

Kali, creator and destroyer

The author argues that lack of early attention to the institutional and political sustainability of the project, along with fundamental flaws in the underlying structure of the entity, led to its ultimate failure. The author is currently Assistant Professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology.



Michael L. Best
Assistant Professor, Georgia Institute of
Technology
mikeb@cc.gatech.edu

From this year, i4d is introducing a new section named as 'i opener'. The critical views of the authors/readers regarding any particular aspect in the field of ICT application will be published in this section

Media Lab Asia endeavored to be the world's largest university research laboratory for ICT's and international development. With it routinely described as a "billion dollar" facility in pollyannish anticipation of huge fundraising successes – the optimism of the Lab was staggering. And it certainly was the highest profile, and perhaps most interesting, South/North university collaboration in the ICT for development arena, bringing together two of the globe's biggest academic heavyweights: the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT). The vision of the Lab was for a unique public-private-academic partnership focused on innovation and world class research; a sort of organization never before seen.

But after twelve months of operation under a formal relationship between MIT and the Government of India (GoI), the connection to MIT was severed, the Lab's expectations were downsized, and now it continues on as a strictly GoI operation still struggling to define its mission.

The inability to sustain the MIT/MLAsia connection was due mainly to two critical failures. First, the Lab was structurally unsound; it sowed seeds of failure in the contracts and framework of the Lab itself. Second, and most critically, the Lab went forward with a number of shotgun marriages; it relied on various self-interested relationships that, lacking the trust that comes from time and effort, were never strong enough to maintain the collaboration. Said another way, MLAsia

ultimately fell victim to its inability to establish political and institutional sustainability.

Love at first demo

The genesis of MLAsia came in a visit to the MIT Media Lab, in 2000, by then Indian IT Minister Pramod Mahajan. The Media Lab had recently launched a new program focused on technologies for the developing world and had also been looking at opportunities for international expansion. Driven by the leadership of Nicholas Negroponte, founder and chair of the Media Lab, and Alex (Sandy) Pentland, a senior member of the faculty, the Media Lab worked to develop a program in India. A joint task force was put in place to study the feasibility of such a lab but the committee's final report was a foregone conclusion – strongly supporting its creation.

In June 2001, MIT and the GoI entered into a formal agreement to create the Laboratory with the GoI committing 13 million dollars for the Lab's first year of operation. Of this, 1.2 million went to MIT to support its activities related to the Lab and the rest, a considerable research allotment for the first year, was to be spent in country. A Board was created, with Mahajan at the helm, and CEO-like authorities were vested in a Management Committee comprised of Sandy Pentland; Sanjay Dhande, who was then a senior IIT Kanpur professor and is now head of that institution; S. Ramakrishnan, a senior bureaucrat from the Ministry of IT; and this author.

The formal launch of MLAsia was a grand event hosted at Mumbai's Oberoi Hotel on June 24, 2001, complete with laser shows and dance numbers. In the front row of the ballroom was the future president of India, APJ Abdul Kalam, sitting next to India's godman of IT, Infosys primo Naryana Murthy. On the dais sat Pramod Mahajan and representing the MIT Media Lab, Sandy Pentland. The Lab's future looked exciting indeed and the optimism jumped off of the page of the Lab's initial prospectus: "Media Lab Asia is the world's largest academic research program dedicated to bringing the benefits of new technologies to everyone, with a special focus on meeting the grand challenges in learning, health, and economic development."

Weak structure creates weak substance

Within days of the launch, however, it was clear that the Lab's institutional architecture put it at risk. The initial structure of the Lab, including its relationship with MIT, was flawed and led to failures in substance as well as the disenfranchisement of a number of stakeholder communities. First and foremost, the Lab was launched on an initial trial year basis. MIT was the proponent of the trial year structure, a twelve-month escape clause that was insisted upon by the MIT's upper management and not by the Media Lab leadership.

The idea of a one-year trial might have been a good one if it had been properly defined as a stepping stone to longer term sustainability. MIT and the GoI could have spent the year ensuring the Lab's feasibility, developing a shared vision and strategy, identifying strong management and research personnel, and most critically, cultivating the range of stakeholders that would be essential to success: the private sector, the Indian academic community, and relevant members of civil society and the development community. Instead, the Lab was mandated to realize immediate research successes. An evaluation committee was empanelled and metrics were designed, including the number of patents applied for and number of published papers. In other words, the structure demanded mature research outputs from this initial year. This was in addition to the nitty-gritty activities such as leasing office space and putting in place a basic administration.

