

Modernity Under Construction: Comparative Ethnographies of Internet¹

Don Slater, LSE and Jo Tacchi, QUT

Draft only: Do not quote. The following is a very preliminary version of a paper under development.

Introduction

Viewed from an ethnographic point of view, academics have been far too global in their thinking about globalization. The same applies to the assorted management gurus, IT visionaries and politicians who have nailed their flags to the mast of new economy, network society and other planetary social tsunamis. Indeed, global views of globalization are frequently part of the problem rather than its analysis. Epochal images of techno-driven change and apocalyptic images of absolute digital divides can be agents of socio-political panic and of simply bad policy making: for example, third world individuals and institutions desperately seek to reposition themselves in response to the modern fate or destiny most recently announced to them from the metropolitan centres.

In this paper, we want to insist on an alternative view that might be summarised under the slogan, 'modernity under construction'. Modernity is not a sociological abstraction whose presence and impacts are to be traced outwards from metropolitan centres. It is an analysis of the structure of contemporary change that must be built from the ground up, from all the soils in which histories and practices of change are formulated and contested. However, the ethnographic duty is not simply to assert the local and particular, or simply to relativise the grand narratives of globalization and new economy, or merely to say that things are very different elsewhere, in other places. Nor is ethnography simply a matter of tracing the impacts of global shifts on local contexts, to trace the differential assimilation of big things – new economies, information technologies, global networks – in 'little' and peripheral places.

Rather, the slogan 'modernity under construction' is meant to suggest that these big things are under construction everywhere, and that – even with full acknowledgement of the power differentials between California and Sri Lanka – modernity is as much shaped and to be understood via Colombo as it is via Silicon Alley. It should be obvious that this position is making both analytical and political claims about which voices and actors are to be acknowledged by us as constructors of the modern, and that these are analytical and political issues that have structured the entire colonial and global structure of modernity from its earliest encounters with other places. We could put the entire matter simply by saying that the guiding spirit of this paper is not Castell's *Internet Galaxy* but rather C.L.R James' *Black Jacobins*: even European modernity is incomprehensible without the *constitutive* role of Europe's others.

¹ This paper arises from fieldwork undertaken in Kothmale Community Radio, Sri Lanka, March-April 2002, funded by Department for International Development (DfID), under the auspices of UNESCO. The fieldwork was conducted by Peter Lewis (LSE), Don Slater (LSE) and Jo Tacchi (Queensland University of Technology).

In this paper we will assert this perspective by way of concepts of ‘new economy’. We draw largely on one case study of ICTs – in rural Sri Lanka – and refer to another (in Trinidad) that will be developed in subsequent papers. We consider how the very idea of new economic and organizational forms, widely associated with emergent knowledge-based technologies and enterprises, are being constructed in relation to colonial and post-colonial experiences of education, career and bureaucracy that generate different senses of the modern and the global. Specifically, this discussion should highlight two points, one simple but constantly in need of reiteration; the other more complex. The simple point is about technological determinism: the technologies that are named as agents in these stories – radios, computers, internets – are not pre-given and stable objects, and we cannot sit back and wait for their inevitable and consistent effects on all places. We are concerned with the co-configuration of technologies and social forms. The more complex point is about the contested and divergent values and evaluations of agents of change, about how people and institutions enlist technologies and their properties within their biographical and social projects, and how the latter are reconfigured by these new objects.

The new economy under construction in Sri Lanka

Let us start from some fairly global formulations of the idea of a ‘new economy’. We regard the term ‘new economy’ as a participant in global debates and policies, not as an entity that we are trying to define (Barry and Slater 2002): ‘new economy’ is a concept of socio-economic change and organization delivered through political policies and papers, business meetings, management education, conferences like this, and so on.

