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Summary

This year’s annual community network exchange was organised on 15,17 and 21 November online with a specific focus on the theme- community network for social good. Community Networks is the use of networking technologies by, and for, local communities providing a sustainable solution to address the connectivity gaps that exist in underserved urban, remote, and rural areas around the world. The event was attended by several experts from different nations to come up with strategies to strengthen the community networks to build internet infrastructure, disseminate factual information, fight misinformation, enable better access to health and education and provide critical support in the time of the pandemic. The second day of the event specifically focussed on the synergies between community radio and community networks to explore the scopes of collaboration to provide content and enhanced information to the communities. These interactive sessions discussed successful cases from the barefoot college of Tilonia where the community network and community radio work in tandem; the DREAM project of APC and DEF how the spread of misinformation was tackled through chatbot and the community radio; and the wireless mew community of Nuh district Haryana who run their own community radio. The community radio practitioners and the experts on community media stressed the importance of building up more community radios and demanded the use of funds such as the Universal Service Obligation Funds for this purpose. Short videos of successful models were screened on all three days to demonstrate the potential of community networks in serving rural and remote areas. The conference was jointly hosted by Digital Empowerment Foundation and Internet Society in partnership with APNIC Foundation, Association for Progressive Communications, Alliance for Affordable Internet, Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development, Action for Hope and Landscapes of Hope.
Introduction

Getting online remains a challenge for billions across the globe. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies due to nationwide lockdowns. People and organizations all over the world adjusted to the new normal – with meetings going completely online and office work shifting to the home. At the same time, many rural and low-income communities around the world lacked reliable and affordable access. Wireless access rapidly became a basic need rather than a ‘nice to have’. The lack of affordable access was an issue as it prevented people from having access to a range of digital services – from public health and information to education.

Today, nearly half the world still has no Internet access. The majority are in developing and least developed countries, and for them the need to be online is even more urgent. In recent years, community networks have played a significant role in connecting and empowering rural and underprivileged populations and providing them with access to information, education, healthcare and so much more.

In 2017, Digital Empowerment Foundation and the Internet Society (ISOC) organized the first Community Network Exchange (CNX). Since its inception, CNX has played a crucial part in understanding the role, relevance, and evolution of community networks in different contexts. CNX 2020 took place amid a new pandemic-induced reality that explored the need – and significance - of community networks and the various dimensions related to meaningful access.

In 2021, the subsequent waves of the pandemic intensified the fundamental issue of lack of access. Much of the pandemic’s management from vaccinations to movement tracking depends on being digitally connected. As a result, the vulnerability for literally billions of people has increased further. With this in mind, the theme for CNX 2021 is “Community Networks for Social Good”. Within this overall theme, session sub-themes will reflect on the importance of community networks in accelerating reach and providing help to the communities to respond to COVID-19 and also to benefit from digital opportunities. It will also explore the experiences and challenges faced by community networks during the pandemic.
Why CNX?

The Community Network Xchange is organised every year since 2017 with the following objectives in mind:

Training and exchange
To develop a comprehensive and self-contained guide to strengthen grassroots expertise by training community members in basic wireless technology; to enable individuals (barefoot engineers) to not only to run and manage these networks but to also further transfer their skills to others creating a multiplier effect; to organise country-level exchange programmes for learners and barefoot wireless network engineers who can visit and engage in other country networks and learn from their experiences.

Knowledge and network
To organise annual CNX Summits to engage community network providers across the world to share their learnings, experiences and technological innovations on one platform; to create a consortium of community network providers and social funds for the purpose of sustainability in Asia; to provide support to community network gatherings and hands-on work meetings at regional level for advocating and addressing regional policy issues and challenges; to share recommendations from the summit at other international forums such as Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), among others.

Policy and advocacy
To discuss sustainable business models around community networks with a sound understanding of social and economic challenges; to identify various issues such as spectrum, technological, regulatory, content and localisation, among others, that need to be addressed in the national and international framework of policies; to develop a series of policy briefing papers that focus on regulatory issues that need to be addressed; to make community networks visible to policymakers so that they can be considered as an actor within the telecommunications ecosystem.
Format of CNX 2021

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Dates and Thematic Topics of CNX 2021

15th November 2021

Topic 1: The Pandemic, Digital Dependence and the Unconnected: Challenges and Opportunities

Topic 2: Community Networks: Empowering Education and Health Care

17th November 2021:

Special Focus on the Synergies between Community Radio (CR) and Community Networks (CN)

Topic 1: Why are CN and CR Twins

Topic 2: CR & CN Case Stories

Topic 3: The How and Future of CN and CR Collaboration

23rd November 2021

Topic 1: Community Networks: Media, Misinformation and Misuse

Topic 2: Rural Changemakers and Innovators: Community Networks as a Catalyst for Digital Transformation
Deliberations highlights

Day 1: November 15, 2021, Session 1

Session 1: The Pandemic, Digital Dependence and the Unconnected: challenges and opportunities

This session explored how the region has coped or tried to cope in the face of prevailing digital gaps. It also looked at how complimentary access solutions such as community networks have helped communities during the pandemic and highlighted some strategies, best practices and learnings for the future.

The panel had the following speakers:

- Daniel Featherstone, Senior Research Fellow, ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University
- Bhai Shelly, Programme Communication Specialist, UNICEF India Country Office
- Amrita Choudhury, President of Internet Society Delhi Chapter, Vice-Chair Asia Pacific Regional IGF (AprIGF)
- Satish Mittal, Head, Facebook Express WiFi India

Daniel Featherstone

Daniel Featherstone shared his experience working with the indigenous and remote communities in Western Australia, contextualising it in terms of how even within the rich nation-states disparities exist in terms of digital access. Referring to the Digital Inclusion Index he has pointed out that the gap has increased from 5.2 to 7.9 since 2020. In specific remote communities, the gap was 17.3 and 25 compared to the national average. He pointed out that affordability is an issue for a lot of people that a lot of people share devices. He also shared how students could not afford data and participate in school activities where community radios stepped up to broadcast the classes and deliver workbooks door to door.

