'A chance for me to do good, make a real difference': how citizen journalists in India view their role in social transformation

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ABSTRACT

Alternative media in the Indian sub-continent is still an under-researched and underrepresented topic especially in the area of citizen journalism. There is a dearth of qualitative literature about how citizen journalists view their work and potential for social change. Using the theories of James W. Carey's ritual view of communication which conceives of communication as a process that enables and enacts societal transformation [Carey, J. W. 2005. "Historical Pragmatism and the Internet." *New Media & Society* 7 (4): 443–455] and the Most Significant Change Technique (Davies, R., and J. Dart. 2005. "The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique." *A Guide to its use.* 10.13140/RG.2.1.4305.3606. Available at https://www.fingo.fi/sites/default/tiedostot/most-significant-change-guide.pdf (accessed July 2018)), a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation that involves the collection of significant change stories emanating from the field level, this study looks at how reporters of the CGNet Swara, a dedicated citizen journalism site in India, define the impact of their work in bringing social justice in their communities. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with 70 participants and ethnographic field visits, this analysis seeks to contribute to the area of research focusing on the implications and effects of citizen journalism on resource-poor communities.

Introduction

People in a remote hamlet in Chhattisgarh, India, often had to battle illness caused by a lack of basic resources like safe drinking water and the negligence of government health-care workers[1] posted in the area. One particular health personnel would often run away to avoid helping these people who had little other recourse. A news report on the CGNet Swara,[2] a voice-based citizen journalism platform, about a newborn baby that died due to the lack of timely treatment drew the attention of the government. The government investigated the issue and provided the villagers better access to health services and today, fewer children die. This did not happen overnight. It took of months of patient

petitioning, but this story did what no other means of registering a complaint did. It caught official attention and ensured action.

Mainstream media in India vastly underserves such rural and poor populations (Mudliar, Donner, and Thies 2012; Pain 2017). Its ironical that while people in states like Chhattisgarh might be poor, the state's contribution to the overall economy is not mean. For example, the state accounts for 35.4 percent of tin ore reserves of India (India Brand Equity Foundation 2018). Citizen journalism outlets like the CGNet Swara, which feature stories of the poorest communities from this region, told by members themselves, are important. They highlight voices few media focus on and in the process, helps mobilize communities for social change. Previous research has focused on how citizen journalism or how the ability to produce content and participate in media production, either as part of mainstream media or as independent producers increases political awareness or civic participation (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle 2010; Holton, Coddington, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Pain 2017). In different parts of the world citizen journalism has been shown to successfully subvert mainstream media agenda (Von Hippel 2005; Bruns 2005, 2010; Pain 2018) and as the 2004 Tsunami showed, citizen-produced media, especially photographs could be vital contributions to mainstream reportage as well (Allan 2015). But the area of citizen journalism and its ability to bring about positive social change has not garnered much attention. Thus, there needs to be a more sustained focus on the content creators themselves (Holton, Coddington, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013) and how they use the news and narratives produced to 'galvanize' communities to unite and work for change and 'impart agency in their response' (Evanson and Rodriguez 2014).

Using the theories of James W. Carey's ritual view of communication which conceives of communication as a process that enables and enacts societal transformation (Carey 2005) and the Most Significant Change Technique (Davies and Dart 2005), a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation that involves the collection of significant change stories emanating from the field level, this paper is a qualitative study looking at how one citizen journalism project in India uses news and information produced by communities in some of the country's most remote and resource-poor areas to bring about quantifiable social impact and address the inequalities caused by a neoliberal social order while documenting their struggles to produce such narratives.

The ability of alternative journalism to mobilize communities has mostly been studied in terms of the social movement theory (Kurzman 2003), which examines the ability of alternative media to mobilize communities and the different forms under which this mobilization manifests. As Atton (2002) says the material produced by such outlets is, generally, deeply influenced, alternative, and uses participatory organization practices (21). Situations are framed in a way that people perceive inequalities and atrocities and rise in rebellion against them. The social movement theory postulates a typology of resources comprising material, moral, social, human and socio-organizational structures that help sustain movements and such movements are characterized by shared knowledge and collective action. The framing of the self-immolation of a young Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, and the Tunisian revolution is an example (Khondker 2011; Ramadan 2013; Lim 2013). Carey's ritual view of communication shifts focus on how the process of communication enables positive social change and helps analyze the role and function of citizen journalism as a means of communication that produces measurable

effect, beyond its ability to mobilize. It focuses attention from the news content to those who produce and receive the information and the effects of this information on their social reality. The ritual view of communication conceives of communication as a process that enables and enacts societal transformation (Carey 2005) as opposed to the transmission view where the act of imparting information is most important.

