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Action Research Practices and Media for Development

Jo Tacchi, Marcus Foth, Greg Hearn

j.tacchi | m.foth | g.hearn@qut.edu.au

Institute for Creative Industries and Innovation

Queensland University of Technology

Brisbane QLD 4059

Australia

phone +61 7 3138 8772

fax +61 7 3138 8195

Introduction

Media and communications studies have argued for some time that by giving ‘ordinary’ people access to media and other information and communication technology (ICT), and encouraging them to create their own local content, they are better able to become ‘active citizens’ (Rodriguez, 2004). Power relationships shift when people achieve access to media (Couldry, 2000) and yet these power relations remain dynamic, permanently shifting and changing (Rodriguez, 2001). The idea that community-based media and ICT initiatives can help to empower ‘ordinary’ people is of interest to development and poverty reduction agencies, so that media and other ICTs are sometimes employed in initiatives that seek to reduce poverty in a developing world context. Large donor organisations are constantly seeking to improve knowledge and policies for ICT for development, and ‘communication for social change’ (see <http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/>).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), in particular, views information, communication and knowledge as core to human progress and well-being, and sees traditional and new media as providing opportunities for higher levels of development across the world. This opportunity for human progress and well-being represents challenges, not least due to the fact that many people and nations ‘do not have effective and equitable access to the means for producing, disseminating and using information and, therefore, to development opportunities’ (UNESCO, 2005, p. 191). UNESCO advocates the concept of ‘knowledge societies’ which are ‘about capabilities to identify, produce, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development’ (UNESCO, 2005, p. 191). The concept of knowledge societies as promoted by UNESCO encompasses plurality, inclusion, solidarity and participation, and is based on certain principles, including freedom of expression and the universal access to information and knowledge. UNESCO has a priority of empowering people through access to information and knowledge, with a special emphasis on freedom of expression. This paper discusses an embedded methodology that attempts to address some of the fundamental concerns in this field – poverty itself and the impact of media initiatives on it.

Communication for development initiatives have been implemented around the world for several decades. They entail using communication research, participatory methods (Chambers, 1995, 1998, 2004), new and traditional media and relevant materials to ‘facilitate the exchange of information, ideas and knowledge among all the people involved in a development effort’ (Anyaegebunam et al., 2004). While ICTs are often promoted as effective for development and social change, there is often a lack of effective participation and commitment from key stakeholders. Approaches taken may not take the local culture, language and context into account, rather assuming a straightforward relationship between the provision of information and behaviour change, following a vertical and modernist approach to development (Inagaki 2007; Waisbord 2001). Such approaches are permeated by assumptions that poor people lack ‘knowledge’, and that provision of information will address this (Parks, 2005, p. 4). In addition, insufficient attention has been paid to the ongoing and *embedded* evaluation of the impact of new ICT initiatives (Feek, 2003; Slater & Tacchi, 2004).

This has led to calls for more subtle and holistic evaluation measures and methodologies, and new indicators of social change (Gray-Felder & Deane, 1999). These focus more on community participation and dialogue, on alliances and broader social change rather than individual behavioural change (Gray-Felder & Deane, 1999; Skuse, 2004). At the same time, the ‘changing communication environment’ with its possibilities for networking and multiple sources of information, is seen to allow for horizontal rather than vertical patterns of communication, allowing for debate and dialogue (Deane 2004). It was in response to these possibilities and the need for a subtle and holistic approach that we first developed Ethnographic Action Research (EAR). This approach was developed through initial support from the British Government’s Department for International Development (DFID) in 2002, and then from UNESCO who continue to support, use and promote it mostly in South Asia, but also in Africa, and most recently for use in Indonesia with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

In this article, we trace the development of EAR by first revisiting the original rationale for its conceptualisation and development. We then outline some key principles that underpin the application of EAR in the context of media and communications initiatives for development. These principles are illustrated in practice by introducing and discussing the *Finding a Voice* research project and exploring how EAR was employed by this project to gather data and organise the collaboration between the research stakeholders. We then present the communicative ecology framework as a conceptual aid that helps us analyse and make sense of the data we captured through EAR. Finally, we examine a number of methods and tools that have proven useful in operationalising the EAR methodology.