We could say that ‘new economy’ visions and languages revolve around three conceptualizations, with much overlap and ambiguity:

1. ‘the new American dream’: efficiency/productivity gains, based on networked computerization, permitting stable and uninterrupted economic growth. A new capitalism that sits comfortably alongside trends towards deregulation and decentralization.
2. ‘cultural economy’ or ‘informational economy’ (or even ‘weightless economy’): cultural, informational or symbolic goods and raw materials are either increasingly central to economic processes, or are increasingly exemplary of the issues facing contemporary political economy: eg. intellectual property issues, branding. The argument is that cultural goods do not behave like material ones, in their production, distribution or consumption. New economy circulates new commodities and labour forms through new market and property forms.
3. enterprise culture, post-fordism, new organizational and career structures: new economy visions are the direct inheritors of earlier visions – often equally technology-driven, and also equally bound to neo-liberal agendas of deregulation and structural adjustment which *constituted* some new subjects (individualized, entrepreneurial careers; decentralized, networked organizations) and *disempowered* others (eg, trade unions, bureaucratic hierarchies, etc).

In point of fact, the actual phrase ‘new economy’ did not play a significant role in the ethnographies of either Trinidad or Sri Lanka – the term was not particularly used. However, all three conceptualisations together constitute a set of issues and visions of technology and modernity that thoroughly permeated both places in profound ways. Specifically, new technologies and the kinds of expertise and practice that seemed linked to them were associated with new organizational forms, new career trajectories and new ‘global positionings’ of both individuals, nations and regions.

The 'newness' of these developments was consistently characterised in terms of 'free spaces' – the hope of overcoming traditional, colonial and state bureaucratic structures. New economy discourses are saturated with images of freedom. They emerge from a history of both post-Fordist and neo-liberal visions of deregulated and decentralised restructuring that – as perhaps best captured in Nikolas Rose's work – configures new self-regulating and 'responsibilized' subjects within technology-enabled organizational forms generally characterized through network imagery (Barry 2001). We can reckon up the costs and the illusions of this new 'freedom' (eg, Sennett, *Corrosion of Character*), but we cannot ignore the seductions of its rhetorics or the potentials for practice it opens up. I have discussed the specific link between Internet and rhetorics of freedom in previous work, in the context of both Trinidad and the Northern experience.

Our fieldsite, Kothmale Community Radio (KCR), is important because it plays out narratives of freedom that traverse several media (radio, internet, publishing) and traverse several discourses of freedom (from community media to something related to new economy). At the very least, it is therefore a study of the configuration and contradictions of a specific practice of freedom; at most it shows how local, national and regional transformations around new economy are refracted through a particular location.

Kothmale Community Radio and Internet project, Sri Lanka

Kothmale Community Radio is located south of Kandy, Central Province, in a mountainous rural area with a complex ethnic and social mix. The immediate surrounds are quite remote, combining upland tea plantations with large concentrations of Tamil labourers and more lowland Sinhalese paddy cultivators. Local villages also serve the two main local towns of Nawalapitya (about 15,000 pop) and Gampola (about 60,000). These villages and towns add an additional ingredient of Moslem traders. The project has been running in one form or another since 1983, but grew over the 1980s until it became more established as a full community radio station in 1989. It gradually increased broadcasting hours and facilities up to its present situation: commercial morning transmissions from 5.30 to 1.00 pm and more community based programming from 5.00-8.00.

In 1999, UNESCO funding helped the project add an internet and computing centre, an idea originated by Mr Jayaweera. Five other organizations were involved including SLBC, Colombo University, Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, Mahiweli Authority and Sri Lanka Telecom). This is what we were originally asked to look at: Kothmale has gained world-wide publicity within the development and community media world for pioneering hybrid use of radio and internet, and UNESCO has treated Kothmale as something of a showpiece – the radio/internet connection brings together two organizational forms and policy orientations: community radio/media centres and the telecentre idea. The vision that founded this project was more than simply locating internet within an ongoing community media project. It was the production of synergies and hybridities. In addition to simply drawing on staff, building and audience resources to attract people to computer classes and internet use, it was felt that radio could be used to publicise the very idea of the internet by highlighting – through broadcast programs – information drawn from websites; conversely, networked computer facilities and trainings would obviously attract more attention to the station, both local, regional and international. All of this was signified through their flagship 'Radio Browsing' programme: this was a nightly half hour or one hour programme in which a particular topic was explored through internet browsing. More mundanely, a morning programme – *Sirasara* – a very wide-ranging magazine style format drew heavily on Internet for things like weather, international news, agricultural prices and so on.

