India Calling

Rachel Jolley

When the world needs innovation it often looks for the discovery of some cutting-edge technology to solve the problem. But sometimes something simple can provide the answer.

[Image 1] Volunteers learn how to use the news platform at Swara. Credit: Purushottam Thakur.

In central India, a journalist who wanted to change the lives of millions of people found his technical challenge solved by a simple, non-smart mobile phone.

Former BBC South Asia producer Shubhranshu Choudhary didn't have to ask the techies to pull something clever out of the box; instead, he needed a bit of technology to which millions of poor people already had access, and once he realised that, he knew where to look. He created a new kind of media service where anyone could call in and leave a message in their own language and suggest or tell a news story; alternatively, they could call and listen to stories left by others.

Many poor, rural people who live in Chhattisgarh and in the forested areas of central India do not speak Hindi or English, the main languages of the Indian media; they don't have access to newspapers or internet news; they live in remote villages, often without running water and schools. They also live at the centre of a region that the Indian government has been pouring troops into for years to tackle the "Maoist insurgency". For these people, this invention, a media platform called CGNet Swara, was a way of both telling news stories and listening to news from others, using a piece of equipment they either already owned or could get access to.

[Image 2] Women phone in to hear the news. Credit: Purushottam Thakur.

The latest Indian census (2011) reported that more people had a mobile phone than had inside toilets, with 53 per cent of households in the country owning a mobile phone, compared with only 3.1 per cent having internet access. Take into account the fact that, in addition to these 53 per cent of households, people share mobile phones with others beyond the household, and others use landlines, giving an even wider group access to telephone communication. In fact the Indian telecommunications regulator TRAI suggest that access to mobile phones stand at around 70 per cent, with this figure at 40 per cent in rural communities.

Choudhary, a Knight International Journalism Fellow, was inspired to create a news platform for this region during his time working for the BBC: "I was travelling from one war zone to another, then wars started near my home. I grew up in central India and I also covered the region for the BBC. When something happens nearer to you, nearer to your heart, it makes you think more. The difference in this case was that I grew up in that area, and the backbenchers in my school – they were the 'terrorists' that the prime minister called the 'biggest internal security threat', and it unnerved me. These were the students that never raised their voices, and how come 25 years later they had become 'terrorists'?"

So he took some time living in the forests of central India with these communities, who were being referred to as Maoists. And he was told by the local people that the system of communicating news, and communicating what was wrong in their lives, was not working for them. "This is a huge community, around 100 million people, and this is a breakdown of communication. Our communication system is still very aristocratic, where a small number of people sitting on top have too much power and the huge majority of people don't have any voice or have very little power to decide what is not heard and what should be heard. When you sit in a village in a small group of people under a tree and discuss the issues, then that discussion is democratic because the medium they use is air, which is not owned by anyone." Democracy or equality disappears when certain people own the medium that transmits the news, he argues, and when a group's voice is not being heard, grudges accumulate. He argues that the absence of those debates leads to dissatisfaction and leaves communities susceptible to groups who come to the forest claiming that they can create something better: "We call it the Maoist problem, but the number of people in the forest who are Maoist is 2 per cent or 5 per cent. They have simple problems such as water, roads, hospitals, jobs, and we didn't deliver because we didn't hear them."

Many people are adivasis, marginalised indigenous people, who often have low levels of literacy but have an oral history tradition of passing on news and traditions. "We go to these villages and ask who speaks Hindi without realising that is the language of the rich; 70 to 90 per cent of these people don't speak any language but their mother tongue," said Choudhary.

But users of the new type of news platform introduced by Choudhary don't need to speak another language – they can dial in and leave an audio message of the story they would like to tell in their own language. Areas are broken up into groups, so local people hear from other local people, and there are hundreds of these audio communities. Most of these groups primarily listen to local stories, but occasionally the moderators for the service find a story that they think other groups would be interested in, about a wider issue, and it is shared.

