

The liminal role of the information intermediary in community multimedia centres

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Abstract - Donor and government funded Internet kiosks, telecentres and community multimedia centres continue to be implemented in developing countries, yet many remain underutilised, and subsequently shut down. This paper argues that a large part of this is because not enough attention is paid to the information intermediaries - the centre or kiosk manager and staff, whose responsibility it is to translate government or donor policy at field level, and make ICTs more accessible to the public. There appears to be insufficient research on these critical individuals. Drawing on the ideas of contradiction and conflict from Giddens's structuration theory, and Goffman's concept of performance, we present the position of information intermediaries at a donor funded community multimedia centre in rural India. The analysis illustrates that the intermediaries stand on a shaky bridge between various groups of stakeholders. Firstly, they are somewhat condescending towards the community they are working with. Secondly, they are in turn regarded by their superiors as the bottom of the (developmentalist) pyramid. Thirdly, they encounter contradiction and conflict with other stakeholder groups. Fourth, they manipulate their performance according to the circumstances required. While information intermediaries play a critical role in facilitating public access to ICTs, they can also hinder it, and we call for greater care paid to these intermediaries when such centres are implemented.

Index Terms— intermediaries, community multimedia centres, telecentres, contradiction, conflict, performance.

I. INTRODUCTION

After the early hype of "overcoming the digital divide" and taking technology to the last mile, an increasing focus began to emerge on the importance of intermediaries who would help facilitate ICT access. Yet, the position and motivations of these individuals has generally been seen as positive. This paper presents a detailed analysis, incorporating narrative techniques, of the field level intermediaries at a donor established community multimedia centre (a centre incorporating computers, the Internet, community radio, telephones, loudspeakers, photocopier and fax) in India. In terms of how we define "intermediary", we adopt the Oxford English Dictionary definition of "a person who acts as a link

between people in order to try and bring about an agreement or re-conciliation; a mediator" [1]. We believe that it is this link which appears undertheorised in ICTD literature. What are the personalities and motivations of these intermediaries? What are the challenges they encounter in their everyday social practices? We first briefly outline how the role of the intermediary has been seen in "ICTD". Next, we present how the intermediary has been analysed both in development and information science. Thirdly, we present two specific theoretical constructs: the faultlines of contradiction and conflict from structuration theory, and the notion of performance from Erving Goffman. We then introduce our case study of Voices and analyse the role of the intermediaries according to these two theoretical constructs.

II. THE INTERMEDIARY

A. *The intermediary in ICTD*

It is increasingly pointed out that an intermediary is necessary to facilitate public access to information and ICTs [2-4]. In the donor established community multimedia centre Nabanna [5], selected women were trained to further train others on the opportunities to learn computer skills at the centres. Similarly, in the network of around 600 Akshaya telecentres in the Malappuram district of Kerala, intermediaries raised awareness about telecentres [6, 7]. However in ICTD, intermediaries can be seen in a mainly positive light in their efforts to help others. For example, writing about the potential of ICTs in empowering those at the "bottom of the pyramid", Prahalad presents the following view of 16 EID Parry kiosks established in Tamil Nadu, India in 2001 [8]: "through use of technology, farm extension services are now available from village kiosks. Farmers can gather information directly from the kiosk or communicate with an agronomist to get specific, customised advice via e-mail. A typical turnaround time is a day. Services such as crop diagnostics can even be performed remotely. The franchisee can use a digital camera to photograph the crop to be inspected and e-mail the image to the agronomist. The agronomist then can follow up with his diagnosis. All this can be done without the farmer leaving the village." (p. 157-158).

However, what Prahalad does not do is discuss the role of the franchisee/kiosk manager (who we would consider the intermediary) in greater detail. What is his attitude? What is his motivation to photograph the crop and contact the agronomist? What would be the relationship between him and

Manuscript received January 4, 2010. This work was supported by Microsoft Research India during fieldwork.

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the farmer, and him and the agronomist? And indeed, how would the situation be different, if the franchisee was a woman? There are only hints of the delicate yet critical position of the information intermediary. For example, in van Belle and Trussler's analysis of a community multimedia centre (CMC) in South Africa [9], one of the employees states of the CMC manager that: "[he] was the driver. [He] was the one who stepped on toes. [He] was the one who told you, "I want that thing, and I want it now, not yesterday, now!" He is the one that pulled everything together. If he was not here then everything would fall apart. Not that we are not in control, everyone knows what they have to do in here. But he is the one, not with the ideas, we all have ideas, but he is the one that puts the action to the ideas and makes sure that things get done." The position of the intermediary is therefore clearly pivotal - having to operationalise policies, being powerful but having to empower others.

