Finding Voice: Lessons from listening for community insights

aapti institute

video volunteers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is an output of the collective vision of people from six different organisations or institutes who wish to see more bottom-up solutions driving social change and are interested in amplifying and analyzing citizen insights at scale.

It was written by Heena Singhal and Jessica Mayberry from Video Volunteers and Sarayu Natarajan from Aapti Institute, with important contributions from Rishabh Verma from Sylva, Vijay Pratap Singh from Gram Vaani, Gabi Kruks-Wisner from the University of Virginia, Tanu Kumar from Claremont Graduate University, and Sunderrajan Krishnan from INREM Foundation.

NOTE ON CONSENT AND COMMUNITY DATA USE

As part of the acknowledgements, we wish to explicitly recognize the communities whose voices, experiences, and knowledge shaped this research. With the growing use of AI to analyze citizen-generated content, we also acknowledge that traditional models of consent may no longer be sufficient. Consent in the age of AI must be an ongoing conversation which is transparent, informed, and grounded in mutual trust. We see this not just as an ethical responsibility, but as essential to ensuring that research serves those it seeks to represent.

Synopsis

This report presents a multi-year, multi-phase exploration into *how we can meaningfully listen to the development-related content created by marginalized communities—at scale and on their terms.* At its heart is the belief that lived experience is knowledge, and that community-generated content holds deep insights into the systems shaping people's lives.

Grounded in two decades of citizen-led media practice, the methodology builds on principles from participatory development, democracy studies, and the tech4good ecosystem. The research journey began with the human analysis of 80 community videos. It evolved through a structured codebook, an AI-assisted review of 76 videos, and large-scale testing of a custom-built research bot across 472 transcripts.

The findings demonstrate that **community insight is not anecdotal**—it is essential evidence. With mobile phones, WhatsApp, and the support of ethical AI, **it is now possible to listen intentionally and at scale.** This report offers a practical, values-driven pathway to elevate citizen voices—not just as stories, but as **systems of knowledge** capable of shaping better policy, technology, and action.

Introduction

Across the last few years, a collective effort has been underway to answer an urgent question: how do we meaningfully *listen* to the development-related content being created by marginalized communities—on their terms, and at scale?

This work is grounded in the belief that lived experience is knowledge, and draws on two decades of practice by Video Volunteers (VV)—an organisation that has trained over 300 Community Content Creators (CCs) to report from within their communities. Together, they have produced more than 25,000 videos, forming one of the largest living archives of rural India, recognised by YouTube in 2015. These stories have surfaced injustice, driven on-the-ground change, and shaped how NGOs and local governments respond.

The approach builds on the principles of participatory development, media and democracy studies, and conversations within the tech4good ecosystem. We began not with AI, but with people—believing that ethical, human-centered design must precede innovation.

A central aim of this research is to ensure that these voices are not just recorded—but truly heard, and recognised as critical knowledge for development.

Why does this matter? Because too often, policies are made without listening to those most affected. Their insights can help fix what's broken, track what matters, and shape smarter, fairer technology. If development is to be inclusive, **listening must be central.**

This report shares what we explored over the last 2–3 years: how we engaged with hundreds of community-generated videos, the tools and methods we tested—both human and AI-assisted—and what we learned from the process.

STUDY 1

How We Started Listening

The first phase of this collective research began in 2022, in partnership with the Aapti Institute[1], through a qualitative analysis of 80 community-generated videos created by the network of Community Content Creators (CCs) associated with Video Volunteers (VV).

The aim was to identify recurring themes and patterns across two types of content: 40 issue-based videos and 40 impact videos, sourced from five states—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Jammu & Kashmir. These videos addressed governance, anti-poverty programs, water, and education. Read the full report here[2] and access the raw data here[3].

Two methodologies shaped the analysis: **content analysis**[4], which tracked key terms and advocacy tools, and **frame analysis**[5], which explored how issues were presented visually and narratively by the creators. The study's goal was to understand how marginalized communities describe problems, identify causes, and propose solutions through their lens.