Ethnographic Action Research: Rationale

The development of EAR started with a small research project in Sri Lanka. Funded by DFID, it was designed to explore the usefulness of ethnography in the development of a transferable methodology for monitoring and evaluating media and communication for

development initiatives (Slater et al., 2002; Tacchi, Slater, & Lewis, 2003). As alluded to above, this took place in a context where significant funding was given to ICT and poverty reduction activities, but the usual baseline survey approach to monitoring and evaluation and impact assessment was unsatisfactory. Indicators were difficult to determine but anecdotal evidence of interesting social change abounded. It was thought that ethnography might help to capture the kinds of changes that surveys and impact assessments failed to account for.

To explore this, an ethnographic study was undertaken of the Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project (KCRIP) in Central Province, Sri Lanka. The Kothmale community radio station had been operating since the 1980s, while the Internet centre was a fairly recent addition (since 2000). KCRIP provided an interesting example of a 'community multimedia centre' that was anecdotally having a lot of positive outcomes, but little rigorous research and no regular monitoring and evaluation was taking place to back up this impression. The combination of the Internet centre and the radio station was of particular interest in this area where most people had access to radio, but very few to other communication technologies such as telephones, computers and the Internet.

A fairly standard ethnographic approach was used on KCRIP, one that attempted to take account of the short duration of the field trip (one month). We used a team of three researchers from the UK and Australia and local research assistants and translators (one research manager who dealt with logistics, three research assistants). We used a form of participant observation in that we 'hung around' at the centre and in the surrounding areas (although the researchers from overseas always stood out as foreigners). Our main source of qualitative data was through a series of in-depth interviews in a range of locations (including households, shops, temples, the radio station and computer centre itself, and local schools) which we conducted with translators and local research assistants. We also used a short survey administered in 200 households by the research assistants.

A full analysis of KCRIP's research findings can be read elsewhere (Slater et al., 2002). Suffice to say, this research allowed us to come up with some interesting descriptions of the activities of the project and some of the characteristics of local communities and their media uses and information sources. What it failed to do was give us a methodology that was useful for the ongoing development of KCRIP itself. While the evaluation at Kothmale came up with interesting and important findings in academic terms and in terms of how the project might adapt and develop, there were two main problems that we were left with and addressing them directly led to the development of Ethnographic Action Research.

Firstly, one month's ethnographic fieldwork does not constitute a fully fledged ethnography as understood by anthropologists: long-term immersion in the site of study. We partly overcame this limitation through using a team of researchers and local research assistants but the limitation remains. There were many more lines of enquiry that we were unable to pursue to deepen our understanding of KCRIP and its context. Miller and Slater (2000) carried out ethnographic research of the Internet in Trinidad – also conducted in just one month – but Miller has been conducting fieldwork in Trinidad for a number of years and without that background of work, as the authors acknowledge, the insights developed through that one month's ethnographic focus on the Internet would

have been significantly reduced. So as an ethnographic study in itself, it was limited. However, it provided promising insights that deserved further attention.

The second and far more significant problem was that rather than simply coming up with research findings and recommendations, we wanted KCRIP to be empowered to apply them. Despite enormous interest from KCRIP staff and volunteers in our findings, there was no real ownership of the evaluation on the part of KCRIP, and no obvious route to making use of the findings. We recognised the need to develop a methodology that aimed to overcome both of these problems – integrating an ethnographic research approach into media initiatives and their development, training project workers themselves to undertake long-term ethnographic work, and drawing on the strengths of participatory and action research traditions.

It is clear then, that EAR developed through recognition that an ethnographic approach provided important and useful insights. Moreover, that ethnography combined with action research can help media initiatives develop effectively where ethnography on its own is less likely to be useful and useable by those working on the ground. Ethnography offered an interesting approach in a field where some donor organisations and practitioners are starting to question the appropriateness of the quantitative indicators that major donors themselves use to measure poverty, health, education, nutrition and other areas of development (Cracknell, 2000, p. 321). There is recognition that the benefits that poor people themselves give priority to are often more closely linked to qualitative indicators such as the right to involvement in national life, and the movement towards greater social equality – aspects of life that quantitative indicators are unlikely to identify and measure (Inagaki, 2007, p. 15).

