Chapter 7

The Kothmale Model:
Using radio to make the Internet visible[1]

Ian Pringle and MJR David

> *Spectacular growth in information and communication technologies (ICTs), and specifically the internet, has the potential to offer a new generation of tools for rural development. The internet, with its huge quantities and variety of content, is increasingly becoming an effective delivery and exchange system for information and knowledge, continuing education and learning. However,* [rural ICT] *requires special efforts to create appropriate models for those who can neither afford the Internet access nor have the language capacity to understand the content.*[2]

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) represent perhaps the greatest tool to date for self-education and value-addition to an individual or community's efforts for development, yet people in poor rural communities do not have the necessary awareness, skills or facilities to contribute to their development using ICTs. Most people in South Asia, especially those in rural areas, are excluded from the revolution that ICTs are ushering in.

Parallel to other increasing forms of inequity, there is a gap, widening at an exponential rate, between those with access to media and ICTs as productive tools and those without. Closing what has become known as 'the digital divide' is particularly important precisely because digital ICTs cut across and add value to all fields of development and offer opportunities to bridge the spectrum of inequities of which the 'digital divide' is only an extension or a symptom.

The communication scenario along with the political context in the island nation of Sri Lanka is very much similar to most of its South Asian neighbours. Urban centres are witnessing rapid expansions in telecom and media, while telephones, electricity and clean drinking water are still luxuries for many in the countryside.

Beyond the question of access, the lack of experience with ICTs is major barrier for their use in rural areas. One example that offers some insight and elements for a successful model is Kothmale Community Radio and Internet in central Sri Lanka.

Kothmale

The internet project at Kothmale was initiated in 1998 – by UNESCO in partnership with a number of Sri Lankan[3] and international agencies – to address 'the digital divide' by piloting a model for rural ICT use. The elements that make Kothmale stand out in the field of ICT projects are the 'marriage' of internet with local community radio and the innovation in raising rural community awareness of ICTs that this convergence has allowed.

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[1] This paper would not have been possible without the work and inputs of Tanya Notley. The authors would also like to recognise the contribution of K.M. Karunaratna of Colombo University.

[2] Unpublished UNESCO documents related to the replication of the Kothmale project; Wijayananda Jayaweera, 2001.

[3] Partners included the Sri Lankan Government, Sri Lanka Telecommunications Authority, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, Sri Lanka Telecom and University of Colombo.

Combining internet with radio and approaching radio listeners as potential internet users has significantly raised awareness of ICTs in an area that five years previously had neither a computer or a telephone. While there are still only a handful of computers and telephones, by interfacing internet through radio, both directly through the physical availability of computers at the radio station and indirectly but with more dramatic results by making web-browsing into the basis for daily radio shows, thousands of people have been exposed to the internet. A significant portion of these people have been able to use the internet themselves and some have benefited directly in terms of education, business and livelihood, entertainment and enjoyment.

The presence of computers and the internet along with the accumulation of skills, largely through peer-based training, has led to an expanded local capacity to use ICTs, one of the project's key achievements. The Kothmale model clearly demonstrates the potential development impact of access to the internet, both for the individual and the community-at-large. However the demand that has been created exceeds the availability of access points and appropriate content, two other key considerations in rural ICT application. Two and a half years into the project, the benefits appear to be concentrated in certain demographic sectors and the project has not delivered a recipe for sustainability.

Kothmale Community Radio

In South Asia where localised media channels are rare to non-existent, Sri Lanka was the first country to introduce non-government radio and, predating that by more than a decade, the first to introduce any sort of community radio.

The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation's (SLBC) community radio programming and local FM stations, from their origins in the Mahaweli community radio initiatives in the eighties,[4] to the Kothmale internet project in the nineties, are an unusual example of community media. SLBC's 'community radio' stations exist officially through the government broadcasting system and SLBC provides an operational infrastructure: salaried and trained staff, studio facilities and equipment. More importantly, SLBC provides permission to broadcast. While the stations are top down in terms of licensing and core operations, their day-to-day functioning and impact are clearly at the local level.

