Innovating Multimedia to Increase Accessibility in the Hills of Nepal

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The Tansen Community Multimedia Center (CMC)

The Tansen Community Multimedia Center (CMC) initiative is part of a regional innovation and research project initiated by UNESCO to study the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for poverty reduction. The project is looking for ways in which ICTs can be used to empower and strengthen the voices of the poor.

Community multimedia centers are an extension of UNESCO's long-standing work with community radio, inspired by the increasingly important role played by new digital technologies. Community multimedia centers like the one in Tansen, Palpa District, Nepal, combine traditional community media—in Tansen's case video, cable TV,

and print—with new media tools such as computers and the Internet. The goal is to explore ways in which Tansen can use ICTs as dynamic development tools: to bring more voices, cultural forms, ideas, and issues into the community's media space, and to provide poor, marginalized youth with new skills and opportunities.

The combination of established local media such as community TV with new technologies like the Internet opens up great possibilities to link small, comparatively inaccessible towns and villages such as Tansen to new global networks. New media are not only powerful tools for producing content, they are also gateways to ever-expanding information and knowledge resources.

Growing marginalization in the Nepal hills

Tansen is a hill town some 300 km by road west of Kathmandu. Once the seat of the Sen Dynasty, it is now the headquarters of Palpa District in Western Nepal. Perched on the rim of a fertile valley, Tansen is about 30 km into the Himalayan foothills and 60 km from Nepal's border with India. The population of the Tansen municipality is about 25,000, made up of a mix of ethnic communities and traditional caste groupings. Like the rest of Nepal

and much of South Asia, a majority of the population are youth below the age of 18. The townspeople are predominantly Newar Buddhists, and Brahmin and Magar Hindus. Though officially a thing of the past, traditional caste, trade and ethnic groupings are still a very strong part of Tansen's social fabric.

Historically a regional center, like many hill towns in the Himalayan belt Tansen is increasingly isolated from the plains where growth, trade and mobility are higher (Figure 1). Palpa also faces the pressures of migrating labor and instabili-
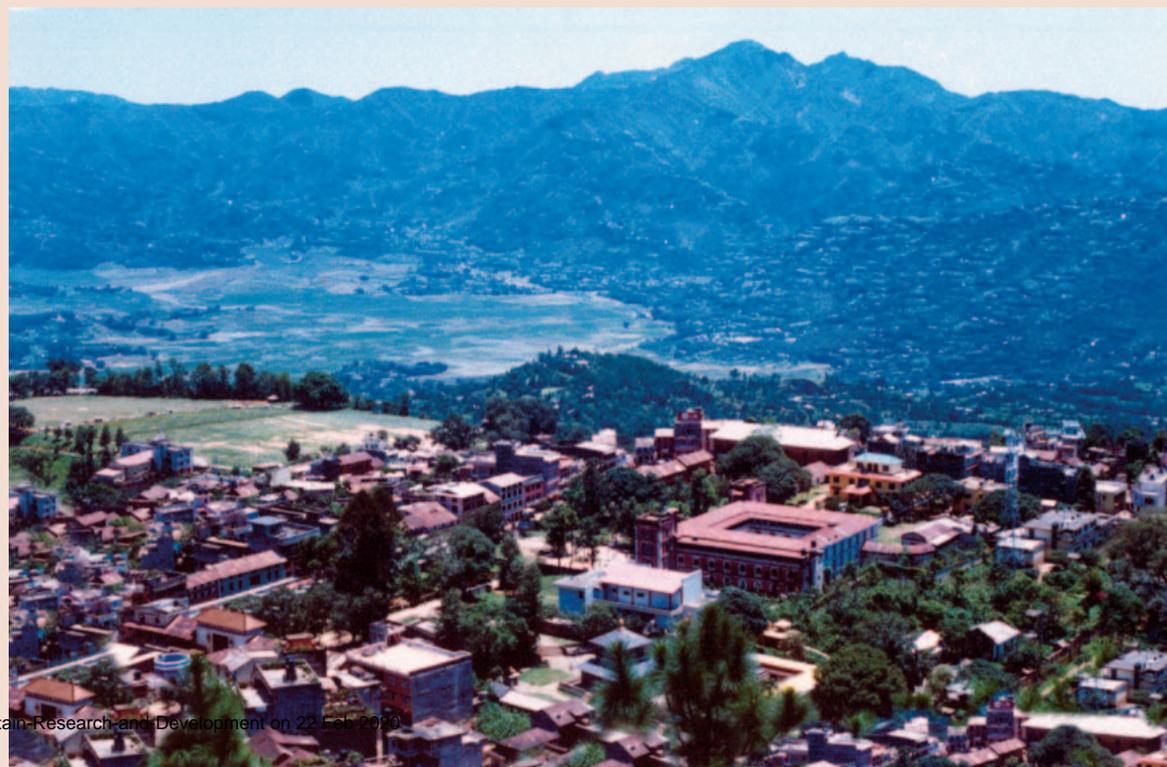

