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ETHNOGRAPHIC MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF COMMUNITY MULTIMEDIA CENTRES

A Study of Kothmale Community Radio Internet Project, Sri Lanka

Don Slater, LSE

Jo Tacchi, QUT

Peter Lewis, LSE

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‘...answering the question of the effects on society of a particular technology requires one to have a good theory of how that society works. The simplicity of the question is misleading. Answering it properly will often require an understanding of the overall dynamics of a society, and it is thus one of the most difficult, rather than one of the easiest, questions to answer.’ (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999: 6-7)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the research

This report presents the findings of pilot research to explore new methodological approaches to monitoring and evaluating community multi-media centres (CMCs) in the context of development and poverty reduction. The research was originally commissioned by UNESCO’s Adviser for Communication and Information for Asia, Mr Wijayananda Jayaweera, and was funded by DfID with continuing UNESCO support and involvement. The research responded to an urgent need for richer and deeper knowledge of the socio-cultural processes in which community media projects seek to intervene. This report makes the case that a broad-based qualitative research approach – ‘ethnographic action research’ – can provide a reliable foundation for assessing CMC operations, for diagnosing issues and opportunities, and for recommending strategies and solutions.

The research project had two specific objectives:

- to evaluate Kothmale Community Radio Internet Project (KCRIP), Sri Lanka, focusing particularly on the conjuncture of new and old media;
- to develop and pilot a new approach to evaluation research.

The following report reflects this dual aim. It delivers substantive findings about one CMC, and it presents these findings as the outcomes of a specific methodology. It is therefore both an evaluation of a particular community media project, and an evaluation of an evaluation methodology.

The complete research programme (February-August 2002) involved several components:

- A critical literature survey of existing evaluation methodologies and reports;
- One month intensive fieldwork in Sri Lanka, involving members of the funded research team plus local project manager and research assistants (the methods used are fully detailed in Section 4);
- Further development of the research methodology through collaboration with UNESCO in South Asia, including drafting of a research training manual and participation in a UNESCO consultation with CMC project stakeholders and managers in Bangalore, India (August 2002).

In Part I, we present the specific study of KCRIP. This section should constitute both a practical and useable assessment of the project and at the same time an example of the kind of analysis made possible by an ethnographic research approach.

In Part II, we develop our pilot research into a transferable model of research methodology. This includes critical reflection on actual research practice and problems in the Kothmale research. It also presents further developments of the research approach that have emerged from evolving the methodology through further collaboration with UNESCO, during and after the Kothmale research.

1.2 Ethnographic action research

The methodological approach that was piloted and developed through the Kothmale research is detailed in Section 4. Its main elements are:

1. It is an *ethnographic approach*: the aim is to understand both media use and the community media project as part of its wider society and culture. The focus is on the social relations, processes and networks through which information and communications flow, and within which the project is trying to be effective.
2. We therefore study local *communicative ecologies*, rather than individual media and their impacts.
3. We use a range of methods (qualitative and quantitative), in close connection with each other, to explore the important themes and dynamics that impact on the project's effectiveness.
4. Within these broader concerns, research can be clearly targeted on key issues, problems and opportunities that confront the project. Unlike other monitoring and evaluation approaches, however, the focus is on *understanding* social processes rather than measuring impacts.
5. As ethnographers, we start by exploring local understandings of media, of needs, of problems and aims, rather than applying variables or indicators that have been developed for universal application.
6. This commitment to exploring local understandings makes ethnography naturally akin to participatory and action research approaches. We have been developing the approach in this direction, in collaboration with UNESCO, since the Kothmale fieldwork.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 Kothmale Evaluation summary

3.1 Profile of KCR and KCRIP

The community multi-media project comprises Kothmale Community Radio (KCR), Kothmale Community Radio Internet Project (KCRIP) and the Media Project. It is formally part of Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), and is run by a combination of permanent SLBC employees, part-time paid workers ('relief announcers') and volunteers. It was originally started to rebuild a rural community in central Sri Lanka following displacement of populations due to a major dam project on the Mahaweli River.

3.2 Profile of Kothmale region

Kothmale region comprises mixed habitations, from small villages to two medium sized towns. Employment is largely agricultural (paddy farming and tea plantations), with some textile industry, government employment and trade. The region has a complex ethnic mix of Sinhalese, Tamils and Moslems. It is less poor and has experienced less violence than many other parts of Sri Lanka, but has major development problems.

3.3 Profile of media use and information/communication needs in the Kothmale region

Kothmale has poor information resources and problems of information diffusion because of geographical dispersed population and few domestic telephones. Radio is popular and listened to by everyone; television watching is common, ownership is not. Although there is very little use or access to internet, there is high awareness and some understanding of it. Diffusion of new media is likely to occur through diverse and unpredictable routes, such as use of CD and video technologies within music and film consumption and local communications centres.

Information is highly valued, particularly in relation to education. Specifically poverty-related information needs include information related to overseas labour migration; educational information and materials; health; market price information and legal and governmental information.

Diffusion of new media and provision of targeted poverty reduction information are not necessarily related processes: new media up-take (and possible consequent economic developments) is as likely to arise from entertainment or communications-related media activity.

4. Overarching themes

Three major themes emerged within our research as fundamental to understanding the communicative ecology of Kothmale, and KCR's place within it: community, locality and modernization.

4.1 Defining community in Sri Lanka and Kothmale

The concept of 'community' in Sri Lanka is linked to a long history of 'village ideology', in which the rural village is seen as the moral core of the nation, which is defined as a 'nation of villages'. This community ideal is closely identified with Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, and with strong central government control exercised through large scale technological projects such as dams and irrigation. This situation produces a strong language of loyalty to the community. At the same time, it idealises the community as a unified 'people', potentially ignoring social divisions and multi-ethnicity. Finally, allocation of resources within the community – particularly the flow of assets like money, patronage, water or information into the locality – is historically fraught with issues of power and complex institutional arrangements.

4.2. Locality, mobility and media 'spaces'

Local communications and information flows in Kothmale are dominated by face-to-face communications and by issues of mobility. We argue that mass media such as radio and internet are understood by people in terms of their relation to locality and mobility. 'Loudspeaker events' are discussed as an example of face-to-face communications, rooted in the locality. They may be used as

the basis for radio programmes, but the local audience is all-important and radio is valued because it is so rooted in locality. In fact, good radio is understood by people as something like a ‘nation of villages’. Internet use has a similar character.

4.3 Bureaucracy and modernization

KCR is relatively ‘modern’ in the sense that it is innovative, entrepreneurial, relatively non-hierarchical, professional and encourages free activity. It has had to maintain this modern space in a context which its staff experience as traditional and bureaucratic. SLBC exemplifies this, as do other institutions and political processes that KCR has to deal with. Modernization in Sri Lanka, on the other hand, is seen in terms of deregulation and commercialization. There seem to be three strands or ‘survival strategies’ that mark KCR’s response to its institutional and political context: community, professionalism and commercialism.

5. Findings – Fitting KCRIP into the picture

This section presents the themes which emerged from our research as central to illuminating the issues KCR has to face, how well it is responding to them, and what opportunities are open to it for dealing with them more effectively.

5.1 SLBC, autonomy and sustainability

The single main factor dominating KCR is its position within SLBC. As a part of a bureaucratic, state owned broadcasting corporation, KCR is restricted by the processes, structures and regulations imposed upon it by being a part of the SLBC. There is a feeling amongst staff that the SLBC is too restrictive and does not allow them enough autonomy. At the same time, being somewhat remote from the centre of the SLBC (Colombo), KCR staff do have a degree of freedom and autonomy that is rare within the corporation and has led to innovative work that would be unlikely to happen elsewhere within the SLBC. Independence, or partial independence from the SLBC is an issue that was much discussed amongst staff but is yet to be explored strategically within the organisation.

5.2 Ethos, innovation and careers

The most involved participants at KCR – the relief announcers – are extremely attached to the project and highly value the autonomy, learning opportunities and sense of community and belonging they experience there. However, many of them have been fully committed to the project for a very long time. They feel under considerable pressure to get permanent jobs with reasonable incomes. As a station operating as part of the SLBC, KCR is unable to meet these demands. It is also of benefit to the local communities to see people enter the station, learn and practice a range of otherwise unavailable skills, and move on making way for new people to benefit. However, career paths for those who have gained skills at KCR are unclear, and the relief announcers feel unable to get secure jobs elsewhere which also make use of their skills and approximate to the ethos of KCR. A strategy is needed for thinking about project participation in terms of career development.

5.3 Community Divisions – inclusion/exclusion

Five main dimensions of local social division are particularly important for KCR’s mission. Although generally a rural area, Kothmale contains within it a split between *rural* and *urban* areas; there is a danger of increasing local inequalities by favouring urban youth. *Ethnic* divisions are fundamental to the region; much more work needs to be done to include the very poor local Tamil population within KCR. In terms of *gender*, KCR has to deal with restrictions on women’s mobility and access to public places such as the project; this particularly applies to Tamil women. New media in general tend to have a low *age* profile. Finally, *friendship* and *kinship* networks can be used either to include people in the project or to draw boundaries around it.

5.4 Education

Education is generally highly valued in Kothmale as the sole route to social and economic security and advancement. However, due to the requirements of employers, education institutions, students and families tend to be exclusively focused on obtaining formal, paper qualifications rather than on learning, skills and practical experience. Schools are poorly resourced, particularly lacking in information and communication resources. There is also a great need to ‘educate the educators’, particularly in computing and new media.

5.5 Media convergence and technologies

KCRIP aimed to promote access to new media, and to do this partly through convergence between internet and radio. This convergence was partly focused on the idea of Radio Browsing, for which it became well known. This radio format 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 routine operations. Although the idea has brought many benefits to the project, it is no longer appropriate to focus exclusively on this programming format when examining the convergence of radio and internet in the working environment of KCR. The internet is generally regarded within KCR as one information and communication resource amongst many.

Media innovation and convergence at KCR has largely developed through communication and entertainment needs and content rather than through provision of information. An important area for further innovation and convergence is *mobility*, with the ideal of developing internet along similar lines to KCR's radio outside broadcasts. Finally, we discuss some significant barriers to internet use at KCR.

5.6 Language

Lack of functional English language competence is a major barrier to ICT use at KCR, and is politically related to the government's adoption of a Sinhala-only policy in the 1950s. There is a great demand amongst local people to learn practical English. There are few resources available on the internet in Sinhala language. KCRIP could work with teachers or volunteers to develop language learning materials linked to internet use.

The other major local language issue is bilingualism: lack of Tamil speaking and bilingual staff is a major problem, as are technical needs for fonts, bilingual software and translation facilities.

2.2 Methodology summary

7. Defining the approach – Ethnographic Research

We have pursued an *ethnographic approach*: we use a wide but integrated range of methods to build an understanding of the culture and society in which a community multi-media project is working. More specifically, we seek to understand the project's problems and opportunities by studying the 'communicative ecology' of its locale: all the social processes, relations and technologies through which information and communications flow.

Although ethnographic research aims at an holistic understanding of the complete context of a project, our pilot study shows that it can be targeted on specific issues that are relevant to projects and stakeholders. Moreover, it has the advantage of identifying relevant issues through an investigation of the communicative ecology of the project itself. Finally, ethnographic research is naturally participatory and 'dialogic' throughout the research process. Our research team has been developing this aspect of the ethnographic approach through further collaboration with UNESCO, extending our methodology through the idea of *ethnographic action research*.

8. Ethnographic Research in Kothmale

8.1 Description of the research

The pilot research in Kothmale used an integrated array of research methods, including a survey, interviews with households, community organizations, staff, users and key ICT and media figures outside the community, group discussions, observation, informal participation in the social life of the project, analysis of media content and of documents.

8.2 Problems and issues

In trying to develop ethnographic research as a generalizable and transferable methodology for monitoring and evaluation, we identified several issues that need to be addressed. Firstly, ethnography has different aims and outcomes from conventional evaluation: it focuses on mapping communication processes and local understandings of media rather than on quantitative measurement of impacts; and it is best used as a development tool and a way of qualifying effects. Secondly, ethnography can be

cost-effective and accomplished through relatively short fieldwork but this depends on targeting the research and ensuring that certain conditions are met. Thirdly, ethnography brings a new approach to the idea of participatory research: we argue that we should move to the idea of building a *research culture* in multi-media projects. Fourthly, good local informants are crucial to ethnography; in evaluation research this should be thought about in terms of staff participation in research and partnership with local researchers. Fifthly, although many evaluation approaches are ‘multi-method’, ethnography integrates methods, blurs the boundaries between them and tries to bring all data within a single analytical frame. Finally, because ethnography involves mapping social relations and processes it is good at discovering connections and barriers to connections; this can make it very effective in helping projects find and build partnerships, resources and connections with their communities.

Appendix 1

Since our Kothmale fieldwork, we have worked in collaboration with UNESCO to develop our ethnographic approach to monitoring and evaluation into a complete methodology covering all aspects of project development. At the same time, we have further developed the participatory aspects of our model in the direction of action research.

As part of our work with UNESCO, and with the help of an additional researcher (Greg Hearn, QUT), we produced a draft training manual based on this research approach. This is to be used for training researchers who will be attached, for one year each, to a UNESCO ‘cross-cutting themes’ programme: ‘Information and Communication Technologies for Poverty Alleviation’.

This draft manual is attached as Appendix 1, and should give an indication of how the overall methodology can be developed to cover the entire life-cycle of a project, to be transferable both to researchers and to community multi-media projects themselves.

Part I: An Ethnography of Kothmale Community Radio Internet Project (KCRIP)

3. INTRODUCTION

The authors of this report were approached by UNESCO's Adviser for Communication and Information for Asia, Mr Wijayananda Jayaweera, in February 2001, to conduct a monitoring and evaluation of KCRIP. Set up in 1999, with support from UNESCO, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), Sri Lanka Telecomms (SLT) and the Institute of Computer Technology (ICT) at the University of Colombo, this project located a computer and internet centre within the existing Kothmale Community Radio project.

Although the initial focus was the specific internet project, KCRIP, both the research and the report necessarily took a broader perspective, studying the entire CMC as well as its broader communicative and social context. This broadening was dictated not only by our methodology but also by the actual situation we were studying: it proved impossible to disentangle KCR and KCRIP. Unless otherwise indicated, the name 'KCR' will refer to the entire project (including the internet project and the newer 'Media Project').

The organization of this section is dictated by our methodology and is designed to bring out its particular character and strengths. Presenting ethnographic data and analysis in the form of an evaluation and monitoring report required innovation and needs some comment. (We are also aware that other ways of presenting the material were possible.)

1. Ethnographic research proceeds by identifying and exploring key *themes* that organize the material and make it understandable. Some of these themes (Section 5: Findings), emerged and were actively explored in the course of fieldwork, and were then tested and refined in later stages of analysis. These tend to be themes that are closely and directly related to KCR. Other themes – which we have called 'overarching themes' (Section 4) – cut across all aspects of our research and are considered to be fundamental to understanding both KCR and the Kothmale region in which it operates. Overarching themes are necessarily of a broader, more general nature than are usually found in monitoring and evaluation reports.
2. Themes emerge from looking at all the research material in relation to each other. It is therefore inappropriate to present the findings of different methods (survey, interviews, observation) separately. We detail the specific methods, and their contribution to the findings, in Section 4.
3. This approach allows us both to make specific recommendations for the project and to provide a richer understanding of the problems and opportunities the project faces. Section 6, Recommendations, reflects a different way of stating the practical outcomes of research, by continuing the ethnographic development of 'themes'.

This section begins with a profile of Kothmale Community Radio and of the Kothmale region. In Section 4 we present the three overarching themes which emerged from our research and which set the context for discussion of more specific findings in Section 5. This is followed by specific recommendations pertaining to KCR and its development.

3.1 Profile of KCR and KCRIP

Kothmale Community Radio Internet Project is a computing and internet project that was set up within Kothmale Community Radio (KCR). Both are located in a relatively remote hill top settlement called Riverside, near a village called Mawathura. It is well within the boundaries of the Mahaweli Development Authority and within the community that was displaced by that authority's dam projects. KCR has relatively spacious and well built premises (though vulnerable to lightening and other climatic disruptions of both radio transmission and telecommunications), including very basic living quarters and cooking facilities. The site is up to 45 minutes by bus from the largest neighbouring towns of Nawalapitiya and Gampola, where many of the project's workers and users live.

KCR is formally a radio station within Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, rather than an independent community radio project. It is financially and technically regulated by SLBC, and is managed by SLBC employees. Nonetheless, KCR has served the largely rural community described above since 1991 (and in the form of Mahaweli Community Radio since 1981). It broadcasts from 5.00am-2.00-pm as Kothmale fm (Kfm), which has a more commercial orientation; and from 5.00-8.00pm as Kothmale Community Radio. Despite this mixed operation, and the station's position within SLBC, the entire project has a strong community ethos throughout its activities, and this has continued into its internet project and more recent Media Project.

KCR has been managed by a Controller, Mr Sunil Wijesinghe, since its inception as Mahaweli Community Radio in 1981. He is officially an SLBC employee though he has been entirely involved in community-oriented radio since 1979. KCR has two other full-time SLBC employees (both technicians). All other participants are either volunteers or 'Relief Announcers'. Relief Announcers are crucial to the KCR story. The station (and now the internet project) relies heavily on a small group of core participants with the requisite technical and media skills, and commitment of time and energy, to maintain operations. They have been recruited over time through public advertisements, or by increasing their commitment as volunteers. As we discuss in Section 5.2, core participants have shown very high levels of commitment, often over many years, which needed to be both rewarded and materially supported. The station negotiated with SLBC the appointment of volunteers as Relief Announcers: these are not permanent positions, but payments for work up to a strict limit - no person could be paid more than Rs 4700 a month, out of a total budget available to the station for relief announcer fees of Rs 35,000 per month. This is a very low level of financial support but offers some highly valued recognition of their role in the organization.

The internet project, KCRIP, launched in 1999, represented, firstly, a move to bring computing and internet to a poor rural area, with the additional original aim of establishing outlying internet access in neighbouring towns. Secondly, however, KCRIP had a more innovative aim of integrating internet and radio within community communications. This has since continued with the establishment of a media project, with funding from a Dutch donor (HIVOS). ICT convergence was particularly symbolized by the project's 'Radio Browsing' format (see Section 5.5), which brought KCR considerable international attention.

KCRIP comprises three well-specified computers, including multi-media facilities and internet access via ISDN, in a publicly accessible room, plus one in the radio studio. Initial plans for access points in two neighbouring towns have not been fulfilled because of lack of technical support. An Australian volunteer, Tanya Notley, originally managed the project for one year; since which it has been overseen largely by relief announcers. Technical support is currently provided largely through a volunteer from Colombo who is also given some payment under the relief announcer scheme as well as through the Media Project.

The project offers a good range of computing courses (some paid, some free), from basic computer literacy through fairly advanced programming. It is open seven days a week from early morning till late at night, and is generally very fully used by individuals, students on courses, local school classes and by project workers and volunteers. There is developing activity in web design.

Finally, the project was to have included a website plus web hosting of sites produced by users. This has had a difficult history (detailed below) but a new website is now under development. .

The Media Project was launched in 2001, located in the local library at the neighbouring town of Nawalapitiya. It comprises computers, printer and photocopier which are intended to develop publishing projects, in particular a local newsletter called *Penthalia*.

3.1.1 History

In 1977, the Sri Lankan government, under the UNP party, launched a major dam construction project in the Kothmale region, south of Kandy. This was part of the Mahaweli Development Authority's massive programme to develop hydroelectric power, irrigation and water supplies through Sri Lanka. It continued centuries-old themes within Sri Lanka, connecting large-scale technical projects and increased central state authority. Mahaweli Development Authority was described to us (by one of its leading managers) as a 'government within the government': it had enormous power both to displace populations and to reconstruct regions through programmes of road and settlement construction, education and job creation.

The Kothmale project involved considerable population displacement and the building of new towns and settlements. The idea of using radio to meet local communications needs and help to regenerate community in the region was first proposed by a Danish community radio producer, Knud Ebbesen. It was supported by the Sri Lankan Media Ministry, DANIDA and UNESCO. There was growing support for the concept of community radio within international media and development work at this time. Moreover, there existed within the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) a small number of producers and announcers who were pushing for the establishment of community radio. Some of these have continued this commitment up to the present day, through KCR, SLBC, UNESCO or all three. After 1979, several community stations – or regional stations with a community orientation – were set up within SLBC.

Mahaweli Community Radio began operations in 1981 as an SLBC operation, with additional UNESCO funding committed until 1985, DANIDA funding until 1986. It was managed by Mr Sunil Wijesinghe who continued until September 2002 as Controller. In these first years MCR was a mobile radio recording unit of a considerable size, three teams whose productions were transmitted as half-hour programmes three to four times a week on regional SLBC stations. Typically a programme would take two weeks to produce, involving living and researching in villages, setting up mobile studios in local temples, schools or community centres, producing programmes with local participation and community comment. This level of commitment could not be sustained beyond the mid-1980s.

Kothmale Community Radio began on an experimental basis in February 1989, when MCR was given equipment as a by-product of political disputes within the Media Ministry. The political violence later in 1989, which reduced field visits in MCR as elsewhere (Page and Crawley 1999: 333), delayed the official launch of KCR till February 1991 when the station, under Sunil Wijesinghe, broadcast from a very remote site in Doregala from 5pm to 8pm three days a week, gradually increasing to five days a week.

Political conflict with the new People's Alliance government plus the launch of commercial radio in the early 1990s placed great pressure on both KCR and SLBC, with declining popularity and advertising revenue. SLBC implemented staff cuts, and ordered regional stations – and KCR – to generate local revenue. KCR therefore launched a more popular and commercial morning transmission that would attract advertising: Kothmale FM.

Addition of a computer/internet project was discussed from 1998 onwards. One of the authors of the idea, MJR David, stated its aims:

- to empower marginalised rural communities to take advantage of new communication technologies ... to reduce the rural/urban communication gap
- to create awareness of new technologies among rural communities
- to develop a rural community database by interfacing community radio with the internet
- to provide a test-bed to develop an adaptable model for provision of access to new communication technologies by alternative means (David 2001)

Synergies between radio and internet were expected from the start, with each encouraging increased participation in the other. However, the plans also included two elements that would promote media convergence and an integrated approach to local information and communications needs: Radio Browsing and a local information database (both discussed in detail elsewhere).