Through in-depth qualitative interviews with 70 participants including citizen journalists and associated collaborators and field visits, this study looks at how reporters from the CGNet Swara view their work and define its impact in addressing glaring social inequalities in their communities and contributes to the area of studies focusing on the implications and effects of citizen journalism as well as adding to the growing body of literature on citizen journalism in the Indian sub-continent.

CGNet Swara: 'For the people of Chhattisgarh'

Shubrashu Choudhury, a former BBC correspondent, set up the CGNet Swara in February 2010 for the people of Chhattisgarh. Populated primarily by Adivasis, indigenous tribal people who are among the poorest and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups in India, Chhattisgarh has rich reserves of minerals but lacks basic school and health facilities.[3] Choudhury describes CGNet Swara as a 'biased platform for less empowered people who are now enabled to raise issues' (2016). Of the state's 25 million inhabitants, 80 percent live in rural areas, and 30 percent are illiterate which is much lower than national averages. The area is also home to the Maoist insurgency, a violent left-wing movement. In 2007, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh designated this insurgency as 'India's greatest internal security threat' (Mudliar, Donner, and Thies 2012).

CGNet is a voice portal that citizens call using any mobile or landline to record a news story. CGNet Swara is not Internet dependent for users and callers are guided through voice prompts. Users place an ordinary phone call to the system, which presents them with the option of listening to other messages or recording their stories (Mudliar, Donner, and Thies 2012). Incoming calls are usually free, with outgoing calls costing a few cents. Once a message gets recorded from the field, editors accessing the system use a Web-based interface to review and verify the report. Approved reports are then made available for playback over the phone. They can also be accessed on the CGNet Swara site. As the Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011 shows in Chhattisgarh only 28.47 percent households actually own a mobile phone. People use the service because of the low costs involved and the impact CGNet has had through its news. 'Literacy therefore isn't an issue and that ensures the participation of women traditionally not sent to school or taught to read,' says Choudhary (2016). The site has a separate section[4] for its impact stories and has over 450[5] stories at the last count (December 2017) featuring many issues like the lack of access to water, education, wage and migration-related narratives. Each story ends with a call to action. Either the reporter requests for people to call the numbers given to bring pressure on officials or information about an organized protest is provided so that listeners have recourse to action.

Chhattisgarh is a difficult environment for the media. Due to a shortage of trained journalists in rural areas, there are no established news sources in the local tribal languages, such as Kurukh or Gondi, each of which has more than two million speakers (Mudliar, Donner, and Thies 2012). While newspapers and television stations have a presence in

the state, rarely do they cater to the needs or broadcast the voices of the Adivasi population. CGNet Swara currently logs more than 500 calls per day. 'As journalism goes our work finishes as soon as the story is put up,' says Choudhary (2016). 'Impact was never on our agenda but lately impact has become major force of operation. It completes the circle of response when someone raises a problem.'

Previous research on CGNet Swara has focused on its evolution as a voice-based interface for recording and listening to information over the phone (Mudliar, Donner, and Thies 2012) and the fact that mainstream media doesn't view this as a critical component of mainstream journalism (Chadha and Steiner 2015; Pain 2018). This study looks at the impact of this citizen journalism service in greater detail and examines the various elements of the communication process, as defined by Carey's theory of communication as a ritual, to explore the nuances of how CGNet Swara uses citizen journalism to effect social change.