This is certainly the case at Kothmale Community Radio (KCR), located at Mawathula in the Kothmale Valley in the central hilly area of Sri Lanka, not far from the former capital, Kandy. The towns of Gampola and Nawalapitiya as well as some 50 villages and 17 schools are within the station's broadcast range, giving the station a total potential listenership of over 200,000 people. KCR has one functioning studio that feeds to a 300-watt transmitter, putting out 11.5 hours of programming a day, during a morning and an evening shift. The station has a small paid staff – some full-time, some paid on a per-programme basis – and some volunteers.

Kothmale is a local radio station. While it has received much international attention in the past few years because of the internet project, in Sri Lanka it goes largely unnoticed outside of its broadcast area. Although it is officially part of SLBC, Kothmale has a high degree of autonomy, if not editorial independence. The station raises funds through advertising, as much as 75 percent of its budget, and makes independent decisions about programming. Management and staffing are local. The station makes use of a significant

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[4] Community radio in Sri Lanka, including Kothmale Community Radio (KCR), came into being during the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people as a result of the Mahaweli irrigation project. Community radios were identified as a means to mitigate the relocation of people into new areas. For more on the Mahaweli Community Radio project see David, MJR, "Mahaweli Community Radio" in Girard, Bruce, *A Passion for Radio: Radio Waves and Community* (1992). Available online at <www.comunica.org/passion/>.

number of volunteers, features an active listeners' group and has a high degree of community interaction.

There are, however, limits to this autonomy and the station's potential for growth as a rural communications vehicle, is limited by its dependency on SLBC. In effect, KCR has more capacity than authority in decision-making, and it has greater potential than impact.

A frequent scenario that flashed across our minds was rural youth with little or no ICT skills being marginalised in the job market. There are kids in village schools who do not receive their text books on time while their counterparts in urban schools are sending emails and surfing the internet for supplementary information for school projects. Inevitably, all these children will be queuing for employment in the near future and most probably the ones who lack familiarity and skills in ICTs will be sidelined

Sri Lanka has seen enough blood spilled in its fifty years of independence. There have been two violent youth insurrections in the south and a civil war continues in the north. Marginalisation from the mainstream and frustration of the vernacular-educated youth are often sited as the main reasons underlying these violent reactions. In this context the digital divide is not something academic but something real, something that provokes shocking memories and impulses for action among those who have seen the social cost incurred by unequal opportunities in Sri Lanka – MJR David in recollections about planning the Kothmale project.

Kothmale Community Radio and Internet

When the internet project began in 1998, KCR changed location and upgraded its technology. Previously situated on an isolated hilltop, the studios and offices were moved to a more accessible location with a relay sending the signal from the new studio to the transmitter on the hilltop. The new location was also equipped with a telephone line, a 64 kbs microwave connection to the internet, a server, and three work stations with internet access – one for the station's use and two for community access.

Some key points from the operational guidelines developed at a workshop to review the Kothmale project's initial needs assessment:

- The Internet and other new communication technologies should not be presented as a technological gimmick or marvel. They should be presented as a something that is useful in day-to-day life.
- The first precondition for success is active community participation. For this, the computers and other facilities should be placed and operated in a user-friendly manner.
- Simple step-by-step instructions should be prepared on how to use the Internet and there should be someone at the radio station … to explain the Internet and how it is used.
- As many do not have telephones the importance of postcards [for listener feedback] should be emphasised within the radio program.
- Internet content should be put across the radio program with reference to the local context.
- Women should be encouraged to participate.
- The staff should not be over cautious about breakdowns in computers. The users should be given a free hand.

At the same time, an initial needs assessment was conducted by project and station staff, giving them first hand knowledge of how the community perceived computers and internet, what their information and communication needs were, and what was expected from the project.

Modelling Rural Community ICT

The Kothmale project targeted different elements that are essential for the success of ICTs in a rural context: community awareness, capacity development, public access and locally appropriate content. Although the model represents an integrated approach of these elements, the achievements of the project are primarily in the areas of awareness and capacity development.

Awareness

The design of the Kothmale project takes as a starting point that awareness of ICTs and of their potential is essential if members of a rural community are to be motivated to use ICTs. The critical lack of awareness of the uses and benefits of information and communication technologies is evident not only in rural areas, with farmers and labourers, but also with the implementers of development programmes, from NGOs to local and district governments.

