



# REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL ACTORS IN THE PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM PROCESS

- A CASE FROM INDIA

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## Abstract

Recent decades have seen the emergence of participatory journalism - as a movement within and as an alternative to traditional, mainstream media. Largely fuelled by the widespread use of internet technology and social media, this shift is touted to have blurred the traditional roles and boundaries in the journalistic process. The aim of this research paper is to critically examine the representations of roles and relations between social actors in the organised participatory journalism process. Applying a lens of identity theories, we use publicly available data from a single case to draw an interpretation. The findings show that traditional identities and social differences are perpetuated in representations of the actors as they occupy complementary roles, form separate identity categories and partake in hierarchical relations. The findings bring out aspects of inclusion and exclusion, complementary roles, power differences, asymmetrical relations, and exchange of social and material resources.

Keywords: participatory journalism, power relations, roles, exclusion, identity

## 1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen the emergence of participatory journalism - as a movement within as well as an alternative to traditional, mainstream media. This movement has been largely fuelled by the widespread use of communication technology and internet-based social media.

The terms participatory and citizen journalism are sometimes used interchangeably and do not have definitive boundaries. They have been defined as a '*range of web-based practices whereby ordinary users engage in journalistic practices*' [Goode 2009,

p. 1288] and include the evolving spectrum of user contributions to news content [Allan and Thorsen 2009]. Broadly, they refer to initiatives by ordinary citizens in producing, sharing and consuming news.

New forms of technology have led to these new ways of practising journalism and producing content. By providing alternatives to and contesting dominant news flows, this shift is supposed to have blurred the traditional roles and boundaries in the journalistic process. Participatory journalism has also been posited to negate the 'gate-keeping' role played traditionally by journalists, through control and influence over what is presented as 'news' [Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa 2010]. Thus, it is claimed to be changing the power dynamics between 'producers' and 'consumers' of news.

Mainstream media have also gradually opened their 'gates' to this new form of journalism. A number of not-for-profit and alternative media organisations have emerged which aim to channelise this movement for community development [Sonwalkar 2009]. Such 'organised' players may provide resources, technology platforms and/or access to communication media, which enables citizens to express their stories, or communicate on pertinent issues.

Thus, participatory journalism has been represented in media and society in largely positive terms - as enabling and empowering citizens to contribute to news discourse and participate in journalistic practices. This form of journalism is enabled by ICTs which, according to Shirky, allow ordinary citizens to use relatively inexpensive modes of documentation and transmission to define and create 'news' from stories they find important or interesting [Shirky 2008]. These changes in the pattern of journalistic process, as well as the norms and values governing it are largely represented as agents of social change [Goode 2009]. However, not much attention has been paid to the identities of the actors involved in this process, and the implications of these identities.

The aim of this research paper is to critically examine the representation of social actors in the participatory journalism process, with a focus on their roles, relations and identities. The motivation for this study is to examine whether such representations perpetuate prevalent hierarchies and distortions for the actors involved in this process.

How do actors assign and accept certain 'roles' and how do these roles relate to their personal identities? Who are 'included' and who are 'excluded'? What is the nature of power relations between the actors, and what are the implications of these relations? What social, psychological and material aspects define the terms of their mutual participation in this process?

Here, we make a distinction between organised participatory journalism, structured through formal organisation, programmes, and processes; and unorganised user-driven content, for instance - through blogs or the social media [Goode 2009]. Our focus here is on the former. A formal organisation is likely to have a specific set of actors and a well-defined 'context' which influences the behaviours of actors embedded within.

The objective here is not to bring out differences between mainstream and participatory journalism, or to evaluate the effectiveness of either. Inherent in our research objective is our focus on the 'representation' of the social actors; how these influence and are influenced by their identities [Breakwell 1986]. We are not examining the actors' experiences or their perceptions of their roles, relations, or identities; but reading how these are represented in the media and public domain.

The research aims are informed by critical theory, which recognises the historicity of actors, their embeddedness within social structures, distortion, and conflict in society, and the potential for social change, as reflected in IS research [Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991; Ngwenyama and Lee 1997].

We approach the data with an identity theory lens, integrating key theoretical perspectives on identity structures and processes. As participatory journalism harnesses communication technologies for social development, the study also falls broadly under Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for development research. Identity perspectives have been seldom used to examine issues in ICT for development, with a few notable exceptions (such as [Bailey and Ngwenyama 2010; Heeks 2010]).

This study is based on a single case of an organisation working in the citizen journalism space in India. Citizen journalism is a more recent phenomenon in India. Overall a media-rich nation, India is characterised by a co-existence of broadly three sections of society: globalised, developing, and extremely poor [Sonwalkar 2009]. There are large-scale social inequalities based on gender, religion, caste, and region. In the context of citizen journalism, increased citizen participation is uneven; on account of differences in information connectivity, skill and initiative. Only the “globalised” citizens enjoy access to infrastructure needed for citizen journalism - such as media channels, technology, and internet-based social media. In the Indian context, citizen journalism behaviour is also constrained by birth into a particular caste or community, geographical location, social standing, education and language skills [Thomas 2011]. The Indian situation, thus, provides an interesting context for the study.

The case selected for study is Video Volunteers, which describes itself as a community media organisation and operates the India Unheard programme in the backward regions of India. Under this programme, citizen journalists are selected from local communities and trained in video-journalism skills. They in turn produce video content based on local issues and stories - these videos are then shared publicly through various channels (including the Video Volunteers website located at [videovolunteers.org](http://videovolunteers.org)). After about a decade of activities, Video Volunteers has trained over 300 community citizen journalists who are located in over 1000 villages across India. The volunteers screen their films in local communities and also share them with mainstream media for broadcast. The society claims that in the last two years over half of its content has been used by mainstream media.

*Data generation* for this study was from information available in the public domain - mainly the organisation’s website and coverage of the organisation’s activities in print and other media. Such content can be viewed as ‘social representation’ of the organisation and its work, generated purposefully by the organisation, for communication with the external world [Moscovici 2000]. It is the medium through which the organisation represents itself ‘symbolically’ to the larger society [Hirschheim and Newman 1991]. Our focus was on the organisation’s representations of social actors in this process.

