LEGIT: Media for Open Governance

Dr Emile Devereaux

Executive Summary

The production team LEGIT believes that the precise and often impenetrable texts that surround India’s legal procedures can become more easily accessible and open for discussion once re-articulated as visual media. Working with communities in Delhi, Bangalore, and West Bengal, LEGIT explored design tools focussed on three initial topics of concern: disability rights, food security and protection of access to water. For example, LEGIT engaged students in discussions on the topic of on-going water shortages in Kalimpong, West Bengal through participatory methods of animation production. Partnerships with the Alternative Law Forum and Quicksand facilitated connections with communities in Bangalore campaigning for water rights and working to support state-sponsored food programmes for impoverished children. Access to Internet technologies is limited in these communities, requiring engagement in “on-the-ground” approaches including the distribution of print materials. LEGIT also developed an innovative web-based mapping platform to support on-going conversations across communities. The flexible format accommodates the shifting terrain of legislation and connects by shared topics of concern, creating networks between geographically dispersed communities throughout India and potentially internationally. The bringing together of textual and conversational formats alongside video, animation and sound, allows for further interrogation of the relationship between legal discourse and visual media.

Partner Organisations

Alternative Law Forum (Bangalore), PRS Legislative Research (New Delhi), Quicksand (Bangalore)

Researchers and Project Partners

Dr Emile Devereaux, Principal Investigator, University of Sussex
Consultants
Radhamohini Prasad, Filmmaker (India), Alexander Jolliffe, Animator (UK-original UnBox Fellow), Thomas Keene, Web Developer (UK)
Summary report

The main objectives of the LEGIT project are:

1. To research and explore imaginative approaches that rearticulate legislative content by working with communities in India
2. To disseminate media works about legislative policy to relevant audiences
3. To use media and Internet-based forms to generate discourse around public policy and legislation
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of applying such media and internet approaches to legislative content

INDIA-BASED COLLABORATIONS

Our India-based partner organisations helped us to access and understand legislative policies in India, each demonstrating different modes of connecting communities with media. LEGIT reached out to local communities engaged with our chosen subject areas of disability rights, food security and fundamental rights to water access, establishing connections in three geographically dispersed and culturally diverse areas of India, both urban and rural:

Bangalore, Karnataka

Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore, India—Lawrence Liang, one of the founding directors of ALT, describes law as a practice rather than a disciplinary area of study. This critical legal framework and active and community-driven approach supports on-going legal interventions and drives policy changes within India. We also engaged in discussions with ALT member Clifton Rosario, Supreme Court Advisor for the Rights to Food.
DJ Halli, Bangalore, India—July 2013 marked the death of a five-year-old girl due to malnutrition in the DJ Halli slum in Bangalore, a tragedy considered particularly outrageous due to its location in the IT capital, drawing international media coverage (Balakrishnan, 2013). In October 2013 we travelled to DJ Halli to follow-up several months after the media fervour with mother Murugamma and 11-year old sister Ruth, and to witness developments in governmental policies since the widespread media publicity around problems with the government run food schemes (Anganwadi centres).

MARAA, Bangalore, India—This media and arts collective engages with residents of the DJ Halli slum, providing a communication link across volunteers, social workers, food centre employees, NGOs and policy makers. Working with MARAA, we produced print materials to inform residents of DJ Halli about their local Anganwadi, legally-established centres established to provide nutrition and healthcare for children.

People’s Campaign For the Right to Water, Karnataka, India—Interviews were conducted with members of this organisation who work towards water governance.
Quicksand, Bangalore, India—Quicksand works with organisations to design sustainable services including sanitation for slums.
Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore, India—LEGIT presented work to media students, 24 October 2013, at this internationally regarded design school in Bangalore (Hansa Thapliyal, filmmaker and Srishti professor pictured below with students).

Delhi, Haryana
PRS Legislative Research, New Delhi, India—PRS provides open-access research on India’s legislative process, including up-to-date summaries of pending policies.