It is only recently that [10] suggested a conceptualisation of the information intermediary in facilitating public Internet access was necessary, stating that we should ask questions such as what are the services they are providing, who they are, how they are giving their services and why they are doing so. In this paper, although we discuss the questions of who the information intermediaries are and "why" they are facilitating access, we take this debate further to illustrate their liminal position. It should also be pointed out that Voices was not simply a "public access Internet point" but also a community multimedia centre, intending to integrate different types of technologies. Before proceeding to the case study, let us review the existing debates in development on intermediaries.

B. The intermediary in development literature

There seems to have been an increasing focus on the role of the intermediary in implementing development projects from the 1950s until now. In the modernisation era (to the extent it can be homogenised such, usually defined between the 1950s-1960s), the intermediary appeared to be mainly deterministic, employed by governments or development agencies to create awareness and promote development initiatives, change behaviour and create a "modernised society" [11]. Intermediaries were expected to be neutral, in the sense that they were seen to be transferring information, whether they were agricultural extension officers or educationalists. They were therefore seen as no more than a channel in the SMCR model:

Source >Message > Channel > Receiver

Source: [12, 13]

The positionality of the intermediary - their attitudes, challenges and circumstances they worked in - appears rarely discussed in this era. In the 1970s, the paradigm shift to "community participation" included Freire's approach of "conscientisation" [14] which meant a focus on the intermediary, or what Freire called an "animator", who would work with the "oppressed" to free them. However, Freire's

vision of the intermediary as benevolent and those he/she works with as "oppressed" has been criticised for being too simplistic and binary - both on account of disregarding the powerplay the intermediary may be involved in, as well as homogenising the oppressed as one group, while it is likely that power struggles also occur here [15].

Post-development literature from the 1990s onwards began to question the role of the intermediary in more detail. Michener argued that unlike policymakers "who have the luxury of expanding participatory rhetoric", intermediaries have to deal with the realities of project implementation [16]. Secondly, [17] stated that intermediaries working between development agencies and a community may tend to align themselves with the development agency, which they consider modern, while considering the rest of the village to be traditional and conservative, giving the example of an FAO fish scout in Zambia who considers the rest of the village "ignorant". [18] comments that the intermediary becomes more of a "promoter or a professional of participation rather than a sensitive party to process of mutual learning" (p. 123). Thirdly, even if the intermediary tries his or her hardest to work with the community, it is possible that the latter do not consider the former a part of them, but rather as representative of the development agency. For example, in Harrison's study of agricultural extension workers in Ethiopia, the workers are young, with only nine months of training, but they have to collect debts from farmers so they are not seen by the farmers as one of them [19]. Further, even if the intermediary tries his/her hardest to promote the community's needs, the latter may be sceptical as they are familiar with policy coming from higher echelons, as illustrated in Arce and Long's study of agricultural extension workers in Mexico [20].

The post development literature therefore illustrates the ambivalent position of the intermediary - between the development agency, the government or the NGO on one hand, and the "community" on the other hand, the intermediary adopts a liminal position, neither completely belonging to one group or the other. On the one hand, the intermediaries are powerful. Lipsky's analysis of street level bureaucrats (which he defined as government employed teachers, health care workers and other public servants who interacted directly with the public) illustrated how the latter interpreted and enacted policies in their own way, using their discretion, but also heavily influenced by their beliefs and stereotyping [21]. While intermediaries in development may appear to reflect this, they are also vulnerable as we have seen in Harrison's example above, the bottom of the "development hierarchy", yet not completely part of the communities they are working with. Next, we see how this liminal position has also been discussed in information science, a field also relevant to community multimedia centres, given their central role in information and communication.

C. The intermediary in information science

Writing in 1902, the librarian Corinne Bacon listed "approachableness, omniscience, tact, patience, persistence,

accuracy, knowledge of one's tools, knowledge of one's town, and familiarity with current events ..." as the reference librarian's essential skills [22]. Cronin states that librarians need to review the vast amount of information that is available, and analyse, evaluate and organise according to the user's needs [23]. Mendez and Montero say that one of the essential roles of the librarian is to ensure "democratic access" to information [24]. With this long list of qualities required, we can see that much is required from this individual. A reference librarian is a typical information intermediary, and although this is similar to the agricultural extensionists and teachers discussed in the earlier section, this intermediary's mandate is potentially more difficult, because they are nonspecialist.