The analysis is based on an appreciation of both context and process, with an institutional (sociological) as well as an individual (psychological) focus. Qualitative textual analysis was used to develop themes, and then group these themes into broader categories. The findings bring out aspects of inclusion and exclusion, complementary roles, power differences, asymmetrical relations, and exchange of social and material resources.

The flow of this paper is as follows. In the first section, we discuss Critical research philosophy which informs the aims of this study, and our role and position as researchers. Then, we briefly outline the methods followed for data generation and interpretation. This is followed by a discussion of theoretical perspectives adopted. Then, we present a detailed discussion of the themes, based on the interpretation and analysis. Finally, we provide concluding remarks and point to future research possibilities leading from this work.

## 2. Research Approach

In this section, we discuss our research philosophy, explicate the role of the researcher, and outline the methods followed in generating and analysing the data.

### 2.1 Critical Research Philosophy

We approach this study with a Critical research lens. In Critical social theory, social reality is seen as historically constituted and constructed by human actors, who attach meaning to this reality. There is always a potential for reconstruction of this reality and change in social conditions. This potential is however constrained by various forms of authority and domination - economic, social, political, and cultural [Habermas 1979].

*Critical social theory* emphasises the embeddedness of 'social actors' in their 'context'. This 'context' comprises the organisational as well as the larger socio-cultural context. The society and organisation give meaning to the actors' roles, relationships, and actions, and also define the power, authority, and status relationships between them. The context is defined by not just the present state but also the history of the social institutions. However, the actors also have the volition to accept, reject, or modify these norms. They can exercise their 'constrained' will to make choices and take actions which in turn shape the 'context' [Ngwenyama and Lee 1997].

In this study, we adopt this philosophy to recognise how the historicity and context of social actors, their socio-economic position, and their personal and social identities shape their roles and relations in the participatory journalism process. When citizen journalism is 'organised' under an entity with control mechanisms and resources, do the traditional power structures remain or does the participatory process reduce these differences and provide 'voice' to all actors? With reference to the framework for critical methodology proposed by Habermas [1968], our knowledge interest in this case is both '*practical*' and '*emancipatory*' i.e. the goal is to better understand social behaviour and relations, as well as critically reflect upon social distortions and power differences.

### 2.2. Role of the Researcher

The critical researcher is inherently implicated in the objectives of the research. The researcher does not claim to be neutral - there is a definite value position and a goal of emancipation and social improvement. Conflict is seen as inherent to social systems - the research attempts to reveal these conflicts, contradictions, and distortions; and to identify and critique unjust or inequitable conditions with the goal of emancipation of social actors [Ngwenyama and Lee 1997].

Various forms of domination and alienation are sometimes so deep-rooted that the social actors, constrained by their history, context, or beliefs, may not even be conscious of their existence. Hence the role of a critical researcher goes beyond understanding or interpreting the actor's sense-making of his or her life-world [Ngwenyama 1991]. The aim is to uncover hidden conflicts and distortions which are typically not accessible through 'accounts' of participants who may be unable to perceive or describe these circumstances. It therefore involves a more active engagement with the data, and going beyond the statements and representations of the actors to draw critical inferences [Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991].

These interpretations are inevitably guided by the researcher's own background, values, and position, and by the theoretical framework guiding the study. As

researchers, we are aware that our identities as urban, educated Indians and our respective professional backgrounds influence our research aims, how we see the data, and what we see in the data [Mason 2002].

Also, while we may comment on power differences in social relations, we are aware of our own membership in the 'affluent' class of society, which may limit our empathetic understanding of issues and concerns of the less privileged.

Also, we do not comment on the overall impact of citizen journalism or of this particular organisation (positive or negative), but recognise the complexity of developmental processes and the longitudinal nature of their impact. The aim of this paper is therefore not to evaluate the outcomes of participatory journalism; we focus on the representations of the process and the participants.

### 2.3. Methods

This study is based on a *single case* of an organisation working in the citizen journalism space in India - 'Video Volunteers'. The organisation runs a programme called the 'India Unheard' through which it selects citizen journalists from local communities, trains them in video-based media production and provides systematic exposure to their work through the world-wide web and through partnership with other organisations and media channels. The interpretation is focussed on representation of the actors associated with this organisation and its programme.

Our *data generation* was through secondary sources i.e. text related to the organisation and its programme published on the organisation's website and in media releases. The material chosen as *data* are representations produced by the organisation as a group, and the medium through which it represents itself 'symbolically' to the larger world [Hirschheim and Newman 1991]. We chose not to interview the actors in the case study as our focus is on representations of actors involved in participatory journalism, with an emphasis on how their roles, relations, and identities are represented in the public domain. As explained above, hidden conflicts and distortions are not accessible through participant accounts.

The inquiry was focussed on '*organisational structures and processes, social relations, and symbolic interactions between the actors*' [Ngwenyama and Lee 1997]. Content relevant to the research aims was identified, pertaining to the organisation's mission and plans, the actors involved, details of the citizen journalism programme India Unheard, process of recruiting and training citizen journalists, profiles and work of citizen journalists, and awards and recognition (refer to Appendix for specific sources).

The interpretation is based on qualitative textual analysis of the articles/content identified. Our first step was a general search for material about Video Volunteers from the website contents and links provided therein. Based on an initial reading, and note-taking, we first formed our interpretation of the organisation, the processes, and the key actors. Then, we identified specific articles and website content for a more focussed textual analysis. The principles of '*contextuality*' and '*suspicion*' were followed while conducting the analysis, in the tradition of hermeneutic case research [Klein and Myers 1999].

Then, we developed our analysis around the roles and relations of the key actors. The process began with reading and detailed notes. Noting was in the form of free textual analysis and included descriptive as well as conceptual comments on the data. Further notes and comments were added with each subsequent reading. Then, the initial notes were transformed into themes by focussing on discrete chunks of text. The themes aim to capture the essential quality of what is found in the text.

