



The Power of Voice:

A look inside Equal Access' Community Reporters Program

"...these are the interviews which compel us to do something for the community. These are the stories which are encouraging us to be with the people. That's the difference between a Community Reporter and a journalist"

"A journalist is more concerned with the content and the news, but we are able to add empathy on to that. When a journalist collects voices from people, he/she feels his/her work done, but that is just the starting point for a Community Reporter".

-Apsara Khanal, an Equal Access trained Community Reporter based in Nepalganj, Nepal



Nepal is currently undergoing massive changes and for many Nepalis upholding the right to freedom of expression is central to achieving a successful transition to a New Nepal that so many are working towards. However, whilst the role of mass media and the need for a free media to generate a democratic culture cannot be overstated, what we hope to show is the important need to strive for freedom of expression for Nepali citizens as well. As a blogger on the citizen journalist website OhmyNews recently put it "the citizens ability to express themselves is the single most important defining element of a functional democracy" (Biriwasha; 2007¹).

Although it may be overstating things to say that freedom of expression is the single defining characteristic of democracy, few would argue that substantive democracy cannot exist without an informed and engaged citizenry and that the power of voice in the public sphere is an

unequally distributed resource. By this we mean that certain sections of Nepali community, often described as 'marginalised', including women, Dalits, ethnic minorities and those who don't speak Nepali as a first language, continue to lack the means to be heard and represented nationally through the media.

Certainly, what a person says in private is important, however to effect real change in society public expression is vital and whilst traditional mass media in Nepal has become an increasingly powerful tool of information, often in Nepal as elsewhere, the media and the citizen are seen as

¹ http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?article_class=8&no=368619&rel_no=1

two distinct entities, where media is a 'conduit for observation and information' and the citizen is simply the recipient, or at most provider, of a quote or debate position. This article seeks to re-examine this notion, investigating the opportunities (and limitations) for upholding freedom of expression through media that is created by the citizen, using newly available technologies.

We will examine these issues in the context of an ongoing Equal Access Community Reporter radio project in Nepal that has trained citizens from rural Nepal, in the use of portable audio devices to generate content for local and national broadcast audiences via two weekly, long running radio programs - *Samajdhari* (a UNIFEM funded initiative) and *New Nepal* (funded by USAID and the United Nations Democracy Fund). These radio programs are produced and broadcast both at the national and local levels on more than 50 community, commercial and government stations and have been running successfully for over three years.² Whilst blogging, tweeting on twitter, YouTube and other web 2.0 technologies are just beginning to take off in Nepal, there is still a large percentage of the population that has never used a computer and at 0.8% accessibility³, the internet remains largely inaccessible in rural Nepal. In this context, radio is able to transcend boundaries such as illiteracy, promoting the kind of producer-consumer shifts that new media is synonymous with. What is more, radio has a long and trusted history in the country and with the number of private and commercial radio stations mushrooming from several dozen to over 100 in the past few years and field audio recording and editing capability improving, new radio technology holds a significant key to providing promising opportunities to uphold freedom of expression in Nepal. Put in the hands of citizens, these advancements in radio technologies have the potential to promote a greater diversity of voices on air and offer an alternative to traditional media as stories are not created by a journalist entering a community but instead are generated by members of that community themselves.



Equal Access uses the term 'Community Reporter' to describe those community members trained to use digital audio recording equipment. As captured in the quotes at the top of this article, a Community Reporter is not a journalist in the traditional sense. In fact the success of the Community Reporter initiative in Nepal is very much dependent on the community seeing the reporter as an 'insider' – one of their own who they can approach with a story or issue. Apsara, an Equal Access trained female Community Reporter from Nepalganj in the mid West of Nepal, is described by a community member as a "*daughter in law of this*

community" first and as a follow up thought "*she is a radio reporter also*". This distinction is vital, not to downplay the role of journalists in upholding freedom of expression but in upgrading the ability of community members to encourage a change of attitude towards the interplay between the media, freedom of expression and the 'average citizen'. Key to the distinction between

² Full transcripts of the interviews with Community Reporters that were the basis for this article and more details about the project, training methodology and examples of the program content are available from Equal Access (www.equalaccess.org).