From this analysis, four major content buckets emerged:

- **Legal Dimension:** Videos referencing laws or legal rights (e.g., RTE Act, Food Security Act).
- **Government Schemes:** Focused on the functioning or failure of welfare programs (e.g., MGNREGA, Awas Yojana).
- **Social Benefits:** Addressing the struggles of vulnerable groups like the elderly, women, or students.
- **Human Rights Perspective:** Framing access to food, water, and education as fundamental entitlements.

Creators frequently used recurring terms like *access, deprived, neglect, no grievance redressal, poor service delivery, ground reality, quality, and monitoring* highlighting systemic failures.

[1] http://www.aapti.in

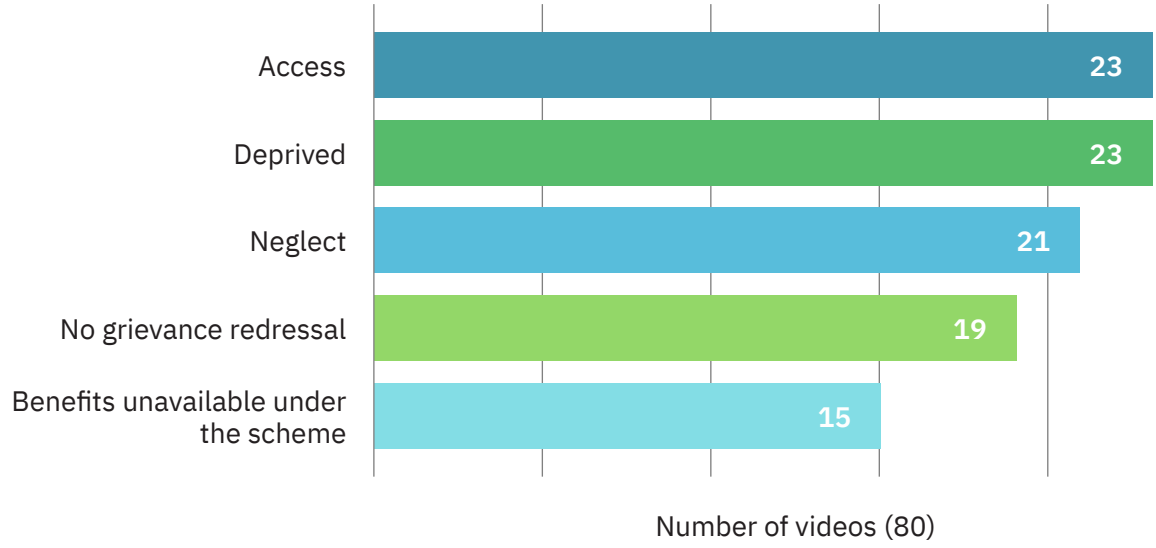
[2] Community of Voice: Analysis of Video Material

[3] Aapti Video Voluneers

[4] Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data (i.e. text). Using content analysis, researchers can quantify and analyse the presence, meanings, and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts.

[5] Frame analysis is a multidisciplinary research method used to understand how people make sense of situations and activities. It explores how frames, which are culturally determined way of understanding the world, shape our perceptions and actions.

For example: Terms like *"Access and deprived"* appeared in 23 videos each, *"Neglect"* was found in 21, and *"No grievance redressal"* appeared in 19.



This analysis offered a foundational lens for the studies that followed—proving that community narratives are rich in structure, insight, and policy relevance.

STUDY 2

Testing how we listened

The second phase of the research was led by the staff of Video Volunteers in early 2024, focusing on a different set of 76 community-produced videos. This analysis marked a shift: from thematic exploration to testing a structured framework for identifying insight in community narratives. To guide this, a detailed Annotation Schema for Citizen Voice[6] was developed—drawing from past research, field experience, and ongoing collaboration with scholars at the University of Virginia and Claremont Graduate University.

