them happy with good content. Once in a while;

3.2 Gaps identified

Three major gaps have been identified while carrying out communication and dissemination activities for UbuntuNet Alliance. These are:

- While major efforts have been put in place, it has been noticed that there are some quarters that still do not know about research and education networking, NRENs and the Alliance.
- There is a broad range of stakeholders that the Alliance must address and each has different needs.
- The landscape is changing as social networking tools appear to be prominent.

These gaps are the reasons why UbuntuNet Alliance decided to develop a Communication Strategy. The aim is to increase and sustain awareness among all stakeholders.

4. Towards a communication strategy

Development of the Communication Strategy for UbuntuNet Alliance started early in 2011. Through the strategy the Alliance aims at increasing awareness and knowledge about UbuntuNet

Alliance as an organisation and its services among all stakeholders. The Communication Strategy is also designed to enhance understanding of research and education networking and its associated activities among all stakeholders starting with students on to the policy maker in the region.

The following are anticipated as outcomes Communication Strategy:

- The profile of UbuntuNet Alliance raised and maintained in Africa and beyond;
- UbuntuNet Alliance perceived as a competent and trusted regional research and education network in the membership region that effectively supports and adds value to NRENs without competing with them;
- Enhanced understanding of and support for research and education networking activities among stakeholders.

4.1 Target Audiences

Hovland in the ODI Planning tools [1] on How to write a communication strategy writes that when designing a communication strategy it is very essential to consider the target audience. It is paramount to identify those audiences with whom you need to communicate to achieve your organisational objectives. The communication strategy process for UbuntuNet Alliance therefore identified 13 target audiences and designed key messages for each. According to Newman [2], key messages are essential tools in all communications work. Key messages are the core of your writing. Key messages open the door to direct communication with your audience, because they bridge what your audience already knows and where you are trying to take them.

The 13 identified audiences are as follows:

1. Member NREN personnel
2. Researchers in research and higher education institutions
3. Professor and lecturers
4. Students
5. Administrator of Universities and Research Centre administrators
6. Member NREN personnel
7. Development partners
8. National Communications Regulators
9. Telecommunication companies
10. Policy makers in government ministries
11. Reporters in Media houses
12. Regional economic bodies
13. Broader (Global) REN community

These audiences will be targeted with dissemination material throughout the implementation of the communication strategy. The strategy takes a holistic approach to communications and dissemination so as not to leave out any category of stakeholders. The Strategy recognises the role of NRENs in that they are the ones that directly interact with most of the target audiences.

4.1.1 The tools and channels of communication

To reach out to the community of stakeholders, the Communication Strategy lists eleven tools that will be used to disseminate information to the target audiences.

1. Newsletter (NUANCE)
2. Fliers
3. Posters
4. Press releases
5. Brochures
6. Reports
7. Maps
8. Case studies
9. Presentations
10. Mailing list
11. Website and Social media

The above tools will reach the audience using the following channels/ media

- Mailing list
- Social networks (Picasa, Twitter, Facebook)
- Website
- TV and Radio
- Conferences
- Face to face meetings
- Newspapers(print and electronic)

Where necessary, databases of contacts (those already there will be enhanced) will be kept and maintained to ensure that the audience is thoroughly reached. The databases will be updated regularly

4.2 Feedback, monitoring and evaluation

The Communication Strategy recognises the role of feedback in the process of communication and dissemination. Feedback received from the audience will be processed and allowed back into the communications cycle as input.

The various tools and channels will be monitored and evaluated for effectiveness. The key messages will be vetted properly before release.

5. Recommendation for NRENs.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, NRENs have boomed over the past year although KENET and TENET existed years before. The NRENs are all making progress in one of the other and are at different stages of development. A quick run through of the NRENs in terms of communication shows that little is being made to address the knowledge gaps that exist between them and their respective communities at national level. This could explain why there are still many people even in universities that do not know anything about their local NREN, UbuntuNet Alliance and general research and education networking.

The Table below shows that out of the 13 member NRENs of UbuntuNet Alliance, 9 have websites. Of these nine, only four maintain a website that reflects the full variety of what the NREN does. Michelle Willmers of the University of Capetown (a follower of @UbuntuNet on Twitter) wrote to Margaret in an email,

“my perspective is that it is imperative that African ICT managers in the research arena start to take into account that dissemination is a new core function of the researcher and of the institution; and that no serious research endeavour can be undertaken without a communication strategy. Added to this, new developments in all other areas can have impact in terms of their capacity to supplement, link to and measure new expanded, technologically-driven scholarly communication practice.”

NREN	Website	Active	Newsletter	Twitter	Facebook
<u>Eb@le</u>	yes	yes	no	not sure	not sure
KENET	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
MAREN	yes	no	no	no	no
MoRENet	yes	no	no	not sure	not sure
RENU	yes	no	no	Not sure	yes
SomaliREN	yes	no	yes	Not sure	no
SudREN	yes	no	not sure	Not sure	no
TENET	yes	yes	yes	no	no
<u>TERNET</u>	yes	yes	yes	no	no
EthERNet	no	no	no	no	no
<u>X-net</u>	no	no	no	no	no
ZAMREN	no	no	no	no	no
RwEdNet	yes	no	no	no	no

Table 1.0

NRENs must position Communication and Dissemination as part of their core activities. A simple communication strategy that maps the target audience develops key messages for each of them and identifies tools and channels would achieve a great deal of the awareness that NRENs need to generate support.

Maria-Jose Lopez, the Public Relations and Communications Manager for CLARA shared with UbuntuNet Alliance that Latin American NRENs have each a person responsible for PR and Communications. These PR people have a network in the framework of CLARA where they share experiences and keep their stakeholders informed at all times.

Above all, NRENs should embrace the social media like Facebook, Picasa, Twitter and also establish good relationship with the media houses existing in their community since this can help in publicising their events whenever they have organised one.

6. Conclusion

It is important for organizations to streamline communication and dissemination within their activities. For the UbuntuNet Alliance, the success of the communication strategy will depend on the NRENs. There is the need for the NRENs to work with the Alliance and ensure that all stakeholders are aware of research and education networking activities.

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Further Reading

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Biography

Rose Chisowa is the Communication and Dissemination Intern of the UbuntuNet Alliance based at the Secretariat in Lilongwe. Her duties include being responsible for the monthly online newsletter NUANCE, day-to-day management of the UbuntuNet Alliance website, including updating and ongoing monitoring, assist in events organization and administration within the framework of the UbuntuNet Alliance projects and many more duties. Prior to joining the UbuntuNet Alliance, Rose worked with other organisations in the department of Communication. Rose has contributed highly in the development of the UbuntuNet Alliance communication strategy. In addition to that she has also worked hard on the production of advocacy and communication materials like the Annual Report, Television documentary, fliers and brochures. Rose graduated from the University of Malawi with a Bachelors of Arts in Journalism