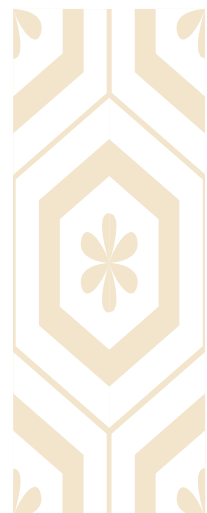


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**Finding a Voice:  
The Potential of Creative ICT Literacy and  
Voice in Community Multimedia Centres in South Asia**

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# Finding a Voice: The Potential of Creative ICT Literacy and Voice in Community Multimedia Centres in South Asia<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** / This paper considers the potential of community multimedia centres to support and promote creative ICT literacy and voice. It does so through presenting comparative research findings from eight ICT centres in South Asia. The research uses a methodology that combines ethnographic approaches with action research. Here I look at instances of 'ordinary' people gaining access to media and ICTs, to create their own local content. As such it describes to some extent the processes of 'metamorphosis' involved in 'citizen's media' participants becoming, through these activities, 'active citizens' (Rodriguez 2004). At a point in time when alternative media studies are finding a new relevance and with development communication research facing a crisis in direction, this paper considers research findings emerging from and utilised in community based ICT initiatives across South Asia.

**Keywords** / community-based media, local content, voice, creative ICT literacy, South Asia.

## Introduction

Contemporary development and globalisation discourse positions information, communication and technology at the vanguard of social and economic inclusion (Castells 1996; ECOSOC 2000; UNDP 2001). However, the assumption that access to information communication technologies (ICTs) may bring benefits to the excluded is primarily based on the perceived socio-economic benefits of ICT proliferation and use in developed, rather than developing, contexts (Golding 2000; Panos 1998). There is evidence that new and dynamic articulations of information and communication technologies are emerging in developing countries (UNESCO 2002) but it is unclear how much potential they have for empowerment and participation.

While this proliferation of new technologies offers at least the theoretical possibility of access to and participation in a 'global commons' (Silverstone 2002), access to new technologies does not automatically equate to the active participation that is a precondition of 'voice'. In social theory 'voice' (inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes, meaning making, autonomy and expression) is central to development (Drèze and Sen 2002, Sen 2000). But in media and communication studies, technological determinism and first world biases mean little of this social theory has been applied (Mansell 2002). Development theory and practice has long recognised the importance of social context, communication and participation in facilitating poor and marginalised people to realise a broad range of human rights – to development, education, health and wellbeing (Servaes 1999). Voicing their needs is now seen as fundamental to most processes of human development (Chambers 1995; de Haan 1999; Gardner & Lewis 1996). The rapid emergence and new articulations of ICTs in marginalised communities, especially through government or NGO activities, reveals a critical need to apply participatory methods to questions of use, and analysis of the implications and impacts of such interventions. In particular, and within such interventions, this paper argues that there is a need to understand and develop culturally appropriate interfaces for local content creation if there is to be a meaningful uptake of ICTs in developing countries.

There remains an assumption by governments that simply by introducing technology to disadvantaged communities the 'digital divide' will be removed and people will go online (Pal 2002). Media literacy skills involve both knowledge of new technologies and the skills to assess the value and reliability of information and perspectives (Mansell 2002, Slater and Tacchi 2004). Many internet-based information services are limited to one-way communication, despite the interactive potential of the medium – they offer little to the majority of citizens to contribute to information and democratic networks and little in terms of providing people with choices based upon their own knowledge systems (Mansell 2002). Mitra and Watts (2002) define one of the central themes for communications scholars in a globalised world as the 'resuscitation of voice'.

'Digital inclusion' is increasingly measured, not by computer or internet access, but by technological fluency and multimedia content creation – 'multimedia literacy' is especially important because of the ways in which the 'social practices of text literacy' have marginalised groups 'whose traditional methods of learning focus on shared storytelling using audiovisual elements such as song, chanting and dance' (Warchauer, 2003: 115-116). It is important to

re-examine our ideas about 'computer literacy' in this context: terms like *creative ICT literacy* are necessary to describe the ability to create and manipulate multimedia content in ways that serve vernacular interests and enable relatively autonomous cultural participation.

