Radio browsing the Internet: an option for rural communities

Modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), more specifically the Internet, has the potential to offer a new generation of tools for rural development. However, it requires special efforts to create appropriate access models for those who can neither afford internet access nor have the language capacity to understand the content. The purpose of the Kothmale community radio internet project was to test and demonstrate an access model that could overcome these barriers and make information accessible to otherwise marginalised communities in rural areas. UNESCO implemented the project in collaboration with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Media, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, Sri Lanka Telecommunication Regulatory Commission and the University of Colombo.

Kothmale community radio

The Kothmale community radio station is located in the central hill region of Sri Lanka and serves a population of 200,000. The area of coverage includes around 60 villages with an average of 400 residents and three rural towns with around 175,000 residents. The station began broadcasting in 1989 and in ten years has become an integral part of the community and the most popular FM radio in the area. Currently, it has morning and evening broadcasts; the morning broadcast is commercialised and the revenue generated covers 75% of the station's operational costs.

Combining Internet with radio

The community radio internet project introduced three features, which combine new information technologies with conventional radio.

a. ***"Radio browsing the Internet" programme*** The radio station broadcasts a daily two-hour programme during which broadcasters supported by resource personnel browse the internet on-air together with their listeners and discuss and contextualise the information in the local language. Listeners direct queries to the station (in person, by mail or by telephone), and the broadcasters surf the Internet on their behalf and transmit the information. Resource persons (agricultural extensionists, doctors) who are invited as studio guests help to put the information in context.

b. ***Provision of internet access*** Besides its own internet café, the station's server provides free internet access at two nearby public libraries. This is quite attractive to people who cannot afford the facilities of a computer and are unable to pay for long-distance telephone calls. Trained volunteers take turns to assist the visitors in using the computer facilities.

c. ***Development of a community database*** The community radio develops its own information database based on the requests of listeners. This database attempts to package information that meets the needs of the rural population in the local languages on the Internet. In addition, the station provides skills to help the community to develop their own web sites and encourages them to produce content for the Internet.

Successful initiative

The project has succeeded in accomplishing its goals - it has brought the benefits of ICTs to a rural population. Many people are benefiting from the increased access to information and the examples are as diverse as the users. A local farmer has obtained information on organic farming of tomatoes and improved storage methods. Another farmer was delighted with the housing diagrams and feeding information for geese he gathered from the Internet. A group of local producers of "*jaggery*" (sweet made of palm treacle) found markets for their product. A group of youth used internet sources to network with other organisations in setting up an environmental NGO. Having mobilised resources, they have launched a reforestation programme in their community. A local health worker was able to find information on mosquito-borne diseases directly relevant to her work.

The project has led to an increased awareness on the benefits of ICTs within the community. Many within the community have opened e-mail accounts to keep in touch with their relatives working abroad. Younger members of the community are enthusiastic users of the computers and the internet facilities at the radio station. Many of them have gained computer literacy and are a bridge for the rest of the community in the learning process.

Apart from expanding the knowledge base of the people, it is also contributing to increased participation of the community in economic and social development.

Keeping it going

The Kothmale project was implemented with an initial grant of US$ 35,000, which covered project management, costs for internet connectivity, equipment and installation, training, research and workshops for project partners. The existence of a well-equipped radio station in Kothmale reduced the setting up costs significantly.

With the UNESCO funding coming to an end, the future of Kothmale internet community radio depends on whether it can finance itself. The station would have to generate an additional US$ 1000 per month to maintain the present activities. Many income generating options are being tried out. Already work has begun on hosting a number of commercial web sites on the station's internet server. The local youth have been trained to design and develop web sites for the private sector. The server can provide seven additional access points, which the station intends to rent to government or non-governmental organisations. The "radio internet browsing" programme is expected to increase the volume of radio advertising. Listeners, who have formed an Internet listeners club, are raising funds to support the facility.

Meanwhile, UNESCO is developing a global programme drawing on the experiences of Kothmale. This programme on community multimedia centres offers a global strategy to address the digital divide in the poorest communities of the developing world.

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