It is a bottom-up model, with communities electing their own moderators who are trained by CGNet on skills such as fact checking and phoning back "reporters" to check up on stories. CGNet also translates stories into Hindi and English and publishes them on its website so a wider group of people can read the stories, as well as providing audio in the original language of the contributor. They get around 500 calls per day, 50 of which they record. After checks, about five recordings are broadcast.

On Jashpurnetsms
Jashpurnetsms
TV
Radio
1) GUNDADHUR
2) CHANDO-BILL
3) SARHUL
4) BASTAR
5) JASHPUR
6) SARGUJA
8) letter
Internet

[Image 3] Staff work closely with volunteers at the news channel. Credit: Purushottam Thakur.

"We have a strict cross check and filtering process, including calling back to encourage them, and if it is opinion it needs to be clearly labelled," said Choudhary. He points out that the difference between this system and the traditional newspaper editor is that these moderators are elected by the community, and so actually represent them.

Stories are varied and range from one report that a forest ranger asked for bribes totalling Rs 99,000 rupees (US$1,628), to another about school dinners not arriving, while a third reports on high numbers of blind and mentally ill children in an *advasi* [sic] village. Swara is clearly having impact too: days after the report about the numbers of blind village children, a health team arrived to find out more, and the ranger has now repaid his bribes.

CGNet is carrying out a wide range of activities to enhance the smooth running of the news platform, including training young people as translators and training adults as moderators, but it is hoped that training will be devolved to the community in the longer term. It is working towards what it calls a “temple model”, in which people train each other: a sort of trickle-down technique for learning. It is also publishing all its learning and knowledge about its technology so other groups can set up similar projects in other regions.

The next step is shortwave radio, which would allow them to reach much bigger audiences still, including those who cannot read. There are obstacles though. Currently there is a news radio reporting monopoly held by the government-backed national All India Radio, although there have been some suggestions that this regulation may be relaxed. So to push onwards CGNet is looking to work with an international provider such as the BBC, with whom Chaudhary has held initial conversations.

“The combination of mobile, internet and radio can really create a democracy in this country. If you can link with radio you have to do so from outside the country because India doesn’t allow shortwave radio. If we want to do short-wave linkage we can only do it from outside India.”

Around 104 million Indian households have access to a radio, double the number with televisions, making radio an extremely powerful communication tool.

Right now, Choudhary is looking for a partner to help make that next step happen, but he is confident that this type of news service is making a difference.

“It is not solving all problems, but you can create some hope, you can combat some problems. You can tackle the attitude of hopelessness.”

Annotation

Puthiya Purayil Sneha

An example of a model of participatory democracy in the age of the digital, CGNet Swara combines the reach and potential of the mobile phone with the immense possibilities of the Internet to present an innovative platform that makes information more accessible and relevant to large but almost invisible indigenous communities in India. As this article by Rachel Jolley illustrates, CGNet Swara began as a small step to connect indigenous and tribal communities located primarily in the Gondwana region in central India (a core region which covers parts of Maharashtra, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh) with each other, and now steadily with the rest of the world. The platform works through an Interactive Voice Recognition System (IVRS), wherein local news is collected, aggregated, moderated and disseminated through a network of mobile and landline phones, and a website, by a collective of trained journalists and translators. Most people of this region are economically and socially disadvantaged; many fall into the categories of scheduled tribes, such as the Adivasis, who have borne the brunt of systemic and historical marginalisation in India. Apart from a host of issues such as lack of basic amenities, employment and security, this region is also the heart of Naxalite-Maoist insurgency, an ongoing conflict between rebel groups and the Indian Government for over five decades for political control over the state. The insurgency has covered large parts of the country, and resulted in much violence and loss of lives and property, often leading to heavy militarization in many regions. Several Naxalite agitations have claimed support from the rural population, particularly the Adivasis, as well as atrocities by armed forces on civilians, and this has further complicated both the movement itself and the attempts by the state to suppress it.

