Development Communication and Interactive Websites:
The Empowering Potential of Participation in www.mandatetthefuture.org

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Masters Degree in Culture, Communication and Media Studies, University of Natal, Durban, January 2003.
Submitted as 25% of the overall degree.
Declaration

I, Veslemøy Lothe Salvesen, hereby declare that this is my own work, and that all other people's works have been fully acknowledged. It is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts Degree in the Faculty of Humanities, at the University of Natal, Durban, South Africa. It is submitted as 25% of the overall degree.

It has not been submitted before for any Degree or examination in any other University.

Signature

Veslemøy Lothe Salvesen
Durban, January 2003
# Table of Contents

## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.mandatethefuture.org">www.mandatethefuture.org</a></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandate the Future – Global or Local?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Measure Empowerment</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation and Empowerment in Freirean Theory</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Different Forms</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in the Web Medium</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandate the Future: Empowerment on a Local Level</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation among Youth Participants</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Reflection among Youth Participants</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandate the Future: Empowerment on a Global Level</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access and Control</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Empowering Potential of Voicing Out</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

At the eve of a new millennium the United Nations pledged to make available the benefits of new information and communication technologies for all people by the year 2015. But what exactly are the benefits of the new communication infrastructure? This thesis embarks on an analysis of the empowering potential for grassroots youth when they become involved in a development communication project based on participation on the World Wide Web. Examples and arguments are extracted from South African youth currently involved in www.mandatethefuture.org.

The process of empowerment is analysed on two levels. On the local level it is argued that participation in a group dialogue, both online and in a local setting, contributes to developing a critical consciousness. Such ability to think critically on the way one exists in the world is important in Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, upon which parts of the thesis is based. On a global level it is argued that the use of an interactive website can empower grassroots people in a way not previously possible for community media projects: by giving them a feeling of raising a voice in an international forum. This second hypothesis is discussed in the light of community radio theory, where a voice for the voiceless as well as a local control of this communication initiative is vital.

The purpose of this discussion is not an evaluation of one specific project; rather it is an investigation into the possible eradication of the former distinction between senders and receivers in the global flow of information. This is the opportunity of the new technology, since in front of an online computer every reader is potentially a sender.
Acknowledgements

To complete a university degree in a foreign and unfamiliar country requires not only a hardworking and eager student, it also calls for supportive surroundings. To all those who took of their time to help me this past year, I am very grateful.

I am especially indebted to the youth of Cala and Rivieronderend, who took time to sit down with me and answered all of my more or less well-informed questions. To their facilitators, Virginia Shuku and Stella Palmer I am also very grateful. My fieldwork in Cape Town would not have been possible without the assistance and help that I received from Samantha Fourie and her colleagues at Centre for Integrated Rural Development (CIRD).

From Durban I would like to emphasise the extraordinary help and support I have received from my mentor Elaine Binedell. She has really made a difference for me, as well as for a many other students at Centre for Culture, Communication and Media Studies (CCMS) this last semester. Such a difference is also made by Susan Govender, Programme Officer at CCMS. I would also like to thank my office mates, as well as Marit, Miranda and all other staff and students at CCMS. A special thanks to Prof. Ruth Teer-Tomaselli, who sacrificed time from her sabbatical to supervise this thesis.

Even though special support is needed when completing a higher degree abroad, one also brings something from home. In my case I am especially grateful to my father, who has inspired my urge for knowledge, and who was there for me, every day of my first twelve years of basic education. - Thank you for making it possible for me to complete a higher university degree. Finances for this degree was made available from the Norwegian government’s student funding programme, which I am grateful for.
Introduction

- The homework that I’m giving you is this: go to those students and academics at the university who are saying ‘no it will be difficult for you, for everyone, to take the computers to rural parts’. Go and convince them, as the way we are saying to you, because you can’t say it’s only the urban areas that are getting the computers. That means you are suppressing the other people. Give them our answers and say they must come back to us if they are not sure, we will convince them.

Young male participant in www.mandatethefuture.org, interview 27.10.02.

Imagine this: a graduate student has just finished an interview with a group of rural South African youth, involved in a development communication project. The tape recorder is switched off, the academic is looking through her notes, when one of the young men commands her to “turn it on again”. She has spoken to them, now he has some homework for her. This was the scenario I faced when I was doing fieldwork for my MA thesis in The Western Cape October 2002. Coming to the field with the conviction that development communication has for too long been conceptualised as disseminating pro-developmental messages to the public and that it is now time to involve the receivers in the encoding of this information, I still had an ambiguous feeling towards the use of Internet and online computers as the medium for local production of messages. Within academic circles the question of limited access, as well as criticism towards a modernisation-like ‘one technology fits all’ bias, are still the very first comments to be raised in relation to projects like this (Dagron 2001; Kumar 1994; Melkote 2001). And there I was, suddenly with a clear message from the rural youth participants themselves: they had used the computers, they had benefited, now it was time for me to go home and do my homework.

Within the field of development communication the idea to involve grassroots in the encoding of mass mediated messages is still a relatively recent one. After the invention of the new electronic communication media, development communication was for decades associated with a one-way vertical approach. Spurred by an optimism following the success of the Marshall Plan in Europe, the mass media was used to support development initiatives by the dissemination of messages to the public. Newer perspectives however claim that this top-down approach represents a limited view of development communication (Servaes 1995;
Melkote 2001; Valle 1995). They argue that in order to accelerate development, active involvement and participation from the public in the process of communication is necessary, since such involvement will empower the participants. As a result of this call, grassroots people have become involved in several different media, such a community radio and popular theatre for development. The central issue of this thesis is the empowering potential of a not so commonly used medium in this context: the web medium. The thesis thus embarks on analysis of the empowering potential of participation in a development communication project based on the web medium. Examples and arguments will be extracted from South African youth currently involved in an international project called Mandate the Future (MtF). According to the strategy of this project, by contributing text to www.mandatethefuture.org grassroots youth become senders of information as well as receivers of response to their own messages (Worldview 2002).

The process of empowerment will be discussed on two levels: the local – where participation in the process of formulating one’s stories might be seen to involve a kind of reflection associated with the development of a critical consciousness (Freire 1996; Servaes 1999); and the global – as access to the project might provide the previously voiceless with a feeling of speaking out in an international forum. The feeling of control and mastery over one’s stories is important to the question of empowerment because very often “the power to create, select and tell stories about one’s self, one’s group or other people is controlled by elites through their organizations, networks, agents, or genres” (Melkote 2001: 355). An important part of the discussion is thus to what extent the youth really can control their own stories, or whether certain characteristics of the web works in favour of control from a level above the participants. Empowerment on both the local and the global level will be discussed on the individual level only, since an assessment of the broader impact in the community as a whole would exceed the format of this thesis.

The discussion will be facilitated by the use of a theory presented by Paulo Freire as a pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire 1996). This influential theory has influenced the whole field of participatory communication to such an extent that its key ideas – dialogue, participation, awareness, praxis and so on – throughout the world have become “the bread and butter of communications-based strategies to name the world in order to change it” (Richards 2001b: 1). In his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed Freire offers an ideological as well as a
pragmatic explanation for why participation is necessary in order to create change. In addition to these justifications for grassroots participation, his theory provides a set of values that must characterise the participation if it should work for its aim (dialogical pedagogy, equality in the relationship between teacher and students etc.). What he does not provide however is a framework for the organisational aspects of the actual implementation of his ideas. Such a framework has later been developed by one of the disciplines within participatory communication highly indebted to Freire: theories of community radio. Academics such as Ruth Teer-Tomaselli and Robert White have contributed to a set of specific requirements or guidelines that have been seen to influence positively the empowering aspects of the communication project (Teer-Tomaselli 2001; White 1990). Because the project under discussion is so inherently global in its character, it is also essential to reinvent the two theories mentioned in a global perspective. Such a reinvention should be able to answer questions such as what characterises communities on the Internet, as well as what constitutes the Freirean concept of the oppressor in a global world.

www.mandatethefuture.org

The Internet project under discussion is Mandate the Future (MtF), managed and funded by Worldview International. Based in Sri Lanka, Worldview is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that enjoys consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Through a network of locally based NGOs MtF aims to bring online the ideas, wants, needs and opinions of grassroots youth. This is done by encouraging the youth participants to write stories for the World Wide Web, in order for them to “become active participants in the communication flux; they become creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients of knowledge” (Worldview 2002).

In South Africa the project is facilitated through Centre for Integrated Rural Development (CIRD) in Cape Town. The organisation has taken the initiative to establish the project in five different locations, all in rural South Africa. Each of the five groups has had a local facilitator employed. The facilitators are all equipped with one online computer and have been given the responsibility to organise local youth around the production of stories for the website www.mandatethefuture.org. The actual publication is done in a three-step process: prior to the production and publication of stories a discussion around generative issues is initiated by the local facilitator. After the group discussion each individual youth writes his or her own
experiences and thoughts on the subject down and – depending on the local facilitator – all or some selected stories are then published on the website. Thus the output of the discussions at community level is the input for the globally accessible website.

- What we do is that I have meetings here in the community hall, and then we talk about maybe poverty, next evening we talk about environment or education, and I ask the question ‘what is the problem of the youth in the community of education?’. The next week is the same question, but on something different, maybe poverty. Then they must talk about it, then they must write something about it and after that they must do it on the computer (Stella Palmer, MiF facilitator in Riviersonderend, interview 23.10.02).

