New Forms of Community Access

[show first digital story]

Rajendra Negi made this digital story in an IPDC supported workshop in India last month. The purpose of the workshop was to gather together people from Community Multimedia and ICT Centres across South Asia and explore the potential of the Digital Story format for use in community based content creation. The beauty of Digital Stories is the way in which they provide new forms of community access using new and traditional technologies. Digital Stories use computers, video and sound editing software, with existing photographs scanned and resized, or digital photographs – it's a form of 'scrapbook television' that anyone (with appropriate support) can make. The process of making a digital story places emphasis on the storytelling component, and we all have stories to tell.

Rajendra's story is a 'typical' digital story in that it is a two minute 'personal' story, using a dozen or so photographs from his own photo album and a script of approximately 250 words, worked up through a storytelling process that we call a story circle.

This IPDC workshop took place within the context of a new research project which is a collaboration between QUT and Adelaide University in Australia, UNESCO in South Asia and UNDP in Indonesia. The name of that project is Finding a Voice and through it we're exploring new forms of community access, building on traditional community media models, incorporating new ICTs, with a special emphasis on content creation at the community level.

At a point in time when new ICTs have for more than two decades been promoted as transformative technologies creating new 'knowledge economies' and 'networked societies' (Castells 1996; Selwyn 2004), the term 'digital divide' which emerged as a stark indicator of those who are part of, and those who are not part of these new developments, has increasingly been questioned. 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. There are complex interrelationships between social and technological networks, and issues of access versus effective use or **engagement** (Warschauer 2003). What are the consequences of engaging with (rather than simply accessing) new ICTs? How effective is this engagement – what are the short-term outcomes, and longer term consequences? (Selwyn 2004, p.356) And how can this be measured?

On the one hand, the fierce promotion of new ICTs for development, **based as much on their promise as practical demonstrations of effectiveness**, has undoubtedly led to many innovative experiments - as Robert Chamber’s says ‘rhetoric opens doors, makes spaces, and provides points of leverage’ (Chambers 1998, p.285). On the other hand Article 19 wants us to ‘challenge an international community that boldly offers theoretical solutions without considering and investing in the grassroots… process.’ (Article19 2005, p.2). A gap exists between technology and development (which is a more fitting focus of our attention that digital divides between developed and developing countries). This gap (between technology and development) is caused by the rapid evolution and expansion of technologies and technological determinist responses from development agencies (Article19 2005, p.3). However, reasoned and pragmatic approaches to and discussions of ICTs and development have emerged that do consider both context and relevance and these are being addressed by many agencies, including UNESCO through its Communication and Information Programme (UNESCO 2005, p. 191-217).

UNESCO advocates the concept of ‘knowledge societies’ which are ‘about capabilities to identify, produce, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development’ (UNESCO 2005, p.191). The concept of knowledge societies as promoted by UNESCO encompasses plurality, inclusion, solidarity and participation and is based on certain principles, including freedom of expression and the universal access to information and knowledge.

But, when many of those we wish to include in knowledge societies do not have access or effective use - how do you integrate new ICTs into communities? Does effective integration mean more than simply providing training in computing and allowing people to use the internet to access information from elsewhere? If so, can they be integrated in ways that prioritise local content creation (at the community level)? Can they be used to enable people to find their voice and, importantly, to be heard?

Despite the interactive potential of new media technologies, dominant configurations tend to follow a broadcast model of one to many. Interactivity is rarely explored innovatively and two way flows of information are rarely promoted. We cannot assume that access to information delivered via new technologies equates to effective use – delivery of information does not mean that people are thereby informed in any meaningful way. Integration of ICTs into communities and people's engagement with those ICTs requires the development of **a new media literacy** if the objective is to provide not only access, but the ability to analyse, critically evaluate and use ICTs and the information and knowledge it can carry, along with the ability to create content (Livingstone 2004).

Ordinary citizens, in developed and developing country contexts are generally positioned as receivers of mediated messages rather than producers. New media technologies have the potential to be interactive rather than one to many and can combine producer and receiver roles rather than separate them. This is particularly interesting in relation to questions of engagement, self-representation and social, political and cultural participation. The idea that new technologies can enable new forms of what Jean Burgess calls 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess 2006a) through the use of computers, software and peripherals - such as digital cameras - apparently places everyone with access to these technologies in the position of a potential producer. What happens when those whom we target in poverty reduction and development programmes are able to use technology to express themselves? What is the potential of this for advocacy and social change?

Does this constitute a positive movement towards the development of knowledge societies? These are all questions we are exploring through the Finding a Voice project.

By vernacular creativity Burgess means:

> a wide range of everyday creative practices (from scrapbooking to family photography to the storytelling that forms part of casual chat). The term 'vernacular' - as with language, where it means colloquial - signifies the ways in which everyday creativity is practiced outside the cultural value systems of either high culture (art) or commercial creative practice (television, say). Further, and again as with language, 'vernacular' signifies the local specificity of such creative practices, and the need to pay attention to the material, cultural, and geographic contexts in which they occur.
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> (Burgess 2006b)

Digital storytelling, as a ‘format’ for vernacular creativity has potential for voices to be heard, and as we shall see in a moment, this format can be used for advocacy – not simply a personal story about oneself, but a story told from a personal perspective about an issue that someone feels strongly about, and which they feel deserves wider attention and/or action. Before we look at a digital story as a form of advocacy there are some larger issues around the topic of new ICTs and community access that deserve our attention – I’ll mention 4 briefly here.

