



BAREFOOT

How often do you see women from India hosting documentaries? How about farmers from Peru? That's the mission of a new organization—to give poor and forgotten people the opportunity to tell their stories to the world and, more important, to themselves.

BY LOUISE DANIELLE PALMER

A woman in a green sari is standing in a field reporting into her microphone, TV anchor-style, while a young boy in tattered clothes sits under the banyan tree behind her. Cut to a woman in a pink sari adjusting the video camera's cord as she walks past piles of melons in a bustling outdoor market. Cut to a woman in a yellow sari shooting from a camera hoisted onto her shoulder as cows wander past.

This montage of women filming a monthly video magazine called "Sneha Praja" is an unusual sight, which is exactly the point. How often do you see poor Indian village women hosting documentaries, shooting news segments, interviewing officials? How often do you see them on TV at all? Not often, except from the other end of the lens, through the eyes of someone from the West.

Flip the lens and you've got a glimpse into a faraway world from the perspective of those who live there—tribal people in Burkina Faso, Native Americans in the U.S. or Peruvian farmers. Flip the lens and what you find is a different form of storytelling

Photos: Video Volunteers

shaped by different narrative structures that reflect different cultures.

Global newscasting by and for the people is the idea of Jessica Mayberry, a fast-talking 28-year-old who left the New York media industry (Court TV, Fox, CNN) to become a social entrepreneur. In 2003, Mayberry founded Video Volunteers (VV), a “global social-media network” designed to give poor people, traditional people and tribal people—the billions who have no access to the media—an opportunity to put their stories on film.

“The time for people’s media is upon us,” says Mayberry, who now shuttles between New York and Ahmedabad, India. “We are changing how we distribute media, who gets access to audiences, how we connect. The next logical step is changing who produces media... If we succeed, we really can create a revolution.”

Mayberry rightly senses she is on the cusp of something big. At the top of the media world, ownership of print and broadcast media is concentrated in ever-fewer hands, while at the bottom, the opposite is true. Technological advances are giving more people than ever a shot at powerful media. The cost of a video camera has fallen from \$10,000 to under \$500 in the past few years while avenues for viewing and selling video have skyrocket-

ed through the Internet, and satellite and cable TV. There’s streaming video, podcasting, Google Video, Current TV and Link TV. No one has yet figured out how to make it all work, but for the first time, community-created media matter.

Mayberry was inspired to start VV after nine months with the video unit of the Self Employed Women’s Association, a powerful advocacy group serving 700,000 women in the west Indian state of Gujarat. Surrounded by Indian “social entrepreneurs” who worked small miracles every day, she became convinced that communities with access to information and a sense of purpose have the capacity to solve their own problems.

VV partners with citizens groups, sending professional filmmakers as volunteers to train community leaders, often women. Each community video unit has four reporter-producers trained to report, shoot and edit. Mayberry’s dream is to have legions of “barefoot filmmakers,” some of whom cannot read or write (illiteracy poses no barrier to filmmaking), telling their stories all over the world.

Each unit has access to four cameras, a TV and VCR, editing software and a wide-screen projector for outdoor screening. Reporters produce a monthly video magazine of news, documentaries, local culture and arts, tips and vox pop segments, focusing

FILMMAKERS





“VIDEOS GIVE THE PUBLIC A PLATFORM TO AIR ISSUES



on subjects important to them and their communities. Like a road show, the projector travels from one village to the next, viewed by as many as 20,000 people per month.

Every unit also has a community editorial board, which gathers audience feedback, circulating it to the reporters and citizens groups. This is crucial because the subjects covered—ranging from witchcraft and farmers' suicide to sexual discrimination and polygamy—are touchy, rarely discussed in public and almost never covered by local media.

One VV magazine in Gujarat, for example, took up the issue of the right to food, allowing villagers to discuss hunger in their communities. Villagers typically avoid the subject because pride dictates that everyone must have enough to eat—never mind that many are starving. Another VV magazine examined ways to stop child marriages. The subject was chosen by the four reporters, all child brides married off to older men by 12 or 13. While most urban Indians believe this illegal practise is a thing of the past, VV found that child marriage is still common and has a profound effect on Indian society.

“You can't solve a problem as long as you are saying there is no problem,” says Stalin K., VV's India director and founder of

Drishti, a leading human-rights media project. “Denial is so high in communities with serious problems because that is how they cope. The video magazines give the public a platform to air issues that are otherwise surrounded by silence.”

It's hard to understand the profound impact of that, he says. Imagine never seeing yourself—or any issue you cared about—reflected in the TV shows you watch or the newspapers you read. Imagine living in Gujarat on less than \$3 a day. You can't afford school fees for your kids, and certainly not a new lipstick. But when you open the paper, it is filled with ads for makeup you don't wear, clothes you can't afford, and movies you will never see, as well as stories you don't understand, like the latest on Brad and Angelina.

The importance of community media is backed by studies such as the World Bank's 1999 “Voices of the Poor,” in which people worldwide identified “having a voice” as their No. 1 need, above food and shelter. VV is betting that the democratizing influence of community media can change the monologue coming out of the West into a dialogue that enables poor people to shift from being passive viewers to active communicators.

“This is a great tool for getting out information, for voicing community concerns, for fostering responsibility, for creating transparency and accountability of those in power,” says Stalin K. “It can help empower a community to take on issues. Taken all together, it can really accelerate social change.”

Here’s the five-year plan: Set up 50 community video units with 200 trained reporter-producers on four continents to feed into a global grassroots media network. Reach thousands per month by producing 10 video magazines a year in each unit. Feed stories to local and national media in the country where they are produced. Enable one village to learn from the next—building solidarity locally and globally—and urbanites to learn from villagers.

Outside the country, VV’s editors will rework footage for agencies like the World Bank and the United Nations. Imagine a DVD with four takes on water from children in four corners of the

world. Once reporters have enough training, the material will be repackaged for international media outlets such as the BBC.

So far, VV has completed 16 projects, including several in the US (in New York’s Harlem neighbourhood, and on the Win-River Indian Reservation in California). It has also set up six units in India, where the model will be perfected before being exported to Africa, the Americas and Asia. If VV receives the funding—and that’s a big *if*—the first global social-media network, a kind of grassroots CNN, will be born.

“My dream is to see media produced by everyone, not just .00001 percent of the population living in LA or Delhi,” says VV founder Jessica Mayberry. “How much truer a version of the world will we have if we understand conflicts and issues from the perspective of the people living them?”

More information: www.videovolunteers.org



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Indian women are making documentaries. Jessica Mayberry (far right) is watching.