The project also encourages youth to comment on each other’s stories, thus aiming for a horizontal flow of information between youth in different parts of the world. According to numbers provided by Worldview, there are 25,000 youth participants globally, contributing through fifty Community Communication Centres (Worldview 2002), five of them in South Africa. Ideally it is the youth themselves who go online to publish their stories. However, as will be discussed later, some of the participants live too far away from the computer facilities to be able to come and ‘push the buttons’ themselves. The lack of access not only represents a threat for empowerment in this particular case, it also illustrates a more structural problem related to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool for development in Sub-Saharan Africa: while this region has nearly 10 percent of the world’s population, is has only got 0,1 percent of its Internet connections (Molloch Brown 2000). It is also a fact that in the whole of Africa there are fewer Internet users than in the city of New York (UNDP 2001).

The obvious lack of infrastructure makes the use of ICT in rural development projects seem utopian, and for a long time the lack of evenly distributed access seems to have kept researches away from the field. On the other hand, providing the necessary infrastructure is high on the international agenda. In its Millennium Declaration, the United Nations has pledged to “make available the benefits of new technologies – especially information and communication technologies” for all people by the year 2015 (United Nations 2000: 6). In South Africa the Universal Service Agency has worked since 1997 to promote and facilitate universal and affordable access to ICT disadvantaged communities (Universal Service
Agency 2002). Seen from this perspective, projects like Mandate the Future represent a unique opportunity to study what can be achieved, given that access is provided. It is also a chance to put into practice a lesson learned from the era of the modernisation paradigm within development studies: that making available the benefits of a new technology is not only about bringing the technology to the rural poor, but it is also about creating contextually relevant adaptations. That is why research into local needs and local adaptations needs to be done even before the solution to the question of access is in place. Projects like MtF, which provides small pockets of access in areas where computers and telephone lines are scarce resources, carry a potential value not only for the youth involved in this particular project, but future projects may also benefit from the knowledge generated within the pilot projects.

*Mandate the Future – global or local?*

For most of the South African participants in MtF, surfing the Internet does not represent their first encounter with the global flow of information. Surely they have all been exposed to foreign television programmes, even if they don’t have access to television regularly. We can however assume that it is the first time they are encouraged to actively contribute to the global flow of information themselves. The characteristic of the information flow has for a long time been that of a one-way – from the West to the rest – a pattern that has and still continues to raise concern among development theorists as well as activists. While some have argued that the Western Media “distort the picture of developing countries in their news reports by concentrating almost single-minded on ‘hot’ news – political upheavals, coups and catastrophes” (McBride 1980: 59), others fear that the globalisation of communication will inherently suppress local culture, thus generating one homogenised global culture:

Since much of the news that reaches Third World audiences originates with the big news media, people in the developing countries receive the same distorted picture, and this can hurt their national pride and harm their sense of their own cultural identity (McBride 1980: 59).

Criticism of what has been termed ‘media imperialism’ found its political expression in the demand for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the 1970s, raised by a coalition between the East bloc and the developing countries. Their aim was to restrict the flow of Western produced media content to the rest of the world in order to create a more “free and balanced flow of information” (McBride 1980: 56). The demand for
restrictions on information coming from the West was later translated by the General Conference of UNESCO into an effort to “strengthen communication capacities in the developing countries in order to increase their participation in the communication process” (Modoux 1997: 217). In order to give concrete expression to its commitment to the democratisation of communication, UNESCO has since 1991 organised several regional seminars aimed at promoting pluralistic media, beginning with Windhoek, Namibia.

Following the new communication strategy, international support is now allocated with projects like for instance Mtb\(^1\), which aims at the realisation of every individual’s right to communicate. What makes this project particularly interesting in the light of the debate around a one-way global flow of information, is that its medium allows the participants to broadcast their views globally. Since the World Wide Web is accessible anywhere in the world, provided there is an online computer, Mtb operates simultaneously on a global and a local level. In a local setting, participants in the project take part in discussions, write stories and later submit these stories from a locally situated computer. To publish these stories means to voice out in an international forum, with the potential consequence of becoming engaged in an interaction with a global audience. Thus by taking part in the project the youth are exposed to the global flow of information, but the tools with which they are handling this flow have changed dramatically from the times of NWICO: while previously the only active contribution available for the receivers of mass produced content was their contextually situated decoding (McQuail 1994), the new communication media offer participants in Mtb the opportunity to communicate back and to comment on the information they receive.

- Take a topic like poverty for example – we don’t define poverty at the same level. Somebody may say ‘I am living under poverty because I don’t have the jeep or Mercedes Benz with the wheel at the back, I don’t have a cell phone 2110 or 6210’ – and that is poverty to him or to her. But not for myself because I am living under the shack and I don’t get water, I stay for three days or four days without food, that is poverty. So that is why you need to put comments all over, so maybe one can see what is really poverty (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

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\(^1\) Worldview has since 1990 received 120 million Rand from the Norwegian government, which is used to fund several communication projects, among them Mandate the Future.
What this example shows, is that by commenting on stories published on www.mandatethefuture.org the youth of Cala are taking some form of cultural action against what they see as a false interpretation of the world. In this way participation in MtF seems to exemplify the process of reflection and action prescribed by Freire as necessary to end domination by an elite over the people (Freire 1996). By engaging in a facilitated discussion on the world one inhabits, the youth are apparently benefiting from the pedagogy of the oppressed. Local production of Internet mediated messages thus becomes an example on how Freirean theory can be reinvented in a global world; while Freire in his context was concerned with the domination of an elite within a nation, what is now at stake is the domination by a minority over a majority of the world, not only economically, but also in terms of who gets to dominate the global flow of information and eventually name the world. This way of reinventing Freirean theory finds support with the British media researcher Michael Richards, as he argues that

Freire’s conception of the process of education echoes that of globalization. Both are concerned with domination, oppression, cultural hegemony, and the denial of the possibility of social action and of actors’ ability to reconstitute forms of knowledge handed down. Both warn against the values of the other (Richards 2001a: 179).

According to Freire, the oppressors use cultural action, in the form of a banking system of education, to uphold the system of domination. But the role of education can also be a liberating one, if a dialogue oriented approach aimed at unveiling the reality of oppression is applied (Freire 1996: 60). In MtF youth participants are urged to reflect upon their local lives, problems and concerns – and thereafter to broadcast these issues to the wider world. It seems like the weapon of domination is turned against the oppressor, since the media previously criticised for its imperialistic nature is now used to liberate the grassroots youth. According to this argument, MtF and other projects aimed at bringing the voice of the grassroots online, are examples of how globalisation of communication is not determined to suppress local identity in favour of a homogenised global culture. Introduction of the web medium into the field of development communication may thus, quite contrary to what is predicted by critics of the technology, contribute to reversing the direction of the global flow of information. Research into the implementation of one such project is necessary to see if the argument has any validity in real life. In order to shed light on the empowering potential of the project, the
research must provide insight into how participation in the web project is experienced by the grassroots participants themselves. Throughout this analysis, Mandate the Future will serve as an example of the kind of development initiative under discussion.

To measure empowerment

The central question that the data collected from Mandate the Future needs to answer, is to what extent the project contributes to the empowerment of its participants. From the two theories selected for this analysis, it is possible to derive the following signifiers: i) according to Freirican theory the development of an ability to reflect critically around the world one inhabits would indicate some level of empowerment; ii) according to community radio theory, a feeling of raising one’s voice would contribute positively to empowerment; iii) also from community radio theory; simply learning how to use an online computer would increase the feeling of control and thereby influence empowerment among the participants. All these three aspects are linked to the understanding of empowerment as “the process by which individuals, organisations and communities gain control and mastery over social and economic conditions; over democratic participation in their communities; and over their stories” (Melkote 2001: 37).

If empowerment concerns individual control over certain aspects of life – such as critical thinking, the feeling of voicing out to the wider world or the feeling of mastering a computer – then it becomes crucial to gain access to understandings and interpretations of representatives from the group of youth involved in the project. To gain such access a combination of focus group interviews and a semi-structured questionnaire were chosen. The interviews ensured that the theory-derived understandings could be supplemented by the feelings and opinions of the youth representatives, as the “methodology allows research to be inductive rather than deductive and potentially allows for serendipitous discoveries” (Basch 1987, as cited in Parker 1994). The questionnaire ensured that the same set of questions was asked to all informants, and it was also meant to generate some amount of quantitative data, suitable to some extent for generalising about the whole population of youth participants. To cover the problem of self-reporting, the data from the youth was supplemented by participatory observation, interviews with local facilitators and to some extent assessment of stories produced by the South African youth participants. The set of methodologies applied did not generate any valid information on the impacts on the community as a whole. This is in
accompany with the aim of the analysis, which is to discuss the empowering potential of participation in the web medium on an individual level.

The fieldwork was conducted in the Western Cape, where I met and carried out the methodology with representatives from CIRD as well as representatives from two of the five South African projects. The group from Riviersonderend, a township one and a half hours drive from Cape Town, consists of mainly unemployed youth, who meet once a week or less. In the event that enough members show up, the facilitator aids the discussion and assists in publishing the stories on the Internet. The second project is situated in Cala, a rural village in the Eastern Cape, but extends its reach beyond the immediate village. Representatives from this group came to Cape Town together with their local facilitator in order to participate in a workshop intended to prepare the project to become self-sustainable. The facilitator in Cala keeps the computer facilities open for the youth four days a week, and the facilitation of discussions are frequently done by trained youth members.

According to basic understandings of participatory communication theories, such as community radio theory, certain organisational factors such as local ownership and local control can generally be said to enhance the level of empowerment in a project. A comparison of the organisation of the two groups clearly confirmed this theory (as will be discussed later), but it also posed a methodological problem. Since the group in Riviersonderend was so loosely connected, it was difficult to gain access to informants that had actually contributed regularly to the discussions and to the website. The quantitative data generated from the questionnaires are therefore not very valid, while qualitative data collected by participatory observation and interviews with the involved groups turned out to be interesting in ways not anticipated prior to the fieldwork.

