

EVALUATING COMMUNITY BASED MEDIA INITIATIVES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper reports on the development of a transferable method for the evaluation of community based ICT initiatives. It is, in essence, a combination of ethnographic approaches with action research. The method was developed following an evaluation of a rural ICT project in Sri Lanka and is now being applied to nine projects across South Asia. In this paper we will describe the initial evaluation undertaken in Sri Lanka and how this led to the development and application of 'ethnographic action research'.

Introduction

Large amounts of development funding are being spent on attempting to bridge the 'digital divide' and engage marginal or excluded communities in the knowledge economy using old and new media technologies. Motivations are often a mix of social and economic development for defined and disadvantaged communities. For example, improved access to information, the generation of new economic enterprise and innovation and the desire to enhance and provide new distribution networks that can directly or indirectly alleviate poverty. To date, however, there has been little rigorous evaluation undertaken to uncover the impacts - planned and unplanned - of such initiatives.

The need to develop a methodology through which data can be captured and compared is essential to building the evidence base necessary to assess the rapidly emerging range of communications initiatives that are currently being promoted by multilateral and bilateral donors, NGOs and civil society organisations. Though these interventions vary in scale, all aim to increase information flows to the information poor and excluded. Whilst the number of communications initiatives is increasing, especially those that address the convergence of new and old communications technologies, few steps have been taken to address or define evaluation methodologies, let alone methodologies that look beyond the narrowness of media and messages towards a more socially contextualised approach to media use (see UNAIDS 2001). With a lack of research that indicates the benefits or otherwise of ICTs for development, debates still rage about the usefulness of funding ICT projects with plenty of scepticism about the role of ICTs in poverty reduction. Even where it is accepted that ICTs are useful it is still unclear what aspects of ICT projects make them effective, how they can be made more effective and how they can be sustained.

Given this gap in knowledge, it is all the more important to decide *what type of* research is most useful into how media resources can effectively be introduced into communities and social groups. While quantitative research on media access is a vital

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reference-point for any policy or academic discussion, there is a particular need for detailed *qualitative* work that can evaluate what forms of access are effective in the short- and long-term, and under what social and cultural conditions. This has been the message of a number of recent reports: Alfonso Gumucio Dagron's *Making Waves: Stories of Participatory Communication for Social Change* (sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, 2001); The Children's Partnership report *Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Americans* (2000) and the UK Government's report *Closing the Digital Divide: Information and Communications Technologies in Deprived Areas* (2001). The conditions for active and effective media use are as complex as for any other form of civic participation.

At the same time, academic agendas in media research are changing. New work from Europe and North and South America on everyday engagement in both mainstream and non-mainstream media has argued for studying mediation as a *broad* social process, involving potentially all levels of society, that brings together insights from sociology, anthropology and development studies in an inter-disciplinary way. For example: Jesus Martin-Barbero *Communication Culture and Hegemony* (Sage, 1993), John Downing *Radical Media* (Sage, 2001, 2nd edition), Clemencia Rodriguez *Fissures in the Mediascape* (Hampton Press, 2001), Daniel Miller and Don Slater *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (Berg, 2000).

Within development and funding agencies, there has been an increasing deployment of broad-based and qualitative approaches. For example, frameworks for the evaluation of telecentres under two IDRC (International Development Research Centre) programmes – Acacia and Pan – implemented multi-method approaches in recognition of the complexity of assessing changing information and communications environments, and of the need for interpretative understandings of their role in development processes. The approach described in this paper differs mainly in its aim of developing a more 'holistic' picture of these environments (including both local and regional features), the way it is integrated into ICT project development, and its aim of developing comparative frameworks that will allow richer analysis and understanding of information and communication processes.

Our ethnographic research on media technologies demonstrates to us that there is not any one single model for local communication initiatives that can be applied universally, but that each place requires an approach to the development of projects tailored to local needs, which take account of local lives and environments. The ways in which people use technologies such as radio and the Internet are defined in large part by their local everyday lives, the social, political, economic and cultural environment in which they live, and by the ways in which they appropriate these technologies (Slater and Tacchi 2003; Tacchi and Slater in preparation; Miller and Slater 2001). It is also recognised that projects imposed from the outside are less likely to tap into existing communication networks, that a lack of understanding of and engagement with the local social, cultural, economic and political milieu will not bode well for ICT projects that seek to bring about change (e.g. giving greater access to civil society, reducing poverty, improving information and communication flows). With this in mind, our research approach is designed not simply to research a project, but to gain a level of understanding of the local context and thus, to assist in project design, ongoing evaluation and monitoring and in a continual cycle of research and project development. In effect it seeks to overcome any separation between research

and project development, placing the evaluation of project work at the centre of project practice, making that evaluation at the same time both more relevant and more useable. Evaluation here is not simply about measuring predetermined impacts - it is about awareness and adaptability.