Honestly realizing immediate quality research successes would be impossible for anyone, so alternative approaches had to be identified and exploited. One approach (which is fairly standard in the broader academic community and is not particularly reprehensible in my opinion) is to double-count existing activities. Anything that smelled remotely of a MLAsia project, and had some loose connection to MIT or other related institutions, was co-opted into the MLAsia family. Fair enough.

The second approach, which was the source of a lot of the Lab's problems, was to outsource the majority of research activities to pre-existing institutions often without sufficient regard to quality or

research integrity. One result was that MLAsia itself was not directly strengthened by these outsourced activities; instead, the collaborating institutions used the resources to further develop their own programs. Moreover, in the rush toward immediate outputs MLAsia assembled what was, in the words of one senior Lab officer, "a motley collection of shitty-little projects." While there were some high-quality exceptions to this, especially in the work from the core IIT collaborators at Kanpur and Chennai, too many of the projects were weak. This dramatically eroded the substantive value that MIT could offer to this North/South collaboration: namely, deliberative, robust, rigorous research direction. Instead, the Laboratory was running around managing (or neglecting to manage) mostly unimportant (at best) and specious (at worst) projects.

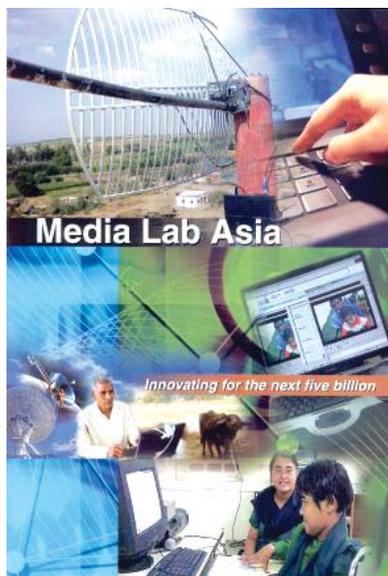
The second structural flaw of MLAsia was that it failed to immediately systematize positive relationships outside of the GoI and MIT – and, indeed, outside of the specific personalities of Pramod Mahajan and the MIT Media Lab. This was reflected in the initial board and management composition. The Board of Directors was chaired by Pramod Mahajan himself and included the principal government bureaucrat from Mahajan's home state of Maharashtra. From the MIT Media Lab side, Nicholas Negroponte and Sandy Pentland sat on the board with Negroponte as co-Chair. This lack of inclusive reach was also true of most of the Lab's immediate senior Indian management, some of whom were selected explicitly because it was thought that they could be easily controlled.

While a later attempt was made to expand the Board to include private sector principals, including Naryana Murthy, it was already too late. Even though the three major Indian IT corporations were, ultimately, represented on the Board, not one of these companies ever became a true partner to the Laboratory or a dues paying member. Further, there was no apparent attempt to broaden the political base of the Lab or its Board.

Weak structure creates weak relationships

As argued above, the initial structure of the Lab had left it systemically weak – politically over-reliant on Mahajan, with alienated stakeholders, supportive of a number of questionable projects, and undermined by weak and shotgun relationships.

But the presence of so many relationships of urgency was not wholly an outcome of the structure of the one-year trial period, but also (perhaps primarily) due to the personalities and culture of the MIT Media Lab leadership. Indians will often question the speed with which North Americans are willing to jump into a relationship. The Indians, perhaps thanks to their ancient culture and practical sense of caution, are slow to commit to partnerships. However, once the link is there it is something that can be relied on. In contrast, the MIT Media Lab team seemed willing to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with an Indian party after a single positive



Source <http://www.medialabasia.org/>

meeting. And an MOU with MLAsia always came with some funds flowing to the external party; in other words, there was plenty of incentive, and few down sides, for others to line up for these relationships.

MOU's were signed with the Delhi, Kharagpur, and Mumbai campuses of the Indian Institute of Technology, before adequate connections with relevant researchers and administrators were established. These were in addition to two MOU's with the IIT campuses in Chennai and Kanpur that were based on long-term and trusted relationships. The result of these MOU's, which included placing laboratory facilities on the IIT campuses themselves, created an appearance, and often reality, that MLAsia was a research facility of the IIT's and not an independent R&D program. That notwithstanding, three (and later four) of these IIT's had little appreciation for or tie to MLAsia or to the MIT Media Lab. In the end, when they were asked: "What has MIT done for you?" they were quick to answer "Nothing".