Ethnographic Action Research: Principles

The EAR approach combines participatory techniques and an ethnographic approach in an action research framework to address the identified gap between research and the ability to implement its findings. Ethnography and participatory techniques are used to guide the research process and action research to link the research back in to the initiative through the development and planning of new activities.

Planning research → Conducting research (collecting and documenting data) → Organising coding and analysing data → Planning and action

At the simplest level, ethnographic action research is designed to build the capacity of media for development initiatives. It takes the qualities of an ethnographic approach and, combined with an action research framework, helps the initiative develop effectively in its local setting, with rich understandings of local conditions and needs. The ethnographic imperative advocates that EAR researchers put aside preconceived ideas of how to use media to achieve their aims, in order to better understand the ways they might be able to use them within the wider ‘communicative ecology’ of their location (see below). That is to say, ethnography is used here to help projects gain a richer understanding of the potential impacts of media initiatives in any given setting through both understanding

how they might work well there and understanding the setting itself. These understandings are used to design actions and develop the effectiveness of activities through a circuitous process of planning, action and reflection.

An EAR initiative develops a *research culture* through which knowledge and reflection are made integral to ongoing development (see below). The research aims, methods and analysis arise from, and then feed back into, a rich understanding of the particular place. The EAR approach is participatory and draws on participatory techniques. EAR researchers are encouraged to involve participants and workers both as informants *and as fellow researchers*. It provides a way of listening carefully to what people know from their own experiences and then brings this local knowledge into the ongoing processes of planning and acting. With participants taking the role of co-researcher, training in participatory research approaches becomes important. Participatory methods which inform EAR include Participatory Action Research (McTaggart, 1991; Reason and Bradbury, 2007), pragmatic action research (Greenwood and Levin, 2006) and PAR applied with a feminist inflection (Lennie 2005).

Some key methods or ‘tools’ in the EAR ‘toolbox’ used by EAR researchers are those which uncover and explore different kinds of knowledge (Tacchi et al. 2007; Tacchi, Slater, & Hearn, 2003). These tools are employed within a triangulated research approach (See for example, Patton 2002) to create “thick description” (Geertz 1975). This approach is evident in the grounded theory tradition of Glasser (1998) where emphasis is placed on making sense from findings as they occur. Although it is mostly a qualitative approach, validity of findings can be checked through using a range of tools with groups and individuals (see for example, Dick, 1999). EAR has an underlying aim of being participatory, in order to challenge preconceived notions, but also acknowledges that much ‘participation’ in development contexts is ‘top-down’ participation where participation constitutes ‘insiders’ learning what ‘outsiders’ want to hear, or simply an exercise in administrative task sharing, or a display of the necessary rhetoric to win funding (Michener 1998; White 1996). The key methods of EAR are designed to promote a more grounded form of participation (Hickey & Mohan 2004).

The key research methods include:

- **Observation, participant observation and field notes:** As a central method of ethnography, this is the kind of data collecting activity that EAR researchers continuously undertake, and can also be undertaken by anyone involved in the project by reflecting on what they observe and recording this in the form of field notes. This is encouraged by EAR researchers as they work towards developing a research culture (see below). Field notes record as much as possible of what EAR researchers see and hear and also record their own reactions and ideas as they happen.
- **Participatory techniques:** The participatory techniques employed, aim to start EAR researchers in the processes of collecting data and quickly gaining an understanding of the local area, local people and local issues, including local communicative ecologies (see below). They are consistent with methods used in Participatory Action Research (PAR) for example. They complement the ethnographic tools and while they are a useful way of starting EAR work, they can also be drawn upon at any time later to explore issues in different ways, and to test findings or ideas generated using different tools.

- **In-depth interviews:** In-depth interviews are, in the EAR context, semi-structured interviews in which the EAR researchers are encouraged to view them as detailed conversations. They are conducted with a range of people, guided by an interview schedule — a list of a few major topics to be covered in each interview — while leaving lots of room to respond to what is interesting in the conversation.
- **Short questionnaire-based surveys:** All of the tools above generate detailed information on a small number of participants. Short questionnaire-based surveys can allow researchers to generate less detailed information from larger numbers.
- **Diaries, feedback mechanisms and other ‘self-documentation’:** All kinds of participants – staff, users and community members – can express themselves on a range of social or personal issues; keep logs of their activities; or document their lives through text, audio recordings, photographs or drawings. Centres can also use feedback forms, visitors’ books, log-books, suggestion boxes, and other ways to get feedback.