As with other intermediaries, technology has not eliminated the need for this information intermediary, but it has changed the role. Also, as with other intermediaries, the attitude of the librarian is critical - as early as 1999, White argued that the Internet made librarians more unwilling to help, because they told the public to search online and not bother "busy librarians" [25].

In theory, the role of the reference librarian in developing countries should be celebrated as that of the gatekeeper to information, information literacy and promoting general confidence on the part of the user. However, drawing from their research in the Dominican Republic, Mendez and Montero state that lack of government funding, meaning low salaries, and poor public perception of a librarian as "boring" can potentially lead to a mutually antagonistic relationship with users [24]. All these characteristics are similar to those of the telecentre/multimedia centre intermediary: they need to have a great deal of knowledge not only about the technology they are using, but also the relevant information needed, and how to convey that. Next, we theorise this liminal position of intermediaries, borrowing from structuration and performance.

III. THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

A. *Contradiction and conflict*

Structuration theory has often been used in information systems [26],[27, 28] – see [29] for a comprehensive review of structuration theory and information systems, and [27] for its application in "ICT and development" literature. Structuration "refers abstractly to the dynamic processes whereby structures come into being" [30]. By reenacting structure - memory traces, including awareness of power and ability to deploy both human and material resources, individuals reproduce it creating systems - shared symbols, values and norms. [28] gives an example of a manager who scolds an employee for arriving late. The manager is drawing on the concept of the start time of the employee, the rule that the employee should arrive before this time, and the ability of the manager to deploy the human resource that is the employee and to have power over the employee. Giddens states that "while not

made by any single person, society is created and recreated a fresh, if not ex-nihilo, by the participants in every social encounter" [31].

The production of society is skilled performance sustained and "made to happen" by human beings" [30]. For Giddens, "the moment of production of action is also one of reproduction in the context of day-to-day enactment of social life" [31]. The theory offers a suggestion as to how actors are at the same time the creators of social systems yet created by them, for example when using and creating language. Giddens states that "when uttering a sentence, relying upon rules sedimented in practical consciousness, I simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of the language as a whole" ([31], p. 37).

However, reproduction of society can also be challenged by what Giddens calls "contradiction" and "conflict". Contradiction illustrates what Giddens calls "fault lines" in society, whereas conflict is the actual struggle between actors or groups. Giddens states that "conflict and contradiction tend to coincide because contradiction expresses the main "faultlines" in the structural constitution of societal systems" [31]. To continue the example given by Walsham above, the employee and the manager may disagree on start times (contradiction), but conflict point is reached if the employee is given repeated warnings and finally dismissed. However, Giddens also comments that "if contradiction does not inevitably breed conflict, it is because the condition under which actors are not only aware of their interests but are most able and motivated to act on them are widely variable" [31] p. 119). Performance, which we explore next, may be one strategy for actors to outwardly conform and recreate social systems (because it is advantageous to do so), while underneath believing something different.

B. *Performance*

The American sociologist Erving Goffman proposed that as individuals we are constantly in performance with one another, or acting on the "front stage" [32]. Any behaviour not intended for the audience occurs in the "back stage". He called the decision of whether behaviour was meant to be front stage or back stage "framing" [33]. The actor either "gives" (verbal symbols or expression) or "gives off" (actions or what Goffman calls sign activity) information to support his act. Goffman states that "if unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them; or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to them" [32].

The performer is therefore aware that the audience is judging him/her on a variety of factors including rank, clothing, posture, speech patterns and racial characteristics. If he/she wants someone to think highly of them, they can either "give" or "give off" sign activity. For example, girls in a dormitory can arrange for calls to be made to create the illusion that they are very popular, or teachers can create the illusion that they

are very strict on the first day to ensure control of the class. Both are examples of sign activity [32]. Women may pretend to be less intelligent than men in order to achieve their objectives. Another example is status - as the circumstances require, particular class or caste groups may emulate higher/lower/richer/poorer groups. While some may wish to appear rich, others may find it more beneficial to appear poor depending on the circumstances: Goffman gives an example of an Italian social security investigator who overhears conversations in Italian during her home visits, such as a woman telling her child to put shoes or clothes away in an effort to convey the need for social security.

