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## India calling

Rachael Jolley

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# India calling



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It's citizen journalism with a twist. Shubhranshu Choudhary and his team have harnessed some simple technology to bring news reporting to a whole region of people in central India who felt abandoned by the traditional media, finds **Rachael Jolley**. Photos by **Purushottam Thakur**

**W**HEN THE WORLD needs innovation it often looks for the discovery of some cutting-edge technology to solve the problem. But sometimes something simple can provide the answer.

## The combination of mobile, internet and radio can really create a democracy in this country

In central India, a journalist who wanted to change the lives of millions of people found his technical challenge solved by a simple, non-smart mobile phone.

Former BBC South Asia producer Shubhranshu Choudhary didn't have to ask the techies to pull something clever out of the box; instead, he needed a bit of technology to which millions of poor people already had access, and once he realised that, he knew where to look. He created a new kind of media service where anyone could call in and leave a message in their own language and suggest or tell a news story; alternatively, →

ABOVE: Volunteers learn how to use the news platform at Swara





ABOVE: Women phone in to hear the news

→ they could call and listen to stories left by others.

Many poor, rural people who live in Chhattisgarh and in the forested areas of central India do not speak Hindi or English, the main languages of the Indian media; they don't have access to newspapers or internet news; they live in remote villages, often without running water and schools. They also live at the centre of a region that the Indian government has been pouring troops into for years to tackle the "Maoist insurgency".

For these people, this invention, a media platform called CGNet Swara, was a way of both telling news stories and listening to

news from others, using a piece of equipment they either already owned or could get access to.

The latest Indian census (2011) reported that more people had a mobile phone than had inside toilets, with 53 per cent of households in the country owning a mobile phone, compared with only 3.1 per cent having internet access. Take into account the fact that, in addition to these 53 per cent of households, people share mobile phones with others beyond the household, and others use landlines, giving an even wider group access to telephone communication. In fact the Indian telecommunications regulator



TRAI suggest that access to mobile phones stand at around 70 per cent, with this figure at 40 per cent in rural communities.

Choudhary, a Knight International Journalism Fellow, was inspired to create a news platform for this region during his time working for the BBC: “I was travelling from one war zone to another, then wars started near my home. I grew up in central India and I also covered the region for the BBC. When something happens nearer to you, nearer to your heart, it makes you think more. The difference in this case was that I grew up in that area, and the backbenchers in my school – they were the ‘terrorists’ that the prime minister called the ‘biggest internal security threat’, and it unnerved me. These were the students that never raised their voices, and how come 25 years later they had become ‘terrorists’?”

So he took some time living in the forests of central India with these communities, who were being referred to as Maoists. And he was told by the local people that the system of communicating news, and communicating what was wrong in their lives, was not working for them. “This is a huge community, around 100 million people, and this is a breakdown of communication. Our communication system is still very aristocratic, where a small number of people sitting on top have too much power and the huge majority of people don’t have any voice or have very little power to decide what is not heard and what should be heard. When you sit in a village in a small group of people under a tree and discuss the issues, then that discussion is democratic because the medium they use is air, which is not owned by anyone.” Democracy or equality disappears when certain people own the medium that transmits the news, he argues, and when a group’s voice is not being heard, grudges accumulate. He argues that the absence of those debates leads to dissatisfaction and leaves communities susceptible to groups who come to the forest claiming that they

can create something better: “We call it the Maoist problem, but the number of people in the forest who are Maoist is 2 per cent or 5 per cent. They have simple problems such as water, roads, hospitals, jobs, and we didn’t deliver because we didn’t hear them.”

Many people are *adivasis*, marginalised indigenous people, who often have low levels of literacy but have an oral history tradition of passing on news and traditions. “We go to these villages and ask who speaks Hindi without realising that is the language of the rich; 70 to 90 per cent of these people don’t speak any language but their mother tongue,” said Choudhary.

## **The huge majority of people don’t have any voice or have very little power to decide what is not heard**

But users of the new type of news platform introduced by Choudhary don’t need to speak another language – they can dial in and leave an audio message of the story they would like to tell in their own language. Areas are broken up into groups, so local people hear from other local people, and there are hundreds of these audio communities. Most of these groups primarily listen to local stories, but occasionally the moderators for the service find a story that they think other groups would be interested in, about a wider issue, and it is shared.

It is a bottom-up model, with communities electing their own moderators who are trained by CGNet on skills such as fact checking and phoning back “reporters” to check up on stories. CGNet also translates stories into Hindi and English and publishes them on its website so a wider group of people can read the stories, as well as providing audio in the original language of the contributor. They get around 500 calls →



ABOVE: Staff work closely with volunteers at the news channel.

## DID YOU KNOW ?

104 million households in India have radios, double the number that have TVs

53 per cent of homes have mobile phones, but only 47 per cent have an indoor toilet

India Census, 2011

→ per day, 50 of which they record. After checks, about five recordings are broadcast.

“We have a strict cross check and filtering process, including calling back to encourage them, and if it is opinion it needs to be clearly labelled,” said Choudhary. He points out that the difference between this system and the traditional newspaper editor is that these moderators are elected by the community, and so actually represent them.

Stories are varied and range from one report that a forest ranger asked for bribes totalling RR99,000 rupees (US\$1,628), to another about school dinners not arriving, while a third reports on high numbers of blind and mentally ill children in an *advasi*

village. Swara is clearly having impact too: days after the report about the numbers of blind village children, a health team arrived to find out more, and the ranger has now repaid his bribes.

CGNet is carrying out a wide range of activities to enhance the smooth running of the news platform, including training young people as translators and training adults as moderators, but it is hoped that training will be devolved to the community in the longer term. It is working towards what it calls a “temple model”, in which people train each other: a sort of trickle-down technique for learning. It is also publishing all its learning and knowledge about its technology so other

groups can set up similar projects in other regions.

The next step is shortwave radio, which would allow them to reach much bigger audiences still, including those who cannot read. There are obstacles though. Currently there is a news radio reporting monopoly held by the government-backed national All India Radio, although there have been some suggestions that this regulation may be relaxed. So to push onwards CGNet is looking to work with an international provider such as the BBC, with whom Chaudhary has held initial conversations.

“The combination of mobile, internet and radio can really create a democracy in this country. If you can link with radio you have to do so from outside the country because India doesn’t allow shortwave radio. If we want to do shortwave linkage we can only do it from outside India.”

Around 104 million Indian households have access to a radio, double the number with televisions, making radio an extremely powerful communication tool.

Right now, Choudhary is looking for a partner to help make that next step happen, but he is confident that this type of news service is making a difference.

“It is not solving all problems, but you can create some hope, you can combat some problems. You can tackle the attitude of hopelessness.” ☒

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**Rachael Jolley** is the editor of Index on Censorship magazine