Participation and Empowerment in Freirean Theory

If there is one word for the influence that Freirean theory has exercised over the discipline of development work and development communication, it has to be ‘participation’. In its context of liberation struggles in Latin America in the 1970s, Pedagogy of the Oppressed introduced new and rather controversial ideas regarding the participation of the masses. Mainstream
development strategies of that time saw development as a question of transferring new technology from the West to the would-be developed world, very often by means of mass media. The role of people living in the affected parts of the world was as passive recipients of information meant to create a “climate of modernisation”, as individuals were blamed for a lack of “appetite for change” (Mowlana 1995). Further participation by the people in the development process was considered “slow, inefficient, and more often than not, unlikely” (Rogers 1976, as cited in Melkote 2001: 72). The dominant paradigm varied from the Freirean approach not only in terms of how development is created, but also in terms of what actually constitutes development. According to modernists development was defined through quantitative measurements such as gross national product and per capita income (Melkote 2001: 73), thus development was seen as synonymous with economic progress, with a focus on ‘well-having’ rather that ‘well-being’.

Against this dominant view Freire argued that development is about the process of liberating the oppressed, not in economic terms but in terms of developing a critical consciousness in the individual. Development in this sense cannot happen without the active participation by the people themselves. In order to create a ‘well-being’ of the people Freire calls for participation not only on a general basis, but in a very specific process – that of reflection and subsequently action. By participating in a carefully facilitated dialogue, people should be able to “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire 1996: 31). What must be achieved is not merely awareness, however, but its relationship to a project of social transformation, whereby consciousness and action on consciousness are dialectically linked (Servaes 1996: 78). To describe the outcome of these two organically integrated processes Freire invented the term conscientizacao – in English translated to conscientization. Conscientization of the individual is thus constituted by active participation in both action and reflection. It is in this process of active participation, and in this process only, that the grassroots can become empowered in the sense that they begin to take control over decisions and actions concerning their own life.

Some of the importance of Freire’s book is found in his reasoning for why it is so imperative to involve the people in their own development process. According to Stanley Aronowitz it is a common mistake to see Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a pragmatic document relating only
to how teaching is best done in schools, thus overlooking the political context of the book. Considering these political aspects, the important contribution of the theory lies in his radical democratic humanism, seen in the aim of the pedagogy, which is to make all people beings for themselves, as opposed to beings for others (Aronowitz 1993). Participation by the people in the process of development is thus necessary simply because

to substitute monologue, slogans, and communiqués for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication. Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects (Freire 1996: 47).

The other reason for involving people in their own development is more pragmatic in its character. Freire is arguing in favour of participation since no leadership can merely ‘implant’ in the oppressed a belief in freedom, thus thinking to win their trust. The correct method lies in dialogue. The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own conscientizacao (Freire 1996: 49).

In this citation Freire reveals not only his development strategy, but also some of the political context within which the book is written. In the context of Latin America in the 1970s ‘revolution’ referred to a very particular kind of change: the overthrow of capitalism and introduction of a Marxist inspired society. However, as his ideas have become frequently used among development organisations, the United Nations, as well as various grassroots movements, what has been realised is that the method does not only apply to this particular context. In the context of this thesis the revolutionary aspect will refer to an anticipated change in the way youth participants perceive themselves and the role that they play in their own lives. This development occurs when the youth empower themselves with new knowledge and becomes able to negotiate their own identities and the way that they understand their own reality. Thus, in a contemporary context the pedagogy of the oppressed can be used to produce revolutionary action rather than the revolution. In order to avoid misinterpretations of this text, I have substituted the word ‘revolution’ with ‘development’ and will continue to do so.
Participation in different forms

During the last decade, Freirean ideas and ways of legitimating participation have been largely incorporated into what is termed 'another development' paradigm. One reason for this was the obvious lack of sustainable development experienced in projects built on the ethos of the modernisation paradigm. As the anticipated trickle-down effect proved itself wrong and the number of White Elephants on the African continent grew, participation was introduced as a means to ensure local co-operation and ownership. Thus the concept of establishing a dialogue with beneficiaries all along the process of conceiving, planning, implementing and evaluating a project was gradually becoming common sense:

At first, implementers understood that beneficiaries should be involved in the activities leading to social and economic development of a community, for the purpose of building up a sense of 'ownership' within the community. This was last perceived as important especially in terms of the sustainability of the project once the external inputs ended. Next, planners realised that the sense of ownership couldn't be promoted if the beneficiaries didn't have a word in the decisions made before a project started. For example, the simple issue of deciding where to dig a borehole and place a hand pump could reveal the complexity of internal relations within a rural community (Dagron 2001: 10).

Even if this concept of participation takes into account the importance of local knowledge, it is still qualitatively different from what is encouraged in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Authentic participation, according to Freire, is rooted ideologically in universal humanism, thus the act of participation cannot be reduced to a means to an end – participation by the people is in itself an end. This does not mean that participation cannot contribute to the achievement of pragmatic goals as discussed above, what it means is that the justification for participation can never be reduced to simply these goals. Only when the intentions and justifications for participation goes beyond such pragmatic goals as higher productivity, higher formal education or higher consumption patterns can it “facilitate conscientization of 'marginalized people globally of unequal social, political, and spatial structures in their societies” (Melkote 2001: 339).

To achieve this kind of participation, it is necessary to trust in the people and in their ability to reason. According to Freire “[w]hoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon)
dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions” (Freire 1996: 48). Authentic participation is thus not possible without an “intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all)” (Freire 1996: 71).

While Freirean theory has made a significant contribution into the purpose and nature of participation by the people in local development projects, theorists like Jan Servaes and Robert White have discussed the more practical sides of the participatory model. One of their arguments is that in order for a project to be truly empowering, participation must transcend into all levels of the development project. Thus participation by the people should be seen not only at the grassroots level, but at all levels – international, national, local, and individual (Servaes 1999). This requirement is particularly important to the analysis of Mandate the Future, since as we have seen, the project operates at all these levels simultaneously. If it is found that the South African youth representatives in MtF have no channels for having their opinion heard by the international head office in Sri Lanka or the national desk in Cape Town, this will weaken the empowering potential of the project substantially. Furthermore, the analysis of the project must also take into consideration in which phases of the project participation is encouraged. According to Servaes participation must be found in every phase of the project, including project planning and the development of strategies. The latter argument is built on the understanding that local knowledge is invaluable and that endogenous effort is what will finally bring about development in the affected areas. The participative model thus “points to a strategy that is not merely inclusive of but largely emanates from the traditional ‘receivers’” (Servaes 1999: 88).

In the event where the use of media is part of the development project, one phase becomes particularly interesting: that of encoding of messages. Since participation is required in all phases, the people must also be involved in the production of media content. This participation implies a radical shift in the roles of sender versus receivers and has implications for the communication model used to describe the flow of information within a particular development project. If grassroots people are successfully integrated into the process of encoding media messages, communication can no longer be described as a linear process of transmission, but rather as a horizontal, interactive and two-way process (Servaes 1999).
Since the people are now communicating to themselves, the centrally situated sender metaphor, used to describe communication within the modernisation paradigm, has been substituted with many, locally situated senders. In this ideal situation, the famous postulation made by Marshall McLuhan in the 1970s – centers everywhere, margins nowhere – might finally have some roots in reality (Levinson 1999).

The problem with McLuhan’s statement in its own context was that his newly conceptualised centres were completely without opportunities to respond back to the mass mediated messages. From the outside it might seem as if it is the chance to communicate back that constitutes the strongest argument in relation to empowering potentials of web projects such as MiF. It needs to be investigated however, if the youth are actually able to control the production of mediated content themselves. One aspect of this discussion should be concerned with the medium itself and how it is capable of incorporating participation by the youth participants.

* Participation in the web medium

One of the important characteristics of the World Wide Web as opposed to other mediums such as television and radio, is that of interactivity. The interactive nature of the medium not only allows each individual user to make her own way through the content by clicking the so-called hyperlinks. It may also allow the user to contribute to the volume of content available on the website. In the first case, interaction with the content is made possible by the use of hypertext, a “software that allows many different texts to be linked, so that simply clicking a mouse on a key word brings up a new related document” (Friedman 1995: 73). Such interaction is common for online newspapers, and since this interaction only allows for consumption of already produced material, it could be said to constitute interactivity at a basic level. Interactivity on an advanced level would then refer to the process whereby the user interacts with the medium in a way that produces new content to the medium, available for others to see and read. It follows from the above focus on participation in production of media content, that it is the latter form of interaction that is interesting in the context of this thesis.2

Failures and subsequent scepticism towards the use of Internet in grassroots development

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2 Although the two forms of interaction can also be combined, as is the case when online newspapers initiate a debate over a certain issue among its readers.
projects often occurs because the difference between these two levels of interaction is not fully appreciated. One illustrative example is the use of so-called ‘telecentres’ in South Africa. Since the Universal Service Agency was founded by the South African government in 1997, it has been responsible for establishing 66 telecentres throughout the country (Universal Service Agency 2002). The aim of this effort is to “ensure universal access to all telecommunication services” (Dagron 2001: 268) – a typical centre would consist of a telephone, a photocopying machine and an online computer. According to a recent report on participatory communication for social change, these centres are basically functioning as reference centres, which “refer people to outside community resources when necessary; many people come here asking for direction” (Dagron 2001: 267). The report is sceptical because “a passive use of the Internet may only result in a more homogenised and globalised world, a huge marketplace with many consumers and few products” (Dagron 2001: 31). This might be true in the case of the telecentres, where according to the report people generally participate at a basic level of interaction, if they interact with the Internet at all. Since participation is limited to the activity of downloading information, a vertical top-down pattern of information flow seems to apply. The introduction of a new communication media has in this case not enabled people to respond to the information that they receive, thus local empowerment is less likely.