While many of these aspects of EAR are consistent with action research broadly, we can now examine its more distinctive characteristics by exploring how they were used in the *Finding a Voice* research project.

Ethnographic Action Research: Practice

The most recent development in the practice of EAR will serve to explore how it is used in the field. This was a research project that began in 2006 called *Finding a Voice: Making Technological Change Socially Effective and Culturally Empowering*. It was funded by the Australian Research Council, UNESCO and UNDP. EAR research took place in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Indonesia between 2006-2008 (see <http://findingavoice.org>). *Finding a Voice* explored the use of combinations of old media (radio, TV, video, print and so on) and newer and emerging media (computers, Internet, digital cameras, wireless and so on) for development. There was a network of 15 ICT centres across the four countries. Each centre was different, but all had computers and Internet connectivity. Some were community computer centres (sometimes called ‘telecentres’) others were community radio stations, or video centres with access to a local cable television network. Aims of the project included an exploration of how different combinations of media might work together and how content might be created for these media through active participation with communities. We therefore worked with the network of centres to develop and provide training and support in the use of media and ICTs in the creation and distribution of locally produced content. A broad research question was, can old and new ICTs be used to give otherwise marginalised people a voice, and if so, who will listen? We worked with the centres to help them to develop participatory content creation strategies and action plans, making use of the media and other resources available to them. As detailed in Watkins & Tacchi (2008) and Martin & Tacchi (2008) our main findings about participatory content creation included the need to:

- pay attention to the peculiarities and specificities of each context and think about what might be locally appropriate, relevant and beneficial;
- creatively reach out to and engage marginalized groups to work towards inclusion and encourage a diversity of voices;
- create content that will generate debate and dialogue locally, to address local issues and raise awareness amongst local communities and those in positions of power; and,
- encourage participation at all stages of content creation, so that content is locally meaningful and might lead to positive social change.

In this paper we will concentrate on the concurrent activity of EAR which, as part of its remit, was to research and help to strategise these participatory content creation activities. Indeed as the findings about participatory content creation suggest, ethnographic action research was found to have an important role in both informing and documenting these activities.

Each centre had an EAR researcher working as an integral part of the centre. The EAR researchers were trained through workshops and supported online and face to face by an Australian team of researchers. They were involved in participatory content creation strategy building workshops with other members of their local centre, to ensure research was fed into those strategies, and content creation action plans were included in the EAR researchers future work. While one person is identified in each centre as responsible for ensuring EAR is carried out, EAR tasks are often shared by media centre team members and volunteers. In most cases the EAR researchers were local people, sometimes with no background in research. They were recruited locally by the centres, and trained to conduct EAR as part of *Finding a Voice* activities. EAR is intended as a built-in component of a media centre that is integrated into the centre itself. Ideally, it allows for the fully transparent development of a centre, for ongoing monitoring and evaluation that will effect the ways in which the centre develops, and that helps to build flexibility into centres so that they can adapt to local needs and changing situations. The experiences and feedback of the *Finding a Voice* EAR researchers were built into online EAR training materials (<http://ear.findingavoice.org>).

Through *Finding a Voice* we found that there is value in embedded research for ICT for development initiatives - it can provide useful and useable data to help the initiatives develop in ways that suit local circumstances and respond to local communities' needs. EAR and any other form of embedded research is only really useful if it improves the effectiveness of the ICT or media initiative itself. A major challenge we found in *Finding a Voice* was in consistently bringing research findings to bear on the activities of the initiatives. In some cases it worked well, in others it proved hard to penetrate the decision-making layers of local organisations. Any such embedded, action research approach requires whole organisation commitment. We found it was generally easier to implement within smaller and more flexible organisational structures. Where it worked well it allowed those initiatives to adapt and innovate in ways that were highly beneficial.

The EAR researcher is given two particular and related tasks to try to achieve this level of impact: to develop a research culture within the media centre and to work as a socio-cultural animator.