FIGURE 1 The center of Tansen town photographed from Shreenagar Park on the rim of the Madi valley. The CMC is located on the main bazaar road, which runs from the lower left to the center of the photo. (Photo courtesy of New Photo Concern Studio, Tansen)

FIGURE 2 Anjanali does the layout for *Gaaule Deurali*, a rural, community-oriented weekly paper from Tansen. The cover story is about raising guinea pigs to sell as pets. In May 2004, *Deurali* went online as part of the tansenpalpa.net web site. (Photo by Ian Pringle)

ty due to ongoing conflict between Nepal's government and Maoist insurgents. There are few local job or business opportunities through which young people can hope to make a decent living, and the situation is worse for the poor, in particular women and people from marginalized castes.

A center for media innovation

Tansen has an unusually wide range of local media for a relatively small and isolated hill town. Tansen's media mix includes 3 local FM radios in the town itself (all established in mid-2004), 1 in nearby Madanpokhara village, as well as a weekly community-oriented paper, 2 cable networks, a local television producer, and the Tansen Community Multimedia Center (CMC). Cable TV started in Tansen in the early 1990s with the emergence of satellite and cable technology in South Asia, a combination that dramatically changed the region's media environment and gave rise to thousands of small, local cable operations.

In Tansen, video production and cable distribution grew in response to the absence of either Nepali language or local content programming available via satellite in the early 1990s. In the following years, local musicians and media enthusiasts using basic equipment and volunteer labor created one of South Asia's few local television programs running more or less uninterrupted for over 10 years.

Community multimedia for youth

With support from UNESCO, the Tansen TV group expanded their set-up in early 2003, adding a computer network and basic digital production facilities. Over the course of the first year, some 175 young participants—mostly aged 16 to 20—were recruited and trained in video, multimedia and computer skills. A high percentage of these trainees now contribute as volunteers to a range of local media: a weekly TV show called *The Local Programme*, a local community web site, and as of 2004 an online version of a local community-oriented newspaper called *Deurali* (Figure 2).

The CMC emphasizes the participation of girls, achieving a roughly 65:35 ratio with boys, and has proactively recruited youth from poor families and marginalized caste groups. Approximately 15% of youth trained in the first year are from so-called low-caste groups. The youth train together in batches of 30 to 40, learning both computing and media production skills. They plan and produce their own multimedia programming, using digital video cameras and production software such as Microsoft Moviemaker and Adobe Premiere (Figure 3). Their video productions end up as part of *The Local Programme*, cablecast on Saturday nights 7–8 pm to some 1200 households and adjoining rural areas.

The idea is to enable and amplify the voice of marginalized local youth, to improve both the quantity and quality of local media programming, and to introduce new formats that actively combine

"The main criterion to get entry into this center is poverty. I mean the poor and marginalized young people are the only ones who have an opportunity in the center. So being poor, it has given me the opportunity to be a student at the center. I came to know that the center was built for the poor. The center is helping students to become somewhat able to work in society." (From an interview with a Tansen CMC participant)

FIGURE 3 Young participants learn to edit audio in the CMC's makeshift studio. Remarkably, Tansen boasts no less than 3 FM radio stations in the town itself. (Photo by Mahesh Shakya)

Box 1

Som and Manoj Hitanga are cousins and belong to the traditional shoemaker caste, which has traditionally been considered as "untouchable" because of the association with feet and animal hides. Recruited in the first batch, Som and Manoj are 2 of the CMC's most promising trainees. They quickly mastered the computing and video production skills taught in the basic curriculum, and have gone on to learn advanced digital production applications like Adobe Premiere. They have contributed a number of features to The Local Programme*, and since Som took over the regular feature on community activities, townspeople regularly come to knock on the door of his home to inform him of local happenings and events. Some time back, the owner of a cable network in India offered both Som and Manoj jobs to help start up and produce a local cable program in Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. Although they went to Gorakhpur, they returned to Tansen after less than a week because they were not happy in a big Indian city in the plains.* (Notes from a field visit to Tansen)

Tansen's various media: TV, radio, print, and web sites. In the process the CMC hopes to foster a sense and practice of community ownership that will support an increasingly wide range of local media. After one year of youth training programs, the CMC began designing new training programs for specific groups, eg housewives, campus MA lecturers, etc.