Citizen journalism in India

The impact of citizen journalism has been asymmetric and under-researched in India, but citizen journalism is still in its infancy in the country. Citizen participation in India is most visible on television channels and radio entertainment programs where viewers contribute to the program or news content in the form of SMS polls, video footage, complaints, phone-ins and studio discussions involving citizen journalists (Sonwalkar 2009; Pain 2017). Today, on the lines of the CNN iReporter, television channels like NDTV have added a citizen journalism component to their programs but rarely do we see citizen journalism being an integral part of the news coverage. They remain just an additional component. The ubiquitous mobile phone has been a hugely enabling factor in the rise of citizen journalism in India. Coverage of local issues especially those pertaining to the rural poor is extremely low in the Indian press (Pain 2017). Recent scholarship on Indian journalism has strongly critiqued the Indian press for their very commercial approach to the profession (Rao 2009), calling it the 'Murdochization of the Indian press' (Sonwalkar 2002, 831).

Allan, Sonwalkar, and Carter (2007) have described the active role played by citizen journalists in Northeast India, an area consisting of seven independent 'tribal' states. Manipuronline.com, E-Pao.net, Kanglaonline.com and the Sangai Express have played important functions in supporting the causes of the population there and proved the capacity of CJ 'to bear witness to human suffering' (Sonwalker 2009). The different citizen journalism sites in India include Merinews, which calls itself the largest citizen journalism portal in India (Thomas 2014). In contrast to the Merinews site, the Citizens News Services, available in English and Hindi is an alternative news service that features prominent social activists blogging on a variety of issues in India. India also has some alternative radio stations which strive to produce at least 50 percent of their own content with an emphasis on development-related programs in local languages. India also has an active presence on the Global Voices blog. Besides these, UNESCO funded and assisted projects like Nabanna: Networking Rural Women and Knowledge (Baduria, North 24 Parganas District, and West Bengal, India) and the Namma Dhwani Local ICT Network also work to promote local voices and ensure that communities get access to information specially tailored for their use and betterment (Allan, Sonwalkar, and Carter 2007).

Literature review and theoretical background

The need for citizen journalism

Graeme Turner (2010) aligns the rise of the citizen journalist with a crisis in the credibility of professional news itself, as well as with the 'ordinary' person's effort at bridging the alienating gap between traditional journalism and its public (Turner 2010, 143). In India, for example, issues like poverty are discussed on media platforms where those who have the most stakes in the issue have little access (Mudliar, Donner, and Thies 2012; Sonwalkar 2002). Though scholars still assert that professional journalism is the guardian of democracy (Papacharissi 2009), this is increasingly perceived as a failed idea. Radsch (2013) describes citizen journalism as

> an alternative and activist form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a response to shortcomings in the professional journalistic field, that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism.

CGNet defines itself as a citizen journalism site. The narratives produced by CGNet generally have an activist purpose, because they are created to draw attention to and change issues. They are made by populations, most of who have never been to school and whose living standards are below the poverty line. They have no journalism training and have little idea about what constitutes formal definitions of news. These are ordinary beleaguered citizens using very simple and accessible technology to create media that helps draw attention to the lack of basic resources and its effects on their lives. As one journalist interviewed said, 'Finally it's our voice; we are no longer marginalized' (2016). In India both television and print media images increasingly contribute to the reproduction of a hegemonic political culture (Fernandes 2000); thus, making necessary the need for what more optimistic proponents of citizen journalism identify as 'media witnessing' (Frosh and Pinchevski 2014; Gillmor 2004). The concept of 'media witnessing' implies closeness, a more personal approach to the subject of reporting unlike the objectivity required of and associated with professional journalism. They write and report from their positions as citizens, members of communities and activists (Atton 2010).

Rodriguez defines citizens' produced media as a concept 'that implies a collective embracing of new media and interaction, in a way that contests social codes, legitimized identities and institutionalized social relations, through a means of empowering the community' (Coyer, Dowmunt, and Fountain 2007). In this presentation of how the news of CGNet helps a resource-poor community address deep-seated issues of social inequalities, we explore how the information posted and the ability to do so, encourage and demand calls to action (Hunting and Hinck 2017) and show communities that they have the power to address issues and solve problems. Citizen journalism helps dissolve barriers to information production and broadcasting and seeks to create a more aware community of 'active citizens' by providing space for alternative voices which, as Rodriguez has emphasized, is one of its primary goals (Rodríguez 2003).

This is in keeping with Servaes' description of communication that involves participation from the community as 'an agent for social change, culture development and democratization' (Servaes 2008). As media, citizen journalism is specific to particular

geographic regions (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010). It works to empower communities with relevant and pertinent information and often is produced by people from the very communities it seeks to serve and who hitherto had no access to be a part of any news production process (Dagron 2004). The Global Voices blog is an international example. Its role in providing spaces for activists from Tunisia has been well documented (Allagui and Kuebler 2011).

Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) warn that such media remain extremely marginal due to the constraints of size and resources and that they can create a fragmented public sphere; a non-commercial approach making resources scarce to 'establish a broad counter-public sphere' (141). Yet applying the theories and concepts that have stemmed from analyses of mainstream media to understanding notions of alternative media mean using definitions that are too restricted to parse out the nuances of the effects of alternate media. Too often the success of such media is measured against the effects of mainstream media (Thurman 2008; Kaufhold, Valenzuela, and Gil de Zúñiga 2010; Paulussen and Ugille 2008; Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, and Rojas 2009; Chadha and Steiner 2015) and this is thus problematic (Rodriguez and Fields 2002; Pain 2018).

Theoretical framework

To theoretician James Carey, communication was more than a system of sender, signals receiver and information (Carey 1989). Articulating the difference between communication as transmission and communication as ritual, he said that communication as transmission was mainly about using conformation for 'control' whereas when communication is a ritual process, it is 'linked to terms such as 'sharing', 'participation', 'association', 'fellowship', 'the possession of a common faith' (Carey 1989; Anderson 2011, 14). This perspective is not to highlight the differences between types of communication like broadcasts or speech but rather about the inherent capacities of communication (Carey 1989; Anderson 2011). Illustrating this through a print media example, Carey says that in the transmission model the value of a newspaper lies in the information it provides. Through the lens of the ritual model, the information it imparts is less important than the act of receiving and reading it each day and exploring how this information shapes worldviews (Carrey 1989). The theory asserts that 'communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed' (Carey 1989) and conceives of the ritual view of communication as a process that enables and enacts societal transformation, linking acts of 'communication' and 'community' and 'culture' (Carey 1989). The theory believes that communication is also the representation of shared beliefs and common experiences, which was destroyed when the telegraphic model of communication became popular. The telegraph allowed for widespread dissemination of messages, but these messages were devoid of 'humor, colloquialism and idiosyncrasies' for the benefit of objectivity and balance, so that the text could be understood by people from very different backgrounds and perspectives.

'Not a dominant motif in American scholarship' (Carey 1992), the theory does not distinguish between culture and communication (Grossberg 2006). Instead, the two are embedded into all aspects of everyday life. CGNet Swara's reporters post stories from the communities they are a part of. When reporters come from the very community they report on, there is a greater understanding of the culture, daily life and realities.

They are thus able to put before the reader something that is more than just 'pure information' but that which is also 'a portrayal of the contending forces in the world' (Carey 1989).

The most significant change (MSC) technique

The most significant change (MSC) technique is a form of qualitative, participatory monitoring and evaluation (Davies and Dart 2005). It is a form of monitoring that occurs throughout the program cycle and provides information to help people manage the program. Once changes have been captured, participants sit down together, read the stories aloud and have regular in-depth discussions about the value of these reported changes (Dart and Davies 2003). Members of the CGNet Swara and those involved were asked about how they choose their stories and defined the impact of the work they did. An analysis of the first 10 interviews revealed that the collaborators were not really choosing any single or set of stories as being impactful alone. Rather they were talking about the whole impact the project has had on their community, referring to the ways it's enabled them to start dialogue about the pressing issues in their area and how it encourages them to seek their own solutions.

Two focus groups of 15 participants, each, were held where participants defined impact and spoke of their experiences as a collective rather than individually. Thus, a variation of the technique was used to arrive at conclusions about the work the journalists here do and their views about its importance in bringing about social change. There have been concerns expressed about the validity of MSC as a qualitative approach to for monitoring and evaluation; on the grounds that it is not based on conventional measures of validity such as statistical tests to determine the significance of difference (Wrigley 2006). But as Wrigley (2006) has underlined since the process verifies each story presented (since all the collaborators in the lifecycle of the story was interviewed), is transparent in its approach and allows participants to confirm the narratives analyzed, it's a valid method to draw verifiable conclusions from the qualitative data generated. Besides the moderators verifying the validity of the stories, participants and others like officials involved in the process of change were also asked to discuss the details and impact, thus ensuring better accuracy of details. In this light, this paper seeks to reflect on three broad research questions:

RQ1: How do the reporters, audience members and other participants define the impact of CGNet Swara?