In this paper I examine the notion of creative ICT literacy and voice through comparative research across a network of community multimedia centres in South Asia. These centres are supported (though not established) by UNESCO and have development objectives. First I describe the network and the methodology and briefly introduce some of the local projects within the network. I then discuss ideas of voice, local content and creativity in more detail. The main section of the paper presents findings from the South Asian research, indicating the potential of community multimedia centres and of media technologies for creative expression and the promotion of voice. These findings emerge from research in and about interventions that take place within a development paradigm that is working towards social change.

### **Introduction to ictPR**

In mid 2002 UNESCO's Bureau for Communication and Information (Asia-Pacific) put out a call for organisations working in South Asia to submit proposals for innovative applications of ICTs for poverty reduction. UNESCO's aim was to support their work through the provision of ICTs and to research each of them in order to answer some basic questions about the usefulness of new technologies for development. Can ICTs help to reduce poverty, and if so, how? In what circumstances and in what ways? The project is called 'ictPR'. Nine local initiatives were supported and work began in late 2002 – there are 5 in India and one each in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. While they all have a different organisational structure, each has the involvement of at least one locally active NGO. Some were existing development projects that through this opportunity added ICT components, while others developed because of the UNESCO support. Out of the nine project sites, eight of them have been contributing research data to a centralised research website for over two years.<sup>2</sup> Each local initiative has a local researcher who has been trained in ethnographic action research (Tacchi et al 2003). This is a methodology that takes an ethnographic approach - through the use of methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews and the writing of field notes – to action research where research is fed into development of local initiatives in a cycle of *plan, do, reflect*. Ethnographic action research is therefore a methodology that combines research with project development. It has been designed particularly for ICT for development projects.

A basic principle of ethnographic action research is that in order to understand the potential and real impacts of individual ICTs in any given situation, you need to place this experience within a broader understanding of the ways in which communication and access to, and the use of, information is structured in people's lives. Each instance of communication or information-use takes place within an already existing 'communicative ecology', and each place has its own unique communicative ecology. Using ethnographic methods, researchers working in each ICT project conduct research within an holistic framework, trying to understand their project, and improve it, according to a good understanding of the wider contexts in which they work.

The research has proved important for individual project development locally and at the same time comparison of research across the sites has helped us to learn from each other's experiences. More than this, the process of training all the researchers in the same methodology, and storing and discussing research data in a centralised location has given us the opportunity to compare and contrast research, and develop significant insights into the potential role of ICTs in poverty reduction. These insights are based on data from across the sites which use a range of media mixes, approaches, resources and organisational structures. Indeed, the implementation of the methodology has varied across projects, with some spending considerable time conducting research prior to the intervention, and others taking a far more action research approach, testing and adapting (experimenting) through the implementation of the project and project development methodology at the same time.

All of the ictPR initiatives combine and link social and technical resources in different ways, often in response to the knowledge and resources available to their organisation and in an attempt to respond to the needs of their target communities. The ictPR initiatives encompass

a wide range of technical, social and organisational combinations that have allowed us to investigate some of the different directions that community ICTs can take, as well as the ways in which different media and media mixes can be related to poverty reduction. To demonstrate the range of applications of ICTs, here I briefly describe just five of the initiatives:

**Nabanna: Networking Rural Women and Knowledge** (Baduria, North 24 Parganas District, West Bengal, India) uses grassroots processes to build information-sharing networks among low-income, rural women. Networking is done face-to-face and through web- and print-based mechanisms, linking women and their groups from different parts of the municipality.