Bhai Shelly

Bhai Shelly spoke from his own experience working with UNICEF in Uttar Pradesh India on nutrition and child health. Responding to the moderator’s questions on the role traditional media and digital media play, he stressed the relevance of hybrid models where communication mediums should be used to complement the traditional models. UN has trained Anganwadi workers on telemedicine and tele-counselling, which now complements the efforts in building a healthy community.
Amrita Choudhury

Amrita Choudhury began by pointing out that it is not the unconnected communities that are suffering, but the under-connected communities too. Under-connected communities can't effectively use the internet for their progress due to the low bandwidth. She pointed out that along with the gender divide in digital accessibility; language also contributes to differential access. Even when there is an attempt to include regional languages for communication, the coverage is only partial while the majority of the content is still in English. She also talked about the need for the government to follow certain privacy-related regulations even when a new technology is introduced for the benefit of vulnerable and disadvantaged people. She spoke about the Internet Society’s ‘internet way of networking tool kit’ which has parameters to see whether the particular regulation is following a proper open, interoperable, secure and trustworthy internet. She suggested that regulators can use it as a checklist to assess how accountable a new technology is. He also stressed the importance of policymaking that is participatory with the space for feedback and making it collaborative. She also stressed the importance of listening and negotiating when civil society organisations, governments and private parties work in collaboration.

Satish Mittal

Satish Mittal, representing Meta, spoke on their experience of addressing the digital divide. He also spoke about how Meta has devised different strategies for the under-connected and unconnected. He insisted on the importance of acknowledging that India has moved from unconnected to under-connected. Identifying that resolving the problems of the unconnected is more difficult he pointed out four dimensions of this problem, that are:

- Availability of the network
- Affordability of the network
- Device availability
- Availability of relevant content in local languages

He highlighted that Meta is working on moving from monolithic network structure to disaggregated network structure, creating multiple monetisation capabilities depending on regions and working on building up systems that can be used for multiple purposes.

In the post-session discussions, Osama Manzar pointed out the need to connect the super-connected with the unconnected and under-connected as they are the victims of misinformation. Sarbani Belur from the audience also pointed out the importance of setting up cooperatives as well, including setting up internet infrastructure as an agenda in the Gram Panchayat development plans. Bhai Shelly added PM-WANI as another possibility opened by the government to tap into.
Session 2: Community Networks: Empowering Education and Healthcare

This session discussed the ways and means of accelerating online learning and how initiatives such as community networks can be used to promote education in underserved communities in both structured and unstructured ways. The session was moderated by Osama Manzar from the Digital empowerment foundation.

The panel had the following speakers:

- Talant Sultanov, Co-founder of the Internet Society-Kyrgyzstan
- Dr Regi George, Co-founder, Tribal Health Initiative, Sittilingi, Tamil Nadu
- Duncan Macintosh, CEO, APNIC Foundation
- Meeta Sengupta, Expert on Education and Policy

(Dr. Regi George had to leave the conference in the middle due to an emergency at the hospital)

Talant Sultanov

Talant Sultanov shared his experience working in Kyrgyzstan which is a landlocked and mountainous country. He observed that earlier when they visited villages to set up internet people were reluctant, but things changed in the pandemic. They were eager to get the internet because their children's education was suffering. Students were recording the classes on TV on their smartphones due to the lack of internet. Some of them in the remotest areas had to move in with their relatives in connected parts. In one of the villages he visited where there is no electricity or TV connections, people were listening to radios to receive critical information. The challenges they faced also included challenges on content- they managed this challenge by digitising textbooks and making them available through the internet in a box. The textbooks were also not copyrighted by the government, but the authors created another set of challenges for them. The cost of building up internet infrastructure was also exorbitant according to the government, but communities suggested alternative options such as using electricity polls to get the cables. He said they built internet infrastructure at a much cheaper rate in collaboration with the local community compared to the figures suggested by the government. He introduced the following solutions that can work in situations like this:

- Using the Internet in a box to connect the unconnected
- Providing digital skill training to teachers and students
- Giga initiative by UNICEF that can connect all the schools globally

He also spoke about how after setting up internet infrastructure and making it affordable, they are now focused on designing interactive web portals for education.
Duncan Macintosh

Duncan Macintosh spoke about how APNIC Foundation is focussing on three key thematic areas to overcome the challenges faced in education.

- Inclusion
- Infrastructure
- Knowledge.

He observed that universities, like schools, are suffering too from interns providing platforms for virtual education. The positive outcome according to him is that it streamlined the importance of education and connectivity. He spoke about different initiatives by the foundation to connect the Tier-2 cities and build up university networks that can support each other. He also spoke about how the changing policies around internet licensing have made provisions such as satellite internet more difficult in unconnected regions.

Meeta Sengupta

Meeta Sengupta spoke about how people face the digital divide on different scales and the need to create solutions that would work simultaneously for different scales of problems. But she highlighted that the most critical problem is in the education sector which has ignored all the efforts in the past two decades to incorporate ICT tools in education. She also differentiated between technical training on the internet and digital education. Digital education is communicating in digital space. She highlighted the lack of pedagogical training in digital communication and how the current method is two-dimensional communication through broadcasting classes. She stressed the importance of developing digital pedagogies and the need for the design to address these problems to be participatory as the Internet is a public good.