Despite the publicity that surrounded the Radio Browsing format idea, the picture that emerged from our research and conversations was more complicated. On the one hand, there were far

more subtle convergences between the technologies – for example, many staff had clearly come to regard Internet as simply one of their many resources for building better radio, indistinguishable from CD-ROMs, correspondent networks and telephones. For various reasons (particularly, interruption of their internet connection for a year!) the Radio Browsing programme had actually died out for some time, and as Internet became available again, many staff were thinking of new technical and media possibilities – eg, Internet radio. On the other hand, it was clear from group discussions with staff, that alongside this hybridity there was also clear separation: some staff saw their expertise, roles and futures more in terms of Internet/computing than radio, or vice versa, and clear lines of division and even tension had opened up.

The same tensions emerged over another project, added through Dutch funding, in 2001: this was a publishing project – housed originally in the neighbouring town of Nawalapitiya, with several computers, scanner, printer, etc - which, amongst other things, produces a periodical newsletter.

There is no question that NGOs, station management, staff and community participants believed that each of these new technologies would open up new possibilities for expertise, local informational and communicative resources, community participation. However, it is equally clear that each of these new media projects was a step in another kind of game: how to win institutional autonomy, organizational freedom and room for manoeuvre. A kind of independence that was both required for proper community work, but also was the prize to be gained under the community banner.

To understand this, we need to contrast the institutional context of Kothmale with the ethos that informed it. Community Radio in the form of weekly half hour programmes recorded and produced in villages was originally started in 1981 as part of the Mahaweli District Authority, a government programme which oversaw the construction of large-scale dam, irrigation and power projects, and the resettling of populations displaced by consequent flooding. The Kothmale dam, the largest of their structures, displaced lowland paddy cultivators and surrounding villages. The radio station – originally known as Mahaweli Community Radio, and broadcasting only an hour a day, was specifically commissioned by Mahaweli Authority to reconstruct ‘community’, and did so within a huge machine of social planning including the building of new towns, educational and training authorities and so on. The station was therefore originally attached to an authority that was described to us, by one of its long-serving managers, as a government within the government, almost like an ancient Kandian kingdom.

However, a second bureaucratic state structure was also central to the narrative: Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). KCR was moulded by two figures: Mr Jayaweera, now with UNESCO, was a left-leaning career SLBC broadcaster who adopted the concept of community radio as early as 1979. He pioneered the idea of community radio in a northern station started in 1981 (funded by UNESCO) in North Central Province: the Rajaratna Service. Jayaweera initiated this alongside the man who later became KCR Controller from 1989 to the present: Mr Sunil Wijesinghe. The clear impression from retrospective interviews is that – within the context of SLBC as an intensely bureaucratic and politicized structure - community radio served to create a social mission for radio in which it both served the community and detached itself to a degree from a variety of political roles, including serving the government of the day and being hitched to government policy, etc. At the same time, under the banner of community radio they were able to open up a space – albeit limited, unstable and highly vulnerable – for organizational, some political and personal freedom, as well as something of an alternative career path.

SLBC was frankly regarded by everyone concerned as exemplary of centralized state bureaucracies encountered throughout Sri Lankan life. Overstaffing, lack of any financial autonomy, advertising rate cards, Kumar’s story of transmitter locked in customs then in SLBC

for two years, private stations think it is a joke, etc. Telecoms guy: 'no work, no problems' – just wait to rise to top through seniority.