Skills and empowerment

Although the link between poverty and media training and production is not immediately clear to many observers, the CMC's work with poor local youth does several things that are important in reducing poverty: it develops skills, builds confidence, and inspires self-expression and participation in wider community spaces. A good example is the story of the Hitangas (Box 1).

While the CMC facilitators are aware that not all students will find employment through their new skills, the handful that have found employment—shooting and editing wedding videos, as camera operators, and in the new radio stations—are a positive example for the rest, inspiring them to look for new opportunities with new skills and confidence.

Self-expression and advocacy

The CMC's flagship production is *The Local Programme,* a weekly 1-hour show made up of 15-minute student features, an entertainment segment that alternates between folk and pop music, and a round-up of community events, meetings and different programs. Features and the community activities are the exclusive responsibility of the CMC's young participants, who collaborate with CMC staff for the entertainment segments.

Participants are given a free hand in choosing topics and formats for the student features; however, common themes of advocacy, awareness, and self-expression have emerged (Box 2). Two girls with promising skills have started an interesting series of programs that they call *Path of Life* (Figure 4), featuring episodes on different local professions, most of them part of traditionally low-caste trades such as shoemakers, metalworkers, carpenters, barbers, and tailors.

Box 2

Today is a very important day in my life because today our program was going to be telecasted through local TV. We worked very hard to make the program entitled Jeevanko Goreto *(Path of Life). It is an informative program giving information about the different skills which people are using to earn a living. Our Mahesh Sir has told us that this program will be telecasted on Saturday at 6.00 pm. I was very excited to see that program on TV so at 6.00 pm, I switched on TV and I called all my family members to watch the program. After a while the program was started. When I saw our program on TV, I was so happy that I couldn't express it. I had never thought that I would be able to make such a program and I would be seen on TV. When the program was being shown, there were many guests in my home. They also watched the program and they were very much surprised to see me on the screen. They began to ask me many questions. They were very much interested in knowing how it was possible. I told them everything about CMC, our trainings and about local TV. They became very happy to know all the things and they praised me for this and wished for my success.* (Excerpt from a participant's diary)

Similar features have been done about local street hawkers and the changing nature of tailoring as a result of TV-influenced fashion. Other programs have looked at the state of the municipality's roads, explored different aspects of local culture, featured ideas for income generating activities and advocated on behalf of the local environment through programs on garbage, pollution and preserving local fresh water springs (Table 1). In addition to student productions, volunteers produced some fifteen 10–15-minute features between May and August 2004.

Information and innovation

With a more reliable Internet connection in 2004, the Tansen CMC is now able to start exploring ways to bring information from the world wide web into their local media channels. *Rochak Prasanga,* meaning interesting facts, features just that: it explores and searches the Internet and then presents a regular short feature for *The Local Programme.*

Direct access to the Internet is also opening up new ideas and spaces for exploration. After a computer training program for 30 housewives, a handful of women have started using email to keep in touch with family members abroad. They also search the Internet for new recipes and hair styles to put to use in small businesses. To address the lack of good materials available in masters-level programs, the CMC is introducing a specialized course for local campus lecturers on searching and using the Internet.