**Namma Dhwani Local ICT Network** (Budikote, Kolar District, Karnataka, India) combines a radio studio, an audio cable network that delivers radio to local households, and a telecentre with computers and other multimedia tools. It is run by and centered on a network of women's self-help groups (SHG) and linked to a local development resource centre. Radio programming addresses local information and communication needs, drawing on productions by local volunteers as well as a variety of multimedia resources, like websites and CD-ROMs.

**Tansen Community Media Centre** (Tansen, Palpa District, Nepal) works with local youth from poor families and traditionally marginalised caste groups, training them in audio-visual production and computer and internet skills. The centre is made up of a digital production studio and a computer/internet access centre and is linked to a local cable TV network. Participants' audio and audio-visual programming is aired on the cable TV network and local community radio stations.

**Uva Community Multimedia Network** (Uva Province, Sri Lanka) uses a combination of radio and new technologies as a way to facilitate responsive development and governance on a province-wide basis. A series of community multimedia centres, combining FM radio and telecentre facilities, have been established alongside a series of grassroots 'knowledge societies'.

**ICT Learning Centre for Women** (Seelampur, New Delhi, India) is an open learning centre for girls and women located at an inner-city madarsa (Islamic school) in a high-density, low-income area of New Delhi. A range of interactive multimedia content has been developed and used to support vocational and life-skills training and to build awareness of health issues and livelihood opportunities.

UNESCO has supplied all nine initiatives with computers, with each group securing internet access. Each of these local initiatives is now at least two years old. While some have integrated internet use into their work, others are just beginning or struggling with this process due to connectivity or other technical challenges. All of the sites were also supplied with digital cameras, multifunction printers (including scanner and basic photocopy facilities) and digital pen drives, and in some cases webcams and microphones by UNESCO.

Research shows that the process of linking technical and social networks can only be developed at a local level, as different locations, communities and technologies interact with each other in different and often unpredictable ways – what works and is appropriate in one place will not transfer automatically to another. Local researchers have been conducting research within a conceptual framework that recognises that each location has its own, unique communicative ecology. That is, each local use of a media technology takes place in complex information and communication environments, in which they are linked to other media and social and cultural networks that need to be understood if particular instances of use are to be analysed and learnt from. In ictPR research, computers are considered both in relation to the other media resources available within the projects (radio, video, newsletters, digital photography), to the existing communicative ecology (the channels and flows of information and communications that already exist and which the intervention seeks to impact upon) and to existing and developing social networks. Researchers have studied communicative activities such as face-to-face communication, the consumption of mainstream television, film, radio, and the use of telephones and postal services as they have tried to understand the ways in which their particular ICT interventions might work in their local contexts.

Furthermore, the project takes a 'subjective approach' to poverty, rather than an objective one (Nyaki Adeya 2002). This approach is in line with participatory poverty assessment approaches which seek to understand the perspectives of those we are engaging with in order to understand what poverty or being poor means in this place, and thus how the ICT initiative can address some of these issues. Gaining this type of understanding of locally specific definitions of poverty has been a central concern of the research.

Initial comparative research findings have been published (Slater and Tacchi 2004) which demonstrate the promise of promoting local voices and developing multimedia formats for local content creation as well as the tensions, power struggles and challenges such activities can create locally. I will explore those tensions, power struggles and challenges in detail elsewhere. In this paper I concentrate on issues of voice, local content and creativity which I argue can be understood both at an everyday level of media literacy, engagement and entertainment, and as a tool for social change.