In the absence of Regi George in the panel, the moderator also introduced the Tribal Health Initiative and how they had to travel 160 Kms to access the internet. The moderator also added the importance of looking at providing internet to school children similar to the mid-day meal scheme in India.
Day 2: November 17, 2021

**Special Focus on the Synergies Between Community Radio (CR) and Community Networks (CN)**

Both Community Networks (CN) and Community Radios (CR) are by the community, for the community and with the community. Both CR and CN broadcast or facilitate infrastructure for information sharing. CRs and CNs also enable huge community participation and can often be found in localised (and underserved) remote areas. Both CRs and CNs are people technologies. Operationally, while CRs produce lots of content for broadcasting, CNs allow the Internet to reach the hands of the people and open access to information and content. Both CRs and CNs use the public spectrum for public use. Interestingly, besides producing large amounts of locally relevant public content, CRs also use radio towers. Such radio towers are also a primary requirement of CNs to enable localised Internet connectivity using Wi-Fi. The sessions on day two were an interactive discourse on the synergies of Community Networks and Community Radio in association with The Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD).
Day 2: November 17, 2021, Session 1

Session 1: Why are CN and CR Twins?

Session one of day two discussed the similarities between Community Network and Community Radios and how they can complement each other in meaningful communication.

The discussants in this session were:

- Prof. Vinod Pavarala, UNESCO Chair on Community Media, University of Hyderabad
- Martin Corben, Community Media Consultant, Australia
- “Radio Rob” Hopkins, Radio and Telecommunications Enthusiast Yukon, Canada
- AHM Bazlur Rahman, Chief Executive Officer, Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio & Communication

The first session was anchored by Philomena Gnanapragasam from AIBD and Rajnesh Singh from ISOC. Rajnesh Singh started the session by pointing out how both internet and community media provide critical information to the communities and how community radios are filling the information gap in the absence of the internet. Philomena Gnanapragasam also reiterated how bringing CRs and CNs together can be powerful.

Martin Corben

Martin Corben spoke from the perspective of the remote indigenous communities he is working with in Australia who are reliant on community radio due to the geographical limitations as well as resource limitations. He also spoke about how a lot of communities set up community hubs which acted as a centre that collected and disseminated information during the pandemic. Further, he also pointed out the importance of community media courses to build the capacities of community media practitioners.

Vinod Pavarala

Vinod Pavarala laid out six principles of community communication. They are:

- Horizontal communication- It is about facilitating communication between and among communities.
- Bottom-up communication: The voice infrastructure needs to be accessible and affordable.
- Communities should be able to control the process of communication. Away from patronising state control and rampages of big corporations.
- Contents should be local, vernacular and produced by the local communities.
• Communities are not homogenous entities. There are hierarchies within the communities. Community radios should be the voice of the most marginalised

• It should be supported by an enabling policy.

On the last point, he further spoke about how community media is not even recognised as a resource in India by policymakers and how GOI has closed the airway in India due to the perceived threats.

Responding to Rajnesh Singh’s question on whether community media networks also had the ability to become internet network providers and whether radio stations leverage the internet to provide different types of services, he talked about how it is important to envision technology-enabled community networks being able to do the things traditionally done by the community networks. He also pointed out that unlike the case in Malaysia, Canada and Australia, in countries like India and Bangladesh, the commercial companies are not interested in reaching remote and rural communities as they are not the target audiences of commercials. Vinod gave two policy suggestions; transparent spectrum allocation and using the Universal Service Obligation Fund to boost community radios and networks. He pointed out that 60,000 crores are available in India alone under the Universal Service Obligation Fund and there should be advocacy to get it utilised for the communities.

“Radio Robb” Hopkins

“Radio Robb” Hopkins spoke from Northern Canada, 2000 km away from Vancouver. He pointed out the process through which commercial companies monopolise internet distribution in Canada. Twenty-five years ago there were around 200 community networks in Northern Canada as Internet Service Providers. Now there are only two of them left. One of them is a giant company. So 40% of the landmass is now covered by one phone company. He also pointed out that the government is subsidising them while other community networks are extinct. He added that where indigenous people are living community radios play an important role. Emergency broadcasting is where people are reliant on information from the radios on the weather forecasts and natural disasters. Even though some indigenous communities have expensive satellite receivers they are ridiculously priced. Community radios ensure last-mile delivery of information because everybody has radios and it is affordable to everyone. He pointed out that while this is the case for Northern Canada, the rural indigenous communities in Southern Canada have a cooperative community network to provide services. They also compete with other commercial service providers. The ISPs and radios work in collaboration if there is an internet blackout for example. He also pointed out that the community channels by the non-profit groups have also disappeared due to corporatisation. According to him, these trends also show how our freedom of expression can be impeded and hence community radios are critical as they are affordable, accessible and autonomous compared to other platforms. Another interesting aspect that was brought by Robb was also the indigenous communities’ preference of community media over big platforms like Facebook.
AHM Bazlur Rahman

AHM Bazlur Rahman was part of the community radio movement in south Asia and spoke from that perspective. In his opinion, Community radio practitioners are creating, disseminating and utilising knowledge. There are four areas that are non-negotiable when it comes to this.

• Human rights
• Freedom of expression
• Universal access to information and knowledge.
• Respect for cultural and linguistic diversity
• Quality education for all

He identified three keywords essential for our future actions: E-enable, E-engage and E-empower.

Responding to Philomena’s question on the aspect of “visual” in radio, which has traditionally been voice, he pointed out how International broadcasters like BBC, Voice of America and Deutsche Welle had discontinued Bangla programs in Radio and moved to the local TV channels. He also stressed the importance of ministries working in collaboration. In Bangladesh for example, while the Universal Social Obligation Fund is with the telecom ministry, the internet is looked after by the ICT ministry and Community Radios come under the Information and Broadcasting ministry. He requested AIBD to include all three ministries in future consultations.
Day 2: November 17, 2021, Session 2

Session 2: CR and CN Case Stories

Session two discussed three case stories from the ground. They were on:

- Barefoot College in Tilonia: The entire campus is Wi-Fi enabled and has Community Radio. They both work in tandem.