RQ2: What do they attribute the success of CGNet Swara to?

RQ3: How do the journalists view their role as citizen journalists?

Methodology

Selecting participants

The reporters for the study were selected from the website of the CGNet Swara which displays the number of the reporters who have called in with the story and whose stories have had an impact that is helped bring about a positive change. Twenty-five reporters

from CGNet were interviewed. The reporters provided contact details of the government officials who had helped them resolve issues and these officials (a total of five) were then interviewed to understand how the communication process worked. Nine members of the audience and two local journalists from two mainstream newspapers from the area participated as well. Each participant was requested for an anonymous interview either over the phone or during field visits. All the interviews except the one with the founder of the site, CGNet Swara, were confidential.

All the participants were asked a set of common questions which included how they defined the impact of CGNet, what they thought led to the impact, how did they describe and understand what CGNet Swara is, their interactions with journalists from the local media, the different subjects CGNet has helped them resolve and the different issues they face while reporting. The officials (from local and national levels) who helped resolve the issues were asked if they were active listeners and what motivated them to act. Since the analysis looks at how reporters viewed their work they were asked how they defined and viewed the impact of CGNet Swara and their work (Do you think CGNet has had an impact? What is its biggest impact?). They were also asked about how they felt if their reports did not resolve an issue and how that affected their perceptions of the success of CGNet. While discussing impact, the conversations lead to participants talking about what they attributed the success of CGNet Swara to.

Conducting interviews

All interviews were conducted in Hindi (the local language of the area) during 2014 and 2016, with the exception of the founder and two journalists, who were interviewed in English. Seventy interviews in total were conducted with contributors who had recorded posts, those who posted grievances that were not yet resolved (i.e. not yet followed by an impact post), as well as the moderators who edited the posts. CGNet has active reporters, called 'field champions' who help others from the community listen and report on issues. They spread the word about CGNet and ensure that more people start using the service to report on issues from their villages and areas. Much of the success of CGNet can be attributed to these ground staff who ensure that new audiences members and reporters are regularly bought into the fold.

Only 10 reporters, out the total of 70 participants interviewed, were women. Ethnographic field visits showed that all the CGNet Swara reporters were well beneath the poverty level. Most were engaged in work like farming and bricklaying and lived in homes made of mud and other natural materials. Few were literate. Most were very keen to ensure that their children went to school and had a secure future. Officers in the government offices who helped resolve the issues raised by the reporters were interviewed as well. Field workers based in Rewa, Madhya Pradesh and Kawardha, Chhattisgarh, were also a part of this study. The interviews were transcribed for analysis and the continuous comparative method applied to check emerging themes. During the field visit, two focus groups were conducted with participants convened by the field champions. One local journalist was also a part of this focus group. The interviews and focus group data were translated into English and examined for the themes this paper seeks to explore.

RQ1: Defining the impact of CGNet Swara

CGNet Swara has far fewer impact stories than news stories. The editors interviewed (2016) said that much of the impact that resulted from the posts didn't get reported. Contributors defined the issue of impact as a larger effect on community rather than focusing on the resolution of specific issues per se. One reporter whose posts have had impact said,

> Within the time I have been with CGNet I have posted lots of news pieces. About half of them have initiated action at some level and brought about some change. This is a space where we post about adivasi issues (tribal community members) and issues that plague people in remote regions where no media exists. People sitting in different parts of the country immediately call and bring pressure on officials making them work to improve situations. This I think is its greatest impact. (2016)

The platform has been instrumental in convincing members (Focus group, 2016) that while they may not be reporters in the conventional sense of the term since they mostly talk about grievances and issues that need resolution, it has given them the confidence that they can get work done on their own; through their own efforts (2014). Listeners and reporters alike underlined this encouraging of people to act on issues as one of its important impact. Its impact has been viewed in terms of the effect it has had on its audience. As one participant said, 'It biggest impact has definitely been convincing people that it can help solve issues' (2016). Not all posts see a resolution of issues. But as one participant said:

> None of my stories have had impact but I am not disheartened. I believe it's a start … On my mobile I hear news about people thanking others for the resolution of their problems and that's how I know CGNET is effective. (2015)

Talking about issues that see resolution was important to stay encouraged and keep reporting. Encouraging people to take a stand and wok for resolution was one of the most important impacts of CGNET. As respondents reiterated, CGNet news has helped ' … start work that has been stopped for years in our community' (2015). Participants also viewed its impact in terms of ease of use of the medium:

> The fact that we can record our stories at will is its best part. Before CGNET it was very difficult to get across issues like this. Not too many people are interested in them and how would we get across to so many people with such little effort? (2016).