These emergent themes were then examined for patterns and connections, keeping in mind the research question. Similar themes were grouped together to form a cluster, defined by a higher-level 'super-ordinate theme'. These themes are elaborated in section 6 on Interpretation and Analysis. Finally, the super-ordinate themes were moved to a higher level of abstraction invoking more psychological and conceptual terminology (from identity theory) to arrive at the process framework proposed in section 7. In doing this, we examined the choice of language and metaphors as symbols [Hirschheim and Newman 1991]. Our lens was informed by theoretical perspectives elaborated in the following section, to explore actors' identity issues.

In the findings, we aim for theoretical rather than empirical generalisation [Walsham 1995]. The purpose is to provide insights based on our interpretation of a single case, and use these to draw conclusions about the likely internal distortions within a 'participative' process.

### 3. Theoretical Perspectives

We draw upon identity theory perspectives as a theoretical framework to conduct the analysis. There are several conceptualisations of 'identity' in sociology and social psychology. Three major ways in which identity is theorised are: *social identity theory*, which emphasises identification with social groups and categories [Tajfel and Turner 1985]; *identity theory* [Stryker 1968], which emphasises identification with social roles and positions; and *identity process theory* [Breakwell 1986], which examines construction and maintenance of identities over time.

#### 3.1. Social Identity Theory

According to the *social identity perspective* [Hogg 2000], individuals categorise themselves (and others) as members of social groups and have multiple identities based on their identification with each of these groups. An individual's 'social identity' is therefore a sum total of identifications with categories such as gender, ethnicity, race, and occupation, varying in terms of salience to the self [Tajfel 1982]. Salience of a social identity depends upon separateness, clarity, and distinctiveness of the social group [Tajfel and Turner 1985].

The two important processes involved in social identity formation are: *self-categorisation* and *social comparison*. The former leads to increase in perceived similarity between oneself and in-group members, and perceived differences between oneself and out-group members. The latter process is geared towards self-enhancing outcomes, by focussing on dimensions which result in positive evaluation of in-group [Hogg and Abrams 1990; Hogg 2000]. The basic need for positive self-esteem will induce individuals to favour their in-groups in most comparisons with out-groups. Overall, such social categorisation results in salient group boundaries, which limits communication and social integration and fosters conflict among groups [Abrams and Hogg 2004].

A person's identification with a social group can have important consequences for behaviour, such as: commitment and loyalty to the group, attraction to its members, conformity to the group norms, engagement in activities congruent with social identity, reinforcement of the group's values and practices, and the tendency to attribute prototypical characteristics of the group to oneself. This is a consequence of *depersonalisation* i.e. seeing oneself as an in-group prototype rather than a unique individual [Abrams and Hogg 2004]. It has been found that even when membership is of a low status group, if identification is strong, the individual participates actively in

group culture and distinguishes one's own group from out-groups [Stets and Burke 2000].

### 3.2. Identity Theory

According to *Identity theory*, identities are parts of the individual 'self' and are composed of meanings that people attach to the multiple roles they play in highly differentiated contemporary societies. Social roles are characterised by pre-determined, socially structured responsibilities, and the behaviours appropriate to such roles are culturally determined. The 'self' is seen as a hierarchical collection of identities, based on occupying different social roles [Stryker 1968].

The extent of identification with each role can vary across individuals. The underlying cognitive process is *self-verification* i.e. seeing oneself in terms of the role. These role identities influence behaviour as each role has a set of associated pre-structured meanings, expectations, and behaviour standards related to occupying a position in society [Stryker and Burke 2000].

This theory posits that people devote considerable time and energy to constructing and maintaining their identities, by engaging in 'self-identifying' behaviours and activities, especially for valued roles and identities [Burke 1991]. As a result, the person behaves in accordance with the *identity standards* associated with the role.

The role is given meaning through *counter-roles*, complementary but dissimilar - such as student-teacher or employer-employee. *Role expectations* are defined and mutually negotiated with these counter-roles [Stets and Burke 2003].

### 3.3. Identity Process Theory

The *Identity process theory* [Breakwell 1986] builds on the social identity perspective to explore how an individual constructs and maintains identity over time. This is achieved through complementary psychological processes whereby new information (such as people, events, and ideas) is accommodated within the identity structure; and meaning and value is conferred upon the identity contents.

These processes are also guided by certain motivational principles, such as individuals' desire for continuity and distinctiveness in identity, self-efficacy and self-esteem, sense of belonging, meaning, and overall psychological coherence [Vignoles et al. 2006].

Though the individual has agency in identity construction, these processes are subject to societal constraints and are influenced by dominant social representations [Breakwell 1993].

### 3.4. Social Representations

*Social representations* are cognitive structures which facilitate communication between members of a collective as a result of their shared or consensual form. For the individual, they give meaning to new experiences, people, and events by setting them in a familiar contextual frame [Moscovici 1988; 1998].

A group (or multiple groups) may be the producers and/or the objects of a particular representation. The form of such representations will then serve group objectives including engendering a sense of group identity and defining the boundaries of such identity. Intergroup power differentials have an important impact upon the development of social representations, and their acceptance in larger society [Moscovici 2000]. The relationship between social identity and social representation is thus dialectical - their influences on each other are reciprocal [Breakwell 1993].

### 3.5. Integrating the Theories

Researchers, such as Hogg, Terry, and White [1995], and Stets and Burke [2000], have discussed linkages between identity and social identity perspectives, to establish a more integrated view of 'self'. Both perspectives have meta-theoretical similarities as they emphasise the socially constructed self, linking individual behaviour and identity structure with social structure [Burke 2004]. The main differences between the two, other than their disciplinary roots, are the bases of identity - social categories and social roles i.e. who one is and what one does [Hogg, Terry and White 1995].

In a complex society, an individual simultaneously belongs to multiple groups and occupies multiple roles. In an organisation, an actor's identity may be linked to a role, as mutually negotiated with counter-roles, as well as to membership of a group, defined through prototypical features of group members. Combining these two lenses to examine the self can provide us with a more general theory of the self [Stets and Burke 2000].

The three identity perspectives discussed here have much (unexplored) potential for integration. In this study, we draw upon all three identity perspectives in interpreting (i) how role-based and category-based identities interact; (ii) the process and flow of such interaction; (iii) how actors' identities influence each other and how existing identities influence new anchors, identities, and representations.

