

Beyond the mainstream...

There is no escaping the mass media. Whether its print, television, radio or the latest communication channel – the Internet, mass media is ubiquitous and represents the voice of the masses. In India, about 20 major media houses represent the voice of the a nation of over a billion. There is an assumption that in a free and democratic society, exemplified by the US, the media is free, unbiased and objective. However, the politik of media is endowed with some essential ingredients which falsify the notion of a free and open press. The most important of these are: the size, concentration of ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of mass media and advertising as a primary source of income.

The freedom of expression underpins all other human rights. It is the means by which other human rights are defended and extended. In the Information Age the freedom of expression takes on additional importance, as the ability to send and receive information, regardless of frontiers, comes increasingly to dominate our economic, social and cultural life.

Community media?

Community media is community owned and controlled, giving access to voices in the community and encouraging diversity, creativity and participation. Community media provides a vital counterbalance to the increasing globalisation and commercialisation of the media. Combining social enterprise, creative content production and skills for the digital economy, community media has a vital role in reaching out to people and communities at risk of exclusion and disadvantage. community-based radio, television and Internet projects work by enabling people to become media producers, to send as well as to receive, and, by working together, to reinforce knowledge, dialogue and cultural expression at the neighbourhood and community level.



Image credits: Chaitanya Modak, DRISHTI



Still from 'Kutch Lok Ji Vani'

Journey beyond the mainstream

Over the past ten years, CSDMS has hosted many international conferences and produced extensive content in the form of its four magazines. However the limitations of the spoken (language barriers) and written (literacy level) word usually excludes a vast majority of the affected community from the discussions. The representatives of many grassroots communities as well as government organisations would often bring along short films which communicated the issues of their community through the eyes of the community themselves. A lot of community generated content which focuses on the needs of the grassroots community is available in the form of videos. This content, however, is scattered. The *i4d Film Festival, Beyond the Mainstream...* was an attempt to bring together this community of filmmakers. The filmmakers are farmers, vegetable-sellers, slum dwellers, street children, and just everyday members of the community.

Soon after our mega-event in Malaysia in the month of February 2007, we felt the need to expand our horizons into the visual medium in the form of videos. Many NGOs, non-governmental, international, as well as governmental agencies were keen to bring their experiences to the forum in the form of short films. Thus, was born the concept of the *i4d Film Festival*. In the subsequent months we advertised extensively, calling for entries to this film festival. To our surprise and joy, most of the films submitted were relevant, exciting, conceptually innovative, and most importantly generated by the effected communities themselves.

The film festival held on the 3rd of August 2007 brought together over 20 organisations. There was a sizable representation from various community groups who submitted films. It brought together experiences with community video from across the country.

What happened beyond the mainstream?

The films were powerful, and articulated issues more cohesively than was possible in the written or spoken words. Most of the films were not in English, though subtitled. The themes were localised to the community which produced the film, yet, there was an overwhelming response leading to requests for the films to be screened not only across the country, but also in other countries such as Nepal and Malaysia. This was a proof of the fact that images communicate beyond language. Listed below are some of the many diverse issues portrayed at the festival.

The film, *'The Life Next Door'*, was conceptualised by the young girls from Chetram Sharma Kanya Inter College based in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India. While the underlying theme was the education system in India, it was portrayed creatively through a poor man and his struggle and aspirations and his views on the Indian School education system. It gave a voice to an economically disadvantaged group of young girls and their community.

'Glue made me a Ghost' was another example of the power of the visual medium. The film has been directed by Andrew Pope and Farhad Shadravan and written and performed by ex-street children, from Cambodia, most of whom were addicted to glue. The story is based on real life experiences of these and other children with long histories of using glue, whilst trying to earn money from scavenging and sleeping on the streets. All of these children are now reintegrated back into education and joined with their families. These children have friends that have been injured by traffic accidents while using glue and they wanted to educate their peers of the risks of drug use, as well as the negative future ahead for a glue sniffer on the streets. The film has simulated glue use and shows what this leads to: vagrancy, poverty, loneliness, crime, attacks from gangs and the huge risk to life and well-being. In Khmer culture, ghosts are very much believed in and feared.



Still from 'Glue made me a Ghost'

The message is clear that glue can destroy your life in many ways. The children and M'Lop Tapang - Centre for Street Children have used this film to educate their peers, families and the whole community.

