



Dear Friends,

Our Community Video Units have now reached 60,000 people in more 270 community screenings, since the first screening in September. It's been an incredibly beautiful process to watch the Community Producers blossom, and to engage in such a creative activity with them—it's almost hard to believe that none of these Community Video Units even existed a year ago.

Now that we have begun achieving regular Video Magazine production and village screenings, we are seeing that this is a viable model to create 'community owned media.' I wanted to take a moment to share some of our learnings with our friends, in three areas that are key to our mission.

Articulating Change

The concept of voice was what inspired me to start Video Volunteers—ever since David Hoffman, the Founder of Internews, told me on the phone one day about the World Bank's "Voices of the Poor" study in which 60,000 "poorest of the poor" reported access to a voice as their number one priority—above even food, shelter, and education. But 'voice' is a vague, over-used and unquantifiable concept—whether on VV's homepage or in a cell phone commercial. So what does it mean to us? It means the ability to *articulate*—to prevail in a debate, to express complex ideas and emotions, and to paint verbal pictures that convey one's own unique identity.

Imagine your own life if you were not empowered to articulate—if you couldn't express why you vote for one political party, resolve a conflict with your spouse, convince your boss of your good idea for your organization, or even argue your way onto an overbooked airplane. Our voice *is* as critical to life as our food, shelter and education--yet in so many developing countries, the poor lack the communications skills and the platforms to share and problem-solve in a creative manner. They aren't empowered to explain *why* the road is being built in the wrong place; or to complain to a teacher who doesn't come on time, or to share their aspirations and dreams within their families, especially if they are women. Developing these abilities to *articulate* requires a significant time and financial investment, and an awareness that true articulation is altogether different from just 'having a voice,' and expressing one's emotions—because it can only happen through an investment in that person's *intellectual* ability. This is why, in the Community Video Unit (CVU) model, a trainer is placed in each NGO for one full year. Our goal is to transform our Producers into journalists, leaders, activists, and communicators, with the camera simply as the vehicle for this incredibly intensive leadership development.

Our partner organization, Drishti Media, Arts and Human Rights, is one of the world's experts in providing this kind of empowerment training. Stalin K, Drishti's Director (and the India Director of Video Volunteers), has just been made the Convener of the Community Radio Forum-India. The Forum is a network of organizations that has just won a historic legislative victory enabling communities to own and operate their own small FM radio stations for the first time ever. In all his community media endeavors,

Stalin intends to develop models to use media to empower people to articulate on *all* issues, not just the single issue that community is being organized around.

I've been to so many rallies where 100s of rural people are given a chance to confront government officials. When the organizer says, 'who would like to come to the mic?' there is dead silence, until finally the organizer can coax up one dependable old man to tell how the NGO has changed his life. That community may have been successfully organized around one issue, say water—but if they don't have the platforms to come together again, you will NOT see them organize on another issue; you will not see communities taking the lead in their own development there on an on-going basis.

Our whole motivation is focused around how we can create permanent community platforms where people come together, share and debate, and create solutions—a kind of Athenian forum for villages and slums. The CVUs create those platforms, and the innovative aspects of it—that it is *for, of, and by* a geographically tight community—are all designed to create a 'buzz,' a virtuous circle of discussion, leadership and people taking action. The communities see the Community Producers on a recurring basis, they respond to their probing questions when they are out shooting "vox pop" segments, they see their neighbors on screen and laugh at themselves, and they stay for discussions and debates and go home with new ideas in their heads, and new things to talk about.

The Producers at the Samvad ('Dialogue') Community Video Unit, in partnership with the local NGO Saath, talk about how Rickshaw drivers in their neighborhoods recognize them and thank them; they have kids follow them in the streets singing their theme song, and little girls come up Rehana, one of the women producers, saying, 'you're my favorite in the movie!' Like any media people, they've got their fan clubs—it just so happens that these movies are seen on projectors in public spaces, not TV, and the 'stars' are role models young girls can actually aspire to be.

