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AMRS 

Celebrating humanity through immersion



Being involved in Google's 'Internet Saathi' program in rural India transformed Matt Beal's approach to, and definition of, effective research.

India is experiencing a digital revolution, with the world's second largest internet population of more than 400 million users. Yet, according to a 2017 IMAI-Kantar IMRB report titled *Internet in India 2017*, only 35 per cent of these users are women—shocking considering females comprise almost half of the population. Some have never used or even heard of the internet.

These figures are driving the Indian government's ambition to bring online infrastructure and knowledge to all of its citizens. Yet, to drive digital transformation in this large and diverse country, the internet must be made meaningful for and accessible to everyone—women included. Providing digital access and unlocking its benefits to women in parts of rural India are essential.

Internet Saathi aims to bridge the digital literacy gender divide

Google's digital literacy program 'Internet Saathi' was launched as part of its 'Womenwill' initiative in July 2015 in conjunction with Tata Trusts—and has since positively impacted the lives of almost 22 million Indian women.

The program name translates to 'internet friend' in Hindi and was modelled after India's traditional communication system where Saathis (teachers) are like the village postmen—a single point of contact between women in the village and information from the outside world. Through this program, participating Saathis are given internet-connected smartphones, taught how to use them, and then sent out to teach other women in their own communities and in neighbouring villages.

Google engaged Kantar to measure the impact of this pioneering scheme, and doing so was a transformative experience. Measuring the program's impact entailed much more than standard research. Using a 'test versus control' method, we analysed the differences between the villages where Saathi was implemented and those it had yet to reach. But this was not enough.

The villages selected were often several hours away from any major cities with simple facilities and infrastructure—and as such, immersion in the pilot villages was critical.

Powerful and emotive first-hand stories opened my eyes to the true value of Internet Saathi and helped refine our questionnaire. A local lens proved to be imperative not only to refine the survey, but also to select villages, analyse data, and provide cultural context.

Immersion influenced and changed my etic viewpoints

Before fieldwork began and upon arriving at these rural locations, I harboured concerns that Internet Saathi could encroach on established cultural traditions. I thought that there was no need for the internet in these small, and often isolated, communities. I also believed that the private sector should be focused on providing school supplies, safe running water, and improved farming equipment.

I was quickly proved wrong. My etic view was reversed and aligned with what appeared to be the majority emic opinion—provide us with the right tools and we will learn and improve our communities ourselves. Yes, behaviour change programs do need to be incredibly aware of established cultures and traditions—and we see low level concerns from this research—but, anecdotally, I saw none of this negativity with people demonstrating only pride, determination, and a willingness to share real-life stories about how the internet has improved their lives for the better.

Immersion provided powerful, human truths that illuminated our quant findings

Talking to women involved in Saathi revealed the power of information. We spoke to women trained by Saathis who, after viewing online videos, had set up their own businesses based what they learnt and the skills they'd gained. These businesses were successful in providing economic growth for both those women and their communities—about half of the total household income in our test villages.

One Saathi told us that her main aim is to teach others but the skills she has learned have also benefited her personally. She used YouTube to teach her how to stitch and find new designs and eventually became skilled enough to create intricate stitch designs and sell her creations within her community for weddings, informal events, and in the market—a reflection of the commitment and skills that can flourish by providing access to information.

But the benefits we saw were not just personal—more often they were altruistic and community driven. One story, in particular, grabbed my

attention when a Saathi informed us:

'There was viral fever in our village, so I searched on the internet for what could have caused it. I discovered on that there was an issue with the public well. We emptied the well, taking all the water out and cleaning it properly using purifying medicines. We then fixed a purification cap on every water tap at every house. I also came to know that the drainage water also starts to stick to the taps, so we cleaned all that. Since that time, we have not had as much viral infection in the village.'

This simple access to information and committed pro-activity among trained women had significantly improved healthcare in the village and eradicated a potentially dangerous and life-threatening spread of infection.

Collaboration was key: immersion has changed how I approach my work

Trust and experience were essential—strict timelines meant we had to work closely, rapidly, and in-person, whenever possible. Access to the wider expertise of Google and across Kantar influenced the process of measuring the impact. Input from public sector consultants, advanced analytics doctors and cultural observers was invaluable.

This type of research takes significant time and effort to get right and relies on a collaborative approach and an open mindset. It was critical to come face-to-face with the environment, personalities and enthusiasm for the program in India, which ultimately resulted in us together uncovering amazing stories and powerful insights. All these elements contributed to a truly worthwhile piece of work that celebrates humanity—and have influenced how I approach research and reports for the better.

MATT BEAL, SENIOR RESEARCH CONSULTANT, KANTAR



In May, Matt Beal and Ashley Woods (Google Asia Pacific) won the ESOMAR Best Presentation Award APAC 2019 for their presentation, *Internet Saathi: Building a Digital India for All: Measuring the short to long-term impact of digital literacy education in rural India.*

