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## **Ethnographic (per)versions and creative engagement through locally created content**

In this paper I present some key findings from *Finding a Voice*, a multi-sited ethnographic study of - and experiment in - local content creation. Research has shown that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) can contribute to development, but need to be introduced in ways that recognise local social networks and cultural contexts.

We have established a research network across 15 local media and ICT initiatives in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The goal is to increase understanding of how ICTs can be both effective and empowering in each local context, to investigate the most effective ways of articulating information and communication networks (both social and technological) to empower poor people to communicate their 'voices' within and beyond marginalised communities. We are researching opportunities and constraints for local content created by and for specific local communities, for the development and communication of ideas, information and perspectives appropriate to those communities.

Thus, Finding a Voice has two main activities and outcomes:

1. Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) - a research and development methodology for improving the effectiveness of community-based media and ICT centres.
2. Participatory local content creation - a variety of content creation activities and a transferable set of principles and processes.

We use ethnographic principles and methods along with participatory techniques to guide the research process and action research to link findings back into initiatives through the development and planning of new activities. Twelve local EAR researchers are embedded in the 15 community initiatives. The idea is to build the capacity of these centres by giving them the skills to conduct ongoing action research that will help them become more effective. At the same time, we are experimenting across the sites with mechanisms and tools for participatory content creation. The embedded researchers are both feeding into and reporting and reflecting on these content creation processes.

The embedded researchers are not operating in academic roles – the ethnographic action research will only emerge as useful and relevant if it is applicable locally. Unsurprisingly, views of usefulness across the applications are patchy and inconsistent. As an academic researcher I am fascinated not only by what might account for this variation, but also by what happens when we compare the ethnographic data itself, documented by the embedded researchers, across the 15 sites of the study – and in particular about what this tells me about the currency or otherwise of our particular approach to ‘creative engagement’.

Before giving two brief examples, I want to set out the starting point for our understandings of ‘voice’ and ‘creative engagement’ as these not only form part of the approach the research project takes, but informs the ways in which the embedded researchers work.

We think about poverty as more than income and consumption, drawing upon Sen’s concept of capabilities (2000), and on notions of voice. We can think of voice as significant in terms of poverty itself – ‘voice poverty’ can be understood as the inability of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making. ICTs and their relevance to voice (and vice versa) can be related to a denial of access to modes of expression and more generally to freedom of expression; it can be lack of the opportunity and agency to promote self-expression and advocacy; lack of access to technologies and platforms for distribution of a range of different voices; and it can be related to lack of opportunities to participate in the design of ICT for development interventions. Lister defines voice as the right to participate in decision-making – in social, economic, cultural and political life – and as a *crucial* human and citizenship right (Lister 2004).

The term ‘creative engagement’ captures our stance on issues of digital inclusion and access. Digital inclusion is increasingly measured, not by computer or internet access, but by technological fluency and multimedia content creation (Warchauer, 2003). Terms like *creative engagement* are necessary to describe the ability to create and manipulate multimedia content in ways that serve vernacular interests and enable relatively autonomous cultural participation. Many studies demonstrate a recognition that access is not only about physical access but needs to be broadened to include awareness, engagement and use, motivations to use technologies, barriers to use, and more broadly issues of participation in networks, societies and cultures (DiMaggio and Hargittai 2001; Katz and Rice 2002; Rice et al 2001; Selwyn 2004; Warschauer 2003). Furthermore, new technologies may widen

existing gaps ‘further blocking access to those already without access’ (Rice & Haythornthwaite 2006:93).

Given these underpinnings, one of the most interesting developments in our research is the emergence of data around what it means to participate in content creation, how to facilitate it, what its utility might be, and how creative engagement differs fundamentally to a more pragmatic skills-based approach to ‘access’ to computer technologies.

Two examples must suffice, for lack of space:

In an Indian metropolitan centre, located in a slum cluster, the embedded researcher Aseem talks to a group of 9 young women and one man about what they might like to make a short digital story about. In this centre (and most of the centres we work in) 2-3 minute stories, constructed using still images and voiceovers using video editing software, have been used as a mechanism to explore ways of making local content with the ICTs available (computers, digital cameras and so forth). This group discussion is taking place following a community screening of some of the digital stories made in the centre by local women. What do other women want to make content about?

It turns out they want to make content about a whole range of things. One young woman wants to make a digital story about her personal feelings, her dreams, and the challenges she faces; another woman wants to tell people about her family problems so that someone might offer her some advice. A young woman who was recently involved in a local survey wants to make a story about the common health problems of women in the area and prevention measures they might take. A local entrepreneur wants to make a digital story in which she can show how successful she has been in developing her business, and then to show it to the government or loan agencies to sanction credits for developing her business further.

A range of story ideas and motivations emerged. Some of these stories may be more ‘valid’ than others in terms of promoting social change – advocacy on behalf of a marginalised or voiceless group; positive messages about excluded or discriminated groups; messages that promote good health related behaviours – there is no lack of evidence of people wanting to use media to highlight social issues or demonstrate how one might challenge adversity, often through the device of providing an inspirational example. But we also see other ideas, other forms of self-expression, and other kinds of engagements with media that are as much about self expression as social change.

The second example is from Sri Lanka. The (by now well known) e-tuktuk was used by the Community Multimedia Centre (CMC) Manager, Sriyapali and Fausia, a Tamil radio announcer to travel to an underserved Tamil community and encourage participation in their Community Multimedia Centre activities (Tamil communities are underrepresented in CMC activities). As an outreach mechanism, the e-tuktuk did its job well in this case, encouraging a group of Tamil boys and girls to turn up at the CMC and undertake a training course in computing. But the course Sriyapali is teaching is not straightforward computer skills, she will teach them, amongst other things, to make their own digital stories. The embedded researcher, Kosala, asked her why she wasn't focusing more on basic Microsoft office skills:

I could have done the office course for them.... but this time I want to teach them something more important for them, much more creative for a beginning. They can learn office anywhere but this kind of skill cannot be learned elsewhere. More importantly training on digital storytelling will encourage them to talk openly about themselves about their lives in a different way. This will be a different experience for us too.

Kosala asked Sriyapali if she thought this training might result in a new trainer for the CMC,

Well.... Not a conventional MS office trainer but a more creative person who could teach others to express themselves with new media. Yes!



These are brief examples of how notions of creative engagement are starting to appear in the practices of our sites, and in the data of our embedded researchers. The richness that we are

starting to see in the data is due to its specificity – it is locally collected and contextualised data. However, treating the whole as a multi-sited ethnography, interesting findings are beginning to emerge that are starting to allow different voices to be heard, demonstrating alternative perspectives and challenging our notions of the appropriate relationships between ICTs and poor communities.

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