We see this theoretical framework as compatible with our critical lens, as identity theories are, in essence, a theory of social understanding and change [Hornsey 2008]. They explicate the constraints on actors' behaviour and choices, on account of their position in the social hierarchy and dominant social influence processes.

*Social Identity theory* was the first social-psychological theory to acknowledge that groups occupy different levels in a hierarchy of status and power. It also emphasises that intergroup behaviour and possibilities for change, especially for low-status groups, depend on people's ability to be critical of and to see alternatives to the status quo [Hornsey 2008]. *Identity Process theory* also recognises that identity is created within a particular social context and located within a specific historical period, and that changes in the structure or processes of the social context will call forth changes in identity [Breakwell 2010].

### 3.6. ICT for Development

The case subject of this study is an organisation that deploys communication technologies for social development, and thus the study also falls under the broad rubric of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for development research. This domain of research has examined issues of how ICTs are introduced and diffused in different societies, how they are modified and absorbed, and how they enable transformation in political, economic, and social spheres [Avgerou 2008].

This research has also considered, to a limited extent, the issues of identities and roles of the groups of participants in various ICT deployment situations. Of note are research that has considered caste and ethnic identities in shaping how technologies are absorbed and shaped for use [Sreekumar 2008; De' 2009]; and how the exogenously defined identities are negotiated, or normatively need to be negotiated, for effective development [Heeks 2010]. The pertinent issues of how identities interact and how they influence each other are, however, not considered in this literature and remain a gap.

There is a gap in the literature of ICT for development regarding the role and influence of identities in the effectiveness of ICT deployment. We address this gap in this paper. We use the framework of identity theory (based on a synthesis of the three theoretical perspectives on identity discussed above) to examine a participatory



developmental process that relies on information technology. We conclude that identity theory provides a valuable framework for the analysis of actors' roles and relations, and issues of internal hierarchies and exclusion in ICT for development projects.

## 4. Interpretation and Findings

The key actors in the organised participatory journalism process, in this case, include the organisation's founder and trustees, team of employees, citizen journalists (referred to in the organisation's vocabulary as 'community correspondents'), media and social sector partners, and the larger media audiences and communities.

The participatory journalism process as represented in the media can be seen as generated by groups of actors involved in the process. This is also true of representations of a specific organisation or programme, such as Video Volunteers. Such representations are bound to be impacted by groups' identity, functions, historicity, and power differences [Moscovici 2000; Breakwell 1993].

In our analysis, we have focussed on the representation of two sets of actors - the founder and employees, and the community correspondents. The social and organisational context defines the possibilities of action for these human 'actors' - it can either enable or constrain the actors' behaviours. In this case, the context includes the organisation's policies, processes, norms, and resources; as well as social structures, institutions, practices, and values [Ngwenyama and Lee 1997].

The analysis is organised under three broad thematic categories - *Actors: Roles and Identities*, *Status & Power Relations*, and *Terms of the Exchange*. Each of these categories comprises descriptive themes. The discussion is supported by quoting relevant parts of the data, and by bringing in relevant concepts from theory.

### 4.1. Actors: Roles and Identities

Actors' identities can be based in groups as well as roles. An individual can identify self through membership in a category, where all members are seen as having similar characteristics and attitudes as well as through occupation of a distinct role, the meaning of which is negotiated with counter-roles [Stets and Burke 2000].

#### 4.1.1. *The Organisation and the Community*

There appear to be two distinct groups or categories which define the identities of actors involved in this case: the 'organisation' and the 'communities' it works with.

In the organisational representations, the former group includes the founder, trustees, staff specialising in media, training, administration, and other functions, and even student interns. The 'Team' section of Video Volunteers' website includes this 'organisation' group; it excludes the citizen journalists who perform the core work of media production.

*'Click here to read more about our staff, board of directors, ambassadors, as well as interns and volunteers. The team at Video Volunteers all share the same vision to empower the world's poorest citizens to become players in the global media revolution'.* (Description of Team on the website)

The personal identities of the founder and employees - their motivations and objectives - seem to be intimately linked with that of the organisation i.e. the organisational purpose and identity. These individuals make major decisions on the programme, represent it to the outside world, and maintain its external networks. Majority of content in the public domain which describes the purpose, functioning, and impact of the organisation is authored by members of this group i.e. it is the dominant producer of 'organisational' representations. Note the usage of words 'we' and 'Video

Volunteers' to refer to ideas of and actions taken by this group; and references to the correspondents in the third person.

*'In India, we have created the largest, most diverse network of salaried Community Producers in the world'.* (Description of India Unheard programme)

To meet its objectives in the 'participatory journalism' process, this 'organisation' seeks to work in and for certain local communities. The founders/ administrators select some members of this community to play the role of 'community correspondents'. These individuals are identified with the communities they are drawn from. The organisation group (founders, staff, and interns) are described as the 'team' and the citizen journalists are referred to as the 'network' or 'our network' of community correspondents.

From the organisation's perspective, the identities of these correspondents are linked to these communities, and are distinct from those of the organisation or its founders.

*'We collaborate with disadvantaged communities to develop journalistic, critical thinking and creative skills. They in turn use these skills to articulate their solutions....'* (Mission statement)

A few ex-community correspondents have been provided 'staff' positions and included in the organisational group; however as a whole, they form a separate category in the organisational representations.

#### 4.1.2. *The Benefactors & Beneficiaries*

Roles are usually defined in relation to, and given meaning through, the presence of complementary counter-roles [Burke 1991]. Actors then incorporate the 'identity standards' associated with their roles into their self-definition. The actors identifying with the social groups 'organisation' and 'community' seem to be playing distinct, mutually complementary roles in the representation of participatory journalism process: that of the 'benefactors' and the 'beneficiaries'.

The organisation represents itself as aiming to help the 'backward' communities through different means - media skills and training, financial resources, and a 'voice'.