There is however an important difference between the approach of the South African telecentres and projects like Mandate the Future. The contrast is seen in that the latter type of projects combine access to online computers with an effort to set up a website that encourages interactivity on an advanced level. In MtF youth participants are encouraged not only to download information, but also to upload information as a response to what they read. Thereby they are interacting with the medium in a way that creates new content, which again can be subject for comments from other globally or locally based users. Without anticipating whether this is actually happening, it is possible to say that inherent in the web medium is an opportunity to erase the distinction between readers and writers. This is true since

[i]Interactive software – computer games, hypertext, and even ‘desktop’ programs and databases – connect the oppositions of ‘reader’ and ‘text’, of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’, together in feedback loops that make it impossible to distinguish precisely where one begins and the other ends (Friedman 1995: 73).
If the interactive nature of the Internet gives it a potential to erase the traditional distinction between receivers and senders, the medium has a huge potential to increase participation in development communication and thereby influence local empowerment.

Mandate the Future: Empowerment on a Local Level

Before we go into a discussion on how the web medium influences the actual participation in MtF, we have to consider the empowering potential of the process that goes prior to publication: the discussion, or ‘dialogue’ according to Freirean theory. According to Freire involvement in the dialogue should foster an ability to think critically around one’s own life, given that the dialogue reflects certain ideals. As we have already seen, communication projects that are global in scope often involve a potential tension between the local and the global level. In Mandate the Future one such potential conflict concerns the choice of generative topics for the youth to discuss.

Beginning with the local level of the project, the group meets regularly to take part in discussions around issues affecting them in their own lives. But according to the local facilitator in Cala, the group is not totally free to choose what topic it wants to discuss: “They choose themselves which topic within the website they want to decide on” (Virginia Shuku, interview 27.10.02). Thus the issues for discussion on a local level must fit into one of the seven categories determined on a global level. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed it is the responsibility of the local facilitator to identify generative themes within the local context, that can be re-presented for the people to decode and discuss. The fact that the choice of topics in MtF derives out of a set of globally determined categories may therefore contradict a very important aspect of Freirean theory. Instead of taking as a starting point the present concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people, MtF re-presents to its participants an externally generated view of what constitutes imperative issues. This could easily qualify as one of the mistakes of banking education:

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3 My italics.
In sum: banking theory and practice, as immobilizing and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings; problem-posing theory and practice take the people’s historicity as their starting point (Freire 1996: 65).

The consequences for the process of conscientization may be fatal, since it is when students are posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, that they will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge (Freire 1996: 62). Furthermore, the basis for reinventing Freire in a global world was that the youth should be allowed to protest and negotiate the content of the information flow—not that they would have to frame their contributions according to accepted topics. However, it can be argued in the defence of MtF that the categories presented on the website (‘education’, ‘environment’, ‘gender’, ‘health’, ‘IT for development’, ‘peace’ and ‘poverty’) are rather wide and that they are therefore open for local interpretations and negotiations. This argument is partly supported by answers from the group of youth interviewed in Riviersonderend (interview 25.10.02). Almost all of these youth had never contributed to, nor visited the site. Yet when asked what they would have written stories about should they be given the chance to contribute, their answers could generally be classified into already existing categories (AIDS classifies into ‘health’, poverty into ‘poverty’, education into ‘education’). One answer might be particularly illustrative of the flexibility of the categories: the concern among youth in Riviersonderend for high rates of crime in their township. Initially the concept of crime seems difficult to fit into any of the existing topics. From my perspective, one related category could be that of ‘peace’, but the topic of peace must be said to be more relevant for the Sri Lankan context, given the civil war that has been raging the island for 22 years. It might therefore seem as if the categories are more appropriate in its context of origin (Worldview’s head quarters are in Sri Lanka) than in the South African context. However, as I read through the stories that were actually produced in South Africa, it is evident that the youth have actually managed to incorporate the issue of crime into the existing categories:

Extracts from stories written on ‘poverty’:

Everyday you go out to look for a job, but no jobs are available. You get angry and get dirty ideas. The number in youth crime increases. The youth steal to survive and unintentionally, they are contributing to the poor conditions of the community. Maybe unemployment is the reason why there’s poverty in our community (male South African participant in MtF).
Still talking about unemployment many people engage themselves to crime and theft, for instance people are educated but find it hard to work without jobs and think of another way of survival such as crime. They are just doing this to satisfy their natural needs like food and shelter (male South African participant in MtF).

These stories seem to contradict the hypothesis that when categories are determined on a global level, they are necessary too stringent to allow focus on local problems. Even if the local facilitator is deprived of the opportunity to freely identify locally relevant issues for discussion, the youth might be able to negotiate the categories determined from above. In order to allow these local adoptions, the categories presented by the international administration of the web project must be sufficiently wide and open for negotiation.

**Participation among youth participants**

In addition to identifying generative issues that can be re-presented to his students, the Freirean teacher is responsible for facilitating a dialogue around these issues. This dialogical pedagogy will only be successful if the relationship between teacher and students is one of equal status. The teacher must thus be prepared to re-create and generate new knowledge together with the students, since it is only through genuine participation in the process of reflection that the people can become conscientized:

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement (Freire 1996: 51).

Projects like Mandate the Future add a new dimension to the question of equality between teacher and students, because the 'unveiling of reality' takes place in two phases – in discussions around local issues and in the subsequent publication of the outcome of these discussions. Equality must therefore be present not only in the process of dialogue, but also in the production and publication of messages. The latter aspect might be expected to pose a problem when the use of advanced technology like online computers is involved. Considering that it requires specific skills to operate this technology, one might fear that the use of it could
easily become the domain of a knowledgeable teacher. Special focus on the role of the facilitator versus the youth participants is therefore needed.

Generally, my fieldwork with Mandate the Future revealed a strong awareness of the important role of the facilitator, or co-ordinator. All the individuals interviewed emphasised that merely providing access to the Internet facilities is insufficient; in order to secure that the use of the facilities contributes to local empowerment there has to be a local facilitator. However, the fieldwork also indicated that the understanding of the status of the facilitator varies at different levels of the project. At the national level the local facilitator is valued as "the most important aspect" because without him or her "the youth do all kind of things on the Internet – they want to chat, play games, write their CVs and so on" (Samantha Fourie, national co-ordinator of MtF, interview 22.10.02). The facilitator is also important because when "the youth discuss the co-ordinator sums up their experiences and writes it on the web" (Samantha Fourie, interview 22.10.02). On the local level the actual role of the co-ordinators seemed to vary according to individual differences. The co-ordinator in Riviersondered confirms the expectations from the national level in that she is the one who facilitates discussion, and very often she is also the one who types the stories onto the computer because not all of the participants can do so (Stella Palmer, interview 23.10.02). In the case of the project in Cala however, the local co-ordinator often encourages the more experienced youth to be responsible for facilitation of discussion. During this process it is important to transfer the facilitation skills to other members of the discussion group “so that after that, they can now have a meeting on their own to discuss” (young female participant, interview 27.10.02).

In an interview four of the youth facilitators in Cala emphasised the importance of letting the participants decide on their own rules for the session. Such rules could include whether or not smoking was permitted during discussions, or how individuals who misbehaved should be dealt with. Inherent in this symbolic gesture is an emphasise on the equal relationship between facilitator and students. This equality is also found in the next phase of the process; in Cala the youth are themselves responsible for typing the outcome of the discussions. If some of the participants do not know how to handle the computer or they live too far away from the facilities, they are assisted by one of the more fortunate ones: “Those who don’t know the computers [...] write in paper and then give it to the others to type it on the website” (Virginia Shuku, MtF facilitator in Cala, interview 27.10.02). According to the local
facilitator the youth are also responsible for the final stage of message production – when stories are selected and published:

- If there are ten stories we send ten stories to Samantha⁴. And then we choose some of the stories, like if either it’s AIDS or violence against women or hunger or pollution, then the youth decide which one they want to submit. And then they say, ‘we choose this one, let’s submit this one’, and then they submit that (Virginia Shuku, MfF facilitator in Cala, interview 27.10.02).

Obviously the denial of direct access to computer facilities for some of the youth disfavours the potential for their individual empowerment. The problem is very much a concern for the co-ordinator in Cala, and she is currently trying to attract funding for more computers that would benefit the youth in villages far from Cala. In the case of Riviersonderend the issue of only one computer did not seem to pose a problem. The reason for this might be that the participants all live in close vicinity of the computer, which is placed at the local school. However, it was very difficult to gather reliable data from this community, since most of the participants who had actually contributed to the site were not available. I therefore had to rely on the information given to me by the local facilitator in this case. When asked about other factors that limit participation in message production, her answer echoed those of the youth from Cala: they were all concerned about the use of English as a common language for stories that are to be published. Again this is a constraint associated with the dual level that the project operates on: in a local context languages like Xhosa and Afrikaans might be the most appropriate, but since the stories are meant for audiences outside South Africa as well as inside, those languages are not permitted. The international management of the project acknowledges the challenge posed by English, but believes that the knowledgeable youth can act as mediators also in this regard:

⁴ Refers to Samantha Fourie, the national co-ordinator of MfF in South Africa.
It is a significant problem. But it is offset considerably by a member base that is proficient in the language. They act as enablers in their communities for other youth to take part in the process. In that respect a ‘trickling down’ does happen to a great deal. But it is by no means a permanent solution. Mandate is in fact in [the] process of making its services more inclusive of non-English speakers by customizing regional sites in native languages. Spanish, Singhalese, Tamil and Portuguese sites are already operational (Rudy Edirisinghe, Public Relations Officer of MtF worldwide, e-mail interview 17.12.02).

