CGNet Swara: A Voice Portal for Citizen News Journalism

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What Will Become the Social Media Platform for Rural India?
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Source: UnwireIndia, Sep 2010
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Millions of Users

- Facebook: 20
- Orkut: 20

Source: UnwireIndia, Sep 2010
What Will Become the Social Media Platform for Rural India?

- Based on Mobile Phone
  - 700 million subscribers

- Based on Internet
  - 85 million users

Facebook: 20 million users
Orkut: 20 million users
SMS GupShup: 700 million subscribers

Source: UnwireIndia, Sep 2010
Voice Remains Primary Interface for Mobile Subscribers in India

• Most subscribers lack smart phones

Smart Phone: < 5%
Feature Phone: ~45%
(e.g., music player)
Basic Phone: ~50%

Mobile Internet: < 3% of subscribers

• Text interfaces hindered by:
  – Low literacy (33% of adults in India are non-literate)
  – Language diversity (font support for tribal language?)

Source: McKinsey, IDC India
Interactive Voice Response in India

- In 2010: $750M from value-added IVR services
  - Expected to grow to $3 billion by 2020
- Examples:
  - Ringtones, music, jokes, astrology
  - Booking movie tickets, travel, mobile commerce
  - TATA’s *Behtar Zindagi* program: information for farmers with over 10,000 voice prompts
  - Screening for *Kaun Banega Crorepati*
Your Facebook, in your voice.

Now express emotions that words can't with Facebook Voice Updates on Aircel.

Aircel & Facebook partner to introduce Voice Status Updates. Now express your emotions and much more on Facebook in your own distinctive voice. Just dial 51555* from your Aircel mobile to record and update your status, without even having access to the internet. The recorded voice clip will appear on your Facebook wall as your status update. So go ahead, voice your mind!

Call: 38045 12345 for Kolkata & 98510 12345 for ROWB or 121* aircel.com
Egypt protesters use voice tweets

Google and Twitter have launched a service which circumvents the ban on net services in Egypt.

The so-called speak-to-tweet system allows people caught up in the unrest to post messages without any need to use an internet connection.

The service, which is already live, allows people to dial an international telephone number and leave a voicemail message.

The message is then sent out as a tweet with the hashtag #egypt.
Journalism in Tribal India

- No news medium for tribal languages in India
  - Very few tribal journalists who know these languages
- Is it not legal to broadcast news over community radio in India!
- Can a mobile platform enable citizens to share their own news?
Partner Organization: CGNet

• Formed in 2004 by a group of journalists + technologists native to Chhattisgarh
• Collected news through social networks, seeded discussion via online discussion forum
• Brought several issues into the mainstream discourse
  – Farmer suicide
  – Migration and displacement in Chhattisgarh
  – Preservation of oral tradition of Tribals
CGNet Swara: A Voice Portal for Citizen Journalism

with CGNet, MIT and the International Center for Journalists

- Anyone can report news, issues, etc. in local language
- Submissions are reviewed by moderators over the Web
- Appropriate submissions are published:
  - For playback on audio channel
  - For browsing on Web
  - Some submissions seed stories for posting on CGNet site + list
Training Citizen Journalists

• Two-day training in rural Chhattisgarh (tribal area)
  – Basics of journalism
  – Role of Swara system
  – Extensive practice recording stories

• Participants (N=29, 66% male)
  – 9 farmers or self-employed
  – 9 social workers
  – Half had college degree;
    All but 4 had finished 10th standard

• Non-expert technology users
  – 80% owned cell phone, but
    less than half had sent SMS
  – 33% without power at home
  – 40% without reliable cell coverage at home
Deployment: The First Year

- Most posts are in Hindi
- About 10% are in Kurukh (first news source in Kurukh!)
- Some posts in Gondi, Chattisgarhi, Nagpuri, Oriya...
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 Pitbasu. For more on the story please contact Manish at 09826538904.
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, has been suffering from leprosy. His son, who was born in 1994 and lived to be 19 years old, had a heart problem.

"If MNREGA had been paid on time, perhaps my son would have been alive," Bhoi said.

