Case study: Mobile devices, Wi-Fi, and the next generation of media producers

Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) and Nokia's Wi-Fi Anywhere project

Summary

In 2006, as San Francisco entered into intense negotiations with providers bidding to take control of San Francisco's municipal wireless initiative, the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) joined forces with the Mayor's Office and Nokia to pilot Wi-Fi Anywhere, a project which allows disadvantaged youth access to mobile device technology in a Wi-Fi-enabled landscape. The project seeks to demonstrate what is possible for our communities and young people when they are given free, unlimited Internet access and the tools with which to document and share their environments, challenges, and experiences.

The problem

The number one obstacle to the production of media by underserved urban youth is by no means a lack of things to say, but rather tools to say it with. As a nonprofit, even a media arts center that works in the field of advanced media technology, BAVC constantly struggles with a lack of resources and equipment. These constraints limit the number of students we are able to train and mentor as well as the amount and quality of the media those students are able to produce. In 2005 and 2006, in partnership with the Community Technology Foundation of California (CTFC), we had the opportunity to work with over twenty organizations throughout the state of California through the Digital Storytelling Institute, a project in which nonprofit organizations received production training, technology recommendations, and technical support from BAVC to produce community stories and implement media technology programs. Similarly, and to a greater degree, we saw through that project how few of the available technologies are being utilized by nonprofits that lack the training, knowledge, and tools with which to produce their own media.

The digital divide that BAVC has battled since its founding over three decades ago still exists, but it continues to take new forms. In 2007, while businesses and privileged families outfit their homes and office places with one-gigabit wireless networks and plasma screens with hundreds of channels on HDTV, the majority of students who enter our programs do not have Internet access or computers, let alone video cameras, at home. Our underserved communities and the nonprofit organizations that serve them stand to be left behind again.

Addressing the problem

Through Wi-Fi anywhere, BAVC sought to address the split in technology access through three components: mutually beneficial industry partnerships, an unwavering focus on the training and production of *meaningful* community-based media, and a rethinking and adaptation to distribution channels that more closely match the technical quality and messages.

Nonprofits often have a disinclination to partner with companies, or see it as a necessary evil. BAVC feels that partnering with like-minded companies is not only necessary, but is mutually beneficial and stands to elevate the technical capacities of community-based organizations and young people. In the case of Wi-Fi Anywhere, partnering with a corporation as our initial step became a win-win situation: our young people get tools, and Nokia gets more people to use (and to purchase) the tools and services they provide. We developed a similar relationship with PureDigital, a company that has begun to produce a very easy-to-use $99

video camera. These partnerships are a readily replicable model, with hundreds of communities poised to utilize municipal Wi-Fi, and hundreds of competing technology providers seeking to advertise their services and Internet-enabled mobile products. As a nonprofit, we found ourselves in the position to address the problem by serving as the broker for these relationships between industry and the communities we serve.

Put a video-enabled cell phone into the hands of a young person standing in a Wi-Fi hotspot, and you have an "instant mediamaker." Internet access! YouTube! Blogging! But how can we use free Internet tools to enrich and improve the lives of young people in our communities? The tools alone are not enough; the other half of the digital divide is access to educational opportunities, particularly advanced ones. For this reason, BAVC piloted Wi-Fi Anywhere in conjunction with our existing after-school advanced video training programs and local public schools. What we found was that using mobile devices not only enabled a smaller technical learning curve for participants, it also freed up program time to focus on media literacy and story development. In the end, we find that although the technical quality of the resulting video may not compare to the high definition video cameras we use in other training programs, the overly simplified process enables intensified focus on the content of the pieces.

Similarly, as we share the media with others and use it as organizing tools, we must begin to distribute pieces in new ways. Again, we find that a potential weakness of the technology (small resolution, poor sound quality) is not necessarily a disadvantage, because the pieces are small enough to be directly distributed by the mediamakers themselves -- via the Internet or directly from one device to another.

IMPACT

Overall, the impact of using mobile devices for digital community-based storytelling is that it has enabled more of our young people to produce more media and disseminate it more rapidly. In its pilot phase, the project has been limited only by the lack of functional municipal Wi-Fi, meaning our students have inexpensive devices with which to record video and access the Internet to blog and communicate, but they can only access the Internet where Wi-Fi is available. As a demonstration, Wi-Fi towers were installed at two local high schools, providing those students with a mini-ecosystem of free Wi-Fi with mobile devices that allow them utilize it.

As we negotiate this landscape, the impact of the project -- for us, as well as for the youth we serve -- has been learning to balance the increased production abilities with a continued focus on producing meaningful, high-quality media. As producers, we have been able to pressure for municipal Wi-Fi, simply by connecting underserved youth to their local government through this partnership and allowing them to show us all what a Wi-Fi world could look like. In January, 2007, the City of San Francisco signed a deal for municipal Wi-Fi with Google and Earthlink, which means that our young people are poised to be the first utilizers of this technology, and the explorers of its possibilities.

The Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) is the nation's largest noncommercial media arts center. We are a state-of-the-art production facility, an affordable training center, and a home base for the next generation of independent media producers. For more about the projects mentioned in this case study, visit bavc.org, bavc.org/nextgen, digitalstorytelling.zerodivide.org, and nokiausa.com.