

The Communication Circle: Returning Back to Symbols



Osama Manzar

Founder & Director
Digital Empowerment Foundation
[@osamamanzar](https://twitter.com/osamamanzar)

Breaking the barriers of languages - symbols, sounds & gestures have been a part of human communication from time immemorial. In the contemporary Digital Era, we have gone a full circle and returned to the use of symbols in a more developed pattern.

The digital revolution, especially the rise and pervasiveness of smart phones and other ICT tools, has given new meaning and acceptance to the symbols that are used regularly by the masses across ethnic and linguistic diversity. It provides insight that symbols are not only the manifestation of acceptance across many cultures and languages, but also a powerful tool of expression and creation of narratives.

There are around 500 million smartphone users across India, 200 million of which belong to small towns and rural India. Majority of these people have not received formal education, hence, can recognise iconised symbols like 'forward' or 'share' buttons from apps like WhatsApp and Facebook anywhere.

These symbols have empowered even the illiterates - in the traditional sense, enabling them to share content which moves or influences them. The use of symbols and oral language thus,

creates an inclusive environment for all overcoming barriers and stereotypes based on skills, knowledge, gender, religion, etc.

The use of ubiquitous emoticons has pervaded our everyday lives so intricately that even when someone makes a face or talks about an emotion in the back of our



Osama Manzar at The Radio Festival 2020



Children participation at The Radio Festival 2020

mind, we can actually visualise emoticons from various Apps. The point being that symbols and oral communication together helps develop visualisation, which has its own pros and cons.

The power of visualisation and personal understanding of the topics which may or may not be correct, can still be used to mobilise masses with similar thought process and no understanding of the importance of critical thinking. Most informative audience is unaware of the fact that if the content at their disposal is authentic or not, with no regards to how far their shared information can travel and what could be the consequences. We use these tools carelessly in lieu of making fun, passing time or merely to be proud of the fact that we shared it first. Language in any form requires us to be responsible in context to the dissemination of information.

Even with the second-highest Internet users, India still has vast Digital Divide especially in rural and far-flung areas. As the world embraces greater access to information and services online, the excluded individuals are being further excluded—almost to the level of being disenfranchised.

As we tune into the future, it's time we connect the unconnected using symbols and oral communication to build an all-inclusive digitally literate society