FIGURE 4 Two young producers film and conduct an interview as part of *Jeevanko Goreto* (Path of Life). The CMC's focus is on youth, and young women constituted a majority of the 174 participants that the CMC trained in the first year of the program. (Photo by Anil Ligal)

TABLE 1 A selection of Tansen Community Multimedia Center (CMC) volunteer productions

Nepali title (English title)	Description
Haamro Sadak (Our Street)	• State of the municipality's roads
Jeevanko Goreto (Path of Life)	• Shoemakers' skills and profession • Potmakers' (metalworkers') skills and profession • Carpenters' skills and profession • Tailors' skills and profession • Barbers' skills and profession
Haamro Sanskriti (Our Culture)	• Local Tansen culture
Phohor Maila (Garbage)	• Garbage, pollution, and Tansen's local environment
Dhunge Dhara (Natural Spring)	• Preserving traditional water sources
Silai Katai (Cutting and Stitching)	• The changing nature of the tailoring trade under the influence of TV
Sthaniya Gatibidhi (Community Events, News Segments)	• Inter-caste marriage of a CMC volunteer • Raising guinea pigs to sell as pets • Workshop on growing coffee • School results • World Environment Day • Human rights training
Rochak Prasanga (Interesting Facts)	• A series featuring Internet-based stories and information

The CMC is also developing a new program called *TV Browsing*, in which local youth invite guest experts to surf the web with them on camera, simultaneously translating and interpreting Internet-sourced information and showing local viewers—the vast majority of whom have never heard of the Internet, let alone seen it—what these new technologies are all about. Viewers can request the CMC to feature particular topics and web sites allowing them to surf the Internet on their televisions.

A window on the world

To some extent, the Tansen CMC counters the inaccessibility of mountain towns, and as cable penetration increases, semi-rural suburbs and larger villages as well. The CMC increases local capacity to create programming and use media tools, while simultaneously starting and supporting new means to showcase the outputs. By linking media like the Internet with local radio and TV, the CMC connects Tansen to the outside world, from markets on the plains to education opportunities in the capital. It also links absent students and migrants with their families back home. The CMC provides hundreds with direct access to ICTs. Through cable TV, radio, and print, thousands more are given some degree of mediated access, thus providing translation and contextualization, not to mention overcoming literacy and afford-ability barriers.

Built-in research

Like other sites in the UNESCO regional project network, the Tansen CMC has used an integrated research methodology developed in conjunction with the London School of Economics and the Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane). The approach employs full-time researchers as part of the local project team who use ethnographic research tools, including field notes, diaries and a range of interview methods to explore both what poverty means in Tansen and how it relates to what the research approach calls the local "communicative ecology," essentially the complete range of communication media and information flows in a given community. The research places ICTs (radio, computers, mobile phones, print media, etc) in the context of all the ways of communicating that are important locally, including face-to-face interaction. The small size of the project—in numbers of participants, the town environment, and the close-knit nature of the local team—has contributed to research playing an important role in the project and has fed naturally back into the process of planning and implementing.

Research has helped the project team to understand the nature of poverty in Tansen, particularly the role played by caste, marginalization and powerlessness, and the lack of opportunities for self-expression. Practically, the research approach has been used to identify poor students, taking into account a range of factors, more than simply economic status. Continuous interaction and a high degree of engagement with participants

allowed the local team to both refine and adapt curricula for successive batches of students, creating specialized courses to meet the needs of learners.

Sustainability

With over a year of operations under their belt and a history of local production dating back more than 10 years, the Tansen CMC has many creative ideas on how to sustain their operations and provide employment and income generating opportunities for poor local youth.

The CMC is introducing a membership system through which community members and volunteers are able to use the computer and Internet facilities. The team plans to expand the hours of cablecast programming to increase viewership and hopefully community support. *The Local Programme* has started to carry some small advertising with spots made by youth volunteers. The CMC offers paid video and production services for local weddings and other ceremonies. Youth who do the video shooting split the NPR 2000 fee (about USD 25) with the center. The CMC charges NPR 750 to mix wedding video footage. The center has started to offer limited, low-cost training programs. For example, 30 housewives are paying an average of NPR 900 (about USD 12) for a three-month course covering basic computers, word processing and Internet (Figure 5). The CMC is also planning to introduce on-demand music and video features for cable subscribers.

FIGURE 5 Housewives taking a computer course at the CMC in Tansen. Drawing on tradition and saving on furniture costs, the CMC set up computers on low tables so that users could sit on cushions on the floor. The arrangement helps to give the center a less formal air—part of the process of de-mystifying the technology and making users feel at home. (Photo by Ian Pringle)

With 3 new FM radios broadcasting from Tansen, at least another 4 FM stations in the area, as well as 5 TV stations in the capital, the Tansen CMC organizers feel they are in a unique position to provide both skilled human resources as well as high quality audio and video program productions.

FURTHER READING

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