The impact of the medium is also viewed in terms of the time within with issues are resolved. One respondent said, 'CGNET isn't magic. It can't solve every problem but … .at least we have a venue now. Earlier we had very little to work with.'

Many of the participants joined seeing the impact the act of posting a news story on the CGNet Swara could achieve. One respondent said that they had no water for days and officials were turning a deaf ear to their pleas to repair the only water pump in the area till a report on CGNet Swara prompted action. The contributors know that their work doesn't end with just posting a story. One reporter, whose story had ensured that workers had got their rightful wages, said, 'I posted the story and also went and spoke to the officer in charge. It took a while to get the collectors ear but now he listens to me. It takes time to establish relationships with these higher ups' (2015).

Participants believed that posting a news story was perhaps the 'easiest part' of their work. Impact and the solving of issues that CGNet Swara helped the community with is an important part of why the portal is popular. Following up on the stories posted is an essential part of finding resolutions. As one respondent whose posts had led to many different types of impact said,

> Our work involves going to officers, making phone calls, ensuring that officers are on our side and will help us. Its takes very long before we can make the connections with the officers and sometimes just when we have made the connection, they get transferred and we have to start all over again. (2014)

Participants knew that 'Resolution is a big part of what CGNet is about.' One respondent said, 'I don't think CGNet would be as effective as it is without the resolution aspect. We need solutions' (2015).

An important aspect of the impact of CGNet Swara was the awareness of various issues that listening to CGNet Swara brought about. A lot of the news on CGNet Swara is about health and human rights violations. Respondents said that the health stories were useful because they usually gave them advice about how to use local medicines to stay healthy. They learned about their rights as citizens through the stories on human rights violations. Listeners said that listening to CGNet showed them that 'there were others like us' and that it helped them learn from each other's experience (2015). One respondent said, 'We also learn how issues are resolved in different parts of the country. Maybe we can use the same methods in case we are faced with the same issue' (2015).

RQ2: Attribution of success

CGNet has changed their relationship with authority and the bureaucracy in the area, claimed a majority of the respondents. Even the officials who had often intervened to help resolve issues agreed. Before CGNet Swara, respondents said they would take their issues to the government officials in the area and wait for a resolution. Officials often said they often did not receive the complaints but felt CGNet Swara had opened up channels of discussion (2016). But reporters post news stories with care. One respondent said,

> Like in the case of the hand pumps, we went to the officials and waited for a while hoping our requests for something as basic as water would be resolved but nothing happened. For most of our issues, even our most pressing ones, we first give the officials a chance to do their job before we post on CGNet. (2016)

Reporters believed it was this diplomacy that helped them use the medium effectively. A recurring point was that finally here was a medium that was raising news and issues they immediately identified with. A majority of the contributors attributed this point to making the medium successful. One respondent whose stories on healthcare had helped address crucial inequalities in the area said: We have many issues and we have been trying to draw official attention to them for a while. Now we have CGNet Swara. Constantly posting about every unaddressed problem will make it sound like we were just picking the phone up and complaining. We look at this as a way to ensure that officials at least hear about the issue (Focus group, 2016).

RQ3: Viewing themselves as reporters

Participant responses underlined a keen social conscience and a need to help their communities that kept them motivated to work for CGNet Swara ('I want to help improve society. I like to help people.'). One field champion whose reports had brought about impact and who also organized meetings to tell more people about the service, said,

> I was 16 when I worked to remove the caste system in our village; with CGNet I feel my work as a social oriented person who wants to make a difference is enhanced. With CGNet I can promote not just my views and voice but the voices of all those people who really need to be heard. (2016)

As participants said their work doesn't end with posting news on CGNet. They then worked to follow up with those in power to ensure that issues were resolved. CGNet Swara also posts the phone number of the official that can help communities with their issues. The idea is to ensure that people call them and pressurize them to do their work. Participants agreed that being a part of a similar situation where most of the contributors and listeners were poor and disempowered ensured that the audience had a clear understanding of the news posted and put in the required efforts to ensure resolution. One participant interviewed said, 'Reporters from the local newspapers often ask us for news leads but taps without water and the lack of schools aren't news enough for them' (2015).