In early 2002 the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) funded research designed to develop a transferable methodology for the evaluation of community multimedia centres (Slater, Tacchi & Lewis 2002). We conducted an ethnographic study of a UNESCO supported community radio and Internet project in rural Sri Lanka – Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project (KCRIP). An ethnographic approach allowed us to develop rich understandings of the project, the communities it serves, and the ways in which media technologies are used. As an approach to the evaluation of such projects, we found ethnography to be insightful and more appropriate than more quantitative methodologies – we were able to make various recommendations that would allow the project to more effectively meet its objectives. But it was beyond the scope of that study, and the time afforded us, to apply the research findings in any way beyond providing KCRIP with an evaluation report. Here we found a situation where we felt that in order to develop a transferable evaluation methodology that would enable projects to apply research findings we would need to create a more applied method. With additional funding from UNESCO we developed a methodology that preserved the benefits of ethnography and drew on the strengths of participatory action research.

Thus, we developed a methodological approach based on the combination of two research approaches - ethnography and action research (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn, 2002). Here ethnography is used to guide the research process and action research to link the findings back into a project's ongoing development. The approach has been developed to focus on actual practices of use and interaction with technologies in the wider context of people's lives and social and cultural structures - what we term 'communicative ecologies' (Slater and Tacchi 2003). Placing users and producers at the centre of the research process is important if useful analytical frameworks are to be developed. For our purposes an ethnographic approach aims to make sense of the complete range of social relationships and processes within which a project is doing its work. This includes:

- The immediate circle of participants – how they are organized, how the project fits into their everyday lives;
- The wider social context of the project: (eg, social divisions within the community, language issues, community economy, social and cultural resources, community power and institutions); and,
- The social structures and processes beyond the locality that nevertheless impacts upon it (e.g., infrastructure, government policies, economic developments).

Ethnography places a project in relevant local and non-local contexts to include those that the project works to impact upon and those that impact upon the project. Action research means that the research process is tightly connected to the activities of a project in three possible ways:

1. Active participation - the people who should benefit from the research participate in defining the aims and direction of the project and in interpreting and drawing conclusions from it;
2. Action-based methods - the activities and experiences of participants generate knowledge alongside, or in combination with, more formal methods; and,
3. Generating action - research is directly aimed at generating short, medium and long-term plans, including business plans; ideas for new initiatives; solving problems; targeting sectors of the user constituency; finding new resources or partners.

In theory, the beauty of such an approach is the potential it holds for ensuring that a project adapts itself to locally defined needs and is therefore unable in a sense to not be effective. At the same time, if real needs are really being met, sustainability should be less of an issue for projects. Using a participatory approach all stakeholders, including members of local user communities should be involved at every step, helping to ensure the relevance of projects and generating a degree of ownership and involvement that will help to ensure a project's future. At least, this is how it works in theory. Here we can begin to look in a little more detail at whether the theory is in fact being matched by the practice. We can look, firstly, at the kinds of research findings an ethnographic approach to evaluation and monitoring can uncover by describing the approach we took to, and some of the findings from, the research undertaken at KCRIP. We will then look at how the ethnographic action research approach was developed from this experience and at how it is being applied in UNESCO's ictPR project – specifically, we can look at how one of those projects, in West Bengal, is working with the approach and we can look at the kinds of findings they are coming up with and how they are feeding these back into their project design.

An ethnographic evaluation of the Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project

Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project (KCRIP) is a computing and Internet project that was set up within Kothmale Community Radio (KCR) station in Central Province, Sri Lanka. The station is located in a rural hill top settlement called Riverside, near a village called Mawathura. The community radio station is a part of the state sponsored Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). There is currently no avenue for developing independent community radio in the country, although there are a growing number of commercial radio stations. KCR is financially and technically regulated by SLBC, and is managed by SLBC employees, although the vast majority of workers are freelance or volunteers. Despite its lack of independence at this level, KCR has served its largely rural community since 1991 (and in the form of Mahaweli Community Radio since 1981), and because of its distance from Colombo (the capital city) it enjoys a degree of operational freedom in terms of everyday activities.