UNESCO involvement was again critical, with major support from Mr Wijayananda Jayaweera, now Regional Communications Officer for Asia. Sri Lankan financial and technical support was provided by Sri Lankan Telecomms; the Institute of Computer Technology (ICT) at the University of Colombo was given a two-year contract to operationalise the system and provide training and website development; and SLBC supported this broadening of KCR's operations. The Internet project began on an experimental basis in January 1999 and officially from April 1999. Its first year of operation was, by all accounts, a period of both intense enthusiasm and innovation, and intense frustration. The positive side took the form of discovering potential for internet use both within the Radio Browsing format and through teaching, web design and community outreach. This was particularly aided by the one year appointment of an Australian volunteer, Tanya Notley, who was able to develop a range of initiatives within the compass of a thorough-going community orientation.

The frustrations were both institutional and technical. Firstly, there was a clear breakdown in the working relationship between KCR and ICT. Without trying to apportion blame, we can say that KCR staff and volunteers universally experienced ICT's approach as technocratic and controlling, rather than oriented to community participation; that it constructed an inappropriate website for the project, hampering many of its initiatives; and that many of the technical facilities it promised were not delivered. Most crucially, ICT was contracted to set up internet access points in the neighbouring towns of Nawalapitiya and Gampola, routed through Kothmale, which would mitigate the remote siting of the main project. Only one of these outposts was ever made functional, and then only briefly, reducing both the concept and scale of the internet project. Frustration reached crisis point in late 2000 when the entire internet connection to Kothmale was terminated for a year, at the end of the project funding period, and the end therefore of the free of charge lease line connection provided by SLT. Once back on line, the internet project had evolved and developed. It continues as an integrated component of KCR whilst still often working under threat of disconnection (as the SLBC considers saving money) and without a dedicated development worker.

Finally, in 2001, a 'Media Project' was added to KCR. This originally took the form of installing computers and printers in the public library at Nawalapitiya in order to produce locally-oriented newsletters and other publications. The funding was raised by KCR participants from a Dutch donor but it was established with – and with the aim of – sufficient distance from the project that its funding and facilities escaped SLBC control. It therefore created a limited sphere of autonomy. The newsletter it produces – *Penthalia* – has generated a high level of enthusiasm, participation and skills development, particularly amongst its young producers. It is also virtually unique in being bi-lingual Sinhalese and Tamil. Some of its broader aims of encouraging public use in the town were frustrated by local politics: during the local elections in March 2002, council officials tried to commandeer the facilities to the extent that the Chair of media project management committee felt it had to recapture the equipment and relocate it to Kothmale. They are currently seeking neutral and secure premises in Nawalapitiya.

3.2 Profile of Kothmale region

The Kothmale region is located in Central Province, south of Kandy. KCR's catchment centres on a rural uplands area surrounding a major dam project along the Mahaweli River. This district contains a mixture of settlements including small villages of rice paddy farmers, labourers or tea plantation workers; accommodation tied to tea plantations and factories, or to large local employers such as the Mahaweli Development Authority (MDA); and larger villages which tend to be transport centres or junctions. There are two larger towns just outside the boundaries of the Mahaweli Development Authority: Nawalapitiya (town population approximately 15,000) and Gampola (town population approximately 60,000), which play a major role in the life of the region and of KCR.

The region is quite mountainous, and noted for its beauty, fresh and cool air, and good water. Nonetheless it is subject to daily power and water cuts. It is reasonably well connected to both Kandy (about an hour by train) and Colombo (about 3-4 hours by train or bus). The region is strongly identified as part of the heartland of Kandyan Sri Lanka, while at the same time distinguishing itself from the old Kandyan elite.

The area has a complex ethnic mix of Sinhalese, Tamils, Moslems, 'Malays', 'Burghers' (of European decent) and various Christian sects. Some generalizations are possible (rural Sinhalese are often paddy farmers; Tamils are concentrated in tea plantations, living in remote 'line houses' (one story houses, built in rows of six, with two or three small rooms); Moslems tend to be in the towns or larger villages. However, it is the complexity of ethnic distribution that stands out (see Section 5.3.2), such that each town, ward and village had a different composition.

Although there has been open conflict in this area, it has in recent years been less affected by the extremes of the civil war than other parts of Sri Lanka. At the same time, the Mahaweli dam has been considered a high security risk; the region has therefore been subject to heavy policing.

There is little industry in the region beyond a few textile firms. The main sources of income in the rural areas are agricultural (rice and vegetable cultivation in owned or tenanted paddies; labour in tea plantations or tea factories); and state employment (teaching, MDA). In the towns, employment centres on trade and retail. Nawalapitiya is, in addition, a main centre for railway administration.

3.3 Profile of media use and information/communication needs in the Kothmale region

In this section we will sketch out the general media characteristics of the Kothmale area, drawing on surveys, questionnaires, observations and published data. The aim is descriptive: broader themes of communicative ecology are developed in sections 4 and 5.

3.3.1 Media diffusion

Local information and communications flows are dominated by face-to-face communications and therefore by mobility issues – the physical movements of people and messages (via, for example, handbills and loudspeakers). We discuss these local flows in detail in Section 4.2, below.

At the same time there was both high awareness of the complete range of contemporary media technologies, and widespread use, if not ownership. This was, as would be expected, highly differentiated as to both ethnicity and income, ranging from poor and isolated Tamil plantation workers through to well-networked and wealthier Moslem traders. There was also considerable differentiation by gender.

Information resources: Aside from the individual media, discussed below, we looked at a range of local information diffusion patterns, all of which showed serious problems of information scarcity and up-to-dateness. Kothmale may have been well supplied in relation to poorer regions, but very badly in relation to its high literacy and education level, as well as the ambitions of the people. The public library in Nawalapitiya, for example, had an extremely small, out of date and haphazard book stock, particularly in key areas such as English language learning material, technology and computing, and

law, and this despite a well motivated and trained staff, and despite winning awards as the best local library in the region. School libraries were even worse in terms of both books and alternative information sources. None that we visited had computers, whether for internet or CD-ROMs, and wherever school computer centres existed, they were badly under-utilized and did not coordinate at all with their libraries. The worst school libraries – predictably – were those of rural Tamil primary schools (though the Sinhalese secondary school neighbouring KCR was, in point of fact, the absolute emptiest). The government do supply text books apparently in sufficient quantity.

Lack of information resources is complemented by problems of information flow and diffusion. We visited health centres and trade unions with parallel problems. They each had the arduous task of receiving information in the form of booklets and newsletters produced by central government agencies (covering health dangers and prevention measures, or legal issues concerning employment, respectively), which they had to translate into media forms that would be understandable by their different publics. They then had to transmit these to constituencies that were geographically scattered and often remote. The health centres (for example, midwives) divided the region into a large number of regions, each covered by a single midwife transmitting information through visits, meetings and – in more urgent cases – touring with loudspeakers mounted on a car. The trade union reached tea plantation workers through a rota of meetings at remote sites. It should be added that schools had a similar problem of maintaining regular contact – flows of both information and communication – with parents living in scattered rural habitations, which were precisely where the worst issues of attendance arose.

Telephones: Few people had domestic access to telephones, or use of workplace phones for personal use. Commercial ‘communications centres’ however were plentiful, generally offering local and international phoning, fax and – increasingly – internet, email and CD burning. Mobile phones – which were already popular in Colombo and Kandy – were still rare in Kothmale. Use of a phone was regarded as a very infrequent and expensive event, largely for contacting relatives living away or abroad, but was not seen as particularly difficult, frightening or special.

Radio: Radio was ubiquitous, with near universal ownership of at least one radio and very high popularity. Radio in Sri Lanka is highly regarded by both audience and professionals. Particularly in comparison with television (seen as stodgy, amateurish, with low production values) and press (seen as elitist and generally tied to party politics), radio has a reputation for being world class, and for being innovative, popular and populist, independent and clearly targeted on a wide range of age, ethnicity and interest groups.

None of this positive feeling for radio applies to SLBC. Indeed, commercial radio is highly valued throughout the population precisely for the values that are increasingly associated with the commercial sphere: it is modern, pleasurable and independent both of political parties and governmental programmes. This is probably also aided by the fact that – in addition to clearly identified spot advertising – commercial radio funding (again including KCRIP) is heavily dependent on sponsorship arrangements which merge advertising and editorial content. We were originally confused by constant reference to 15 and 30 minute ‘advertisements’, meaning companies sponsored programmes containing different amounts of spot advertising, or based on formats or events more or less closely tied to a product.

Most importantly, radio seemed able to combine two apparently incompatible qualities: popular radio broadcast a steady diet of global culture (western popular music and South Asian film music) and national culture (new Sinhalese and Tamil music); at the same time, it was widely seen as ‘good at getting out into the community, getting into towns, villages....creating a hype somewhere’ (quote from an advertising executive), in the form of local events, marches and parades, promotions, and so on. In this respect Kfm (KCRIP’s morning commercial broadcasting) was in line with the general character of Sri Lankan commercial radio, and probably equivalently innovative and professional, though without the equivalent resources. Its other programming was valued for providing what was missing from most radio – local information, older popular music, a developed association with one particular place.

The greatest demand – across all social divisions – was for music. Choice of station largely depended on the kind of music and associated media environment a station offered: Tamil and Hindi film music,

with Tamil announcers; Sinhalese popular and folk music; international, youth-oriented popular music, frequently in English. After music, people articulated a demand for news and for religious programming.

Television: There is relatively high domestic ownership of TV in the local towns, declining as one moves out to rural villages. However, even here TV is familiar and watching is an everyday experience, largely through shared resources. Although, as with radio, people generally claim an interest in news, information and religious content, it is abundantly clear that television is immensely popular for one major reason alone: teledramas. These are half hour Sri Lankan dramas, similar to soap operas (though coming to a conclusion at the end of a limited – generally 12 week – series). They usually deal with rural life as a site for family and village conflicts and resolutions. They are immensely popular; it was common for people to be religiously fixed to the screen from 8.00-9.30. After teledramas, the most popular programmes seemed to be films and health information.

It is worth noting that although local people did not tend to comment on the style or production values of television (they just watched the teledramas), anyone who might be classed as a media worker saw Sri Lankan television as backward and stymied by government bureaucracy. There are signs of renaissance here. The state television company (which is partly commercially supported), Rupahavini, is about to reorganize its broadcasting so that one channel will be entirely Sinhalese and the second channel will be divided between Tamil during the day and English during prime time. The English production will be given out to independent producers, which is seen as a way of allowing innovation.

Press: our survey and interviews picked up high levels of newspaper reading (less magazine consumption). Notably, a lot of people read newspapers in the library once a week rather than pay the cover price. We got little sense that press was either a popular, valued or trusted medium, largely because of its involvement in partisan politics, and because quality papers tend to be published in English.

CD, VCD, video, audio cassettes: Largely due to the intense popularity of music, film and film music culture, there was significant diffusion of electronic media via formal, informal and pirate networks. There was a great deal of entrepreneurial activity around these media: the towns had numerous vendors of all these formats, as well as technicians capable of doctoring machines to play VCDs. There were public advertisements for commercial CD burning ‘studios’. One communications centre offering internet access was largely occupied in burning pirate copies of films and downloading graphics off the net to print out for packaging, posters and purchase by fans. Large audio tape and CD music collections were not confined to the young: KCR relied on private collections for all genres of music.

It seemed abundantly that this was a major route for diffusion of new media technologies and expertise because of their location within music and film culture, their extension of already familiar media (eg, audio cassettes) and because of the extensive exchange relations surrounding the circulation of this culture (selling, bartering, gifting, etc).

ICTs: We can say quite simply that domestic internet access is unheard of in the more rural areas and extremely rare in the towns: in the course of survey and interviews, the only instances we came across were one very wealthy Moslem merchant family and one of our researcher assistants (who taught at the local university), plus several people who had friends with domestic access. Moreover, we found no evidence of internet access via workplace. However, there were numerous instances of relatives who had used the internet at work in Kandy or Colombo; this was often the route through which they had learned about these new media, and in some cases people had accessed online information via that relative. Some others had seen computers or internet when working abroad.

Awareness of internet, on the other hand, was very high throughout our survey, interviews and observation: both ‘internet’ and ‘email’ were familiar terms, picked up through television, newspapers or word of mouth. Understanding of these terms was far more sketchy. The idea most people conveyed was, ‘a fast way of getting information from abroad’, or ‘a fast way of sending messages abroad’; most people clearly associated them with computers, less clearly with telephone lines. The focus was speed, connection to foreign places (rather than within Sri Lanka), and unlimited information or communication.

Most importantly, internet was associated with young people, both in popular perception and in reality. Older people saw internet (when they thought about it at all) as part of their children's future, very much on a par with the computer education that they heavily invested in. Although there was some association of internet with danger (pornography) and the frivolous (games), this was minimal compared to the great desire for their children to gather those technical skills that would allow them to do well in their education and therefore in future careers. Again, the focus was on educational success rather than direct relevance to work: the only computers, let alone internet access, visible in workplaces were in betting shops, communications centres and private computer schools; even the local banks were not significantly computerised. There was only one graphic designer in Nawalapitiya who used computer graphics. The young people we talked to that were learning computing at KCR in order to get a job saw their employment opportunities lying in Colombo.

In reality, young people were indeed involving themselves in both computers and internet through private computer schools, through KCR itself and through visits to cybercafés in Kandy. The majority of internet users at KCR were young.

Communications centres: Communications centres are numerous in Nawalapitiya and Gampola (but tend to be scarce and basic in the rural areas). Developing originally around fax and local, national and international call facilities, the addition of email, chat and web browsing has been a natural extension, as has CD burning facilities. None have yet developed into full-service cybercafés (though one particular local entrepreneur was clearly well-placed to do this), mainly because of the large investment that would be required. Entrepreneurs in this area felt the demand was definitely there (aside from general interest in internet, there was plenty of mention of travelling to Kandy to use the cybercafés there). The pattern in Kothmale region was responsiveness to specific demands (music, email for people travelling on business) and use of considerable entrepreneurial skills in finding opportunities within technologies and costs structures. One entrepreneur operated a local postal service, using teenagers to home deliver emails that arrive via his own account.

Each of the three communications centres we visited was a mine of expertise about the local communicative ecology and how to respond innovatively in terms of both technology and business planning. It would seem crucial for KCR to look at innovative responses of small businesses, and perhaps work in partnership with them.

3.3.2 Two examples: the communicative ecology of school children

The picture painted above is supported by surveys, interviews and observation. However, a particularly vivid impression was given by group discussions and interviews at four schools in the region (for more details see Education section):

Sinhalese school, rural: We talked to a class of 29 students (14 girls and 15 boys) all aged 16. They felt that education was important to them and all planned to study for their A Levels once they had completed their O Levels. Fifteen of the children had extra tuition classes outside of school. They talked about the kinds of work they wanted to do when they finished their education. These included engineering, becoming a doctor, a science teacher, a music teacher, a pilot and a cricketer. They talked about wanting to do work that benefited their country, that helped it to develop, and most wanted to work in their local area in order to do this. There was a strong sense of the notion of community (as discussed in section 4.1, below), and that the rural areas were where one could do most good work for the country as a whole.

Their parents worked as teachers, engineers, farmers, tailors, electricians, drivers and tea factory supervisors. One described his parent as a 'village headman'. All of the children had TV sets and radios at home, 3 had VCRs, and two had telephones. They had all, at some time, used a telephone either from their own home, a relatives house, a communication centre or a neighbour's house. All of the class had visited Colombo and Kandy – some went to Kandy regularly to attend math tuition classes. Most of their homes get newspapers regularly, some every day. Almost all of the students had visited KCR to use the computers there. They were students who studied commerce and they had visited KCR with their class. Two of the boys had used the Internet there. Many of them knew someone who had used KCR's Internet facilities to obtain O-Level results. Most had used computers

for drawing, games and basic computer skills though none of them went to KCR for computer classes outside of school visits.

They understood the Internet to be a 'powerful mode of communication', a 'global village', and a means to find out what was happening around the world 'immediately'. They understood it to work by connecting computers through satellites. They knew that email was a means of sending messages quickly from one computer to another using the Internet. They knew this from the TV and from visiting KCR. Their general media consumption was high and they described TV as a family activity (often involving arguments about which channel to watch) and radio as something they did *tanyuma* (alone). They all went to the cinema, some boys saying that they missed Sunday school in order to go and watch films.

There are no computers in the school. The Principal encourages the children to go to KCR because he feels it is important for them to learn about computers and has a lot of confidence in the station because it is a part of the area and he knows the students won't misuse the technology there. He does not know how to use computers or the Internet, but some of the teachers go to KCR to learn about this.

Tamil School, rural: We talked to a group of 8 pupils, all studying at grade 7, though they ranged in age from 11 to 16. There were four boys and four girls. The group grew as other children joined in so that eventually there was a group of 21 children. They all said they hoped to pass their O-Levels and wanted to go on to study A-Levels and later go to university. Most of them said they wanted to become teachers and work in the local area.

Out of 21 pupils, 15 had radios at home, 9 had TV sets, and 7 watch TV at friends or relatives homes. None of the children's homes had a telephone. One of the girls had used the telephone to talk to her uncle in Colombo (using a telephone in a shop). One girl talks on the telephone once a month to her mother who is working in Saudi – her mother calls a local shop – another talks to her father once a month – he is overseas and so he calls a neighbour's house. None of the other children had ever used a telephone.

They had very little knowledge of computing, the Internet or email although two of them had attended KCRIP for computer classes. The Principal told us that the teachers did not know these things either. Some of the children had visited KCRIP as Tanya had taken them. They had seen and used the computers but had not used the Internet. KFM staff had visited the school to talk about the radio station and the computer facilities. Being so close to KCRIP, the Principal was keen to send children there regularly and was interested to know how this might be done through the school,

These children are very poor. They do not get the opportunity to go anywhere. Most of them still haven't even been to Kandy. Some have never been out of the area that they live in. Their parents are also uneducated, therefore they do not understand the importance of taking the children to show them places and even if they wanted to they cannot afford it.

3.3.3 Information and communication needs

All sectors of the community placed a high value on information, and had a clear sense of what they needed information for. They placed particular value on educational material and news. In terms of communications, they placed the highest value on face-to-face interaction and the means to participate in local social networks, including religious ones. Finally, there was rich involvement in mediated culture, focused above all on music and film. In addition, the area is characterised by reasonable levels of education and literacy, economic and cultural activity, technical expertise and so on, plus generally high aspirations in terms of education and jobs.

Within this overall picture, there were specific information and communication issues that emerged regularly in our research, and which clearly had poverty-reduction implications, either directly or indirectly:

1. In many households, overseas employment of one or more family members is often the largest single opportunity (and risk) for poverty reduction. Given the many information and communication issues involved in managing this process, enhanced ICT in this area would be of enormous benefit: 1. providing independent information about reliable employment agencies, employers, legal advice support agencies, and transport; 2. helping manage and

- transfer funds; 3. on-line purchase of transport; 4. enhanced communication with family via email, webcams, chat and so on.
2. Educational information: ability to research courses, qualifications and funding sources.
 3. Educational materials: scarce and out-of-date library resources in this region seriously hamper both educational success and actual skills development, above all amongst the poor Tamil community. Easy and well-organized access to online information, current CD-ROMs and printed material sourced from both would have immediate benefits, particularly in English teaching, technical and scientific subjects and business education.
 4. The region had little in the way of small enterprises that would benefit from ecommerce, either as purchasers or suppliers. Retail and services was for local markets; agricultural production was either marketed through tea companies or – in the case of paddy cultivation – through transport to regional markets. A major poverty-related ICT intervention that would be significant in this regard is the publication of market prices for agricultural products.
 5. Legal and governmental information: a great deal of time and resource is bound up in legal disputes and in dealing with government bureaucracy. The complicated and often abused legal system also raises issues of civil rights, due process and recourse against malpractices. There is a great need for accessible information and advice about legal rights, processes and recourse, as well as government policies and programmes.

Finally, it needs to be emphasised that the information and communication needs that will most likely promote diffusion of new media possibilities are not necessarily those needs that are directly and obviously related to poverty reduction. To take an extreme example: We can be sceptical that the very formal computing education we observed will really fulfil parents' ambitions for their children's rise out of poverty, precisely because of its formal approach. On the other hand, cobbling together CD burning operations or playing around with online chat, however frivolous it may seem, both built on practical media understandings and expertise and developed them in innovative and entrepreneurial directions.

That is to say, encouraging diffusion of ICTs – with consequent impacts on skills levels, innovative and entrepreneurial attitudes, and global connection – may be best furthered through such things as entertainment and chat than directly through meeting 'information needs'. At the same time, there is a need to recognise the importance in Sri Lanka of paper qualifications.

3.3.4 ICT developments external to the region

We interviewed a range of ICT-related people in Colombo and Kandy, and looked at a range of documents concerning ICT policy and initiatives in Sri Lanka. Although space precludes a detailed treatment here, several issues are important for understanding the situation in Kothmale:

1. In contrast to the Kothmale region, the internet has made strong inroads into Colombo, and to a lesser extent Kandy, both in terms of business use (advertising agencies we talked to could do all client communication via email), and popular youth culture, at least amongst the middle classes: there is a buzz around internet amongst young people in Colombo, and it is seen as an inevitable part of the future once there is significant increase in infrastructure, lowered costs, more cybercafés and more English literacy. To some extent, local youth markets can already be reached via internet media.
2. Telecommunications deregulation, and organizational modernization of Sri Lanka Telecomms, looks set to rapidly develop telecomms infrastructure, including facilities for data traffic. Similarly there is already considerable activity in satellite, microwave and mobile communications areas. It is hard to know how quickly this will impact on the Kothmale region.
3. What we can say is that government officials, regulators, educators, business communities and intelligentsia are all speaking the language of knowledge-based economy and internet revolution. Moreover, this is generally conceptualised in terms of deregulation and

commercialisation, with strong moves away from governmental solutions and towards local devolution (for example, Mahaweli Development Authority has reduced its staff by two thirds and is pursuing a policy of withdrawing from centralized development programmes).