While the editors factcheck the stories as they come in, ensuring that only genuine, credible and clearly audible stories are released, contributors didn't feel stifled by this editorial control. There is an immediate identification with the issues posted on the portal. For example, a story on unpaid wages immediately finds its audience making calls to ensure that they are paid. As one participant said, 'We are daily wage earners. No wages mean no food' (2016).

CGNet Swara works to highlight news of immediate relevance to the community and members of the community ensure access to the news. While mobile phones are commonly available, listening to news on Swara news is often a community activity. Participants interviewed emphasized that they helped each other post news. Reporters whose news brought in impact were congratulated and thanked for their efforts. One participant said that these 'congratulatory messages' (2015) encouraged her to look out for news and ensure a regular stream of information.

CGNet Swara has space for poems and songs as well. Respondents interviewed said this was an important aspect of the portal. One participant, said, 'In the midst of all our problems we sing too. We are not only about problems' (2016). Participants were anxious to portray their community as a resilient one. 'We request for change, not beg for mercy,' said one respondent (2016). The news on CGNET is posted from different parts of Chhattisgarh but as listeners interviewed said they could identify with the issues posted even if it wasn't from their areas. 'Not having water is the same everywhere,' said one respondent (Focus group, 2016).

The reporters of CGNet Swara also reported a mistrust of journalists and mainstream media. 'Local journalists often come to chat with us,' says Choudhury (2014). 'Mainstream journalists are often very irritated with the way Swara works. They often call CGNET lame and "nor noise nor voice."' Relationships with mainstream media are often fraught with

tension. As one contributor said, ' … the problem is that they put their own views across. Sometimes our point of view gets lost completely' (2015).

Also, the journalists on CGNet are aware that they work differently from mainstream media journalists. As one participant said,

> Posting a news story is the easiest part of our work. This is different because we also look for solving the issues posted. Its takes very long before we can make the connections with the officers and but what motivates us is the fact that it is these connections that make our work effective. (2016)

Discussion and conclusion

While previous research on CGNet Swara has focused its voice-based interface (Mudliar, Donner, and Thies 2012) and has looked at anecdotal evidence that indicates impact on local communities, this paper looks at the impact of this citizen journalism service in greater detail from the view of the reporters and audience and analyses their relationship with mainstream media from the point of view of James Carey's ritual view of communication. As a citizen journalism platform, CGNet Swara is certainly fulfilling a vital role, highlighting the issues of those living in very resource-poor areas and engaging those whose lives hitherto were only restricted to discussion on platforms where they were excluded from (Mudliar, Donner, and Thies 2012). Those who have the 'the largest stake in the conversation' now have an exclusive stand to continue the dialogue. In keeping with Carey's theory of communication, communication here was certainly more than just a system of sender, signals receiver and information (Carey 1989).

CGNet has succeeded in convincing a disenfranchised community that they can find solutions to their issues themselves. In keeping with Carey's example of a newspaper whose news when read also changes mindsets, CGNet Swara's news informs its audience about health and human right and in the process, empowers them with knowledge that enables them to be citizens, aware of their rights. In keeping with the concept where 'communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed' (Carey 1989), CGNet Swara doesn't shy away from highlighting the reality of the communities they report about and from. The reality is a harsh one where citizen rights to health and basic amenities are ignored but through the power given to common citizens through this ability to produce news, this reality can be transformed – citizen rights can be demanded for and in certain cases, be got.

For the local and mainstream media their plight and issues like access to drinking water or the closure of school isn't news. For CGNet Swara news isn't just information for purposes of control but news that will help bring quantifiable impact in the community. Concepts of 'sharing', 'participation', 'association', 'fellowship', 'the possession of a common faith' (Anderson 2011, 14) has made this project a success. The audience is one that knows what it's like to be powerless and disenfranchised.

