

## SESSION VII: Technology, transformation and tipping points – Case studies of non-linear change

*This session demonstrated how progressive community based change can be effected through technologies. Panelists shared experiences and perspectives elaborating how the nature of technology-induced change presents itself, and what could be the key 'tipping points'.*

*Presenters:*

*Jessica Colaco, Research Lead at iHub Research, iHub, Kenya  
Meghana Rao, Manager - Communications, Breakthrough, India*

*Chair: Chandrika Sepali Kottegoda, Director, Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka*

ψψψ

---

### Jessica Colaco - Research Lead at iHub Research, iHub, Kenya

---

Jessica began by saying that her objective was to give a concrete example of how technology has impacted a community. She began by examining *Ushahidi*. *Ushahidi* emerged as a physical and virtual space at a time when Nairobi was plagued by riots. The community of technologists and the community of bloggers who were involved in *Ushahidi* thought they should create a platform that provides information to riot victims and simultaneously helps people reach out to each other in terms of providing food, water and aid. Bloggers were on the ground transmitting information about what was happening.

One of the co-founders of *Ushahidi* actually said, "Why should we not do a mash-up on a map and disseminate information over the web and mobiles, in order to show people around the world and around the country what is happening in Kenya?" Consequently, volunteer developers built the platform that became *Ushahidi*, after the co-founders came together and reached out to the developer community. *Ushahidi* means 'Witness' in Swahili, and this platform has become a witness to events.

When we look back to what has happened, the 'tipping point' was how the technology evolved in that particular situation, and how we responded to that situation. Over the last three years, *Ushahidi* has evolved and has been used in very different situations ranging from war reporting, crisis monitoring and media monitoring.

What does *Ushahidi* actually do? It provides community members the tools to recount their

stories and with these multiple snippets, we can construct stories of communities.

There is also available - supporting technology such as search engines that can be run on *Ushahidi* for throwing up relevant results. Through *Ushahidi*, 'invited spaces' are being created for more and more people to participate.

That is the story of *Ushahidi*. As one of the co-founders (Eric Hersman) says, "Technology exists. But it is how people decide to use the platform that makes a difference". In 2009-10, technological infrastructure was on the rise and the technology communities were very capable. *Ushahidi*, in this climate, got funding to create a physical space called iHub where developers and technologists could come together and innovate, addressing questions of how the new developers in Nairobi could help transform the lives of people - such as the farming communities.



Jessica Colaco

Jessica related two such stories of support that were made possible through iHub. One was the story of AkiraChix - a venture which supported the technical training of women in the slums of Nairobi - 30 women who underwent the training are now working in start-ups. The other story is a start-up by some of the members involved in a training venture in the agricultural sector. They got together and identified the gap in the agricultural sector as far as price information for farmers was concerned. Not having information really limited the existing marketing opportunities available to farmers. So they started thinking and built an SMS based

technology to enable farmers to find out the prices of agricultural commodities across the various markets. Crowdsourcing is used to gather this information. Farmers use this platform today. There are many such stories from the iHub and she stressed on the key points below:

1. Virtual and physical spaces are co-constituted and have a cyclic relationship.
2. Another initiative that emerged from *Ushahidi* is '*Huduma*' (which means 'ask for help'). This platform addresses six key areas from health to education to gender to infrastructure in order to improve their constituencies. For example, if a road is pot-holed, one can report to the MP. So it is a platform which supports the enforcement of governmental accountability and give people a 'voice'.

These she said were a few examples of how the virtual space created by technology is capable of bringing about social change.

---

### **Meghana Rao – Manager, Communications, Breakthrough, India**

---

Meghana began her presentation by playing a clip from Breakthrough's '*Bell Bajao*' (Ring the bell) campaign. The clip urged women and men to take a stand against domestic violence and not be quiet bystanders. The video focused on the small actions taken by communities to challenge domestic violence in their communities, and on Breakthrough's trainings that focussed on challenging the popular perception that domestic violence is a 'myth'.

Meghana, then spoke about how the media could be used in the non-profit sector. Breakthrough's mission is to use media in the non-profit sector to challenge violence against women, by building partnerships with governmental and non-profit sector organisations, and work in Karnataka, Delhi and UP. One of their key partners is Vimochana.

As the clip played demonstrated, Public Service Ads (PSAs) constitute an important part of Breakthrough's media strategy. The other strategy used is going into communities and performing plays against violence. In UP, they have used 'puppet theatre', and in Karnataka, they have use '*Yaksha Gana*'. The media is

carefully selected fitting into the existing folk traditions.

Media has been crucial to Breakthrough right from the beginning – as those familiar with '*Man Ke Manjeere*' would know. in fact '*Man Ke Manjeere*' is a video about choices a woman makes to transform her life positively, and emerges from an experience of violence, by taking her life into her hands. Breakthrough was trying to use a media strategy that was not reliant on mass media, from the outset. '*Bell Bajao*' is one of the more successful campaigns and has been adapted for use in the Chinese and Pakistani contexts. From Breakthrough's experience, media enables the creation of a cathartic moment that is important in discussing sensitive issues.



Meghana Rao

Coming to new media, Meghana said that they had been moderately successful in new media discussions on this issue. They conduct bloggers' meet to get young people to write about the issue. The challenge has been to get the content on the mainstream media.

She ended by showing another video on people's reflections on their attitudinal change to violence against women.

---

### **Discussion:**

Parminder observed that he found the extension of the idea of 'invited' spaces to the analysis of technological platforms - interesting. He asked Jessica to expand on her idea of the continuities between offline and online spaces, through this lens.

Jessica replied by saying that she felt that the continuity lies in trust-building with the communities they work with. Offline trust building goes a long way and there is need to take care to support this in the online platforms that are built. *Ushahidi* and iHub have managed to create community based and community run platforms, and develop a sense of community ownership.

Meghana responded to Crystal's question on partnering with mainstream media by sharing that Breakthrough has always found mainstream

media partnerships tough and challenging. It requires intense lobbying and a long wait, but they have managed to do this at Breakthrough, especially in terms of putting the PSAs on air.

Sarala mentioned that coming from an organisation that provides direct services to women, one recognises the importance of such campaigns but the issues remain complex. If a woman watches, and she is in an abusive, complicated marriage – what does she do next?

Phet commented on Jessica's presentation and said that Sri Lanka had a similar initiative called Sahana - the post-tsunami work conducted was similar to *Ushahidi*. They were successful after the Tsunami but where are they now? There may be some lessons one can learn from that experience. Also, regarding crowdsourcing – how do we ensure ethical practice? Reliability? These are difficult questions to think about.

Gayatri felt a crucial question to ask was - who are the people benefiting from this technology? In *Sahayog*, FAT started a project where they could use the *Ushahidi* platform to help women

record their stories of corruption but then they found that there was no way to reach them through the Internet and it was only possible through phones. This started them thinking about the limitations involved.

Shakun responded to Sarala by saying that from their experience partnering with Breakthrough, they found that men acting in the community plays against domestic violence has a huge impact. A question she brought up was - why has ham technology not seen the response digital has?

Srilatha asked Meghana if Breakthrough had studies that demonstrate the impact of their campaign on behaviour? On whether women are more likely to access the protection of the law after campaigns.

Meghana responded by saying that there exist progressive anti-domestic violence law but there is need to work on the implementation. Even if there is a change of 2-3 percent in women accessing the law, it is an impact.