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Voice and Poverty

There are at least two areas of work that can be considered to be attempting to bring issues of 'voice' to the fore in international development and development communications. On the one hand there is now an established body of work on participatory approaches to understanding poverty, which is concerned to let those who experience poverty tell those who do not what this experience is like, rather than have external 'experts' assess it from afar. On the other hand, in the fields of development communication and ICT for development there is growing attention being paid to the local production of content. The first is about the need to listen to the voices of the poor in order to both understand and tackle poverty. The second is concerned with promoting a diversity of voices through media and communications.

Before discussing these two ways of thinking about the connections between issues of voice and poverty, I want to briefly explore what is meant by 'voice', and how it might relate to poverty at all. A somewhat slippery word, though at the same time glaringly self-evident, 'voice' can be used in a number of ways in relation to development. Voice can be defined as inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes, meaning making, autonomy and expression. We can think of 'voice poverty' as the denial of the right of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making.

The ability to express oneself and participate in social and public spheres through information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be considered to be another way to promote this idea of 'voice' that has relevance to how we think about media and communication and its relevance to poverty reduction. Clearly not everyone has the same levels of access or skills required to be full participants in this way. We can think about this, for example, in terms of media literacy which can include the ability to create content, which in turn might be considered a fundamental aspect of what it is to be a citizen in a new media worldⁱ. Debates about digital divides have shifted to focus on issues of digital inclusion and engagement. If we combine such ideas – media literacy, local content creation and digital inclusion and engagement, we can think in terms of 'creative engagement' as a suitable goal for ICTs for development. This involves the ability of people to access technologies and be creative with them in ways that enable their voices to be heard.

ICTs and their relevance to voice (and vice versa) can then be related, both for individuals and groups, to access or a denial of access to modes of expression and more generally to freedom of expression. It can relate to opportunity and agency or the lack thereof, to promote self-expression and advocacy and access to technologies and platforms for distribution of a range of different voices. It can also be related to opportunities to participate in the design of ICT for development interventions themselves.

So defined, 'voice' insists on a 'bottom up' approach – giving people an opportunity to have a voice and influence or drive their own social change - and is of particular relevance to ICTs or communication and development. In other words, nowadays, voice can be considered as a necessary component of development per se, and ICT for development in particular. This is reflected, for example, in a growing interest in communication for social change which insists that 'Social Change can be defined as: a positive change in peoples' lives – as they themselves define such change'ⁱⁱ.

Firstly then, 'voice' can be related to active participation in the development project itself, in establishing what should be the focus of development, in the design and implementation of development initiatives, and in the assessment of whether or not positive social change has resulted. This I discuss as 'participatory approaches and voices of the poor'. Secondly, 'voice' can refer to local content creation, to the expression of a diversity of voices through a range of local media and ICTs. It can be related to the idea of media literacy and digital inclusion and I present this as 'local content and creative engagement'. Finally I will bring these discussions together as I briefly describe a research project designed to explore issues of voice along these lines.

Participatory approaches and voices of the poor

The World Bank's 'Consultations with the Poor' project provides a significant demonstration of the general acceptance of the need for participatory approaches to understanding poverty. It represents probably the largest in scale attempt to 'listen' to the voices of those experiencing poverty, having collected together the voices of 60,000 poor men and women, from 60 countries. Generally referred to as 'voices of the poor', the study is founded on the idea that those who are themselves experiencing poverty are the people who need to describe it, and that participatory techniques provide the means to 'get at' these descriptions and understandings. The use of participatory techniques to understand poverty has its roots in the work of Paulo Freire and has been developed and promoted in particular by Robert Chambers since the early 1980s.

The Voices of the Poor study and its input into the World Development Report 2000/2001 helped both to link voicelessness and powerlessness, insecurity and humiliation to concepts of poverty, and give a boost to the notion that we need to listen to those who have experienced poverty, through participatory approaches to the analysis of poverty, if we are to understand and 'attack' it.

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 Asian Development Bank has more recently published a study called *Learning from the Poor* (2007). Covering seven Indian states, and including over 20,000 people through participatory poverty assessments, again the desire is to place 'the poor' at the centre stage of development and the definition of poverty itself. Participatory techniques are now used across a range of organisations and projects, from the very small scale to large scale like the ADB and the World Bank initiatives. One problem with such large scale 'listening' to voices of the poor is the 'one off' nature of that listening. While we can see how *Voices of the Poor* was the first major project undertaken where, rather than assessing poverty from the outside, the World Bank attempted to understand poverty from the inside, and while it has impacted on various approaches to poverty reduction, the question remains, what happens next to those people and their concerns?

Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) is a more inclusive approach to participatory research, attempting to involve a broad range of participants at every level of the development or social change initiative. In fact, the researcher or 'external expert' acts as a facilitator in such an approach while those directly impacted conduct the evaluation. The key principles of PM&E include respecting and emphasising local knowledge; a broad range of stakeholders design, implement and

determine the impacts or success of an initiative; any learning has practical value to participants; and, the process is educational, empowering and capacity building.

There is a clear intention evident in all of this work to use participatory approaches to listen to the voices of the poor and engage them in decision making and the design of development. The communication for social change (CFSC) consortium shows how participatory approaches can be linked directly to media and communication itself (see www.communicationforsocialchange.org). So let's turn now to think about voice in terms of the content of media and communication.