These are the 'early indicators' of 'community owned media', and in the coming year we will develop programs to create the ultimate test of community ownership—whether communities will pay to receive media. One of the other Community Video Units, Aapna Ma Lakma (meaning 'In our Land') is an all-Dalit CVU in partnership with the NGO Navsarjan. They have set a monthly target that one more of their 25 villages should agree to cover the transportation costs of bringing the video magazine to their village, so that within two years communities are covering the entire local distribution cost!

Our emphasis on creating an environment to foster local ownership, where communities are willing to make sacrifices to keep the Community Video Unit going, is what separates our earlier approach of isolated 'projects' from our recently-developed vision of creating a global 'media industry' at the base of the pyramid. It is our goal that the CVUs will be able to cover a significant part of their operating costs within a few years. Many things are necessary for this, but I'll talk about two that we are actively pursuing in 2007: involving the mainstream media, and an active and expanding network.

Mainstream Media and Community Media

The Indian media has gone from one state-owned television station, to 100s of independent channels in just over a decade—and now, community radio. But what impact does this have on the poor?

All the Community Video Units spent their first few weeks surveying the community on the issues they would like to see in the media: health information, employment opportunities, local culture... this is what they want to see, but never do. We give the Community Producers an exercise in which they add up the column inches in newspapers, and airtime minutes on the news, given to the issues affecting the poor. In every case, the attention to these critical issues is minute or non-existent. Stalin knows reporters

whose beats have shifted from agriculture, to fashion, in the last five years, or from 'labor,' to lifestyle—all the beats to promote the idea of a "Shining India" of outsourcing films and new billionaires. But the media, and the government, have now woken up to the fact that this isn't the reality: the previous central government was thrown out by distressed rural voters, and the media is also realizing rural viewers are a market they need to listen to. A journalist from one of the major 24 hour news stations came to visit us last week—they would like our Community Video Units to provide them content for their 'citizen's journalism' programs. They launched it six months ago, but have *never once* gotten a story from a rural area.

There's a great business model here to get the mainstream media—and through them, the middle classes—to engage with issues of poverty and rights violations: the plethora of media channels, both nationally, internationally, and on the web, have no way of getting content from rural areas. We are already one of the bigger media production companies in India using the 'VideoJournalism' model of low-cost production. We intend to grow the network to over 100 Community Producers in the next year. For the stations, we will merely be a source of 'cheap content,' but that's fine with us, because it still helps us do what we want to do—increase the visibility and representation of the most marginalized and unheard voices and communities in the mainstream media.

Growing a Social Media Network

Before I sign off, I'd like to share one of our key learnings from the last year. If our community media initiatives are to be financially sustainable, and are to impact the mainstream media, we must achieve scale, and make long-term commitments to the communities where we work. Around the world, community media is usually undertaken as part of an NGO's marketing effort, in which community members undergo a few days or weeks of training, and produce a lovely video for that NGO at the end. Few of these are expected to continue after the project period, or to generate income—but it is our goal, at Video Volunteers and at Drishti, to demonstrate that much more is possible. The investments that organizations make in outside filmmakers or in single video products, can be investments in the communities themselves—investments in the creation of permanent platforms that catalyze community-led development. That's what we have set out to create with the Community Video Units, and what we feel is possible in all community media initiatives in our new digital age.

As many of you know, we have started our efforts to expand the Network to more NGOs in India later this year. The response so far has been tremendous, and we've had expressions of interest from over 60 NGOs! This is a good indicator that a Social Media Network of Community Producers from around the world, supported by a network of NGOs, is indeed possible. None of this would have been possible without our NGO partners Laya, Navsarjan, Saath, Yuvshakti, Akshara and Yuva, and the future won't be possible without more like them.

If you are an NGO, or an individual, interested in empowering local communities to articulate and in investing in this emergent social media network, I hope we will hear from you soon.

With warm regards

Jessica Mayberry
Founding Director
Video Volunteers