Research Culture

Rather than considering research as an evaluation or impact assessment activity that happens to development initiatives by external evaluators at specified points in time – for example, at the beginning of a donor funded activity and one year later – EAR integrates research as a form of growing understanding and rich descriptions of local contexts and issues into the project's continuous cycle of planning and acting. In *Finding a Voice*, the EAR research was in particular geared to help to build participatory content creation activities. The benefits were that the organisations could change and adapt activities and respond on the basis of informed reflection. Instead of simply measuring impacts at certain points in time, EAR meant that media centre staff and volunteers were encouraged to continuously think and produce knowledge about how they were working. In order for the media centre's staff and participants to feel ownership of this process, and to see its value, the EAR researchers tried to develop a research culture through which knowledge and reflection were fed back in ways that helped in the development of content creation activities.

EAR incorporates common features of action research. It involves a range of people in all stages of research and media centre activities and development – planning, doing, observing, and reflecting. It seeks to ensure that media centres are linked to the aspirations and circumstances of people locally. In order to make this so, those people and their viewpoints are integral to the development of the project. It is designed to help ICT projects develop in locally appropriate and beneficial ways. Research informs project development by focusing on how problems and opportunities are defined by people locally and allows research methods and the centre itself to creatively adapt to the local situation. A division between researcher and research subjects is avoided. Rather, EAR research involves many different roles and different kinds of conversations. Hence, participants can be engaged both as informants and as fellow researchers. It provides a systematic means for listening carefully to what people know from their experience, helping to structure this more clearly, and bringing it into the processes of planning and acting.

Socio-cultural Animation

Thus the researcher's role is more than simply being attached to a media centre to carry out research. An EAR researcher may undertake a variety of roles within a centre, and research responsibility may be shared between different members of staff and volunteers. In any case, the researcher should be an integral part of a team, not an outsider only there to judge how well they are doing. One way of describing the role of the EAR researcher (or researchers) is through the term 'social-cultural animator'. Foth (2006b, p. 640) describes socio-cultural animation as "a way of mobilising the social and cultural participation of individuals and community members so that they become actively engaged in their personal development and in the development of their

community”. In this role they encourage awareness amongst all staff and volunteers of the local social and cultural environment. Not only will the researcher encourage project workers themselves to be active in the shaping and evaluation of the projects, s/he will encourage project workers to engage in interaction with local people and groups, to look to local people and groups as participants, and to include their ways of making sense of the world and themselves in their evaluations of projects. Animation in this sense suggests viewing project workers, local communities, groups and individuals as active agents.

The findings from EAR activities can be fed into the centre’s development in several ways. The researchers can play a role in making sure research is both appropriate and understood by all concerned. They can do this through discussion with staff and stakeholders, through the verbal reporting of research findings, through written reports, through participation in planning and evaluation meetings, general centre and staff meetings. It is a resource that will only be effective for a media centre if it is integrated into that centre’s activities. If everyone involved understands that EAR is there to help them as a valuable resource that they can call upon when needed, a ‘research culture’ can develop and ethnographic action research is more likely to be effective.

Embedded researchers can do a lot through social mobilisation or animation to encourage and maintain participation from local groups, especially the hard to reach. They can also act as an interface or intermediary between new digital technologies and local people, and between the ICT or media initiative and local communities. Participatory research and evaluation is easier with embedded researchers. They can provide regular feedback to local communities (Tacchi & Kiran 2008).

Ethnographic Action Research: Analysis

The *Finding a Voice* project took an ethnographic action research approach to the study of media and situated its analysis in the wider ‘communicative ecology’ that provides a framework for understanding the ‘working patterns’ of local communication flows. The term ‘communicative ecology’ (Foth & Hearn, 2007; Hearn & Foth, 2007; Tacchi, Slater, & Hearn, 2003; Tacchi & Kiran 2008) refers to the complex system of communication media and information flows in a local community. It places ICTs (which include radio, computers, mobile phones, print media and so on) in the context of all the ways of communicating that are significant locally, including face-to-face interaction. It is recognised that any ‘new’ connections and networks (social and technical) that develop as a result of the introduction of individual ICTs will be far more effective if they are somehow interconnected with existing, locally appropriate, systems and structures (Foth & Hearn, 2007). Access to ICTs is not enough to ensure ‘effective’ use (Gurstein, 2003): this can only be achieved by appropriating and localising both applications and content by local communities within their local context. This approach is grounded in the realities of the everyday lives of individuals and community groups along with the social and economic climate in which they are situated (Keeble, 2003). It is ineffective to supply new technologies (or traditional media technologies for that matter), or training in how to use them, without taking account of how they might fit into existing ‘communicative

