Emergent Practices Around CGNet Swara, A Voice Forum for Citizen Journalism in Rural India

Preeti Mudliar, UT Austin
Jonathan Donner, Microsoft Research India (@jcdonner)
William Thies, Microsoft Research India

Special thanks to:
RQ: Can we leverage voice for a more inclusive digital democracy (in low-resource settings)?
Paper contributions

1. Design & deployment of voice-based extension to existing citizen journalism platform
2. Qualitative multi-stakeholder assessment of systems’ uptake, use, and appropriation
Chhattisgarh, India

- Challenging geo-political context
- 80% rural population
- Internet penetration – 0.5%
News and mass media in Chhattisgarh

- Little visibility in mainstream media
- Lack of news outlets for tribal languages
- Community radio is expensive to set up
- Illegal to discuss news on community radio

2004

CGNet: an Internet forum for Chhattisgarh
- Website and mailing list to discuss local issues
  - 2,200 members
  - 300 posts / month
News and mass media in Chhattisgarh

- CGNet: an Internet forum for Chhattisgarh
  - Website and mailing list to discuss local issues
    - 2,200 members
    - 300 posts / month

- CGNet Swara: a voice portal for citizen news
  - Augments website, mailing list with voice-based phone interface
  - Goal: foster a more inclusive dialogue
Design and Deployment
CGNet Swara: an ecosystem of actors

Server

Moderator

Callers

Web Visitors
CGNet Swara: an ecosystem of actors

Callers
- Send missed call to server, which calls them back
- “Press 1 to listen, Press 2 to record”
- Recordings await moderation

Server
Moderator
Callers
Web Visitors
CGNet Swara: an ecosystem of actors

**Server**
- Runs an IVR server and a Web server
- Open-source code, built on Asterisk
CGNet Swara: an ecosystem of actors

Moderator
- Chhattisgarh native & former BBC journalist
- Reviews posts, cross-checks facts, approves
- Releases audio to phone, audio + text to Web
- Follows-up to spur action from stakeholders

Server

Callers

Web Visitors
CGNet Swara: an ecosystem of actors

Web Visitors
- Citizens, journalists, government officials
- Visits site to monitor news and grievances
- Sometimes re-publishes posts in national media
- Sometimes fixes reported problems
Father wanders for due NREGA wages, son dies in hospital...

Manish Rai from Ambikapur says some days back I had heard an interview on CGnet Swara with a labourer called Pitbasu who had completed 100 days work in NREGA but had not been paid any wages. Today by chance I met him in the hospital and found that while Pitbasu was making rounds for his due NREGA wages his son died in the hospital. Is there any provision in NREGA to punish officials who has caused this grave incident? NREGA laws should be so strong that no one should wait for their wages as has happened with Pitbas. For more on the story please contact Manish at 09826538904

POSTED ON: JAN 14, 2011, BY MANISH RAI

Comments

Post a Comment

To record your comment, please call and leave a message at +91-80-4113 7280. Recording your comment in audio format will ensure that it is accessible to all CGNet Swara users, most of whom lack Internet access and access the reports via phone.

If you are located outside of India and unable to place a phone call to the number above, then you may leave a comment in text format using the following form. Your comment will be available on the website, but not via phone.
Father struggles to get NREGA wages, son dies in hospital

Supriya Sharma, TNN, Jan 21, 2011, 10.04pm IST

RAIPUR: A week after he lost his ailing son, and ten months after he worked on a village road project, Pitbasu Bhoi finally got the ten thousand rupees he had earned under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Program (MNREGA).

"Of what use is the money now? I have just immersed my son's ashes. When I needed the money to save his life, I did not have it," says Bhoi.

The disabled man, in his forties, along with his wife and children, lives on a farm in Baila village in Kanker. His son, Harish, was a good student and was slated to join a college but fell ill with dengue.

Pitbasu was willing to work to pay for his son’s treatment, but the scheme provided him only a half day's work.