Perhaps another example of a hasty relationship was represented in the appointment of the initial CEO, Bimal Sareen, who joined in June 2002. Sareen was the first individual interviewed for the job by the Media Lab leadership and was then hired to replace the Management Committee. To be fair, the Media Lab team interviewed other candidates and was quick to point out how unlikely it was that they hired the first person they met. All that notwithstanding, it is hard to imagine a worse choice. Sareen had to be hired over the objections of the private sector and Government of India Board members who did not approve of his substantial salary base. The concerns of the Board quickly became manifest as Sareen succeeded to alienate or outright infuriate all of the existing members of MLAsia's management and support team and most everyone from the Government of India. Indeed, fifty percent of the Mumbai professional staff resigned within the first months of Sareen's appointment. Sareen was such a failure that one has to wonder how he sneaked past the due diligence process of the executive hiring firm, Heidrick and Struggles, who was responsible for the search. Indeed, some of Sareen's former colleagues posited that they must not have done a reference check with his past employers or they never would have suggested him for the job.

So much hope and optimism had been placed in the new CEO; he was going to fix all the Lab's problems. It was horribly demoralizing that he was so clearly wrong for the job.

Mahajan leaves and so does MIT

The full unraveling of the MIT / MLAsia collaboration began with the ouster of Pramod Mahajan from his position as IT Minister. In January 2003, soon after Sareen had joined MLAsia, Mahajan was unceremoniously removed from the IT Ministry, and the cabinet as a whole, by the most senior party and cabinet members. Replacing Mahajan was Arun Shourie, a man known for his no-nonsense approach to things. Early in Shourie's tenure as minister he held a series of reviews of MLAsia. He focused his attention on a review of expenditures, projects, team members, and on the relationship with the IIT's.

Money was an important issue, though not as critical as the deeper institutional problems. But from the outset there had been a promise from the MIT Media Lab leadership to raise 80% of

MLAsia's annual budget, with the GoI putting in the remaining 20%. As Shourie began his review, however, not a single rupee had been raised from any source outside of the GoI. (We should recall that this was the height of the telecom and dot.com bust and the usual funding sources for this type of an endeavor were very limited.)

The original vision for MLAsia was that it would not operate as a government lab and would not be constrained by the government's rules and regulations. However, with 100% government financing it became difficult to consider it as anything but a government lab. An example of this tension was the thorny issue of the Lab's salary structure: was it paying at international rates, at Indian private sector rates, or at GoI rates. In point of fact, it was paying at all three of these levels, depending on the hiring case. Sareen made an international salary while some GoI officials on secondment to the lab were getting government salaries. When Shourie reviewed these numbers he noted that some MLAsia employees were making ten times or more that of a comparable or more senior employee at one of the few prestigious government research laboratories.

Moving on from salaries, he reviewed the various projects and could not help but notice the fairly weak set of outputs from the first year. This was the "motley collection of shitty-little projects" problem. But, while the research value or esthetic could easily be questioned, Shourie and his internal review team went so far as to label some of the outsourced research expenditures as "actionable". The feeling was that money had flowed to parties who were not then held sufficiently accountable.

Shourie examined the research and management team that MLAsia had put in place. Sareen was considered a liability and there were very few positive research assets directly affiliated with the Lab since most of the real work had been outsourced. Certainly all this was quite regrettable, but in my opinion all could have been forgiven. Mahajan, for his part, had told us explicitly that he understood how the dot.com bust years were not the best for fundraising and that twelve months were not enough time to generate solid research outputs. And everyone was sympathetic to the fact that, to speak candidly, institution (and relationship) building in a country as complex as India can be a very difficult and slow process.

Sareen could have been sacked, salaries could have been harmonized, projects could have been rationalized, and the reported \$5 million requested by MIT to sustain their end of the relationship could have been easily realized. But, in the end, the relationship with MIT was terminated. Recall that much of the outsourcing of the Lab had been to the Indian Institutes of Technology. And in the final analysis, it was the nature of these relationships that proved to be the *coup de grâce* to the MIT / MLAsia partnership. By this time, four of the five IIT's had either a neutral or an antagonistic position towards MIT. When asked: "What has MIT done for you?" they answered "Nothing".

Regrettably, the end of the MIT / MLAsia relationship was not pretty. Significant acrimony and vindictive statements were traded between Negroponte and Shourie. Nobody benefited from this quite public argument. But, quickly, things quieted down and the President of MIT issued a private letter of apology to H'ble Minister.

At the time of this writing the BJP, the party of Mahajan and Shourie, is sitting in the opposition and Congress is back in control

with a new set of politicians in charge. Media Lab Asia continues on as a program of the Ministry fully supported by the Government of India, primarily serving as a funding agency, and strongly linked to the IIT's.

My role and vision

It must be said that I was complicit to many of these failures and responsible for some of them. Furthermore, I hasten to add that I had and continue to have enormous respect and personal regard for many of the stakeholders in the MLAsia experiment including Negroponte, Pentland, many IIT colleagues, and the initial MLAsia senior staff.