The picture within the KCR project is radically different: to some extent, the project has fulfilled many of the aims of community media as widely understood, and the logic of achieving this dictates innovative use of technology and autonomous organizational forms. As we have seen, this has been extended from radio to new technologies. In all these projects, KCR has been reasonably successful in involving wide sections of the community in both production and consumption of media, skilling people, responding to information, communication and entertainment demands, and so on. However, none of this gets at the way that participants *feel* about the place, at what we came to think of as its 'ethos'. Put simply, despite significant tensions that we will explore in a moment, active participants felt an often painful degree of commitment and love for the place and their life within it.

This feeling was made up of many parts: Firstly, there was a profound desire to be 'close to the people', to do good for the community and to be of the community. This was quite compatible with the apparently narcissistic pleasure of being a local celebrity: for Pavi to be known by everyone in Gampola (the largest town around) through his presenting was a source of pride and ego but also a proof of his success as a *community* broadcaster. Others talked about how it was 'cool' to be working for a radio station, or computer/internet project.

Secondly, this serious drive to serve the community was inextricable from the nurturing of technical and communicational expertise – skilling in all aspects of running a media organization. Skilling themselves and skilling the general publics that came to the station. However, the meaning of 'skilling' is only brought out by contrasting their skills (and means of learning) with what they understood as the alternative modes: on the one hand, SLBC and other state organizations seen as filled with incompetent time-servers, armies of union-supported technicians who could not solve the simplest problems; on the other hand, they contrasted their own hands-on expertise with that of people with merely paper qualifications, who had an empty claim to knowledge based on formal education. Kothmale relief announcers saw themselves as versatile, innovative, creative because of the way in which they were allowed to learn and work, and at the same time as *professional* – both in the sense of being *as* professional as those with more formal qualifications or permanent jobs and in the sense of being *more* professional, or professional in a deeper sense – *really* rather than formally professional.

Thirdly, all of the above was constantly related to a vision of the station itself as a free space, a space of creativity, flexibility and innovation. The most extreme articulation of this was Pavi who frankly described it as a paradise because he was free to try anything he wanted. He kept describing himself as someone who loved to 'experiment' and to 'research', and who clearly identified this with being alive. But the same would go for – for example – Palitha, a long-serving member of the station, always described as an 'all-rounder' who could run nearly any aspect of the station. Or Kumar, a technician who was one of only three people with a permanent SLBC position: he felt he had learned nothing until he'd arrived at the station, where he had been able to learn through problem solving, and could move from specifically technical/engineering problems to broader issues of station organization, finances and media content.

Other things that arise from all this: although we witnessed serious divisions, there was still an intense invocation of deep friendships, familial relations (and indeed Sunil was in direct contact with a lot of their families, managing crises so that his announcers could sustain their freedom and commitment within the station – story of Tushari and of Sriyapali, 'managing' Pavi's wife – a sad story)

To be explicit: new economy themes of knowledge work, innovation/enterprise, flexible work organization and so on were emergent from an earlier community-based model which sought to carve out a space for freedom and flexibility within a state bureaucracy. Moreover, it was

developed around radio, not Internet or computing – the issue is not the technology but the space for articulating new freedoms in relation to practice. These ways of working – so highly valorized by the participants – have since extended into internet and publishing. However, the publishing and internet projects seen in this light were launched by the station not so much because of their inherent technical properties but simply because as relatively autonomous projects they were part of a general strategy of increasing their freedom of action with respect to SLBC – for example, funnelling staff payments through the publishing project potentially allowed them to build activities that SLBC wouldn't support or allow. It was a clear extension of an organizational strategy, not a technical one.

Crises

These visions and attachments were consistently articulated and valued but the story emerging over the course of fieldwork was far darker and more tense. We will try to put it starkly although the story is endlessly complicated and ramifying. We felt by the end of our fieldwork that far from simply studying a community media centre in its local context we were looking at the most profound tensions of Sri Lankan society as they were refracted through one institution.

