Towards Village Information Entrepreneurship

By Ashir Ahmed

ICT today allows users to play active roles as information consumers, producers and owners. However, people in rural areas in developing countries have not been able to move much beyond the traditional role of passive consumers of information. Many of the efforts to resolve this problem focus on increasing villagers' access to facilities and on training in ICT use. One of the current problems is that there are few contents available that really suit villagers. Villagers do not develop the actual contents they use, nor do they own or profit from them. Yet it is the villagers who have the most to communicate about their village, and it is they who should own and profit from the information.

Our project aims to build a model of social information infrastructure (SII) where villagers can also be producers and owners of village information. Rather than using high-tech infrastructure and training, our model shows how villagers with their current skill set and their own devices can generate and broadcast information. In order to bridge the gap between their capability and the capability of their devices, a “BoP adaptation layer” is introduced in SII model.

Recently our organization, GCC (Global Communication Center) and Kyushu University in Japan has conducted a series of surveys to understand the requirements of villagers in terms of using ICT. The villagers surveyed are Bangladeshis who are classified as belonging the BoP (Base of the Pyramid). Among the findings of the survey, we observed that contents are a major vehicle to popularize ICT. However, at present, there are few contents available that really suit villagers at the BoP. We can gain insight into why this is the case by considering the answers to three basic questions:

1. Who developed the contents?
2. Who owns the contents?
3. Who profits from the content business?

Unfortunately, the word “villager” cannot be used to answer a single one of the above questions. Yet it is the villagers who know more about their village than anyone else, it is the villagers who can update the village information earlier than anyone else, and it is the villagers who should naturally own and profit from the village information. The traditional explanation as to why villagers do not control their own information would probably be that they are illiterate and lack other skills. Training programs and literacy development should continue to be pursued, but does giving villagers a voice in ICT need to depend on village literacy, especially in this high tech century? Villagers need ICT to spread their voices. Indeed it can be argued that we need their voices as much as they do. For can we not more efficiently achieve the SDGs by seeing their world through their pictures and stories?

To find a way for villagers to develop, own and commoditize information, our research team came up with the GramWeb (www.gramweb.net) platform. The platform is capable of handling 85000 portals for 85000 villages in Bangladesh. However, we envision GramWeb as a prototype for other BoP villages around the world. While there are challenges to be faced before GramWeb can be widely used, our research team continues working to find creative solutions to put, in Professor Mohammed Yunus’ words, poverty and disadvantage in a museum.