Disability Rights Group, New Delhi, India—video interviews were conducted with Javed Abidi, founder of this organisation on the pending Rights for Persons with Disabilities Bill.

Kalimpong, West Bengal
While activist groups advocate for policy changes in urban centres like Bangalore, the day to day struggles of more rural areas receive very little attention. Severe water shortages and concerns about water privitisation affect the daily lives of residents in this region, producing a mature sense of political awareness even among children.

Kalimpong College, Kalimpong, West Bengal, India—The still marginal position of this local college is reflected by its history as stated on the current website.
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College was originally established “with the aim of ‘providing higher education to the people of the backward place of Kalimpong’” (kalimpongcollege.org). Approximately twenty students from Kalimpong College engaged in discussions about access to water prior to our attending our animation workshop on 11th October, followed up by a screening of finished works in 10 December 2013.


Dr. Graham’s Homes, Kalimpong, West Bengal, India—A home for orphaned and abandoned Anglo-Indian children.
PRODUCTION METHODS and OUTREACH

The imaginative approaches that we developed for generating discussions around legislative content were tailored to fit the circumstances of the community with whom we were working. Some of the techniques included:

a. Paper-based exercises and story-boarding “blocks”—These methods work best alongside another event or conference, functioning primarily as listening tools with outreach to a more generalised audience. As tactile, interactive, and visual forms involving movement and pay, they are not restricted by language barriers and can be conducted in a variety of international locations. These approaches allow us to hear what social issues and topics participants are concerned with at any particular moment and help us to identify topics for future development (UnBox Festival, February 2013 and Alchemy Festival, April 2013).
b. Animation workshops—Workshops consist of a brief screening of animation works and historical overview to introduce potential animation techniques. The workshop participants, children and young adults from the ages of 8-18, came prepared to discuss the topic of water access, a subject of daily concern in the lower Himalayan districts (Kalimpong, West Bengal, October 2013).

c. Print materials—The DJ Halli slums require a very direct communication strategy, one based on information distribution and printed flyers (Bangalore, October and December 2013). Media technologies within this location draw excessive attention to themselves, adding an element of spectacle that hinders
d. Video interviews—Following up with initial informal discussions, a number of video interviews are conducted. This method works well with activist and policy-based organisations and with members of our partner organisations as a means of drawing on their expertise. This method proves the most time-efficient for producing a final product and is comfortable to those working professionally on the topic, but cause discomfort in many members of the community (January-December 2013).
e. Co-designed media production (photography and animation)—These techniques are the most experimental, allowing for the production of creative works that express a number of cultural viewpoints and languages. On-the-ground guidance is required from start to completion, however, which proves difficult with international collaborations. An example of this process includes a production based on Nepali story-telling traditions and an animated folktale expressing contemporary concerns of water privitisation (October and December 2013).

f. Lectures and presentations—India-based presentations of the project have taken place at Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology (Bangalore, 24 October 2013) and at the International Institute of Information Technology
(Bangalore, May 2014). Earlier versions of the project were presented at the UnBox Festival in Delhi in February 2013. Additionally, the project has been presented as part of a MA New Media seminar and public lecture in the Visual Culture Program at San Jose State, California, 7 November 2013.

g. Web-development—While “on the ground” production methods allow for establishing connections with communities, the web platform we developed allows for gathering the disparate conversations and media works in one place, connecting them thematically and spanning a wide geographical scope. Works and comments can be uploaded to the site on an on-going basis from any international location. To view the web prototype that we have developed and tested please see: http://legit.theanthillsocial.co.uk. In the following phase of the project will be developing the piece into “LawDigital” and transferring it to the LawDigital domain.