Interviews with the group in Cala support the assumption that the youth who are able to communicate in English work as translators for the others. According to the local co-ordinator in Cala, the youth are allowed to write stories in whatever language they want, whereupon the stories are translated and retyped into English by either the facilitator or one of the youth. However, a translation of a story does not mean the participant is involved in the whole process of message production. Since the words have been translated into an unfamiliar language, it will not be possible for the author to recognise the story on the Internet, neither will it be possible for her to post it there, since the publication software itself requires mastery of English. The kind of participation available for youth that do not master the English language is therefore of an indirect character, not sufficient in terms of the ideal equal relationship between teacher and students. Thus the conflict between global target audiences and local needs might limit the potential for empowerment among one group of the youth participants.

In addition to language barriers, some participants also face barriers in terms of technological ‘know-how’. In a project where Internet is the medium for message production, the participant has to possess some general knowledge of computer work as well as some basic insight into the ‘window-system’ found in the two most commonly used web browsers (Microsoft Explorer and Netscape). The word ‘basic’ is here used deliberately because the publication system developed for www.mandatethefuture.org is kept relatively simple. In the experience of the facilitator in Cala it is “a little problem in the beginning because everybody is so scared, but they get used to it and then it is fine” (Virginia Shuku, interview 27.10.02). The window used for publishing (see Figure 1) consists of six small boxes in addition to one ‘preview’ button. Some of the boxes have so-called drop-down menus attached to them, which means that participants have to select one out of a set of fixed topics, while some of
them are open for the participants to write the text. Once the discussion is over and the story is compiled on paper, the participant fills in these boxes and submits the story into the database of the site.

Figure 1: 'ctrlaltesc submissions' (http://www.ctrlaltesc.org/submit.pl)
As mentioned earlier, the co-ordinators in Cala and Riviersonderend have chosen different approaches when it comes to the actual publication of stories – the main difference being the more responsible role allocated to the youth in Cala. While the youth in Cala are facilitating discussions and publishing stories on the Net, the youth in Riviersonderend do not get the same opportunities. One can therefore assume that the empowering potential of participation in the web medium is greater for the Cala youth than for the ones in Riviersonderend, despite the fact that challenges posed by technical barriers and language problems are the same. However, the fact that youth in Cala are able to participate at all levels of publication shows that it is indeed possible to involve participants in computer-related work, and thus that access does not necessarily become monopolised.

The tradition of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has invented a very illustrative expression to describe this way of handing over the tools to local participants. The expression testifies to its rural context of origin, since according to PRA the project facilitator has to ‘hand over the stick’ to local participants (Chambers 1997). Since the stick used to draw symbols and figures on the ground has traditionally been controlled by the facilitator, handing it over to the participants symbolises equality between facilitator and participants. Interviews with participants in Cala indicate that it is indeed possible to hand over the tool, even in the event that the ‘stick’ is an online computer. In this project the youth have not only become the facilitators of their own discussions, they have also become equal to the facilitator in terms of control over the tool for message production. In handing over this tool to the youth, the local co-ordinator in Cala demonstrates an intense faith in the ability of the youth to reason and to produce their own stories. According to Freire such faith in the ability of the people to name the world is a necessary precondition for local empowerment: “The facilitator do bear the responsibility for coordination and, at times, direction – but if they deny praxis to the people they thereby invalidate their own praxis” (Freire 1996: 107). Translated into the context of projects like Mandate the Future this would mean that the youth ought to be the author of their own stories. In the event that the technology is reserved only for the teacher, this represents a violation of the prescribed equal status between the co-ordinator and the youth. Such a violation would diminish the potential for local empowerment. While data collected from Mandate the Future indicates that it is possible to leave the management of the computer in the hands of the youth, the difference between the two projects visited shows that what actually happens depends on the individual co-ordinator. Thus the role chosen by the local co-
ordinator plays a major part in creating an equal status between teacher and students, a factor that eventually influences local empowerment.

**Critical reflection among youth participants**

While the above analysis indicates that it is possible for projects like MtF to incorporate many of the ideals from the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the question still remains whether or not the youth participants have developed an increased ability to think critically around their own life and reality as a result of their involvement in the project. Such “deepened consciousness” is the aim of the Freirean pedagogy (Freire 1996: 66), and it is therefore an important part in the discussion of the empowering potential of MtF.

In the interviews conducted, the youth representatives explained that their way of thinking had changed, mostly in the sense that they now knew how to access information previously unavailable for them. Generally, when asked about the outcome of their involvement in the project, the youth themselves emphasised the acquisition of concrete skills:

- Would you say that you have learnt something from taking part in the project?

- Yes, we have learned something. For instance, we never knew how Internet works, but now we do know. And whatever information you need, you can get it on the Internet. And if you want to find a book, you just write the name of the author of the book and the edition and then click on search and it will search for you and find the information you need. It really helps you to find information (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

- Any kind of information that you need you can get on the Internet. Like, we just attracted some new papers now on bed and breakfasts, because we are looking forward to starting a bed and breakfast in Cala, because there is only one at the moment. So rather than phoning, because phone is so expensive, we found the information on the Internet (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

In the introductory part of this thesis it was established an understanding of empowerment as the process whereby individuals gain control and mastery over certain aspects of their own lives, such as their stories and economic conditions (page 8). In this perspective, learning how to type and navigate an online computer does signify some degree of local empowerment.
However, the acquisition of such communication skills does not represent a unique change in the way the world is perceived by the participants, as is the aim of the Freirean methodology. According to Freire, by participating in a problem-posing dialogue people should develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world:

That which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications (if indeed it was perceived at all) begins to 'stand out', assuming the character of a problem and therefore of challenge. Thus, men and women begin to single out elements from their 'background awareness' and to reflect upon them (Freire 1996: 64).

In a truly liberating education people do not only acquire new tools for handling the reality as they perceive it, but the tools they develop have the power to unveil the reality itself. By participating in a carefully facilitated dialogue on local issues, people simultaneously reflect on themselves and on the world, increase the scope of their perception and begin to direct their observations towards previously inconspicuous phenomena (Freire 1996: 63). However, the answers brought forward by the youth from Cala may indicate that this process has taken place alongside the acquisition of actual computer skills.5

- Why did you write stories to MfF?

- I was motivating myself, because there is a proverb, which says 'you know where you come from, but you don't know where you go'. So I did write my story, as my life, how I grew up, what are the problems I was experiencing and everything since I am here now. It was a life story, or something like that, on my background as from young until now. And I was very impressed to write about myself and to see that what are the developments (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

According to this young man, writing a story about his own life made him reflect on who he was and how the reality in which he grew up has played a role in him becoming what he is today. Depending on the interpretations of the Freirean theory, this citation can serve as a good example of the kind of 'revolutionary action' referred to earlier in this thesis. In my

5 The data collected from the group in Riviersonderend is not sufficient to tell whether or not reflection has occurred as a result of involvement with the project.
view it is a good example in that it represents a change in the way a young man perceives himself, and subsequently he becomes able to negotiate his own identity and make changes in his own life. On the other hand, it is possible to interpret Freire in a way where the only true change in perception is one that involves the identification of an ‘oppressor’. If understood this way, his theory may seem a bit arrogant on the behalf of the assumed beneficiaries of his pedagogy. Not only would he assume that the participants are unable to see the reality of their own lives without the help from his pedagogy, he also reserves for himself the right to dismiss any representations that are not according to his own. To avoid this latter interpretation I have chosen to see the above citation as an example of the unveiling of reality that is anticipated by Freire in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

The young man’s decision to make a change is also interesting, since an important aspect of the development of a critical consciousness is the realisation of the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process and in transformation (Freire 1996: 64). In his reasoning for change the young man portrays such an understanding of the world:

- I decided to change, because I wanted to live a better life. Because when you grow up in the rural areas, then you think it is the first stage that you are born and bred in the rural areas. And so you have to change your mindset not to be stereotyped, to be proactive, so that is why I wrote that story – telling where I was then, where I am at the moment, and what are the problems that I experienced or encountered. And how was the life at that time, how is life now (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

While these quotes are examples of the empowering potential of participation in MtF, they do not make explicit reference to how the technology itself influences the level and quality of reflection. In other words – is there any value added by including a website in the method of dialogical pedagogy? One argument in favour of including the web element is the inherently global character of the website. Since its content is produced by youth from so many different parts of the world, the site potentially exposes the South African participants to various views and representations of reality. According to the youth themselves these stories from far away work to inspire discussions, comments and stories on a local level:
- From the [web]page Mandate the Future we learn how other people live their lives. So they write a story and then we can read them and write our stories for them to read too (female participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

- It is a two-way communication, so you become aware that there are certain things happening in other countries while we are here in South Africa (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

- It learns me to help other people who have more problems than me. And also to communicate with other people (male participant, Riviersonderend group, interview 25.10.02).

The opportunity to interact with the content not on a reader-only basis, but on an advanced level further enhances the reflection. Because of the interactive nature of the website, the youth may compare and comment online in relation to what they read about other parts of the world, and they may also expect an answer to their own stories. In this way the interactivity on the web imitates the face-to-face communication that takes place in real life, though with one important difference: because participants in computer-mediated communication are unable to see, hear, and feel one another they cannot use the usual contextualization cues conveyed by appearance, non-verbal signals and features of physical context. With these cues to social context removed, participants may gain greater anonymity because their gender, race, rank, physical appearance and other features of public identity are not immediately evident. Such anonymity is often suggested to work in favour of a more democratic participation among members of the contributing groups:

As a consequence of this enhanced anonymity, participation is said to be more evenly distributed across group members. Researchers often equate this balancing of participation with egalitarianism and go on to claim that computer mediation makes it difficult for people to dominate and impose their views on others. This egalitarianism is sometimes seen as an advantage of CMC [Computer Mediated Communication], for it allows women and minorities who are not heard in face-to-face interaction to have their voices heard (Baym 1995: 139-140).