*'But, Jessica Mayberry and her team of Video Volunteers have done just that — they armed locals with a video camera and made journalists out of day labourers, rickshaw drivers, and women from an India Unheard'.* (Newspaper article, <http://www.videovolunteers.org/media/print-articles/>)

The objectives and mission of the organisation are described through frequent usage of words such as 'providing', 'teaching', 'empowering', 'enabling', and 'offering', suggesting a relationship where one party gives and the other receives. It is implied that the organisational group has the necessary resources, skills, and know-how and is in a position to 'help' the other, less advantaged group representing the community.

*'Video Volunteers has initiated and sustained a global community media movement, which has empowered people by giving them a voice, training them to use it, and enabled them to take action towards social change'.* (Section on 'Our Impact' on website)

The representations also depict the correspondents then helping or impacting their local communities, enabled to do so by the skills and opportunities provided by the organisation. The communities are therefore the ultimate beneficiaries, and the organisational impact on them is achieved through 'empowering' the correspondents.

#### 4.1.3. *The Mainstream, Alternate, and Unheard*

The actors are also represented by their position in the larger social context, and in relation to other important actors in the journalism process i.e. the audiences and other media organisations. Again, there is a process of categorisation, where groups are defined by attributes, in relation to and in opposition to each other i.e. one is defined by what the other is not [Tajfel 1982].

The discourse on 'participatory journalism' has frequent references to mainstream and alternate media - the former referring to traditional media channels such as television and print; and the latter referring to newer community-oriented or social-networking media. Alternate media builds on new opportunities provided by development of ICTs and their application towards the 'democratisation' of media [Shirky 2008; Goode 2009]. It is understood that the former enjoys access to a wider audience, globally.

In the organisation's representations, the so-called backward communities and correspondents are often referred to as the 'unheard', signifying an absence of voice in the traditional, mainstream media. These are the sections of society referred to as the 'poorest of poor' in Sonwalkar's [2009] analysis of media access in India. The programme is itself referred to as the 'India Unheard' initiative.

*'This new initiative is constituted of a network of Community Correspondents who are trained to tell unique stories about their own communities; stories which have until now been left untold.'* (Description of India Unheard)

Video Volunteers describes itself as a 'community media organisation', thus representing itself as a pioneer of the alternate process - whereby it gives an opportunity for the 'unheard' to voice their local issues and concerns. It accomplishes this by forming partnerships and alliances with mainstream media and other alternate media participants, including international organisations. Video Volunteers seeks to ensure that these 'unheard' voices are heard by the 'mainstream', i.e. globalised audience [Sonwalkar 2009] who would otherwise not have an access to these 'stories'.

*'By feeding this community-produced content to national and international outlets, such as mainstream television channels and social networking sites, India Unheard links rural communities with a truly global audience...'*

*'Video Volunteers offers the global audience a clear window into the real India...'* (Description of 'The Model' of India Unheard)

It appears that this 'mainstream' is described in opposition to the 'unheard'. The latter are again described through vocabulary such as *backward, remote, rural*; the mainstream is identified as *developed, technology-savvy, social media-savvy, and elite*. Thus the 'alternate', *community-oriented, activist, socially conscious*, can be viewed as playing the role of a mediator between the mainstream and unheard, bridging the so-called gap between the two and providing them access to one another.

#### 4.2. Status & Power Relations

The dialectical relationship between social structures and social identities makes these identities rigid and resistant to change [Breakwell 2001]. In this theme, we discuss the relations between the actors in the representation of the participatory journalism process with a focus on status and power.

We explore how the social status differences and pre-existing (or traditional) identities of the actors continue into the representation of complementary roles, and translate into asymmetry in their relations in the internal organisation and process. This hierarchy of roles and relations then enters the organisational representations, on account of power differential between the actors.

#### 4.2.1. *Background and Social Status*

The founders and staff (representing the organisation) and the correspondents (representing the community) come from significantly different socio-economic strata and therefore enjoy very different social status. Thus, they historically identify with different social categories occupying unequal positions in social hierarchy [Tajfel 1982]. I refer to these identities, based on the social structure they were born into, as ‘traditional identities’.

The organisation describes itself as an ‘*international medial organisation*’. The founder and board of trustees belong to the western world (majority from the U.S.), and have professional experience and accomplishments in renowned international organisations in the media or social sector. The employees are Indians - mostly urban, highly educated with degrees in media or social work from well-known institutions, and from relatively affluent socio-economic backgrounds. Their education and past experience has seen them in similar ‘helping’ roles in the social sector.

*‘Nature lover and adventure junkie by nature and a social worker by profession, T has always had a keen interest in issues relating to social justice. Originally from Coorg and brought up in Bangalore, she completed her MA in Social Work from TISS, Mumbai in 2008 with a focus on Criminology and Correctional Justice. She has worked with Prerana in Mumbai and Biocon Foundation in Bangalore’.* (Staff profile on website)

On the other hand, the correspondents drawn from the communities to be served are typically from an ‘underprivileged’ background - with respect to caste, class, and/or gender, and belong to rural, less developed regions of the country.

*‘These Community Correspondents represent India’s most marginalized perspectives, including women, Dalits, tribals, religious, linguistic and sexual minorities’.* (Description of the Model of India Unheard)

This perception of ‘low status’ is reflected in the frequent usage of words such as ‘backward’, ‘under-privileged’, ‘marginalised’, etc. while referring to the correspondents, and the communities they are drawn from. The organisational process of selecting such correspondents and the selection criteria are geared towards identifying individuals who reflect this ‘backward’ status. Even where a previous community correspondent has been now selected into employment positions, these references are evident.

*‘S was a Community Correspondent from Cuttack District before she became the Odisha co-ordinator for India Unheard. Born in a village where there are no schools that teach past the seventh grade, she had to struggle and persevere to get educated’.* (Staff profile on website)

Overall, the organisational representations of these actors continue to focus on characteristics of their traditional identities, including status (backward or minority), previous education and experience, and past roles.

#### 4.2.2. *Hierarchical Relations*

The socio-economic background and social status of the ‘organisation’ enables it to enjoy access to resources - both financial and knowledge, social legitimacy, and participation in high-status networks.