At first the Centre had only given him Rs 20 daily for the work, and he asked that this be increased to Rs 40. However, his request was not entertained.

"The Centre was giving wages only for half a day’s work. We have no choice, we have to work," said Bhoi who had only been able to earn Rs 100 in two months under the scheme.

When his son died, he lost his job as well. He learnt that he could get Rs 1000 as an ex-gratia payment under the National Food Security Act, but he could not apply as his son’s death certificate had not been issued.

"Can’t we get anything? I have nothing for my son."

Pitbasu’s son, who was a first class student, died of dengue on December 15 and his body was immersed in the Ganges in Raipur on December 18.

The man who worked under the scheme is an ex-serviceman and his family has been deprived of the social security package provided under the act.

The couple, who has no income, has to depend on pitbasu’s work under the scheme to fend for their family. "It is a tough life. We have no option," Pitbasu said.
Highlights
- Total calls: >90,000
- Unique callers: >11,000
- Total posts: >1,200
- Unique contributors: >450
- Top 10 contributors responsible for 25% of posts
Based on first 20 months of posts
Qualitative Assessment
Methodology

Interviews
• CGNet Swara users recruited from Swara call logs
• Interviews include
  – 17 content contributors
  – 14 listeners
  – 5 Journalists
  – 3 Bureaucrats

Field immersion
• Travel throughout 4 districts of Chhattisgarh
• Contexts of field interviews include
  – Public meetings protesting wage payment delays
  – Protests against land acquisitions
  – Chhattisgarh government’s MNREGA complaint cell

• Grounded Theory for data analysis
Users

• Who is calling?
  – Social activists and their beneficiaries
  – Part-time stringers and journalists
  – Passive listeners

• Who is not calling?
  – The poorest of the poor
  – Lack of awareness
  – Fear of repercussion

“We cannot expect a weak defenseless person to have the courage to speak out on Swara ... talking on the mobile phone to someone or something he does not know is a big thing.”

— Editor of a Hindi daily
Motivations

• Grievance redressal
  – “I tell them it is a very nice medium where we can speak about any irregularities in government schemes. When you speak, then the government and the administration listen to you and they take steps to address the problem.”
  – Complementing government’s hotline

• Occasional performances
Imagined Audiences

“Who do you think is listening?”

• The decision makers


• Bridge to the Internet & Internet users

  – “What happens these days is that the stories are also put on Facebook and a lot of people are reading it. Some people are taking legal action based on the stories, some people are calling up government officers after learning of incidents. So this is creating a pressure. CGNet Swara is spurring action on stories”
Actual Audiences

• Journalists
  – “What is news?”
  – “We are catering to an urban readership”
  – “Profits are not to be found in reporting on tribal issues”

• Government
  – “If it has to be taken seriously, it has to come to some visible level and also take up various issues not limited to certain complaints or anti-government issues ...nobody will take it seriously if it just becomes a complaint box.”
Discussion
Broader implications for ICT4D

• Continuing crucial role for infomediaries
• Text *AND* voice trumps text *OR* voice
• System helps journalists, does not replace them
How to Replicate CGNet Swara

• Need to replicate two parts:
  – Technical ➔ EASY. Code is free & open source.
  – Human ➔ HARD. Our moderator is irreplaceable.

Paul Farmer
Renowned public health pioneer

“If Paul is the model, we’re f***ed.”
— Dr. Jim Kim
President, Dartmouth College Co-founder, Partners in Health
Conclusions

New Affordances
• Demonstrated value of voice in participatory platforms for low-literacy environments
• Increased reach, inclusiveness and accessibility
• Small-scale ‘ICT4D’ success with real users, constituencies, and impact

Persistent Challenges
• Importance of “champion”/infomediary/editor as barrier to scale
• Intervention best assessed as new actor in multiplayer, multi-stakeholder space
• Further scale and deeper impact will be hard-fought