Chapter 5.12
ICT Aided Education for People's Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised that knowledge and education are the key factors that need attention to eradicate poverty. Yet the poorest sections of the community have the least access to conventional means of gaining knowledge and education. Thus we are witnessing a polarized world where on the one side we would find an "information elite" and on the other, the digitally illiterates or excluded. Such a position is very apparent from the world map of the Internet users (Zooknic, 2003). This paradox is common in the developing countries across the globe. The gap between population groups and accessibility to knowledge resources is widening as the awareness, information, as well as education and skill development efforts fail to reach the right target. The major reason for this lies with the present system of knowledge dissemination and not with knowledge resources.

India, where literacy is still very low, cannot simply rely on printed books for effective education and knowledge dissemination.

Therefore to bridge the gap between the target disadvantaged population and the knowledge resource, appropriate methods of communication are needed so that the shortcomings of the print and audio-visual media, especially lack of participation, are mitigated. In this regard the digital media and information and communication technology (ICT) have immense potential. This is one of the primary concerns of practice of Community Informatics (Marshall et al., 2003). Community Informatics emphasises that the method of its deployment is particularly important rather than the technology itself. In this article we will describe a model for the community informatics approach that we followed in order to harness the digital media for education, health awareness and development in a specific location in India.

HOW THE PROJECT STARTED

The concept of the project started with our conviction in "ICT-mediated human network creation to complement skills and assemble resources for development." It started with the following questions:

- What is appropriate model for using interactive media for education and awareness?
- How is it best to tackle the challenge of removing people's mental barriers (especially in the developing countries) to ICT?
- Where Internet bandwidth is still a problem how is it possible to spread the effective use of ICT using the existing human network?

After their belated entry, Personal Computers (PC) and communication facilities are now becoming more available in urban and semi-urban areas in India. However the PC has not generally been considered as an information dissemination tool. This is particularly because of two reasons: (a) people in many cases consider the PC as a sophisticated device or a device for playing games, and (b) there is not enough content that presents knowledge or information suited to local needs. Therefore our first priority was to project the PC as an easy to use "information appliance" for the community. We targeted the stated goal with the following directed efforts:

- Low cost media development using student resources to reach out to people for basic education, health and environment awareness; and
- Creating awareness by involving stakeholders in both developing and promoting the media.

Consequently we created a forum where like-minded NGOs (Non-Government Organizations), ICT experts, students, and schools exchanged views and collaborated to adopt the digital media that would add value to the current method of knowledge dissemination. We started with a consultative workshop with all the stakeholders and fixed the following plan of actions:

- Developing interactive multimedia content as a low cost alternative for awareness and education;
- Promoting the content to the grassroots community through the NGOs;
- Developing Community Information and Learning Centers where ICT activities could be conducted; and
- Promoting the creativity of student community for development of such media.

It was decided that emphasis would be placed on the design of content so that it provided more interactivity in using the media, participation of target groups in realizing the media and lastly development in low denominator technology so that it ran on any platform or machine. Appropriate guidelines were prepared for this purpose.

PARTNERS AND THEIR ROLES

This project evolved through collaboration with various strategic partners that are listed below with their respective roles.

Grass Roots NGOs

There are many NGOs that are already engaged in promotion of education, health and other developmental activities related to local needs. Therefore they are often more acceptable to the community and more likely to have rapport with members of the community. Their role as partners was to extend the community reach quickly and to provide advice on the subject matter, design, approach and language of the digital content. Our long-term goal was to empower the NGO's and the community so that they could initiate

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