ecologies'. Through this perspective one might ask how new ICTs articulate with more traditional ICTs: how do different media serve different purposes, and how do they combine in people's everyday lives?

Each community is complex, and each media initiative, event and relationship will change and shift the power relations at both an individual and community level. The concept of the communicative ecology, and ethnographic action research as a research and media centre development methodology, take this into account in working to build research cultures in each communication initiative so that they can adapt and respond to changing environments, changing needs and opportunities as they present themselves. In the *Finding a Voice* project all of the EAR researchers began their work by starting to build an understanding of the communicative ecologies in the communities their media centres serve. The EAR researchers were able to observe changes in the communicative ecologies as a result of their media interventions and participatory content creation activities. Not only was this important as it allowed researchers to monitor changes that happen as a result of these interventions; it was important to plan them. They helped to understand what existing information and communication flows and channels, formal and informal, social and technological, their interventions could tap into and leverage.

As a first step in understanding the significance of the ways in which information flows, and who has access and is able to use which communication technologies there are some key questions to be asked:

- What kinds of communication and information activities do people carry out or wish to carry out?
- What communications resources are available to these people – media content, technologies, and skills?
- How do they understand the way these resources can be used?
- Who do they communicate with, and why?
- How does a particular medium – such as radio or Internet – fit into their existing *social* networks?
- Does that medium expand their networks? How can a media centre connect with their social networks?

EAR researchers are asked to map social network by drawing a type of rich picture (Monk & Howard, 1998) – the people, activities, relationships and media people are linked to on a weekly basis, to indicate the different sorts of information they get from different people and places: health, education, entertainment, family, social events, local news and national news. They are asked to think about the different factors that place people in different social networks.

This serves to demonstrate the differences amongst people and their communicative ecologies, even when they live in close proximity. Gender, class, socioeconomic and age differences, as well as the impact of the lack of infrastructure, the

differences between urban and rural settings and the impact of differential pricing structures are among the issues that routinely emerge.

Ethnographic Action Research: Tools

As well as a focus of the research itself, media can be used as a tool for action research. In the *Finding a Voice* project media are central to the activities being studied, and are used as a mechanism or tool for research training, management, data archiving and analysis. In the final section of this paper we explore how this is done. First we look at the potential of media for uncovering hidden perspectives, and the consequences of these being ‘heard’. Secondly, we look at how online communication and networking tools can be used to establish a support network of action researchers across continents. Finally, we look at some individual communication and networking tools and consider how they can be used to support action research.

Hearing Voices

Engaging local people in the creation of media content can allow insights into the pressing issues of a community, as well as give insights into everyday lives that are barely visible. However, despite the interactive potential of new media technologies, dominant configurations tend to follow a broadcast model of one to many and interactivity is rarely explored innovatively – two way flows of information are rarely promoted. We cannot assume that access to information delivered via new or older media technologies equates to effective use; delivery of information does not automatically mean that people are thereby informed in any meaningful way. The integration of ICTs into communities and people’s engagement with those ICTs requires the development of a new media literacy if the objective is to provide not only access, but the ability to analyse, critically evaluate and use ICTs and the information and knowledge it can carry. This and the ability to create content makes us ‘new media literate’ according to Livingstone (2004).

The idea that new technologies can enable new forms of what Burgess (2006) calls ‘vernacular creativity’ 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. What happens when those whom we target in poverty reduction and development programmes are able to use technology to express themselves? What is the potential of this for advocacy and social change? Does this constitute a positive movement towards the development of knowledge societies and a new public sphere as suggested by Burgess, Foth, & Klæbe (2006)? These are all questions we explored through the *Finding a Voice* project, and the media content itself gave us useful and useable insights (Tacchi 2009 in press; Tacchi and Kiran 2008; Watkins & Tacchi 2008).

