

Manas Chakrabarti

## D-CONTENT:

# Not just digital

The tag line of this magazine, "digital content for development," raises a few interesting questions. Why digital? Whose content? What kind of development? My guess is that digital content has little to do with GDP growth, so it's unlikely that the word "development" is being used in that sense. Among the more likely candidates, I find the idea of "sustainable development" fairly attractive because it might have something to do with content. It also broadens the meaning of development by encompassing human, social, environmental and economic sustainability. But it still doesn't connect all the dots.

I was puzzling over the tag line staring at my bookshelf, and I saw the answer staring right back at me. Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* was lying on its side in a little-used corner of the shelf. I dusted off the book and flipped through the pages, connecting with the ideas I had read several years ago. According to Sen, "freedom is viewed, in this approach, both as the primary end and as the principal means of development."

If "freedom is central to the process of development," the freedom to express myself or the freedom to have my voice heard is certainly a critical ingredient. I can exercise this freedom, guaranteed by Article 19 of the Indian Constitution, because I went to school, live in the National Capital Region and have friends who ask me to write articles in magazines. But what about the millions of Indian citizens who have no means of

having their voices heard? What about their freedom, their development?

Digital content opens doors that were previously shut by social structures and requirements for literacy. I, as an illiterate tribal from Jharkhand, can tell my story about radioactive effluents without writing a word or waiting for someone to give me permission. I can express myself through my voice, maybe even broadcast my story on community radio. I, as a teacher in Koraput, can narrate my experiences of teaching science with local materials. And I, as a witness to the retreating glaciers of Ladakh, can share my pictures from now and from ten years ago.

Digital content has huge potential to empower and engage communities because it is such a versatile medium. It is much more than just Web pages on the Internet - it includes voice, music, conversations, radio plays, text, pictures, videos, conversations, and so on. And it can be created and delivered on a variety of devices, not just computers. More importantly, digital content does not depend on a centralized review-edit-publish process. d-Content can be created, published and owned by anyone, including individuals, communities and organisations. I also believe, and hope, that this bottom-up content will enrich and inform policies and practices prescribed by the thought leaders of our country.

The two most common criticisms of using digital technologies for development are lack of skills (including literacy) among communities and lack of infrastructure. The Hole-in-the-Wall has shown that learning to use digital technologies is trivial. And Raghav (the radio guy) has shown that infrastructure is not a constraint. Rather than skills and resources, I suspect what might be lacking is a commitment to democratic values. Sure we want development, but only if we can choose what's good for "them." Letting people decide for themselves is so messy, so democratic.

So when I think of d-Content and what it might mean for development, the word that comes to mind is not so much digital, as democratic. I think we might have stumbled onto something far bigger than mere bits and bytes on a screen.

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