Firstly the issue of inclusion and freedom of expression – thinking about how to allow for a ‘pull’ on information rather than a ‘push’. The range and variety of the voices that are heard in the ‘Information Society’ along with the information that is available and circulated should surely be ‘scrutinized’ (Article19 2005) if we are pushing new ICTs with little or no cognisance of existing and functioning communicative ecologies (context and relevance) and information networks (both social and technical, formal and informal). If given a voice, what do poor people say about their experiences of poverty, and their needs?

Linked to this issue, a second issue draws attention to the need for a shift in thinking away from ICTs as merely infrastructure for the delivery of information, to creative tools and communication channels that can be used to create local content and distribute it. It is ironic that those promoting the use of new ICTs for development and poverty reduction are challenged over how best to allow those they target to communicate and share information, and to participate in their own development. Typically, most ICT initiatives in developing countries provide access to other people's knowledge and perspectives (UNESCO 2004). Research shows that strengthening participation in content creation is a particularly high priority in poor countries (FAO 2003; Slater and Tacchi 2004), where the introduction of new technologies can increase, rather than reduce, inequality (Rodriguez and Wilson 1999; UNDP 2001).

A third issue is one of mixing technologies. The tendency is to view new ICTs as separate from older ones while strategies and programmes that mix them can be seen to hold more promise. There is insufficient incorporation of new ICTs with older communication technologies, such as radio. Andrew Skuse challenges donors to increase support for radio (especially at community and national levels) which provides many poor men, women and children with "*the* essential information lifeline" (Skuse forthcoming) and is a strategic tool of human development and poverty reduction (Skuse 2004). Ramos and Díez demonstrate how, for remote indigenous populations in Mexico, radio can link with postal services, face to face communication, telephone and internet to create 'airwave mail' which, given the significance of migration to these populations, has 'become an important tool for keeping culture alive outside its geographical boundaries' (Ramos and Díez 2003). How can new ICTs be used to support voices for social change from marginalised communities? Mitra and Watts (2002) propose that new technologies offer a chance to examine how marginalised groups can correct some of the biases inherent in traditional media's structures of 'speaking power'. They define one of the central themes for communications scholars in a globalised world as the 'resuscitation of voice' – but how can new ICTs alone achieve this, and why would we isolate new technologies from older and embedded ones?

Rodriguez argues that alternative, or citizens' media transforms participants into active citizens (Rodriguez 2004). Community-based media has a long tradition, has proven formats and sustainability. How can we integrate new technologies into such models, and how can traditional technologies and models for community-based media mediate between and support new ICTs with the benefits that they can bring? In fact Jeffrey James argues for a 'paragidgmatic shift' from a model that is based on the idea of telecentres equipped with computers, to an intermediary-based model that provides internet access to local intermediaries who blend technologies (new and traditional) to distribute information and share knowledge (James 2004). The Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project, and UNESCO's Community Multimedia Centre Programme are good examples of what James refers to here.

A fourth issue is that of embedded and ongoing evaluation. Amartya Sen's long term analysis of development and poverty and his emphasis on capabilities has permeated the work of UN agencies, development departments and donors. Capabilities and human rights have become central to the ways in which poverty and development are understood (UHCHR 2004). However, monitoring and evaluation is not well geared to capture changes in capabilities and substantive freedoms, geared as it is to the measurement of Impacts that are more related to increasingly outmoded indicators of poverty and income deprivation alone. Not only do we need to rethink how we set indicators and measure impact, we need to build the capacity of local ICT initiatives to conduct ongoing evaluation, in such a way that they can adapt to research findings that they both own and understand. Efforts are needed to measure and study the many dimensions of poverty. We need to be able to develop new indicators to track aspects such as risk, vulnerability, social exclusion, access to social and cultural capital, the ability to have a voice and to be heard.

Digital stories are just one example of a multimedia format that provides new forms of community access – and allows for 'vernacular creativity' - other formats will be developed and explored over the coming 2 years through the Finding a Voice project – for example, blogging (both text and video blogging)

is an interesting use of new technologies that challenges traditional forms of journalism.

But a crucial dimension to consider is that of distribution. Digital stories are interesting because they can be distributed in a variety of ways – they can be shown on television, the soundtrack can be played on radio, they can be copied to DVDs or VCDs, and they can be placed on a website for streaming, downloading or podcasting (I have some digital stories on my video iPod which I'll pass round for you to see).

While new forms of community access and engagement with new ICTs can be encouraged and usefully explored through formats such as digital stories, the question if impact remains, and this is why thinking through the distribution of this kind of content deserves attention. When people are given a voice through new ICTs, who will listen?

I'll end this presentation by showing you another story created in the IPDC workshop last month. This story is called *Ship breaking* and was made by Alamgir Kabir from Bangladesh.

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