The need for actors's performance generally relates back to the desire for ontological security. Actors may wish to conform to their peer group, or to a particular stereotype. They may be calculating - there may be value in projecting a particular performance, or there may be something to hide "back stage". Goffman argues that "framing" is a means of understanding what the circumstances require and what can be revealed on the front stage. He states "self, then, is not an entity half concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them" [32].

The notion of performance has been used in development by Kothari who argues that strategies such as participatory rural appraisals are performed by all parties. She states that "just as the PRA "expert" is performing, so too are recipients of development aid. Through their performance, they invest power relations in small and big ways" [34]. In terms of ICTs, there is little reference to technology in Goffman's *The presentation of the self*, other than recognizing that back and front stages are adopted by television or radio announcers. However, performance has been applied to online interactions by [35] who sees the internet as a modern "stage" where it is easy for users to assimilate different roles. Analysing 50 relationships in online dating sites, she finds that only three last more than six months, suggesting that people may have been performing online. Similarly, although he does not directly refer to Goffman, [36] illustrates the performance of the leader of the Zapatistas, Sub Commander Marcos, who can be anybody on the Internet. Russell comments that "Marcos is black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel [and so on]" [36], illustrating the ability of any figurehead on the Internet to be able to mould themselves to reflect other struggles. Similarly, in ICTs and development, although there is no direct reference to Goffman, there can be several interpretations, such as the Kayapo Indians in Brazil mentioned by [37], who underplay their contracts with mining and logging companies to avoid alienation from international environmental organisations, and respondents in telecentres surveys who state that their main use of the centres is work-related, although observations illustrate this is not the case [38].

Both structuration and Goffman's performance perspective have been critiqued for being too general [39-41] as well as [42] respectively - but the intention of this paper is not to

analyse the theories in detail, and rather to use them as lenses for our study which we do next.

IV. CASE STUDY

Voices is a community multimedia centre established by an international donor agency¹ in 2001 in an Indian village we will call Bhairavi. It initially comprised four networked computers, a scanner, a printer, a photocopier, as well as a community radio. The donor's aim was to provide information about employment, better farming techniques and health, which would lead to sustainable job opportunities, and improved quality of life (the exact words have not been used here in order to preserve anonymity of the case study). At the time of research, there was no Internet access (there were conflicting reports on whether this ever worked), which was clearly a major impediment to the project. Despite this, basic computer familiarisation, navigation in Windows Explorer, Microsoft Word and Excel continued to be taught at the centre. The key "multimedia" component of Voices however, was the community radio, which played for roughly an hour daily, with content such as agricultural and medical advice, market prices, as well as songs and quizzes. In 2004, loudspeakers were placed in the lower caste satellite villages which disseminated the programs.

When donor funding ended after three years, the two intermediary NGOs, Maatu and Jaan, decided for the sake of financial efficiency to merge Voices into Jaan's existing operation of a "community managed resource centre". Guru, the Jaan centre manager, a 35-year-old ex-agricultural extension officer with 11 years history working in the area with Jaan was then therefore effectively in charge of Voices. At the time of research, he employed six community resource persons (or CRPs) - Nikhil, Sheila, Divya, Veena, Manu and Rani. Between them, they taught the IT classes, contributed and managed programmes for the community radio, and generally publicised the centre. According to Guru, the CRPs were "the bridge between the centre and the people". A management committee (MC) had been formed for Voices, comprising 12 representatives from the self-help groups in the village. However, this committee had disbanded in 2004 and was replaced by a more diverse committee covering a larger catchment area.

Three particular events appeared to be critical in the history of Voices for those interviewed. Firstly, in 2005, a camera was stolen and appeared to generate bad feeling between the centre staff and village residents. Secondly, also in 2005, one of the staff was allegedly "fired", although the circumstances in which this happened remained unclear. Third, in 2006 (during fieldwork), the cables carrying Voices to the satellite villages were cut, the loudspeakers stolen and used for a local festival. All these events appeared to result in increasing tension between the centre and the residents of the village, and follow up visits in 2007, 2008 and 2009 saw the centre as

¹ All details have been kept anonymous.

desolate, and more as an outpost for Jaan's NGO work, rather than a community centre.