This community generated media content is somewhat similar to, and could be viewed as, a media version (on a much smaller scale) of the World Bank’s *Voices of the Poor* project (Narayan, Chambers et al., 2000; Narayan, Patel et al., 2000; Narayan & Petesch, 2002). *Voices of the Poor* collected together the voices of 60,000 poor men and women from 60 countries. Participatory approaches highlighted the non-material dimensions of poverty, including ‘lack of voice, shame and stigma; powerlessness; denial

of rights and diminished citizenship’, which Lister calls ‘relational/symbolic’ aspects of poverty (Lister, 2004, p. 7). The *Voices of the Poor* study and its input into the World Development Report 2000/2001 (<http://econ.worldbank.org/wdr/>) helped to link voicelessness, powerlessness, insecurity and humiliation to concepts of poverty. It boosted the notion that we need to listen to those who have experienced poverty using participatory approaches that analyse poverty, if we are to understand and ‘attack’ it. Directly listening to the voices of the poor, in whatever mediated format, does allow different perspectives and different understandings to develop.

In these ways, through experimenting with participatory content creation, a range of media were a major focus of the *Finding a Voice* project. In addition, we used the networking capabilities of digital media to connect researchers together and help us to undertake comparative analysis across the 4 country study.

Networking EAR Researchers

The *Finding a Voice* project developed from earlier work with a network of community media centres in South Asia, supported by UNESCO (Slater & Tacchi, 2004). Since late 2002, a collaborative, members only community website supported the associated network of action researchers (Foth, 2006a; Foth & Tacchi, 2004). That site was a first step towards building a set of tools to support the exchange and communication between the lead researchers who trained and supported the action researchers who were located at different community-based media initiatives sites. That website was hosted in Australia and used by 43 active members including local EAR researchers, project coordinators and the team at UNESCO. This approach proved to be highly useful to manage such a dispersed research network, and a similar website was created for *Finding a Voice*.

These websites allowed the lead researchers to support and enhance the training of local action researchers, and it allowed for exchanges and discussions on the data being collected and the development and application of the research. The research websites provided the core of the online interaction with local networks of field workers, supplemented by emails, telephone calls and online chats using instant messaging. The websites enabled local researchers to upload and discuss research data. They enabled feedback and support, and the sharing of experiences across the entire network. These are aspects of the websites that might offer other action researchers a means to set up support networks, share data and work collaboratively on analysis. Below we outline and discuss features of the websites that we found to be particularly helpful.

Networking and Communication Tools

User Directory

A user directory or section for including member’s profiles offered ways for EAR researchers to find out about each other and to raise awareness of the informal networks as well as skills and experiences that are present across the dispersed group. Integrated into an asset-based community development approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), the generation and population of a directory presents an opportunity to create a ‘white pages’ list with contact details of participants and stakeholders, which may increase

levels of community efficacy (Carroll & Reese, 2003). The directory can be categorised according to individual and group (that is, social network) membership. Combined with separate mailing lists for each of these entities, the directory acts as a starting point for networking the networks and can be used to broadcast or specifically channel information between participants and feed results back to the community at large.

Blogs

The process of critical inquiry and reflection on an individual level is supported through online journals or blogs (short for ‘web logs’) to write up, or paste in, field notes that are an important research tool in the project. In the *Finding a Voice* website each researcher had their own blog (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006) to submit their postings. They act as a personal diary that participants use to record notes, events, experiences and observations, and copy and paste information into from email, instant messaging or chat communication. Blog entries can be used to share thoughts and reflections with other participants who can then comment on these entries. A blog is also a means of documenting progress that is driven by the networked, online community participants. Instead of interview recordings and meeting minutes that require a dedicated transcriber or secretary, blogs involve users in the documentation process itself, which in turn helps to share ownership and responsibility, support transparency and accountability, and maintain rigour by collecting rich accounts of personal reflections.