### **Voice, Local Content and creativity**

Most ICT initiatives in developing countries provide access to other people's knowledge and perspectives, that is, content produced elsewhere (UNESCO 2004). Strengthening participation in content creation constitutes a priority in developing countries where the introduction of new technologies can increase, rather than reduce, inequality (Rodriguez and Wilson 1999, UNDP 2001). Mansell (2002) emphasises our lack of understanding about the impacts of new media technologies in the context of developing nations, which in part is a consequence of the priority given to the promotion of ICT diffusion in pursuit of more diverse access. This is tied closely with assumptions about what access will do in terms of empowering those who are disadvantaged (Selwyn 2004). There has been little debate regarding the developments of new media and an examination of alternatives 'that are consistent with a goal of empowering the majority of citizens in their interactions with the new media' (Mansell:408). Instead, Mansell believes that digital divide debates, which have dominated ICT policy agendas, have overemphasised macro-level issues of technology access and social exclusion rather than micro-issues of the capabilities people require to function in a society where internet-based communication interactions are increasingly favoured. Issues of new media literacies and technology innovation at the micro level have been swept aside in the global ICT agenda. The concept of the 'digital divide' (which simply describes the access or lack of access to computers and digital information) is less useful than 'digital inequality' (DiMaggio and Hargittai 2001; Selwyn 2004) or 'digital inclusion' as a way of describing the relationships between ICTs, cultural agency, and social contexts.

Mitra and Watts (2002) see new technologies as offering a chance to examine how marginalised groups can correct some of the biases inherent in traditional media's structures of 'speaking power'. But alternative media research is not new and indeed its salience to the broad agenda of media and communications research is claimed to be growing (Atton and Couldry 2003). New social movements, power, and empowerment are foci for both alternative media research and development communication studies. Robert Huesca (2001) suggests that development communication as a field of research is facing a 'critical juncture'. Changing political, economic and social contexts along with advances in communication technologies have 'questioned the pertinence of development communication theory and practice' (*ibid.*: 415). He feels that research on 'new social movements' could make a significant contribution to development communication research which is in need of directions for conceptual advancement. In the special issue of *Media, Culture and Society* (edited by Atton and Couldry 2003) contributors identify the importance of considering the community context of alternative media and the need to include this in our studies (Gillett 2003), and key, unanswered, questions for alternative media (Downing 2003) – which include questions about the links between alternative media and political practice or empowerment. Alternative or 'citizens' media 'articulates the metamorphic transformation of alternative media participants ... into active citizens' (Rodriguez 2004). In this way, citizens' media 'is a concept that accounts for the processes of empowerment, conscientisation, and fragmentation of power that result when men, women, and youth gain access to and re-claim their own media' (*ibid.*). In this process, media is used to 're-constitute their own cultural codes to name the world in their own terms' and to 'disrupt power relationships, exercise their own agency, and re-constitute

their own lives, futures, and cultures' (ibid). This, however, depends on who has the power – economic, political, and social – to capture and use citizens' media, so that there is a need for a power critique of what constitutes this medium, what facilitates or denies access.

### **Finding a voice – lessons from ictPR**

The ictPR research demonstrates the need to identify and nurture the innovative, adventurous and pleasurable ways in which participants explore the possibilities of media and media mixes – especially in terms of local content creation. Rather than simply understanding these technologies as tools for accessing and circulating useful information, participants engaged with them in far more complex and creative ways, mixing information and entertainment, the learning of skills as a pleasurable activity in its own right and skills as a means of directly changing their circumstances. In some cases this has led to social tensions and fissures – who has the power, and who is given the power, to access and use ICTs is clearly significant in our understanding of the ways in which these ICTs can be used for social change. Furthermore, in some cases individual or group circumstances could be seen to have changed because of their *associations* with the technologies rather than through actual uses of them. Such examples will be discussed elsewhere; here I will consider some examples of what I mean by creative engagement.

The short digital film, *Sonali Tantu*, was created by some women in the Nabanna project. The women got the idea from the visit of one of the research coordinators, who had brought with her a video camera and a camera operator to make a short film about the research methodology. Shortly afterwards, the Nabanna project workers were approached by the women who asked if they could make a film, just as their visitors had done:

As usual I was conducting a group discussion, more of an informal chat really, with some of the [women] on the various steps of jute processing. This led to an idea of a movie on the various steps. As they have seen us using the digital [still] camera before, they asked me how to go about it... The things that came to my mind first are how efficient this camera is to make a film. It has a very little [memory] space and is without sound. Therefore, we have to record the voiceover separately. The quality of the sound recorder is bad. However, their enthusiasm encouraged me to try to give their idea a proper shape. I [wanted them to make the film themselves] therefore I asked them to do the whole thing.