4. We came across a bewildering profusion of institutions, NGOs and multi-agency proposals and committees to developing computing/internet skills and facilities in rural areas. These included, for example, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT); Sarvodaya (a very large Buddhist-based NGO); and Save the Children. There is a real lack of coordination and partnership between these various initiatives, and lack of awareness of who is doing what. For example, SLIIT's plans not only fit perfectly with KCRIP's activities, but they had set up a branch nearby in Kandy, yet neither knew of the other.

3.3.5 Conclusions

Given that one of KCRIP's main aims is to promote both access to and awareness of new media, it is important to draw some conclusions here about the likely paths of internet diffusion. The main conclusion is obvious but often forgotten in discussions of digital divide: awareness and use of technologies arises from extremely heterogeneous directions, needs and developments; and each of these can give a very different understanding of new media. For example, the intense desire for computing as part of schooling and achieving formal qualifications produces a different 'internet' from popular involvement in assembling pirate music CDs.

What seems to be required is an opportunistic sensitivity to the range of activities to which elements of new media can be attached, and to the kinds of media that are thereby constructed.

4. OVERARCHING THEMES

In this section we discuss three overarching themes that we found to be crucial for understanding the context in which KRC operates. They therefore set the backdrop for the more specific treatment of KCR in the next section.

Firstly, we found that Sri Lankan concepts of *community* – specifically idealised as the rural village community – have played a decisive role in framing the possible meaning of community media in Kothmale.

Secondly, we found that the idea of *locality* was crucial in framing understandings of all media and of how they relate to each other within the communicative ecology of the region.

Thirdly, but briefly, locality and local media interventions are highly structured by a concern with autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic and other structures. This frames the options that the project feels are open to it.

4.1 Defining community in Sri Lanka and Kothmale

As noted above, the very concept of KCR as a *community* media project has its origins in two different concepts of ‘community’, that of agencies such as UNESCO and DANIDA and that of the Mahaweli Development Authority. The simple story is that MDA’s Kothmale dam project was envisioned as a complete rural development programme that displaced villages but also provided a range of socio-economic initiatives to develop the area; community radio could play its part in the large scale relocation of people and the (re)building of community. This meshed well with the NGO idiom of ‘community media’, also adopted by figures within SLBC, which spoke of using the media for local empowerment.

However, this story misses the deeper issues. The MDA version of ‘community’ has profound – literally ancient – roots in Sri Lankan culture and governance. These were evident in the almost constant analogies drawn between the MDA and the ancient irrigation culture of the Anaradhapura civilization and the Kandyan kingdom.

Sri Lanka’s political elite finds its legitimacy, in part, in an indigenous political framework that stems from the ancient Sinhala civilizational tradition (or, more accurately, from modern interpretations of that tradition). The ancient Sinhala kings legitimated their rule by constructing irrigation works, and modern politicians – especially those of the ruling United National Party – emulate their example..... (Pfaffenberger 1988: 246)

MDA, like the related Village Awakening Program (*Gam Udava*, starting in 1977), is widely viewed (within the academic literature on Sri Lanka) as a post-colonial attempt to combine rural socio-economic development and the political incorporation of the peasantry within a project of Sri Lankan nationalism and nation-building. As Pfaffenberger writes:

The Sri Lankan project planners envisioned communities of sturdy, independent, yeoman farmers who possess secure land tenure. Thus protected from exploitation and poverty, such farmers would naturally regard their protector, the state, with affection and loyalty. (246)

Both the vision of yeoman communities, and the very strategy of pursuing an agricultural rather than industrial development path, testifies to the almost mythic role of the village community in Sri Lankan (and particularly Sinhala) identity. This vision of Sri Lanka was clearly expressed in the specifically Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that dominated politics from the 1920s through the 1980s. As Brow (1996) argues, this was dominated by an image of a just or virtuous social order (*dharmistha samajaya*) at whose core were ‘prosperous, contented, and largely self-sufficient village communities in which simple devotion to Buddhist precepts and harmonious cooperation in agriculture were the hallmarks of social life, and the basic unit of organization was the family farm’ (78). Economic and moral development were considered inseparable: although the image of the village community was

mythological (it was always located in the lost past of the country), it was a mythology deeply ingrained in both elites and peasantry, and formed the key to national goals: to 'achieve spiritual and material regeneration of rural life through programs of self-help that would restore the village community to the condition of harmony, virtue and prosperity that it was believed to have enjoyed in ancient times.' (88) It must be pointed out that this view of village, society and history was profoundly Sinhalese, closely identifying all three with *Buddhist* – not Tamil or Hindu – precepts and culture.

The relationship between village and state however is deeply paradoxical. It is very clearly expressed by Brow:

processes of local and national communalisation meshed comfortably together....In many of its most prominent representations the Sinhala nation was itself imagined as a nation of villages, and the village community was even located at its moral core. Nevertheless the propagation of nationalist ideology through such official activities as the Village Awakening Program was profoundly contradictory and disruptive. This was largely due to the fact that Sinhala nationalism was most stridently carried into villages by representatives of the major political parties, whose competition with one another had intensified local conflicts to the point of fracturing the very sense of village unity that was so loudly celebrated in nationalist rhetoric. (23)

Constructing national identity as a 'nation of villages' means balancing the autonomy that is morally valued with incorporation into centralized political programmes. This is especially the case when relations between the political centre and the village communities have been dominated for two millennia by massive technological interventions: the irrigation systems and water projects of which MDA was simply a late example. Hence, MDA was described to us as a 'government within the government', almost a recreation of the old Kandyan kingdom in which, in exchange for water (and now hydro electric power), the state expected to be able to regulate all aspects of local life.

What stands out from historical and anthropological accounts of this 'nation of villages' is not the village autonomy it ostensibly valued but rather a complex structure of kinship and caste (*pavula*, *gama* and *variga*) through which state resources and obligations had to be mediated, largely through a figure such as village headman (the *gamaral* or, later, the *vel vedane*, a local who represented official authority, and could mediate between village and state). Within this situation, state resources (water, land, education, money grants) became enmeshed in local means of exercising power, negotiating obligations and keeping peace. These included forms of systematic debt, complicated land tenure arrangements, labour obligations and local alliances and patronage structures.

Pfaffenberger, for example, discusses traditional local strategies for mitigating the inegalitarian effects of large scale irrigation projects that privilege 'top-enders' (families with land-holdings nearest the tanks, where water pressure and volume are highest): villagers mediated and diffused these advantages through devices such as linking land-rights and water rights so that benefits and disadvantages were more balanced; and 'inter-familial juggling' of land holdings to ensure economical sustainable holdings, kin-based systems of reciprocity and resource sharing (1988: 248). The point is not that villages really conformed to an egalitarian ideal but rather that we need to look at the 'community' as structured by its local attempts to allocate in-flowing resources within a specific local culture and structure.

However, a new feature arises in the post-war period, and particularly from the mid-1970s: politicisation. On the one hand, parties vie with each other to be seen as most closely aligned with village regeneration (both for ideological reasons and to increase their electoral support and local bases through patronage). On the other, (shifting) party allegiance forms another overlay of local resource allocation, mapped onto kinship and caste. For example, we were regularly informed of the repercussions on KCR of the recent (December) change of national government to UNP, and of the extreme uncertainty surrounding the expected change of local government as a result of local elections during the (March) research period. People would say of a KCR staff member, 'now that his party is in power....', the implication being that local power and resource control was expected to flow along party political lines.

If MDA is part of a continuous history of state-village relations that define community as both a moral centre and a point of state intervention, how do we characterize KCR?

These very broad themes were very evident in everyday observation of KCR:

1. There is a strong language of ‘loyalty to the community’, and of ‘localization’ (understanding the world from the perspective of a strong rootedness in *this place*). For example, school children of all ages expressed aspirations to achieve skills (become doctors or lawyers) in order to return to the Kothmale area and help develop it. Not giving back to the community, or moving out of the area, to work in Colombo, for example, was seen as disloyalty, and had to be justified (we’d only move if we can’t find jobs here). Moreover, when students talked – as they frequently did – of working for the good of the country, they meant working in a rural area like Kothmale.
2. The term ‘community’, as it operates within the history of KCR, invokes many different and often conflicting ways of understanding locality. The Sri Lanka ‘community’ or ‘village ideology’ is not necessarily the same as the ‘community media’ ideal that KCR took on board via UNESCO and DANIDA. The Sri Lankan term involves a nostalgic ideal of community that is intrinsically tied to reconstructing the moral core of the nation.

This idealised view of village community in Sri Lanka fits rather (too) well with some older concepts of community media: community marks a place of original or lost goodness, corrupted by modernisation or power processes. In this view, the community is ‘the people’, seen as united and good.

This same view sits considerably less well with a view of community as a place of differences, divisions and conflicts that have to be understood, of diverse needs and interests, and of both inclusions and exclusions, of multi-ethnicity. It needs hardly be said that the exclusion of the Tamil population (economically, culturally, politically) was exacerbated to the point of civil war by precisely the same Sinhala Buddhist nationalism whose core was the village ideology.

3. The flow of water down the social hierarchy in Sri Lankan irrigation systems, ancient and modern, stands as a good metaphor for the diffusion of media within that society. While both are acknowledged to bring real benefits (water, information), they are also understood to bring huge problems and injustices. Like the *gamarala* (village chief) or *vel vedane* (irrigation headman), KCR’s Controller was at the top level of the inward flow of information resources, a flow which comprised external monies (UNESCO, SLBC), skills, technologies and prestige, in addition to information. As in the water systems, KCR had to manage this flow through a segmented and hierarchical structure of villages, in which it was mediated by complex arrangements, powers and obligations. He had to watch every step he or his staff took. He had to deal with the other structures of patronage and corruption that surrounded him, and which had arisen from the same social structure, eg, local politicians who wanted to control and commandeer KCR’s flow of resources. He had to ensure that the flow carried on as far down the system as possible, to the poorest, while living with the reality that – as with irrigation – much would be siphoned off on its way down the channels. Indeed, one of things that stands out most from our research is the astuteness and adeptness of KCR’s Controller in playing and surviving the political games that constitute this whole environment.

4.2. Locality, mobility and media ‘spaces’

In addition to concepts of community, the relation between *locality* and *media* emerged as a central theme in our research. Localised and face-to-face communication was fundamental in Kothmale. More than this, however, it seemed clear that people’s understandings of the various media were based on their sense of locality.

4.2.1 Locality and local communications:

Local communications and information flows in Kothmale are dominated by face-to-face communication and by issues of mobility. Firstly, communication flows through primary social networks bound up with kinship, friendship and local organizations such as temple youth groups. The

primary media are those that tap directly into face-to-face communications: transport and visiting; gatherings in homes, teashops, schools and temples; handbills, posters and other cheap and immediate public announcements are ubiquitous and they are the first media that occur to people when unprompted (Samarasinghe, 1997); loudspeakers, either mounted in public places or on cars driven around the locale (see below), are also extremely common and important. We have also been told of the use of ceremonial drums for public announcements, still a fresh local memory. In our survey, the most frequent sources of information cited were word of mouth, local authorities such as doctors and teachers, and handbills and posters. It was also clear from all our research that face-to-face communication was highly valued and trusted and that this formed a major context for both using and evaluating other media. Finally, the mass media were consumed within and mediated by these face-to-face contexts and more localized communication flows. For example, television – particularly in tea plantations – could be a communal event, involving several families in joint operations to obtain, technically construct and power a watchable television, to decide on what to watch and to socially and spatially construct a viewing event. Similarly, consumption of film music culture may have less to do with going to the cinema or listening to radio than with locally producing and circulating videos, VCDs, audio cassettes, film posters and other publicity, singing and drumming on buses, and so on.

Secondly, because of both the importance of face-to-face communication and the shallow diffusion of telephones, local communication is dominated by mobility issues: much communication was bound up with the physical movement of people. This is exacerbated by the social and geographical complexity of the region (particularly the split between rural and urban areas) which required a great deal of travel for work, marketing and shopping, social visits, social and religious events and, crucially, education. Indeed, it is the roads and the actors who operate and impact on them (trishaws, buses, trains, monsoons and landslides, police/army checkpoints, schedules) that should be regarded as the main local communication system.

For example, much public and institutional communication depends on travel to populations (eg, trade union or school visits to plantations). Health information diffusion (like many other public announcements) is organized through cars with mounted loudspeakers circulating through a grid of health districts.

4.2.2 Wider mobilities and communications

Mobility extends outwards from Kothmale. Our survey and other research showed a high level of both travel outside the locale. Travel to Kandy (about 1 hour by train from Nawalapitiya) was frequent and unremarkable, could be weekly or daily, particularly for children attending school or classes there, or adults for shopping or visiting relatives. Travel to Colombo was much less frequent, but still unremarkable, mainly for government business, work, or visiting relatives. Some people had visited other parts of Sri Lanka, almost solely for visiting relatives. The one exception to this was the large number of railway workers in Nawalapitiya: the town was historically a significant railway centre, a fact that occasioned both actual travel and a feeling of connectedness to the rest of the country.

Nonetheless, we are still talking about actual movement rather than media as means of communication: again, face-to-face communication was highly valued; other media were regarded as rather difficult means of coordinating actual meetings between people (it was not unusual for people, when asked how they arranged visits to family in Kandy, to say that they just turn up!). Scarcity of telephones in private homes means that convergent assemblage of media is all important: For example, a father who works for the railway, frequently spending weeks in a town two hours away by road, will get a railway office worker to send a fax through the company to a local communications centre near his family; the fax will be delivered by a local boy, arranging a time for the family to be at the centre to take his phone call. Similarly arrangements are involved in communicating with family members working abroad in the middle east.

Mobility is clearly mediated through ethnicity, poverty, gender and other factors. The most immobile sector is undoubtedly the Tamil tea plantation and tea factory workers, who are confined by remoteness, long hours, poverty, ethnic and linguistic exclusion, and harsher gender limitations on travel. Yet, at the same time they sometimes have considerable connection to wider social worlds, if not movement, because their ethnicity connects them more directly to distributed kinship networks, to

Indian Tamil culture or to labour migration routes. At the other end of the wealth spectrum, Moslem families – because of trade, family and religious connections – were both more mobile and more connected to sources of information outside the locale. Again, this did not extend markedly to the women of this community.

Finally, there is another kind of mobility with huge implications for the population: labour migration, particularly to the middle east and other parts of South Asia. A very large number of families had at least one member at the nuclear level working abroad. The economics and labour contracts involved generally entail a minimum of 2-3 years away, but stays of over 10 years, with very infrequent visits home, were very common. This brought people into contact with a wide range of new media.

4.2.3 A ‘nation of villages’: media, locality and community

The significance of local communications and mobility goes beyond their simple preponderance. Locality is *primary*, we argue, all media – including radio and internet – are viewed and understood in terms of locality. We can see this more clearly by starting with one of the most ubiquitous media in the region: the loudspeaker.

Loudspeakers

Loudspeaker systems are a hugely significant communications technology in Kothmale: for public announcements, for religious and social events, for political rallies, for advertising. People who own and hire out these systems can be significant community figures, central to its social and cultural life, and earning an income from the importance of loudspeakers to so many gatherings.

For example, KCR has organized a programme of ‘City Events’ in recent years, as a way of earning money for both relief announcers and the radio station, and for publicity. These follow a classic local pattern: announcers solicit sponsorship money from local businesses to stage an event in a town centre. The event consists of a stage with loudspeakers, in a public space or outside a private house, and features a mix of music, competitions, announcements, speeches by public figures and so on. The event is organized and MC’d by an announcer, usually with the participation of local groups. The sponsorship money covers the costs of loudspeaker hire and a payment to the announcer. The same format is used for advertising (eg, Nescafe held a such an event in Nawalapitiya during our fieldwork), by commercial radio stations (see below), for KCR outside broadcasts and much more.

These are popular local events that generally attract quite a crowd. What seems most significant about them, however, is that neither announcers nor anyone else made much of a distinction between loudspeaker events that were broadcast over radio and those that were not. In fact, it took us until the end of our research to find out that KCR’s City Events were not broadcast – to us as observers they were identical to many outside broadcasts that we attended.

The genre was identical whether it was limited to the immediate audience or transmitted regionally or nationally. What was important was the audience that was physically present. A radio audience might listen in or not. The impression was that far from creating a programme for a dispersed, disembodied audience, the aim of broadcasting was to publicize or extend the local event, to share the locality, or to show how good and special it was.

KCR’s Sri Lankan New Year’s outside broadcast, for example, involved them in an SLBC nationwide link-up with 6 regional radio stations. The format throughout the country was the same, broadcast from large festival gatherings in private houses, with the usual mix of music, announcements, competitions and speeches. Again, the role of the wider audience was to listen in to local gathering. It was also there to judge between competing localities: KCR people were most concerned to give a good account of themselves as radio professionals, alongside allowing its local gathering to represent itself well (warm and hospitable, faithful to festival traditions, inclusive of Tamil visitors).

Indeed, the centrepiece of the day’s broadcast was a drumming competition that nicely captures the situation: the Colombo station gave groups of drummers in each of the six localities a different rhythm to beat, then judged which improvised the best performance. At the KCR event, there were two groups of four local women drummers, arrayed in their festival finery, with traditional drums that they had spent hours setting up and heating to the correct tension and pitch over open fires. One of the groups

seemed fairly competent; the other – even to the completely ignorant ear of the researcher – was clearly hopeless.

The KCR crew had to deal with this situation as a simultaneously private-local and public-national dilemma. The competition was both serious and not serious. The crew wanted the local event to unfold in its own way (hence, they wanted to extend normal community courtesy to the incompetent drummers, who were simply part of the festivities, like everyone else there). At the same time, radio had to represent the locality in terms of ideals of village life and culture, in competition with other localities.

The solution was very simple: the radio crew slowly and surreptitiously adjusted the sound mix and moved the microphones until the radio audience – and other SLBC stations – could only hear the competent drummers. Kothmale ended in a respectable third place.

This picture of the primacy of locality and local events, which radio ‘listens in to’, is corroborated by the way much national commercial radio is produced. Indeed, advertising, radio and other media people argued that Sri Lanka radio is innovative and popular precisely because it employs a wide range of formats that base radio on local or localised events, processions and local movement (eg, a sponsored competition and programme produced in the vans that some people take to work). These formats, in which ‘radio comes to your locale’ (as an advertising director put it) are understood more in terms of ‘our locale comes to your radio’.

Finally, localized loudspeaker events have a great deal to do with local celebrity on the part of announcers. For example, in the case of KCR City Events there was great competition between announcers over their ability to attract sponsorship money, which was partly a reflection of their popularity and reknown in the region. KCR’s Tamil announcer was justifiably proud that he was asked to do a sporting event miles away from the station.

To say that radio simply ‘listened in’ to local events is obviously not to say that local events were ‘authentic’ or more real. Genres based on the loudspeaker event obviously also *constructed* localities. They do not transparently ‘represent’ them: people assemble and present themselves in particular ways to make ‘a loudspeaker event’ (eg, there is a certain formality to these occasions, a mobilization of local hierarchies and senior local and religious figures).

The point, rather, is that the local event was treated as *primary*, and the range of media are understood and experienced largely in relation to the local. If Sri Lanka has for so long imagined itself as a ‘nation of villages’, the same seems to apply to their media. These are best understood as a ‘media geography’, in which the *nation of villages* is translated into a *place of localities*.

Media geographies

In any society, the various available media can be understood by people in terms of the different geographies they construct, or the scale on which they allow people to operate. In the case of Sri Lanka, where the entire concept of locality is highly charged, it is important to understand these media geographies. The argument is that their understandings of media arise from different relations to the local.

In the long-standing cultural formation that idealises the village community, ‘the nation was represented as a nation of villages’ (Brow 1996: 83). Radio, television and internet all – in their different ways – embody this view of national (and global) identity: they were understood and valued in terms of the way they established a larger social space by assembling local communities either in practice (eg, the active voices of communities in radio and internet) or in myth (eg, television’s rural teledramas). The press, by contrast, was held in some disrepute because it defined nation in terms of the government/state, and therefore represented something corrupt and artificial, however informative.

Radio connected people to a wider but paradoxical community. On the one hand, it could be a community of global cultures (eg, western popular music and South Asian film music) or of national culture (new Sinhalese and Tamil music). At the same time, as we have argued above, radio – alone amongst media – was closest to community and locality because of its reliance on local events and outside broadcasts. It was widely seen as ‘good at getting out into the community, getting into towns,

villages...creating a hype somewhere' (interview with advertising director), in the form of local events, marches and parades, promotions.

In this respect Kfm (KCR's morning commercial broadcasting) was clearly in line with the general character of Sri Lankan commercial radio, and probably equivalently innovative and professional, though without the equivalent resources. Its other programming was valued for providing precisely what was missing from most radio – local information, older popular music, and a developed association with one particular place.

Radio, then, mediates between local and non-local in more effective and complex ways than any other medium. Indeed, its 'global identity' sometimes appears to be an assemblage of, or connection between numerous localities.

Television was understood in terms of national community and as very close to government. However, the one kind of program which *everyone* watched were the teledramas, which were soap operas set in highly idealized rural community settings. If the teledramas are mythical villages, television is widely experienced as the mythical form of the 'nation of villages. Television's popularity depended on evoking a national imaginary that was comprised of ideal localities. It was like the radio outside broadcasts, but in a heightened fictional form.

Newspapers presented a completely different, largely negative, geography. Because they were widely viewed as politically self-serving vehicles of political parties, the government of the day and urban elites, and largely published in English, they were experienced as largely unconnected to locality (even when informative and full of local news). *As a medium*, they presented the very opposite of a 'nation of villages', a geography more like a western map of nation states in which community is understood as the effect of government, elitist machinations and political manoeuvring.

Internet and **email** evoked a completely consistent geography whether we were talking to school children, KCRIP staff or members of the broader community. Internet and email are about speedily and directly connecting to 'the world': to other countries, to people, institutions and information in other places. It is always about going outside of Sri Lanka, and doing this fast and directly. It is therefore understood as something that connects the local to the global directly, bypassing both the national and the governmental. And doing so with an immediacy that is closer to radio than to either post or fax.

This direct connection of the local to the global is not experienced in terms of being swamped by the global, or as undermining the local (not yet, anyway). It is closer to the radio model, a space in which localities can be placed on a geographically broader scale, and a place that depends for its popularity and effectiveness on strong and participating localities.