*‘J is a TED Fellow and a Fellow of Echoing Green, an organization that invests in social entrepreneurs with high-impact solutions. In 2009 she was recognized as an Architect of the Future by the Waldzell Institute of Austria, and in 2010, as an Outstanding Young Person by the Junior Chamber International Osaka. In 2011, she*

*was one of the top fifty people shortlisted for the Grinnell College Young Innovator for Social Justice Prize, out of over 1000 applicants from 66 countries'. (Staff profile on website)*

The community correspondents are selected from a pool of individuals with limited means, low socio-economic status, and often oppressive histories. Even where such individuals were previously involved in social activism within their local communities, they lacked the visibility or resources to have a major impact.

*'One of the CCs is a transgender. He was born a female but knew he identified as a man. During his childhood, he was so abused at home that he tried to commit suicide many times. I also met amazing women who championed women's rights even after years of severe domestic violence. There was this particular Muslim woman who told us that this training was the first time in her entire life that she had not been forced to wear her hijab'. (Article on working with community media <http://www.videovolunteers.org/working-with-community-media/>)*

There appears to be an underlying hierarchy in the structure of relations between the actors - between roles of 'benefactors' vis-a-vis the 'beneficiaries', and between the 'mainstream', 'alternate', and 'unheard'. This is also represented in writing by interns/volunteers who had brief associations with the organisation.

*'Before coming to India, I read books about cultures and traditions in India. Most of the time, they just described the Indian culture as very traditional and patriarchal. I knew that the people from VV would be very open-minded and different from what was stated in the book. What I did not realise was that their passion for their work, their ideas and ways of seeing the world and just the way they are would be so innovative and would give so much hope for a better future and change for poor and marginalised people'. (A Volunteer's account)*

Thus, the founders, employees, and citizen journalists seem to be unequal partners in the participatory journalism process. The inequality inherent in social structure is perpetuated in the internal organisation of the process, and in the representation of actors. Continuity and coherence are important motivational principles in identity maintenance processes i.e. individuals desire aspects of the self to remain consistent over time and seek the perception of compatibility and coherence between inter-connected identities [Breakwell 1993].

In this case, actors' pre-existing high-status and low-status social identities, and roles of 'helping' and 'oppressed', receive 'continuity' through the meaning of their new roles and groups under the organisation. The new organisational groups become social identity 'categories' and individual identities as organisational members are constructed around these categories.

#### 4.2.3. *Selection, Exclusion, and Gate-Keeping*

Since the 'organisation' has the control over and access to organisational resources, it controls the mandate of how and to whom they should be allotted. The geographical region to be covered, the local issues to be selected, and the desired profile of correspondents are defined by the organisation before a 'recruitment drive' within these regions to identify potential community correspondents.

The organisation recruits individuals into their network of 'community correspondents' based on a thorough selection process (application, group discussion, and interview) and well-defined selection criteria. The criteria focus on marginalised, economically backward, diverse, and geographically spread individuals with a demonstrated interest in social activism. These processes of selection - of people and

of issues - could mean exclusion of other people and other issues, and an operation of a top-down mandate by the higher-level employees in the form of 'strategy'.

*'After the fever of group discussions, the candidates are grilled one-on-one by VV staff. The candidates are mostly asked about their prior experience. Questions that remain unresolved at the group discussion are introduced. During the interview, the team clarifies and makes final notes on the candidates'.*

*'Our goal is to have one Community Correspondent in every district, i.e. 645, within the next five years. We're have around 130 total trained at the moment, and we are now growing state by state.... As we make the annual plan for the year, we decide which states we want to expand to'. (Refer to articles on 'Criteria for selecting CCs' and 'An Insider's View on Recruiting Community Correspondents')*

The selection of correspondents is followed by a residential training programme prior to commencing work in the field. The correspondents are trained to build media production skills as per the organisation's standards. One of the goals (posited) appears to be, to be on par with mainstream journalism and to produce content that is seen as worthy by globalised audiences. Further, based on their 'performance', a section of correspondents is included in the 'staff' positions which form the core team of the organisation.

*'The emphasis should be on how to get such stories to be a part of the mainstream media and to sharpen skills that ensure stories are newsworthy'. (Newspaper article hosted on <http://www.videovolunteers.org/media/print-articles/>)*

*'Top 10% CCs moved into leadership roles of mentoring and training, and trained to initiate their own projects'. (Annual Report 2013-14)*

One of the significant aspects of participatory journalism is negation of the gate-keeping role played traditionally by journalists in deciding which story becomes news and how. This 'democratic' process or movement is posited to shift the power balance in favour of ordinary citizens, and blur the boundaries between the journalist and audience [Lewis et al. 2010].

However, in this organised form, the gate-keeping function appears to exist subtly through control over who tells which stories, and how. The inherent inequality of actors in the internal organisation translates into processes that may be selective and exclusionary, and largely controlled by the founders. The organisation seeks to influence the skill and style of media production. While ensuring greater exposure to sections of society traditionally denied media exposure, the organisation still appears to function as a silent gatekeeper.

### 4.3. Terms of the Exchange

In this theme, we explore the representation of the social exchange relationship between the organisation and the community correspondents. These are represented in unequal terms and hint at 'need' on part of communities, and 'help' on part of the organisation. Implicit is the assumption that media access and skill is a rare and valuable resource, which the organisation 'owns' and extends as a means of empowerment and community change. What does it receive in exchange from the communities, the 'others'? We discuss actors' identity processes as the source of their motivation to participate in this process.

#### 4.3.1. Instrumental and Social Exchange

As discussed in previous sections, the representation of the relations between the 'organisation' and 'community' is asymmetrical, where the organisation extends benefits to, and empowers the community, through media access.

Viewed in instrumental terms, the organisation provides certain resources to the community correspondents, which benefit the larger community. These include financial resources in the form of paid employment, access to and visibility in mainstream media networks, and media-production and usage skills. It is these benefits that are largely emphasised in organisational representations about its work and impact.

*'Our international community media organization equips women and men in underdeveloped areas with video journalism skills, enabling entire communities to expose under-reported stories from their communities...'* (Section on 'What is Video Volunteers?')