The Bhoi family, living on less than one acre of land, was working on the road project as a part of an ongoing initiative to clear road embankments. They have earned Rs 500 per day for the project, which started in June 2010.

"We expected the government to give us wages in July or August. But we didn’t receive anything even though we worked hard for months," Bhoi said. "Now we have nothing to eat."

In November, the Center had promised to pay wages within two weeks. But Bhoi and his family didn’t receive any money. Then, the families received wages in December after urging other labourers. However, most of the families were paid in cash. It also took them a month’s time to receive their wages.

Bhoi has written to the chief minister and the minister for rural development but has not received any response.

"I have been writing to the minister for the last six months. I am not even getting a single response," Bhoi said. "I don’t know how I can support my family with nothing to eat.

"I can’t afford to refuse work. If I don’t work, my family will face starvation," Bhoi said.

Bhoi, who has two children, has been working as a daily wage labourer since his childhood. He used to work for a living. But now, he has to work to support his family and for his son’s treatment.

"I used to work all day long and earn Rs 500 per day. But now, I have to work only when there is work," Bhoi said. "I don’t have a single paisa to support my family.

"I am not even getting a single paisa," Bhoi said. "I want the government to pay me the money I have been earning for the last 20 years."

Bhoi has to pay for his son’s treatment, which costs Rs 20,000 per month. He has to bear the expenses of his son’s treatment and his family’s food. He has no money to support his family. He has to work to support his family and for his son’s treatment.
Additional Impact Stories

- Report on non-payment of NREGA wages led to visit from The Hindu and 1,000 workers being paid 6 months of wages
- Similar report led to overdue payment of 1 year’s wages to teachers in Dantewada
- Official ordered liquor shop to be removed from school vicinity due to report (Bijapur)
- Social activist (Prakash Korram) under illegal detention was released following report
Who is Reporting?

• >150 contributors
  – Top 10% responsible for 45% of posts
• Often social activists, but with limited voice
  – $100-$200 income / month
• Why do they post?
  – Publicize important issues; potential impact
  – Platform is anonymous, agnostic to caste
    • Though callers often identify themselves (85% of calls)
Who is Listening?

• 2500 unique callers
  – Top 10% responsible for 20% of calls

• Geographies:
Categorizing the Reports

Based on 110 recent reports
Subject of Reports

• Primarily local news (70% of posts)
  – Often based on experience of caller (45% of posts)

Governance
Payment
Living conditions
Event
Politics
Anniversary
Entertainment
Health
Education

Additional topics:
Women Rights,
Agriculture,
Employment,
Current affairs,
History, Social ills,
Environment, Civic life, Public utilities
Is This Helping?

- Social media can also aid authoritarian regimes [Evgeny Morozov]
  - Makes them appear open
  - Enables identification and tracking of dissenters
  - Gives avenue for buying support
- In China: 280,000 members of the “50 Cent Party” are being paid to produce pro-government content online
- Counter-measures in a voice channel:
  - Moderation and fact-checking by mainstream journalists
  - Integrate social networks (trust) with social media (information)
  - Leverage personal authenticity of voice
Research Challenges

• How to make it usable at scale?
  – IVR systems are frustrating even for expert users!
  – Automatic localization (by caller ID / PIN code?)
  – Leverage user profiles, reputation systems
  – Rank content by most listened-to

• New playground for speech researchers
  – Language-independent audio indexing and search
  – Automatic classification of posts by tags, language, dialect
  – Speech recognition and synthesis for Indic languages
Operational Challenges

• How to pay for distribution of content?
  – Might not have to, if people are willing to call
  – Support with advertising (tough)
  – Start with entertainment?
  – Use caller tunes?

• How to build a robust social ecosystem?
  – How to ensure credibility of reports
  – How to protect reporter identity
  – How to manage conflict in forums
Conclusions

• Social media looks to the phone in India
  – Mobile SMS services are prevalent; voice is growing
  – Simple voice interaction allows high-impact content

• Huge untapped potential
  – 35M GupShup users vs. 700M mobile subscribers
  – Can we define the next social network on mobiles?