Thus, for example, the websites that KCRIP staff and participants produced from the first, and continue to produce, are consciously local, and vividly replicate the relationship between loudspeaker events and radio. They are, for example, about local temples, festivals, customs and sites (linked very much to the evocation of heritage with Sinhala village ideology), or local ecology. No connection is drawn between the local 'event' and the invisible audience and their place; nor is another place constructed. The visitor is simply allowed to observe or participate in the local. At the same time, the websites (and chat) that KCRIP users *consume* is almost exclusively non-local: as with commercial radio broadcasts of global culture, it is consumption of the world as space of *other localities*.

Along the same lines, the idea of internet radio made enormous intuitive sense to KCR staff: the ability to take music or information requests from listeners in Dubai, to connect Kothmale to Sri Lankan audiences in North America, or other community radios in Nepal – all this seemed a very simple extension of the prevalent ideal of radio: one activates one's locality at more global geographic scales.

Indeed, we would argue that it is in this respect – locality – that one can see the most powerful internal connection or affinity between radio and internet, the connection which probably shows the real underlying issues that structure KCRIP and its future, as well as that of similar projects in Sri Lanka: it is understood as a more effective and more global way of doing what popular Sri Lankan radio has generally been trying to do.

4.3 Bureaucracy and modernization

As we will discuss throughout Section 5, KCR presents a paradox that exemplifies much wider tensions within Sri Lankan life. Specifically, it is a ‘modern’ place in the sense that – internally – it tends to be innovative, entrepreneurial, non-hierarchical and to value free and autonomous activity, practical skills and knowledge and professionalism in producing high quality results.

Many of the struggles that make up the project’s daily life, as it is experienced by participants, involve protecting this ‘modern’ space from the world of traditional and bureaucratic structures, barriers and intrigues that surround it. These are exemplified – indeed embodied as a constant presence – in SLBC, which is seen simultaneously as effectively authoritarian and as profoundly moribund, ineffective and out-of-date. It is also hierarchical, and based on seniority and patronage, hence seen as, in some senses, corrupt. However, beyond SLBC – or represented through it – are many other similar institutions (government ministries, parties, education systems); local political structures; and even – to some extent – family and religious organizations.

As experienced from KCR’s point of view, this traditional-bureaucratic world is also deeply interconnected: a story that starts with negotiations with one local politician will move up and down party and ministry hierarchies, and between them through interlinked patronage networks, interconnected deals and obligation and into family and business connections. What struck us most forcibly from countless interviews, anecdotes and observation of events was something that might be called the ‘web of intrigue’ in which every action was caught. Quite simply, answers to apparently straightforward questions would frequently involve extraordinarily long, elaborate stories with huge casts of characters as one followed the interconnections between plots, interests, organizations and individuals.

One example should suffice: KCR needed a new 1kw transmitter, which would more than double its broadcasting range. The equipment was donated by UNESCO, and bought from an Asian supplier in 1999. It then was held in customs at the harbour for over one year, awaiting customs approval and telecoms regulatory authority approval. It then passed into the hands of SLBC where it stayed for a year without being installed. One day someone from SLBC came and asked where the transmitter was. On being told that it hadn’t been handed over yet, they all began to push to get it. At this point Mr Jayaweera, the UNESCO advisor who donated the transmitter in the first place, visited and was rather angry to discover the situation. He had to push the matter personally because SLBC didn’t know anything about it and all the letters and forms involved were simply sitting on unknown desks, unanswered. Jayaweera mobilized all his connections, formal and informal (which involved stories of a wide range of connections, obligations and favours) and finally got the transmitter installed. Shortly afterwards, a crucial part was found to be faulty and the entire process had to start again.

We are of course wary of terms like modern and traditional, but the tensions that make up KCR’s context are generally couched in such concepts within Sri Lanka. Modernization of both private and state organizations (as well as modernization of infrastructure) is seen as the next most urgent task after pacification of the civil war. Indeed, it is sometimes the way in which the hoped for ‘peace dividend’ is envisioned. Modernization in Sri Lanka carries many of the same associations that it does elsewhere today: liberalization, deregulation and privatisation (or public-private partnerships); commercialisation; and knowledge-based or ICT-based growth strategies.

KCR, as we argue, is in some respects already ‘modernized’, internally. However, its survival has so far depended on managing effectively within the most unmodernized structures. At the same time, its internal ‘modernity’ only partly follows the model of commercial and neo-liberal deregulation: it is also a *community* organization, with a real and pervasive community mission. Finally, KCR has tried to defend its autonomy within the ‘web of intrigue’ by defining itself as a *professional* organization, hence outside of partisan battles. We can therefore summarise its underlying position within Sri Lankan institutional life in terms of three ‘survival strategies’ it has pursued:

1. ‘*community*’: By marking itself as a community media project, KCR aligns itself with an important Sri Lankan ideal and with an international media politics supported by international agencies, as we have seen. At the same time, it secures itself a special status within SLBC, and has in fact gathered strong local support and participation. The problem

has been, firstly, a rather idealized concept of community; and, secondly, a danger that because of its position within SLBC 'community media' becomes identified with simple 'regional broadcasting'.

2. '**professionalism**': Defining KCR in terms of media professionalism is a way of defining it as non partisan or non aligned: it is 'with the people' (rather than with a party or ideology) and serves them through media which are independent of patronage, corruption and ideology. This has been crucial in relation to surviving through the long civil war, as well as everyday politics. However, several tensions arise: firstly, the balance between professionalism and community involvement; and secondly between non partisan professionalism and community activism.
3. '**commercialism**': In relation to SLBC, commercial activities (selling advertising, holding commercial events, running courses, designing websites, etc) are strategies for securing a measure of financial independence, demonstrating popularity and sustainability, exploring new ways of organizing and innovating. They also align KCR with the 'modernizing' developments in Sri Lanka more generally, both in radio and new media. Some are tempted by a complete autonomy that would inevitably be largely commercially funded; all are aware of the dangers, above all, insecurity and a relationship to the community based on popularity rather than service or a more political definition of community action.

5. FINDINGS – FITTING KCRIP INTO THE PICTURE

In this section we present the six main themes that emerged from analysis of our research material within the context of the overarching themes discussed above. These are followed by recommendations for further action on the part of KCR and KCRIP.

5.1 SLBC, autonomy and sustainability

The single main factor dominating the life and work of KCR and KCRIP was its position with SLBC. At a practical level, the corporation quite simply had a stranglehold over the project. We should add that KCR's position was no different than that of any other SLBC station, and in many respects better (the Kandy regional station we visited was in worse shape, having little of the initiative or breathing space that KCR had carved out for itself), but was far more frustrating given the project's ambitions, orientation and potential.

We could give endless examples of this but a few major ones will do: SLBC controlled all KCR finances down to the lowest level of detail, siphoning off all revenue (including income from computer classes and even web design). Every item of equipment purchase had to be agreed with SLBC; there were strict limits laid down for staff payments, monthly allowable mileage in their use of the station van; any changes in advertising rate card had to be agreed by SLBC (which often took months) making commercial negotiations impossible. SLBC and their technicians union had strict and inflexible regulations concerning all equipment and staffing by technicians.

Moreover, SLBC was not only overly controlling, bureaucratically moribund and unresponsive; it was also perpetually in a state of crisis and confusion, with a bewildering profusion of rumours, plans and personnel changes both within SLBC and its governing ministry. It gave the project insufficient resources and autonomy with which to make itself sustainable and potentially independent, yet at the same time it constantly destabilized it with threats of closure.

As a result, KCR (and Sunil Wijesinghe in particular) had to devote huge amounts of time, ingenuity and energy to evading its clutches and securing a measure of autonomy. Indeed, most major decisions were at least in part moves to retain income or staff, or to enable initiatives to be carried out in spite of SLBC. Both KCRIP and the Media Project were themselves not simply innovations in technology and community media. They are also strategic moves to secure autonomy, revenue streams and local, national and global recognition which would either convince SLBC of the project's importance and viability, or lay the basis for its independence. For example, the expectation in proposing the internet project was that SLBC would continue to fund the station out of the community radio budget: "we argued that this connectivity would increase the station's commercial potential. We also thought the server would be able to host some websites which would be attractive to commercial organisations, for example in Kandy it might be possible to organise hotel bookings through the website" (interview with Jayaweera).

Similarly, over the past two years KCR have carried out their annual City Events programme (described above, Section 4.2.3). Because these loudspeaker events are not broadcast and are formally carried out by relief announcers independently of KCR, the income earned can be kept free of SLBC. They nonetheless publicize the project and raise sufficient advertising sponsorship money to help support the relief announcers (above the minimal wage SLBC allows KCR to pay them) and the project as well.

Although KCR has been enormously astute and ingenious in surviving and prospering under these conditions, there is a general sense that this cannot go on forever (though this point appears to have been reached several times in the past as well). This also arises from the problems discussed in the next section: the relief announcers have reached the limit of their commitment to the station under their current insecure and underpaid position. The options facing the station are complicated and uncertain. Firstly, there is the possibility of major change within SLBC itself as it modernizes in

response to commercial radio and general liberalization. Recent management changes point to this, although there have also been discussions within the SLBC considering the closure of community radio stations. KCR appears to have been spared for now.

Secondly, there is the possibility of partial or complete financial and institutional independence for KCR, with revenue derived from commercial radio, computer teaching and internet activities such as web design, and grants from government and donors. Despite the clear ability of KCR under the direction of Sunil Wijesingha to achieve at least some form of self sufficiency and independence the station has been so stretched in terms of resources that development options have simply not been explored in detail.

Drawing up different options, and business plans, was beyond the remit of our research but our first recommendation would have to be for precisely this kind of medium and long-term strategic thinking. An exploration of the implications in terms of such things as organizational form, employment and the project's mission of community development is an urgent need. This would need to be funded by an external agency, with the mission of achieving inclusion in the process by all stakeholders including the SLBC.

5.2 Ethos, innovation and careers

A major focus that emerged in the course of research was how to define KCR itself as a project and organization. This was subject of intense debate during our field visit, a period around which long term issues had been emerging. The discussion was generally filtered through one particular issue: jobs, careers and participation in KCR, or – more generally – the relation between individuals' biographies and the project as an ongoing enterprise.

The central issue is this: for core participants, KCR represents a place of freedom, skilling, and innovation that places it to some extent outside traditional social structures, educational and career patterns and organizational forms. This produced intense long-term commitment to the project. On the other hand, KCR could not offer either adequate wages or job security ('permanency'). As participants got older, and family commitments became pressing, they felt that – despite their continuing attachment to the project – it did not offer benefits that matched their skills and experience or allowed them to sustain family life. At the same time, it had placed them outside traditional educational and career structures. None of the potential solutions could reconcile all these issues. Conversely, the long term commitment of relief announcers also produced contradictions for the project itself. In particular, it seemed incompatible with a community orientation that called for a flow of participants, with new ones periodically entering the project and older ones exiting for careers elsewhere, and for avoiding the identification of the project with particular 'indispensable' individuals.

5.2.1 Ethos – freedom, innovation and attachment

The most outstanding fact about KCR was the level of commitment, loyalty, enthusiasm and effort it inspired. Put simply, despite significant tensions that we will explore in a moment, active participants felt an often painful degree of commitment and love for the place and their life within it. This was evident in the range of users and volunteers it attracted and retained but most impressively in the role of the 'relief announcers' (see 3.1, above). The 11 relief announcers had been working at the station for anything between one and ten years, often living at the station for long periods and working very long hours, often at considerable cost to family and personal life. They were highly professional in the sense of demonstrating high levels of skill, self-discipline, motivation and initiative.

There were several main aspects to this deep attachment:

Firstly, the station was seen as a free space, a space of creativity, flexibility and innovation. Participants felt they could take full responsibility for their activities and develop them freely. The

most extreme articulation of this was SR¹ who frankly described KCR as a paradise because he was free to try anything he wanted. He kept describing himself as someone who loved to ‘experiment’ and to ‘research’, and who clearly identified this with being alive. But the same would go for – for example – TS, a long-serving member of the station, always described as an ‘all-rounder’ who could run nearly any aspect of the station. Or HB, a technician who was one of only three people with a permanent SLBC position. Kumar does repair, maintenance and modifications on the transmitter, UHF links, generators, audio equipment, electrics and even plumbing and masonry, plus feels able to make suggestions on programmes and KCR organization, as well as putting forward new technical solutions for transmission. He had been trained narrowly by SLBC and was intensely bored and restricted by his previous job. SLBC colleagues had thought he was crazy to abandon a conventional and secure career path but he was clearly in love with KCR: ‘Sometimes I feel the ten years I spent at the transmitter station were wasted, I wish I'd joined here instead of wasting time at other places.’ At KCR he has been able to learn through problem solving and by taking initiative and responsibility.

Secondly, and flowing from this sense of freedom and innovation, KCR was a place that nurtured their technical and communicational expertise – it skilled them in all aspects of running a media organization. Skilling themselves and skilling the general publics that came to the station. However, the meaning of ‘skilling’ is only brought out by contrasting their skills (and means of learning) with what they understood as the alternative modes. KCR was constantly contrasted with the dead weight of traditional and bureaucratic structures experienced outside it: these included SLBC, but also formal education (contrasted with the ‘learning by doing’ experienced in KCR), family life and work. Life in bureaucracies was characterised as ‘no work, no worries’: do nothing, cause no trouble and you will rise through simple time-serving and seniority.

On the one hand, SLBC and other state organizations were seen as filled with incompetent time-servers, armies of union-supported technicians who could not solve the simplest problems. On the other hand, they contrasted their own hands-on expertise with that of people with merely paper qualifications, who had an empty claim to knowledge based on formal education. Kothmale relief announcers saw themselves as versatile, innovative, creative because of the way in which they were allowed to learn and work, and at the same time as *professional* – both in the sense of being *as* professional as those with more formal qualifications or permanent jobs and in the sense of being *more* professional, or professional in a deeper sense – *really* rather than formally professional. The result was considerable pride, competitiveness and *esprit de corps* but also, as discussed below, frustration.

Thirdly, there was a profound desire to be ‘close to the people’, to do good for the community and to be ‘of the community’. This was quite compatible with the apparently narcissistic pleasure of being a local celebrity: for SR to be known by everyone in Gampola through his presenting was a source of pride and ego but also a proof of his success as a *community* broadcaster. Others talked about how it was ‘cool’ to be working for a radio station, or computer/internet project, or the ‘merit’ (in the Buddhist sense) achieved by helping one’s community with the skills that the community had supported one in learning.

Finally, KCR was itself a tightly knit community. Despite tensions, it involved deep friendships and working relationships. These were naturally encouraged by a remote site with kitchen and sleeping facilities; long hours of work; and long term involvement in the station. Moreover, the project as a community was not only encouraged but positively embodied in the remarkable figure of KCR’s controller, Mr Sunil Wijesinghe whose commitment (over nearly 20 years), energy, inventiveness, skill and professionalism was not only exemplary but always expressed in terms of the over-riding needs of the station as a project and mission. For example, Sunil at one point summed up the entire relationship between KCR and its participants in the following terms – they mustn’t forget that whatever they are they have got from the station, the station must survive first.

The picture of KCR as a space of freedom and innovation colours it as a ‘modern’ space, or even as akin to new economy or creative industries models of media organization as opposed to hierarchical and traditional ones. Yet it resides within a range of more traditional social relations.

¹ To preserve anonymity, we have replaced all names with random initials.

From the point of view of the project itself, Sunil Wijesinghe has for years defended this space of freedom and innovation by adeptly managing and fending off political and bureaucratic threats through quite traditional means: mobilizing patronage networks and protectors, finding circuitous routes to develop and fund initiatives, developing complicated schemes. Moreover, he had an authority position akin to that of village elder, which allowed him to treat the station as something like a family, and at the same time to sort out family disputes and local conflicts by virtue of his position. He was remarkably astute and successful in this, and we have no doubt that the project could not have survived let alone achieved so much without his ability to operate in this way.

Sunil's situation illustrates the contradictory mix of a modern 'space of freedom' which is protected by embroilment in the traditional-bureaucratic structure of Sri Lankan society. The relief announcers exemplified a similar contradiction: the very freedom that had given the relief announcers access to skills, respect and a sense of mission was increasingly seen by them in terms of insecurity and lack of appreciation, and they formulated their frustration in terms of the demand that was most traditional and least compatible with the new media model they had developed: guaranteed permanent jobs.

5.2.2 Contradictions

From the point of view of the relief announcers, various pressures have been coming to a head in recent years. The problem is in some ways quite simple: KCR cannot give them what they most want – permanent jobs at a reasonable salary. SLBC is quite adamant that the relief announcers cannot be made permanent, and KCR has neither the autonomy nor finance to offer this. Moreover, permanency is in many respects incompatible with a commitment to community media where the ideal involves two kinds of participation: volunteers who are able to sustain responsible involvement on an unpaid basis alongside their normal life activities; and core workers – typically young – who are involved full time in a project, developing skills and experience until such time as they are ready to move on to other work (hopefully related to their new skills), leaving spaces open for new members of the community to take their place.

In the case of KCR, it is felt that none of these options quite work. Volunteering is considered an inadequate basis for sustaining the station both because of the level of skill and commitment required and because it is considered inappropriate for a relatively poor community. On the other hand, the relief announcers both felt that they were unlikely to get 'good jobs' elsewhere and at the same time knew that they would never get them at KCR (where they all ideally would like to stay permanently). Hence both they and the project felt stalemated and trapped.

The issue of 'permanency' needs to be developed in order to understand this situation: Many of the relief announcers are now in their late 20s or early 30s (and the younger ones clearly see future problems through the experiences of the older ones). Firstly, this is an age at which Sri Lankans are expected to take on family commitments, with the implied need both for higher incomes and for more secure long-term careers. More broadly, there is an expectation from their parents and wider family that the time has come to make good on all the support and education that has been invested in them by taking on a position of responsibility within the family.

At the same time, they feel that they have achieved considerable skill, experience, professionalism and standing in the community. Ideally, this should be recompensed and recognized within KCR through decent wages and permanent posts. However, they also feel that in terms of the wider job market – both within the media sector and elsewhere – they have missed the boat: they are beyond the age at which Sri Lankan careers start and feel that their logical destinations – commercial radio and new media organizations – will only hire hotshot youngsters from the capital; they are outside the patronage networks of established bureaucracies and socially isolated from Colombo in a rural region; and whether or not they have higher education qualifications, they have spent too long outside the formal channels of career development. They feel that all the skills, innovation and experience they have developed are not valued in the wider traditional-bureaucratic world, and they have to a great extent rendered themselves both unfit and unwilling to work in spaces less free and innovative than KCR. Finally, there is strong loyalty to the locale as well as to the project: they do not want to have to move out of the region in order to capitalise on their experience and to move on in their lives.

For example, one of the longest serving and administratively central of the women relief announcers has a university degree and feels that her family have invested highly in her education. She must move on from KCR in order to repay this obligation by getting a job with more money and security, including a pension. However, even with her qualifications – both paper qualifications and experience in computing, broadcasting and administration, she does not feel she will be able to find the kind of employment that will allow her to do the kinds of things she does at KCR, that will be as interesting or responsible, and she feels that at her age (early 30s) she has been bypassed by most career paths.

We found it difficult to confirm whether it was really so impossible for people to move on, and the stories we came across were contradictory. There were certainly examples of relief announcers either getting jobs with commercial radio or setting up allied businesses in the area (for example, selling advertising spots on radio).

However, it is clearly exceptionally difficult to move on to careers that recognize the skills they have developed, and – more to the point – most of these are in any case unlikely to offer them the permanency they really seek (eg, software companies or commercial radio may offer them good wages and more modern working conditions but hardly security and permanence). The same applies to the other options that are open to KCR: if the project moves towards complete independence from SLBC it will have to take a largely commercial form which will put jobs at far more risk than at present (and at probably not much higher pay); if the project moves towards a more established place within SLBC it will sacrifice both community-orientation and freedom/innovation for bureaucratic professionalism.

The situation can be summed up in one event at KCR, attended by one of the researchers: I am sitting drinking with a group of male relief announcers and some of their friends from SLBC Kandy on the veranda of a remote rural house. They have just finished their outside broadcast for the Buddhist New Year. They are happy because it was not only a successful professional job but because they were part of a link up with SLBC Colombo in which they were the only community station participating amongst 6 other regional SLBC stations: they more than held their own. However, the conversation turns very bitter: BD – the main announcer that day – is 29, educated, and has 5 years experience with the station. He feels he can do the job as well as anyone in the country, particularly because of the exceptional breadth of experience this non-conventional station has given him. He has been unable to marry because he cannot support himself on the wages he can get through the station – SLBC has placed a limit on the number of hours that can be paid out to any relief announcer. TS has been working at the station under similar conditions for 10 years and is under intense pressure from his new family, with baby, for which he is sole support, finally to quit and take up a job as a school bus driver. He is always described as the station's all-rounder – he can handle all aspects of its running and is often mentioned by Sunil as one of the few people who could succeed him. We have already heard this story endlessly, from everyone. SR then bursts out: he goes through each person sitting at the table, one by one, telling me their family background and what they do at the station and then blurts out: what are we doing here on New Year's day, why aren't we with our families? We have given our lives to this station, we've sacrificed everything to this station because we love it and we love what we can do here. But why aren't we with our families?

5.2.3 Career and community

KCR is unlikely to be able to meet the relief announcers' aspirations to permanent jobs. Nor should it necessarily. We largely agree that a system of strictly voluntary, unpaid participation in the project is probably unfeasible and would exclude most of those who most benefit from *working* at KCR (rather than simply participating at a lower level of involvement). However, too strong a focus on paid permanent staff is clearly incompatible with broader commitments to community development: there was already a concern that relief announcers had too much ownership of the project, might exclude newer participants and were beginning to see KCR as a something that should serve their career interests rather than as a project which they should serve and in return learn from.

On the other hand, the project has clear responsibilities to long-term participants, which it has on the whole recognized and honoured to the best of its abilities. However, these responsibilities could be more explicitly formulated and effectively dealt with through stated policies and procedures. A further recommendation of this research is therefore that such issues be considered as part of the business and

development planning that needs to take place. KCR should regard its relationship to core staff in terms of *career development*, in addition to *managing the project*: being clear about career expectations, tailoring training to the career aspirations of each participant, as far as possible, establishing ‘exit strategies’ through advice and help in finding new jobs or educational opportunities.