The situation goes something like this: KCR is not an independent community radio, but a space carved out within a state broadcasting corporation. Its funds are funnelled entirely through SLBC: it has to get virtually every payment OK'd by SLBC, and all its income is commandeered by SLBC. They are even told how many kilometres per month they can drive in their van, on which almost all activities depend. Its only permanent staff, paid for by SLBC, is the station controller – Sunil – and two technicians. Everyone else who is involved in the station is either a plain volunteer or a (freelance) relief announcer. The relief announcers (who are paid for their radio work, though they may be more involved in computing or internet) are people who are deeply involved in the station, for whom Sunil has managed to get SLBC hourly wages up to a monthly maximum, but whom SLBC will absolutely not give permanent positions: they will never be employees of SLBC, as far as the corporation is concerned.

I am sitting drinking with a group of male relief announcers and some of their friends from SLBC Kandy on the veranda of a remote rural house. They have just finished their outside broadcast for the Buddhist and Hindu New Year. They are happy because it was not only a successful professional job but because they were part of a link up with SLBC Colombo in which they were the only community station participating amongst 6 other SLBC stations: they more than held their own. However, the conversation turns very bitter: Anil – the main announcer that day – is 29, educated, and has 5 (??) years experience with the station. He feels he can do the job as well as anyone in the country, particularly because of the exceptional breadth of experience this non-conventional station has given him. He has been unable to marry because he cannot support himself on the wages he can get through the station – SLBC has placed a limit on the number of hours that can be paid out to any relief announcer (max rs4,700 pm, but Sunil only has 35,000 per month between 11 relief announcers 3,500? – we've got this somewhere). Palitha has been working at the station under similar conditions for 10 years and is under intense pressure from his new family, with baby, for which he is sole support, to quit finally and take up a job as a driver. He is always described as the station's all-rounder – he can handle all aspects of its running and is often mentioned by Sunil as one of the few people who could succeed him. We have already heard this story endlessly, from everyone. Pavi then bursts out: he goes through each person sitting at the table, one by one, telling me their family background and what they do at the station and then blurts out: what are we doing here on New Year's day, why aren't we with our families? We have given our lives to this station, we've sacrificed everything to this station because we love it and we love what we can do here. But why aren't we with our families?

Put simply: within the space of freedom, these people have developed mission, expertise and standing in the community. As in so many new economy/culture industry contexts, they have

done this through personal investments of enormous labour rather than formal training, and have no paper qualifications in a country where formal education and degrees are the main foundation upon which a secure life for self and family might be built. They have reached a point where – in a familiar biographical pattern – they have taken on (or feel they should take on) family responsibilities. They also feel tremendous debts of obligation and duty to families that have supported them over long periods of involvement in the station, or simply feel the culturally strong duty to support their families.

This is not just a matter of money, though it is that too. The demands they make with increasing bitterness are for both wages that will support a reasonable lifestyle and for *permanency*. The latter is complex and needs unpacking: literally, it means that SLBC should change their status from relief announcers to permanent staff with secure jobs. This would give them liveable incomes. It would also, however, show that their skills and service are ‘appreciated’. And – perhaps most importantly – it would give them security.

Sunil had just informed them, a month ago, that this will *never* happen. At some level, they all knew this all the time but somehow the hope of permanency had always still been there, perhaps as a working fantasy, a fiction that allowed their sense of mission to persist. It was now tearing the station apart. On the one hand, Sunil felt hugely betrayed: Sunil plays a complex and often – indeed increasingly – unhappy role. His mission is to protect KCR as a space that is both free and responsible to the community, under a concept of community media. The contradiction of his life is that he can only create and protect this free space by being enormously shrewd, alert and adept at playing one of the most hidebound Sri Lankan bureaucracy, SLBC. In a sense, he takes the burden of managing old Sri Lanka on his own shoulders. Reflected, for example, in lack of transparency with staff – how *could* he openly discuss with them the context of secrecy, interconnected deals, patronage, etc on which every move he makes depends. And yet, on the other hand, in his relations ‘downwards’ to staff and volunteers Sunil combines highly collaborative, decentralized, enabling modes of working with a position as father-figure, protector or village headman. You can see this in the way that in the very process of partying and getting drunk together, Pavi keeps referring to Sunil as ‘my controller, Mr Sunil Wijesinghe’; or you would have had to see how on New Year’s Day and after, *everyone* ritually ‘worshipped’ him by bowing before him on their knees and taking his blessing, as they would before a priest or head of household. Sunil has been playing a difficult game for almost 20 years: the production of new freedoms stabilized by traditional forms and social relations. He felt betrayed by his staff’s new bitterness both in his role as proponent of a modern community media mission *and* in his role as traditional village leader.

