Social media and governance for the BoP

Gram Vaani Community Media

The relevance of social media for governance

What is so special about social media?

We believe that social media has certain inherent properties that make it very interesting:

- **Opportunity for self expression:** *Social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter provide immense opportunity for anybody to put out their thoughts and opinion, and make themselves heard across the world*

- **Shared context:** *Social relations capture the embedding of social media into the real world, and make shared information contextual to the recipients. Information transforms as it perpetuates along social links, gaining context and becoming more and more relevant as it progresses*

- **Self organizing and correcting:** *Simple communication primitives that allow people to easily share information, strive for validation, and connect it to the real world, help people get organized and put out coherent voices to relevant stakeholders*

This degree of social connectivity, opportunity for self-expression, and an open medium to debate and engage is unprecedented in human history.

So what this mean for governance? Governance cannot happen without a citizen connect, and social media provides an ideal vehicle for this.

Citizen-government engagement via social media:

Moving towards participatory democracy

Citizens being able to share information with a common context are able to help each other understand the implications of current events and government schemes.
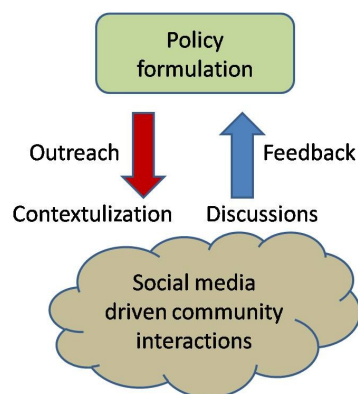
Self expression provides an opportunity to them to express their opinion.

And the self-organizing properties of social media help others comment and discuss the topic, and come up with coordinate and articulate voices that represent the views of the citizens.

Plus the fact that more than a billion users are already on Facebook provides a ready medium for citizen-government engagement.
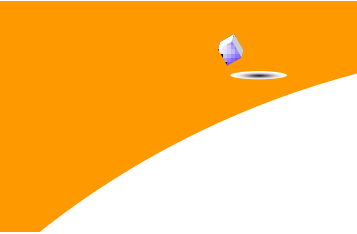
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Empowering communities through technology, media, and development

Awards we have won:

- Knight News Challenge in 2008

- Manthan Awards in 2009

- Economic Times Power of Ideas awards in 2010

- Rising Stars in Global Health award in 2012

- mBillionth South Asia Award in 2012

www.gramvaani.org

We started Gram Vaani in 2009 with the intent of reversing the flow of information, that is, to make it bottom-up instead of top-down. Using simple technologies and social context to design tools, we have been able to impact communities at large - more than 2 million users in over 7 Indian States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Namibia and South Africa. More interesting than this are the outcomes of what we have done: Forty rural radio stations are able to manage and share content over mobiles and the web, corrupt ration shop officials in Jharkhand were arrested due to citizen complaints made on our platform, Women Sarpanches in Uttar Pradesh shared learning and opinions on their work with senior government officials, and citizens were able to monitor and report on waste management in 18 wards of Delhi to hold MCD officials accountable for their work. We work with organizations all across India and in other developing parts of the world.

Social media for the BoP? The answer is voice and video

Rural and low-income urban populations are not on Internet based social media platforms such as Facebook ad Twitter. Poor text literary coupled with sparse Internet connectivity and the inability to afford smartphones are some factors that inhibit the reach of social media to the bottom of the pyramid population.

How then can Internet-like social media eco-systems be created for this demography?

The answer probably lies in the use of voice and video. Being able to communicate in voice automatically jumps *literacy barriers, and the wide proliferation of mobile phones even at the BoP provides a ready medium.*

Several pilots using IVR based systems to enable voice-based communication, the success of community radio , and experiments on community video have demonstrated the potential in using voice and video to build the equivalent of a Facebook for rural India.

These forums are typically moderated, and have an exclusive focus on local content production and consumption.

1. Speak
People call or record content locally in voice

2. Moderate & share
Local content managers supervise and share the content with community members

3. Stakeholder connect
Community inputs are shared with government, development agencies

Workflow of a typical voice/ video based community media network

Building an institutional connect between social media and government departments

We can consider a two-way flow of information between citizen driven social media platforms, and the government hierarchy:

- From the government towards the social media eco-system: *This would typically consist of announcements, details of government schemes, and new initiatives. The social media eco-system helps spread the information and contextualize it for different agents in the eco-system*

- From the social media eco-system towards the government hierarchy: *This would consist of feedback from the citizens about the performance of government schemes, what is working and what is not, and grievances that require some action on behalf of the government.*

Problems

Several issues currently hinder this connect from operating effectively:

- Social media is not recognized as an official outreach channel: *Most government departments do not use social media for outreach, especially new experiments such as voice-based social media platforms operating in rural areas. Empanelled outreach agencies typically consist of traditional mass media such as radio, television, print, and cinema, which are not interactive and do not allow for any contextualization*

- There is a lack of understanding of how information messaging works in rural areas: *Centrally produced content lacks local context and is hence less effective in influencing the behavior of rural populations towards up-take of government schemes or best-practices in livelihood and other activities. Social media has the tremendous potential of contextualizing information to make it locally relevant, but the notion of*
facilitating local content creation based on guidelines does not exist

- Giving a ear to social media conversations: *Social media conversations are often ignored as meaningless chatter or as lacking in credibility. Even moderated and verified citizen inputs are however rarely able to reach the concerned authorities because plugs into the government hierarchy do not exist that can listen to citizen inputs and respond. The equivalent of an RTI process is absent when it comes to government engagement with social media.*

Recommendations

The following can therefore be catalytic in initiating citizen-government engagement using social media:

- Use social media channels for outreach and citizen connect at all levels — *Central, State, Local — by mandating that government departments should look beyond traditional media for outreach*

- Pioneer a novel outreach process by handing out ONLY message and contextualization guidelines to agencies operating social media platforms: *Marking a departure from conventional thinking of producing content centrally and distributing it, move towards facilitating distributed content generation and distribution, while giving guidelines on the messages the content should carry*

- Designate social media response personnel in each government department at different levels: *Just like a grievance cell, a social media cell should listen to community audit reports and demands brought in through social media channels. Further, independent agencies can be engaged to verify the social media messages.*

> *"Rather than central content production followed by mass distribution, a move is required towards distributed content production and consumption, while ONLY providing guidelines for the messages to be carried in the content"*
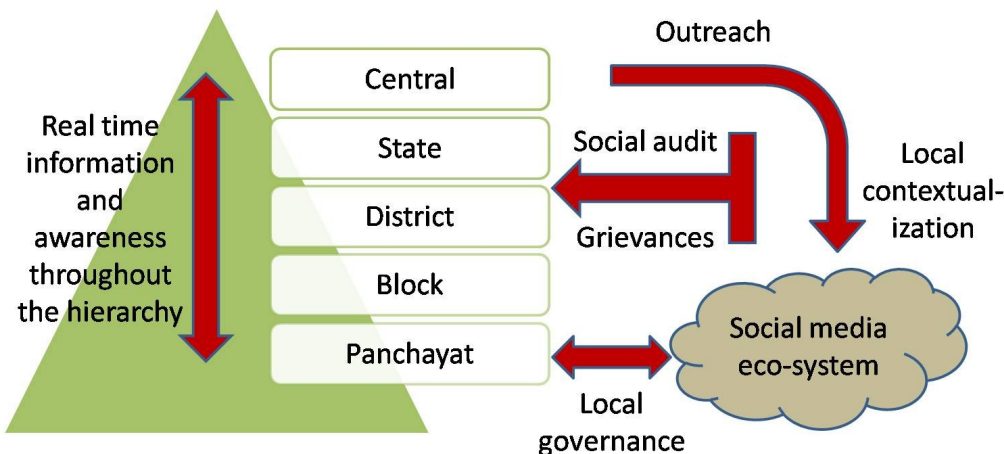
Local governance aided through social media

Other than integrating social media eco-systems with government departments, social media can be used for more inclusive local governance. This includes the following:

- Create deliberations among communities on local issues such as budgeting, resource allocation, running education and health institutions, and management of the commons

- Run polls to collect inputs around building consensus on local issues

- Hold local institutions directly accountable to the communities by publishing performance reports and meeting minutes in text or voice

- Bring transparency to local budgeting and fund allocation

Gram Vaani case study: Fullcircle platform for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi to instrument its performance

Gram Vaani helped the MCD run a pro-bono pilot on its Fullcircle platform, to monitor and audit garbage cleaning sites across 18 wards of Delhi

Dates: Jun to Nov 2011

Objective: *To build a self-reporting system for monitoring garbage collection activities, and allow communities to audit the reports*

Pilot project: *The MCD mandated its contractors across 18 wards of Delhi to send daily reports about the cleanliness status of garbage collection sites.*

Updates were delivered using SMS, carrying information about whether or not a specific garbage site had been cleaned that day. These SMSes were used to generate a dashboard for the city that could be queried in real time by concerned citizens, and who could dispute the reported claims.

A fortnightly meeting was held with the MCD commissioner to discuss the reports and disputes, if any. The meetings were attended by the contractors as well, who would have to answer to the commissioner for any discrepancy reports.

Results: The self-reporting helped the MCD understand its own internal points of inefficiency. The citizen accountability angle further helped bring responsiveness. MCD has now included the requirement for such a system in its IT contract.

MCD had set up a separate Facebook cell to respond to comments on social media

Screenshot of Gram Vaani's Fullcircle platform

Gram Vaani case study: Jharkhand Mobile Vaani and its linkage with government and other stakeholders

The Jharkhand Mobile Vaani network is a voice-based interaction platform operated by Gram Vaani on which people can call and share messages and stories with each other.

The Mobile Vaani network in Jharkhand reaches out to more than 35,000 users who regularly interact on the platform contributing call volumes as high as 2,500 calls per day.

Concerned rural citizens are the primary participants, and the content contributed

and accessed is broad based comprising of folk songs, local news and announcements, questions and sharing of best practices on health and agriculture, and feedback on government schemes.

Gram Vaani has also built a large network of field partners who are instrumental in carrying out significant offline activity and follow-ups on the information discussed on the forum. This includes a number of local partner organizations:

- Panchayat Nama which covers JMV discussions in their weekly publication

- Organizations including PHRN, GSA, Leads Trust, Sesame, IDF, PLAN, JSACS, Red Cross Society and PRADAN, which help answer questions and provide information to JMV callers

- Progressive district collectors from a few districts who take the community feedback into consideration while planning projects

- State departments including the Department of Labour which helps address grievances and community audit reports put out by the JMV callers

JMV has so far published over 4,000 stories, run 8 information campaigns, and has documented more than 150 impact stories that resulted because of its interventions. The network is now being expanded with the help from local partners to several more states including UP, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, HP, Uttarakhand, Haryana, MP, and AP.

Village groups call into a toll-free number to tell stories and experiences

The submitted stories are validated and moderated by a trained editor

Validated stories are published online

Valuable statistics and reports can be derived from the information collected

Other people can call into the toll-free number to listen to the validated stories

Validated stories are also published for access on same toll-free number