

Social E-Challenge: Spotlight: BookBox - BASES: Business Association of Stanford Engineering Students - May 2004

Social E-Challenge :: Spotlight



In 1996, I hit upon the idea of using Same Language Subtitling (SLS) of Bollywood film songs on television to make millions of people read in India. Simply, SLS creates a 'What you hear is what you read!' effect. SLS is now proven to improve reading skills, giving 10,000 people reading practice in India at a cost of one US Dollar per person per year!

When I came to Stanford as a Reuters Digital Vision Fellow (2003-4), we were already making 200 million people read in Hindi, Marathi, and Gujarati languages with SLS on several TV programs. My project at Stanford was to create a digital jukebox of Bollywood songs with transliterated subtitling in multiple languages.

Then I heard about BASES and its Social e-Challenge competition in a class on social entrepreneurship. That class brought me in contact with three international students initially, who were interested in taking SLS to their respective countries. But I suspect what was missing for all of us was that the idea of simply scaling up to other countries, was not enough to really get our entrepreneurial juices flowing.

We decided to take SLS in a whole new direction. BookBox was born with a fiercely ambitious goal of "Creating a book for every child in every language." No geographical boundaries. To achieve this, our 'book' had to be paperless. Our 'book' had to be distributable electronically through TV, the dominant medium in most countries today, and the internet where available, because of the ease of transnational distribution. So THE most important contribution of BASES was to invite us into an entrepreneurial space. With BookBox, Stanford students and fellows came together to take a proven idea for literacy in one country, and employ it in a completely different context for children's literacy, globally. BookBox blends this social goal with considerable revenue generation potential.

The world of social entrepreneurship is small but growing fast. Some of the key players in this field actually serve as judges for the Social E-Challenge. So, chances are that if one is a finalist, the entire network of social venture and funding comes closer within 2-3 degrees of separation. BookBox is beginning to experience this proximity as we find ourselves going through the process of forming a company and raising capital.

BASES also gave BookBox \$6000 for winning the competition. This seed capital helped us produce, in India, our first 'book' in six languages – English, Spanish, French, Mandarin, Hindi, and Bengali. BookBox plans to create 'books' in this core set of languages and additional languages depending on social need and market demand.

Last but not the least, the competition brought together what I consider to be an ideal team for BookBox with members from India, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Brazil, South Africa, and the US. Most of our original team members continue to meet weekly at Stanford and we have collectively invested \$24,000 in our social venture startup. Within the next six months we hope to produce 12 'book' in at least six languages each, on our own strength. If a VC joins forces, well and good. If not, we're a passionate enough group to bootstrap and make BookBox a social and commercial success. Our titles are expected to be available for paid download in the range of \$2/book/language, starting in November, 2004. BookBox 'books' will be useful for children (and even adults!) interested in reading, language learning, and cross-cultural learning.

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