At another level, the issue of permanency was bringing out long-term contradictions within the whole idea of the station. For example, closing ranks around a small permanent staff – even if it were possible either by a change in SLBC policy or through independence from SLBC – was not compatible with a community media ethos: people should be trained up through the station and then move on to other work. Sunil interpreted some of the bitterness of staff as their desire to claim personal ownership of the station and thereby exclude others from entering it. There needs to be a throughput of people, and – as he constantly put it – ‘no one is indispensable’. Sunil regarded his loyalty as primarily to the idea of the station and its long-term survival. They forget, he argued, that if they (and he himself) have skills and community standing and meaningful work it is because of the station. And yet, they had each built up a classic basis for an individualized, non-institutional career – they were skilled media workers who could work anywhere.

Nor were the alternatives particularly attractive. On the one hand, Sunil was clear that UNESCO’s model of community media based on volunteer staff was completely inappropriate to Sri Lanka. And this was certainly repeated in almost every conversation with staff and potential participants: community participation on a voluntary basis was not financially possible for most people. Even the skills training it offered involved an investment that only the very young could

sustain, and not for long – without the relief announcer wages, they'd have been long gone. On the other hand, many suggested that complete independence from SLBC was what was needed: give us financial autonomy to sink or swim as an independent station. Clearly there was a great deal of confidence and bravura – we are good professional media people; we can pull this off. But it was clear that this was a huge gamble that might lose them both what they had and what they wanted: it might sacrifice their community ethos to commercialism and it would precisely not achieve the security or permanency they most wanted. At best they could achieve decent wages within a basically commercial media context.

Conversations, interviews, discussions went round and round these houses with a pervading sense of stalemate: It might be summed up in the question, where were these people to go? Not so much how should the station develop but rather, what happens to the skill trajectories that the station had nurtured? What kind of career trajectories could it actually point to? We could say that these people had pioneered new organizational and work forms which actually disqualified them – they believed – from achieving the income and security that their skills should have entitled them to. The older bureaucracies like SLBC wouldn't employ them. The new private organizations – the new creative industries in radio or computing – wouldn't either. At least this is what they believed though the picture is far from clear, and there were certainly examples of people getting jobs in commercial radio, or setting up local advertising agencies, and there were hopes of breaking into web design. However, they all said that they were too old for most of the private organizations – the commercial radio stations were hiring 20 year olds, the web designers were youngsters. Or that they did not have the connections to get jobs because in Sri Lankan society patronage and connection is everything. But they were too distant from Colombo – socially, if not geographically, because of their rural base, lack of university or other paper qualifications, their marginality to established hierarchies.