Before people will use the internet, they must have some sense of what it is. Before they can use it productively, they need to have a sense of what it can do. While this is true everywhere, in rural areas of regions like South Asia basic awareness is a formidable barrier. ICT coverage in the media tends to come only once a market has been established; likewise, word of mouth functions only when there is something to talk about. In most of rural South Asia there are no computers – not in schools, offices nor homes – and there is no visible or affordable internet access. One of KCR's main objectives was to make the internet visible

Radio Browsing

Before its inauguration at a musical event that drew thousands, the project staff had visited schools, temples and government institutions to talk about the merits of new communication technologies. They used the radio to introduce computers and the internet to listeners. As it got off the ground, the internet began to receive a lot of attention in the community.

> *The morning programs generally announce the daily exchange rates and the daily wholesale agriculture prices from the Central bank of Sri Lanka. The weather report is also read from the internet. The afternoon broadcasts will often incorporate Sri Lankan and world news from Reuters and other web sites.*[5]

To some extent, many of Kothmale's radio programmes benefit by having the resources of the web at their disposal as a research tool. However, the project and the programmers have taken it further, introducing the concept of 'radio web browsing', an innovative programming format that has been successful not only in addressing information needs, but also in terms of raising awareness of the internet and how it can be used in the

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Radio Web Browsing

The community radio station broadcasts a daily 'Radio Browsing the Internet' programme, and in this programme, the broadcasters, supported by resource personnel, browse the Internet on-air together with their listeners and discuss and contextualise information in local language. The radio programme thus contributes to raise awareness about the Internet in a participatory manner, the listeners request the broadcasters to surf the WEB on their behalf and the programme transmits information in response to their requests. This information is explained and contextualised with the help of the studio guests, for example: a local doctor may explain data on a health website. " (UNESCO Project Documents)

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[5] Unpublished report on the Kothmale project; Tanya Notley, 2000.

community.

Radio web browsing has opened a window onto the internet for the local community. After researching their topics and choosing websites to feature, Kothmale's programmers browse the internet live on the radio using a computer in the studio. The content of each programme focuses on specific information within a different topic: health, legal issues and ICTs themselves. Staff, volunteers and guests interpret, contextualise and translate web-based information and broadcast it to the station's listeners. A huge amount of information becomes accessible, firstly because it is explained in simple terms, secondly because it is contextualised to suit the local environment and thirdly and most importantly, information is presented in the local languages[6]. The programmes have significant appeal because the type of information broadcast is not available to listeners anywhere else and, especially in the early stages of the project, because of the novelty of the internet.

Important features of the radio web browsing are the format and the timing of the programmes. Significantly, the internet is not used simply as an additional tool for programme research. ICTs and the web become the focus of the programme in terms of both content and format – the shows are essentially live web-browsing broadcasts. Nor is the programming isolated in the broadcast week. Radio browsing is a one hour daily programme block.

As with other aspects of the Kothmale project, of importance is the fact that groundwork has been laid for future growth. As Kothmale's station controller put it, "At this stage I cannot say these are superb programs, but in the future they will be."[7] Whatever the format, radio combined with internet offers powerful educational possibilities.

Capacity Development

Kosala Keetharatne, an 18-year-old regular student to the centre, had never used a computer when he first came to the station one year ago. Like many of the students, he heard about the access centre from the Kothmale FM broadcasts. Now he is creating web pages, animations and computer art. As a volunteer of the station he now teaches computer programs to other students and hosts an internet radio broadcast once per week. "It has changed my life…I have learnt a lot about computers because of this centre…Most of the people who come here don't know how to use a computer. They get their first lesson from here."[8]

Experience in ICT applications for marginalised and rural communities has shown that the ability of local residents with no prior computer or internet experience to master basic skills and even move on to more advanced levels should not be underestimated.[9] Kothmale certainly reinforces this lesson, especially with youth.

One of the most important achievements of the Kothmale project is in the area of capacity development. Although there are several factors at play including high literacy rates and a good education system relative to other South Asian countries, the willingness to allow for learning by doing and learning from peers is significant. The project guideline that says "staff should not be over cautious about breakdowns of the computers" and insistence that "users should be given a free hand" has been followed and with considerable success.