*'Providing disadvantaged communities with the journalistic and creative skills they need, VV's models for locally-owned and managed media production teach people to articulate and share their perspectives on the issues that matter to them - on a local and a global scale.'* (Mission statement)

However, based on the social exchange perspective [Emerson 1976], partners will remain in a social relationship so long as they derive some benefit (economic, social, or psychological) from the exchange. However, it appears that the benefits that the organisation receives from the correspondents are not adequately represented in its discourse.

The organisation benefits from the correspondents' connection with the community, their understanding of local issues, and their effort and motivation to cover important issues which subsequently result into relevant media content. To fulfil its mission of helping backward communities through media, it needs participation and initiative from these community journalists who would be willing to work with the organisation on these issues.

*'We're interested in hyper local journalism. We want to work with people who will stay engaged in that community. We're also interested in having the videos reflect the diversity of the country. As compared to mainstream journalists we believe that a community correspondent's connection to their community is their greatest, most unique selling point.'* (Article on 'Criteria for selecting CCs')

This contribution of correspondents to the effective functioning and impact of the process is important, yet under-emphasised.

#### 4.3.2. *Identity and Self-Enhancement*

The exchange relationship between the founders and correspondents, and their motivation to participate in this process, can be viewed from the identity perspective as a source of self-enhancement for both sets of actors - as individuals and as a social group [Tajfel and Turner 1985]. Individuals seek an identity that is unique and positively distinctive from others, feelings of competence and control, perceptions of personal or social worth, feelings of closeness to and acceptance from others, and a sense of significance and purpose in one's life [Vignoles et al. 2006]. When these principles are not met, the individual experiences an 'identity threat' [Breakwell 2001].

For the citizen journalists, it appears that identifying oneself as a 'community correspondent' is a means for building or recovering their personal identity, negated or marginalised by their socio-economic status and previous experiences. The correspondent profiles and stories are characterised by personal experiences of discrimination and oppression on account of their caste, gender, or social position. In fact individuals from such backgrounds are selected into, and perhaps also self select into, this process.

*'As quoted in the Nick News piece, N says, "When I see the work which is being done, I am proud about it. Even I can do something. I am worth something"'. (A Correspondent's quote in <http://www.videovolunteers.org/media/collaborations/>)*

Being associated with a credible, reputed organisation, working towards a positive impact on community, and being a part of a network of other correspondents allows these individuals to construct a positive identity that provides meaning, self-efficacy, self-worth, and a sense of belonging [Breakwell 1993]. There are opportunities for improved self-efficacy through development of new skills and capacities, and possibly higher prestige in the community through working on social issues as a part of the India Unheard programme. There is also an opportunity to 'enhance' their collective identities defined through caste, gender, or class, by participating in a rights-based social movement.

*"This platform has enabled me to understand issues better. I have also come a long way because I am no longer scared to talk to anyone," said R A, a video correspondent from Sagar district in Madhya Pradesh'. (A correspondent's quote in a newspaper article, <http://www.videovolunteers.org/media/print-articles/>)*

For the 'organisation' - founder, trustees, staff, and volunteers - their sense of identity is anchored around building or being involved in (to varying degrees) an organisation that helps society, uplifts 'backward' communities, and pioneers an alternative form of media. Especially where such individuals come from an affluent background and/or a history of 'mainstream' work, taking on this 'alternate' work identity and all that it stands for can be a means to achieve distinctiveness, meaning, and worth. They can now identify themselves with a larger cause and see themselves as socially responsive, innovative individuals.

*'Throughout this experience so far, I am really enjoying myself and don't feel like going back to work for mainstream media. In fact, I now want to continue to work for NGOs, foundations or institutions engaged in social change or in environmental issues and to create documentary films about their issues. Here I want to thank VV for all of this, for having given me the chance to realise my dream and more energy to continue in this way'. (A Volunteer's account)*

*'She (J) spent nine months training rural women in the art of film-making. "I remember writing in my journal, 'What if this is the beginning of a new direction in my life,' recalls the 33 year old Native New Yorker, 'What if I fall in love with India and stay forever?'"' (Description of founder)*

## 5. Analysis

Based on the discussion in previous section, we provide a framework that captures our understanding of the representation of roles and relations of social actors in the participatory journalism process examined in this case. We see actors' identities as underlying the nature and terms of the relationships they form, and the roles they come to occupy in the participatory journalism context.

The intention is to present the key elements of our findings in an organised form and explore linkages between them.

*Traditional identities:* The actors associated with the organisation and those associated with the community typically differ in their background and social status - the former hail from more affluent, privileged sections and the beneficiaries from less privileged backgrounds. They come into the participatory journalism process with these self-



categorisations and social identifications - their traditional identities based on membership in groups such as class, caste, region, and nationality.

*Organisational identities:* Based on these pre-existing differences, actors are likely to categorise themselves and the other actors into separate identity groups (such as those representing organisation and community), playing complementary roles (such as benefactor and beneficiary) in the participatory journalism process. These identities are defined through prototypical features of one's social group (for instance: backward, marginalised community correspondents) and through meaning negotiated with counter-roles. In this case, the counter-roles include other actors such as mainstream media and audience, who mutually assign role expectations.

*Power differences:* Not all organisational groups or roles enjoy equal power. The historical differences in social group status are likely to continue in the form of hierarchical relations between the 'benefactors' and 'beneficiaries'. The more powerful group i.e. founders and employees (also playing the benefactor role), is the dominant producer of organisational representations. These differences also translate into the organisational processes. The 'benefactors' enjoy control over resources and act as silent gatekeepers, with the power to select and exclude people as well as content.

*Enhanced selves:* Identity motivational principles of meaning, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-worth explain the actors' mutual engagement in the participatory journalism process - both sets of actors benefit from enhanced selves i.e. positive identities constructed around their roles.

*Continued identities:* The desire for continuity in identities may motivate actors to retain traditional identities (own and others), built around social group membership [Breakwell 1993]. The historical differences in identity and power are likely to continue in the participatory journalism space, which claims to be designed to alter them.