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6 See definition on page 14.
Anonymity on the web is also valued because it creates opportunities to invent alternative versions of one’s self and to engage in untired forms of interaction. In the context of increased levels of reflection, the web therefore offers a unique chance to try out, rehearse and experiment with one’s identity without the consequences of real life. Participants in a communication project like MtF can therefore be compared to actors in a role-play, only with one important exception: even if the web provides its participants with audiences and fellow actors, there are few social consequences.

Despite all the opportunities offered by anonymous interaction on the web, very few of the South African participants in MtF have chosen to remain without names on the web. This may be partly due to the fact that not all of the members have access to the computers themselves. Since participants who do not live close enough to the computer facilities or do not know how to use it, have to hand over the stories for others to publish, their anonymity on a local level is lost. Especially in cases where the topic of the story relates to sensitive issues, like sexually transmitted diseases and rape, this further marginalizes those without access. However, even within the group of youth who are able to operate the computer themselves, the opportunity to refrain from submitting their names is not frequently used. According to the interviews conducted this has two reasons. Firstly because the local facilitator “prefer[s] the youth that are coming to use the MtF to use their own names, their real names” (Virginia Shuku, MtF facilitator in Cala, interview 27.10.02). This statement serves as another example of how the role of the facilitator influences the empowering potential of the web technology. Secondly, the youth representatives choose not to be anonymous since they see MtF as a chance to introduce themselves to the wider world:

- It is like when there is a talk show on the radio, you will hear somebody saying ‘I’m a listener’. She or he hides her name, and I don’t know why. Because I should think for me, it is great, or it is very important to say I am so-and-so and I just wanted to say about this and this and that and that (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

Generally, the chance to speak out to audiences outside their immediate community seems to constitute an important motivating factor for participation in MtF. Therefore the advantages of anonymity may have been substituted by another factor equally effective in motivating reflection and communication. According to the facilitator in Cala, writing for an audience is
“more exciting than putting the stories in a box and there is nothing that comes out” (Virginia Shuku, interview 27.10.02). It therefore seems like the inherent characteristic of the technology contributes positively to creating a critical consciousness, since the chance to communicate to the wider world motivates production of stories and thereby increases reflection. How the opportunity to speak out can itself carry potential for local empowerment is the topic of the next section.

**Mandate the Future: Empowerment on a Global Level**

To insist on a methodology with the ultimate purpose of creating reflection, is according to Freire “to call an armchair revolution” (Freire 1996: 48). This is because reflection in itself constitutes only half of the praxis needed to liberate the oppressed – it is the dialectical process of reflection and action that makes up the process of conscientization (Servaes 1996: 78). If we are to conduct a Freirean analysis of a web project like MtF, we must therefore also look for possible examples of cultural action.

One problem with the Freirean notion of dialogic communication and action is that he gives little attention to the language or form of the communication, devoting most of his discussion to the intentions of communication actions (Servaes 1996: 79). For that reason it is difficult to establish which forms of action qualify according to the theory. However, one way to start is to look at the role he dedicates to the act of ‘speaking a true word’ in the transformation of the world. According to Freire “there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis” (Freire 1996: 68). Thus, to speak a true word, which unveils the oppressive order of the reality, is to transform the world. This can be so since the most sustainable change concerns a transformation in the ability of individuals to take control over their own lives. Once this has been achieved, the people themselves will initiate a multiplicity of other changes. In this perspective the mere act of writing a story of one’s life, exposing the things that have kept you from living the life that you want, can qualify as some kind of cultural action. But a web project like MtF goes further in offering its participants the chance to take action against the reality that they themselves discover: through the web medium the youth are given the opportunity to broadcast their stories and views to the wider world. The act of publishing one’s stories constitutes action in a Freirean sense since it is *action based on reflection*. 

29
However, since Freire based his theory on group dialogue rather than such amplifying media as radio, print and television (Servaes 1996: 79), his concept of action constituted by the broadcasting of messages is too vague to base my analysis on. In order to analyse in depth the empowering potential of the act of publication, I believe it can prove fruitful to introduce some central aspects of another development communication theory – that of community radio.

A combination of the two theories can be rewarding in this context, since the medium under discussion has characteristics consistent with both. While the Internet allows for transmission outside the immediate group physically present, the use of the medium still resembles a dialogue, thanks to the interactive nature of the particular website under discussion. In the next section the act of writing and publishing stories for MtF is considered a cultural action as described by Freirean theory, while the actual potential for local empowerment will be analysed using theories of community radio, developed by among others Robert White and Ruth Teer-Tomaselli.

Access and local control

‘A voice for the voiceless’ is often said to be the mandate and raison d’être for community radio projects (Naughton 1996). This mantra expresses in few words the democratisation of communication that takes place when traditional receivers become senders of information. When asked for the visions of MtF as a project, Worldview International echoes the ethos of community radio. However, in addition to the aim of providing all community members with an opportunity to speak out on issues of concern to them, Worldview aspires to bring the voice of the previously marginalized to the attention of important international decision makers:

The ultimate aim of engaging and encouraging youth to communicate is the synthesis of coherent youth perspectives, needs and solutions they propose to development problems. Fostering such a youth voice would be meaningless if the youth advocacy efforts aren’t brought to the attention of the decision makers, who can propose high level global/regional/country recommendations for implementation (Rudy Edirisinghe, Public Relations Officer of MtF worldwide, e-mail interview 17.12.02).
By encouraging the so-called decision-makers to visit the site, Worldview tries to link local grassroots with empowerment on a global level. If such a link is to be viable, certain requirements on the local level must be met. These requirements are well described in community radio theory and include factors like local control, local participation and general access to communication tools (White 1990). The latter concept, of access, has been the arena for much academic discussion. One approach found its expression in the UNESCO debates of the 1970s, and in this discourse access was defined in terms of

the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organisations (Servaes 1996: 79).

Access according to this definition does not include the right to use the production facilities, but is restricted only to feedback and demands to production organisations. Such access does not characterise a community medium according to the theory. Rather, for it to constitute a democratisation of communication “all of the public should have access to the tools of media production and to technical help for making their own programming” (White 1995: 96). In its new communication strategy UNESCO emphasises this right not only to receive, but also to impart information. The organisation is now encouraging projects that are strengthening communication capacities in the developing countries in order to increase grassroots participation in the communication process. In this perspective it is interesting to see how CIRD evaluates the advantages of the Internet compared to other media used to spur grassroots development:

- We have tried to work with newsletters, which was a success, then radio and camera, which was no success because there was no channel through which we could broadcast our messages. Then MtF came, and immediately the channel was there – they were online and accessible to the rest of the world without having to set up our own broadcasting station (Samantha Fourie, national co-ordinator of MtF, interview 22.10.02).

Their point is simple: while access in community radio or video projects involve a whole set-up of broadcasting facilities, access in Internet-based projects only require a computer and a telephone line.
Community radio projects also have to overcome another important challenge in their effort to provide grassroots people with their own voice. The problem is the limited numbers of community members who have been seen to actively contribute to the radio station, despite the intention to encourage phone-ins, letters and local interviews (Teer-Tomaselli & Mjawucu 2002). A comparison with the web medium reveals interesting features about the sending part of the communication process. While in the case of a radio station, the equipment needed to receive and send messages are two different sets of tools, the equipment for receiving and producing content on the Internet is exactly the same. In front of the computer every reader is potentially a sender, and consequently access to communication tools automatically translates to access in both senses of the concept. Maybe even more important than the immediate access, is the fact that users of an Internet site do not have to be allocated their own programme slots in order to broadcast their views. This quality of the Internet makes contribution of content open for all receivers of information. From this perspective the web medium seems particularly suited for contemporary development communication, where a two-way flow of information is so highly appreciated. The point is further illustrated by the term listener to the radio versus user of the Internet.

From a critical point of view, it is obvious that the success of such a project is conditioned by one very crucial and scarce resource — access to online computers. As we have already seen, the question of access to computer facilities is indeed a relevant question in relation to MfF in South Africa. Even within those communities selected for participation in the project, factors like long distances, expensive transport and knowledge barriers limit the opportunities for some members to sit down in front of the computer. These members, who have to hand over their stories for others to publish, do not get the experience of simultaneously being in the role of a reader and a producer of information. The type of indirect access offered to them is therefore not fully appreciative of the potential of the web medium, even if their participation does constitute some kind of cultural action. Another key problem in the question of access is the price for using the computers. In Rivieronderend the youth have to pay a fee each time they are using the computer, something that prevents many of them from using it at all. In the case of Cala, participants pay a membership fee in order to gain access:
- It is not free, it is free for the members, because they pay the membership fee, but for the general community they pay a fee [each time]. Like if they want to print out a page, they pay a fee, which is a form of fundraising (Virginia Shuku, MtF facilitator in Cala, interview 27.10.02).

According to interviews with the youth from Cala, the annual fee is not of such magnitude that it prevents them from using the computer. In contrast, this seems to be exactly the problem in Riviersonderend. In this township, interviews were conducted with a lot of youth who had never accessed the website precisely because it was unaffordable to them. The different approach of the two projects is another example of the influential role of the local co-ordinator. However, in both cases access to computers is a scarce resource. Limited access, especially for those without financial power, reduces the potential of the project to bring about empowerment for all members. For some members participation in the project may be reduced to only involving the reflection associated with group discussions, something that weakens the potential for conscientization as it is described in Freirean theory. However, even if there is no universal access to computer facilities in the two projects visited, there are still examples of youth members who are able to go online on a weekly basis. Interviews with these participants, who have experienced the thrill of posting a story or a question and getting an answer back, prove that it is possible for the traditional receivers of information to become senders via an online computer. Once a participant is logged on to [www.mandatethefuture.org](http://www.mandatethefuture.org) she is free to interact with the content on an advanced level, thus she is at once a reader and a producer of information.

