

Amid fund crunch, CGNet Swara eyes shift to Bluetooth radio tech

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CGNet Swara founder Shubhranshu Choudhary. Photo: Hindustan Times

Funding from the United Nations Democracy Fund was the last to dry up and in December, CGNet Swara, a citizen journalism venture that uses mobile phones to collect and disseminate local news in central Gondwana, Chhattisgarh, cut its staff from 45 to just 10.

"If this continues, we'll have to shut down completely," said Shubhranshu Choudhary, founder of CGNet Swara, in a phone interview.

In 2004, Choudhary gave up his job as a BBC South Asia producer to start CGNet Swara with the help of William Thies, then a PhD student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US who was working on a software for mobile phones.

In 2010, CGNet Swara won the m-billionth Award in the m-news category. The award is given each year by the New Delhi-based Digital Empowerment Foundation to recognize organizations that are using mobile phone to deliver important services to people in remote areas.

Since it received the award, the number of listeners on CGNet Swara has grown threefold and the number of people recording messages has increased ten-fold. But the technology that set CGNet Swara apart—mobile telephony—has also become a cause of its financial troubles.

"The monthly phone bills are in excess of Rs.1 lakh," said Choudhary.

"As soon as we start charging for a service, we notice the number of callers dropping substantially. The model works, but it is not sustainable," he added.

Here's how the service works: CGNet Swara has trained citizen journalists to publish reports on its voice-based portal using their mobile phones. These reports, about local issues like broken roads and contaminated water, are usually in Gondi, the language of the Gond Adivasi community in Chhattisgarh, and sometimes in Hindi. People record and listen in to these messages by giving a missed call on +91 8050068000. They get a call back in under a minute, and can choose an activity (listen to up to four messages at a time or record) from an interactive voice recording menu. The messages are verified before being shared on the platform.

Choudhary said: "1,000-1,500 callers listen to recorded messages on the site every day; and 100-150 people call to record something."

CGNet Swara has been testing Bluetooth radio technology. People can record messages themselves or reach out to a trained citizen journalist in their locality. The message is verified, and compiled for a "radio show" typically hosted by two anchors. The programmes can then be downloaded from a village panchayat office with a broadband connection and shared with others using Bluetooth, for free.

The weaknesses of Bluetooth radio, according to Choudhary, are: you need someone with access to the Internet nearby; and it is a top-down approach where information flows one way compared with the mobile phone which enabled two-way communication.

But Choudhary is optimistic about the Bluetooth radio technology. "Under the Digital India campaign, optical fibre cables are being laid at the village level. That is the difference between 2010 and 2016," he said, adding, "Bluetooth radio couldn't have worked then. Now, we have Internet in a village 15km outside Mandla city in Madhya Pradesh."

A second idea CGNet Swara is trying out is starting an institute of rural journalism and reaching out to rural entrepreneurs to support CGNet Swara.

"We are starting a college of skill development called the Indian Institute of Rural Journalism and Entrepreneurship. We want to see if rural entrepreneurs can support our bottom-up, democratic journalism," said Choudhary.

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