*Organisational representations:* The separation of social groups and references to traditional identities is then maintained and perpetuated in the representations of participatory journalism [Moscovici 1988]. These representations are produced dominantly by the more powerful organisational group, though the others also contribute to their production. The representation of the exchange relationship between the actors is in asymmetrical terms - where the 'benefactors' empower and bring about a positive impact on the 'beneficiaries'. The contribution of these 'beneficiaries' to the journalistic process and the organisation's objectives is under-emphasised.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to critically examine the 'representation' of roles and relations between the key social actors in the participatory journalism process. We adopt a theoretical lens based on a synthesis of identity perspectives. By examining public data generated by an organisation as a symbolic representation of this process, we seek to question surface understandings of this movement in the media discourse.

This study is based on the case of a single organisation, Video Volunteers, operating in the citizen journalism space in India. The important actors in this case are

the founders and trustees, staff, citizen journalists, media partners, as well as the larger community and audience. Though the boundaries of the organisation under study can be viewed as fairly loose, the founders, employees, and community journalists appear to be the key participants in the functioning of the process. We chose to focus on the representation of roles and relationships of these actors.

The interpretation is based on a textual analysis of information 'represented' by the organisation in the public domain through its website and media releases. Based on our analysis, we find that the actors' identity processes play a significant part in their mutual exchange relationship and roles they play in this process.

The founders bring in their identities as innovative, socially responsible individuals desiring to make an impact by helping less privileged citizens and communities. They also bring in their affluent status giving them access to resources, skills, knowledge, and networks, which they then extend to the communities. Participation in this movement enables them to reaffirm and enhance their identities through a sense of meaning and direction to their lives. While differentiating themselves as an 'alternative' organisation, they accomplish their aims by partnering and working with the mainstream media channels.

The citizen journalists bring in their identities as marginalised, excluded, and 'invisible' activists looking to make a difference to their local communities and groups, perhaps on a smaller scale. They bring in their motivation to work for specific causes, their connection with and understanding of local issues, identities firmly rooted in the community they work for, and thus their unique perspective to the journalistic process. In the process, they also seek to recover and enhance their identities - personal and relational by association with the organisation and its programme.

Thus the two sets of actors come into the process with traditional identities based on existing social categories. These differences in social status and identities lead them to occupy complementary roles of 'benefactor' and 'beneficiary' implying an asymmetry in their relations. The 'organisation' therefore reserves the right to select and exclude correspondents into its network, and community members thus excluded would not receive the privileges of participation or being 'heard'. Thus, the traditional group identities (and differences) are perpetuated even through this 'participatory' process and become part of its organisational representations.

The contribution of this research is an improved insight into organised participatory journalism and its inherent power structures. It draws attention to the significance of actors' identity processes in IS and ICT for development research. The objective of a reflective critical research is this improved understanding which can eventually lead to improvement in the conditions of those targeted for development. ICT for development research has not considered the deeper issues of identities of different participant and stakeholder groups in ICT projects, as is discussed in this paper.

This framework can be a starting point for further theory development and research on significance of identity processes in participatory journalism and other ICT-based participatory and developmental processes. Traditional social identities impact and are impacted by the introduction of ICTs in rural and marginalised communities. Are these identities then re-affirmed by the technology regime thus introduced or do they offer possibilities for transition to newer identities? Role-based and organisational identities often follow from the nature of both skills and access to resources. Is it therefore important for those designing or field-implementing such development schemes to be conscious of such possible role definitions and try to modify or subvert them? Historically, power differences in groups with traditional identities have shaped the

manner and scope of access to ICTs and the developmental impact they have. Can such power differences be tactically used to ensure benefits of ICTs to those in marginalised communities? Or can ICTs subvert such power differences? The above are some questions that follow from the analysis presented in this paper.

Future studies can be designed to examine cases of 'local' emergent organisations formed by and from within the community - where the identities of 'organisation' and 'community' may not be very segregated. Finally, a significant area of research building on this work would be a comparison of actors' roles in 'informal' citizen journalism with the more 'organised' form, which formed the focus of this study.

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## Appendix: Data Sources

Data sources are primarily drawn from the Video Volunteers website and other web links posted on this site. The major data sources are listed below. The data was harvested in the period Dec 2013 - May 2014.

**Video Volunteers website** - <http://www.videovolunteers.org/>

- Homepage:
  - Who we work with, About Video Volunteers, Awards
  - Community Correspondents
- Recent articles:
  - Community Correspondent gets Proper Services at Local Anganwadi
  - Impact: Camera, Action, Lights!
  - 'The People Vs. POSCO' Screened to a Packed Hall!
  - IU Impact: Justice For Woman Who Defied Caste Discrimination
  - Community Correspondent Diaries: Sajad Rasool

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- Experiencing community media with Video Volunteers
- About us <http://www.videovolunteers.org/about/>
- Team <http://www.videovolunteers.org/about/team/>
  - Profiles of staff, board of trustees, interns, and volunteers
- India Unheard <http://www.videovolunteers.org/about/indiaunheard/>
  - Community Correspondents profiles
  - An Insider's View on Recruiting Community Correspondents  
<http://www.videovolunteers.org/engaging-the-grassroots-video-volunteers-recruitment>
  - What makes a great Community Correspondent? Our criteria for selecting CC's  
<http://www.videovolunteers.org/criteria-confusions-and-frequently-asked-questions-about-recruitment/>
  - Chhattisgarh, Here Comes India Unheard
- Meet our Ambassadors
- Annual Report 2013-2014 <http://www.videovolunteers.org/overall-achievements-apr13-mar14/>
- Media: <http://www.videovolunteers.org/media/>
  - Media collaborations
  - Print articles <http://www.videovolunteers.org/media/print-articles/>
  - Web, TV & Radio
- Press releases: <http://www.videovolunteers.org/media/archive/>
  - December 2012 - It Took Only One Video
  - December 2012 - He Said, She Said. Letter from the Directors
  - February 2011 - Speak Out India
  - June 2011 - Inspiring Stories from the India Unheard Training
  - December 2009 - Community Video Fellowship Programme and Call for Nominations
  - October 2009 - Community Video Training Camp 09
  - March 2007 - Our Learnings in Three Key Areas
  - September 2002 - Arrival to India