Chapter Two

Finding a Voice through content creation
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It is widely appreciated that information and communication technology can provide new and interesting channels for civic, political and community involvement. In this chapter we outline our research into participatory content creation programs supported by ICT-equipped telecentres. We examine how to equip these communities to speak with their own voices on advocacy, poverty reduction and social change.

The ability for individual citizens to make their voices heard in the public sphere using digital platforms and applications is used by proponents of ICT to support investment in technology infrastructure development programs. Although agencies such as UNESCO have placed significant emphasis on ICT-enabled “knowledge societies”,¹ various socio-cultural commentators argue that the provision of physical ICT infrastructure does not automatically generate demand for digital products and services within target communities. Within the context of underserved communities, it has even been suggested that new technologies may widen existing gaps “further blocking access to those already without access”.²

In this book, we are concerned with 'voice poverty' – the inability of citizens to influence the decisions that affect their lives.

¹ See from Towards knowledge societies by Bindé, J., in the UNESCO World Report 2005.
A somewhat slippery word, 'voice' can be defined in relation to development as inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes. So defined, strategies to reduce voice poverty require a bottom-up approach which can give underserved communities an opportunity to influence their own social vectors using ICT. This is reflected in a growing interest in communication for social change which insists that “Social Change can be defined as: a positive change in peoples' lives – as they themselves define such change”.³

There is now an established body of work on participatory approaches to understanding poverty. This is concerned with letting those who experience poverty describe their own lives, rather than have external experts assess it from afar. We link this work to complementary research in the fields of development communication and ICT for development, both of which pay growing attention to the local production of content as a strategy to promote a diversity of voices through media and communications. For example, the World Bank’s ‘Consultations with the Poor’ project demonstrates the mainstream acceptance of participatory approaches to understanding poverty.⁴ Often referred to as 'Voices of the Poor', the study is based on the idea that those who are


themselves experiencing poverty are the people who need to describe it; and that participatory techniques can provide a means to generate these descriptions. Therefore the study collected together the voices of 60,000 poor men and women from 60 countries: a huge undertaking which focussed attention on the issue of voice as self-expression, as people spoke for themselves about their own circumstances and their own feelings about poverty-related issues. In so doing, it proved the effectiveness of participatory processes in wider conceptualisations and definitions of poverty.

More recently the Asian Development Bank has published a study called Learning from the Poor. Covering seven states in India, and including over 20,000 people through participatory poverty assessments, again the desire is to place 'the poor' at the centre stage of development and the definition of poverty itself. Participatory techniques are now used across a range of organisations and projects, from the very small scale to large scale like the ADB and the World Bank initiatives. One problem with such large scale 'listening' to voices of the poor is the 'one-off' nature of the endeavour. We can see how Voices of the Poor was the World Bank’s first major attempt at collecting local accounts of the experience of poverty; while it has impacted on various approaches to poverty reduction, the question remains as to what happens next to those people and their concerns?

The idea of achieving voice through participatory content creation initiatives underpinned the Finding a Voice research project, which worked across India, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka from 2005-08. Funded by the Australian Research Council in collaboration with UNESCO & UNDP, Finding a Voice investigated how ICT can enable underserved communities to be heard in the public sphere through digital content creation activities. In this book, when we refer to 'digital content' we’re talking about content that can be transmitted via digital media: words, pictures, music, stories, messages, programs. This creative engagement with ICT is an attempt to move beyond the access debate, in order to consider how digital inclusion could be achieved at the intersection of creative ICT applications and existing community media networks. Community-based media are seen to offer voice through pluralism and diversity, by encouraging dialogue and transparency of administration at the local level. Therefore Finding a Voice worked with a network of fifteen local media and ICT initiatives located

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5 See Learning from the Poor: Findings from Participatory Poverty Assessments in India by Viswanathan, S. and Srivastava, R. Published by Asian Development Bank (2007)
within underserved communities, and offering a basic PC infrastructure and limited web connection. These are known either as 'telecentres' or 'community multimedia centres' (CMCs). Some of the CMC sites in *Finding a Voice* are co-located with community radio or TV initiatives and through this integration of analog and digital media, CMCs can link local and global networks and bring digital tools and new opportunities within the reach of underserved communities, often in remote rural areas. UNESCO runs a global CMC pilot project which is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

The goal of *Finding a Voice* was to experiment with how ICT could be employed in each local context to empower poor people to communicate their 'voices' within and beyond marginalised communities. The project followed three broad phases:

**Phase 1: Training of trainers** established a core group of content creation trainers in India, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka. These trainers were usually associated with a CMC or telecentre. Small groups of local volunteers were trained in narrative and multimedia production techniques during a four- to five-day workshop. The trainees were introduced to the techniques required to prepare a short video narrative, with an emphasis on developing digital literacy through storytelling exercises. These exercises were loosely based on a format established by the Center for Digital Storytelling, wherein the individual creator writes and records a personal audio narrative accompanied by a sequence of still images, to create a simple mini-movie lasting between two to three minutes. The creator is responsible for the entire story, from the original idea through to the finished product. A feature of this digital literacy training is the use of off-the-shelf hardware and applications, including digital video and stills cameras and editing software. The philosophy behind digital storytelling is that individual creators are empowered to create their own content and speak with their own voices in the public sphere, by telling their own stories and distributing them via digital media both online and offline. In this way, citizens are able to inhabit a media space previously accessible only to state and commercial broadcasters.