- DREAM project of APC and DEF: The project developed content and training material on misinformation. The communities were reached out through the Chatbot and Community radio at the time of Covid-19. *(A report by the APC and DEF team was presented)*

- The Meo Community in Haryana in the district of Nuh used Community Networks and Community radio to reach out to villagers. This was presented through a film.

- How the Community Network is helping the remote tribal area of Sittlingi in Tamil Nadu through a collaborative project of Tribal Health Initiative and Digital Empowerment Foundation. This was also presented through a film.

Day 2: November 17, 2021, Session 3

Session 3: The How and Future of CN and CR Collaboration

Session three discussed the future of CN and CR. The discussion explained how CR and CN complement each other, how they can operate together, how they leverage each other, what the building blocks of working in synergy are and how they should work in the future to ensure maximum reach of last-mile internet connectivity.

The discussants were:

- Naveed Haq, *Regional Director, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Internet Society*

- Osama Manzar, *Founder Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation*

Naveed Haq

Session two proceeded to session three when Naveed Haq shared an example of a rural school in Pakistan without any teachers. The school had laptops but children could not learn their lessons with a laptop alone. His team connected a teacher from Islamabad to teach the students. The teacher gave them a crash course in four months. He fondly remembered how happy the girls in the school were with the lessons. He shared another example of Papua New Guinea and their interactions with the regulators there to deploy the community network. He said how this can be used as an example to get the regulators to fund the community network. He spoke about how Community Networks are able to do what the internet cannot do. They bring out the local contexts. He spoke about digital agriculture as an example, where they teach farmers how to use the internet to farm and
sell their produce. He pointed two the commonalities between community radios and community network.

- Both need mobilization
- Both need similar infrastructure.
- Both can fill the content gap through local content
- Both can promote each other

**Osama Manzar**

Osama Manzar reiterated the importance of reimagining radios and pointed out the emerging trends where radios are operating through platforms like YouTube. He also agreed with the discussants on the need to “visualise” the “voices” of community Radios.

AHM Bazlur Rahman also raised two points as part of this session.

1. It is time for all the community radios to rebrand themselves as community visual radio
2. They have to Rescale and upscale while revisiting the traditional format
Day 3: November 23, 2021, Session 1

Session 1- Community networks: Media, Misinformation and Misuse

The session revolved around how access to credible information is crucial during crises such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this, messaging apps and digital platforms have been asked by Governments to help disseminate accurate information related to the pandemic. However, without a proportionate response to provide the same information through other channels, including traditional media, those who have no access to digital technologies struggle with differentiating between fact and fiction. This is more important as hearsay often comes into play in many communities. This session discussed how community networks in underserved areas can be leveraged to disrupt misinformation and how traditional media – including community radio – can be leveraged. This session was moderated by Nandini Chami from IT for change.

Panellists:

- Philomena Gnanapragasam, Director, Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development
- Natasha Badhwar, Creative Producer, Karwan-E-Mohabbat
- Sarbani Banerjee Belur, Asia Regional Coordinator, Community Networks, APC
- Anju Mangal, Head of Asia-Pacific Regions, A4AI, World Wide Web Foundation
- Balkrishna Pokhrel, Executive Director, ACORAB, Nepal
- Harish Pillay, Head, OSPO APAC, Red Hat Asia Pacific

Nandini Chami

Nandini Chami started saying the media that was supposed to decentralize information sharing and establish democratic rights has been captured by few corporations and used for the benefits of few people. In this age of social media, people are fed with algorithms through sponsored news, join groups, watch videos, and join pages full of polarizing news. Not only this, these feeds are filled with polarizing messages and celebrations of violence. In today's situation, transparency is the best sunlight to fight misinformation and fake news.

Anju Mangal

Anju Mangal emphasized the fact that misinformation has been circulating for centuries but during recent times the way it spread has changed completely. Today, online has taken over offline communication and in minutes things are made viral and reach distant places around the world. In her own words 'My concern right now is related to viral hate speech that
causes a lot of distress to people, particularly youth who are on social media. It has a huge social impact and this could range from discrimination segregation and also now we’ve started seeing a lot of suicides, and as a result, they don’t want to participate in the online world.’

Philomena Gnanapragasam

Philomena Gnanapragasam focused more on misinformation and disinformation; she added that these are the tools that have the power to change the government in some countries. Today, we want to brand us and people to talk about us, long before radio provided that synonyms platform. This is why people want community radio, they want to share and talk about themselves. Today people do this on social media channels, people share the information instantly like the restaurant they visited, we have become a society that over shares.

Sarbani Banerjee Belur

Sarbani Belur shared her experience, where she got a call from a lady in a village where the news was circulated that breastfeeding children during the pandemic can transfer the virus from the mother to her baby. She and her team quickly acted by creating videos at IIT Bombay and shared within the community through WhatsApp. This is some type of samples that I am telling you, sharing my experiences that we are just not working on enabling connectivity in any form, but also the utilization of the connectivity by which it can benefit the people in the last mile.

Sarbani said “we are just not working on enabling connectivity in any form, but the utilization of the connectivity by which it can benefit the people in the last mile.

Natasha Badhwar

“In India what we are experiencing is multi-layered misinformation and disinformation which is more like a powerful kind of assault on the conscience of the people. We are not talking about people's propensity to believe, we are talking about the big techs collaborating and collating with the government to make large groups allow hate speech to continue, instead of implementing their own laws on moving of the content.” said Natasha Badhwar.