Listening to CGNet is a communal affair. This is also because only 28 percent of the households have a mobile phone. But gathering together also means discussing issues and a course of action together as a community. The news posted, and broadcast is a familiar one. When one community resolves an issue, another set of people far away learns how to deal with an issue. It's an extension for community members with a social

conscience and a desire to transform their social situation. This is communication for change produced by the very people who need it the most. The chance to produce their own stories hasn't concentrated power to post stories in the hands of a few, but rather, it is a chance to amplify the voices of a community. As Carey postulated, the message and the shared experience is the same and therefore there is a deep identification among CGNet's audience with the issues that different groups and individuals in the area face – unpaid wages will mean hungry children in every family in the area. Unlike television, which is entertaining, and a break from harsh realities, CGNet celebrates 'shared reality'. Unlike mainstream media, communication isn't just about transmission but rather it is communication as ritual (Carey 1992) and isn't for 'control.' Rather they are to initiate a ritual process 'linked to ideas such as "sharing", "participation", "association", "fellowship"' (Anderson 2011) and start the process of change, of finding solutions to the issues.

Communication here is truly a symbolic process whereby the reality of the audience of CGNet produced and maintained in the issues highlighted and 'repaired' and 'transformed' (Carey 1989) when resolutions are sought. Though songs and poems also find place among the news to ensure that listeners are aware of other facets of their community, it is not done in any way to dilute authenticity. The community and its transformation, starting with convincing people that they are strong enough to find their solutions, is an integral part of the impact of the portal and is a ritualistic part of the news and narratives it produces. As Grossberg (2006) have underlined, culture and communication here are not independent of each other but work as an indistinguishable whole. The MSC technique allowed for a large number of participants to be interviewed so that respondents' responses could be checked and analyzed as well as for greater veracity.

While the rise of citizen journalism has often been linked with a crisis in the credibility of professional news itself, (Turner 2010), it has also been seen the 'ordinary' person's effort (Turner 2010, 143) at bridging certain crucial gaps. Residents of the areas that CGNet Swara serves are not the focus for most mainstream publications. CGNet Swara highlights concerns that rarely make it to mainstream media but they are not supplanting the professional journalist. CGNET shows that much of the reporters' choices of stories stem from experience, unhampered by restrictive editorial dictates. The case was different with local newspapers who had a much more positive view of the news posted on the site. The local journalists interviewed were clear that in remote villages it was hard to make the right contacts and that CGNET was thus a great resource. The site was deemed to help bring issues to the forefront, 'highlighting stories that we don't see anywhere else.'

Resolution as the participants said was a large part of the impact of CGNet Swara. While not all posts ensured a solution, others did, and it was the hope of resolution that led reporters to keep on posting. The reporter's work doesn't end with just posting a story but rather that's a start to finding the rights channels and resources to ensure that problems are solved. It is akin to the concept of 'media witnessing' that implies closeness; a more personal approach to the subject of reporting unlike the objectivity required of and associated with professional journalism (Frosh and Pinchevski 2014; Gillmor 2004). It is viewed as an impactful platform where issues about 'people and issues that plague people in remote regions where no media exists' can be posted. Its 'biggest impact has definitely been convincing people that it can help solve issues' say respondents.

Talking about the impact of their work, the reporters were clear that many of them participate, influenced by the impact, the act of posting a news story on the CGNet Swara could achieve. Respondents were clear that a story was the beginning of advocating for change, for finding a solution to the problem the story highlighted. They did not view themselves as reporters alone but also advocates for change. Their main motivations were social and community oriented in nature. CGNet Swara may be helping a very small part of India's poor and powerless resource-poor communities but there is little doubt that it has strong positive impact. The nature of impact isn't assessed in totality because ways to improve the service were not analyzed. Yet as an analysis of the motivations of the participants show they are often endowed with a strong social conscience and the fact that with CGNET they can promote not just their views and voice but 'the voices of all those people who really need to be heard.'

Notes

1. http://CGNetswara.org/index.php?id=52597
2. http://CGNetswara.org/about.html
3. Govt of India Statistics (NHDR Survey 2018).
4. http://CGNetswara.org/impact2.php
5. http://CGNetswara.org/impact2.php

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