Development of Learning and a Shared Understanding in Participatory Media Environments

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July 2020

"*After listening to people's experiences with early marriage on health problems and financial issues, I have decided that neither will I get married before age nor would I marry a girl under 18 years of age*", spoke a 19-year old boy from the Giridih district in Jharkhand. In the state of Jharkhand in India, more than 55% of girls are married before 18 (UNFPA, 2012). The reasons are many, ranging from tradition, to financial constraints, practices like dowry, education and literacy, gender issues in decision making, etc. A campaign cannot change anything overnight, but a 26-year old woman from the Topchanchi block in Jharkhand summarized it well: "*Campaigns on issues such as these must go on because no discussion would be initiated otherwise. At least, due to the campaign, people are now discussing these issues and getting more educated and informed. They are able to understand the difference between good and bad practices*".

Mobile Vaani is a voice-based participatory media platform that enables people to share and discuss issues with one another in voice, using simple mobile phones that do not require any Internet connectivity (Moitra *et al.*, 2016). People can give a missed-call to a unique phone number, the Mobile Vaani telephony servers automatically cut the call and call the person back, making the service free of cost for them. Using key-presses on their phones, people are then able to listen to voice messages and also record their own messages. These recorded voice messages are published back to the platform for others to hear, thereby enabling them to ask questions and answer for one another, share local news, comment on policy discussions, and also share folk songs and poetry. Such IVR (Interactive Voice Response) based interactive information sharing platforms are widely used in India and other developing regions where low-literacy or a lack of reliable Internet access or affordability of smartphones may prevent people from participating in the information revolution (Seth *et al.*, 2020a).

Over the years, Mobile Vaani has run numerous campaigns on social issues such as early marriage, domestic violence, delivery of government schemes and services, mid-day meals for children in schools, nutrition for pregnant and new mothers, financial inclusion, etc. Thousands of users call the Mobile Vaani platforms each day to listen to the campaigns, contribute their own views and experiences, and build a wider and richer understanding of the issues.

Although not an online social network like Facebook or Twitter, the open participation encouraged by Mobile Vaani builds upon two fundamental aspects that underpin human social networks. Links between people are known to be clustered, with tight clusters composed of people having commonalities with one another, like friends from the same school or same neighbourhood. Connections between disparate clusters are in turn formed by people who bridge multiple worlds (Travers and Milgram, 1969). People within the same cluster tend to be similar to one another, a phenomenon called homophily (McPherson *et al.*, 2001), while people who build ties across different clusters help in the flow of diverse information that otherwise may have remained trapped within homogenous clusters (Granovetter, 1973). Stated as the famous *strength of weak ties* theory

by Mark Granovetter, this concept is also relevant when it comes to learning on participatory media platforms such as Mobile Vaani.

Information shared by weak ties, ie. people typically different from you, connected weakly with your social network cluster, brings new viewpoints, and contributes to greater information *completeness*. Information shared by strong ties, ie. people similar to you, often in the same social network cluster as you, help provide valuable *context* to the information which improves both your understanding as well as explains the significance of overlooked aspects. This combination of *context and completeness* in participatory media environments leads to accelerated learning and building of a shared understanding among different users.

Mobile Vaani campaigns such as on early marriage were able to engage multiple stakeholders – parents, young unmarried girls and boys, young couples, teachers, local leaders and lawmakers – and through this combination of increased *context* and *completeness* of information, the campaign helped them understand the issues from one another's perspectives. In the same way, some years back a strike of contract teachers saw extensive participation on Mobile Vaani. The strike brought comments by contract teachers, permanent teachers, parents and students, activists, and government officials, and a detailed content analysis revealed that the aspects covered on Mobile Vaani were more evenly balanced than even the regional mass media which tended to cover mostly aspects related to the disruption caused by to the strike (Moitra *et al.*, 2016). Such a multi-stakeholder participation has also been useful for behavior change in health and nutrition practices of new mothers, where voice recordings by women heard by men helped husbands understand for the first time how simple household practices which are taken for granted, like husbands being fed before their wives, could contribute to their wives remaining undernourished even while they were pregnant (Chakraborty *et al.* 2019).

IVR surveys of several hundred Mobile Vaani users revealed that 67% of them agreed that Mobile Vaani is different from other mass media in giving an opportunity for anybody to voice themselves, 69% acknowledged the value of dialogue created on the platform to understand different viewpoints, 88% reported an increase in connecting back to their cultural roots, 85% reported an increase in political awareness, and 50% acknowledged having learned new ways to articulate their views (Moitra *et al.*, 2019).

However, building a platform on which diverse stakeholders participate and air opposing views in respectful ways, was not straightforward. All content on Mobile Vaani is moderated, and carefully designed and implemented editorial policies of moderation and curation of the user generated content have helped foster usage norms of mutual respect, keeping Mobile Vaani safe from problems of misinformation, hate speech, and uncivil dialogue (Seth, 2020b). With upper class and caste groups being more technology savvy in learning to use new technologies like Mobile Vaani, biases in the user population also emerged leading to the exclusion of truly marginalized groups. Concerted efforts in identifying and training volunteers from these marginalized groups helped steadily increase their participation on the platform (Seth, 2020b). Such a strategy to diversify the userbase may not always work though, and in some contexts it might be better to have group-segregated platforms. This may reduce the diversity of content, possibly even lead to echo-chambers, but the creation of safe spaces might be essential when setting up platforms for groups like women users, or adolescent girls, so that they are assured of privacy protection and no backlash from their participation (Seth, 2020a).

Can such an emergence of learning and shared understanding created via participatory media platforms, also lead to collective action? Our experience in this regard points to the relevance of

offline networks, as also has been found in studying the role of social media in offline protests (Fuchs, 2014). Mobile Vaani has often been used by activists to muster wider participation. A women-led group used Mobile Vaani to campaign against an illegal liquor shop in their village. Not only was that liquor shop shutdown, the district administration also launched an inspection of other liquor shops too (Moitra *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, Mobile Vaani volunteers have launched campaigns on the need for inspection of the quality of mid-day meals served in schools, provision of full units of subsidized food at the ration shops, registration of work demand under the national rural employment guarantee scheme, etc (Gram Vaani, 2020). Such campaigns on Mobile Vaani bring reports about violations of rights and entitlements, in the form of voice recordings and IVR surveys, which are forwarded via IVR and other channels like Whatsapp, Facebook, and Email to the administrative officials and nudges them into action. Sometimes, coverage of these reports in the mass media also helps amplify the pressure for accountability. Upon a survey of Mobile Vaani users, 84% acknowledged the strong offline support they received from MV volunteers in helping solve their problems, and 64% agreed with the public nature of carrying grievances on Mobile Vaani and other media that led to this collective pressure.

While online participation in the campaigns is easy for users because offline advocacy is advanced by Mobile Vaani volunteers and other social sector partners, a question remains if users can also be encouraged for offline participation. This is a direction in which we are actively thinking and learning, to understand for what kind of issues are users willing to take time off and put in additional effort than simply recording their experiences or participating in surveys. While these are early days for such an engagement strategy, initial insights again highlight the relevance of offline networks – platforms where the Mobile Vaani or partner teams are present physically on the ground, gives more assurance to users to engage strongly. In some recent work in the space of labour rights where Mobile Vaani is a new player and lightly present on the ground through volunteer networks, such offline mobilization has not been straightforward (Ruthven, 2020).

The experience with Mobile Vaani thus points towards the important role that voice-based participatory media networks can play in accelerating learning, especially in rural and low-income communities, and in empowering people with an open platform through which they can hold local power-holders to account. Several open questions still remain though about translating online activism to offline participation.

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