Local content and creative engagement

The PANOS report *Making Poverty the Story* (2007) tells us it is time to involve the media far more than at present in poverty reduction. PANOS views public service and public interest journalism as a vital 'public good' and suggests one key strategy in *Making Poverty the Story* is the inclusion of 'voice' to provide the 'human angle' in media reports. At the same time it demonstrates a disjoint between the skills of the journalists and the knowledge of Civil Society Organisations and suggests they work together more effectively, to understand each other's needs and identify opportunities to promote dialogue, debate and change for the poor. This report stops short of talking in any depth about 'ordinary citizens' having a leading role to play, though it advocates the use of 'oral testimonies' to provide the voice that will give journalistic features the element of human interest that will engage audiences in thinking more empathetically about issues of poverty.

Perhaps more grounded at the community level and more aligned to ideas of 'participation' in content creation, the World Congress on Communication for Development, held in Rome in October 2006, produced a set of recommendations to policy makers based on an understanding that communication is a 'major pillar' for development and social change. *The Rome Consensus* places community participation and ownership on the part of the poor and excluded at the heart of communication for development. Among the 'strategic requirements' specified in the consensus are: access to communication tools so that people can communicate amongst themselves and with decision makers (community-based media); recognition of the need for different approaches depending on different cultures (context specific); and, support to those most affected by development issues to have a say (voice). According to the consensus there needs to be more of this, in greater depth, and it must always be adequately monitored and evaluated. There is a stress on the need to build capacity for development communication at all levels, from community members to development specialists.

Finding a Voice

These ideas of community-based media, the need to develop activities specific to each context, and the potential benefits of giving those most affected by development issues a voice underpin a project that has been working across India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Indonesia for the past two years. *Finding a Voice*ⁱⁱⁱ began with the assumption that rather than simply understanding ICTs and the media as tools for accessing and circulating useful information, given the opportunity, participants are likely to engage with ICTs in far more complex, creative and expressive ways. I like to call this *creative engagement* with ICTs in an attempt to move beyond limiting issues of access and encompass ideas about digital inclusion. This is particularly interesting in relation to questions of

engagement with ICTs, self-representation and social, political and cultural participation. Clemencia Rodriguez calls this form of media, 'citizens' media'^{iv}.

Community-based media is seen to offer media pluralism and the diversity of content. It is seen as encouraging dialogue and transparency of administration at local levels. It is considered to offer a voice to the voiceless. This demonstrates an opportunity to develop approaches to new technologies that can tap into local creativity and the desire for self expression that might allow users to explore new technologies on their own terms. 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.

Finding a Voice works with a network of 15 local media and ICT initiatives ranging from telecentres to community radio stations, including community libraries, community multimedia centres and community television. 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. 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.

These can be overlaid onto the two aspects of voice and poverty that I write about in this article – participatory approaches to understanding poverty, and local content creation.

Twelve local 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 but this in itself is helping us to understand the importance of participation in any such development communication initiatives and the need to fully account for local contexts. 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' might differ fundamentally to a more pragmatic skills-based approach to 'access' to information and to computer technologies.

In an urban site in India, for example, poor Muslim women have been making short digital stories^v. A range of story ideas and motivations have 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. In this particular centre a Media Development Course has been developed which is training 18 young women in media and design software and skills, readying them for employment in the locality. Rather than train them in basic computer skills and the usual Microsoft suite of softwares, this course is built on the development of creative skills, the kinds of skills that are both in greater demand and better paid in the vicinity.

In another example of 'creative engagement' from Sri Lanka, the Community Multimedia Centre (CMC) Manager travelled to an underserved Tamil community to encourage participation in their CMC activities (minority ethnic Tamil communities are underrepresented). She encouraged a group of young people to come to the CMC and undertake a training course. But again, the course is not straightforward computer skills. They are learning how to make their own digital stories. Asked why, she responded "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".

These are brief examples of how notions of creative engagement are starting to appear across the *Finding a Voice* sites, which are in turn being monitored by the 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. 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, and about the relationship between voice and poverty. The notion of 'voice' represents in many ways a development zeitgeist, combining participatory approaches to development and local content creation. It is an appropriate time to give these ideas some considered attention in order to learn from experiences.

ⁱ Livingstone, S. 2004. 'Media Literacy and the Challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies'. *The Communication Review*. 7: 3-14.

ⁱⁱ Parks, W. 2005. *Who Measures Change: An Introduction to Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation of Communication for Social Change*. New Jersey: Communication for Social Change Consortium. p.3

ⁱⁱⁱ *Finding a Voice: Making Technological Change Socially Effective and Culturally Empowering* is funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP0561848) with UNESCO & UNDP. Examples from India and Sri Lanka were provided by local researchers Aseem and Kosala who were supported by Jo Fildes - See www.findingavoice.org for more details.

^{iv} Rodriguez, C. 2001. *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media*. New Jersey: Hampton Press.

^v 2-3 minute stories, constructed using still images and voiceovers using video editing software have been used in *Finding a Voice* as a mechanism to explore ways of making local content with the ICTs available (computers,

digital cameras and so forth). See chapter 9, Hearn, Tacchi, Foth, and Lennie. (forthcoming 2008) *Action Research and New Media: Concepts, Methods and Cases*. Hampton Press.