We evolved the digital storytelling format in order to suit our context. Our training workshops were co-hosted by either UNESCO or UNDP, and this connection usually resulted in some kind of development agenda within the stories created by workshop participants. Furthermore, many of these participants had a personal

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6 [www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)
agenda of social change or activism, which resulted in a more journalistic style of storytelling. We responded to these agendas by inviting trainees to structure their creative process through a technique borrowed from journalism, known as the 'five Ws':

- **What** is happening in this story?
- **Who** is involved?
- **When** and **Where** does the story take place?
- **Why** are you telling this story?

If you're unfamiliar with the five Ws device, then read the main article of an English-language newspaper. You'll see that these five questions are usually answered within the first two sentences. In addition to this journalistic structure, our training program emphasised the importance of audience-focused communication. We invited trainees to clearly define a target audience for their stories, in order to help them hone their key messages and choice of language. This is a technique familiar to many professional communicators. Therefore, through the five Ws structure and an audience focus, our training program steered participants into creating a type of content known as a 'microdocumentary'. We felt that this was an appropriate goal, given the development agenda within which we were operating. It's interesting to note how the five Ws device was evolved by content creators in both Nepal and Indonesia: this is discussed in later chapters.
Phase 2: Content creation encompasses the content creation programs initiated by the core training team at the project’s various sites. The Finding a Voice research team worked closely with these trainers and their communities to establish the foundation of a sustainable participatory content creation program based at the host CMC or telecentre. Rather than designing a uniform top-down training program across all sites, all parties collaborated to develop a program appropriate to the local context. This strategy was based on the aims of participatory design which “requires a shared form of life – a shared social and cultural background and a shared language. Hence, participatory design means not only users participating in design but also designers participating in use”. These programs have resulted in the creation of scores of microdocumentaries and digital stories by community members from across the region. Some recurring themes include poverty, water and health, gender, education, and substance abuse. These themes are explored by individual creators or creative teams within the local context, for a local audience, using local dialect or language. Some have been successful and display signs of longevity – others not. These various programs are discussed in successive chapters of this book.

Phase 3: Distribution seeks to establish strategies and relationships which can enable the distribution of content created in phase 2 to appropriate audiences. One of the most distinguishing features of pervasive digital networks is the ability for private citizens to upload and publish their own content; either at a local level (via video CD or community media) or even through to the global online community. This ability shifts the citizen from being a passive consumer of media content, to becoming a small-scale producer. The digitally literate content producer is not a fanciful idea – we have only to look to the explosion of 'do-it-yourself' social media portals such as YouTube and Flickr to appreciate the repressed demand for linking personal content creation activities to wider audiences via online distribution. We’re particularly excited at the development of hybrid networks in the development sector which employ both analog and digital media technologies (we discuss a combined Web and community radio information distribution network in chapter 5). There is rich potential to leverage existing community media networks for content distribution in countries like Nepal, which have a well-established community radio landscape. However, any such initiative will require careful formulation of sustainable digital distribution systems and processes.

The opportunities for digital content creation and distribution are particularly relevant to language groups which are not represented in mainstream media. This is not to say that all the microdocumentaries produced as part of Finding a Voice were uploaded to a social media portal as a matter of course. Distribution networks are a function of audience and message; therefore not all stories are suitable for distribution outside of the immediate community. To this end, the finished microdocumentaries were usually screened to the local community at a CMC, and the decision as to whether they were distributed to a wider audience was left to the creator.

**Participation and digital literacy**

The purpose of the participatory content creation training was not solely to promote the communication of social issues from the bottom-up. In fact, many trainees used their newly acquired creative ICT skills to produce stories as a form of self-expression, to talk about their everyday experiences without reference to a wider agenda. The varied body of work produced by communities throughout the project illustrates a shift from passive media consumption to the active production and distribution of local content. Through this shift, we have seen how underserved communities can creatively engage in shaping their social, cultural or political identity.

The information and communication skills required by an individual to be considered ‘literate’ within a media-rich culture continue to evolve. No longer is it adequate to think of textual and
visual modes of literacy separately, nor envision the Internet as only a vast catalogue and receptacle of information. Through its virtual pervasiveness, online media challenge the traditional roles of producers and consumers in culture, narrowing the distance between them. We are not suggesting that the ability to both produce and consume digital media – sometimes known as 'digital literacy' – should be considered as more important than traditional forms of literacy or learning. Rather, we see this kind of creative engagement as an important element of any ICT infrastructure development or sustainability strategy. The provision of an Internet connection to an underserved community potentially opens a door to a one-way stream of information and messaging over which the receiver can have little control. We believe that to use the same connection as a means to send one’s own information and content 'upstream' requires more substantial, prolonged and creative training. Our approach demonstrates an opportunity to deploy ICT in a way that can tap into local creativity and the desire for self-expression; so that users can learn new technologies on their own terms. Content creation itself can be a powerful (albeit time-consuming) means of engaging people with ICT, with the added benefit of allowing them to voice their concerns and share and learn locally relevant knowledge. The data gathered from across the Finding a Voice sites are both rich and specific; suggesting that content creation initiatives can allow different voices to be heard, and demonstrating new bottom-up perspectives on the relationship between ICT, voice and poverty. One of the most interesting developments in our research is the emergence of data around what it means to participate in content creation, how to facilitate it, what its utility might be, and how 'creative engagement' might differ fundamentally to a more pragmatic skills-based approach to 'information access' and computer technologies. Of course, participation in content creation activities is affected by more than purely digital literacy: as you read this book you will appreciate how caste, class, poverty and gender shape or even block creative engagement with ICT. Unsurprisingly, views of usefulness across the sites are patchy and inconsistent – but these disparate views are helping us to understand the importance of participation in any such development communication initiative, including the need to fully account for local contexts.