

SRI LANKA'S KOTHTMALE COMMUNITY RADIO INTERNET PROJECT***I. Abstract**

The Kothmale Community Radio Internet Project is an attempt to extend the benefits of information and communication technology (ICT) to some of the remote areas of Sri Lanka through the innovative convergence of two media—the radio and the Internet. Most of the radio broadcasts use information collected by browsing the Internet; this information is then discussed with listeners on the air. The Internet access points established in the community enable direct computer access and respond to the information needs of various groups in the community (60 villages and 3 rural towns). An online database of information requests is maintained, and a Web page in local languages enables active community participation in the operation of the radio.

Easy and free access to information has been effectively used by community members for business, educational, recreational, and other purposes. More than 30 Web pages have been created by community youths. In addition, an Internet club and a listeners' club have been formed. The radio station has become an integral part of the community, with people actively participating in interactive programs, contributing compact disks and songs to the station, and using the information aired on various programs to upgrade their businesses or learn more skills.

However, the operational and financial sustainability of the project needs more attention and consideration needs to be given to better utilization of technical capacities for increasing revenue. In addition, the project has reached a point where staff-management coordination requires review and remedial action.

II. Background

The Kothmale FM Community Radio Station was set up in February 1989 by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation with the objective of providing information to more than 60,000 people who had been relocated as a result of Sri Lanka's second largest dam project—the Mahaweli Irrigation Project. This radio station was one of the four community radio stations established in the country at that time. In 1996, discussions held between the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and community radio broadcasters gave rise to the concept of merging two media—the radio and the Internet. It was proposed that the integration of these media would not only increase the knowledge base of the community, but also lower connectivity costs and make the Internet accessible to a wider audience.

The project was supported by a UNESCO grant of US\$30,000. Responsibility for project implementation was assumed by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation; the Ministry of

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The station was technically upgraded for the Internet project. The station was shifted from its previous location on an isolated hilltop to a more accessible central region of Mawathura. A 64 Kbs (kilobytes per second) microwave connection, a telephone line, a server computer, and three Internet computers (two for community access) were installed in the station. UNESCO provided the computer equipment and training.

During the initial stages, the station was permitted one hour of transmission time a week. In February 1991, this was extended to three days a week with three hours of transmission a day. Currently, the station is on the air for 12.5 hours a day on weekdays and 8 hours a day on weekends. The morning broadcast has been commercialized, and 75 percent of the operational costs are collected from this source. The station's transmissions cover a targeted broadcast area with a 20-kilometer radius that includes 60 villages and 3 rural towns (with a combined population of approximately 200,000 people), and 17 schools.

The station airs programs on health, human rights, international news, and women's and children's programs. It receives inputs from the community in the form of letters, calls, and drop-ins. Questions and queries sent in by the listeners are answered by surfing the Web or reading CD-ROMs. In addition, the station also airs the "Radio Browsing the Internet" program in which the Web surfing is done during the program by trained volunteers, and the information is communicated in a local language (Tamil or Sinhala) and discussed with the listeners on the air. Thus, the program acts as an interface between the Internet and people who do not have direct computer access.

Apart from the station, the server provides two other computer access points, established in the nearby towns of Navalapitiya and Gampola. The three computer access points together facilitate direct computer and Internet access for the local community. The FM radio station also serves as a local service provider. At times, the computer access points have been used as direct links to the radio station to produce and air live broadcast programs.

The staff and the volunteers of the radio station, who belong to the families of plantation workers and farmers in the surrounding areas, are educated, which reflects a literacy rate in Sri Lanka that exceeds 90 percent. Currently, 19 people are employed as relief announcers, and there are 15 volunteers. The volunteers, mostly young persons, seek to expand their knowledge of computers and technology by working at the radio station. Field visits to the community for recorded and live broadcasts are carried out frequently. Staff members have a high degree of autonomy and make decisions on programming independently.