He also shared a few instances when there were announcements that everybody is getting food, but on the ground, there was no food grain that was being distributed. There were announcements that vaccines were free, but on the ground, vaccines were not available. It was circulated that the number of deaths or the number of cases of COVID had been contained, but on the ground actually, the reality was very different and more people were dying.
Sarbani Belur talked more about creating offline and online resources for the community. In the community, both online and offline content helps people to access the content at their own time, through local connectivity in that area.

**Balkrishna Polkhrel**

Balkrishna Polkhrel started by sharing about a survey done during the pandemic in Nepal, it was noted 78% of the people depended on community radio as a tool of information dissemination. Even today community radio holds a great penetration and reaches in rural areas, which became more evident during the crisis time. He also added that in nearly 30 districts in Nepal there is no other mode of connectivity other than community radio.

Osama Manzar said that in this hyper-connected world where every information is available at the click of the information we need a reference point that can guide and help people on what is right or wrong. It has been noted that community radio holds more credibility amongst the people in comparison to other sources of media.
Day 3: November 23, 2021, Session 2

Session 2- Rural Changemakers and Innovators: Community Networks as a Catalyst for Digital Transformation

Panellists:

• Harish Pillay, Head, OSPO APAC, Red Hat Asia Pacific
• Siope Vakataki ‘Ofa, Economic Affairs Officer, ICT and Development Section, ICT and Disaster Risk Reduction Division, ESCAP
• Jane Coffin, Senior Vice President, Internet Growth, Internet Society
• Satyam Darmora, CEO & Founder, i2e1

Digital Transformation is on the agenda for most policymakers, but that is typically focused around urban centres and industries. Developing countries have also put much emphasis into rural development programmes, yet these do not always appear to prioritise leveraging digital connectivity. These points to an obvious disconnect. Community Networks can serve as a foundation for helping build the digital economy at a very local level. They can also serve as a catalyst for digital transformation by empowering the local community to embrace digital technologies in their locality e.g. with agriculture and other local industries that may be present. Equally, Community Networks can also serve as a rural maker space, where the community can learn new skills and be innovators in their own right. This session will explore how Community Networks can be leveraged to create the next generation of rural change-makers and innovators.

Rajneesh Singh started by talking about the frugal innovations that are being done in India, especially in the northern part. “If we can start and bring people from rural India into the innovation ecosystem and provide them with the necessary resources they can come up with something new and start the entrepreneurship journey,” Rajneesh added.

Madan Rao asked the panellists how they see the journey of close to two decades when they started the community radio program and now when all have reached certain places.

Harish Pillay

Harish Pillay showed a small device that is changing how people connect to radio and digital communication, which is quite cheaper and changes things. These smaller devices have changed too many things and have made radio affordable for people and the community. This is one of the open-source technologies like the one Red hat is using.
Siope Vakataki ‘Ofa
Siope Vakataki emphasized the participation of the government in building community radio. He also added that community networks play an extremely important role, especially in in Asia Pacific countries, with a big portion of rural communities that relies heavily on community networks for the correct and accurate information for disaster risk, and I understand that many countries in the region are using radio communication is one key element of providing information on disasters during disasters to address to help out communities, and especially in rural communities.

Jane Coffin
Jane Coffin started with to talk on some of the very most innovative networks, which are the community networks coming at this from a start-up side if you would look at it, but it’s a rural remote and sometimes urban start-up, to build networks where just know that many companies can’t go because they don’t get the return on investment or in some countries.

Satyam Darmora
Satyam Darmora said that we are at an early stage of technology development and connecting to everyone in India, he also added scalability and sustainability are the two important features of his start-up. In his own words “After three to four years working with regulators demonstrating them technologically it is possible, making sure that all security agencies are aligned with it is payable to get the government announced what is today called PM-WANI, which is Prime Minister wireless access network interface is a new architecture that the government of India.”

Osama Manzar added that community networks are seen more like a tech-driven democratic initiative to connect the last mile. In order to connect and take the community network to the masses, it is important the whole community network ecosystem need to be reimagined. Today, after the government has declared that anyone can buy and sell connectivity, it is more like a community network in a profitable way or charitable way or pay while you earn.

On the possibility of open access and licensing the access, Satyam replied that in this architecture there could be more start-ups and more good companies to start and do business. And in this scenario, the role of civil societies becomes more important and crucial.

As a closing statement, Rajnesh thanked all the participants and wanted more of this gathering to take place. He also added that there is so much more to be done and acted for connecting the unconnected.
Conclusion

CNX APAC 2021 took place over 3 days, with 26 panellists from the Asia-Pacific region joining us online. The event was hosted by Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and the Internet Society (ISOC) with support from the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), APNIC Foundation, Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD), Action For Hope, and Landscapes of Hope.

We are grateful to our partners for their support in the lead-up to, and during, the conference. Our panellists joined us from across continents, with some making special arrangements to connect at odd hours for their time zones. Their participation enriched the discussions and added nuanced perspectives. We would like to express our gratitude to each one of them.

We would also like to thank Joly MacFie from the Internet Society New York Chapter for assisting the organising team with live-streaming the sessions across various digital platforms and for providing technical assistance. We are grateful to Mr Madanmohan Rao for being the Moderator for Day 3, Session 2.

We have exciting plans lined up for CNX 2022, and we look forward to seeing all our community network partners, organisers, and well-wishers joining us then!
Key recommendations

- Contextualisation of interventions: Even though the digital divide developed countries are smaller compared to the developing countries, the indigenous people in remote regions face difficulty in accessing internet too. Community Networks and Community radios are important in bridging this gap.

- Internet connectivity needs to be acknowledged as a development agenda in developing countries. This should be embedded in the local governance plans. Options such as community network cooperatives needs to be explored.

- New tech-initiatives and interventions from the government should also abide by certain accountability criteria. These initiatives should also be participatory where there is space for feedback from the community members.

