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Tacchi, Jo (2006) Information, Communication, Poverty and Voice. In Proceedings *Mapping the New Field of Communication for Development and Social Change*, University of Queensland.

Accessed from: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00001314

Information, Communication, Poverty and Voice

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Paper presented at the international conference MAPPING THE NEW FIELD OF COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE, July 5-8, 2006. Brisbane, Australia.

(Full paper submitted to conference organisers for review and possible publication)

Introduction

The notion of 'voice' can be used in a number of ways in relation to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and development. Access to ICTs does not automatically equate to the active or equal participation that is a precondition of 'voice'. If we define voice as inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes, meaning making, autonomy and expression, what does this mean in terms of ICTs and development?

We can expand on this definition of voice with specific focus on ICTs and development at the community level. 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, both for individuals and groups, to a denial of access to modes of expression and more generally to freedom of expression; it can be the lack of the opportunity and agency to promote self-expression and advocacy; the lack of access to technologies and platforms for distribution of a range of different voices; and it can be related to the lack of opportunities to participate in the design of ICT for development interventions themselves.

Many internet-based information services and mainstream media are limited to one-way communication, despite the interactive and participatory potential

of these media – they offer little to the majority of citizens to contribute to information and democratic networks and little in terms of providing people with choices based upon their own local or indigenous knowledge systems (Mansell, 2002).

How does active participation, especially in local content creation, increase 'voice' and what social and developmental impact might this have?

Content creation
Poverty
Mixing media

Content creation

There has been an emphasis on pushing information and not enough attention on the use of ICTs to communicate a range of different voices (Feek, 2003; D. Slater & Tacchi, 2004).

There has also been an emphasis on technical infrastructure rather than content, with 'content' meaning the development and communication of ideas, information and thinking. There's been insufficient attention to local content development. There's a need for a shift in thinking away from ICTs as merely infrastructure for the delivery of information, to creative tools and communication channels that can be used to create local content and distribute it (Feek, 2003; D. Slater & Tacchi, 2004). It's ironic that those promoting the use of ICTs for development and poverty reduction are challenged over how best to allow those they target to communicate and share information, and to participate in their own development.

Voicing their needs is now seen as fundamental to most processes of human development (Chambers, 1995; deHaan, 1999; Gardner & Lewis, 1996). The rapid emergence and new articulations of ICTs in marginalised communities therefore suggest a need to understand and develop culturally appropriate interfaces not simply for creating channels for information to be delivered to

marginalised people, but for local content creation, if there is to be meaningful uptake of ICTs in developing countries.

Ordinary citizens, in developed and developing country contexts are generally positioned as receivers of mediated messages rather than producers. New media technologies have the potential to be interactive rather than one to many and can combine producer and receiver roles rather than separate them. This is particularly interesting in relation to questions of engagement, self-representation and social, political and cultural participation. The idea that new technologies can enable new forms of what Jean Burgess calls 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess, 2006a) through the use of computers, software and peripherals such as digital cameras apparently places everyone with access to these technologies in the position of a potential producer.

Sonia Livingstone suggests that of the four components of media literacy – access, analysis, critical evaluation and content creation – the latter two are the most critical to a democratic agenda, 'Only if these are firmly foregrounded in a definition of media literacy will people be positioned not merely as selective, receptive and accepting but also as participating, critical; in short, not merely as consumers but also as citizens' (Livingstone, 2004, p.11).

Research on a network of ICT for poverty reduction initiatives in South Asia (ictPR) demonstrated the need to identify and nurture innovative, adventurous and pleasurable ways in which people could explore the possibilities of new ICTs – especially in terms of local content creation (D. Slater & Tacchi, 2004; Tacchi, 2005). Rather than simply understanding these technologies as tools for accessing and circulating useful information, participants engaged with them in far more complex, creative and expressive ways when given the opportunity. This could be considered as a form of *creative engagement* with ICTs (Tacchi, 2005).

In all of the initiatives that make up the ictPR network, the desire from participants to generate local content emerged almost from the start. While

participants' sense of the relevance of and their interest in computers and the internet was often talked about in very pragmatic ways – in order to even be considered for an office job one would need to know computing, and the internet is useful for finding information and news – it was through more creative uses of these and other ICTs that participants seemed to develop the most skills. A key finding from the research was thus that content creation itself is a powerful means of engaging people with media technologies that has added benefits of allowing them to voice their concerns and share and learn locally relevant knowledge.