The Internet project, launched in 1999, represented a move to bring computing and Internet to a poor rural area. The vast majority of local people do not have telephones and most have never used a computer. The idea was that KCRIP would utilise a communication technology that was freely and universally available (radio) to provide access to the information and communication capabilities of the Internet. This convergence was particularly symbolized by the project's 'Radio Browsing' format.

In this case, a daily programme would be aired on KCR where the presenters would respond to requests from the audience (sent in by postcard, by telephone or in person) by searching on the Internet for particular pieces of information and then broadcasting this on air. KCRIP has three computers available to the public plus one in the radio studio, and Internet access via a leased line. The project offers a range of computing courses (some paid, some free), from basic computer literacy through fairly advanced programming and website design. It is open seven days a week from early morning till late at night, and is generally very fully used by individuals, students on courses, local school classes and by project workers and volunteers.

The ethnographic monitoring and evaluation of KCRIP was undertaken in early 2002. The major aims were to see how such an ethnographic approach could be useful and to use the experience to develop a transferable monitoring and evaluation method for community multimedia centres based on an ethnographic approach. Taking an ethnographic approach to the evaluation of KCRIP meant seeking to gain a holistic understanding of the project in its local (and wider) social, cultural and communicative contexts. With this approach we study what we term 'communicative ecologies' rather than simply looking at individual media or ICT projects and their measurable impact – such impact measures, if not placed in a wider and more holistic study would inevitably be narrow with limited value. Our emphasis was on understanding social processes, mapping social and cultural networks and information flows, and looking for ways in which the project worked within and impacted upon them.

An ethnographic approach, in the study of KCRIP, meant using a range of methods. The main methods we used during one months fieldwork were participant observation, in-depth interviews in a range of locations (including households, shops, temples, the station itself and local schools) and a short survey. We treated all encounters, formal and informal as part of the research, engaged in social activities, and spent time simply hanging out at the radio station and in local tea shops, villages and towns. We employed local research assistants and translators.

We organised our findings into six main themes that emerged from the research:

1. Autonomy (independence) and sustainability;
2. The ethos of the station, innovation and career paths;
3. Community divisions and issues of exclusion and inclusion;
4. The importance of education; and,
5. Media convergence and technology.

A full analysis can be read elsewhere (Slater, Tacchi and Lewis 2002). Here we might just look at one finding that illustrates the importance of taking a broad and holistic approach to evaluation – and demonstrates the usefulness of ethnography as a methodology. Radio browsing has been presented by KCRIP and its funders as an innovative example of media convergence and a central plank in KCRIP's development potential. A traditional evaluation of KCRIP might have focussed too intently on this particular radio format and missed some of the ways in which it has, over more than three years, become far less of a feature in the actual practices of the station. As it has become less important on the ground as it were, in terms of measuring its presence and its impact, the findings would not have been particularly good. However, taking the approach that we did we were able to see how this original

format had changed over time and how media convergence was no longer practiced through a single daily show but integrated throughout the programming and operations of the station, in much less visible but equally (if not more) valuable and effective ways.

By the same token, the term ‘convergence’ does not really do justice to what needs to be looked at. It assumes the existence of already existing, individual media which are then combined; or the insertion of a new medium, with fixed properties, into an existing repertoire of older media. The situation we observed is rather different from this: it is more like the reconfiguration of an array of media and technology possibilities within their communications needs and practices.

The Radio Browsing programme was launched in 1999, and we heard of many exciting and innovative uses of this format up to the point at which KCRIP’s Internet connection was dropped for a year from late 2000. These included extensive use of Radio Browsing in conveying health, legal, agricultural and enterprise related information. However, we have to admit that we did not find evidence of great impact or awareness of this format, either through surveying or interviews; and actual production of explicitly Radio Browsing programmes was not extensive at the time of our fieldwork. The one regular radio programme that strictly speaking conformed to this format was not generally perceived by members of the public to be an internet-based programme, and it generally focused on issues of general knowledge and cultural heritage rather than meeting information needs through online searches. Conversely, the ‘computer’ programme most commonly mentioned to us was a regular broadcast about computer hardware, which did not use the Internet at all. At the same time, we strongly felt that it would be a great mistake to evaluate media convergence at KCR in terms of the success or failure of any one radio programme, especially since that format had in fact been superseded by more subtle developments.