The fact that CGNet Swara did not involve a lot of radically new social or technological research points towards an often ignored aspect of innovation in the development sector, which is that most breakthroughs are often the result of finding new ways to utilise existing resources. CGNet Swara makes optimum use of the ubiquitous presence of mobile phones (mostly not even of the ‘smart’ variety), landlines, and the Internet to effectively crowdsource information about issues that are pertinent to communities in the areas covered. The platform uses open-source software freely available online, and other minimal infrastructure in an effort to make the model replicable in diverse conditions. This so-called convergence of old and new media also in some sense questions these easy and often polarized binaries, as it makes it apparent that one may actually not be able to work without the other. The model also addresses a crucial ‘last mile connectivity’ problem, which has often been called the Achilles heel of all ICT-related development strategies, particularly in the Global South. The CGNet Swara model is an illustrative example of how more than being technological or technical, the problem of the last mile is really more of a conceptual one, as described by Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2011). He critiques the extant notion of techno-utopia that has framed most of the discourse around ICTs and development, wherein technology by virtue of being neutral, accessible and incorruptible, would resolve issues of governance that the state cannot, owing to its own shortcomings in this regard, thus ushering in a new era of techno-democracy propelled by increased connectivity. Apart from this imagination of technology as being value-neutral, another crucial drawback of this model of governance was that it envisaged a linear model of transmission or information/resources from the state or market-state entity to the public, in which the end-beneficiary often remained a passive recipient, which is never the case, as is made apparent by CGNet Swara.

The article also locates marginalization within and among regional languages as the cause for many insurmountable obstacles to having the voices of marginalized communities heard over privileged ones, usually the dominant English and Hindi language press and broadcast media. This demonstrates the changing contours of news media today, as the local slowly becomes at the same time invisible and over exposed through an increased emphasis on the growth of development reporting across the world.

The growth of citizen media, often posed as a counter to this hegemony of the mainstream press, and spurred by the rise of the Internet in particular, can be understood in a different context and nuance here, as the citizen reporter is not the stereotyped technologically savvy blogger, but very often a digital immigrant of sorts. The growth in citizen media and other such independent organizations also points to a decentering in the processes of communication normally controlled and regulated by the state, thus giving rise to more forms of peer-to-peer communication, as noted by Rajadhyaksha in his monograph. CGNet Swara thus raises interesting questions for us about the nature of activism today in the digital age, particularly in conditions of little or no access to technology, and the importance of making initiatives localized and relevant for greater social impact and better participation in the exercise of democracy today.

References and Further Readings

“About”. CGNet Swara. Accessed June 9, 2015. http://cgnetswara.org/about.html.

Bijoy, C R. 2003. “The Adivasis of India: A History of Discrimination, Conflict and Resistance.” People’s Union for Civic Liberties (PUCL) Bulletin. [Digital Edition]. Accessed June 9, 2015. http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2003/adivasi.htm.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 2011. “Chapter One: Naming the Problem or Thinking like the State” in *The Last Cultural Mile*. The Centre for Internet and Society. http://cis-india.org/raw/histories-of-the-internet/last-cultural-mile.pdf.

Roy, Arundhati. 2010. “Walking With the Comrades.” Outlook. February 29. Accessed June 17, 2015. http://www.outlookindia.com/article/walking-with-the-comrades/264738.

Saha, Anoop. 2012. “Cell Phones as a Tool for Democracy: The Example of CGNet Swara.” Economic and Political Weekly. Accessed May 19, 2015. http://indiagovernance.gov.in/files/cgnet-swara.pdf

Subramanian, K.S.2010. “State Response to Maoist Violence in India: A Critical Response.” Economic and Political Weekly. August 7. Volume XLV, Number 32. Accessed June 17, 2015. http://www.countercurrents.org/subramanian.pdf.