A US\$50,000 grant by UNESCO helped Kothmale to become a part of the World Wide Web in 1998. An Internet hub, which includes a local server and five computer terminals, was established. A Web page, based on information provided by listeners, has also been established. The Website component of the project has enabled the development of a

database containing useful information for the community. In addition, as content is posted in local languages, linguistic barriers have been removed.

III. Impact/Results

The project has helped to spread the benefits of ICT to some of the remote areas of Sri Lanka, where previously even telephone lines did not exist. Thousands of people have been exposed to the Internet directly, through access to computer access points, and indirectly, through such programs as “Radio Browsing on the Internet,” newsletters, and personal sources, such as teachers and peers in school. As reported by a local survey, 90 percent of respondents listen to the radio’s Internet program for information.¹

This information is used for various purposes, such as education, business, livelihood, and recreation. For instance, a farmer learned new techniques of growing and storing tomatoes. A village baker tried out new recipes that he found on the Internet. Teachers have download lessons and games for learning English. The information on the radio-browsing program has enabled tea farmers to improve their tea-drying techniques. In addition, easy and free access to the Internet has led to many initiatives and model projects by the members of the community.

An average of 20 to 25 people surf the six computers at the radio station daily, while the Gampola computer access point is host to 10 to 15 surfers. Internet access has been more popular with youth: in a sample survey, 95 percent of the users were between the ages of 10 and 25 years old, with 60 percent of these between 15 and 20.²

Box 1: “A New Initiative in the Community”

Andrew Udaya Kumara, noticing the heavy emphasis on environmental issues on the Internet, wanted to initiate reforestation programs in the local community. After extensive research on the Net, and communication with his friends through e-mails, he formed a nongovernmental organization (NGO) named the Green Lanka Nature Conserving Association. The Association has undertaken more than 100 acres of reforestation activities. In addition, it also engages in wildlife rehabilitation, environmental law, waste minimization, and clean production.

A large number of school children, university graduates, and trainees from vocational training centers are reported to have made use of the Internet access points for training and demonstration purposes. More than 30 Web pages were designed at the radio station by community youth within two years of the project’s inception. The content of these Web pages includes local history, culture, religious traditions, poetry, and artwork. The community Website, which can be accessed in three languages (English, Sinhala, and Tamil), is host to 20 community stories, and has become a medium of community expression. In addition, a listeners’ club and an Internet club have been formed.

¹ Results from a survey conducted by Tanya Notley, which are included in her unpublished report on Kothmale (2000). The survey sampled 93 users of the Kothmale Internet facilities over a two-week period.

² Notley (2002).

The Kothmale staff and the volunteers have developed new and enhanced skills in terms of research, electronic networking, and computer-based production for both the Web and print.

The community radio is under the control of the community, with minimal supervision from the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

IV. Key Elements of Empowerment

Information

The radio station is an important medium for disseminating information on key community issues. For instance, when people in the region lost their lands and started working on tea estates, their immediate information requirements were for tea cultivation methods. The radio station not only broadcast the essential information, but also gave insights on issues such as self-employment and health.

The computer access points provide free Internet access to the people of the community. The Internet is widely used by school children, self-employed people, farmers, and other members of the community.

The radio-browsing program has successfully provided customized information to community members, especially to people who cannot access the Internet because of language barriers. On-air Internet browsing and comments by experts during the broadcast make the program a dependable and credible source of information.

Inclusion/Participation

The radio station encourages the participation of community members in various programs. An attempt is made to involve the community in the programs as much as possible by broadcasting information in local languages and on local topics related to indigenous knowledge, health, agriculture, and entertainment. For instance, doctors, lawyers, and teachers often act as experts on radio programs and reply to listeners' queries after browsing the Internet.

Frequent workshops and events are held to encourage local participation. The station also facilitates discussions on local issues in which opinions and information are exchanged. In this way, the station acts as a meeting point for the community.

The following excerpt from an interview indicates the level of community participation in the operations of the radio station.