³ Equal Access Broadcast Audience Survey 2006

Community Reporters and journalists is not just the access community members have to the Community Reporter, but also differences in the process of mediation of the information as it moves from the community into the public sphere via the Community Reporter's reportage. Stories recorded by a citizen and member of the community means both perceived and real differences in the way the story is packaged for broadcast including story selection and contextualizing, use of language and choice of voices beyond "traditional leaders". As a result, the perception of the community is that the stories comes from and are shaped by them rather than an outsider.

So far, Equal Access has trained over 42 Community Reporters from areas across the country, those trained include rural men and women from underrepresented or marginalized ethnic groups and castes, youth, people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS, women survivors of domestic violence and speakers of minority languages. These groups were focused on particularly due to their limited access to or representation by mainstream media and thus their lack of freedom of expression as stipulated by the Declaration on Human Rights: namely the means of 'imparting information and ideas through any media'⁴. Once chosen, the Community Reporters were trained in the use of digital recording devices, interviewing skills and ethical reporting before returning to their home areas to collect the voices and stories of people in the community on a range of issues including safer migration, HIV, violence against women and peacebuilding.



In the past the idea that a member of these local communities could have access to the means to produce and broadcast reportage directly to a national audience was unrealistic: equipment was too expensive, training local community members to use it independently was too complex, analogue content was too difficult to send and edit and the state dominance of the electronic media meant a lack of means for this content to reach a mass audience. However, with the availability of solid state digital recorders and a dramatic reduction in cost in flash memory storage it is now possible to equip citizens with the training and technology to create content that can feed directly into Equal Access' national programmes. Although initially using mini disks, Equal Access now provide Zoom H2 recorders which feature a high quality built in mic, allowing the handheld recorder to be used directly as a microphone. The price of these recorders has fallen

⁴ Article 19, UDHR adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, Resolution 217A (III)

by 60% to approximately \$170 since their introduction 2 years ago and they are both robust and easy to use in the field. In terms of editing, with the easy availability of Adobe Audition (the successor to Cool Edit), many Community Reporters have learned digital editing and are able to edit their own stories using facilities at local radio stations.

What Equal Access hoped for and indeed has achieved through training Community Reporters is to enable the active participation of citizens in the collection and dissemination of stories *they* feel need to be in the public arena. Too often production houses, country offices, studios and producers are established in county capitals where they are close to the donors, close to the technology and close to the people with the necessary skills to produce the programming...but a long way away from the audiences. By creating a network of Community Reporters drawn from the very communities the program is trying to reach, this approach bridges the gap between the producers and the audience. In Changing Our World, one of the first Equal Access radio programs to trial the Community Reporter approach, over two thirds of the radio program consisted of audio collected outside of the capital by young women with no previous training or experience of making radio.

And it is not just the Community reporters themselves who are able to participate. Communities that have a Community Reporter working in their area repeatedly describe how they never believed *"that (their) voice will come on the radio"*. They feel *"honored"* to hear their voices on air and this encourages wider community listening and further community participation. Thus using radio technology in this way not only allows for an alternative channel of communication direct to the local level, but also provides a space to engage in open and honest discussions that can help encourage a sense of community identity and wider citizen participation. Thus, rather than seeking out a story as a traditional journalist might do, the Community Reporter is regularly approached by community members who want the right to express themselves and have their story told. These stories are frequently extremely personal and emotional yet reflect the experiences of many marginalized Nepalis. After providing an interview about the rape of his six year old daughter, a father from the Dalit caste remembers how he wept when he heard his story aired *"I have never thought that our agony will be aired on the radio. We willingly provided our story in the radio program that people will know about our story. And I always pray God that no child will be abused in future."*

For the first time then, it seems that many of these community members feel an ownership of the radio and its content and also an understanding of the power expression and access to the public sphere to create social change. It is no longer an external medium controlled by unseen intermediaries, but an integral part of the community, with a face that they recognize and voices that echo their own. One reporter even described how a woman in her village had curbed her husband's drinking by declaring to him *"if you don't stop drinking, I will speak to the Community Reporter, then all of Nepal will know your story"*. In terms of approaches to development and citizen participation, this change in attitude towards the role of media and radio is critical. Empowered with the 'power of voice' Community Reporters and the communities they live in will not only seek to speak truth to power but will also use their voice to bring about social change in their communities. Thus, not only is the Community Reporter able to promote the so called 'voices of the voiceless', but having reporters who come from within the community, rather than outside, ensures the community is engaged in the radio program and its agenda for encouraging social change. As described by community members in Nepalganj, Community Reporter's like Naina, Nisha and Apsara are able to encourage the often difficult transition from listening to

participation and action: *"We always use[d] to listen to the musical programs in radio. But it was Apsara-aunt (Community Reporter) who came to us and helped us form a (listener) group. This radio program helped us to know different issues....(and) encouraged us to do something in the community"* (Community Member in Nepalganj where Apsara is the Community Reporter).