We also felt that KCR had in fact already both benefited and suffered too much from its over-identification with Radio Browsing. A far more powerful example of convergence was how one relief announcer struck up a chat-based relationship with a Sri Lankan working in the Middle East who one day asked him what music they were playing at that moment on the radio. It struck the announcer as completely commonsensical to string the computer microphone across the room to place it by the radio loudspeaker, creating an instant Internet radio. A week later, another Sri Lankan in the Middle East was on-line, but in this case he worked in a naval base with access to the PA system: this time Sri Lankan music was played from KCR through the computer microphone and the PA system to a whole base.

This demonstrated both technological innovation and organizational freedom of a sort that were considered rare within normal bureaucratic organizations or traditional structures in Sri Lanka, and symbolised a convergence of freedom and technology. It was not the case that there were any properties intrinsic to new media that naturally produced this freedom; it needs to be remembered that, firstly, this space of freedom had been originally constructed through the broadcast medium of radio, not internet, and secondly that both community radio and internet had been originally introduced as a vehicle to define a space of organizational autonomy (within SLBC) rather than as intrinsically liberating technologies. It also indicated how, in the everyday operations of KCRIP, each media technology available to them was used as and when

it seemed appropriate to do so. The Internet has become just one more media technology at their disposal, and in the process has opened up new and previously unavailable options.

The evaluation came up with interesting and important findings in academic terms and in terms of how the project might adapt and develop. We constructed a list of recommendations that we felt would help KCRIP to develop into an even more effective ICT project and achieve sustainability. However, implementing, or even discussing, the recommendations does not fit into the remit or responsibility of anyone or of any organisation directly related to KCRIP. Clearly the project itself does not have the level of freedom from institutional constraints, or the funds, to take them on itself. However, this experience (and frustration) led to the development of ethnographic action research and UNESCO's ictPR initiative has given us the opportunity to use and refine it in practice. Here we have combined ethnography with action research to develop what might, in effect, be seen as *applied* ethnographic research.

Applying Ethnographic Action Research to UNESCO's ICTs for Poverty Reduction (ictPR) programme in South Asia

This UNESCO initiative seeks to assess the impact of ICTs for poverty reduction through developing and researching projects that use old and new technologies with a variety of poor, marginalised groups in South Asia. Working in collaboration with grassroots NGOs, soft and hardware developers and researchers nine localised projects have been established or are being developed in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. The projects range from a community radio service in rural Karnataka (India) that will utilise the existing commercial cable TV infrastructure to provide locally produced content, supplemented by Internet access provided in a community setting to establish a local ICT network; to an open learning centre with computer training and Internet access for semi-literate poor women and widows designed to improve the vocational skills of the women and thereby increase their income earning capacity in Seelampur, a New Delhi ghetto; to a youth empowerment project in rural Chittagong (Bangladesh) which aims to provide 500 young people with training in digital ICTs to allow them to increase their employability and their participation in areas such as governance and education.

UNESCO is funding a full time, local 'action researcher' in each site for one year. These researchers will be using the methodology we have developed and will be remotely supervised by us, via a web interface which will also be used to store research data. We conducted a training workshop for the action researchers and are visiting each of the sites over the next 12 months in an effort to ensure that each site will generate research and produce actions specific to that locality, community and project. At the same time, we will retain an overview of the total programme, combining and comparing research in order to answer the fundamental question that UNESCO and other donor agencies are grappling with: what are the impacts and potentials of ICTs for poverty reduction in a development context? More specifically, what kinds of information will some of the poorest people in the developing world be offered through these projects, what will they access, what do they want to access, what will they do with this information and what information sources will they trust? Just how will they engage with these media technologies, and how relevant will they

see them to their lives? What channels of empowerment does new technology offer them beyond access to basic information on health, market prices, government schemes and so on? And how does all of this relate to their wider communicative ecologies and everyday lives?

The method is being used to help these nine dispersed projects to ensure that they meet their aims to use ICTs to help in poverty reduction, the actions concerned are to refine and adapt their own work in creative ways to respond more effectively to the communities they seek to benefit. The appeal in this case of the combination of ethnography and action research is the promise it gives of, on the one hand, ensuring each project produces rich research data that will deepen our understandings of both the experience of poverty in different locations, and the potential of ICTs to alleviate the situation, and, allowing each project the best chance of success by feeding research findings back into the projects activities in order to achieve their aims.