- Discussions and advocacy around education should not be limited accessibility alone. There should be more explorations and advocacy around digital pedagogy and contextualised content creation.

- Community radios continue to be critical in providing reliable information in the time of crisis. They also create local content that is easily accessible and affordable. Nevertheless, there must be attempt to revisit the old formats of radio broadcasting and adapt visual forms of broadcasting.

- There should be transparent spectrum allocation for community radios.

- Universal Service Obligation Funds must be used utilised to promote more community networks and community radios.

- In certain countries, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Ministry of Communication and the Ministry of Electronic and Information Technology are established separately. They should work collaboratively for the resource mobilisation and expansion of community networks and community radios.
Annexures

Voices from the community

CNX 2021 saw a segment called “Voices from the Community” which showcased short videos from different regions where community networks and community radio are deployed. These videos highlighted the impact stories, experiences, and local contexts that should be considered in the deployment of community networks. The following is a list of videos and case stories that were showcased throughout three days. Watch them-

• Community Network Xchange 2021 Introductory Video https://youtu.be/d2Wquwr-2z0
• Wireless for Unconnected https://youtu.be/QyWjx98YqV0
• Community Radios as Community Networks https://youtu.be/jFUanlhFV3I
• Journey of Nuh through Community Radio and Community Network https://youtu.be/PNk_ESoHm_k
• Internet on Wheels https://youtu.be/yb0G1NexcUY
• DOCONLINE by DEF India - Helping Rural India to access medical facilities https://youtu.be/PSHew1H2sLM

List of speakers and moderators

• Rajnesh Singh, Regional Vice President, Asia-Pacific, Internet Society
• Osama Manzar, Founder Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation
• Daniel Featherstone, Senior Research Fellow, ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated 2. Decision-Making and Society, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University
• Bhai Shelly, Programme Communication Specialist, UNICEF India Country Office
• Amrita Choudhury, President of Internet Society Delhi Chapter, Vice-Chair Asia Pacific Regional IGF (AprIGF)
• Satish Mittal, Head, Facebook Express WiFi India
• Madanmohan Rao, Research Director, YourStory Media, BIG APC’s Innovation Officer, Charter Member, TiE Bangalore
• Talant Sultanov, Co-founder of the Internet Society-Kyrgyzstan
• Dr Regi George, Co-founder, Tribal Health Initiative, Sittilingi, Tamil Nadu
• Duncan Macintosh, CEO, APNIC Foundation
• Meeta Sengupta, Expert on Education and Policy
• Prof. Vinod Pavarala, *UNESCO Chair on Community Media, University of Hyderabad*
• Martin Corben, *Community Media Consultant, Australia*
• “Radio Rob” Hopkins, *Radio and Telecommunications Enthusiast Yukon, Canada*
• AHM Bazlur Rahman, *Chief Executive Officer, Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio & Communication*
• Naveed Haq, *Regional Director, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Internet Society*
• Philomena Gnanapragasam, Director, Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development
• Natasha Badhwar, Creative Producer, Karwan-E-Mohabbat
• Sarbani Banerjee Belur, Asia Regional Coordinator, Community Networks, APC
• Anju Mangal, Head of Asia-Pacific Regions, A4AI, World Wide Web Foundation
• Balkrishna Pokhrel, Executive Director, ACORAB, Nepal
• Harish Pillay, Head, OSPO APAC, Red Hat Asia Pacific
• Harish Pillay, Head, OSPO APAC, Red Hat Asia Pacific
• Siope Vakataki ‘Ofa, Economic Affairs Officer, ICT and Development Section, ICT and Disaster Risk Reduction Division, ESCAP
• Jane Coffin, Senior Vice President, Internet Growth, Internet Society
• Satyam Darmora, CEO & Founder, i2e1
Agenda
# Session Format & Time

## Online Conference

**November 15, 17 & 23, 2021**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session</th>
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<tr>
<td>05 Min</td>
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**0500 – 0715 UTC**

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Agenda

Community Networks for Social Good

Day 1 15th November 2021

The Pandemic, Digital Dependence and the Unconnected: Challenges and Opportunities

Dr. Daniel Featherstone
Senior Research Fellow, ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University

Bhai Shelly
Programme Communication Specialist, UNICEF India Country Office

Amrita Choudhury
President of Internet Society Delhi Chapter, Vice Chair Asia Pacific Regional IGF (ApriGF)

Satish Mittal
Head, Facebook Express WiFi India

Moderator
Rajnesh Singh
Regional Vice President, Asia-Pacific, Internet Society

Community Networks: Empowering Education and Health Care

Talant Sultanov
Co-founder of the Internet Society-Kyrgyzstan

Dr. Regi George
Co-founder, Tribal Health Initiative, Sittilingi, Tamil Nadu

Duncan Macintosh
CEO, APNIC Foundation

Meeta Sengupta
Expert on Education and Policy

Moderator
Osama Manzar
Founder Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation

*Tentative & Names TBC
Synergies between Community Radio and Community Networks

Holding an interactive discourse on the synergies of Community Networks and Community Radio in association with The Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD)

Session 1 (45 minutes):
Why CN and CR are Twins

Discussing the impact of existing CR and CN based synergy and examples of their impact, specially on the unconnected community.

Discussants:
Prof. Vinod Pavarala
UNESCO Chair on Community Media, University of Hyderabad

AHM Bazlur Rahman
Chief Executive Officer, Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio & Communication

“Radio Rob” Hopkins
Radio and Telecommunications Enthusiast Yukon, Canada

Moderators
Ms. Philomena Gnanapragasam
Director, Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development

Rajesh Singh
Regional Vice President, Asia-Pacific, Internet Society

*Tentative & Names TBC
Session 2 (20 minutes):
CR & CN Case Stories

Discussing and showcasing 2-3 case studies of CR+CN in terms of their modus operandi and execution on the ground - The examples would be: Barefoot College in Tilonia where the entire campus is WiFi and they have Community Radio and they both work in tandem.