According to community radio theory, the issue of access is not limited to communication tools; it also concerns the right to participate at all levels within the communication project (Teer-Tomaselli 2001). The South African implementer of MtF sees limited access to communication tools as causing lack of access to other parts of the project:

- Scarc access impacts the project in many ways, because if it is not accessible to everybody, you are limiting the facility to maybe a small segment of the population. The problem that arises out of that is one of monopoly ownership, monopoly control and power. Power then gets more concentrated, and I think that is a very real threat (Wilfred Wenzel, director of CIRD, interview 24.10.02).
In an ideal world, control in grassroots communication projects should be democratically distributed among all community members. At a very minimum it should at least not be allocated according to financial capabilities, as is the case when some members cannot afford transport or a fee to access the project. As long as these members cannot adequately access project facilities, it weakens the empowering potential of the project. Equally important to distribution of control within the local setting, is the allocation of control between the local and the international level of the project. The issue of financial means may again prove to be an illustrative example of how this question influences empowerment on a local level. In the case of MtF funding for the use of the computers was supposed to come from international donors, via Worldview International in Sri Lanka. For a long time, there has been no financial support coming — according to the national co-ordinator in South Africa without any preliminary warning:

- Funding ends formally next year March, but in reality there has been no transferring of funds for quite a long time. And I do not get to know why, the only answer I have been given is that ‘Worldview is considering its commitment to MtF’ (Samantha Fourie, national co-ordinator of MtF, interview 22.10.02).

This exercise of control from above not only put the local groups under financial pressure, but it also came to them in a situation where they did not have any strategy prepared on how to become self-sustaining. That representatives from the local level were not invited to join a discussion prior to the decision to freeze funding violates one very important ideal within community radio theory. According to a community radio manual developed by AMARC\(^7\) Africa, the requirement of community participation should ensure that members of the community are involved in activities such as policymaking and management of the station (AMARC Africa 1998: 23). If community members are not allowed to participate in these processes, it will negatively impact the potential for local empowerment. In the case of MtF the exclusion of participants from the decision-making process may affect the opportunities of the youth participants to continue raising their voices, if the initiative to attract new funding fails.

\(^7\) AMARC is a French acronym for the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters.
Friction between the needs at a local and international level can be expected to occur frequently in web based projects like Mandate the Future. This is true even if the administrative control of the project is allocated at a local level. The conflict arises out of the inherently global character of the project, rooted in the idea of making available the views of local grassroots to the wider world. If this communication project is to succeed, the relations between the global audiences versus the local producers of information have to be considered. One example is the issue of language. As we have already seen, the choice of English as a common language in MtF has contributed to limiting access to the project for some of the members in rural South Africa. In an attempt to solve this problem, the international management of the project has developed software and alternative sites in four alternative languages, none of them South African. If more power and control had been allocated at the local level, one can assume that the South African participants would have chosen different languages, more suitable for their own local context. The choice of new languages illustrates the same problem as we have already seen in regard to the range of pre-programmed topics available for contributors to MtF: they are not optimal in the South African context, yet there is not sufficient control allocated at a local level to change the decisions made.

It is important to see that this problem does not rise out of the technology involved in the project; it would be perfectly possible to set up a locally based website, with local administration and yet with a global audience. The problem rather originates from the decision to include youth from all over the world in the communication exercise. The price for these global ambitions is that is becomes difficult to adjust to contextual differences.

The Empowering Potential of Voicing Out

If one takes time to log onto www.mandatethefuture.org, one will see that despite organisational challenges and limited local control, participation in the project has resulted in a number of stories produced and published on the web. These stories represent the voice of youth representatives from all over the world, but in order to analyse the empowering potential it is not sufficient to note that the stories are there for the world to read. Neither would the number of visiting audiences provide adequate information to evaluate the empowering value of publishing a story on the website. Rather than the fact that stories are available for a global audience, it is the individual feeling of control and ability to raise one’s own voice, which constitutes grassroots empowerment. Unless the individual participant is
aware that the story is published and believes that by submitting it she will be heard by someone, there can be no empowerment. Therefore any discussion about the empowering potential of speaking out through a website must begin with the way the situation is perceived by the participants. According to the facilitator in Cala, the youth in her group is very much aware that their stories are read by some distant others:

- Even by submitting the story in the Internet they know that as soon as you click ‘go’ on the website, the story appears up there somewhere, and somebody reads that story. Because when we were having the event, the youth were asking some questions about the issues that they read on the website. And the answers came within 10 minutes. Like they would ask a question about Aids or something that they don’t understand, and then the answer would come within 15 minutes to that person. So they know that there is somebody, that there is a human being at the end who listens to their stories (Virginia Shuku, MtF facilitator in Cala, interview 27.10.02).

Unfortunately it was only possible to extract data on perceived audiences from the Cala group, since so many of the youth interviewed in Rivieronderend had never sent off a story to MtF. Nevertheless, answers from the youth in Cala reveal a strong feeling of being able to raise a voice by participating in MtF:

- This thing of writing stories and comments, it helps this process of NEPAD, New Partnership for Africa’s Development, because our continent contains youth, disabled, women and men so you need to get comments from all those different stakeholders. Then when they compile the report they see how the youth live, how the women live, how the disabled live. Then this helps to develop this country, to see how we can do it, because if you don’t voice out your problem, nobody will see that you are having a problem, so you have to voice out your problem (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

The explicit reference to an imagined audience is an interesting aspect of the answer above. This presence of a perceived audience is vital to the discussion of empowerment through the web medium, since without any idea about an audience the feeling of speaking out would be less empowering. For the purpose of empowerment, which is constituted by a feeling felt by the youth themselves, it is not important whether or not the imagined concept of audiences matches the characteristics of visitors to the site in reality. The important factor is that there is
an imagined audience in place, in order for the participant to feel that it is meaningful for he or she to voice out an opinion. The idea of an imagined audience can be better understood through Benedict Anderson’s famous concept of *imagined communities*.

Being a sociologist, Anderson uses the term imagined communities to describe the feeling of relatedness that members of modern nation-states feel towards each other (Anderson 1983). Because the members of such communities are very aware that they will never meet in reality and experience the unity with the distant others, what they have is an ‘imagination of a community’. Like in the case of the imagined audiences, the individual feeling of belonging to a community does not depend on whether or not the imagination matches the reality.

According to Anderson the feeling of closeness to people whom you know you will never meet is made possible through modern technology. With the invention of communication technology such as the radio and the telegraph, it is possible to gain access to information about distant places without having to travel there oneself. In this perspective, Internet might be just another vehicle for transporting information about some distant others, with the interesting consequence of creating a new kind of imagined community. While in Anderson’s case the imagination of a larger unity was based on membership of a certain nation state, selection of members to the imagined audiences in the case of MtF seems to be based on other factors. To find out more about how youth participants in MtF choose their imagined audiences, community radio theory may again prove valuable.

According to the theory of community radio, there are two ways of defining a community. It may either be distinguished on the basis of shared geographical location – in which case there can be no imagined audiences in Anderson’s sense – or it can be defined as a social group with common or specific shared interests (UNESCO 2001: 12). Since the objectives of MtF according to their global strategy is to bring the voice of grassroots youth out to important international decision makers, it seems natural that Worldview define the audiences according to shared interests and not based on shared geography. The youth themselves however, may define their audiences either way. Even if it were found that the youth see their group of audiences among their own neighbours, there would still be a potential for empowerment in the sense that participation in the project brings out a voice.
In the interviews conducted, references to perceived audiences can be sorted into two separate groups. Firstly, there is frequent mention of youth participants from other parts of the world. As mentioned earlier, the South African youth feel that by participating in MtF they learn more about the ways that youth in other countries live their lives, as well as get the chance to describe how they themselves see life in South Africa. From the perspective of community radio theory, this group of audiences is defined in terms of common or shared interests. Members of this group are all interested in the problems and living conditions of the world’s youth and they all communicate about these issues through the MtF website. This form of communication, between youth participants within MtF, may be described using words such as sharing, reflection and friendship. Such a version of communication has much in common with the ritual model of communication, proposed to characterise communication in community radio projects. According to Robert White community radio is best described by this perspective since a

    ritual model of communication is not directed toward extension of messages in time and space in order to influence, but toward the creation, representation and celebration of shared belief (White 1990: 9).

The empowering effect of voicing out is thus not only related to the transfer of information across time and space, but also to the kind of reflection that arises out of sharing information across different countries and contexts. A ritual model of communication has also been proposed to characterise the essence of communication in cyberspace:

    [T]he important element in cyber spatial social relations is the sharing of information. It is not sharing in the sense of the transmission of information that binds communities in cyberspace. It is the ritual sharing of information that pulls it together (Carey 1989, as cited in Jones 1995: 19).

The second group of audiences mentioned by the participants is considered to be an older, more powerful group of audiences. Whenever reference is made to this group, it is in relation to their perceived power to change the life of youth globally:
- If we bring the stories to Worldview there will be institutions and government departments who will do the research like you are doing, to get what the youth says, what the women, what the disabled are saying about this and this. Then they compile the stories to see how we best can be developed (male participant, Cala group, interview 27.10.02).

This group of imagined audiences are seen as readers only; they do not contribute with their own stories. Therefore this group is not part of the community, it is rather perceived as an external target group. The aim of the transfer is in this context advocacy work, and according to Worldview this communication has been successful:

Since its inception a few years ago, Mandate The Future has emerged as the vehicle for online advocacy in the South. Internationally Mandate is now recognized as an important voice for Southern youth. We represented the concerns of the southern youth at the main plenary session of the recently concluded WSSD [World Summit on Sustainable Development] in Jo’burg. Mandate the Future also played a central role in the Virtual Forum for the YES [Youth Employment Summit] 2002 summit in Alexandria last September (Rudy Edirisinghe, Public Relations officer of MtF worldwide, e-mail interview 17.12.02).