Methodologically, six months were spent at Voices in 2006 to understand the processes of community participation in telecentres for the purposes of doctoral research. As research progressed, it became increasingly apparent that the role of the intermediary was critical, and we therefore focus on these particular individuals (Guru, the CRPs, and the management committee) in this paper. In particular, we deploy narrative analysis to understand how actors use different vocabulary to create their interpretive narrative. According to Riessman "studying narratives is... useful for what they reveal about social life; culture 'speaks itself' through an individual's story" [43]. Studying narratives also complements the theoretical constructs of contradiction and conflict, and how actors perform, as we see adherence to and departure from "social dialect" [44] employed, that is the vocabulary, syntax, values and beliefs employed by actors. Through the text that these actors employ, we see their contradictory position, and we understand further the challenges that they face.

Some important points need to be made before discussing our case study. Firstly, narrative analysis, and interpretive research in general, is highly subjective. Other researchers may present findings from Voices very differently, as indeed they have done so, but we have not discussed here, in order to keep the site anonymous. This leads us to the second point. Individuals interviewed were clearly performing in front of donors for a reason, as we will discuss below. This raised ethical considerations when sharing these "back stage" thoughts in this paper. Several justifications are provided for doing so. Firstly, the site's name and all individuals have been anonymised. Secondly, by 2009, Guru and the CRPs had all moved on (of their own accord on to more lucrative, city-based positions), and therefore do not risk a threat to their jobs. Thirdly, interviewees had not only given their permission to being recorded while interviewed, and were aware of the results being shared publicly, but also saw me, as the independent researcher, as a conduit for their feedback to the donors. Several comments were made during research such as "it is good you are telling this", "we cannot say such things, but you can". This illustrated how deeply ingrained these intermediaries were in reproducing the structure and systems of community multimedia centre success, and therefore in Giddens's terms, did not feel able to act on the conflict they felt. Yet, confusingly, at the same time, they also felt that the transient, unsustainable nature of donor funded projects such as Voices was apparent to all, including the donors, and these "back stage" revelations would not be surprising to them. Finally, as [45] have mentioned, interviewees and interviewers perform in all research. It is indisputable that at this well researched site, interviewees were experienced in interacting with researchers and would not have shared anything that they did not want to - after all, they were also performing in front of me.

V. ANALYSIS

A. *Contradiction and conflict*

One of the faultlines of contradiction for the information intermediaries appears to be regarding the value of information. On the one hand, the information intermediaries are positive about information. For example, for Guru, the centre manager: "a radio programme on agriculture, on how to respect the law can only be good. Most problems here are small. Like drinking problems, husbands beating their wives. They are uneducated people". Similarly, according to one of the community resource persons, "the rural people are forgetting family values... we are talking about how the family should be... information can prevent diseases attacking... rural people cannot be neatness... we have to tell them boil water nicely and tell others". Another CRP (community resource person) stated that "giving awareness is important. Information is important. It is good to help others".

However, the subtext of this narrative appears to be paternalistic, as the speakers are placing themselves higher up the hierarchy in using phrases such as "it is good to help others" and "they are uneducated people". Divya (CRP) states that "before the centre, the village people did not know how to talk, how to behave, they had no social skills". Veena (CRP) stated that "in the beginning, you have to feed a child first, then it can feed by itself. That is what we are doing". This paternalistic attitude is also apparent in the management committee (MC). Manjamma, one of the female members of the committee, states that "people here are uneducated. Only boys study here. We want people to be educated. We want to bring awareness." According to Lakshmi (MC): "as long as you keep telling people, they will gain more knowledge". Therefore, on the one hand, these information intermediaries place value on the information being disseminated by the centre. However, in their use of language, they also illustrate how they are seeing themselves in a paternalistic sense, comparing their work to that of feeding a child. Indeed, Guru places his organisation's work even higher up, saying: "Jaan is like a god to them. Other than Jaan, nobody is helping them." They are therefore distancing themselves from the community they are working with (even though they are drawn from it), as if information is not of value to them per se, but to other "information poor" individuals. In terms of Giddens's values and norms and as previously discussed in the development literature, the intermediaries appear to be distancing themselves from what they see as the values and norms of the community.

On the other hand, there is also contradiction to the donor thinking that if information about employment, better farming techniques and health was provided, sustainable job opportunities, improved farming knowledge and healthier life could be achieved because there is a lack of belief on the part of the intermediaries that people will change. According to Guru, "however much information we tell these people, how to look after your animals, they will not change". He is also critical of the concept of community radio: "never we got more than 40% listening to Voices... even for me my field is

forcing you to listen. Otherwise, I don't like to listen. I like TV". The CRPs are also sceptical about the value of the information. For example one of the CRPs stated "we talk about information on health, we are the ones who keep telling other people to listen. But none of this is worth anything, if you don't have money". Another stated "this information, nobody don't interest. What we are thinking is include the entertainment. Otherwise nobody don't listen. People are saying, we are putting blade, blade, blade [slang for boring]". They are therefore in a contradictory position between appreciating the value of information (the perspective of donor and the NGOs) and seeing it as worthless unless you have money, and boring (the "community" position, although as we will discuss, there are clearly dangers creating such a binary distinction and homogenising both these groups).

