Chapter One

Introduction: what is participatory content creation?

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This book offers insights into issues of sustainability, local engagement and participation; all of which are key problems for many ICT for development initiatives. It also highlights the application of participatory methods to the design, implementation and evaluation of culturally appropriate systems for local content creation.

But just what is “Participatory content creation”? Actually, it's not such an easy concept to define. Try asking around for definitions of the words 'participation', 'content' or 'creativity' and prepare yourself to be bombarded by a myriad of different and often opposing views. At least, that’s exactly what happens to us when we conduct this word game during our content creation training workshops. For the purposes of this book we shall practice what we preach and adopt a definition of participatory content creation that was proposed by participants at a microdocumentary production and distribution workshop in New Delhi: “Content created after extensive discussions, conversations and decision-making with the target community; and where community group members take on content creation responsibilities according to their capacities and interests”.

We use this definition of participatory content creation to propose that creative engagement with information and communication technology (ICT) should be an important element in poverty reduction strategies, leading to the construction of a digitally inclusive knowledge society. The provision of physical
access to ICT is the principal objective of various development programs; we're aware that the human catalysts driving such programs might feel that content creation is a 'soft' discussion with little relevance to the 'hard' solutions required for the successful implementation of ICT infrastructure. Rather than dwell on the many case studies that attest to the importance of designing ICT systems for usability and engagement, we prefer to explore in this book how the aims of ICT for development programs can be supported by creative strategies for inclusion and engagement.

ICT has made two major impacts on content creation. The first should be familiar to many readers: distribution via the Internet provides a low-cost global information network to anyone who has both online access and skills. Web browsers and file transfer protocols allow content in a digital format to be seen by online audiences both local and global. Although the fog of hyperbole often chokes the Internet debate, this distribution ability truly is a revolution. Of course, it shouldn’t be forgotten that digital content doesn’t even need the Internet to travel: anyone with access to a CD burner and a post office can distribute video, audio and multimedia files; albeit slightly slower than the online user.

The second major impact ICT has made on content creation seems to have been slightly buried under the burgeoning mass of opinion about the Web and Internet. This is of course the tools of production, both software and hardware. High-quality audiovisual capture devices are now affordable and usable by ordinary people the world over. Even mobile phones can capture digital audio, images and video. After digital content has been captured, it can then be manipulated by software applications once costing thousands of dollars and usable only by trained professionals. Such applications now come bundled with personal computers, or as downloadable freeware. To use them, we don’t need programming knowledge; rather, some skills and/or training in the application itself which are quite achievable if we are familiar with Windows® or Mac® operating systems and conventions.

So: production and distribution. The two factors which allow individuals and communities – with access to basic training and affordable equipment – to participate in creating content that can be distributed via disk or Internet to friends, family, village, district, region, nation, world. Makes you think, doesn't it?

This may all sound simple and straightforward, but anyone who is involved in content creation either for fun or for money (and sometimes even for both) knows that it isn't quite so easy. ICT
might greatly simplify and enhance production and distribution, but there’s one thing it doesn’t bring to the table – a reason to engage in content creation. Who has time and inclination to put aside their daily duties to join a community group and participate for hours (more likely days) in content creation activities? And what would you make content about? What’s the incentive?

It’s certainly not financial. We’ve been asked before how many jobs our content creation initiatives have generated: to date, zero. Although some workshop participants have gone on to get jobs after their training, this is undoubtedly a result of their own hard work and perseverance. Due to lack of time and budget, our intervention was never designed to generate local employment. Rather, we attempted to use content creation activities to transfer marketable digital skills to participants, and to stimulate their 'voice'. The latter refers to the injection of content-rich messages from diverse community voices into the public sphere, through creative engagement with ICT. We explain this more fully in chapter 2; suffice it to say for the moment that in this book we state that digital inclusion and creative engagement with ICT are important if we are to build 'knowledge societies'. In other words, providing physical access to ICT alone is not enough: access needs to be supported by various strategies for inclusion and engagement. ICT and its relevance to voice (and vice versa) can then be related – both for individuals and groups – to modes and freedom of expression; opportunity and agency; self-expression and advocacy; and access to technologies and platforms for the distribution of a range of different voices. We also consider opportunities to participate in the design of ICT for development interventions themselves: in establishing what should be the focus of development; in the design and implementation of development initiatives; and in the assessment of whether or not positive social change has resulted.

If you've read this far, then hopefully this book is for you. It’s aimed primarily at program-side policy strategists and decision-makers. Practitioners will find chapters 2 and 4 of interest: these describe our content creation training program in some detail. We think the book may also interest donor organisations and researchers. Our investigation was conducted across South and South-East Asia from 2005-2008, and 'touched down' at 15 sites across four countries. These sites were chosen for their innovative approach to ICT engagement and remain the exception in their participatory content creation initiatives, rather than the rule. The principles and practices that we present are based on what has worked at these sites, and what hasn't: with appropriate support,
these principles could be extended to many new sites. For example, major scale-up efforts such as the UNESCO-supported Community Multimedia Centre programs in Mali, Mozambique and Senegal could benefit from the examples discussed in this book. Telecentre scale-up initiatives around the world – such as those in India, Jamaica, Indonesia and Rwanda to name just a few – present real opportunities for creative engagement through participatory content creation.

Although ICT is fundamental to our work, this is a non-technical book. We haven’t tried to present a set of formal research findings: rather, we are sharing observations and experiences based on a work-in-progress. It’s far too early to say whether the various interventions we made during the course of our research will have a sustainable positive effect on the communities with which we worked. However, we wanted to share our findings in order to inform current and future ICT for development projects. We hope the book is of use in this regard.