Without anticipating whether or not Worldview is right in their evaluation of the success of the project, it is possible to state that a web project like MtF exemplifies the potential of the web to bring out the voice of the voiceless to the wider world. Citations from the youth show that this potential is recognised by the participants, something that in itself contributes to empowering the grassroots. Thus the potential to reach out globally can be said to constitute an advantage of the medium in development communication. Without this global scope the communication initiative could easily become an exercise of the voiceless communicating to the other voiceless peoples. The problem however, could be one of communicating inwards. Since the MtF-sponsored computer is very often the only online computer in the village or township, the web medium does not seem very effective for inwards communication within the community. However, as the youth participants did not define their community in terms of geographical shared location, the web might actually be an ideal communication tool between and within the global community of interest.
Conclusion

As we have seen, participation in community discussions, online and in a local setting has a potential for changing the way the youth perceive themselves and the reality in which they have been growing up. The success of this exercise is conditioned by the will of a local facilitator to involve the youth in all phases of the project, as well as the ability to identify relevant and generative issues from within the local context. Another necessary condition is access to online computers, which can be blocked not only by lack of equipment, but also by limited knowledge and financial means. Interviews with the youth in Cala showed that once these conditions are fulfilled, the result is critical reflection associated by Paulo Freire with increased levels of local empowerment. According to the Cala youth the reflection process is strengthened by the global character of the medium, which allows for comparisons between different contexts and set of problems. In the case of the second group, it was difficult to collect reliable data since most of the youth who had contributed to the site were not available. From the ones who were interviewed, it was confirmed that financial constraints as well as knowledge barriers had kept them from accessing the computer.

According to Freire and his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, reflection alone does not constitute the praxis needed to liberate the oppressed. Rather it is the dialectical process of reflection and action that make up the process of conscientization. Opportunity for such action is offered to the participants of MtF in the form of an interactive website, ready to bring the results of their reflection online to the rest of the world. A voice out to the wider world would empower the grassroots inasmuch as they believe someone out there is hearing this voice. Fieldwork conducted among participants in MtF indicates that the youth generally operate with two ‘imagined audiences’. Firstly, they feel that by posting their stories onto the web they are able to communicate in a two-way fashion with other youth participants from all over the world. Out of this ritual sharing of information within the community of youth participants comes a higher level of reflection, fuelled by comparisons between different contexts and set of problems. The second group of perceived audiences is a more powerful group of government departments and international organisations like the United Nations. Thus, another empowering effect of participation in this web project is the perceived ability to voice concerns to important international decision makers.
That the project is able to offer its empowering potential on two levels simultaneously – the local and the global – seems to be one of the advantages of involving the web medium in development communication. Yet it is also from the global character of the project that some of its problems arise. Because of the global scope it is difficult to make contextual adjustments, for instance in the range of pre-determined categories for story production or in the choice of one common language. Both these factors may limit the empowering potential of the project. In order to avoid sacrificing local empowerment in favour of a global scope, it is important to negotiate sufficient amounts of local control. It therefore seems as if the empowering potential of web based projects such as MtF is conditioned by carefully balancing the conflicting needs of the local and the global level of the project.

In the analysis of this thesis my focus has been on the empowering potential on an individual level. Given that development is not only about individual changes, further studies could be undertaken in relation to the impact of projects like MtF on a broader community level. Such future research needs to include more contextual factors than this present one. If the set of methodologies is refined in order to include context, one could possibly also filter out external influences contributing to conscientization.
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White, Robert

White, Robert
Questionnaire:
Youth participating on www.mandatethefuture.org

Questions about yourself:

1. I am a
   Girl □
   Boy □

2. How often do you visit the site www.mandatethefuture.org?
   Every day □
   A few times every week □
   A few times every month □
   A few times this year □
   Never □
   Other:

3. Do you wish you could visit the site more often?
   Yes □
   No □
   I don’t know □
4. How often do you write a story for www.mandatethefuture.org?

Every day
A few times every week
A few times every month
A few times this year
Never

Other:

5. How often do you write a comment to www.mandatethefuture.org?

Every day
A few times every week
A few times every month
A few times this year
Never

Other:

6. Please mention one story you have written for www.mandatethefuture.org?

7. Did you learn anything from writing this story? In case you did, what?
8. Why do you participate on www.mandatethefuture.org?

(Cross out the box that you feel describe yourself best.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I participate because I like to learn about computers.</th>
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<td>I strongly agree</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>I participate because I like to communicate with people from other countries.</th>
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<td>I strongly agree</td>
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<th>I participate because it makes me think about what I can do with my life.</th>
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<td>I strongly agree</td>
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<th>I participate because there is nothing else to do.</th>
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<td>I strongly agree</td>
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<th>I participate because I like to tell people what I think about things.</th>
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<td>I strongly agree</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>I participate because it makes me feel proud of myself.</th>
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<td>I strongly agree</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>I participate because my friends do so.</th>
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<tr>
<td>I strongly agree</td>
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Focus group questionnaire:
Youth participating on www.mandatethefuture.org

1 Use of the site
(Findings from this section will be used partly as descriptive information to present the case study, and partly to discuss the level of participation in production of messages. Theoretically it relates to the "action part" of Freire's pedagogy and to the issue of participation in community radio theory.)
- How often do you enter the Internet? And MtF pages?
- How much time do you spend on MtF pages each time you are there?
- Do you wish you could spend more time with the computers?
- If so, what prevents you from spending as much time as you want to?
- How often do you contribute a story?
- How often do you contribute a comment?

2 Increased communication skills
(Findings from this section will be used to discuss the question of actual presentation and communication skills acquired through the project)
- Have you learned something from this project? What?
- Before you started participating in this project, did you know how to operate a computer?
- What do you know about computers now?
- Have you learned anything about writing?

3 Empowering aspects
A (Finding from this section will be used to discuss empowerment in terms of gained confidence and in terms of finding a voice and articulating a view of the world.)
- Why do you write stories for the web?
- How does it make you feel when you see that your story is on the Internet?
- Do you believe that anybody outside this town read your story? Who?
- Have your friends or family seen your stories on the web?
- What did they think?
- Do you think they can learn anything from your story?
- Do you often get comments on your stories?
- Did you ever get a comment from somebody in another country?
- Do you like getting comments on your stories? Why/why not?
- The facilitator told me that they are trying to get important people in United Nations and maybe the government to read your story, what do you think about that? Is it important to you?
- Do you feel differently about yourself in any way? How?

B (Finding from this section will be used to discuss empowerment in terms of increased levels of reflection around one's social reality, and in terms of increased knowledge about the topics selected for stories.)
- What do you write stories about / what topic is your favourite?
- Why did you choose this topic?
- Have you learned anything new about these things after you started participating?
- Are there any problems in your life that you have learned how to solve through the site?
- Have you changed your behaviour in any way after you started participating in the project?

C (Finding from this section will be used to discuss empowerment in terms of negotiating identity and trying out new identities.)
- Do you always use your own name to sign a story you have written?
- If not, what kinds of names do you use?
- Do you sometimes tell a story that happened somebody else and pretend it was you?
- Do you think want the others write on the Internet is always true?
- To the girls: Do you sometimes pretend to be a boy on the Internet?
- To the boys: Do you sometimes pretend to be a girl on the Internet?

D (Finding from this section will be used to discuss empowerment in terms of altered gender relations)
To the girls:
- Do you feel that you contribute more, equal or less than the boys on the web?
- Do you feel that you contribute more, equal or less than the boys at school?
To the boys:
- Do you feel that you contribute more, equal or less than the girls on the web?
- Do you feel that you contribute more, equal or less than the girls at school?

4 Who is perceived to be the community?

(Findings from this session relates to community radio theory, and the question about who is perceived to be the audiences of the produced texts.)
- Have you made any new friends in the project?
- Have you made any new friends outside this village?
- Do you comment on the other stories?
- Why do you comment?
- Who do you believe read your stories?

5 Control of the site

(Relates to the issue of local control and ownership as it is expressed in community radio theory.)
- How do you decide on what story you want to write?
- How do you get the story pasted on the web?
- Is there something you are not allowed to do on the web? (Are there norms and rules that regulate the community?)
- What language do you write in?
Interview with staff members of CIRD
(Centre for Integrated Rural Development):

1 The issue of control of the medium and its use:

(Administration)
- What is the relationship between CIRD and Worldview in Sri Lanka?
- How independent are you from Worldview in Sri Lanka when it comes to
  a) The administration of the project?
  b) The choice of topics for stories to the web?
  c) Funding for the project?
- Where does the funding come from?
- How do you select a community to work in with the web project?
- How are the youth selected for participation in the project?
- Do you involve the youth of the community in the administration of the project?
- Do you involve other representatives from the community into the administration of
  the project?
- How many people from each community are involved?

(Production of messages)
- What is the process of production of stories for the web? Who
  a) Decides on the topic?
  b) Writes the story?
  c) Published the story?
- What is the role of the facilitator/coordinator in the process of writing the stories?
- What are the rules for participating on the site (written or informal)?
- Do you ever censor stories on the web?
2 The issue of English a language for publication:

- What is the language of instruction?
- What is the language of writing?
- How do you feel that the use of English for the stories influence the empowering potential?

3 Who is the community, or audiences of the site?

- How important is it to you that the web has got users in other countries?
- Do you encourage the youth participants to comment on stories from other countries?
- Do you emphasis the international connection to the youth in your project?

4 Exploration of identity on the web:

- The computer allows every participant to be anonymous in front of the online audiences, do you believe that the youth sometimes take the opportunity to be someone else on the Internet?
- Do you as a facilitator know support or sanction them if they operate with alternative identities?