



# **Journalism** through chat media

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It was early in the morning when hundreds of WhatsApp-messages started pouring in. An hour after newsreader Ahmed from Radio Dabanga had announced the WhatsApp number to their Sudanese listeners. He and his team

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expected the initiative to be successful, but were overwhelmed by the reactions. Even the app couldn't handle it and crashed due to all incoming messages.

*By Anne and Irina*

## How it all started

Radio Dabanga was founded as an exiled radio station in 2008. Back then they only reported on the armed conflict in Darfur. Even though the government prohibited all media houses to do so. However, the radio station continued to report on the matter, providing the people living in rural areas with independent news and reliable information that often saved lives. In 2013 Radio Dabanga decided to also launch a satellite tv channel, allowing them to reach people living in the urban areas of Sudan and decision makers. Groups who indirectly helped improve the situation in Darfur. However, this news audience was asking for news about other areas of Sudan. So in that same year Radio Dabanga became a national media house, reporting on both regional as national issues.

## Popularity of chat media

When it comes to gathering and spreading the news, applications such as WhatsApp are crucial to Radio Dabanga since chat media are very popular in Sudan. That's mainly because the Sudanese are very social people who live in a tight community. However, the reality often causes them to be displaced and live scattered throughout the country and other parts of the world. In order to keep in touch with relatives and friends and update them with critical information, they use social media and chat media. These grew in popularity with the introduction of smartphones.

## Eager to contribute

The fact that more people had smartphones, made it easier for the staff of Radio Dabanga to communicate with their vast network of stringers and listeners. As they still rely on local sources to provide them with information on issues such as attacks on villages, humanitarian aid, gender-based violence etc. Since the announcement of the WhatsApp number on the radio, their audience is more than ever eager to contribute to the programmes by sending messages to the central desk.

Last name \*

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Reporter Mustafa tells us: “Before we started using WhatsApp, our audience would call the central desk in the Netherlands. Now they can just send us sending a message or a picture.”

## News gathering and fact checking

Since Mustafa is responsible for WhatsApp and all incoming messages, he starts his day by scanning the app. Both in individual chats as in the various groups (such as doctors, lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, students, politicians etc.) that have added the Dabanga number. From all over Sudan people send feedback, greetings, news updates, pictures or questions: “Messages come from many different places in Sudan; both cities and rural areas and also from the Sudanese diaspora” says Mustafa. Newsworthy information is discussed and assigned to the reporters for fact checking and reporting on the issue. “We received pictures of a enormous fire in South Darfur. Based on this report, we called the people in the area to verify the story and discovered that 50 houses were fully destroyed, leaving 30 families without shelter. We reported this news in our bulletin on the same evening”, Mustafa explains.

## News on WhatsApp travels far

After the popularity of the WhatsApp number and the increased engagement, the Dabanga team decided to use the app both for news gathering and news distribution. “Each day, after we finished our news bulletin, we make a summary that we share via WhatsApp”, says Mustafa. The news is being shared in the morning and has big red bullets to make to make it more recognisable. “When we don't send it early morning we get questions about it. People count on us for independent information,” Mustafa tells us. On a daily basis Radio Dabanga reaches about 120 groups (red. an average group has 150 to max of 250 members) which equals approximately 25.000 people. He continues: “I often see our news being reposted in other WhatsApp groups or on Facebook.”

## Chatbot

Using the WhatsApp number for news gathering and news distribution, is very time consuming. “Every morning there are a lot of messages and I try to answer as many message as possible. In the afternoon we get even more messages with a lot of valuable news tips and photo's. Even at night people are still messaging. It never stops, but I want to be on top of it so that we can give

people the information they deserve to know”, says Mustafa. That’s why [Radio Dabanga](#) is looking at implementing a chatbot. This is an innovative application that allows the team to swiftly respond to listeners and filter out the most crucial information.

#### **The benefits of having a chatbot would be:**

- swiftly share news and information with humanitarian stakeholders on the ground
- always respond when listeners ask questions or send feedback
- categorizes shared news and information for journalists which enables them to swiftly scan for newsworthy information
- send people a confirmation of their news tip
- send news and information updates to the audience when requested.

“The strength of this application is that it can interact with people simultaneously. With a chatbot we’ll be able to scale up both our engagement and reach”, says Mustafa.

Sudan is a country where censorship, intimidation and harassment of media workers is a daily reality. But till this day, [Radio Dabanga](#) remains the main source of reliable and independent news and information.

## **On a daily basis Radio Dabanga reaches roughly:**

- over 2.3 million people through shortwave radio
- about 1.5 million through satellite television
- 57.600 reach through FB (130.000 likes)
- 13.800 impressions through Twitter (12.429 followers)
- 25.000 directly via WhatsApp.

*\* For security reasons the names in this article have been altered. Check the [Radio Dabanga website](#) for more information about the radio and their work.*

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