The violation of human rights of the mentally ill in India is appalling. Mental health patients are being systematically and continuously ignored and denied the social rights they deserve. Therefore, along with a change in mindset, there is a desperate need for reform in the treatment of the mentally ill in our country. As stated before, the freedom of expression is the basic human right. The film 'From Dusk to Dawn' was an excellent example of how if properly motivated, the physically and mentally disabled communities can express their issues and points of view in a fashion that has a large impact on the wider community. The short documentary is an attempt to depict the real life stories of the unfortunate victims of mental illness whose difficulty remains invisible to the society. It is easy to identify the agony of a person suffering from physical disability as we can see his difficulty with our naked eyes. But a mentally ill person often appears perfectly normal & it becomes difficult for the society to understand where the pain lies when the person suffers from delusion, hallucination and other symptoms. So they generally segregate themselves from the mainstream of life and remain secluded within the four walls of their dark rooms. The characters have been played by the affected and therefore it was really a tough for them to enact their own difficulty that too in a foreign language – English.

Another film which received a lot of accolades and has been requested for screening at other locations is 'Aapno Samvad Ekta Par' or 'Our Dialogue on Harmony'. The film was produced by the Samvad Community Video unit, set up in partnership with SAATH in the urban slums of Ahmedabad as a part of the Community Media initiative of Video Volunteers and Drishti.

The group comprises of 8 enthusiastic community producers who are using video for social change. The group has worked on issues such as livelihood, gender and public infrastructure. The Gujarat riots of 2002 had a strong impact on the lives of the community producers. This film is their attempt to build trust and show the true picture of their community in

the post 2002 riots in Ahmedabad. There have been more than 25 screenings of this film in riot torn areas and it has reached out to more than 4000 people.

One of the most appreciated films was 'Kutch Lok ji Vani' or 'Voices of Kutch'. The film is directed by Chaitanya Modak, an independent film maker and produced by Drishti Media. Its an insightful film on the community radio movement in India using the context of an experiment in radio programming done with community participation by the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangatan's community radio project-Radio Ujjas. Revolving around the story of a little girl and a radio she receives as a gift, the film's argument is built through the radio programme she listens to and the shared experience of the practitioners and audiences of community radio broadcasting. The film discusses the set of universals that come into play when you want to get communities into media.

The diversity of issues portrayed at the festival gave us a realistic and encouraging picture of how 'community video' is being utilised as a tool for empowerment amongst many communities around the world. The wide spectrum of topics was only possible because of the enormous contribution of the community itself.

What next?

While the film festival exceeded all expectations in its content and participation from various organisations, it is necessary to make sure that the efforts do not remain limited to an annual festival.

Such content, and more, if available on a consolidated medium such as a portal, will be beneficial for all communities. Each of the films screened at the festival was material, which would be useful and inspirational for an audience far beyond what can be reached through events such as a film festival. There is a need to



Still from 'My Village Our Kingdom'

open up the community to the entire world. There is a need to focus on community generated content. The films described above are just the tip of an enormous metaphoric iceberg of content waiting to be discovered.



Still from 'Password: Women'

i4dtv.org

Before and during the film festival we received a lot of requests to make the films available to the development community. There was also a need felt, for an initiative which brings together this bigger community. The filmmakers were looking for a platform to publicise their issues. This platform was conceptualised in the form of *i4dtv.org*.

Since the advent of the concept of Web 2.0, we have seen a tremendous growth in social networking sites and community spaces over the internet. Internet portals like facebook, youtube, and ourmedia among many others, have been able to sustain a remarkable community base. These sites not only act as a repository of content from the community members but also allow people2people dialogues and discourses. However, a dedicated community space for multimedia content

on development seems lacking. The development content are scattered and people often seem reluctant to post content to general community space. In this context, a community multimedia space, specifically for catering to development issues can really be helpful. It can also promote collaboration between people all across in an effort to make the world a better place to live in.

This community multimedia space can perhaps be also the catalyst to sensitise development communities working in the south to use multimedia content for development. CSDMS has already launched the beta version of the portal at the eINDIA2007 event held in New Delhi from 31st July to 3rd August. We hope to form partnerships with like minded organisations in the region such as Bellanet (www.bellanet.org) and SAP International (<http://sapint.org>) to bring together the community of communities and Community Media beyond the mainstream...

For further information visit www.i4dtv.org

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Media byte

Communities on reel, festival rolls today

i4d film festival aims to bring forth projects that are adapting existing technologies to empower people at the grassroots

Arjun Jassal, Indian Express

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We have all heard of online communities, on orkut and facebook. But what happens when for the first time, technology comes to real life communities? This is the focus of the i4d film festival, which will be held at the India International Centre annexe on Friday. "The festival has films with two perspectives — documentaries on information communication technology projects such as telecentres and e-governance, and films developed by the community for the community," explains Sulakshana Bhattacharya, coordinator of the festival.

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Still from 'Abolomboni'