But what kind of content do we mean here? By vernacular creativity Burgess means:

> a wide range of everyday creative practices (from scrapbooking to family photography to the storytelling that forms part of casual chat). The term 'vernacular' - as with language, where it means colloquial - signifies the ways in which everyday creativity is practiced outside the cultural value systems of either high culture (art) or commercial creative practice (television, say). Further, and again as with language, 'vernacular' signifies the local specificity of such creative practices, and the need to pay attention to the material, cultural, and geographic contexts in which they occur.
> (Burgess, 2006bb)

Vernacular creativity is an interesting term to consider, referencing as it does local specificity – a major issue with, for example, content distributed on the Internet. In places where English is not widely used, the Information Society and the internet need considerable negotiation if they are to allow for either vernacular creativity or creative engagement.

This leads to another important point about newer ICTs in particular, that is the lack of formats for local content creation. Technologies themselves when introduced into a community can widen gaps between rich and poor members, because these technologies do not come bundled, as Article19 says, with 'factors that cannot be leapfrogged: namely, education and

training, basic human and service infrastructure, and the human interaction essential to development and security' (Article19, 2005, p.3).

So, it's not simply about introducing technologies and encouraging content creation and voice, the process needs to allow for active inclusion, education, capacity building and needs to be both relevant and context specific.

Models and traditions in community based media provide us with some clear pointers on how to proceed, especially community radio. Community radio as widely understood (Price-Davies & Tacchi, 2001, and see www.amarc.org) has community programming at its heart, with the majority of content created by local community members. There are well known formats such as features, magazine programmes, phone in shows, soap operas, dramas, and so on. With newer technologies the creation of content is rarely assumed to be the point, emphasis seems to be much more about training in using computers, internet, email, using these tools to deliver information from a global pool of knowledge (i.e. the www).

The use of ICTs for development is perhaps linked more directly than community media *per se* to the Millennium Development Goals and poverty reduction. Community media on the other hand is generally advanced as a tool for participation, citizenship and the notion of communities having a voice. I would suggest that Poverty has been more a focus of attention in discussions around ICT for development than it has in community media debates.

So this takes us to the second focus of this paper:

Poverty

The way that poverty is understood, perhaps helps to slow down the attention we pay to content creation and voice, more concerned as it tends to be with access and divides, and more broadly with income.

The World Bank's 'voices of the poor' project was a huge undertaking which focussed attention on both the issue of voice as self-expression in terms of people speaking for themselves about their own circumstances and what they feel about poverty-related issues, and, on the need for participatory processes in wider conceptualisations and definitions of poverty.

The ways in which poverty is measured reflects assumptions about what it is and its causes (Lok-Dessallien, 1999).

There are some commonly used concepts that are linked to poverty, such as rights, equity, vulnerability, exclusion and underdevelopment. However, despite the fact that it is generally understood that multiple capability deprivations constrain opportunities and choices, and contribute to chronic poverty in particular (CPRC, 2004), it is income and consumption that has largely been studied and measured to date, missing examinations of underlying processes (Hulme & McKay, 2005). The ways in which poverty is understood influences how it is measured, and what is measured. There is a growing interest in communication for social change (see www.communicationforsocialchange.org) which insists that, to quote Will Parks, 'Social Change can be defined as: a positive change in peoples' lives – as they themselves define such change' (Parks, 2005, p.3).

The easiest way to measure poverty is to be able to count it. Measurement is largely quantitative and excludes wider meanings and understandings of poverty. Concepts of poverty, on the other hand, tend to recognise that poverty is more than material, it's qualitative, and generally based on understandings that are difficult to measure or count in surveys,

> One of the most striking developments in the contemporary politics of poverty is the growing demands for poverty to be understood as powerlessness and a denial of fundamental rights and for the voices of those in poverty to be heard in public debates
> (Lister, 2004, p.10)

The Millennium Development Goals recognise the need for multidimensional analysis and measures of poverty.

Capabilities and human rights are central to the ways in which poverty and development are currently understood (UHCHR, 2004).

Oxfam's work on democracy and human rights identifies 'voice poverty' as a focus.

Ruth 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, chapter 7).

Given that such aspects of social change might be significant outcomes of ICT for development initiatives, the lack of embedded and ongoing evaluation becomes a real issue. While Sen's long term analysis of development and poverty and his emphasis on capabilities has permeated the work of UN agencies, development departments and donors, monitoring and evaluation is not well geared to capture changes in capabilities, geared as it is to the measurement of *impacts* that are more related to increasingly outmoded indicators of poverty and income deprivation alone.

Not only do we need to rethink how we set indicators and measure impact, we need to build the capacity of local ICT initiatives to conduct ongoing evaluation, in such a way that they can adapt to research findings that they both own and understand. We need to be able to develop new indicators to track aspects such as risk, vulnerability, social exclusion, access to social and cultural capital, and the ability to have a voice and to be heard.