Another contradictory, liminal position for the intermediaries is the pressure to produce positive results. Guru complains: "it is very difficult for me. So for example, people read in the paper that after getting market rates from Voices, farmers were going to [nearby major cities] to sell their produce. I said, it's very difficult for us to say that. I'm not saying because of Voices their life has improved. So much of what they say to the outside world is just bullshit. Especially in Bhairavi, farmers have other options - they call friends, they call agents, friends, everybody." He adds "it is very difficult to get people to listen to market rates. People are so used to dealing with the agent, they're happy to pay someone for their security. I will openly say, market rate nobody bothers". Once more, Guru appears to be on the faultlines of different systems.

The third contradiction was the different understanding of what "community" meant. One of the main objectives of the project was that the centre should be "community managed". According to Guru: "donor, they keep saying community, community. Share, share, keep everything open. In India, you cannot leave things open for everyone to use. But I know what it's like here, no? I live here. After the camera was stolen, then they understood. Everybody was rushing to lock". Here, he is associating himself with understanding what it is like "in India", as opposed to those who do not understand what it is like "to live here". Similarly, one of the assumptions was that Voices would be able to broadcast programmes on local corruption. However, Guru argues that this is not an attractive proposition: "people do not want to get involved. Because supposing they complain about the richer people, and later the richer people offer work, they will not support them if they have complained before". Again, this points to a Giddensian contradiction between effectively different social systems or beliefs: one that is focused on empowerment and community, and the other which takes into consideration local context and challenges.

Although initially there was much excitement about the centre, some opinions now circulate in Bhairavi that "the people who work there are snobbish" and "they are not from here, so how can they understand the village" (even though, other than Guru - who has lived in the area for 11 years - all

the CRPs and members of the management committee are from Bhairavi or neighbouring villages). At the same time, an employee (his superior) of Jaan commented that "some small amount he gets every month to stay there and keep the villagers happy" which appears to place him lower in the development hierarchy. It is perhaps understandable that there is resentment on his part that although operationalising policies in challenging circumstances, he feels he does not get recognition for his efforts. For example, when Voices won [a prestigious international award in ICTD] in 2005, Guru recalls: "when we won that award I was not the one who went to collect it. But I'm the one who has to deal with all the problems. They tell us what to do, they come from outside, and in the end they all go back to [the city] and we are left to deal with everything." It is revealing therefore that although he considers himself informationally superior to and distinct from the "uneducated villagers", he considers visitors from the donor and the NGOs as "coming from outside", illustrating a liminal position.

Why do these intermediaries not feed back their concerns about the value of the information being disseminated and their challenging role at Voices to the NGOs and donor? In Giddensian terms, why does the contradiction not lead to conflict? A major reason is that although their beliefs may be contradictory to that of the donor, their motivation to act on these may not be high, because they themselves benefit from working at Voices. Nikhil (CRP) says that "I have learnt computers, audio editing, video editing, graphics editing, mixing. Life is much better now. I have a nice job". He has a plan that "I want to use the camera to cover weddings, special events in Bhairavi and then I can earn some money for myself. I can make CDs and sell them to people". Similar employment opportunities have opened up for those on the management committee. Rajesh, a male member of the committee who is an auto driver, who says "business is good with all the visitors to Voices. The taxi can be around Rs. 600 to 800 [\$12-\$16], but they can just call me on my mobile and I will give a good rate". Somewhat ironically therefore, the benefit of Voices for him has not been through better access to information and communication, but earning more because of the visitors who are coming to visit the alleged success story that is Voices. Similarly, Bharati, another committee member, earns money providing food for the visitors of Voices. ICTs may have therefore improved these lives somewhat, but in a tangential way.