But my vision was far from what the current reality is – a government research funding agency. My hopes, shared by many, were for a unique public-private-academic collaboration. From MIT, I would have taken the extraordinary ambition and work ethic and the heavy resource levels; from the MIT Media Lab, I would have taken the appreciation for high-risk research and the playful and experimental ethos; from the IIT's, I would have taken the rigorous capacity for desk research and analytic competencies; from India herself, I would have taken the rich cultural ethic, the seriousness to problems of development, and the diversity of people and thought.

I would have started small with one or two carefully chosen facilities, one or two very solid collaborative relationships, one or two grand challenge problems, and the will to hire and foster world class researchers.

Sustainability framework

A large part of my research has focused on understanding how ICT and international development interventions can be sustained over the long term. I have been conceptualizing, as have others, a sustainability typology. In my research I have noted the need for:

- Economic or financial sustainability – the aspect that probably gets the most attention in the literature.
- Technological sustainability – a fairly well appreciated problem especially as we all are routinely victimized by our own technology and its rapid rush to obsolescence.
- Social and cultural sustainability – by this I mean, in particular, equity of access issues, gender, caste, community, literacy, language, economic groups, and so forth.
- Environmental sustainability – not often directly considered in ICT for development projects, though relevant in terms of e-waste, electric power consumption, and even the carbon reducing promise of the global information infrastructure. And finally,
- Political and institutional sustainability – the nexus of relationships between the broad set of stakeholders.

Time and time again it is lack of attention to this last category, political and institutional sustainability, which results in the death of a project.

In the Hindu pantheon Kali is the black earth mother. She is depicted holding a sword and severed head and wearing a necklace of snakes, skulls and human heads. She sustains the Hindu belief of the never-ending cycles of birth and death. While she is the goddess of death, she lives with an overflowing love for the life of her children. She destroys only to re-create. ■

ICT based programmes in India on HIV/AIDS

TREAT Asia and the Ruby Hall Clinic in Pune, India, will launch an online interactive instructional programme to train health-care professionals on the management of HIV/AIDS. The pilot training course, which will begin this autumn, is part of an ongoing effort by TREAT Asia to help close the doctor gap in India and throughout the region. The pilot programme was funded in part by a grant from Stichting AIDS Fonds of the Netherlands. If successful, the online program will further expand the capacity of TREAT Asia to provide quality health-care training. The online training programme will combine computer-based self-study modules, participatory clinical case studies, e-assisted tutoring, on-site workshops, and the creation of peer consultation networks to provide an integrated clinical program. Source: <http://www.amfar.org/cgi-bin/iowa/asia/news/?record=74>

Arupa Mission Research Foundation (AMRF) in Orissa is building an ICT based awareness and solution networking programme on HIV and AIDS. AMRF already has experience in developing ICT based knowledge kiosks (touch pads). At present it is in the pilot phase, where the quality of information to be imparted is being tested. The next phase would be developing the Human Computer Interface. For a programme of this magnitude to be a success a wide range of indicators and factors have to be looked into which if adhered to the role of ICTs in combating HIV would be fulfilled. We are at present also looking out for sponsors who would be interested in funding our HIV/AIDS - ICT venture.

In Orissa, as part of a joint UNDP and Government of Orissa initiative, ICT centres are being established in high migration areas of two districts, which have a lot of out-migration and also high prevalence rates of HIV. Activities are currently underway in Ganjam district, and would soon be initiated in the other district. This builds on UNDP's experience on ICT centres for livelihoods support that started five years ago in Coastal Orissa.

Resource Centre for Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS (RCSHA) have developed a Multimedia Resource Pack on Targeted Interventions (TI) which has been designed to provide the information on key aspects of the HIV and AIDS programme in India with special reference to Targeted Interventions. The CD contains detailed information on all the components of TI. If any one is interested to have this Multimedia Resource Pack please get in touch with Aslam at RCSHA, at aslam@shrcindia.org.

Another way of using ICT for spreading awareness was done by Heroes Project and Star TV when they launched a first of its kind HIV and AIDS SMS contest. Radio Mirchi to join in for 'Gain from Gyaan'; to run from 22nd November to 15th January '06 on 7827. Heroes Project and Star TV Network in association with Radio Mirchi launched an SMS contest titled 'Gain from Gyaan' that will run till the end of the year. The contest is a first of its kind in India offering users the facility to access HIV/AIDS information on their cell phones in an exciting format. For more information, visit: http://www.heroesprojectindia.org/misc/star_care.htm