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[6] KCR broadcasts in both Sinhalese and Tamil.

[7] Sunil Wijisinghe, Kothmale Station Controller, quoted in a unpublished project report; Tanya Notley (2000).

[8] Unpublished report on the Kothmale project; Tanya Notley, 2000.

[9] Report on UNESCO Seminar on Integrating New and Traditional Information and Communications Technologies for Community Development held at Kothmale in January 2001; Ian Pringle (2001).

At the outset of the project and in follow-up stages, there has been formal and informal training for staff and the volunteers who have become facilitators of greater community involvement. In particular, the project benefited from the services of an Australian volunteer who trained and supported a core group of staff and volunteers and was a consistent presence in skills development over the course of two years.

In 2000 a survey was conducted of 93 users of the community access computers located at the station. Thirty-one percent of them reported they had been trained by station staff, but 44 percent reported they had received their training informally from other users. Kothmale has demonstrated that once participants, especially youth, have basic skills to build on they teach each other and themselves.

Public Access

The absence of any public access facilities for the internet in rural areas is a huge barrier and a central concern for projects like Kothmale. Rural connectivity is a complicated issue involving the inadequate and expensive telecom and electricity infrastructures, commercial reluctance to invest in rural markets, unsupportive government polices, and the lack of appropriate technical solutions. Phone lines in rural areas of South Asia are scarce and, when they exist, are often not of sufficient quality to maintain an internet connection. Internet access through commercial telecom centres and cybercafés is concentrated in urban areas. If the internet line at Kothmale is down, the nearest place to check email is in Kandy, over an hour away.

Kothmale employs a microwave leased-line for its connectivity. The 64 kbs dedicated connection has worked extremely well for the station's three computers and offers unexplored potential for remote access from other sites. However Kothmale's connectivity model is not as yet sustainable. Initial equipment and installation costs were high, but were borne by the project and its partners as a capital investment. Of greater concern are the operational costs. The internet line was down for most of 2001 because the original agreements for the project expired and no one was in a position to pay the costs or renew the agreement.

While the roughly US$300/month needed to keep the line up is not necessarily prohibitive cost, it represents a major investment for a small radio station KCR. If the station had to pay the cost, it would require shifting to a more commercial model. From the outset, access for users has been free of cost and this has unquestionably been a factor in whatever success the project has enjoyed. Although the current trend in ICT projects is towards passing on access costs to users, in the case of Kothmale, this shift would change the nature of the project.

> *Asking people to pay for internet use or computer lessons is very problematic. Unless you can find a way around charging for access, unless you can find a way so that the really poor kids — who ARE the majority of users, the ones who walk 7 kilometres to school rather than pay Rs 2 for the bus — are not disadvantaged by having to pay, then the project FAILS.*[10]

Although the internet line was restored in November 2001 through an agreement between SLBC and UNESCO, it is unclear for how long this arrangement can be sustained. KCR must begin to look at the issue of sustainability and weigh the cost of different options, including changing the means of connectivity or generating revenue through the substantial technical capacity that it provides. KCR could for example offer dial-up accounts and email addresses to groups, businesses and individuals who can afford pay for these services and thereby continue to subsidise access by members of the community who cannot.

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[10] Tanya Notley: Observations about the Kothmale project in email correspondence (2001).

Between 150 and 250 people in a typical two-week period use the two computers at the radio station making the internet room a fairly busy place. The station has tried developed a supportive system and environment for users, including girls who form a minority amongst users. The greatest success in access has been with youth. Of the respondents to the user survey mentioned earlier in this chapter, 95 percent were between the ages of 10 and 25 with 60 percent between 15-20. Although the majority are still boys, gender equity in access has improved. In the first year, there were very few girls using the centre and it took a door-to-door campaign to increase the number of girls and young women participating in orientations, training and using the computers. By the time the survey was conducted, two years into the project, 41 percent of users were female.

This level of impact is extended and reinforced by the presence and popularity of the radio browsing programmes. Although access is concentrated with youth, there are wider benefits for the community-at-large through extension media like radio and newsletters and significantly, through teachers and peers in schools.