Discussion Board

The discussion board or forum provides a communicative outlet for the collective meta-network of EAR practice (Foth, 2006a) that links smaller groups and networks of inquiry. It might be divided into multiple discussion forums according to research themes or community issues and documents network as well as collective action and progress. A discussion board can be made into a public and broadcast-style medium and some members of a community may not feel confident to contribute to a large unknown audience online – nor offline for that matter. Hence, it is crucial to combine it with more private and intimate communication facilities such as blogs (which in the cases discussed here were restricted to the project members) but also email, instant messaging and offline face-to-face interaction. In *Finding a Voice*, access to the online research space was controlled as sensitive materials and thoughts needed to be aired, discussed and worked through by members of the project’s multi-country research team.

File Sharing Area

A file sharing area can be used to collect, store and archive all sorts of digital artefacts including written documents such as reports, meeting minutes, invitations and audiovisual files such as images, maps, photos, diagrams, recordings, songs, and videos. The file sharing area becomes a gallery to showcase the wealth of knowledge, skills and experience and the progress made by the community. In this sense, it functions as a central online repository that reflects the virtual composition of the project’s community memory. Training materials and various collaborative papers were shared and discussed

in this way, often their presence was announced through a blog entry, and then discussed through a dedicated discussion forum.

Audiovisual Material and Podcasting

The work of Pink (2006) and others has highlighted the additional benefits that can be gained by including audiovisual material in the data collection and analysis phase of ethnographic research. The use of multimedia enabled devices such as Third Generation mobile phones and mobile music players (e.g., Apple iPod) could enable local EAR researchers to record audiovisual material. Researchers could publish their material by uploading it to a website and distributing a feed via podcasting. While the technical facilities at the EAR researcher end did not allow for this level of sophistication in *Finding a Voice*, this is eminently (technically) achievable for other research networks. Similar to an on-demand radio or television program, researchers could use an aggregator such as iTunes to subscribe to this feed (Hammersley, 2003). These clients work like multimedia newsreaders in that they download the latest episode available for a given subscription. Podcasting thus can facilitate a decentralised publish and subscribe model for multimedia content, which complements the exchange of textual and oral information both online and offline. Additionally, the increasing ubiquity of deploying mobile devices enables local researchers to play back previously recorded multimedia content to the community for richer interactions and discussions. While for the *Finding a Voice* project we depended on less technically sophisticated mechanisms, it was incredibly important to be able to share and discuss content produced and distributed by the media centres in this online research environment.

Conclusions

Participatory action research is widely used in development situations. EAR differs in three key ways that have been outlined above. Firstly, the ‘ethnographic’ in ethnographic action research refers not simply to the kinds of methods promoted through this approach. It references the sustained, long term engagement in the site of study, and indeed the capacity building component that means that it is media centre staff and volunteers themselves who undertake and manage the action research process. Long term immersion in the field of study, the building of a research culture that understands the role of research and allows it to feed into activities is central to the EAR approach.

Achieving widespread participation, especially from the poorest local communities is a real challenge for community ICT and media centres. Streeten (2002) points out that certain groups – the poorest, such as women, the young, the disabled – have the least power and opportunity in participation initiatives. This is further supported by findings from the Kothmale, Sri Lanka research discussed above: women and Tamil communities had far less opportunities to engage with a project that was said to be for all the local communities, although participation was possible for some women and for many young people (cf. Slater et al., 2002). It is also clear from earlier research that the ‘less poor’ participate more than the ‘extreme poor’ (Slater & Tacchi, 2004).

Participation needs to be supported actively. It is only through sustained research that initiatives are assisted to adapt and change in light of growing understandings that participation itself can be evaluated and adjusted as each local circumstance requires.

Working with the conceptual framework of the communicative ecology, attention is paid to the wider context of information flows and channels, the barriers and the opportunities that exist and can be created. Using ethnographic action research, media for development initiatives can adjust in ways that recognise and respond to local social, political, cultural and economic contexts. This approach also views each media technology as just one in a wider communicative ecology that predates their intervention and is at the same time altered by it.

Finally creative use of the media themselves allow media centres to gain insights into the lives of those they seek to change for the better. It can help to build dialogue and understanding of those whose lives are rarely the focus of attention. In addition, media tools can be used in action research practices, to help share, store, manage and analyse data, and provide support from action researchers who are geographically remote from one another.

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