A central aim of the Community Reporter project is safeguarding freedom of expression for all through access to a form of mass self-communication but using local and national radio instead of the internet. Since becoming a Community Reporter Nisha Lama, a young woman from an indigenous community feels more empowered to express her thoughts and ideas in public places. During an interview conducted by Equal Access staff, Nisha explains that earlier she used to think that only so called top level people could exercise the rights to freedom of expression but now she explains *"people in my community now respect me and involve me in community level activities. I feel like for the first time they now treat me like a citizen of Nepal"*. A male Community Reporter, Naina, describes not the empowerment he experienced himself as an individual, but the knock-on effect that having a 'Dalit' reporter has had within his community: *"Now people believe that airing voices in the radio is not only politicians' and rich people's rights, we (Dalit) people can air our thoughts and voices. As community reporters we are able to put people's voice in front"*. The opportunity for expanding freedom of expression is also possible for other members of the community. One recent example Nisha remembers is the Chepangs, a group of indigenous people listed by the state as a disappearing and marginalized community. After taking an interview with a group of Chepangs they explained *"no one like you has come to us to ask our views and opinion for the constitutional issues yet. You are the first to come to us ... and when you broadcast our voice through the radio we hope our Chepang representative in Constituent Assembly will listen to us."* After sharing this experience Nisha smiled and said *"being a Nepali citizen I feel very proud and more responsible that I can help my people to exercise their rights to freedom of expression."*

The Community Reporters all recognize that their role as conduits for the community comes with an elevated social status that has both its advantages and disadvantages. As women, both Apsara and Nisha mention the sense of achievement and recognition that being invited into male dominated spaces brings them. Seen as the 'voice of the community', Nisha is often invited to her local Ward Committee Consultations to discuss what improvements, such as new roads or better irrigation, are needed in the area. Traditionally, these meetings are attended by community leaders who by the very nature of Nepal's rigid societal structures, tend to be older, higher caste men. For a young female, from an indigenous community, this chance to represent the more marginalized community groups is a big achievement, which Nisha acknowledges: *"I am proud to be a Community Reporter in a male dominated society. Now people come to us to report. Now people invite me to different functions. Now I have different status in my community."* Whilst the Community Reporters are undoubtedly valued by their society, not everyone believes in the power of the voice and an accusation often levied at them is 'so what – I give you my voice but what does that change for me?' Airing marginalized voices is not as immediately tangible as micro credit or road building and the resulting impact or inclusion is hard to measure. However, done well it has the possibility of becoming the ultimate embodiment of freedom of expression in communities which have been excluded from genuine public discourse for generations.

The experiences of Community Reporters in Nepal holds broader lessons for the design of projects aimed at upholding and empowering the right to freedom of expression amongst individuals or communities through the use of media. Whilst journalists still retain a vital role as objective intermediaries, traditional development approaches centered on training journalists to inform through reporting on minority interests or development topics, may need to also consider training those communities themselves in using and consuming the media in ways that contribute to a more open dialogue in the public sphere. In many ways, the experiences of the Community Reporters mirrors the increase in user generated content on the internet such as blogging, reviews, twitter and social networking in societies with high levels of internet penetration. Nisha, Naina and Apsara could be seen as the equivalent to the bloggers, reviewers and strong voices of the internet, using newly accessible media technology and access to a public audience to create the increase in freedom of expression and shifts in power dynamics often described by commentators on the impact of blogs and other new media technologies. Of course, for the great majority of people, conventional mass media remains vital and the importance of a free and open national media is still central to understanding what it means to be a citizen. The Community Reporter model is a uniquely 'bare foot' approach to content generation and whilst its direct impact on freedom of expression is currently limited primarily to those communities with a Community Reporter in their midst, given the increased capability to allow individuals and communities to shape their own messages, 'empowering' disadvantaged communities through media initiatives by putting the power of voice directly into the hands of citizens is a powerful tool for enhancing freedom of expression.