The access point at the radio station itself has worked well, but with only two computers in an accessible but not otherwise busy location, direct access to the internet is limited in the greater community to those who have the time, the funds and the freedom to travel to the radio station. In a two-week period in 2000, 56 percent of users reported travelling over one hour to use the facility. The technical model for the project envisioned two or more remote access sites using the station's server computer and leased-line as a mini-ISP. There are internet computer terminals set up in both of the towns in Kothmale's broadcast area which would considerably expand access if they were connected, however these remote access centres have never been fully operational due to logistical problems and bureaucratic barriers. As with other aspects of the project, Kothmale's technical set up has greater capacity for access and potential for revenue generation than is being used.

Content

The project's design recognises the need for content that is appropriate to local interest/needs and in languages they can easily use. That rural residents have a right to be digital consumers is one issue; another is that rural users of the internet should also have the right and the ability to author their own materials in their own chosen fashion. The Kothmale project has tried to address content issues in two ways: 1) through the creation of an online database and 2) by promoting local web content production.

The project's first website, largely intended to address the first issue through the creation of an appropriate information database, has had problems with the partnerships intended to support it.[11] Maintenance of the site in Colombo disconnected the content component from other activities at the station itself. Updating information quickly became a problem. Without appropriate systems and administration, the station was unable to jointly manage the site. Although content was developed for the site, the link to local issues and needs was tenuous. Most of the site was in English and there were no mechanisms for direct feedback or input from the rural aspects of the project to the site managers in Colombo. New and useful information was posted irregularly and the site quickly became stale.

Staff at the station launched a second website.[12] While it does not have the same level of organisation or planning, it has succeeded in getting local content on the web, addressing interests if not needs. Young people who two years ago had never used a computer are now creating webpages and using a variety of sophisticated digital production tools. Within a year, over thirty webpages had been designed at the station, including content on local history, culture and religious traditions as well as poetry and artwork.

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[11] <kirana.lk>
[12] <kothmale.net>

Local solutions to developing content and extending access to it are ongoing and innovative. In November 2001, KCR launched a small production centre in one of the nearby towns. Volunteers are being trained in the use of computers, internet, writing and layout. The project will publish a regular newsletter to further extend the reach of Kothmale's internet services with goals of greater awareness, access to web-based information in local languages and a greater capacity for the community to manage its own media.

Organisational capacity and project sustainability

Unfortunately, the project guideline stipulating a limited concern for breakdowns and a free hand for users, was not applied to the overall technical set-up or to the management of the project's systems and the station was never fully put in the driver's seat of the project. While the project appears to be sustainable in terms of local human resources, local staff were not able to control certain key aspects of the project, which negatively affected the ability of the project to adapt to changing local conditions.

Management and coordination between the project's key partners has been an evident factor in the limited use of potential and sustainability of the project. The partnership of government agencies in broadcasting and telecom along with Colombo University's computer department was a defining factor in the project happening at all – a remarkable achievement in a country with very tight government control of information and communications – but it has also complicated day-to-day logistics. Components such as the leased-line connection, website maintenance and technical administration were intended to be managed from Colombo and as a result of the distance and the lack of urgency – out of site, out of mind – success at the organisational level, in terms of a model for sustainability and in other areas has been limited.

The reasons behind the problems are largely organisational and of course financial. With bureaucratic central agencies like Sri Lanka Telecom and Colombo University responsible for key elements in the project design, the radio station itself is disempowered to effectively deal with technical and organisational problems when they inevitably arise.

While the station does have capacity in many areas, the project has not provided the necessary mechanisms to allow KCR to further develop its organisational capacity and apply it to the internet aspect of its operations. For example, the station did not have the passwords for the project's main website as this aspect was to be managed from Colombo. Staff were therefore unable to update information, upload individual webpages or manage the site locally. As a solution, they launched a separate website. While this improved the situation in many respects, it was a limited solution in terms of the project's greater objective to use the university's resources to develop a database of locally relevant content.