5.3 Community Divisions – inclusion/exclusion

All media projects work within complex social divisions that structure both the needs they must address and the ways in which they can operate. Above all, we need to understand social division in terms of inclusion and exclusion: who does and does not benefit from participation in KCR and KCRIP? We are not looking for ideal practice (no media project will ‘solve’ these issues on its own) but rather for the approach and policies through which a project understands and deals with social division.

As indicated in the discussion of ‘community’ and elsewhere, the project’s sense of its constituency was partly formed by ideals of community drawn both from international models of community media and from the Sri Lankan ‘village ideology’. This latter stance produced a rather generalized or idealized version of community, usually summed up in the phrase, ‘being close to the people’. This could promote active outreach (though this was generally felt to have declined recently); it certainly accounted for the extremely warm and welcoming atmosphere of the project, and its ability to bring in new people. Moreover, KCR was definitely ‘owned’ by the people in the sense that – throughout our research – people of all constituencies strongly regarded KCR as an authentic and valued local institution and resource, whether or not they listened to Kfm or had ever used KCRIP computers.

However, this view of community could also result in a rather diffuse populism that treated ‘the people’ as a unified whole rather than as a complex of divisions, differences and specific needs and problems. The project’s stress on professionalism could further distance it from the community, treating it rather as an idealized audience.

In this section we consider the four divisions which emerged most strongly from the research, focusing on how KCR relates to them and on their connection to issues of poverty reduction: the rural/urban split, ethnicity, gender and age. Another major division – caste and class – was simply too complex for this short fieldwork period; although we have some hypotheses about this, we would hesitate to build them into a report.

5.3.1 Rural/urban

KCR has always been framed as a rural media project, serving a largely agricultural community. Relative to Colombo or Kandy, this description fits: The Kothmale region served by KCR is a rural area that happens to include two small towns (Nawalapitiya and Gampola, with substantial trade and transport sectors), and some industry (mainly tea and textiles).

However, this picture is unhelpful: the Kothmale region is structured by its own internal rural/urban divide. Nawalapitiya and Gampola may be country towns relative to Colombo or Kandy, but they are cities in terms of how they impact on their region. KCR’s situation needs to be understood in terms of town/country divisions *within* their region, as well as the complex connections between town and country that structure much communication and social life. Moreover, the idea of Kothmale as a ‘rural community’ really obscures the enormous complexity of its constituency: in particular, a local ‘village’ may entirely comprise Sinhalese of a particular caste (eg, a small, ancient village of paddy cultivators), or Moslem traders who commute to Gampola daily for work, or Tamil tea workers living in line houses. Indeed, crucial social divisions such as ethnicity, caste and age are mediated *through* the rural/urban divide.

‘Town’ was a complicated entity for at least three reasons: 1. Even the two most significant towns (Nawalapitiya and Gampola) had very different ethnic distributions (eg, the higher Moslem population of Gampola indicated its commercial importance as opposed to Nawalapitiya’s character as a railway administration centre); 2. Even official documents were ambivalent as to which wards were part of the

town and which not. 3. An outlying 'village' like Ulapene could be better characterised as urban (because its inhabitants commuted to Nawalapitiya for work) than some settlements that were geographically much closer to Nawalapitiya (and that were officially included as wards of the city): some of the latter included tea plantations and were therefore socially identical to the most remote rural Tamil line house clusters. That is to say, towns included country, and country included urban lifestyles or connections.

There were strong connections between town and country: there was constant movement of people between the two for work, shopping, visiting, education, religious events, health matters; and there were many intermediate settlements that by virtue of their population or function (eg, transport connections) had a foot in both camps. Nonetheless, people drew sharp contrasts between them that were highly important for KCR:

1. **Cultural divisions, and nostalgia:** Partly due to the 'village ideology', discussed above, even those who lived in the city identified 'real Sri Lanka' or 'old Sri Lanka' with village life. One trishaw driver, for example, who had moved into the town, said he loved listening to KCR because the accents and content sounded so rural to him; it was like sitting round a fire in a village home.
2. **Wealth and opportunity:** Nonetheless, the country is seen as poor, backward and under-resourced; indeed, as forgotten – resources allocated to improve its lot mysteriously never arrive. The towns are considered to be naturally privileged: aside from more personal wealth, there are opportunities, resources and closeness to (local) power. People with ability and ambition are expected to head for the towns (eg, for their A-level education) at the earliest opportunity; conversely, there is resentment of already privileged towns-people coming to the villages to use their resources (such as KCR and KCRIP).
3. **Specific needs:** Aside from their relative poverty in general, rural areas were considered to have special needs related to their remoteness and information scarcity. A vivid but simple example: paddy farmers were reliant on road haulage firms to take their produce to regional markets and sell them; their payment depended on the regional market price which information they could only obtain through the haulage firms themselves. A member of the community would sometimes ride along to the market to verify prices, a very costly solution.

KCR's site

KCR's current site is about 20 minutes by trishaw from both Nawalapitiya and Gampola, up to an hour by bus. The site was selected for very mixed reasons: engineering and technical issues to do with radio transmission; availability of suitable property, as decided by SLBC; and the continued strong identification of KCR as a rural project.

The site indeed marks KCR as strongly rural, and yet the towns exert a huge pull on its activities. Most of its core staff and many of its active users come from these towns. Commercial resources and major events are related to these towns (eg, advertising, City Events, many outside broadcasts). In fact, our first response to KCR was bewilderment: why didn't they simply move to a convenient town location with easy access for their main users?

There were two ways of seeing this: Firstly, there is a concern that scarce resources intended for an impoverished rural community had yet again been captured by already advantaged town-dwellers. As one interviewee put it:

The children from the cities go to the competitive schools and those that can't go there are the ones who remain in the villages. Whether they can't afford or aren't good enough. For the village child the only resources that come are the ones the school gets but then if it comes to a city child, a town area, they get their resources anyway. They have their computers, their facilities and some of them can afford to obtain such facilities but for the child who is left here- it's the school. So shouldn't we concentrate more on these villages when this is the only thing they have?

Many of the young people who used KCRIP already had better school facilities, local computer schools and access to Kandy, in comparison to Tamil tea workers or Sinhalese farmers. For example, there was a complaint that some of the computer courses at KCRIP were too advanced: they were to

the advantage of the brightest and most promising youth, most of whom had already moved to the towns for better schooling. KCRIP's facilities might increase rather than decrease local social divisions.

This reflected a whole genre of accusations directed by villages against the towns, and the region against Colombo and Kandy. For example, it was claimed that urban families exploited loopholes in the education system: universities accepted students on the basis of aggregate points achieved in their A-levels; these were set lower for rural areas. City children would be sent to rural schools just prior to A-levels so that they could capitalise on their advantageous urban schooling by competing for the lower points threshold set for the rural areas. Rural students were thereby deprived of scarce university places.

The tensions most clearly emerged in a classic form: to the extent that staff saw their aims in terms of developing local talent towards professional standards and producing professional results, there was a strong drift towards 'urban' youth, who already had more cultural and educational advantages as city-dwellers. This was intensified by the fact that more successful youth in any case drifted towards the towns for school or additional courses, and their identities were often already shifting towards the urban. The greater part of the radio and internet staff were in fact 'urban' in this sense; or became so by becoming active as staff. It did seem to be the case that some initiatives that were more directly targeted on the agricultural population (eg, broadcasting commodity prices) had fallen by the wayside.

The second view, in total contrast, argued that this too was serving the community and building up community resources and skills; that people from the local towns might be relatively advantaged compared to remote villages but were hardly privileged. For example, few of the town-based students we interviewed at KCR had any other access to computers; few had seen one outside of KCRIP. Their needs and aspirations might be different from those of the more rural constituency but they could hardly be seen as privileged. Moreover, because of the constant movement between towns and country it was hard to label many people as exclusively one or the other: eg, some of the indisputably local rural youth were in fact attending schools in the towns.

In point of fact, our impression was that KCR would always attract the more ambitious and adventurous people from both town and country, and these were generally the sort of people who would end up in the towns at some point in their education or careers.

By contrast, rural outreach is extremely difficult: the populations are dispersed; many rural people felt that KCRIP had little to do with them or for them (though they often had a strong identification with the radio station as a local institution); KCR staff's mobility was restricted by both time, commitment to broadcasting activities and restrictions on their use of the SLBC station van. They achieved very considerable participation through specific activities such as children's programmes and work with schools, but communication with local rural organizations and constituencies was generally patchy.

One significant paradox that emerged from our research in schools was that KCRIP was used by students attending town schools but it had little or no institutional connection with the schools themselves. When it came to the rural areas, KCRIP had good connections with teachers in at least one rural school, but students said they never used the facilities as individuals, outside of class visits.

It is hard to see how KCR can resolve these issues: it has a clear commitment to both rural and town populations that no single geographical site will solve. Moving to one of the towns would certainly exclude most rural people; however, although many town people regularly visit KCR, a town location would involve far more people in the project and bring it into a much more extensive network of activities and relationships. On the other hand – and this is a very important factor – KCR's rural location gives it considerable freedom from interference by local political and social conflicts in the town.

In fact, KCR is a necessarily *distributed* operation, in keeping with the spread and diversity of its constituencies. It clearly recognizes this with its emphasis on outside broadcasts, the siting of its media project in Nawalapitiya, and its plans to establish internet access points at Nawalapitiya and Gampola. These are crucial developments that need to be supported and built into a business and development plan.

At the same time this needs to be extended and conceptualised in wider terms: as we have emphasised at various points, *mobility* is central to all aspects of communications and information in Kothmale, both the movement of people to media access points, and movement of the media to dispersed constituencies. Internet links between KCR and the two main towns would help enormously, but so too would availability of a van (or several vans), without a low mileage restriction imposed by SLBC and equipped with facilities not only for outside radio broadcasts but also mobile telephony and internet, as well as loudspeakers.

However, this requires KCR to gain additional resources and rethink its organizational structure in terms of mobility and distributed operations; and to rethink its approach to 'outreach'. Reaching dispersed rural settlements and constituencies requires targeting specific groups and using the most appropriate means to reach them and to bring them to KCR.

5.3.2 Ethnicity

Kothmale is as dominated by ethnic division – if not open conflict – as anywhere in Sri Lanka, and any concept of community that glosses these divisions will create exclusions, whether consciously or unconsciously. At one level, KCR has an inspiring and honest idea of itself as inclusive, multi-ethnic and democratic. This has allowed for some quite progressive developments. At the same time, however, there was far too much conscious or unconscious exclusion.

The primary ethnic exclusion is obviously the position of the Tamil populations. They are often geographically remote, and this remoteness is exacerbated by poverty, long working hours, language, prejudice and suspicion due to the history of ethnic conflict.. On the other hand, Tamil and Hindi film and music culture is highly valued by all populations.

Rural Tamils sometimes listened to KCR, but there was a widespread feeling that the project was not really 'for them', did not broadcast enough in Tamil language, or they felt positively unwelcome or ignored there. There were also some specific worries about allowing Tamil girls to visit the project. We also found lack of contact with local Tamil schools, including one very close by the project.

It is clear that KCR and KCRIP have done considerably better than many other local institutions at both serving and integrating Tamil populations, particularly in recent years. For example, it is possibly the only radio station in the country to broadcast bilingual Sinhalese-Tamil programmes, and the Media Project's newsletter, *Penthalia*, is also bilingual. Similarly, the station was rightly proud that its New Year's day outside broadcast included Tamil people present at a major Buddhist festival.

It is important that where the station has done well in this area it has done very well indeed, demonstrating that initiatives can be creative and flow naturally from the style and ethos of the place rather than be implemented in a mechanically, politically correct manner. For example, KCR's Tamil announcer produced a programme that involved sharp, entertaining discussions and commentaries that permitted him to keep an engaged and amused audience while he switched rapidly back and forth between Sinhala and Tamil. This was much more innovative than simply balancing Sinhala programmes with Tamil ones, and made for an exciting programme whose message was 'ethnic mix'. In fact, this Tamil announcer has played an exceptional and creative role in both radio and new media work, and is popular amongst audiences across the ethnic divide. Similarly, music programmes – particularly because of the high value both communities place on Hindi film music and Tamil songs – is a natural meeting point.

However there is much more to be done in this area. Firstly, There are only a few hours of Tamil (let alone bilingual) broadcasting each week, and there is only the one Tamil-speaking relief announcer, only recently employed (and only one other Tamil-speaking volunteer, who works with him, but does not speak Sinhala). When he is away, Tamil-oriented activities – both radio and computing – come to a complete halt.

Secondly, KCRIP has not been very pro-active in engaging Tamil speakers, at least since the departure of the Australian volunteer who launched the project, and who took a fully community-oriented approach to it. There was no computer/internet teaching material or web activity dedicated to Tamil speakers, let alone computer courses in Tamil. There was some attention to the crucial issues of Tamil fonts and keyboards, including the introduction of bilingual Tamil-Sinhalese word processing facilities

donated by a Colombo based software firm while we were there. However, this is quite recent, and much more needs to be done in this direction.

Thirdly, there is a clear need to monitor the use of all facilities (radio, internet, computer and publishing) to ensure that Tamil visitors get access and are not excluded by Sinhalese users who feel more 'at home' or more ownership of the project. Indeed, we heard stories of Tamil visitors to KCRIP being positively ignored or given less than equal access to computers. The staff were angry about this, but need to go beyond good attitudes to a pro-active policy. We also heard stories about Tamil fonts being deleted from the computers, rendering Tamil websites and documents unreadable.

Fourthly, and more broadly, there is a kind of unconscious cultural exclusivity that flows from the connection between community media and 'village ideology' discussed previously. For example, many people described community media and its content in terms of resurrecting and remembering the local heritage and way of life, and this was characterized in terms of the mythology of the Buddhist village. That is to say, there is a need for what we might call a multi-ethnic imagination of community that can be set against, or next to, the Sinhalese Buddhist version.

Finally, the Tamil community has very specific needs and disabilities that the project needs to target specifically: they have particularly poor information resources due to the quality of Tamil schools (and lack of Tamil material in libraries); they suffer from greater remoteness and relative lack of mobility; and there are greater restrictions on Tamil women's freedom of movement.

Positive policies and initiatives need to be developed to address these issues as part of a broader development plan.

5.3.3 Gender

Gender raised fewer issues than we expected, and although it was frequently and openly discussed unprompted by staff and interviewees, it never appeared as a central issue. For example, although there were fewer women (three out of 11) amongst the core participants and relief announcers at KCR, they had very strong presences and central roles, including core management and media production roles, as well as (in one case) a commanding role in both computer/internet activities and Radio Browsing. These women were highly skilled, educated and ambitious, and even running for local public offices.

There were fewer female users of KCRIP facilities, but generally equal numbers taking and completing computer courses (as was also the case at private computer schools). In terms of radio content, female audiences were well catered for through very popular magazine style programmes, as well as religious programmes and music.

Two gender related issues did emerge:

Firstly, there were issues to do with barriers to women's mobility. Above all, Tamil families were reluctant to let female members (whether daughters or wives) come to KCR. This had partly to do with explicit roles in the family: for example, the sole Tamil speaking volunteer at KCR was a middle-aged housewife who was allowed by her husband to participate at the station on Sundays only, often escorted by him. Similarly, Tamil parents felt that their daughters should only go in groups, not on their own, with particular fears both about their security in travelling to and from the project and about what they might get up to at the station. There were some similar concerns from Sinhalese families, but to a much lesser extent.

Clearly the project has to allay many anxieties in this respect, and to make provisions (transport, or the presence or endorsement of respected Tamil community figures) in order to encourage or enable Tamil women to participate.

This relates to the second issue: there is a great need for KCR to be seen as a 'respectable' place, above suspicion, despite being a remote and very free space in which men and women work together and, indeed, are often living side by side when they stay overnight. Moreover, some of the typical association of new media with pornography has already entered local understandings of internet: KCRIP has therefore had to consider implementing filtering software and the use of ids and passwords to bar access to unsavoury sites and track use.

5.3.4 Age

Issues to do with age and seniority are crucial to Sri Lankan society. On the one hand, deference to age-based authority structures permeates family life, organizations and everyday interaction. On the other hand, there is a huge investment in, and encouragement of, young people's education and development of skills, which in turn creates an overwhelming sense of obligation to family, organizations and the elders who are identified with them. This is coupled with a strong sense of biographical stages: for example, A level examinations, marriage and parenthood are milestones to which previous investment is directed and after which obligations must be honoured (through success, appropriate behaviour, redistribution of income and other benefits such as supporting kin).

It is clear from our observations, interviews and previous reports on KCRIP that use of computers/internet was overwhelmingly by youth, from school through mid-20s. Radio involved a wider age range, both in terms of audience and programme-making, constellated around particular interests (older traditional and film music; religion).

On the one hand, the youth-orientation of the computing facilities (and to a lesser extent publishing and radio) led to it being widely regarded as an educational facility, on a par with computer schools. Participation was legitimated within families in terms of formal educational qualifications, marketable skills, furthering general educational advancement, etc. In this respect, the youthful character of the place fits within locally conventional understandings of age.

On the other hand, the underlying KCRIP culture of innovation, freedom and experiment valued youth (and was valued by young people) in ways that undermined traditional conceptions of age. Mainly – as we have argued elsewhere – KCRIP's culture of innovation fits well with more 'new economy', creative industries or new technology approaches to organizations and activities: practice-based, entrepreneurial, non-hierarchical and dismissive of formal qualifications. As we indicated in Section 5.2, in relation to KCR relief announcers, this is very attractive to many people – including users – but can disadvantage them or bring them into conflict with the more traditional career structures and domestic relations in which they need to live.

At the same time there is a real need to involve older users in ICTs, simply because older people do not seem to be aware of how it could help them deal with important problems or do not feel that 'it is for them'. The point is not to target older users as such but to ensure that constituencies that happen to include older members are not excluded.

5.3.5 Friendship and kinship networks

We constantly observed (and were told) that both inclusion and exclusion followed the lines drawn around fairly tight social networks. This is in keeping with broader themes in Sri Lankan society, discussed above, about the local allocation of scarce resources. On the one hand, the best way to get people to the project for radio or internet was get groups of friends or relatives (especially cousins or siblings) to visit together, or to get existing participants to bring friends or relatives with them. On the other hand, people clearly drew a line as to how far out into their friendship/kinship networks they were prepared to go, being clearly concerned not to spread access too far and too thinly. Much of this exclusion is quite subtle – a matter of who is told about facilities, or who is invited or made to feel welcome. It is also quite reversible: a general invitation shouted to a bunch of boys in a local swimming hole brought several of them into KCR the next day.

Again, KCR needs a more explicit and pro-active policy on community access, needs to raise awareness of this policy amongst workers, and needs - if possible – a community-oriented coordinator for KCRIP.

5.4 Education

The importance of education was a recurrent theme throughout the research, and fundamental for understanding the communities served by KCR, the project itself and the links between the two. The importance of computer education and computer literacy as a subset of education was also evident.

5.4.1 The value of education

Education is central to family life and aspirations in the Kothmale region. It is widely regarded as the sole route to a secure future through advancement into state and corporate bureaucracies or, in exceptional cases, the professions. This makes sense in a country which, on the one hand, has a well-organized if under-funded education system that gives universal access to education up to grade 11 (Advanced level examinations), a national curriculum, and has indeed produced a very high level of literacy (90%) and qualification; but which, on the other hand, has career structures that are dominated by rigid hierarchies, patronage and advancement by seniority. Other routes to a livelihood are either traditional and family based (eg, trade or farming), or impoverished and insecure (eg, labouring). As we shall see in a moment, there is very little evidence, as yet, of more informal or entrepreneurial sectors which promise more flexible careers that do not depend on formal educational qualifications.

It therefore makes complete sense that families and students are intensely preoccupied with formal education and paper qualifications. Key examinations and scholarship applications represent dramatic rites of passage on which their futures are felt to depend. Most people have a clear understanding of the details of the education system and how to operate within it. Most importantly, even the poorest families will invest a huge proportion of their resources in advancing their children's education, investing time and money in taking their children to often quite distant schools: one quite poor mother took her promising daughter to a school in Kandy by train every day, waiting there throughout school hours before transporting her back. At a rural Sinhalese school, students came from the surrounding villages, some of which are in the hills with no proper roads so that some students will walk up to 6kms to and from school. The principal of this school feels that parents are very keen on education for their children; some of them will walk from the hills with their children, wait for them and then walk them home. This means that those parents (mainly mothers) cannot take up paid work.

Another indication of the value placed on education and qualifications are the considerable sacrifices parents will make to pay for extra tuition, particularly in maths, English and computer classes. In one class of 29 students (aged 16) at a relatively poor rural Sinhalese school, fifteen of the children were taking extra tuition classes outside of school, some travelling as far as Kandy for weekend courses. Those that didn't often said that they wished they could: in particular, rural Tamils – who most need the extra tuition because of the poor state of their schools – simply could not afford private courses despite often placing the same high value on education.

Conversely, the children in whom so much hope and sacrifice has been invested – particularly the most promising ones – feel under a considerable debt of obligation to 'repay', by succeeding in education and career and, when successful, playing a major role in the family's future advancement. We have already seen that this is a major factor in the way KCR staff participate in the project.

This general picture was apparent as early as the second household interview that we undertook, with a Sinhalese family in Nawalapitiya. This household sells firewood, but they are short of business and money. The father is ill and is not supposed to do very much work. The eldest child of three suffered brain damage before birth and is unable to help her parents. Their son won a scholarship and goes to a school in Kandy. He is now in Grade 9 and his mother described him as their 'only hope'. Her pride in how well he had done, and her hopes for his future were evident. The youngest daughter is in Grade 5 and is now taking scholarship exams. This family saw education as the only way to improve their circumstances and took it very seriously. The mother was very concerned about the education of her children and believed that she should give her children the chances she and her husband did not have. The son attends computer classes in his school at Kandy. The youngest daughter was, until a couple of months before we met, being sent to a nearby computer centre for lessons. The family paid RS150 per month for the classes and although this was a high cost in the light of their income, they thought it was important that she should learn computing both to improve her employment opportunities, and to help her with her English Language studies.