It is already clear that for the nine projects the key issues revolve around the need to create what we might call 'spaces of innovation', rather than any inherent properties of old or new technologies. This was clear in the Sri Lankan research – these spaces of innovation are generated or restricted by complex combinations of technical, local, bureaucratic and other factors (including complex relations of new technologies and organisations to existing communicative ecologies, their 'fit' with particular places). Ethnographic action research is therefore important in the early stages of project development - to develop or protect emerging spaces of innovation and engagement it is important to combine rich local knowledge with action and experimentation.

This kind of research is flexible, responsive and diverse - in a word, *creative*. But it is not chaotic or arbitrary. There is a range of methods – what we call a toolbox - which we can draw on for different purposes, add to and adapt as necessary. Central to these methods are observation and participant observation, the keeping of fieldnotes, in depth interviews and group discussions. Supplemented by questionnaire surveys, content analysis and information sharing exercises the methods are selected – mixed and matched – as appropriate, depending on the research needs which in turn is dependent on the needs of the project and its development. Data generated by these various methods is analysed as a whole, each data stream feeding into the total research picture, producing themes and findings that can be further explored and tested through different methods or in different situations, and through practice.

The ethnographic action research approach follows a traditional action research cycle of *plan, do, observe, and reflect*. It is a process that will allow a continuous cycle of development for each project and for elements within it. It is a process that needs to be constantly repeated: it makes up the research culture of the project, and runs throughout the organization and the life of the project. Beyond this basic cyclical process, we think about the ethnographic action research process in terms of three stages:

Stage 1. Immersion: mapping and contextualizing

You use a range of methods to build up a rich understanding of the project and its context; build relationships with workers, users and stakeholders; and build an analysis of the main themes and issues that need to be understood.

Stage 2. Targeted research

Prioritise the findings from Stage 1 – what issues are most important for poverty reduction and effective project work? Plan targeted research to address those specific issues.

Stage 3. Develop strategies

Use the research to inform specific short, medium and long-term plans.

When all three research stages have been accomplished project planning and action follows. Implementing the strategies in Stage 3 will bring about changes that again need to be studied, using the research process. This will modify the picture developed originally through the research. Implementation of plans will always work straight back into the research process: it both produces more information and experience and requires more research and evaluation. The process is cyclical and ongoing.

The basic premise behind the research process outlined here is that there are four key questions that need to be addressed throughout the life of projects (from inception through to implementation, and beyond). These questions are:

1. What are we trying to do?
2. How are we trying to do it?
3. How well are we doing?
4. How can we do it differently/better?

These four questions must be asked periodically. Answering them in the ways suggested produces a systematic yet adaptable method for effectively developing and evaluating projects. The idea is to develop a *research culture* within a project. If action research means a way of thinking about the relationship between knowledge and action (rather than specific research methods), then it can be part of the culture of a project or organization. That is to say, people can routinely think about what they need to know, what they do know, what knowledge their activities produce, how they can go about knowing more, and how they relate their knowledge to planning future activities.

Although we have written a handbook – which we will continue to update and rewrite in the light of the experiences of ictPR and other projects where we intend to apply it – it is not yet clear if there are limits to the degree to which any such approach can be effectively used as an ‘off the shelf’ solution to evaluation and improved project outcomes/design. We can see in the ictPR case that the impulse for some project workers and researchers to follow the more traditional evaluation route of conducting large baseline surveys followed up by further surveys, that attempt to measure impacts and variables may prove difficult to overcome. As supervisors of the research we are continually working to overcome this. It is clear however, that where our approach is working well, the benefits are beginning to show. The Nabanna project in West Bengal illustrates how well this approach can work when project development is integrated with ethnographic action research.

Nabanna

‘Nabanna’ is an autumn rice harvest festival in West Bengal, an important ritual in an area where rice is the main crop. The name was chosen for this local ICT initiative because the festival is seen to be of particular significance to rural women – the target

group for this project. Nabanna in this context refers to the harvesting of knowledge rather than of rice. Nabanna is being implemented by a local NGO called Change Initiatives in the Baduria Municipality of West Bengal, India. The municipality consists of 17 wards spread over a large area with a total population of over 47,000. The Change Initiatives team describe the area as like four islands separated by land masses and a river. Their concern is to improve the conditions for poor women in this area through improving information and communication flows. They are seeking to create networks of women throughout the municipality in order to share local knowledge and to uncover what kinds of information the women require from other sources. There are two components to this. There is the information (content) itself and there is the means of distribution.