- DREAM project of APC and DEF: Where content and training material developed on misinformation and through the use of Chatbot and Community radio outreach took place at the time of Covid19 (Presentation of a report by APC and DEF team)

- How Meo Community in Haryana in the district of Nuh using Community Networks to connect themselves and also use Mewat Community radio to reach out to villagers (Shown through a film)

Session 3 (45 minutes):
The How and Future of CN and CR Collaboration

Discussing the How and Future of CN and CR. Explaining how CR and CN complement each other, how they can operate together, how they leverage each other, and what are the building blocks of working in synergy and how they should work in the future to ensure maximum reach of last mile internet connectivity.

Discussants:

Naveed Haq
Regional Director, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Internet Society

Balkrishna Pokhrel
Executive Director, ACORAB, Nepal

Osama Manzar
Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation

*Tentative & Names TBC
### Community Networks: Media, Misinformation and Misuse

**Philomena Gnanapragasam**  
Director, Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development

**Natasha Badhwar**  
Creative Producer, Karwan E Mohabbat

**Sarbani Banerjee Belur**  
Asia Regional Coordinator, Community Networks, APC

**Anju Mangal**  
Head of Asia-Pacific Region, Alliance for Affordable Internet

**Balkrishna Pokhrel**  
Executive Director, ACORAB, Nepal

### Rural Changemakers and Innovators: Community Networks as a Catalyst for Digital Transformation

**Harish Pillay**  
Head, OSPO APAC, Red Hat Asia Pacific

**Slope Vakataka ‘Ofa**  
Economic Affairs Officer, ICT and Development Section, UN ESCAP

**Jane Coffin**  
Senior Vice President, Internet Growth, Internet Society

**Satyam Darmora**  
CEO & Founder, i2e1

### Moderator

**Nandini Chami**  
Deputy Director and Fellow, IT for change

**Moderator**  

**Madanmohan Rao**  
Research Director, YourStory Media,  
BIP APC's Innovation officer,  
Charter Member, TiE Bangalore

*Tentative & Names TBC*
Co-Conveners of CNX-APAC 2021

Rajnesh Singh, Regional Vice President, Asia-Pacific, Internet Society
and
Osama Manzar, Founder Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation

An initiative of

Supporting Partners

Coordination Contact
cnxapac2021@defindia.org
Community Networks for Social Good

LAST MILE ACCESS I DIGITAL EXCLUSION I PANDEMIC

Online Conference

November 15, 17 & 23, 2021

An initiative of

Supporting Partners
Introduction

Getting online remains a challenge for billions across the globe. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies due to nationwide lockdowns. People and organizations all over the world adjusted to the new normal – with meetings going completely online and office work shifting to the home. At the same time, many rural and low-income communities around the world lacked reliable and affordable access. Wireless access rapidly became a basic need rather than a ‘nice to have’. The lack of affordable access was an issue as it prevented people from having access to a range of digital services – from public health and information to education.

Today, nearly half the world still has no Internet access. The majority are in developing and least developed countries, and for them the need to be online is even more urgent. In recent years, community networks have played a significant role in connecting and empowering rural and underprivileged populations and providing them with access to information, education, healthcare and so much more.

In 2017, Digital Empowerment Foundation and the Internet Society (ISOC) organized the first Community Network Exchange (CNX). Since its inception, CNX has played a crucial part in understanding the role, relevance, and evolution of community networks in different contexts. CNX 2020 took place amid a new pandemic-induced reality that explored the need – and significance – of community networks and the various dimensions related to meaningful access.

In 2021, the subsequent waves of the pandemic intensified the fundamental issue of lack of access. Much of the pandemic’s management from vaccinations to movement tracking depends on being digitally connected. As a result, the vulnerability for literally billions of people has increased further. With this in mind, the theme for CNX 2021 is “Community Networks for Social Good”. Within this overall theme, session sub-themes will reflect on the importance of community networks in accelerating reach and providing help to the communities to respond to COVID-19 and also to benefit from digital opportunities. It will also explore the experiences and challenges faced by community networks during the pandemic.
Objectives & Methods

CNX 2021 will run online on November 15, 17 and 23rd 2021. To ensure maximum engagement, each day of the conference will only have two focused sessions, running for a total of 135 minutes. The sessions will be held using Zoom and will be broadcast live on a number of diverse platforms including Livestream, Facebook Live and YouTube.

To maintain participants interest and engagement, each session will have three components:

- A moderated crisp panel discussion for 30 minutes with 3 speakers
- A 10 min segment called “Voices of Social Change” which will include short videos from community networks around the region and beyond
- A curated free-flowing open mic session to cater for questions and answers on the session topic.

The second session will run in the same format, and it will be preceded by a short break. The conference has been structured to promote substantive discussion among the stakeholders. The sessions will be delivered by experts and stakeholders, focused on sharing research, evidence-based practices, and policy recommendations with specific implications for action.
Voice of Social Change Segment

Each session will have a 10-minute segment called “Voices of Social Change” which will feature short videos from locations around the region (and beyond) where community networks have helped bring about social change. The segment will cover human interest stories, regional stories, and impact stories in English and regional languages.

Each day of the virtual conference will run for 2 hours 15 minutes in total (135mins). The online platform will go live 10 mins prior to the daily start time to allow participants and speakers to connect, and to ensure a timely start to proceedings.

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### CNX 2021 Format

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CNX 2021 Theme
In the field of education and learning, disruptions in the delivery of lessons to students and the shift to online learning have made the digital educational divide more pronounced. According to UNESCO, around 1.5 billion learners are affected by school closure caused by COVID-19. This emphasizes the point that while the pandemic is new to many of us, the digital divide has been with us for quite some time now. This session will discuss ways and means of accelerating online learning and how initiatives such as community networks can be used to promote education in underserved communities in both structured and unstructured ways.