Similarly, three 17 year old boys were interviewed after a computer class at KCR. They were awaiting their O-Level results. Until the results were published they could not plan their further education. They were using this time to learn computing by attending two classes at KCR per week – one theory class and one practical class. One of the boys lived in Nawalapitiya, one near the Kothmale Dam, and the third in Thispane. Thispane is an hour's bus ride from KCR which costs RS22. Only one of the boys

had used a computer before coming to KCR. His school in Kandy offers access to computers, but only for one hour per week, with two students at each computer. For the complete course the boys each pay RS600. One of the boys pays himself – he earns the money by helping his brother with his business in the Kandy market. The parents of the other two boys pay for the classes. One of those boys comes from a farming family, the other's parents both work, as a teacher and a bank worker. They all saw computing as an important skill for gaining employment, 'everything is done nowadays using the computer'.

Having stressed the value generally placed on education, the exception was amongst rural Tamil populations working on tea estates and living in 'line houses'. Though even here there was some dispute. Some Tamils we interviewed valued education just as highly as rural Sinhalese but felt completely disadvantaged by both poverty and remoteness. On the other hand, headmasters and teachers felt that the parents did not fully understand the importance of education.

The school principal of a rural Tamil school in Mawathura that went up to Grade 9, described her main problem as convincing the parents of the importance of education. She estimated that about 10% of Tamil children in the area stop studying at a very early age and there are some who do not attend school at all. Of those that attend school up to O-Level around 40% pass the exam but few achieve the level of pass required for A-Level study. Some students will move from this school to a school in Nawalapitiya to study for their O-Levels. There was the implication that they would then have a better chance of passing at a higher level. No children who have attended the local Mawathura school have gone on to University, even including those that moved to other schools in Nawalapitiya.

5.4.2 Formal paper qualifications versus practical learning and experience

Despite the high profile of education in the area, its recognised importance, and the investment many families make in educating their children, the harsh reality is that exam results are the ultimate decider of the fate of students. There is no clear alternative pathway for gaining employment.

One headmaster felt education in Sri Lanka was far too demanding on students, they had little free time or time to take part in sports. The emphasis was on examination results, and that was the only thing that mattered in terms of a student progressing.

The consequence is that education is approached *formally*: the focus is almost entirely on obtaining qualifications rather than skills or experience. Conversely, even high levels of skill and experience were not socially recognized or economically valued. This was not only a source of huge frustration and wasted resources, but also coloured the ways in which community media were, or could be, used. This is particularly crucial for media and new media, which are historically associated with different patterns of learning, organization and advancement. Put simply, we noted an emerging conflict between traditional-bureaucratic career and work patterns and newer patterns often associated with terms like 'new economy', 'creative industries' and 'knowledge-based economies'. It was surprising to find this conflict in a rural, agricultural region, but it was quite clear and very much filtered through the issue of education.

English language competency provides a clear instance of the focus on formal qualifications: although English is a core subject through most of their school years, we found a very low level of *functional* English, reflected in their internet use, conversation and writing. There are many reasons for this, as noted in Section 5.6, but it was clear that language teaching was formal rather than practical, that experience of everyday English was minimal and that the aim was to achieve paper qualifications rather than actual competence in the language.

Another example is the extensive investment in courses at private computer schools. Although we were impressed by the number and range of families who sent their children to these courses, neither teachers, parents nor children had a very clear idea of what they were going to get out of it. The general sense was simply that having a paper qualification indicating that they knew something about computers would give them an edge in either educational advancement or the job market (along the lines of having a typing or shorthand qualification), but there was little sense of what skills were needed or what actual tasks could be accomplished with these skills. People who were more knowledgeable about new technologies were critical of how out of date the courses were in terms of

both software and hardware, but consumers of these courses seemed entirely unconcerned about such issues. At the same time, and despite the overriding concern with paper qualifications, we found no private computer schools that were able to offer any internationally accredited qualifications such as a computer 'driving license' or Sun or Microsoft courses which lead to qualifications through training in industry-related skills.

However, the problem can also be illustrated through the example of some of the volunteers and relief announcers at KCR. For some, while they appreciate and recognise the value of the skills they have learned at KCR, their lack of paper qualifications is a severe barrier to them in terms of progressing or gaining employment elsewhere. For others, who have paper qualifications, they felt the need to repay their family's investment in their education through gaining employment that has more security and better pay.

For example, two of the young men most involved in KCRIP (in teaching, web design and managing the computers) had both started with the project while at school, felt they had got an enormous amount of skill and enjoyment from the work, had lost interest in their schooling and did not have sufficient grades for university. They both feel that they now have nowhere else to go. Another highly involved young man has achieved the grades necessary for University entrance and is preparing to leave the project, although he is aware that any future employment is unlikely to offer him the same degree of freedom and opportunity for the application of all of the diverse skills he has gained or for further skills development. He feels strongly that he must remain involved as much as he can with KCR in order to give back to the community and to ensure that others get the same opportunities he was offered by KCR.

5.4.3 State Schools

We visited four schools – Tamil and Sinhalese schools in Nawalapitiya and in the rural area near KCR – and interviewed headmasters, teachers and classes. Three major issues emerged that were specifically related to information and communication:

Information resources: although basic textbooks are provided by the government, school libraries were basic or non-existent even in large schools teaching up to Advanced level. The rural Sinhalese school we visited had only set up a library cupboard six months previously. The schools did not receive newspapers, did not generally have TV or video (in the rural Tamil school they did not have electricity or running water, for that matter). Little use is made of CD-ROMs even where there are some computer resources. We saw no effective examples of coordination between school libraries and computing facilities.

Some local schools and individual teachers used KCR as an information resource, bringing classes to do internet searches. This has mixed success and the main problem is the need to train the *teachers*: they need higher levels of English competence to identify and assess relevant websites; and they need more hands-on experience in order to formulate research questions and online searches more practically, with an understanding of what can and cannot be achieved through the internet.

Schools' use of KCRIP would also greatly benefit from consulting with teachers in advance of their visits to the project; and the preparation of web-based materials (fact sheets, print outs of websites, prepared searches, useful educational links on the KCR website) tied into the national curriculum. All of this would hugely benefit from appointment either of an education officer at KCR, or of a community worker in charge of KCRIP.

Communications with parents: All the schools – but particularly the Tamil schools and the rural ones – were dealing with a range of problems that all required more effective communication with parents. The problems were generally focused on attendance: despite the value placed on education, attendance could be erratic and patchy, if not necessarily low. This was not surprising when children often had to travel quite far to schools (involving time, cost and even – in the case of Tamil girls – fears about their safety); and where poverty and illness were constant deterrents. All headmasters and teachers were clear that these problems required involving parents more closely in the life of the school, which was difficult given their scattered populations (as well as additional problems such as illiterate parents). They all held regular meetings for parents (though never more than three times per year), and one had

a policy of annual visits to all parents. For rural schools there was a wider issue: relations with parents were part of a broader issue of involvement in the community's life. One headmaster was very clear that his effectiveness as an educator depended on his standing in the community as indicated by whether he was invited to local weddings, funerals and festivities.

As with trades unions and health workers, these problems require some creative thinking about communications, and links to communications providers in the area, amongst them KCR itself.

Computer provision and education: Only one of the schools we visited had significant computer facilities and this was – surprisingly – a Tamil school in town (Nawalapitiya). They had six new computers, well specified, and printers. It was badly under-utilized, with highly restricted access, and the staff were clearly in need of help both in developing computer education and in integrating these facilities into mainstream teaching. Of the two schools close to KCR, one made regular use of KCRIP facilities; the other – Tamil – school made no use of it (though a few students used it as individuals and KCR personnel had visited the school). Adequately funded and coordinated outreach work by KCRIP would vastly improve the effectiveness and provision of relevant information resources to local schools.

5.4.4 Computer Schools and education

There were numerous private computer schools in the region, not only in the main towns but also in quite remote settlements, including Mawathura and Kothmale New Town. We were astonished by the proportion of families, down to quite low levels of poverty, that paid for courses for their children, and the diligence with which the children attended.

Computer schools ranged from prosperous and expanding institutions to many that were barely hanging on. Very few had internet access or significant CD information resources. Just as the communications centres were generally set up by people skilled in spotting telecomms opportunities, computer schools were generally set up and run, by computing enthusiasts. These ranged from the talented to the depressingly ill-informed. There seems to be a great need (and opportunity) to educate the educators: really challenging and advanced courses for computer school staff and owners (including both technical and pedagogic training) could pay huge dividends in both the level of capacity building they could pass on to their own customers and in their ability to develop more innovative and opportunistic approaches to the configuration of ICT skills and facilities in their area.

We were unable to assess the quality of learning actually provided beyond noting that they offered reasonably structured courses in basic computer literacy. Hardware was generally reasonably specified, but software and training was widely criticized as being out of date and irrelevant to both job market requirements and everyday computer use.

5.4.5 KCRIP and education

KCR stood out from both state schools and private computer schools in terms of facilities, the skills level of the staff (as well as their enthusiasm, commitment, informality and support for students), free or very cheap courses and access and the facility for students to get involved in a full and free range of computing activities: web design, chat, multimedia, programming and so on. That is to say, KCR was in a different class in terms of quality of provision but also in terms of the environment for learning and practice that it provided. At the same time, there were still familiar tensions: there seemed to be a rather large leap between KCR's basic courses and more advanced ones; some students continued to take a formal approach to their learning.

What seems necessary is to rethink some of the provision in terms of the main issues we have raised here: the relation between formal qualifications and practical experience; the relation between computing/internet skills and the actual job and career paths open to local people; the relation of KCR's teaching and resources to state schooling and its many local problems; and the provision of skills which are foundational to computer/internet use such as English competence and typing skills.

Finally, KCRIP – probably with help and support from other organizations and donors – could play a central role in addressing one of the key ICT needs in the area: educating the educators. Training school teachers (from both state and private schools) so that they could make fuller, more confident

and more creative use of the ICT facilities that they have, and with more emphasis on developing practical competences and project-oriented approaches, would make a huge difference to ICT use, job and career opportunities and the general level of education of all their pupils.

Extremely useful and effective partnerships could be developed with IT educational establishments at all levels (for example, SLIIT), and through such partnerships and the number and quality of locally skilled people this could feed back into the locality through the provision of a range of computer training to suit all levels of need in the community. KCRIP offers organisations such as SLIIT the opportunity to work in a rural area (one of their strategies is to set up training posts across Sri Lanka) and for students to learn in a work based environment. Strategic alliances, networks and partnerships of this kind should be developed as a part of a business and development plan.

5.5 Media convergence and technologies

This theme takes us to the heart of the evaluation: the convergence of older media (radio) and new media (internet) at KCR. The focus of this convergence – in terms of the original project proposal and the reputation of the media project – was the idea of Radio Browsing and we therefore start from an assessment of this radio format. However, the strong conclusion of our research is that this is far too narrow a focus: we found a broader, more interesting and more innovative range of media and technology convergences and cross-overs at KCR, and scope for a great deal more again. These need to be understood in terms of the wider communicative ecology and processes of media diffusion rather than in terms of individual genres or formats.

By the same token, the term ‘convergence’ does not really do justice to what needs to be looked at. It assumes the existence of already existing, individual media which are then combined; or the insertion of a new medium, with fixed properties, into an existing repertoire of older media. The situation we observed is rather different from this: it is more like the reconfiguration of an array of media and technology possibilities within their communications needs and practices.

5.5.1 Radio Browsing

‘Radio Browsing’ is an innovative radio format, and one that has become almost synonymous with Kothmale, its flagship product as it were. The basic idea is a radio programme comprising information sourced from the internet, preferably in response to listener’s questions (sent in person or by post or phone) but above all addressing local information needs. The programme should 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, thus overcoming the need for members of the public to have internet and computing skills, including the need for English language competence. Finally, the programme would publicize KCRIP’s own facilities and attract users.

The programme was launched in 1999, and we heard of many exciting and innovative uses of this format up to the point at which KCRIP’s internet connection was dropped for a year from late 2000. These included extensive use of Radio Browsing in conveying health, legal, agricultural and enterprise related information.

However, we have to admit that we did not find evidence of great impact or awareness of this format, either through surveying or interviews; and actual production of explicitly Radio Browsing programmes was not extensive at the time of our fieldwork. The one regular radio programme that strictly speaking conformed to this format was not generally perceived by members of the public to be an internet-based programme, and it generally focused on issues of general knowledge and cultural heritage rather than meeting information needs through online searches. Conversely, the ‘computer’ programme most commonly mentioned to us was a regular broadcast about computer hardware, which did not use the internet at all.

We hasten to qualify this: 1. Our research was not designed as conventional audience research and it is possible that we failed to pick up on listeners. 2. The break in internet connection of over one year

accounts for much of the lack of impact (or loss of original impact and awareness), and certainly accounts for the considerably reduced use of this format by the station itself.

At the same time, we strongly felt that it would be a great mistake to evaluate media convergence at KCR in terms of the success or failure of any one radio programme, especially since that format had in fact been superseded by more subtle developments. We also felt that KCR had in fact already both benefited and suffered too much from its over-identification with Radio Browsing.

5.5.2 Technology as a social agent

In the previous section, we evaluated Radio Browsing in a completely conventional manner: how well did this specific media format work, and what was its ‘impact’ in terms of its stated aims. This is far too limited a view of both media and technology, and excludes some of the most important ways in which it is understood and operates.

In numerous conversations, Sunil Wijesinghe conceptualised Radio Browsing – indeed KICRP as a whole – in the widest terms, not as a particular genre or project but as a highly complex ‘technological actor’. Radio Browsing and KCRIP have given KCR a unique place in the world: because of its radio-internet work. It is widely recognized, and has gathered standing and prestige as an innovative project. It is through Radio Browsing as a total phenomenon that Sunil thinks through its impacts: because of Radio Browsing, he and other relief announcers have gone to international conferences (he recently went to a community media conference in Nepal) through which they got contacts, ideas, energy and standing; and they have hosted international workshops at KCR itself. When they participate in online discussion forums, they are already well known. They have a continual stream of international visitors, including academics, journalists, development workers and volunteers (eg, a BBC World Service journalist visited for several days while we were there and featured them in a programme – there have already been several).

But Sunil put this even more concretely: because of Radio Browsing, you (the authors of this report) have come here, we can talk and exchange ideas, you go on our radio programmes, you also pay the cleaner and the ‘kade man’ (who provided our meals) and the trishaw drivers. You also brought to KCR people like the project researcher assistant, Lasanthi Daskon, who became (and still is) a volunteer at the project, bringing expertise in law, English and teaching. None of this would have happened without Radio Browsing.

That is to say, Sunil understands the ‘impacts’ of Radio Browsing as an agent or object that makes a vast range of connections which cannot be reduced to ‘who listens to this programme?’ We could add considerably to his list, largely from his own descriptions: For example, KCRIP is a strategic move in KCR’s constant struggle to develop autonomy and room for innovation within SLBC – it is a potential source of revenue, of technical operations which escape the scrutiny and regulation of SLBC and of the various broadcasting unions, yet feeds back into the operation of the radio station.

We can only endorse both Sunil’s conceptual framing of Radio Browsing – it is the right level at which to evaluate it – and most of his conclusions. To be frank, it is utterly in keeping with leading edge western academic perspectives on technology and innovation, such as actor network theory as developed through the work of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law.

We can only add a few qualifications and cautions, which stem from precisely the same way of conceptualising the situation. Radio Browsing occupies a strategic role in a range of networks that have a huge impact on KCR’s life: funding documents, relations with UNESCO and other donors, international academic and development literature, conferences, websites and discussion forums involving other community media and development projects. However, by placing KCR in these networks in this way, Radio Browsing has not only empowered KCR in various ways: it has also *fixed* and constrained it. It is almost like the brand positioning of a popular commodity that needs to be repositioned as times change.

In KCR’s external relations, its identification with Radio Browsing has fixed people’s expectations of it and this has consequences for its funding possibilities, for the ways in which it is evaluated (including this report), for its relationships with other projects and communities. In some people’s minds, KCR stands or falls with the fate of Radio Browsing (and there appears to be something of a

backlash against KCR going on, with accusations that it has been ‘over-sold’, making too great claims for itself on the basis of Radio Browsing).

Internally, this identification with Radio Browsing can become a barrier to fully recognizing and developing its more subtle and effective achievements, and a barrier to understanding the processes of media convergence in more sophisticated and fruitful ways. In effect, the Radio Browsing programme format provided KCR with a starting point for exploring possibilities for convergence between radio and internet. From that starting point KCR has developed and integrated the two media in various and subtle ways that have become normalised in the daily operations of KCR and are very much taken for granted in much of what they do. This must be seen as a positive outcome, as the original aims of the Radio Browsing format have been fully integrated into KCR’s operations in various ways, while at the same time KCR would benefit from explicitly examining such developments and planning and strategising further convergence possibilities.

5.5.3 Innovation and convergence

The more interesting story about media convergence at KCR and KCRIP is therefore not about how Radio Browsing has made the internet visible and audible but quite the contrary: how staff and users have incorporated new media in innovative yet often invisible and taken for granted ways. This is best expressed through a few examples:

Firstly, when the station’s internet connection was first lost several of the announcers carried on producing Radio Browsing programmes simply by using Microsoft’s Encarta CD-Rom encyclopaedia, as well as other CDs and information sources such as newspapers. They actually found this more effective in some ways. They were very clear that innovation was about media content, format and function – not the use of one technology. Internet could be treated as one technological or information resource amongst many.

Similarly, today, announcers use internet alongside a variety of other sources in preparing programmes of all sorts, from getting weather, news headlines and market prices to horoscopes, recipes and fashion. The success of internet use is not in foregrounding new media but rather from its seamless and invisible inclusion in a range of information resources.

Secondly, whereas those explicitly Radio Browsing programmes that have survived seemed somewhat stodgy, other format innovations have taken a different route. For example, the bilingual magazine programme produced by the station’s Tamil announcer uses websites as a point of departure for lively discussions, humour and quite surreal flights of fancy, inserting more serious issues or information within a highly enjoyable and popular style. This depends on the personality of the announcer, but also on simply using the internet within the programme event rather than defining the programme rigidly as an ‘internet programme’.

Thirdly, one of the most dramatic uses of internet during our visit fell outside all conventional ideas of radio programming: the announcement of O- and A-level exam results is the focus of huge anxiety and a decisive moment in the biography of individuals and families. It was widely known that the results this year would be posted on the Internet, several days in advance of postal notification (which would have to be sent to headmasters and then passed on to students). For those several days, students relayed their exam numbers to KCRIP by phone or in person; staff would then look up the results and broadcast them over the air (this was anonymous, as only the exam number was known or announced). KCRIP received over 800 phone calls and innumerable visits during this period.

This might well have been the single most significant ICT intervention in the region, dramatically increasing awareness of the Internet and – most importantly – identifying it with specific practical tasks and information needs. It also strongly identified KCRIP as a specific information conduit, rather than a more abstract ‘internet facility’. Finally – and dramatically – it mapped out a convergence of different technologies and information pathways in people’s minds: face-to-face communication and telephone → Internet → radio. And it mapped out a network of institutions: local schooling—family/students—KCR—Colombo educational bureaucracy.

Fourthly, during our fieldwork we watched the emergence of a homemade internet radio station. People using the computers, situated in the room next to the radio studio, including announcers during

their spare time, got very involved in internet chat, using both audio and webcam. One of the announcers got very friendly with a Sri Lankan working abroad in Kuwait who wanted to hear what the radio station was playing. He requested a song and an 'internet radio' was created by simply bringing the computer microphone into the studio and holding it up to a loudspeaker. A few weeks later, the Sri Lankan at the other end of the chat, again in the Middle East, happened to be working at a naval yard and was able to connect his computer's sound card to the PA system, thus broadcasting Kfm to the entire naval installation. Since then other expatriate Sri Lankans have heard about this and have agreed to send money and support to promote these developments.

Aside from showing that KCR is ready and able to start a real internet radio project, the story shows that innovation and convergence can emerge best out of situations of practical communications in which people are simply trying to make the technology capable of the kinds of communications they want to accomplish. It also came as much out of a sense of fun as of 'information need'.

There are many other such stories we could tell to the same end: that KCRIP has been a successful internet project to the extent that it has made the internet one resource amongst many others, and integrated it with a range of other media technologies within explicit communicative processes.

On the other hand, we need to point out that alongside convergences there are also divisions emerging at KCR. As might be expected, some staff are primarily identified with radio (in terms of both activities at KCR and longer term career plans), others – particularly younger ones – are more closely identified with computing and internet. There is a corresponding skills gap and division of labour emerging, as well as less overlap in friendship and collaboration networks. Some of the radio announcers were concerned that they were both losing out on computer/internet developments and not being sufficiently supported by ICT-identified staff. These problems are not very serious as yet, but the project should be careful not to identify people's work in terms of different technologies, perhaps by setting up project groups that cross over divisions between media technologies.

5.5.4 Media content: Communications versus information

Media content was another theme that was central to assessing media convergence, as well as KCRIP's aims of promoting internet in the area. Two issues came out very strongly in our research, and an important connection between them:

1. The media content relevant to this report (eg, Radio Browsing) had two aims which were not necessarily compatible: to promote internet in the locale and to use radio and internet to transmit internet-accessed information that would meet local information needs for poverty reduction. The problem is simply that one would most effectively promote internet through popular media content such as music, film information and horoscopes which would have nil effect on poverty reduction. Conversely, information rich content might be a good idea, but communication activity (like chat) is equally if not more likely to promote technology use and skills.
2. The media content that exclusively concerns most development literature and agencies is *information*. It seems very clear from our research that the fastest, easiest, most popular and 'natural' route into new media tends to be through *communication* and interaction (chat, email, discussion forums, webcams, etc). The two are far from mutually exclusive, though it is also clear that the information most people want is in keeping with their communication interests: it is popular content such as film and music information or files.

This picture only gets clearer when internet is brought into convergence with radio. If we consider the two together, we get the following main demands for media content:

1. *Entertainment and leisure content* would have to top any list. Music and film come first, largely Tamil and Sinhalese popular and film music, followed by older and folk music. Younger people have some interest in western film and music, but alongside their regional tastes.

As content, this takes multiple and overlapping forms, inscribed in quite various activities: listening to music on radio or online, downloading music files and burning CDs, transferring

between formats (from radio to tape to MP3 to CD; or from MP3 to tape or CD for broadcast on radio; circulation of store bought or pirated tapes or CDs which may end up on radio, internet or both). People may be more oriented to radio or internet, but there is a tendency – increasing as technical facilities, skills and familiarity increase – to treat these different modes of circulation and consumption as a single integrated space.