[6] Community Voice Annotation Schema

The schema offered clear criteria for tagging videos with elements like *root cause, agency, barriers, insight, and intersectionality.* Its purpose was to help researchers "listen" with precision—attending not just to what is said, but how people explain problems, take action, and imagine change.

This work also builds on a core hypothesis that VV has known for many years and seen on the ground: that **community voice is not a waste of time for officials—it makes their work easier.** It reveals what only locals can know: root causes, overlooked populations, early signs of collective organising, and unseen systemic gaps. Some aspects of VV's hypothesis are now backed up by research as well. Prof. Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner's research demonstrates that when officials are exposed to first-person community stories, they become more empathetic, feel greater upward accountability, and are more attentive to community needs. Her work reiterates that citizen testimony can shift bureaucratic behaviour. Read the detailed report here[7].

From the analysis:

- **43%** of videos clearly identified root causes—not just symptoms.
- **61%** featured empowered community members demonstrating resilience and agency.
- Only **30%** surfaced deeper *insight*—suggesting a need to better support content creators in drawing out community-held knowledge, especially when videos feature the most marginalised individuals.

The statistical analysis is captured in this PDF[8].

This last gap is important. It may be linked to the nature of the stories covered, which often focus on access to welfare schemes. In such cases, characters are frequently those most adversely affected—individuals who may not yet have the systemic knowledge to contextualize their experience.

Still, the study confirmed that with the right prompts and analysis frameworks, we can begin to surface deeper layers of knowledge embedded in community narratives—helping us move from stories of exclusion to tools for transformation.

[7] Kruks-Wisner, Gabrielle; Kumar, Tanu; and Mayberry, Jessica. (2024). "Mind the Gap: Citizen-Led Efforts to Build Bureaucratic Responsiveness in Rural India." Ed. Shaber-Twedt, Rose. Governance and Local Development Institute, University of Gothenburg, Policy Brief no. 26, 2024.

[8] Second Review: Videos with Insight, Root Cause, Agency

STUDY 3

Exploring what AI can do to Listen

The third study, conducted in December 2024 by VV, explored whether AI could support researchers in identifying insights embedded in community-generated video content. This initial analysis focused on subtitles from eight selected videos[9]—four showcasing community-driven impact, and four highlighting issues like water, health, and sanitation. Videos were chosen based on two spreadsheets which captured both impact and issue videos with subtitles comprehensively. To avoid bias, the selection excluded videos produced internally by VV or repeated voices from the same regions.

The researcher first read the subtitles, which were basic and devoid of sector-specific terms like "advocacy" or "community voice." To ensure accuracy, she also watched the videos, since ChatGPT[10] is known to hallucinate or generate irrelevant interpretations. The research involved feeding subtitles directly into ChatGPT using a set of structured prompts aligned with VV's codebook (mentioned earlier as well), which includes themes like root causes, agency, intersectionality, and community-driven solutions.

Each subtitle was analyzed using 11 prompts[11]. ChatGPT's responses were summarized—resulting in this report[12]. These were then reviewed humanly using grounded theory, where the researcher identified recurring patterns and grouped them to form data-driven themes. This iterative process allowed for deeper understanding of how communities frame their realities.

The researcher maintained a strong intersectional feminist lens and emphasized ethical practice, ensuring the analysis centered community perspectives rather than overstating VV's role. While ChatGPT provided useful framing for *one video at a time*, it was ineffective at cross-video synthesis.

This pilot study acted as a form of "human coding" assisted by AI. Though the dataset was small, it opened pathways to scale.

[9] Annexure 2: Videos used in the analysis

[10] https://chatgpt.com/

[11] Annexure 1: Prompts/Questions used with ChatGPT

[12] Proving the Point: Yes, Communities Have Insights and ChatGPT Helped Us See Them

[13] Grounded theory is a research method where theories are created by collecting and analysing data, starting with observations instead of a hypothesis. Researchers carefully examine the data, break it into parts, and group it to find patterns and connections. They keep comparing and revisiting the data to improve their ideas. The goal is to build a theory based directly on the data to explain what they studied.

