

Chapter 11

Stronger Voices?

Experiences in Paraguay with Interactive ICTs

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ABSTRACT

This case study focuses on a civil society organization called Radio Viva in Asunción, Paraguay. It was found that the interactive use of 'traditional' and 'new' technologies in locally innovative ways was able to meet community needs through the creation of two local products. Specifically, when radio and telephony were integrated with telecentre services (including internet access), new physical and virtual communication spaces were opened up for civic participation. Second, ICT interactivity was found to lead to the creation of locally relevant content production, helping Paraguayan communities to gain access to useful and contextualized information while also turning local 'information recipients' into 'knowledge users'.

INTRODUCTION

Community participation has long been recognized as a vital component of all stages of development processes, yet development initiatives often place a higher focus on the 'application' of new information and communication technologies for poverty alleviation through greater access to the 'knowledge economy'. Yet it is not the application of technologies that leads to community change, but the reflexive and democratic uses to which

they are applied in people's lives. This paper aims to move past deterministic discussions of technology access, and instead encourages a greater contextualized focus on the locally creative and innovative uses of communication technologies in ways that can help communities answer their own needs. Democratic communication organizations can play a big part in encouraging greater levels of civic participation through the use of appropriate communication media. This Paraguayan case exemplifies how this is possible when radio communication is combined with 'new' ICTs in telecentre, statically changing according to local

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needs. Community radio is an appropriate technology that is far too often ignored as development enthusiasts instead focus on newer emerging technologies. Yet the community radio movement in Latin America remains strong, where radio is often the only mass medium available in rural areas. When combined with ICTs in telecentres, such as computers with internet access, as well as with other traditional communication media like telephones, a multitude of communication channels is produced, giving rise to plural community engagement.

The research presented here focuses on Radio Viva, a community organization based in the outskirts of Asunción, Paraguay, that combines the use of communication technologies in ways that are locally successful in meeting community needs by facilitating civic participation. The key purpose of the study was to investigate how active community participation and dialogue may lead to community change through the increased media channels that are created when an 'old' technology like the radio is combined with a 'new' community technology service like a telecentre. Case study findings revealed that ICT integration through radio and telecentres leads to the creation of two local products. First, communication through interactive ICTs opens up physical and virtual spaces for community dialogue to occur, allowing for civic participation about local issues and challenges. Second, it opens up opportunities for local content production. This leads to the creation of locally useful and contextualized information, allowing for community members to shift from being information recipients to knowledge producers. The framework of this analysis is a social constructivist approach, recognizing that human interactivity and technologies are mutually influential (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 2002).

This chapter begins by presenting the reader with a contextual background of current literature on ICT and poverty reduction strategies, community radio, telecentres, and interactive technologies. Next, case study background is

provided on Radio Viva; including a brief history of the initiative, and information on basic human resources, technical background, services and current set up. This is followed by a description of the methodology used, after which case study findings are discussed in light of how local creative and innovative activities using ICTs can lead to local social change. A summary is presented advocating for a more contextualized approach to media use, particularly including 'traditional' technologies such as the radio and telephone in meeting community needs. This report emphasizes the need for more concrete research to be conducted about the integration of ICTs, and highlights pertinent areas for further discussion to take place. Given time and resource constraints, the purpose of this paper is to bypass discussions on whether Radio Viva is a successful or unsuccessful development organization, focussing instead on one unique aspect of community development organizations – the integration of ICTs in development processes – which has until now received very little study. By exploring the innovative ways in which different communication technologies are leveraged and applied in ways that are locally relevant, we can derive an incredibly useful picture of the ways in which ICT users can engage in civic dialogue (and thereby community change).

BACKGROUND

In the debate about the potential usefulness of ICTs in poverty reduction strategies it is becoming increasingly recognized that a contextualized approach to media use must be taken (Gumucio-Dagrón, 2001; Gómez & Martínez, 2001; Tacchi, Slater & Lewis, 2003). That is, an appreciation of the context surrounding ICT appropriation and use (including social, economic and political inequalities) is key to a deeper understanding of the ways in which ICTs can be useful in human development processes. One of the major challenges to the success of development strategies using ICTs

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