This reflects what Mayoux and Chambers call the *new agenda* in impact assessment (2005). They state that while participatory methods are increasingly used in impact assessment, it is generally seen as a 'frill', an addition to quantitative methods. Consequently participatory methods are underdeveloped, not properly invested in, there is inadequate training and the

time and resources needed to ensure it is done well are rarely made available (2005, pg.272).

Participation in the ways in which development issues are understood (including poverty itself), the creation of content through active engagement with ICTs by those whom development initiatives target, and participation in ongoing development and evaluation can all be seen to be important factors in ICT for development initiatives. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to view new ICTs as separate from older ones like radio, while strategies and programmes that mix them can be seen to hold more promise.

This leads into the third focus of this paper:

Mixing Media

There is an undeniable continuing relevance in communication for development of older communication technologies such as radio and TV. While newer ICTs have in some ways simply 'created confusion' about development priorities (Article19, 2005, p.4) older media technologies have a much clearer and more developed role. Community media and particularly community radio have well established models and formats.

Access to and participation in new ICTs such as the internet and the world wide web are more problematic. Article19 argues that the development of new ICT initiatives, such as telecentres, should not be at the expense 'of reinforcing the continued functioning and maintenance of older, proven modes of communication' (Article19, 2005, pg.38).

Gumucio Dagron argues that while the potential of the internet is great in development communication, the most promising developments are where it is combined with radio (2001).

Despite the promise of new ICTs, in terms of interactivity, on their own these technologies tend to stand out as difficult to access, and even more difficult to engage with. Jeffrey James has called for a paradigm shift in the way we approach ICTs and development, arguing that a model based on

intermediaries has far more chance of success than the flawed and often stagnant model of the telecentre (James, 2004).

By intermediaries, James refers to both people and media – so in the case of the Kothmale Radio and Internet Project in Sri Lanka (an often cited example) it is both the radio presenter (the person) who mediates between the information gathered from the world wide web, and the radio itself as the medium that delivers that information to a large number of people.

Bruce Girard also strongly advocates using the medium of radio to access the power of new ICTs and the internet (Girard, 2003).

Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project was the first UNESCO supported Community Multimedia Centre (CMC) and is a useful and often referred to example of the potential of mixing traditional and new technologies. The idea in Kothmale was that the introduction of computers and the internet would make a wide range of information available and give many people with no access to computers the chance to learn computing skills. Recognising that in a location where access to electricity was problematic and telephone connections rare, radio was the obvious medium to use to ‘harness’ the information capacity of the internet.

It was in Kothmale that the concept of ‘radio browsing’ was first trialled. Radio browsing is a radio programme format that uses information sourced from the internet. Information is sourced preferably in response to listener’s questions (sent in person or by post or phone) and ideally it addresses local information needs. This programme format, and the combination of internet and radio is designed to overcome barriers to local use of the internet firstly by making people aware of the nature and potential of the internet, and secondly by using the radio announcer to mediate and translate the internet to audiences (to be an intermediary in James’ terminology), thus overcoming the need for members of the public to have internet and computing skills or direct access to the computers. In addition, information sourced in English could be provided in local languages, removing the need for the general public to

understand and read English. Radio browsing as a format is now being adopted in other CMCs, and a TV browsing format has been developed in Nepal.

Radio browsing was launched in Kothmale in 1999, and has received significant publicity (some might say hype). However, an often missed finding from possibly the only in-depth evaluation of the initiative (Don Slater, Tacchi, & Lewis, 2002), is the way that a matured approached to new ICTs has developed, so that now the internet, for example, is used not simply as a tool in programme formatting but widely as a 'naturalised' information source, drawn upon along with other information sources, and used as a distribution channel.

This displays a matured approach to new and emerging technologies that is lost when a focus is exclusively on a particular format that blends internet and radio, but also demonstrates the effectiveness of allowing the introduction of new technologies the time and space to seed context specific developments.

The internet is generally regarded within Kothmale as one information and communication resource amongst many. Radio browsing has evolved within the station so that they are now combining radio and internet in subtle, innovative and interesting ways that are often overlooked as they have become a part of everyday and routine operations rather than an innovative and new technological development.

The e-tuktuk is a more recent example of an innovative convergence or mix of technologies at Kothmale that points, in addition, to the value of thinking about mobile applications (and further responds to the restrictions of the telecentre model). The e-tuktuk consists of a mobile information or resource centre, in a three wheel taxi (tuktuk). Able to reach out to those most remote from the radio station and computer and internet centre, the idea is that eventually the laptop in the tuktuk will be able to connect to the internet via the existing radio transmitters. The e-tuktuk initiative is, moreover, a very fitting example of how new technologies might be combined with older ones to achieve more impact

than any of those technologies alone might achieve – in this case, once the project is fully developed, we will see a combination of a laptop computer, an internet connection, radio transmitters, roads and a three wheeled motorised vehicle.

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