Panelists: Attached separately

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated – or perhaps forced - the uptake of digital solutions, tools, and services, speeding up the global transition towards a digital economy. However, it has also exposed the wide chasm between the connected and the unconnected, revealing just how far behind many are on digital uptake. This gap exists within and between segments of the population e.g., minority and rural communities, as well as in different sectors e.g., education and health, and has impacted developed and developing countries. This session will explore how the region has coped - or tried to cope, and the digital gaps that prevail. It will also look at how complementary access solutions such as community networks have helped communities during the pandemic, and highlight some strategies, best practices and learnings for the future.

In the field of education and learning, disruptions in the delivery of lessons to students and the shift to online learning have made the digital educational divide more pronounced. According to UNESCO, around 1.5 billion learners are affected by school closure caused by COVID-19. This emphasizes the point that while the pandemic is new to many of us, the digital divide has been with us for quite some time now. This session will discuss ways and means of accelerating online learning and how initiatives such as community networks can be used to promote education in underserved communities in both structured and unstructured ways. This session will also discuss the role of digital tools and services for health care providers and members of the community during the pandemic, and the need for people to have affordable access to connectivity. It will also explore how health care providers in rural areas have leveraged community networks to deal with the pandemic.
Both Community Networks (CN) and Community Radios (CR) are by the community, for the community and with the community. Both CR and CN broadcast or facilitate infrastructure for information sharing. CRs and CNs also enable huge community participation and can often be found in localised (and underserved) remote areas. Both CRs and CNs are people technologies.

Operationally, while CRs produce lots of content for broadcasting, CNs allow the Internet to reach the hands of the people and open access to information and content. Both CRs and CNs use the public spectrum for public use. Interestingly, besides producing large amounts of locally relevant public content, CRs also use radio towers. Such radio towers are also a primary requirement of CNs to enable localised Internet connectivity using WiFi.

During the first CNX APAC held in 2017, the synergies between CRs and CNs were explored, and have continued to be discussed in subsequent events. The following key points emerged from those discussions between CR and CN practitioners:

- Community radios are already present in the most difficult and remote regions. Established manpower at community radios can be used for community networks.
- Since community radio works within a local community, providers understand the local dialect and language, which is crucial for community network providers as well.
- Community radio stations can provide a wide range of content and services to community network providers. Community network providers and community radio station owners can collaborate and work together to produce content of local interest.
- Community network providers can seek help from community radio station audiences and create and deliver the content on the basis of their audiences. A community network could act as a repository for content in their server that radio stations already put out.
- Community radio stations find it difficult to sustain themselves since subscription models are rare. There is a possibility that community radio subscriptions could include access to the Internet through community networks.
- Technical assistance is still a challenge since these rural areas have a dearth of experienced technicians.

This session will be an interactive discourse on the synergies of Community Networks and Community Radio in association with The Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD). This special session will be focused on the ‘Why’ and ‘How’ of CN and CR. The two hour session is divided into three parts:

Session 1 (45 minutes): Why CN and CR are Twins: Discussing the synergies CR and CNs have between them, and examples of their impact on the local (and typically unconnected) community.

Panelists: Attached separately
Session 2 (20 Minutes): CR & CN Case Stories: Discussing and showcasing a couple of case studies of CR+CN in terms of their modus operandi and execution on the ground. The examples would be that of:

- Barefoot College in Tilonia Where the entire campus is WiFi and they have Community Radio and they both work in tandem
- DREAM project of APC and DEF: Where content and training material developed on misinformation and through the use of Chatbot and Community radio outreach took place at the time of Covid19
- How Meo Community in Haryana in the district of Nuh using Community Networks to connect themselves and also use Mewat Community radio to reach out to villagers
- Session 3 (45 minutes): The How and Future of CN and CR Collaboration: Further exploring how CR and CN complement each other, how they can operate together, how they can leverage each other, what are the building blocks of working in synergy, and how they could work together in the future to provide enhanced information and content for local communities.

Resource Persons: Philomena Gnanapragasam; Rajnesh Singh and Osama Manzar
Community Networks: Media, Misinformation and Misuse

Panelists: Attached separately

Access to credible information is crucial during crises such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this, messaging apps and digital platforms have been asked by Governments to help disseminate accurate information related to the pandemic. However, without a proportionate response to provide the same information through other channels, including traditional media, those who have no access to digital technologies struggle with differentiating between fact and fiction. This is more important as often hearsay comes into play in many communities. This session will discuss how community networks in underserved areas can be leveraged to disrupt misinformation and how traditional media – including community radio – can be leveraged.

Rural Changemakers and Innovators: Community Networks as a Catalyst for Digital Transformation

Panelists: Attached separately

Digital Transformation is on the agenda for most policymakers, but that is typically focused around urban centres and industries. Developing countries have also put much emphasis into rural development programmes, yet these do not always appear to prioritise leveraging digital connectivity. This points to an obvious disconnect. Community Networks can serve as a foundation for helping build the digital economy at a very local level. They can also serve as a catalyst for digital transformation by empowering the local community to embrace digital technologies in their locality e.g. with agriculture and other local industries that may be present. Equally, Community Networks can also serve as a rural makerspace, where the community can learn new skills and be innovators in their own right. This session will explore how Community Networks can be leveraged to create the next generation of rural change makers and innovators.
Co-Conveners of CNX-APAC 2021

Rajnesh Singh, Regional Vice President, Asia-Pacific, Internet Society and
Osama Manzar, Cofounder & Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation

An initiative of

Supporting Partners

Coordination Contact
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