*Extract from Nabanna Researcher's notes on the film making process*

This interest in self expression and experimentation developed through the use of media mixes and has led project workers as well as participants to develop new skills. In this way we can see that basic skills development can be achieved effectively through creative engagement with media technologies. Additionally, and importantly, the level of media literacy that is developed through such exercises is significant. Participants learn how to create media content, and in the process, they learn how the media content they otherwise consume is created.

In Seelampur, within its first few weeks of operation, there was a strong demand from participants to explore technologies that they had only recently encountered. The project workers showed the women a series of CD ROMs that they had made covering tailoring, candle making and other activities. The intention had been to encourage the women themselves to make clothing or candles, but instead the women asked if they could make a CD ROM:

The participants will be using movie-camera for filming practical lessons the community will deliver at the ICT Centre... The community's desire emerged during the process of participative demos I have been holding in the Community for past several weeks. The women kept on observing me and my demos for several days. They became very curious and inquisitive about the digital camera constantly with me and they thought filming and CD production which I outlined was not so difficult for them to handle. They asked me 'Madam, can we make film also? Can we handle the

camera?' At this stage, I encouraged them to make the film and start handling the camera themselves which generated tremendous excitement.

*Extract from Seelampur Researcher's notes*

These experiences are both powerful and pleasurable in their own right. Skills are developed to engage with prestige technologies and it facilitates group learning. They foster project-based (rather than formal and theoretical) engagement with technologies, in which skills are learned in the process of achieving a product that is interesting and relevant to the participants. It also develops the conditions for using these tools to document the participant's community and use them to intervene in it socially and politically.

Both of the above examples of content creation have taken place in sites that concentrate largely on computer and internet (and print media in the case of Nabanna). These content creating activities emerged directly from the needs and desires of participants in the initiatives, rather than project workers. This demonstrates an opportunity to develop approaches to these new technologies that can tap into local creativity and the desire for self expression that might allow users to explore new technologies on their own terms. Other sites within the ictPR project have access to radio and television. Here, local content-making is a central component of the projects, and the 'broadcasting' of the content brings an interesting and powerful additional element.

In Namma Dhwani we have seen how women have found their voices, and how this has positively impacted on their personal and social identity.

In terms of programming an outstanding example would be Meena herself. From being an almost mute woman to have found her own identity as studio manager is an exemplary case study ... same with the volunteers:

Devi, one of the most brilliant and composed volunteers from the neighbouring village learnt a song from our music Library, for a district level music competition and won it!

Padma: one of the committee members had made a programme about her own self improvement after joining her Sangha. This programme has been re-played about 6 times out of popular demand. She has become a celebrity of sorts and of late she was telling me that she has lost count of the number of people who have complimented her on her "confidence and ease while speaking" on ND.

Also, I think like all community radio stations over the world, hearing one's own voice is a boost to one's own morale and confidence. I have seen how volunteers fumble, lose their voice, stammer and stutter to becoming articulate people who smile and enjoy their moment of glory in front of the mic.

*Notes from Namma Dhwani researcher*

In Tansen, where training young people in ICT skills is envisioned as a route to empowering youth as agents of social change, media content has been made that explores social issues such as the environment.

We have finished our basic course in computer so nowadays I and all my friends are planning to make a programme about the problems and solutions of plastic bags to make this programme, we (our group) had a discussion for about half an hour. After the discussion, we made up our mind to set the programme and decided who is going to be cameraman, narrator, script writer and editor. In this way we divided the different responsibilities to all of us. At 4.00 PM, we went for the video recording. We visited almost all the bazaars in Tansen and took video related to polythene bags. We took interview with different sellers and people walking in the street. We asked them about the advantages and disadvantages of polythene bags. When we finished our video recording and interview, we came back to CMC and took a rest for few minutes. At the same time Mahesh sir and Anil sir brought a TV to watch the video recordings that we had made. We watched the recordings for half an hour and then discussed about it.