The female CRPs and management committee members outline greater intangible rather than tangible benefits. They state that they have achieved "dareness to talk", "respect and attention" from others and "talking to people nicely". Manjamma states "we get respect if we go for loans now". For Lakshmi: "before, only my husband would talk, now I have confidence to talk also"; and similarly for Bharati: "the main benefit for me from Voices was more confidence". Given these benefits for themselves, it is not to the intermediaries's advantage to highlight the conceptual contradictions explored by Giddens and Walsham earlier. Instead, these information intermediaries exemplify [46]'s theorisation that those holding bridging positions, or weak ties across networks, may occupy

a weak position in terms of the networks, but also have the potential of the strongest advantage in terms of straddling these networks.

B. Performance

According to Goffman, we as individuals apply the principle of "framing" to decide how we perform "front stage" depending on the audience. Self is a "changeable formula" for managing oneself during events [33]. Narrative analysis illustrates the conscious choice of vocabulary in order to conform to social dialect [44]. Front stage therefore, Guru is keen to use "development speak": "I am just a facilitator. I link developing villagers with facilities. Everything the community does. I just facilitate". This vocabulary is very much enconced in the language used by donors, in the use of words such as "facilitating" and focus on community.

The following conversation with a visiting Reliance [mobile phone] sales person particularly illustrated not only Guru's awareness of his position, but also his understanding of vocabulary:

Reliance salesman: What can we do for you, so that we can make this happen? [For the centre to be an outlet for Reliance mobile phones]

Guru: Give me some money, we are so happy.

Reliance salesman: That is there.

Guru: Some incentive, anything, like 50 phones we sell, we get motorbike.

[Guru and salesman laugh]

Guru: I am thinking, I am helping, getting information, ICTs to the people. So 50 phones, one bike. 100 phones, one car.

Reliance salesman: This will be a costly thing for us.

Guru: We want people to get a connection, to get ICTs.

Reliance salesman: So, it is not only upliftment of the community, it is also upliftment for you.

[Guru and salesman laugh]

Guru: I am also community, no? I'm joking.

Once again, Guru is consciously performing "front stage" by using phrases such as "I am helping, getting information, ICTs to the people" but also "community". He is also aware of his critical intermediary position by demanding a percentage for the ostensible good work he is carrying out. However, his laughter along with the salesman's illustrates they are aware of his performance.

Another example of performance on the front stage was when a representative from another donor agency visited the centre. The visitor asked "so, children can come here and play on the Internet? That's fabulous. This is a real example of bridging the digital divide... are you part of the Mission 2007 [the Indian government's scheme to establish a telecentre in each of India's 600,000 villages by its 60th anniversary of independence, which did not prove successful] scheme?" Instead of saying that the Internet did not work, and neither did the community radio any longer, Guru stated "yes, the Internet is very useful. Any development information people need, we give them. Even farmers phone to ask the market

price". This is therefore in direct contradiction to what had been mentioned previously "back stage" that "I will openly say market rate nobody bothers", clearly illustrating that he would not in fact "openly say" as he had claimed before but judge when it was possible to reveal his opinion ("framing"). Ultimately, Guru is clearly aware of his need for performance and framing as the circumstances require, as he states "there are two Gurus. One is the Jaan Guru, and the other is the normal Guru. I say what they want to hear".

Guru's performance, as well as the contradictory language used by the CRPs and MC illustrates the ability of the intermediary to manage themselves through a changeable formula, as suggested by Goffman. However, it also problematises the value of the intermediary when used to disseminate the policies of development agencies which we discuss next.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To some extent, contradiction and performance occur in all human interactions. However, the tensions in Voices has wider implications for telecentres/community multimedia centres and ICTD in general. Firstly, it is clear that in a donor led initiative, greater attention needs to be paid to information intermediaries. Intermediaries need to feel "safe" enough to admit to donors if initiatives are not working - market prices not being accessed for example (similar stories of market prices not being accessed at telecentres/kiosks because of more reliable pre-existing social networks have also been documented by [47]). As Brett has mentioned regarding community participation in development projects [48], there need to be greater institutional openness and feedback mechanisms so that both formal and informal feedback from intermediaries is welcomed. Failure of a project (or an element of a project) should not necessarily be seen as a failure on the part of intermediaries.

There are those who argue that project failure/unsustainability can be avoided in the first place if PRAs, focus groups and requirements analyses are carried out pre-implementation. Yet, as Kothari has pointed out earlier [34] can also occur at these initial stages, particularly in communities which are used to transient donor initiatives, such as Bhairavi was (previous donors in the area included DANIDA and the World Bank). Such performances as illustrated in Voices can only be minimised if a genuine feeling of institutional openness is fostered. For example, at the time of writing this paper, a World Bank session was being organised on "failed" mobile phone projects, with anonymity guaranteed for experiences shared including no recording of the event. The outcomes of this remained to be seen, but such events will improve learning within the ICTD community.