Film is obviously not suitable for radio, but circulation of VCDs (whether sourced from internet or elsewhere, and viewed on either computer or TV) enters into the flow of audio media.

After music and film, the picture gets fragmented: boys and young men consistently (and unexpectedly) claimed that the most popular websites were to do with martial arts, NASA and luxury cars as well as news sites.

Amongst women, there was a huge interest in what might be called ‘daily life’ material such as would be found in a women’s magazine or a radio magazine programme. Indeed this kind of material featured strongly in Kfm’s magazine style programmes, including one that involved much internet use: topics included cooking and domestic issues, health, and horoscopes and other fortune telling techniques, such as parrot divination (both could be accessed through animated websites, particularly Tamil ones, or through newspapers). The importance of horoscopes cannot be overestimated in either Buddhist or Hindu culture, and involved not only women but also men and families as a whole.

2. *Local news and culture:* Kfm and KCR were highly valued by listeners and participants for their local character. This localness was often identified most clearly through such things as: announcements of a *very* local nature – births, marriages, deaths, events. Much of this content fits better with the idea of local communication than information. More generally, people spoke very warmly about the local ‘flavour’ of the station (accents, music, etc).

Finally, as discussed elsewhere, radio, websites and their combination in Radio Browsing were constantly and almost naturally used for content to do with ‘cultural heritage’, in line with ‘village ideology’, discussed above.

5.5.5 Mobility

We have frequently stressed the crucial importance of locality, and have also noted that the physical location of KCR has been a problem since its beginning (Section 5.3.1). Its first site (at Doregala, a mountaintop occupied by a few houses and a tea factory) was so remote that the station’s first campaign (successful) was to establish a bus service there (without which it was a two hour walk straight uphill). The current site is far from ideal in terms of accessibility, either for rural users or the many who come from the two main towns. It should also be noted that both sites were chosen for what are generally regarded as the wrong reasons: firstly, the administrative convenience of SLBC; secondly technical engineering considerations (finding the optimal site for transmission, rather than access or production); and thirdly, political reasons to do with Mahaweli Authority Minister.

There is no ideal physical site for the project that would resolve all its problems (particularly, the tension between the demands of town and country, discussed in Section 5.3.1). There are certainly technical and organizational steps that should be taken: a presence in Nawalapitiya and Gampola, with permanent online connection to KCR, would seem imperative.

However, this approach on its own does not take account of a major feature of the communicative ecology of the area: mobility. As discussed, people move about a great deal; indeed, the success of KCR and KCRIP has depended on people’s willingness to travel up to an hour or more, each way, to computer classes, free internet access, radio programmes and events. Conversely, KCR – like most local media – makes great efforts to be mobile, to go out to the community. The major examples are its outside broadcasts (OBs) and City Events. Some announcers have shown considerable initiative in going out with cassette recorders to make programmes, though there was a general feeling that this had regrettably declined since the earlier days of the station. A major concern of Sunil’s was to drive participants out of the studio back into the community, an ambition that was hampered by the whole relief announcer issue described above.

However, there was a conspicuous absence of other typically local ways of mobilizing messages and connections: the project did not use handbills, posters or loudspeaker cars ('announces') to publicize radio schedules, events or facilities; did not hold meetings at remote sites (as for example, the trades unions and schools did); or send people out to local institutions and communication networks. On the other hand, KCR does have a listeners' club which has often been very effective.

We also felt that it would be appropriate to try and think through KCRIP's internet and computer projects along the same lines that the KCR had successfully developed radio: mobility and outside broadcasts. KCR used a 'suitcase radio station' that packed all the equipment necessary for broadcasting into a suitcase. The ideal would be a 'suitcase internet'. And a van that could mobilize a complete package of telephones, internet, computing and multi-media and radio. This could be used alongside a policy of linking with existing local facilities (eg, partnerships with communication centres and computer schools) and setting up remote access points, eg in Nawalapitiya and Gampola.

The entire complex of problems that face KCR were summed up for us by one simple fact: SLBC accountants set a maximum travel limit for the station van of 1750 km per month. When they reached that limit (barely adequate for routine operations let alone serious outreach work), they were stuck at the remote station, and they could not legally use other funds to buy more mobility. This was a vivid and frustrating daily reminder of their place within a moribund bureaucracy that assumed a static media model that bore no relation to the project's aims or actual operation.

5.6 Language

Language emerged as a central theme in terms of two issues: the problem of English language competence; and the lack of local language media content.

5.6.1 English

Lack of functional English is generally regarded as a major barrier to efficient use of ICTs. In Sri Lanka this is a highly politicised issue. In the 1950s, the government established a Sinhala-only policy that is widely regarded as a devastating historical mistake: in one stroke it cut off the population (particularly the intelligentsia) from global knowledge and culture and simultaneously lay the basis for enduring Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic division. There is also a generational divide between those who were taught in English before this policy came into effect and those who have only received English-language courses at school and often have very low levels of functional English competence.

Significantly in this context, the concern of most local people was to develop English language skills rather than to increase vernacular content (except for provision of more Tamil radio and television content). This arose from a desire to reverse the political direction the country had taken, from an unspoken assumption and acceptance that the internet was intrinsically an English-language medium, and from a confidence that – with proper educational provision – they should be able to develop sufficient competence in English to use it effectively. Ironically, the Sri Lankan population that is potentially most linguistically empowered by the internet are the Tamils, who can access the extensive internet content (and conversation) that is available in Tamil and other Indian languages.

This also links to the widespread understanding of the internet, previously noted, as a medium primarily for connecting between the immediate locality and the rest of the world (which is assumed to speak English, with the exception of Tamil speakers in India) rather than for use within Sri Lanka. This situation may well change as and when ICTs spread within Sri Lanka; moreover there are programmes being developed (for example, by Save the Children and British Council), to encourage online communication between school students in different parts of the country.

As noted in our discussion of education, despite the fact that English is a core element of the school curriculum there was a low level of functional English competence. This produced a great deal of frustration in using the internet: searches produced confusion as users were unable to decipher and assess what might be relevant or reliable. Writing (and receiving) email could be a painful process. Chat was easier for many internet users, as it usually involves developing ad hoc and medium-specific

vernaculars, abbreviations and linguistic routines. In fact, even those with low English skills were adept with the roman alphabet and many were skilled at transliterating both Sinhalese and Tamil into roman characters.

In fact, online media both require English and provide a wealth of resources for learning English. KCRIP could work with teachers or volunteers to develop language learning materials.

5.6.2 Local languages

While English is in great demand, local language issues and content also need to be addressed. This is not straightforward. In terms of computer and internet use, Sri Lanka shares with many parts of the world general problems of linguistic ‘localisation’ (see, for example, Hall 2002 for a discussion of economics and technology and linguistic ‘localisation’). These include adapting keyboards to languages that involve over a hundred characters; getting the right fonts for a wide range of software (for example, in order to view all Tamil websites over twenty different fonts have to be available on each computer; Microsoft Office comes with dictionaries and fonts for Tamil but not Sinhala; Unicode does include Sinhala). There was little Sinhalese internet content; there was considerably more Tamil content, but originated in India not Sri Lanka.

However, in addition to the linguistic localisation problems, Sri Lanka has two national languages, Sinhalese and Tamil. We found a surprisingly low level of bilingualism between Sinhala and Tamil, which both isolates the latter community and makes practical cooperation difficult. Moreover, there are few bilingual media: the normal pattern is to have separate Sinhalese and Tamil newspapers, radio, TV and now internet. As already noted (see ‘Ethnicity’), KCR is actually unique in having some bilingual broadcasting and publications.

Vernacular content and translation facilities between Sinhala and Tamil are both necessary and made more practicable through ICTs: for example, there are now bi-lingual DTP publications, on-line translation programmes and word-processing programs in local languages (these are available from software developers whom we visited).

KCRIP can certainly play its part in helping develop local language internet content. The websites it currently hosts are generally published in both English and Sinhalese versions. However, as noted in the section on Ethnicity, this needs to be extended to Tamil content and software facilities.

Finally, we should note other language skills: 1. Many Tamil-speakers can function in other Indian languages. 2. Significant minorities amongst both Tamil and Sinhalese speakers have functional language skills in Arabic languages because they have worked in the Middle East. Moslems often do too as result of work abroad, trade and kinship networks and religious education.

As in the case of English, language skills are a prerequisite for efficient ICT use; but ICTs are also a major resource for developing language skills.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS: KCR AND KCRIP

The findings set out above all point to the need for KCR to develop medium and long-term strategic thinking to ensure its future and to develop its capacity to deliver appropriate and needed media facilities and services to the Kothmale region. A business and development plan would need to include an exploration of the feasibility of working towards a level of autonomy from the SLBC, the organizational form necessary to achieve self sustainability, staffing and employment and training opportunities, all in the context of the project's mission of community development. Included in this is the need to develop active policies for inclusion for the various constituencies that KCR aims to serve. This process would need to be funded by an external agency, with the mission of achieving inclusion in the process by all stakeholders including the SLBC. We recommend that this is done with the assistance of independent experts who can help KCR staff sift through the complexities of the situation and help present a convincing case for the chosen direction to SLBC, ministries and potential donors.

1. Autonomy and sustainability

Institutional autonomy: Autonomy is the central issue faced by KCR, impacting on every aspect of its finances, staffing, activities and identity. This needs to be faced head-on and within a planning context, rather than short-term responses and arrangements. Several options need to be explored thoroughly: negotiating greater autonomy within SLBC; complete autonomy as an independent organization; establishing a parallel organization (perhaps based on the existing Media Project) that is fully independent and can retain earned income.

Business planning: need to identify a limited range of possible organizational directions, and assess their viability with respect to financial costs and revenues, political context and staff aspirations to permanent, paid jobs.

Explore diversified revenue sources and partnerships: KCR could pursue more systematically its current initiatives in seeking new ways of generating income and retaining this income through organizational arrangements. It could explore funding from local enterprises, as well as partnerships with NGOs, educational institutes and more diverse external donors.

Staffing: KCR should regard its relationship to core staff in terms of *career development*, in addition to the needs of *managing the project*: being clear about career expectations, tailoring training to the career aspirations of each participant, as far as possible, and establishing 'exit strategies' through advice and help in finding new jobs or educational opportunities.

2. Community and outreach

Community policy: need to move away from idealized concepts of community to focus on a detailed analysis of community divisions and diverse needs, and to something closer to 'multi-ethnicity'. It then needs to prioritise and target specific communities, or community divisions. This should be formulated in a specific community outreach policy that is internalised and actioned by all staff and volunteers and strategised through the business and development plan.

Tamil communities: need to specifically target Tamil speakers, particularly the poorest, through increased radio programming, computer classes and teaching materials in Tamil. More than this, the project needs more Tamil or Tamil speaking core staff, liaison with Tamil schools and other community organizations, and direct address of specific needs of Tamil communities: remoteness, lack of mobility, poverty of information resources (including legal and health information), and needs for educational support and encouragement.

Marketing and publicity: need to increase local awareness of the project and all its activities (radio schedules, computer classes and internet facilities, publishing) through handbills and

posters, loudspeaker announcements and public meetings/events. This is important not only to attract users and listeners in general but to target those who are excluded from immediate social networks and population centres. It is also important for ensuring greater capacity for generating commercial income from local and national advertisers/sponsors.

Community outreach workers: KCRIP desperately needs a dedicated, full-time staff member who will manage the computer/internet facilities within an explicitly community-oriented policy. This could also be achieved by allocating a core staff member to focus on community policy and outreach throughout the project, working closely with radio and internet staff. This worker should also focus on liaising with targeted community organizations throughout the area. A strategy for funding of such a post should be developed in the business plan.

3. Media technology and content

Language: KCRIP could be playing a role in developing both English language skills and Tamil/Sinhala bilingualism. Particularly in relation to English, we consistently observed a gap between provision of formal English classes at school and functional linguistic ability in actual tasks like understanding websites. Again, a practice based approach that integrates English language skills with projects where there is both opportunity and motivation to develop functional grasp of the language, with support.

Multi-media integration: link radio, internet and print media more closely through 1. staff linkages and skill-sharing, probably through formally partnering radio-oriented and computer-oriented staff into project teams; 2. new radio and internet formats for integrated content (internet radio is crucial for this)

Mobility: It is important to develop KCR's mobile approach to radio and ideally to extend it into computing, internet and telephony. Geographical issues are crucial to its outreach, to local social divisions and to local means of communicating. They might focus more on mobile technologies, publicized schedules of outreach work, establishing a circuit of mobile workshops/events, and so on. The ideal in terms of extending access and of reaching excluded communities would be a technological kit, housed in a van, would include mobile radio production, with satellite-based internet and telephone services, computers and multi-media facilities.

4. Education

Schools: closer partnerships with schools to develop information resources and teaching material.

Educating the educators: there is a great need for courses that will help teachers develop skills and understanding of ICTs; and for more challenging courses for those involved in ICT-related education.

Encouraging practical knowledge (versus formal qualifications): KCRIP is well placed to develop more innovative approaches to ICT learning that are based on hands-on experience and project work. Achieving a level of accreditation for courses offered, in partnership with educational institutions would help to bridge the gap between practical learning approaches and the need for paper qualifications.

Part II: Methodology – ethnographic action research

The second aim of this study was to pilot a methodological approach to monitoring and evaluation that could be used across a wide spectrum of media and multi-media projects aimed at poverty reduction in developing regions.

We have pursued an *ethnographic approach*: we use a wide but integrated range of methods to build an understanding of the culture and society in which a community multi-media project is working. More specifically, we seek to understand the project's problems and opportunities by studying the 'communicative ecology' of its locale: all the social processes, relations and technologies through which information and communications flow.

In Sections 7 and 8 we define our ethnographic approach, describe how we implemented it in the KCRIP pilot research and discuss the key issues and problems that emerged from this experience.

In Kothmale, we applied the ethnographic approach only to 'monitoring and evaluation' research. However, our aim is to develop the approach into a transferable methodology that can help in all aspects of a project's development. In collaboration with UNESCO, we have moved towards an approach we call *ethnographic action research*. The guiding idea is to develop a research culture within projects through which planning and action are guided by rich and reflective understanding of the social relations within which they work.

Finally, as part of our work with UNESCO, and with the help of an additional researcher (Greg Hearn, QUT), we produced a draft training manual based on ethnographic action research. This is to be used for training researchers who will be attached, for one year each, to a UNESCO 'cross-cutting themes' programme: 'Information and Communication Technologies for Poverty Alleviation'. This draft manual is attached as Appendix 1, and should give an indication of how the overall methodology can be developed to cover the entire life-cycle of a project, to be transferable both to researchers and to community multi-media projects themselves.

7. DEFINING THE APPROACH – ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Ethnography comes from a long tradition within anthropology that aims to develop a complete understanding of a society or culture through a long-term immersion in its life. By living in and with a social world, the researcher can learn about it through a wide range of methods and encounters, can test and refine that knowledge and – most importantly – can build up a picture of the *whole* way of life and of how the different relations, processes and organizations interconnect. The claim is that this provides a richer understanding and a good basis for responding to issues sensitively, appropriately and creatively.

We can outline the ethnography approach through a few specific features:

1. **‘Holistic’ approach:** Ethnography aims at understanding a whole way of life, grounding its object of study (eg, a media project) in its wider context. It tries to make sense of each feature of a place and a project in relation to the bigger picture and not in isolation.
2. **Specific understanding:** Ethnography starts from local features and understandings rather than general concepts or variables. It assumes that whatever we are studying will be different in different places: we need to know how, for example, media, information needs or social divisions are constructed, interrelated and understood in a specific place. We can then set this within wider contexts (eg, national media infrastructures and policies, global economic developments) while still staying close to what is relevant to the locale.

Focusing on the *specificity* (or uniqueness) of a particular context means that we build up a research agenda and analysis that is grounded in an understanding of that place. This is particularly appropriate for establishing the interests, aims, issues and understandings of project stakeholders and ensuring that these guide the research.

3. **Integrated multi-method approach:** Ethnography can employ a wide range of methods – participant observation, interviews, surveys, analysis of documents, objects and images, group discussions, for example. In fact, ethnography treats *every* encounter or conversation as ‘material’ that can be brought into its analytical frame.

However, ethnography – unlike other multi-method approaches – does not simply add up the results of separate methods, used in isolation. Methods are integrated within a single research process: each is guided and informed by the others and by the overall picture that is emerging. For example, survey design is guided by a developing ethnographic understanding of social organization and issues; interviews may be refocused on themes that have emerged from participant observation or more informal conversations.

4. **Targeted research:** ‘Classic’ ethnography generally aims at complete descriptions. However, it is clearly possible to target this research on specific issues that are relevant to project participants, communities, donors and policy makers. In ethnographic approaches, these target issues typically emerge in the form of ‘themes’ or ‘patterns’: issues that continually crop up across the various methods and encounters (as in Sections 4 and 5, above).
5. **Participatory or ‘dialogic’ research:** By its very nature, ethnography involves a wide range of involvements or dialogues with a project and its social world: it involves, listening, participating, observing, discussing; it generally also involves socializing and forming friendships. All of this makes it eminently suitable for participatory or action research of a particularly rich kind. Rather than confining participation to formal consultations with stakeholders, dialogue is built into every aspect of the research.

Communicative ecology

We used the concept of *communicative ecology* to adapt the general ethnographic approach to researching community multi-media projects in particular. Above all, the concept reflects the aims of holistic and specific understanding.

Communicative ecology asks us to look at the complete picture of communication and information flows in a locale, and at the specific pattern of communication needs, practices and understandings that characterises that place. What media are used, and in what combinations, by whom, for what purposes? Who is trying to communicate with whom? How do communications media and technologies connect to other technologies, organizations and social processes?

No medium or communications process is treated in isolation. Moreover, no claims are made about the specific ‘impacts’ or ‘effects’ of any one medium in isolation. Rather, we look at the social networks and processes through which different media work and are diffused through the population. For example, as in Part I, rather than asking about the impact of internet, we looked at the communications processes with which it could connect, and barriers to that connection.

In practical terms, this means helping projects to understand the social processes on which they are trying to make an impact: identifying the relevant processes, identifying barriers to their effectiveness, identifying networks and processes which will help them achieve their aims.

What knowledge can ethnographic research produce?

To be clear, ethnography – by its very nature – will not produce simple statements about the impact of any single, isolated medium or organization. Although it can produce quantitative measures, these are not its strength, and – again – these measures will not answer simplistic impact questions.

Moreover, its commitment to both holism and specificity mean that it will not produce conventional ‘indicators’ – variables that can be applied and measured indiscriminately in any place. Ethnography does not apply pre-given indicators to a place, but rather generates its ‘variables’ (themes, patterns, processes) from its understanding of a specific place. And it has a different approach to the problem of generalizing outwards from particular cases.

Finally, to complete this discussion of what ethnography is not, alternative approaches (particularly more quantitative ones) are generally reluctant to treat qualitative research as ‘hard data’ or as rigorous, often dismissing ethnographic findings as ‘anecdotal’ or merely suggestive. Conversely, ethnographers tend to regard quantitative (or more ‘scientific’) research as making false claims to rigour, or achieving formal rigour at the cost of any real or significant understanding. In fact, firstly, ethnographic approaches have their own internal rigour and systematic procedures through which they both generate and test ideas and findings; and, secondly, their use of multiple methods and comprehensive analysis works to ensure that researchers and readers are clear both about the extent to which particular avenues were explored and tested, and the limits of confidence in the findings.

More positively, we can sum up the character of ethnographic findings as follows:

Themes, patterns and processes: as in Part I, we aim to generate a limited (but rich and extensive) number of themes that foreground the key features of the social world in which a project is operating.

Contexts: ethnographic research grounds all key features in its social context, allowing an understanding of all the relevant forces impacting on a situation.

Monitoring and evaluation: ethnography can give a clear but complex assessment of how well a project is doing by showing how it fits into the overall picture of needs, communications processes, social divisions and problems, and institutional structures of a locale.

Generalization and comparison: Ethnography proceeds from the specific rather than from general indicators and variables. It generalizes to other projects and situations through *comparative analysis*. The themes and contexts derived from any one ethnography can be stated generally enough to inform both research and analysis of other situations. This gives the ability to diagnose similarities and differences, to generate hypotheses, to sensitise researchers to potential key features in their situation, and to adapt research strategies for other places. For example, Part I placed great stress on Sri Lankan concepts of community. A similar study of, say, Ghana, will likely want to explore similar concepts there, developing a specific and local knowledge but at the same time using the comparison with Sri Lanka to generate ideas, develop hypotheses, and so on.

8. ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN KOTHMALE

Our Kothmale research aimed to pilot an ethnographic approach to the specific process of ‘monitoring and evaluation’. In this section we give a description of how the research was carried out, followed by a discussion of key problems and issues that have implications for developing the method.

8.1 Description of the research

8.1.1 Narrative

The research was conducted in the period 1 February to 31 August, with a core team of Don Slater, Jo Tacchi and Peter Lewis.

1. Preparation (1 February-14 March)

Review of all available documents on KCR and KCRIP. Review of monitoring and evaluation approaches and reports with respect to community media and multi-media.

Researching Sri Lankan websites. Reading background literature on Sri Lanka.

Interviews with several people connected with the project’s history (eg, MJR David, Knud Ebbeson).

Appointment of project manager in Kothmale (Tanya Notley) and hiring of translators. Drafting of questionnaire and piloting of survey in selected areas.

Contact and liaison with KCR Controller Sunil Wijesinghe.

2. Fieldwork (14 March-25 April)

Don Slater and Jo Tacchi were at Kothmale for the whole period; Peter Lewis for one week, which included interviewing in Colombo (eg, Media Ministry, SLBC head office). During this period, we lived in a house within a few minutes walk of KCR, in Riverside, along with several of our research assistants. The house was both close and on the way to the station: we therefore had a constant stream of visitors (users, volunteers, etc) and a good place for socializing. It was therefore ideal for complete, and informal, immersion in the project.

The following lists main activities over this period:

Week 1: Briefing by Mr Jayaweera, and several interviews with him. Initial meetings and interviews with key project workers. Orientation: trips to main towns and villages with research assistants and project workers. Selection of main settlements to study: decision to focus on Nawalapitiya as our main town site, where we spent much of Week 2.