Reflecting on its limitations and potential, VV envisioned developing a **custom GPT model** to analyze its entire 25,000-video archive. Such a model could help researchers listen at scale—without losing the nuance, ethics, or agency that define community voice. This was the first step in that direction.voice. This was the first step in that direction.

STUDY 4

How we can apply AI to listen better

To deepen its AI exploration, VV collaborated with technologist Shiva Kommareddi, who built a customised GPT model—**nicknamed the *research bot***—as a pro-bono contribution.

Using this bot, VV conducted an experimental study focused on health in February 2025 to analyze 472 video transcripts from its community archive. Of these, 85 were directly tagged under health—covering states like West Bengal, Jammu & Kashmir, and Jharkhand—while the remaining 387 addressed related issues such as education, caste, livelihoods, and environment.

What began as a narrow inquiry into health content quickly evolved into a deeper investigation of intersecting injustices. While some videos covered expected themes like hospital conditions and vaccination, most revealed deeper structural concerns—such as broken health infrastructure, corruption in supply chains, and the exclusion of marginalized voices from policy processes.

By using the research bot to scan transcripts, VV's researcher rapidly identified recurring patterns like *lack of medicines, caste-based discrimination,* and *absent facilities.* These findings affirmed that health cannot be understood in isolation. Videos on livelihoods, sanitation, and transport also revealed embedded health impacts—showing how systemic neglect compounds across sectors.

This study not only demonstrated AI's potential to surface nuanced connections quickly, but also reaffirmed the need for a **"whole person approach"**—recognizing that any social issue such as health is deeply shaped by the broader social and political realities communities navigate daily. Read the full report here[14].

Conclusion: Listening is the future

All the findings in the entire study affirms a clear truth: marginalized communities hold essential knowledge—and with the right tools, we can now listen to them at scale, ethically and meaningfully.

We've shown that it is possible to **tag for insight,** and even **train community members** to do so. Our analysis doesn't have to be shallow or extractive. Community voices are a **knowledge system**—and **qualitative data** can no longer be dismissed. Listening, especially at scale, requires **changing the way we hear**—developing new muscles to understand voice, agency, and exclusion.

AI can support this shift. As a **second brain,** it helps surface patterns and translate everyday language into policy-relevant insight. What was once too expensive—listening to thousands of stories—is now possible, thanks to **mobile phones, WhatsApp,** and **AI-powered tools.**

But AI cannot do this work alone. It must be **guided by human ethics,** grounded in context, and trained using both **expert knowledge and lived experience.** Communities rarely use formal sector language—but their insights are deeply political.

[14] How We Used AI to Hear Health Beyond Hospitals

This study generated concrete recommendations for anyone looking to build ethical AI tools to amplify community voices:

1. **Incorporate intersectionality:** AI must recognize how caste, class, gender, and geography intersect in shaping lived realities.
2. **Use hybrid datasets:** Blend scholarly and community-generated content to train AI in both theory and grounded experience.
3. **Move from insight to action:** AI should not just identify concerns—it should suggest next steps or link to resources.
4. **Design for everyday language:** Build models that understand how people naturally speak, not how institutions write.
5. **Validate with humans:** AI insights must always be grounded in human interpretation and field validation.

As we move forward, we must resolve critical questions around **data ownership, governance,** and the balance between **scale and depth.** But above all, we must ensure that **community voices are never reduced to metrics**—that the people behind these stories remain centered.

We close with a simple conviction:
Listening is the beginning of change. Community insight is not a supplement—it is the evidence.

video volunteers

Video Volunteers is a global organization dedicated to advancing the right to voice. VV amplifies marginalized voices to ensure social change and policymaking are grounded in community-led, participatory insights from the ground up.

info@videovolunteers.org | videovolunteers.org

aapti institute

Aapti is a public research institute that works at the intersection of technology and society. Aapti examines the ways in which people interact and negotiate with technology both offline and online.

contact@aapti.in | www.aapti.in