*From Tansen participant's diary*

In all of the projects, the desire from participants to generate local content emerged almost from the start, and project staff responded to them, sometimes reorganising much of their

programme to do so. While participants' sense of the relevance of and their interest in computers and the internet was often talked about in very pragmatic ways – in order to even be considered for an office job one would need to know computing, and the internet is useful for finding information and news – it was through more creative uses of these and other ICTs that participants seemed to develop the most skills.

A key finding from the research is thus that content creation itself is a powerful means of engaging people with media technologies that has added benefits of allowing them to voice their concerns and share and learn locally relevant knowledge. Furthermore, skills and training in content creation that can be built upon and further developed will be useful for participants, and having access to more than one distribution platform (e.g. radio, the internet, local intranets, video, and print) will expand the reach of that content.

The metaphor of 'voice' can be seen as empowerment through various articulations of engagement and creativity. New media, and especially combinations of old and new media (Slater and Tacchi 2004, Feek 2004) can allow for creativity and democratic participation. The ongoing critical engagement by cultural studies with the dominant definitions of the 'public sphere' is understood as the space where democracy might be constituted via rational-critical debate. Hartley (1999) argues that commercial popular culture, especially television, teaches cultural citizenship through his concepts of DIY citizenship and democratainment. Literacy in this context means working knowledges of the systems and forms of commercial popular culture (e.g. advertising 1999:156). Citizenship in this sense is not schooled and institutionalised, but rather informal, reflexive, voluntary citizenship (1999:156-157). A key part of Hartley's argument is that popular media is more democratic than formal education or formal democracy, allowing representation for/by a much broader demographic range. Negus and Pickering (2004) trace the changing meaning and uses of the concept of "creativity" through its various incarnations in Western thought – most relevant is the argument that fundamentally, cultural creativity (e.g. in music, film, television, visual art, or fiction) is a matter of *social communication*, not abstract aesthetic value. That is to say, available cultural resources (including both 'material' resources – content – and immaterial resources – genre conventions, shared histories, and so on) are recombined in novel ways, so that they are both recognisable because of their familiar elements, and create affective impact through the innovative process of this recombination.

The ictPR research shows that rather than simply understanding these technologies as tools for accessing and circulating useful information, participants engaged with them in far more complex and creative ways, mixing information and entertainment, the learning of skills as a pleasurable activity in its own right and skills as a means of directly changing their circumstances. To encourage creativity in communication and expression is to provide a 'play-space' for users – multiple possible entry points, levels of engagement, combinations of genres (humour, drama, puzzles to solve) – and with new media there are many more opportunities for participation and engagement. Thus, while recognising the creative 'cognitive play' of audiences for preceding media, new media are understood by many as more 'playable' (that is, open to direct, creative participation) than any preceding form (Jenkins 2003; Fiske 1987; Silverstone 1999: 60-66). Avoiding a broadcast paradigm in the study and practice of new media creativity is essential (Kücklich 2004). New media are likely to afford 'new directions in flows of imagery and narratives [and] ideologies and virtual vocabularies are likely to have political and social consequences that are unforeseeable, perhaps unimaginable' (Gillespie 2002:173). Wilson further argues that this model of new media engagement as play is both universally applicable and tolerant of cultural diversity (2004: 3).

In terms of media use generally, it is important to recognise that many participants find that using ICTs is fun, and that this enjoyment is not necessarily in opposition to more 'serious' ICT engagements that involve direct or more obvious interventions in poverty. It is also important to recognise that this feeling of fun and excitement is a complex experience. The pleasure that marginalised and often illiterate people take in using computers or listening to their voice on the radio is an experience of symbolic and real triumph over technologies. These kinds of involvements with ICTs have an impact on participants' sense of social status and self-worth, and can be seen in some cases as an assertion of active citizenship.