There was a pervading sense of stalemate, that no options would work, and that freedom had actually turned out to be a trap, a dead end. This did not lead them to value it any the less, or to take less pride in their skills or personal independence. But the very freedom that had given the relief announcers access to skills, the respect of community and self-respect, a sense of mission and merit – this was increasingly seen in terms of insecurity and lack of appreciation, and were formulated in terms of two demands that were least compatible with the new media model they had developed: guaranteed good WAGES and PERMANENT jobs. The older opposition between community media and state bureaucratic structures was paradoxically being dissolved: the former should secure a path to the latter – *everyone* formulated their demands and their grievances in terms of the older career and social structures. In a sense Sunil is a potential self taught model entrepreneur, because of the way he sees the situation and the solutions he would like to develop. However he is unable to develop most of them, or only very slowly (he repeatedly enunciated the 'camel theory': a camel, standing in the rain, asks to be let into your tent to get dry. You let him put his head in, but then he asks to put in his neck, then his whole body, at which point the whole tent collapses. You have to know the limits of change and resources if you are to protect the whole structure.) Sunil believes in necessity of risk to achieve his aims, but few others there are able to see things in the same way, because of the particular pressures they are under. At the same time they clearly see his personal sacrifices, and value them hugely.

Conclusion

There is one simple point to be made from this story: that new technologies do not produce new economies, nor do things that we abstractly call network organizations. This is not because local or traditional social relations constituted barriers to techno-driven development but because these technologies, and the forms of practice they involve, are constructed within different histories, projects and problems. It is well to remember that the underlying challenge to

traditional Sri Lankan society and to state bureaucratic organization came not through internet but through the much older technology of broadcast radio. Internet was a way of furthering radio, already understood as the progressive force by the station people. The very emergence of something that looks so new economy-like needs to be understood not in terms of globalization, or new technologies, or even something so quaintly modern as urbanization. Rather, the story of the radio station and its internet needs to be told in terms of long-term battles in and against structures – exemplified here by SLBC – that are at once part of the traditional, colonial and post-colonial history of Sri Lanka, and indeed of the Kothmale district.

Nor would this story be entirely different if told not from the stalemated situation of a local radio station but rather from the heart of Colombo: eg, we talked with advertising people, software developers, the head of the Sri Lankan Institute for Information Technology. The latter looks like the kind of operation that could equally be found in Cambridge (UK or US), Malaysia or Paris: A new private IT college, granting Australian degrees, with associated research centres, commercial incubator, venture capital seed money. And yet – not unlike Kothmale Community Radio – it was also carved out of political connections, some dubious government money, some charisma, some shrewd manoeuvring to secure independence from politicians, powerful university professors, older business elites. The head of that institute, not unlike Sunil, combines a vision of new freedom with the utmost adeptness in playing the oldest of governmental games.

Pavi

I want to end with an image from my last night in Sri Lanka. Pavi – the only Tamil relief announcer, who was frankly the Johnnie Vaughan of Community radio in terms of wit, charisma and sheer inventiveness – rode with me in the van to the airport, getting off at his home in Gampola (which he barely visited these days). It's dark and Pavi talks on and on, in his best announcer voice, improvising on a theme he has been pursuing for days. He wants desperately to start an Internet radio operation at the studio. 'We have to do globalization' he says, we really have to do globalization. With Internet radio (which they've played with) they can connect up with all the Sri Lankans abroad, and they can bring world music and news into Kothmale. They can be global without being any less local. He dreams of taking requests from Sri Lankans in Dubai to play local music; he equally dreams of showing people all over the world how bloody good he is.

This dream melds into another: in his constant and even irritating thirst for innovation, his quick grasp of the potentials of technologies, Pavi dreams of a late night radio show, a graveyard shift from 10.00pm to 2.00am. It is a dream of pure freedom – the station will be dark, he says, no one to disturb me or interfere, and he can sit alone in his booth talking to the world. I will get an email from Mr Don in London and from Mrs Jo in Australia and I'll talk about it and play your music. I can make money from advertising because I am a good businessman and I know everyone in Gampola – I'll show SLBC that it can pay its way. I can speak Tamil and Sinhala and English and Hindi and German. And I can experiment and experiment and experiment. In his vision, as for so many new economy visions, the dream is of pure freedom through pure connection, and of innovation through trusting one's communicative instincts. In that moment of dreaming, at least, security and permanency played no part, did not even reckon as a cost or risk. It was simply a statement of what the free space of the station had allowed him to imagine and of what he believed he could do if given half a chance.