The station unfortunately had no such home-grown solutions when computers broke down in the first year or when the lease-line was cut off at the end of the project's two-year agreement with the telecom authority. Nor was Kothmale in a sufficiently independent position to seek the funds elsewhere or re-orient services in such a way as to generate funds to pay for the line. Poor rural communities, with a lack of political power and limited influence, are unable to leverage the financial support they need and are limited in their abilities to plan and implement self-reliant alternatives.

Local communities cannot initiate and fully develop the infrastructure of an ICT project without financial inputs and other support from national/international centres and yet the project cannot fully develop or sustain itself without local ownership and overall management. Just as local capacity must be developed in terms of skills and awareness of potential ICT benefits, so must organisational capacity be developed in order to make services sustainable.

Conclusions

The Kothmale project sought to demonstrate a model for constructive application of ICTs in a rural environment and to show that rural residents and youth can innovate and benefit from access to internet-sourced information. There is good quantitative, qualitative and anecdotal evidence to suggest that the model is effective in this respect, and the potential for this type of project has been clearly demonstrated.

Kothmale has laid the groundwork for the local community to use ICTs for a variety of purposes, including economic improvement, the development of new skills, networking and of course for entertainment and enjoyment.

Kothmale's experience also demonstrates the value of converging local media services and centres, in this case, using community radio as a model and base for rural ICT applications. This success is especially evident in terms of raising awareness, overcoming language barriers and extending the reach of the internet using radio and in particular the innovation of radio browsing.

Assessing impact is difficult. This aspect of evaluation needs far greater attention for ICT projects and experiences. Throughout the project, a number of efforts, including monitoring, focus groups and a survey, were made to study impact. These efforts make it clear that no dramatic change has taken place, but rather a slow qualitative change has begun to emerge, starting with subgroups within the larger community. The initial sign of this process was a dramatically increased awareness of the benefits of new communication technology.

The impact of initiatives like those in the Kothmale project is long term, in no small part because rural Sri Lanka is so far behind its urban counterparts. There is no question that the introduction of ICTs has an impact. In less than ten years, the internet has fundamentally changed life for those who use it and has made a unique imprint on the nature of work and society for those who are directly or indirectly part of the so-called 'information age'. Although the signs may be somewhat ambiguous in this early stage, there is no doubt that the Kothmale project is having a positive impact. Hundreds of youth have computer skills and knowledge about the internet; thousands in the community know what the internet is and what it can do. This is significant because it represents a foothold and foundation on which the Kothmale community itself can build.

The potential that the Kothmale model demonstrates however cannot be realised without addressing the limitations: The internet connection itself was down for the better part of 2001, raising the issue of sustainability. Remote access sites using the station as a server are not yet fully operational. Content development is only a mixed success. And direct access to the internet is not widespread. The greatest barrier to Kothmale making full use of the model is the lack of local control over the project elements, from the technical side of connectivity, networking and site maintenance to financial operations, wherein lies the potential for self-reliance. This is not to say that Kothmale does not need support, both financial and technical, however the station needs to be the centre of attention and squarely enabled as an organisation.

Although Kothmale remains an isolated case and the model has yet to be replicated either in Sri Lanka or other parts of South Asia, in all likelihood new initiatives inspired by Kothmale will take root in 2002 in Nepal, India and other areas of Sri Lanka. With the leased-line at Kothmale once again in operation, one can only hope that the model will be revitalised in Kothmale itself.

However alongside more projects and initiatives, certain pre-requisite efforts must be made in several key areas. Detailed evaluation and impact assessments must be carried out as

part of rural ICT projects. Similarly, research is needed on many fronts, including new technical models for connectivity, systems for community management of information and creative solutions for sustainability and means of self-reliance. In all cases, there must be greater sharing of information and evaluation of successful and unsuccessful practices amongst those with a direct stake in community ICT initiatives.

Greater cooperation and more constructive engagement is required between local people and organisations and central support mechanisms and agencies that have the know-how and funds to support these type of projects. At the regional or even global level, the search for quick-fix formulas 'to bridge the digital divide' needs to be put to an end. Community ICT applications will have a higher rate of success if they are part of a cohesive strategy supported by international, regional and national policies that are genuinely interested and invested in empowering rural men and women, girls and boys to use ICTs in positive ways.