The second issue which emerged from Voices was a contradiction between the intermediaries and the "community" with comments such as "people here are uneducated". To some extent, such comments could have been made as

performances to myself as a researcher firstly in an effort at self aggrandisement, and secondly to emphasise the value of knowledge and Voices (I was frequently referred to/seen as representing the donors and NGOs, even though this was repeatedly refuted). However, it was apparent that this relationship was at times mutually antagonistic with community members. Such a chasm may be inevitable when information is concerned - those who believe they have it may consider themselves superior and knowledgeable, and those who do not (or are told that they do not) may feel resentful. Voices had made some attempts to redress the possibility of such a division occurring, for example ensuring that the management committee was comprised of representatives from different self-help groups, and therefore different networks, and with a maximum three-year term of serving on the committee. However, there were reports that those on the committee had refused to give up their positions, combined with others outside the committee whose stated they were not interested in serving (perhaps a causal link). Firmer management in such situations may facilitate more equitable participation. Another suggestion could be that there is not just one single layer of intermediaries, but several - for example, discussing mobile phone usage in Bangalore slums, [49] illustrate that it is mainly family members and neighbours who are accepted as intermediaries (for example, dial phone numbers and make calls or read out text messages in English). Similarly, at Voices, friends and family could come and help each other out when taking IT classes, or a more creative, community feeling could be fostered when radio programmes are being made. Again, there were accounts of this in the early stages of Voices, but bad feeling appears to have occurred after the camera theft, employee dismissal and cable cutting.

Some contradiction between stakeholders is inevitable - for example in Bhairavi, the local government allegedly felt threatened by Voices, and attempts were made to bring the village Panchayat on board early on, although this limited what could be broadcast on the radio. Ultimately, it should be the intermediaries's decision as to how much can be discussed on the community radio, as they are the ones who have to live in the area.

An important point is that intermediaries need to be valued for their critical role (for example, Guru could have been sent to collect that particular award which rankled with him). Donors and NGOs should try to spend longer in the field, or at least provide support so that intermediaries do not feel that "in the end they all go back to the city and we have to deal with these problems" (to paraphrase Guru). This closer linkage will also enable intermediaries to contextualise their work in the broader policy picture.

There are those of course who argue that the entire donor-based model is flawed - [50] was one of the early critics of community multimedia centres, and argued that that a private sector model (such as a cyber cafe, or a community radio subsidised by on air advertisements) is more sustainable. Such models may present reduced contradiction and conflict between different belief systems and less need for performance by the intermediary, as they fulfil very clear

requirements defined by users. However, private sector models of access to ICTs once again present dilemmas of equity - only the richer and more educated demographic are likely to use/participate. The aim of CMCs is to take away some of the mystique surrounding technology and to encourage a more inclusive environment, although, as we have seen, this is largely down to the intermediaries.

Fundamentally, this paper has attempted to highlight the precarious position of the information intermediary in charge of kiosks, telecentres and community multimedia centres. We have argued that the sustainability of such centres is highly dependent on the personality, motivations and the ability of these individuals to mediate between two different groups. However, one of the key weaknesses of this paper is that groups such as "intermediaries", "the donor", "NGOs" and "community" have been artificially, statically, homogenised as "intermediaries" although there will clearly be differences, hierarchies, cliques and mobility between them. Thirdly, it has to be emphasised again that actors were performing even in front of us as researchers, so it would be too presumptuous to state that what was being shared with the researchers was entirely "back stage". However, as Myers and Newman have suggested [45] in every interview we conduct as researchers, both we and our interviewees are performing.

Much further research remains to be conducted in the case of Voices. The doctoral research resulted in numerous narratives, for example from those who provided the content for Voices's community radio such as the agricultural extension officer, the vet, the local doctor and so on, not to mention the various cleavages within the "community". Similarly, further theoretical perspectives could be applied to discuss the liminal position of these intermediaries could be drawn from network theory, where these intermediaries would be seen as bridging the structural hole [51] between the different networks of donor, the NGOs and the "community". Finally, we firmly believe that this insight into Voices would not have been possible without the extensive time spent on site, and therefore we call for ethnographic style research, where we can access the "back stage" (to the extent that we can) and further understand the position of the information intermediary.

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