Survey conducted over weeks 1 and 2, accompanied by Slater and Tacchi. Beginning of interviews with households and local organizations.

Trips to Kandy and Colombo (Lewis) to interview media organizations and ministries, NGOs.

Week 2 and 3: Completion of survey. In-depth interviews with households and local organizations (schools, communications centres, computer schools, health workers, temples, trade unions, betting shops, etc).

Observations of KCR: radio production, computer and internet use, classes, general life of the project. Interviews with most project workers and many users.

Visit to Colombo to interview advertising and software companies, Sri Lanka Telecomms, SLIIT, Mahaweli Development Authority manager, and commercial radio.

Participation in local events such as religious festivals and outside broadcasts.

Week 4: Completed interviews with project workers. Held series of group discussions with relief announcers. Many last minute discussions/interviews.

Worked with research assistants to organize material, enter survey in database, arrange translations and transcriptions.

Attended KCR's outside broadcasts over New Year's festivities and interviewed participants.

3. Analysis (25 April-31 August)

Organization and analysis of all materials collected to develop and refine themes which emerged during research. Identification of overarching themes.

Writing the report.

4. Continued collaboration with UNESCO (15 July-present)

In our meetings with Mr Jayaweera at the start of fieldwork we discussed extending our research approach through involvement in a new UNESCO programme of pilot ICT projects in South Asia. In July, Slater and Tacchi produced a training manual for ethnographic action research, which they then presented at a 3-day consultation with project managers within that programme (Bangalore, 1-3 August). See Appendix 1 for the full document.

This both allowed us to develop the methodology in greater depth and to discuss it with a range of other projects.

8.1.2 Fieldwork methods

The range of separate fieldwork activities we carried out is listed in Table 1, along with the kinds of contribution they made to the overall research programme. This list gives an idea of the kinds of people and activities we studied and how we approached them.

However, it does not reflect the overall character of the research in at least three ways:

Firstly, the different methods were *integrated* in various ways, as we have pointed out before. In particular, the themes that guide research rarely emerged from any one method. Rather they were patterns that were detected across all or most of our research encounters.

Secondly, in practice the different methods were also *overlapping* or 'blurred'. An informal conversation that started while observing some event might turn into an in-depth interview; an interview conducted in someone's home might turn into an observation and analysis of the material culture of that house (What media were there? How were they spatially organized in the home?)

Thirdly, as we have also pointed out before, findings from one method might re-orient others. Above all, the survey needed constant readjustment in relation to our developing ethnographic understanding of the social composition and spatial organisation of the local population. Similarly, sitting in the station, we often had a congregation of station staff, users, local people, researchers and so on. Information and ideas from any of our research methods might become part of the conversation, and the conversation would generate further questions that might inform any of the interviews the next day.

Method	Quantity	Material	Contribution
Survey	130 households	Questions on household composition, income, religion, language; media use and information sources; awareness of KCR and KCRIP	Expand numerical scope of findings; assess generality of findings from other methods; mitigate potential biases in other methods.
Household interviews¹	40	In-depth discussions about family, work, communication and information needs, way of life, etc. Conducted in households, usually with several members present	Rich investigation of ways of life and role of communication needs and media.
Community interviews	20+	In-depth discussions with schools (heads, teachers and classes), communications centres, computer schools, health workers, temples, trade unions, betting shops.	Each represents key aspects, interests or constituencies of community.
Staff interviews	13 people, some more than once	All permanent staff, relief announcers, volunteers. Discussed all aspects of organization and its operations; experience of working there, etc.	Insight into operation of project; relation of participants to project as organization
User interviews	10	Discussions with users of computers/internet and classes and participants in radio production. Covered their use of KCR, information needs and general questions concerning their way of life.	Insight into communication needs and response of KCR/KCRIP.
Group discussions	8 formal meetings	Group discussions with KCR staff, with groups of users and with school classes.	Discussion agenda arises from discussion; allows new issues to emerge.
Observation	Daily	All aspects of KCR/KCRIP activity; social gatherings; outside broadcasts; homes; communication centres; temples; cafes; etc	Compare interview material with observed action and events; learn through participation; observe spatial and material culture.
Informal	Daily	Socializing, participating in project activities (OBs, discussions, daily activities)	Building stronger and more confiding relationships, informal conversation, etc.
Media content		Websites, radio programmes, publications, chat, handbills and poster, music and film, etc.	Analysis of actual information and communication forms.
Documents		Annual accounts, policy documents, programme prospectuses, etc; reports on KCR, monitoring and evaluation literature; published statistics and other material on Kothmale and Sri Lanka.	Material that contextualises local interviews and observation.
Non-local interviews and material	18+ interviews	Managers at advertising agencies, software companies, media organizations, NGOs, British Council, educational institutes and universities, government ministries (eg, telecomms, MDA, media ministry, SLBC)	Material that contextualises local interviews and observation.

1. Interviews denote in-depth discussions generally lasting an hour or more. There were in addition numerous informal chats (not included in the table). All interviews and most chats were tape recorded and transcribed. In addition field notes were made of all such encounters.

8.2 Problems and issues

Several issues emerge from our pilot that are crucial for developing the approach into a more generalizable method:

4.3.1 Monitoring and Evaluation

We have become increasingly confident over the course of this research, and our ongoing work with UNESCO, that an ethnographic research approach requires some rethinking of both the purpose of research and the meaning of ‘monitoring and evaluation’.

As part of our research programme we have carried out an extensive review of the literature on monitoring and evaluation, and have read a very large number of both approaches and project reports. While there is considerable agreement over such issues as the necessity of multiple research methods, of baseline research, needs assessments and so on, these concepts take on quite different meanings in different approaches.

Ethnography most fundamentally differs from other approaches in two respects that we have already mentioned:

1. It focuses on mapping the diffusion of communicative practices and resources through social networks, relations and processes, and therefore on understanding the dynamics of the world in which the project is operating.

Other approaches tend to use the language of ‘impacts’ or ‘effects’, and therefore focus on *measuring* such things as audiences, impacts, needs, use. The issue is not whether measurements are useful or not (our study certainly included a survey, for example). Rather, ethnography tends to be sceptical as to whether impacts, effects or audience measurements are a good way of understanding the real role, effectiveness and potential of a project within its community, let alone for developing the project.

2. It focuses on local understandings, issues and aims, seeking to build upwards from the local and specific to the more general and comparative.

Because of this, the outcome of this pilot could not be a set of general ‘indicators’ which can be mapped on to any fieldsite. The generalizable and transferable outcome is the research approach itself, rather than specific concepts, questions or indicators of impact or project success. Generalizing at the latter, substantive level, is a more difficult issue for ethnography, but we are certainly sceptical about the validity of numerical comparisons between projects based on generalized indicators.

On the basis of our pilot, we feel that these two features have some very specific implications:

1. In regard to the needs of projects and communities themselves, ethnographic research is best understood as a development tool, rather than as a means of measuring outcomes. This is why we have been developing our research model in the direction of ethnographic *action* research: while it is eminently suitable for baseline research, and incorporates some degree of measurement, its strength lies in generating rich social understandings which can be readily incorporated within the daily practice and planning of projects. In this context, ‘monitoring and evaluation’ – in the sense of understanding the place of a project in its local ecology, and identifying possibilities and problems – takes its place within a broader research culture within the project.
2. In regard to the monitoring and evaluation needs of donors, ethnography would pose the same sorts of questions: should research be treated as a development tool or as a way of quantifying success? We strongly believe that the Kothmale pilot provides a clear answer to this: We are able to make substantial claims about the way in which KCRIP works in the community, and recommendations for more effective work, but even where these are based on measurement they do not fall under a conventional ‘monitoring and evaluation’ or ‘indicators’ approach. Rather, claims about effectiveness can only be confidently made to the extent that they are

based on more ethnographic understandings of the locality, and to that extent they are more oriented to understanding developmental processes than to measuring impacts.

We might add that some of these tensions are very visible within projects themselves, both at Kothmale and elsewhere. We noted that staff ideas for self-monitoring tended to take a relatively quantitative form (usage statistics, forms to be filled on-line or off). This orientation is adopted somewhat unthinkingly from the wider culture, from schooling and from dealing with NGOs. This orientation tends to be in some conflict with their many other sources of knowledge about who they are dealing with, and how successfully: day-to-day contacts, anecdotes, feedback from trusted 'informants' and community opinion leaders, etc.

That is, project workers behave more like ethnographers than like any other kind of researcher in the way they generate a knowledge base for their work. This is not to say that statistics and usage forms are not useful (we also use them in academic ethnography) but, firstly, that ethnography is more in keeping with the processes of development within the projects themselves; and, secondly, that more quantitative approaches run the danger of devaluing or marginalizing the rich knowledge naturally generated by staff.

It would be better to build on what people know and on their ways of knowing by making this more explicit, reflective and systematic. That is the aim in the ethnographic action research approach that we propose below and in Appendix 1.

4.3.2 Cost-effective, 'quick' ethnographies

While conventional academic ethnography has generally insisted on a minimum fieldwork period of one year, a 'quick ethnography' such as our study is not unusual today. It is increasingly acceptable in academia, business, government and NGOs. At the same time, even this is a potentially extensive business: one month of intensive fieldwork, by two or more senior academics, book-ended by additional periods of preparation and analysis, might appear an excessive and non-replicable expenditure on monitoring and evaluation.

We are intensely aware that a replicable ethnographic approach needs to balance cost effectiveness with a reasonable degree of ethnographic depth.

In the Kothmale pilot, one month was sufficient to establish close rapport with a range of staff and community members, to interview a wide range of stakeholders, to research both project operations and the wider communicative context. It was also sufficient to identify the main themes that impinged on the project, though not always to research them to the depth we desired. Most importantly it was sufficient time to generate lines of enquiry and develop them within the field visit.

We might also add that one of the authors of this report conducted similar research in Trinidad, with one collaborator, over one month, and was able to develop an even greater degree of depth (Miller and Slater 2000). However, a central reason for this was his collaborator's 10-year long involvement in the specific anthropology of Trinidad: we therefore started from an enormous background knowledge of many of the features that, in Sri Lanka, we had to gain from scratch. In the interests of time, as well as depth, at least one member of research teams should be a local researcher and/or area specialists rather than media specialists.

The success of the KCR fieldwork rested on several features:

1. A research team (as opposed to research carried out by one individual) compensated for some of the time limitation. Three academics were involved (two of them for a month each), plus a local research manager and three research assistants at various times.
2. The excellence of the research manager and one of the research assistants was a key factor: the importance of good local researchers cannot be over-estimated. In our case, they were both superb administrators and intellectually engaged throughout.
3. We lived together onsite, in a house 50 meters from the project, allowing for rich involvement, including extensive social, informal contact.

4. We were able to design and partially implement the survey before our field visit (though this was a mixed blessing, see below).
5. KCR staff were extremely helpful, open and enthusiastic.

More generally, cost-effective, time-constrained but rich ethnography needs to combine open-ended and exploratory research with *targeted research*. The pilot demonstrated to us that an ethnographic approach can indeed accomplish this. Open-ended research allows an agenda of issues and ‘stories’ to emerge from the field itself. Through discussions with staff and stakeholders and through the researchers’ own analysis whilst in the field, it is then possible to target research on key issues during the research process itself.

Despite the time constraints, this allows the researchers to generate and refine a research agenda that emerges from the specifics of that locality, and therefore a richer and more useful analysis than would be possible starting from a pre-defined set of targets or indicators.

Providing that research is focused, and benefits from some of the advantages described above, 3-4 weeks fieldwork is adequate. In this case the cost of fieldwork is comparable to, if not lower than, any other monitoring and evaluation we have come across.

A further issue, however, is time for analysis. Our impression is that ethnographic analysis may require more time, energy and skill than some other approaches. Rather than summarising the results of discrete methods, the researcher has to integrate a large volume of heterogeneous material in terms of themes that will organize and illuminate them. As with most ethnographies, the depth one can reach depends on the time available for reflection, experimentation, discussion and background reading and consultation. On the other hand, we can also safely say that – in our own experience – the main themes and concepts emerged during or immediately after the fieldwork itself. Much of the analysis time was bound up with refining and finding ways to present our material.

Several of the issues raised below also have a strong bearing on issues of time and cost-effectiveness, in particular ensuring staff participation by both designating a project staff member as a member of the research team, and working to build a research culture in the project.

4.3.3 From ‘Participatory Research’ to ‘Research Culture’

Participatory research or evaluation often denotes implementing formal mechanisms such as meetings and consultations with staff and/or stakeholders. These formal mechanisms are often associated with equally formal research stages: eg, ‘needs assessment’ or baseline research should precede project implementation; stakeholder consultations should set research priorities in advance of research.

In an ethnographic approach, participation follows less formal paths. These cannot be reduced to simple, formal rules of consultation. Drawing on our Kothmale experience, we feel that two important points emerge:

Treat participation as an emergent feature of research: Ethnographic research naturally involves diverse forms of participation; and we would expect different structures of participation to emerge from it. People are involved through interviews and participant observation; but also through the broad-based informal relationships that are built up over time. These allow people to develop a more complex sense of what the research might accomplish; and allow the researchers to assess the research needs and priorities of the stakeholders continuously and sensitively, rather than only through formal meetings.

To take an example: at the very end of the Kothmale research we held group discussions with station staff. Of course, we had discussions from the very beginning about the nature and direction of the research, and adjusted our research plans accordingly. However, by reserving more formal meetings till the end, we ended up with extremely frank, enthusiastic and fruitful discussions. There are several reasons for this:

- The discussions took place on the basis of established relationships with the researchers, which had become complex and multi-layered.
- This allowed for more trust and confidence.

- Both we and they were able to be more challenging and assertive, and a lot less polite.
- These discussions were part of a process that had already been going on for a month so the discussions were built on all the interviews and chats that had gone on over the whole time. This also meant that participants had a clearer understanding of the research process as a whole.

Participatory research, in this approach, comes out of building up processes and relationships, not on going through the right formal steps on the basis of generic views of participation.

Building ‘research culture’: Although we worked closely with KCR participants, we felt there was another step that needs to be taken. It goes beyond inviting formal participation towards integrating research within the project in the form of a *research culture*. This is what we are now developing through our training manual (Appendix 1) and continued collaboration with UNESCO.

Ethnography can be understood simply as a mode of *reflection* in which people use many of their normal ways of gaining knowledge with more awareness and more systematically. This means valorising project workers’ existing knowledge and experience; treating their own everyday practices and interactions as material that can be analyzed; and supplementing this with some training in the range of ethnographic research methods and analysis.

Through this approach, research – including monitoring and evaluation – can be treated as an everyday aspect of project work (rather than as a specialism belonging to outside professionals). We can treat it as a process and an orientation that is transferable. The external researchers’ role would then combine training and research.

As a start, we would strongly recommend that in any subsequent research along these lines, one staff member of the CMC is explicitly designated as a member of the research team. This makes sense in practical terms (liaison, follow-up, etc). It also compensates for the time constraint by allowing the researchers to draw on an informed informant. But, more than this, appointing a staff member to the research team would help to instil a research culture within the project.

4.3.4 Local informants

We have already stressed the importance of excellent local researchers and informants for the Kothmale pilot project. We would want to stress, as an outcome of our research, that two kinds of local participation are significant for the success of this kind of research:

Staff participation: as indicated in the previous section, bringing one central member of the project staff into the research team as an active participant is extremely important. In the Kothmale study, our research manager was a former volunteer with KCRIP. This gave us access to background knowledge, organizational details, history, informants, etc. It was invaluable.

Local researchers: Work in partnership with a local ethnographer (a member of the culture who has had academic training in related methodologies, or someone who, as in our case, was simply unusually adept in these approaches). Whether academically trained or not, this person’s role should be envisaged, from the start, as an equal, integral member of the research team, involving a period of discussion and training at the start of fieldwork.

Ethnography involves a balance between closeness and distance: the researcher aims at complete immersion for full understanding, but the entire approach recognises the value of not being an actual member of the community, the advantages of being an outsider who has to learn the culture and therefore takes nothing for granted, asking questions about things which members take entirely for granted or which may be invisible to them.

4.3.5 ‘Multi-method’ versus ‘ethnographic’ research approaches

Like ethnography many, or most, available evaluation approaches mobilize a variety of research methods: surveys, interviews, focus groups, consultations, etc. This can sometimes be rather mechanical – a simple matter of deploying several independent techniques and adding up their results

at the end. Some approaches are more ‘organic’ or integrated, bringing different methods into contact within the research period itself.

Ethnography lies at the ‘organic’ end of this spectrum, and this needs to be strongly emphasized. It is not simply ‘multi-method’:

- the design and implementation of any method is actively modified by the other methods being used (see below: our survey could only be designed, accomplished and analysed against the background of the broader ethnography)
- methods are not always clearly distinguishable, nor should they be (eg, one might not be able to say if a particular conversation is a survey, interview or observation, and it is quite feasible to be all three at once)
- a crucial ethnographic skill is to integrate diverse kinds of research material within coherent analytical frameworks.

The clearest example of this is the survey we conducted in Kothmale. The main point is that surveys are unintelligible without ethnographic knowledge. They cannot be either properly designed or analysed without an informed ethnographic background. This is a general point about all surveys, whether or not it is acknowledged. In the case of surveying a traditional, rural and complexly divided community, this not only needs to be acknowledged but placed stage centre.

Why conduct a survey? The classic answers are representation and generality: a survey sample should represent a broader population in order to make reliable claims about it. This presumes two things: a. a sampling frame with clear and enumerated divisions/variables (so many Tamils, so many women, etc); and b. a distribution that allows access to these populations in a meaningful way. In western and urban areas one can assume that there are relatively reliable enumerations of the population, and that the population is clustered in a limited number of types of settlement with known characteristics (eg, cities, towns, suburbs, villages). A western sample that selects a small number of towns in an area would allow you some confidence that you had covered the significant types of towns.

The situation in Kothmale was completely different. 1. there was no register from which we could extract a random sample and then generate a list of addresses to visit. 2. Even if we could do this, we could have no confidence – unless we carried out a *very* large survey – that any random sample would meaningfully reflect the diversity of settlements in the area. It might pick up the right numbers of, say, different ethnicities. But there is a huge difference, in relation to communications, between, say, a Sinhalese living in Nawalapitiya, Ulapene, Mawathura, a lowlands paddy village, or a white collar enclave like Riverside, and so on. Moreover, settlements have a very different character depending on their predominant caste.

Basically, every village or town was virtually unique. Therefore we could not select or interpret particular settlements or population types in advance of the ethnography; yet we could not assess the generality of our ethnographic findings without a broader survey.

The solution, or muddling-through, that we adopted was more akin to quota sampling, as is more widely adopted in commercial than in academic research: 1. we focused on two major variables – ethnicity and rural/urban – and tried to select respondents in numbers that reflected the ethnic distributions in towns and in non-towns. This involved selecting locations (villages, or streets in towns), on the basis of both local knowledge and published statistics, that were likely to offer the right sorts of respondents. 2. However, these variables were far too crude and we had to exercise considerable judgement in choosing locations that also broadly represented the kinds of settlements which ethnography and local informants pointed out to us.

4.3.6 Connective ethnography – mapping and connecting

As discussed above, ethnographic approaches focus on the diffusion of information and communication through social and technical networks, relations and processes (rather than on measuring impacts or needs as dependent variables). It is therefore about *mapping connections*, understanding how these connections work, and seeing how more effective connections can be made.

We found that this approach could be of direct practical use in at least three major ways:

Diagnosing barriers to connection: Project staff are often highly aware – often on the basis of everyday local knowledge and project experience – of who the stakeholders and important constituencies are, who is neediest, what those needs are, and so on. They are often less reflexive about the social dynamics which help or hinder these constituencies in connecting with the project. Research needs to focus not only on measuring who is getting what benefits from a project but also *why* and *how*.

For example, it was no surprise to researchers or staff that Tamil constituencies were less involved in all aspects of KCR activities than Sinhalese. It is hard to see what more precise measurement would add to this picture. On the other hand, *understanding* this situation in order to address it was considerably more complicated and surprising (as indicated in the Section 5.3). What lay behind statements from Tamil household interviews such as that KCR was ‘not for them’? This requires looking at the barriers to connection (social isolation) of many Tamils through poverty, geographically remote housing and work locations, language and separate schooling. It also requires looking at the ways in which Sinhalese users locally allocate resources by sharing them within bounded informal friendship and kinship networks.

Mapping technological connections: As discussed above, KCR’s radio, internet and publishing activities were themselves part of wider communicative ecologies in which they were connected to or disconnected from other modes of communication (phones, roads, face-to-face interaction, etc). Research needs to focus on the connections between technology uses in order to use them more effectively and integrate the project within social networks.

As a simple example, while KCR was making excellent use of local media forms such as loudspeaker events, it did not tap into one of the major local forms of dissemination: posters and handbills. Similarly, although mobile communications (loudspeakers and loudspeaker cars, physical movement of people) were locally crucial, KCR tended to think about mobility only in terms of outside radio broadcasts and the movement of people to fixed sites.

Connecting to initiatives and resources: Largely due to pressures of work and time, staff often have a sketchy, sometimes blank, map of parallel initiatives, competitors and complementary work by other organizations in their locality and beyond. This can mean missing out on potentially fruitful partnerships and available resources, as well as unnecessarily duplicating effort within an area. Moreover, projects tend to be aware only of other NGOs and projects to which they are connected through their donors. Research needs to focus on exploring potential new connections.

For example, in the case of Kothmale, ethnographic research showed up a clear basis for connecting KCRIP with local private sector initiatives in ICTs which involved high levels of both resource, skill and enterprise: eg, computer schools and communications centres, and some unlikely possibilities such as betting shops which had high levels of installed IT. Similarly, there were larger scale institutions with innovative ideas that could provide funding, trained personnel and support for educational programmes (SLIIT). Finally, ethnography is adept at finding new kinds of connections with more obvious kinds of stakeholders such as trade unions, schools and health services.

We are not suggesting that any or all of these connections would turn out to be successful or even advisable. However, research can certainly carry out a creative mapping of possibilities to explore.

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APPENDIX 1: ETHNOGRAPHIC ACTION RESEARCH HANDBOOK