With their aim to reach as many people as possible, and collect knowledge for redistribution and sharing from as many people as possible, Nabanna uses the simple idea of network growth. At the centre of the network will be a web portal in Bengali language – this will be the space where indigenous and other knowledge will be stored, shared, sourced and exchanged. Forty-four poor women, selected through a series of group discussions and interviews, are being trained to build the web portal, gathering and searching for information that is of relevance to them, and to the women they interact with in their local neighbourhoods. Each woman has created an information group, consisting of the women in a further 10 households with whom they will work to share, collect and record local knowledge as well as identify knowledge gaps. Through these 44 women trained in computing and the Internet, many other women will gain access to information and contribute to the information generation and distribution. Small information and communication centres will be set up in five sites across the municipality, each equipped with a PC, a printer, a modem and a telephone line. In addition, Nabanna will produce a regular printed newsletter containing some of the content of the web portal in an effort to expand the reach of the project.

Nabanna provides a neat example of how ICTs can be used to improve information and communication flows amongst poor women in West Bengal. But it is the way in which Nabanna has utilised the ethnographic action research approach to research and project development that is of relevance to this paper. They have engaged in three months ‘immersion’ work, using a range of methods, to identify women to take part in the project and to begin to understand the local communicative ecology and information needs of the area. Alongside group discussion, formal and informal interviews, structured and unstructured short questionnaires, Nabanna has developed the basic setup of the project in ways which the research tells them they might be most effective. One interesting method that they have used is diary keeping by the 44 women central to the network. It has become an important way for deepening the project’s understanding of local lives and at the same time is providing them with interesting and highly relevant content for their portal.

Nabanna is now moving into the second stage of ethnographic action research – as the communication centres are being set up and the women are being trained in computing and the Internet, they are planning targeted research to explore in more depth some of the themes that have emerged during the first three months. Key amongst these is poverty itself – what does it mean in this municipality? What aspects of poverty do the women themselves want to address? How can increased information

flow and knowledge sharing most effectively help in poverty reduction? And how will the project workers know if they are being effective? As Nabanna develops these findings will be fed back into the project to ensure it achieves and retains its local relevance. Their wider research is mapping out the situations of these women, their localities, neighbourhoods, educational, health, political and communication infrastructures within which they work – and the formal and informal social communication networks that already exist. How can they tap into these, how can they make them more effective? In addition, the very issue of what poverty is and how it is experienced by people in Baduria, and comparatively by people in different areas of Baduria, will allow Nabanna to ensure its work is targeted on the areas that local people themselves see as important.

In conclusion, we are not yet at a stage where we can draw firm conclusions about the usefulness and transferability of ethnographic action research, although we can say that so far its use in the ictPR programme is looking extremely encouraging. In mapping out its development to date, we hope to raise discussion and share experiences with others working in similar research and ICT project development areas. We might, however, make two rather general points here.

Firstly, one early lesson that is poignant for us is the importance of having a realistic opportunity for any research and evaluation findings and recommendations to be taken up as the responsibility of someone involved in project delivery (the project itself, funders, stakeholders). Our frustration from the Kothmale work was that we hadn't actually looked at, or had time to pursue, how findings might be used. Staff at KCRIP were involved in the evaluation, and very much wanted our work to have positive effects on the project – this was a main motivator to their participation in the research. In this regard we are, of course, looking for ways to ensure that the evaluation will be used and recommendations will be followed. Contrast this with the research we are involved with in the ictPR programme, and the use of the ethnographic action research approach (which is by necessity participatory) and it is already abundantly clear that the gap between research and application of research (through project development) is closing.

Secondly, through involvement in variously funded research projects, we are building a comparative body of research on the social impacts and possibilities of ICTs in a range of settings – all using ethnographic approaches. Over the next couple of years we will be involved in ICT related ethnographic action research in South Asia, the UK and Australia, and more traditional ethnographic research around new technologies and poverty in India, South Africa, Ghana and Jamaica. It would be interesting for us to look at ways in which we can build a bank of research and a network of researchers and projects using similar research approaches.