STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE

Kim Hancock, India, Information and Communication Technology

Assessing the barriers to access for Women Soochnapreneurs in rural India

Between 2001 and 2012, the number of phone subscribers in India grew from just 45 million to over 900 million, globally only behind China. Since then, India’s IT sector has grown enormously, with smartphone technology and internet access becoming widespread. Despite the rapid rise of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) in India, large disparities continue to exist, particularly along the axes of geography and gender. Initiatives such as Digital India have addressed inequities of access, however, there is a need for gender-aggregated data on the status, progress, and proliferation of online information.

I became interested in ICTs for development through my mutual interests in international relations and computer science and while studying political science in New Delhi through the Middlebury in India program. During the program, I reached out to the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) to learn more about grassroots initiatives to address information inequality. While I was sent home in March due to COVID-19, I have been able to work with a team at DEF analyzing social media posts by writing a program to conduct a social network analysis.

With a Fulbright grant, I plan on working with DEF to collect data on the progress of their Soochnapreneur (information entrepreneur) program. The program was established in 2017 to strengthen the poor information ecosystem in rural communities by building information centers and training young entrepreneurs in digital literacy. The program targets backwards districts where many people are dependent on government entitlement programs. Through information resource centers, Soochnapreneurs help community members use technology to access information pertaining to banking, retirement programs, food schemes, etc, in exchange for a small fee. The Soochnapreneur program started in 5 districts, but the success of the model has led to its incorporation in over 100 districts within DEF plus many other organizations.

Over the last few months, I have been in contact with Anulekha Nandi from DEF. While speaking with her about my interest in a longer-term research project, she spoke about a need to assess the progress made through the Soochnapreneur program as it has expanded rapidly in the last three years. The Soochnapreneur program has so far trained 3 groups of people--100 people in 2017, 100 women in 2018, and 100 differently-abled people in 2019. Specifically, she mentioned the need to analyze existing data which is scattered across different locations as well as collect new data over a longer time period. I spent a number of weeks doing a literature review of existing work surrounding digital empowerment, and found that many studies expressed a need for gender-aggregated data in particular. When I told Anulekha about my specific interests, she introduced me to Arpana Sharma, who will be my community mentor.

My proposed project is a comparative study between men and women’s cell phone use through the lens of the Soochnapreneur model. I would conduct quantitative research to study the differences in internet use between women and men in information-dark regions of Rajasthan, specifically Alwar and Barmer. This location is perfect due to the large number of Soochnapreneurs as well as its proximity to Delhi, where Arpana resides. The methodology will be based on existing case studies and training reports conducted by DEF fellows. These focus on teaching and assessing skills such as using “MeraApp,” an android app developed by DEF to help facilitate the spread of useful information. During phase 1 of my project, I plan on creating a descriptive survey to give to Soochnapreneurs to assess their own digital skills. This will be created with the current Soochnapreneur team at DEF to ensure that the questions are relevant and quantitative. I seek to collect data on women’s and men’s current levels of internet literacy skills specific to the Soochnapreneur training model which can then be compared on the basis of gender. The target group of Soochnapreneurs is youth populations (18-25). Phase 2 of my project will be using random sampling to build another survey to give to those who have worked with Soochnapreneurs. Existing field reports on the Soochnapreneurs point to a need for better documentation of services as well as a lack of dependency and availability of the MeraApp. These are issues that I will ensure are addressed in the survey, for example, by asking specific questions about which features of the app people use regularly. Depending on the local context, I also hope to conduct quantitative interviews where I ask Soochnapreneurs and other community members about their technical skills relevant to the program.

I will be in continued communication with Arpana and the rest of the team throughout the next 8 months to continue planning the details of this project proposal. Given the current context of COVID-19 desperately affecting rural communities, right now there is a heightened need for information regarding government entitlements. The next 8 months will be hard to predict in terms of how these communities will continue to be adversely impacted, and Arpana is willing to help me build my methodology as the program progresses into 2021.

The final phase of the project will be writing a final report about the key differences between men and women’s ability to utilize the Soochnapreneur model to find and use critical information online, as well as barriers to access for women to become Soochnapreneurs in the first place. Such a report will be useful for DEF so they can adapt the Soochnapreneur training sessions to better support women Soochnapreneurs and the people they serve based on the key differences between the skillsets of men and women. In addition, I will make the report available to local agencies and government organizations. Since the Soochnapreneur model is self-sustaining within the local community, these reports are crucial in ensuring that the change happening at the grassroots level is heard by higher authorities. With my strong background in computer science developing applications, I would also be able to help improve the user-interface and capabilities of the MeraApp depending on the need, such as including better data logging capabilities for users of the app.

Outside of the project, I plan on engaging with members of the community through volunteering to help teach students about digital literacy, which I have done at Bowdoin through a club I lead mentoring students living in a subsidized housing community in Portland. I am also a dancer and would love to find a dance studio where I could take traditional classes. In addition, I am planning on applying for the 3-month language intensive program before the start of my project to improve my Hindi. I took over 200 hours of Hindi with the Zabaan language learning institution in Delhi and am excited to continue learning in India. I understand that the language barrier will still be challenging, but I am confident that DEF will provide the support necessary to ensure that I have an interpreter when needed.

Through a Fulbright scholarship, I will be able to pursue my interest in understanding digital empowerment in a world where information inequality intersects with many other forms of inequality. Digital technology is a tool that is becoming increasingly available in India; the important question now is how it can be effectively used to empower everyone, notably including women, backwards castes, and rural communities. I am excited to carry out my research project as well as get involved in the local community to continue learning how to engage in another culture in an open-minded and unbiased way.