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Computer scientists help Indian villagers share stories across the digital divide

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Computer scientists at Swansea University are working on a collaborative project that is using new mobile phone technologies to help villagers in India record and share their stories and experiences.

And it is believed that the technology could be adapted to provide consumers in the UK with new ways of creating and editing videos, music and pictures to share with other users.

The StoryBank project is providing people in the Indian village of Budikote, 100km from Bangalore, with mobile devices that allow them to make videos, record sound and take photographs, and then edit the material into short films or "stories".

Although Budikote does have access to PCs, the Internet and mobile phones, access is limited and technology is not as central to the life of the village as it is to communities in the UK.

Dr Matt Jones, who manages the project at Swansea University, said: "The people of Budikote have a strong tradition of visual and oral history, so we were interested in how we could develop digital technology to enable them to communicate their stories in new ways."

The team placed a touch screen in a covered public area of the village. The StoryBank digital library presents a collage of pictures representing the stories that villagers have created. Touching the screen and using a radio tuner-style knob allows users to cycle through the stories and to choose which they want to see and listen to.

Stories created by the villagers can be "gifted" to the StoryBank by using wireless connections from their mobile devices and uploading videos and pictures to the system. In the same way, users can download stories from the StoryBank to their mobiles.

"The mobile phone digital story authoring application we have developed is giving members of this isolated Indian community a new, lasting record of individual stories, shared experiences and history. The digital library will have a wide reach and should be a useful resource for the whole community," said Dr Jones, who is based in the Future Interaction Technology Laboratory at Swansea University's Department of Computer Science.

The project is the result of an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) initiative to bring together scientists, sociologists and other academics with an interest in finding new ways of narrowing the global digital divide.

Digital technologies are impacting on society as never before, but many communities and around the world – in the UK and Europe as well as in India and Africa – are not benefiting fully from the opportunities that the technologies offer. The EPSRC initiative aims to enable everyone to make full use of digital technology and services.

The project partners include Surrey University, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University London and Nottingham Trent University, as well as a researcher employed on a full time basis in India.

Dr Jones added: "This technology is potentially very interesting to organisations such as YouTube, the online video sharing community, and Nokia as it provides consumers with everything they need to capture and edit videos, pictures and music on their mobile devices.

"The videos can be sent to other devices, computers and websites, giving consumers immense flexibility with how they make their stories available to other people.

"We have been lucky in that we have a strong storytelling and technology base in Wales, notably through BBC Wales, which we believe is a leading player in the digital story movement in Europe.

"We hope that we will be able to make good use of the technology developed by this project to enable communities in Wales and further afield to capture and share their stories more effectively."

The 18-month, EPSRC-funded project, worth over £400,000, ends in February 2008. For further details about the project,

please visit <http://www.cs.swansea.ac.uk/storybank/>

Bethan Evans | Quelle: alphagalileo

Weitere Informationen: www.swansea.ac.uk