In terms of what participants find interesting in their existing media consumption habits, it is clear that different people constitute different audiences, and that projects are sometimes challenged to deal with issues that might be locally sensitive:

I asked them about the kind of stuff they liked to watch on TV. They said that the soap operas on TV taught them a lot about lives of other women and that different women learned the right and sometime the wrong from these serials. But more than anything else, TV had for them become an addiction that they needed. We somehow got talking about health and media and they started to tell me about these different shows on TV. One on the Tamil channel is a phone in with a gynaecologist. She said that it is very nice to see people from all over talk about stuff like sex lives, fear about small penises, reproduction problems so openly on TV. If they can do it why cant we on ND she asked me?

*From Namma Dhwani researcher notes*

These same women had earlier made a programme about menstruation for Namma Dhwani,

I asked them how they felt after they heard that programme on the radio. Usha, the more vocal woman, said that she felt good that she was able to discuss this on the radio because people have to be aware. She said that she has noticed that in many households mothers were rude and suspicious when their children missed their periods and did not think that it could be just a health or nutrition problem. ... I asked them why even in Budikote I have come across many women, who are educated and aware but still get their daughters married off, bowing to what they call public pressure - the 'What will people say?' syndrome Usha said that in this day and age it is impossible to please everybody and that if someone came up to her and asked her that question about her daughter then she would explain that until 18, a girl would not be mentally or physically fit to carry 'the burden of marriage'.

*From Namma Dhwani researcher notes*

Not only have these women learned how to create content, communicate it and review its usefulness, they have learned a high degree of media literacy. Thinking about the audiences for programmes, as well as the intrinsic usefulness in terms of the information content is crucial – the Namma Dhwani team routinely thinks about what different audiences locally might be interested in and what kinds of programming will appeal to them. Namma Dhwani was generally perceived as 'women's radio' until the station started providing daily market prices and men started to tune into it. Discussions about patterns of prices and cropping with agriculture department representatives and farmers further sustained their interest and participation.

There is a clear difference between the perceptions of information and its importance. Most of these perceptions coincide with stereotypes of 'male and female interests'. In March, the team for the first time decided to cover some 'hard topics' and the election itself.

The reasons for covering political processes was because over the last year I noticed that most development work had a close relationship to regional political process. Be it roads, electricity, agriculture schemes etc. I have also noticed the men's tendency to take ND seriously mostly when we cover issues related to governance.

*Notes from Namma Dhwani researcher*

Namma Dhwani is working to get involved in locally meaningful ways in activities that promote good governance. A good recent example of how they are doing this - through creative combinations of media - is their coverage of local elections, as described by the Namma Dhwani researcher in the following extract from his report on the activities:

... The counting of votes took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March and it took place in a nearby town 15 kms away, called Bangarpet. Now there is no media channel covering the counting process and periodically the winners in each Panchayat are announced by the authorities.

Namma Dhwani placed a local reporter... with a mobile phone in the counting centre in Bangarpet. Every fifteen minutes, Namma Dhwani called up this mobile phone to hear about the election results. Nagaraj's voice came through in a speaker phone which in turn was placed near a mike. This meant that every word which Nagaraj was saying was being cablecast and narrowcast live. ...The program went on to last till two thirty in the morning and Namma Dhwani at the end of the day logged in nearly three hundred phone calls from the community. Most of these phone calls were to appreciate Namma Dhwani's coverage and others were to ask for specific information about the results.

Not only were the results covered live, Namma Dhwani also facilitated live interviews with candidates present at the counting centre, the MLA of Bangarpet Taluk, and other prominent members of the community members for their opinions on the elections. At the studio itself, Mamata an old volunteer was maintaining the mixing console while Vanaja, Bhavani and Ashwath, all volunteers were receiving and making the phone calls. Later, as the show progressed into the night, the quality of coverage increased substantially. Immediately after Nagaraj gave a report on the events, the volunteers at the phone started a debate about what Nagaraj had just reported. This debate/discussion would continue until it was time for the next phone call to Nagaraj. The topics covered in the discussion were free and fair elections, community interest in the elections, chances of prospective candidates etc.