Box 2: "I sent my first letter to the station 3 years ago"

"My name is S.B.K Wijarathna. My village is Dekekanawa Nawalapitya. I sell lottery tickets. I am 52 years old, and I am married, with three daughters.... I sent my first letter to the station

three years ago; it was aired the next day. The feeling I had on that day was very joyful. Since then, I write to this station and I contribute with poems and historical stories and send facts and information.... I think this station is a very friendly broadcasting service; it gives opportunities to new singers and artists. Our listeners enjoy the songs very much.”

The radio-browsing program follows a participatory approach to operation. Responding to the information requirements of community members, information is assimilated collectively, in contrast to the prevailing mode of individual information access by computer. Listeners not only get the requested information, but also react and discuss it on the air.

Local Organizational Capacity

Regular and enthusiastic listeners of the radio programs have formed an Internet listeners' club, consisting of a sizable number of community members, which delivers news summaries to the station every day. The club also sought permission from the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation to allow community membership in the project, and collected US\$300 as an initial fund to support the facility.

The Website (www.kothmale.net) is a local community initiative. An Internet club has been formed whose members have learned skills such as HTML and Web page design. A variety of Web pages have been created on topics as diverse as techniques to produce local honey (*kitul*), to the Mahaweli dam, snakes, and personal profiles.

Through the mediation of the radio, various community events have been organized, such as a blood donation campaign and an exhibition focusing on self-employment. The radio station also aided in collecting US\$12,500 for a new hospital project with kidney transplant facilities.

V. Issues and Lessons

Challenges

Because community access is free of charge, one of the major issues facing the project's implementation has been its financial and operational sustainability. For instance, computers broke down in the first year of the project's operation. Another example of operational failure was the disconnection of the Internet leased line during most of 2001, because the original agreements for the project had expired (since operational costs were high, the agreement had not been renewed). Although the agreement between Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and UNESCO was renewed in late November, the sustainability of the agreement remains uncertain.

The project needs to exploit its potential for revenue generation in order to tackle the problem of sustainability. For instance, the station could offer dial-up accounts and e-mail addresses to groups, businesses, and individuals that can afford to pay for these

services, and thereby subsidize access for other members of the community who cannot afford these services.³

Certain technical issues, such as enhancing the accessibility of the remote access points set up in the community, require attention. A survey result reported that in a two-week period, 56 percent of users traveled more than one hour to use the facility. Because of bureaucratic barriers and logistical problems, these centers have not been fully operational. According to Pringle and David (2002), computer access would have been improved if the centers had been connected. In addition, the leased line and the station's computer server could be used to set up more remote access points within the community.

With central agencies such as Sri Lanka Telecom and Colombo University involved in the project design, the radio station had less say in the organizational and administrative aspects of the project. The enforcement mechanisms employed were such that they gave limited authority to the radio station to tackle problems arising during day-to-day operations. For instance, the station was not given the passwords for the main page of the Website, because the team at Colombo handled Website administration. Consequently, the staff at the station could not upload changes to the pages of the Website and manage them independently. Thus, the data on the Web page became outdated in a short period of time. To resolve this issue, the staff at the station developed a new Website (www.kothmale.net). Although the launch of a new site provided respite from the problems discussed above, this incident demonstrates a strong need for management support and organizational planning.

The initial phases of the Kothmale project witnessed extensive community research for designing the type and content of programs, the outreach activities, the development of the Website, and other strategic decisions made in order to spread the benefits of information technology within the community. Replication of the project by another country would require consideration of community- and country-specific factors, as well as the design of national plans that support the use and applications of ICTs in rural areas.

Key Factors for Success

Overall, the Kothmale Radio Internet Project has provided easy access to information for its community members. Information from the two media, the radio and the Internet, has been used constructively for a variety of purposes. Increased participation and a sense of ownership among the audience have made the radio station an important part of the community, and have facilitated the organization of events, exhibitions, and discussions about local needs. Information access and increased community participation can be regarded as major forces behind the success of the project.

³ Pringle and David (2002).

VI. Further Information: References and World Wide Web Resources

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