INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the limitations of ICT4D projects that aim to empower poor people through voice without asking who will listen. It focuses on the ‘Open Knowledge Network’ (OKN), a pioneering but ultimately unsuccessful ICT4D project that enabled poor communities in Africa and South Asia to create and exchange local content through nearly 200 telecenters between December 2003 and October 2007. The architects of the project explicitly recognized poor people’s knowledge, experience, opinions and ideas as a valuable resource in the fight against poverty and thus sought to bring it online and make it as widely available as possible across the developing world. This unique starting point makes OKN an interesting case for exploring the political value of ICT4D projects that aim to empower poor people through voice because its perceived success was contingent on the impact of local content that they helped to create. In this respect, the paper will argue that the project failed. It was motivated by a top-down sense of what needs to be done to address the dearth of local content on the Internet, rather than a strong sense of need or interest from the intended beneficiaries of the

ABSTRACT

This paper uses a case study of the ‘Open Knowledge Network’ to explore the political value of ‘information and communication technology for development’ (ICT4D) projects that promote the creation and exchange of ‘local content’ in poor communities. These initiatives are distinguishable from the vast majority of digital content initiatives that aggregate and adapt ‘global content,’ which project implementers consider relevant to the needs of target beneficiaries. They are guided by the assumption that active participation in the Information Society is a crucial component of human development, which is closely tied to citizenship and political agency. From this starting point, ICTs are seen as political vehicles for strengthening the voices of the poor, rather than positioning them as passive recipients of mediated messages from above. This paper argues that the political value of these projects will be limited if they focus too strongly on generating local content without addressing the question of demand.

Keywords: Digital Inclusion, Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D), Local Content, Telecentre Projects, Voice

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project. The result, it is argued, was an overly insular and supply-driven content offering for which there was little demand.

The paper commences with a two-part literature review, which provides a conceptual framework in which the case study can be understood. The first part summarizes different streams of academic and practitioner-oriented studies with an interest in supporting a more inclusive Information Society through digital content creation. The second part critiques the prevailing assumption in much of the literature that community participation is the key to success of donor-aided telecenter projects, reflecting on the practical implications of promoting community participation while ignoring local priorities and needs. The literature review is followed by an overview of the research approach. Next comes the case study, which emphasizes three reasons for OKN’s failure to empower target beneficiaries as envisioned: first, tensions between the aims and methods of the project; second, the gap between supply and demand for information; and third, the benefits of participation favored local content providers, not recipients. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the OKN experience for the small but growing field of ICT4D research and practice that focuses on the politically transformative potential of new ICTs to enable very poor people to have their say.

VISIONS OF AN INCLUSIVE INFORMATION SOCIETY

It is widely considered a methodological prerequisite and a critical determinant of success for the intended beneficiaries of development projects to participate in defining and resolving their own problems. The rhetorical emphasis on participation has been particularly strong in the ICT4D field, which emerged in the mid 1990s as a result of high-level commitments by multilateral institutions and donor agencies to support participation by ‘poor’ countries and ‘poor’ people in the Information Society. To support this goal, major donors initially embarked on a concerted effort to close the so-called ‘digital divide’ by increasing Internet accessibility and affordability in developing countries. This was initiated through the creation of telecommunications links, Internet service providers, and public access points or ‘telecenters’ where such facilities were thinly spread or absent. ICT4D projects of this nature still continue, alongside efforts to reform ICT policy environments that frustrate rollout in many countries. Of more interest to this paper however are ICT4D projects that aim to support participation in the Information Society through the creation and exchange of digital content. ‘Digital content initiatives’ are founded on the understanding that connectivity will be meaningless for the world’s poorest people who will find very little information of relevance to their lives and almost nothing in their own language in the absence of a complementary investment in digital content creation.

The vast majority of digital content initiatives take as their starting point an assumed connection between knowledge and economic growth. This derives from the strategic management literature on the global knowledge economy, which contends that all types of organizations, including countries, depend upon their capacity to mobilize knowledge to thrive (e.g., Drucker, 1993; Boisot, 1998). These ideas were picked up by the World Bank in the 1998/99 World Development Report titled Knowledge for Development, which has been highly influential in convincing most major donors to adopt an “economically-based knowledge focus” in their aid programs (Johnstone, 2003). The report has provided one of the most systematic analyses of the role of knowledge in development to date, but it erroneously assumes, along with “much scholarship about knowledge and development […] that the main task is to transfer commoditized chunks of information and knowledge from one place to another” (Chataway & Wield, 2000, p. 817; McFarlane, 2006; Powell, 2006). Although we do not have complete knowledge, it implies that vast quantities are available, located mainly in the Global North. ICTs are presented as
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