Stories from some KCR volunteers

Kumuduni Aponso – Teacher

I listen to KCR regularly and when I came to know that there is an Internet facility, I thought that I should show it to my class. I brought my class to KCR and it was unbelievable to find out that the facility could be used free of charge. My class and myself became frequent visitors. I make it a point to come every Wednesday to collect information for my classes and higher studies.

I am getting ready for my Bachelors Degree in English. Earlier I had to go to the British Council but now all the information needed is available at Kothmale. Later the staff invited me to present the Internet program 'Travelers Inn on the Horizon' and now once a week, on Wednesday, I present the program. Since presenting this program I always carry pencil and paper because there are so many who meet me with specific requests. I make it a point to answer these requests in the program. Also there are people who leave messages for me all over the community i.e. at school, the temple and women's society etc. They first thought that I was a very knowledgeable person who is a know-it-all so I had to explain that I was no wizard but the Internet was an immense resource. I am astonished with the wealth of information in the Internet. On a Poya day (religious holiday) I had to talk on Buddhism and was surprised that even in Ethiopia Buddhism is practised.

My favourite topic of the Internet program is the use of English. I download learning games and adopt them to suit radio. The kids pick up very fast. Fortunately, most web sites on the Internet use simple English. We are people who did not even have a typewriter to use, now we are surfing the Internet. It is a dream come alive for me. I have motivated a large number of teachers and students to use this facility. The greatest thing about this is the friendly environment and courteous staff. The doors are open and the staff is ever ready to help.

Andrew Udaya Kumara – Student

I first came here to serve tea for those who came from the University of Colombo to set up the Internet. They motivated me to surf the net and within a few weeks I mastered the Internet and now I can find whatever I want within a few minutes. Now I am very popular in school because I help my fellow students to prepare their school projects. Recently there was a special meeting convened in school to appreciate what I have done using the Internet and computers to improve our studies. I have decided to make my future with computers. It is a hard way ahead. I am the youngest of a family of ten but with these computers I have some hope.

D W Abeykoon & Martin Thelkarage – Lawyers

As a tool of technology, the Internet is very easy to use. The challenging part of it is how to select relevant information and use it appropriately. That's what we have been trying to here with the Internet. We present a programme once week because we think that we have to be of some service to the community. Only when information is interpreted within the social context does it become useful. Let us give you an example. We downloaded information on mosquitoes and generated a discussion that went well beyond the information that was on the Internet. In addition to the information on the internet we discussed several traditional ways to get rid of mosquitoes i.e. growing flower plants, burning leaves etc. that mosquitoes are allergic to. A week later, a villager met me and said "*I listened to your program and I have been thinking of making a mosquito coil using these locally available materials*". He came up with a paste and rubbed it on a thin bamboo stripe like a jockstick. The fume was much better than the mosquito coils available in the market. It could have been an ideal product for the local market but unfortunately the villager did not have enough capital to invest.

If you want to present Internet based information through radio, first you must be able to digest the information. For instance we presented a program on tomatoes the guest in the studio was a farmer from the area. We used the downloaded information to tease the farmer in the studio. We said, this is how the Internet based information tells us to grow tomatoes and the farmer responded saying, no it would not work that way. This dialogue may have helped the listener to arrive at a realistic conclusion. We had a program on Bamboo. There were several requests for further information because there are many in this area that are engaged in the craft. One of them, an art teacher, was so much encouraged by our program that he held an exhibition at the Town Hall. Some of the exhibits were adaptations of Chinese and Japanese products which he had seen on the Internet at Kothmale. The teacher surfed the net to find out how bamboo could be treated and made more flexible. The information we presented on marketing white pepper and tea also motivated young people to explore foreign markets.

Jeyaraj Pavithran – Tea plantation owner

I own a small tea plantation and as that brings me some income, I can devote some time for KCR as a Tamil presenter. First of all, I learned a lot about tea plantation in other countries from the Internet. An Indian web site visited advised that tealeaf should not be crushed because it degrades the quality of the final product. I checked it with the experts and they confirmed it. I was able to share this information with my listeners. I also worked with Tanya, Kothmale's volunteer, on a story for our website on kitul juggery. I did this because I see an export potential for kitul juggery and honey for our community.

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