Special Lecture on 
Voice-based Social Media for Rural India

Mr. Neil Patel  
Ph.D. Student, Dept. of Computer Science  
Stanford University, California

Abstract:

Mobile phones are revolutionizing how poor and isolated communities around the world access information. However, thus far for the most part information services have treated users as passive knowledge consumers, and not as active producers. The true potential of the network lies in the ability to connect to new sources of knowledge, including your peers. Unfortunately, due to limitations of literacy, education and access, it is difficult for many people to interact with and author text. To address this limitation, we have implemented Avaaj Otalo (literally, "voice stoop") for farmers in rural Gujarat to access and share agricultural information over the phone. Callers dial Avaaj Otalo through a regular phone number and navigate automated prompts to access (among other features) a voice forum where farmers can record questions, listen to questions and answers of other farmers, and answer questions themselves.

We piloted AO in January 2009 with 50 farmers; none had significant prior experience with computers or automated phone services. The system was enthusiastically received, serving 3500 calls in the first month (over 2 calls per farmer per day). The question and answer forum was the most popular feature, and developed into a lively social space with the emergence of communication norms, group moderation, and a demand for mechanisms to manage identity and reputation. In this talk I will discuss these and other key findings from the 7-month pilot, as well as future directions for usage study and design of AO.