![LawDigital Web Prototype](image)

**PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND FUTURE PLANS**

After researching a number of web-based formats for our prototype, we customized our own platform based around a digital cartography mapping format developed by Ushahidi. “Ushahidi” is the Swahili word for testimony (Ushahidi.com). We chose to follow their coding approach in order to retain the personal and creative aspects of our community-based media formats, to allow for the on-going broadcasting of personal voices “on the ground,” even though digital mapping formats in the era of Big-Data tend towards surveillance and panopticon-like vision. The Ushahidi platform also has the ability to expand to an international context and allows for thematic searching, which could work
especially well for future development of *LawDigital*—in connecting international discussions on access to water, for example. Recent publicity about the privitisation of water which has been shut off from homes in Detroit, Michigan, could potentially link directly to discussions we’ve explored in Bangalore and Kalimpong (Lukacs 2014).

While restricting our research to three legislative topics was still potentially overly ambitious, approaching multiple legislative policies has been essential for discovering how differences in topic areas result in unique sets of practical considerations, ultimately impacting *digital forms*. Perhaps the most informative aspects of this research, definitely those that I’ve found most thought provoking, concern undertakings where digital media production has reached these limits. I’d like to briefly describe one example.

Importantly, a crucial aspect of this research has explored the limitations of media communication. While at times frustrating, the struggles we encountered in developing work directly with communities on the topic of food security exemplifies the gulf that still exists between certain legislation policies, communities, and forms of media communication. Various forms of corruption have produced a climate of fear that obstructs the video interviewing process. In addition, the communities who could most benefit from clarity and changes in legislative policies in this case, the malnourished living in slums, are not in a position to engage in media production nor do they often get to speak for themselves. Given these conditions, *LEGIT* undertook a very basic communication task to distribute simple flyers (translations in Hindi and Kannada) to inform residents where they could locate their nearest government-sponsored food centres. The difficulty of this seemingly straight-forward exercise illuminated unforeseen sets of problems particular to the “off the grid” space of slums, where terrain and decisions constantly shift and information cannot be solidified.

For future development, it could be useful to revisit the obstacles presented by this location. As a starting point, centre workers, volunteers, activists, NGO’s and social workers could benefit from digital cartography tools to help shape, connect, and consolidate their work and conversations. In this case, the digital tools work alongside pre-established institutional frameworks and organisations.
and only indirectly link with residents of DJ Halli through the individuals working on their behalf.

**LawDigital**

The next step involves further development and expansion of the web-based platform, *LawDigital*. In the short term, I am applying for a development grant from Sussex University. I have also recently established additional connections through the RCUK Digital Economy Community and Culture Network +, the Bangalore-based International Institute of Information Technology and company developing digital simulations to address social problems, Fields of View. I will also be presenting this work to professors and students affiliated with the summer Media Arts programme organised by the Universities of Riejka, Croatia and Nova Gorica, Slovenia in early September 2014.
References and external links


Communities and Culture Network + accessed 17 August 2014.


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People’s Campaign for Right to Water accessed 17 August 2014.

Quicksand last accessed 17 August 2014.

Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology accessed 17 August 2014.

Ushahidi accessed 17 August 2014.
The UnBox Booster funding scheme aimed to enable teams who have met through the UnBox fellowships to sustain, develop and expand creatively upon the collaborations formed. Dr Emma Wakelin, Associate Director at the AHRC said:

‘The AHRC was delighted to work with the British Council, UnBox and the Science and Innovation Network India to support the UnBox festival 2013. Finding new ways to support UK researchers in the arts and humanities to work in collaboration with partners in the creative and cultural sectors is one of our priorities, as is encouraging international networks.

We were particularly pleased that all five UnBox Fellows in 2013 were successful in gaining AHRC booster funding, enabling them to continue to develop the collaborative projects and the fruitful partnerships they began during their time in India, and which they showcased along with their creative sector partners from the UK and India at the UnBox festival in Delhi in February 2013. This funding was intended to support the researchers to continue the innovative worked inspired by UnBox, to build on the valuable and creative networks initiated in India, and to explore research ideas that will have a tangible impact and would not otherwise have been possible.’