Prior to this coverage, Namma Dhwani played its role in ensuring a free and participative election. All candidates who had filed their nominations were interviewed in terms of their intent, their assurances, their background, educational qualification etc. One of the important questions included "If you win, will you allow Namma Dhwani to cover or record all Panchayat meetings?" Interestingly enough all candidates agreed to let Namma Dhwani be present during Panchayat meetings. Furthermore, Namma Dhwani also conducted a vox-pop asking people about what they thought was the most important thing to ensure a good election. The majority said that candidates standing for election should not try and bribe people to vote for them. Issues which could not be directly talked about like corruption and violence during elections were talked about using creative formats like radio plays and songs. This year, the communities at Budikote, AB Colony, Kodgurki and other villages nearby got timely information about the candidates and the results. For this effort, everybody in the Namma Dhwani team received numerous accolades from the community members.

*From Namma Dhwani researcher's report*

## **Conclusion**

The media models and initiatives in the ictPR project have been under development for only a short time but the potential of an inclusive and multimedia view of ICTs is clear. Content creation can be a powerful means of engaging people with media technologies and developing sophisticated ICT skills that has the added benefits of allowing them to voice their concerns and to acquire and share locally relevant knowledge. This can be seen as an example of the development of a creative ICT literacy and wider participation. Engagement with ICTs brought out innovation and creativity in marginalised users and communities both in content and in understandings of the media. The sites have demonstrated a significant local capacity for expression, programming and production using a range of media. Mixed media approaches have clearly facilitated an increase in local users' media literacy and a greater capacity to express their ideas concerning a range of issues and ideas.

This research reinforces Dagron's statement that

technology alone may not be the answer if culture and identity are not at the heart of the discussion. When new technologies are introduced to a different social setting, what is transferred is not only technology itself, but also the social use of it, a set of assumptions and practices that emerged from another context and other needs.

Dagron 2001: 31

It is precisely in the ways in which interventions recognise and work within existing communicative ecologies and social networks, and allow for creative expression and the

promotion of voice that both technological determinism and western-centric practices and assumptions can be avoided. Given such a starting point, initiatives employing new ICTs can build upon existing community media and multimedia models (particularly community radio and video) which have long traditions of community content development and participatory training and production. This can help shift computer and internet use in the community from general purpose skills and information access to the production of locally relevant content.

Integrating ICTs with established media like community radio also draws on the strong organisation and ownership models of community media, which has positive implications for the sustainability of local ICT initiatives. In many cases, through this process of integrating media, technologies and resources we are seeing the potential emergence of local community knowledge organisations that promote local voices and local content and work towards active citizenship. More research investigating the further development of these combinations and innovations in these and other local initiatives - taking into account the broader context of each site including local power critiques - will help us to develop clearer understandings of how ICTs might be employed for development, and allow us to investigate further the potential benefits of promoting creative ICT literacy and voice.

### Notes

1. My thanks to Jean Burgess for her inputs regarding vernacular creativity. Thanks also to Andrew Skuse (Adelaide) for inputs into broader ideas of digital divide and the need for promoting local content creation. The research upon which this paper draws is the result of the hard work of the local researchers working in the local ICT initiatives in South Asia. The methodology employed was developed with Don Slater (LSE) and Greg Hearn (QUT).

2. There have been delays in establishing facilities and challenges in conducting research in the remote Bhutan project, so we have limited amount of research data from this site.

3. View this short film at <http://cirac.qut.edu.au/ictpr/downloads/SonaliTantu.WMV>

4. <http://www.creativeindustries.qut.edu.au/research/cirac/documents/ICT3.mov>

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