

# Google 'democracy' for small filmmakers

SAM RAO

Las Vegas, Nevada

ANYONE with a camera and a halfway decent story can now seize the moment and compete with major movie studios across the globe. That's video democracy Google style.

The latest offering from Google at the recently concluded Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Google Video allows independent filmmakers to distribute their own movies—small as well as big budget—by setting their own price structure. The tech giant charges “a small fee” and ad revenue for this.

Launched with 5,000 titles, the introductory offer on Google Video also includes Google Pack, a software aimed at equipping newly purchased PCs with basics including a web browser and anti-virus software. Also available are four prime-time hit series from CBS—*CSI*, *NCIS*, *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*. These will be available the



Sergey Brin



Larry Page

day after their initial airdate for US\$1.99 each. Even the National Basketball league (NBA) is on board and is charging \$3.95 to purchase game broadcasts 24 hours after they air—with a revised price structure and special pricing possible depending on viewing traffic.

“It is a win-win situation for the

filmmakers and the consumers as it will eliminate middle-men and lower the cost of creating and distributing movies resulting in reduced cost to the consumer,” says actor Rajiv Nema, who starred in independent movies *Bugaboo* (1999) and *Asphyxiating Uma* (2000).

Google Video is the first major

challenge to the early lead that Apple Computer Inc. has in the emerging market for online video. While Apple's iTunes and the newer iPod Video helped open up the independent filmmaking market, Google Video makes it completely open, flexible and easy to distribute.

With the proliferation of consumer-produced media blogs, v-blogs and podcasts, small filmmakers with some technical knowledge have been able to find audiences online. And Google as a primary search engine helped fuel this phenomenon resulting in nearly 3 million visitors a month to the video portion of its search engine—currently its flagship product. One of the biggest success stories of this is Indian-American filmmaker Ben Rekhi, who ignored major studio offers reportedly in the six-figures and chose to offer his film *Waterborne* through Google for \$4.99 per download.

The problems—many of which may surface gradually—include copyright infringement and industry

standards. Currently, Google plans to offer content viewing on only Google devices—making them a third industry standard for copyright other than Apple and Microsoft. Thus, material bought from one vendor may not work with devices sold by another. Content owners can also decide whether to use copying protections to prevent customers from transferring the videos they buy onto portable devices.

But independent filmmakers like Sheshan Shashi and Nema are ecstatic, agreeing with analysts that the Google service is “a sign of legitimacy for this video-over-the-web marketplace”. “Who wants to pay \$10 along with \$10 for large coke and stale hot dog? This direction of the entertainment industry is ideal for a consumer who has been out of the 18-34 demographic for couple of years now and has to worry about babysitters every time the thought of watching a movie crosses the mind,” says Nema reflecting on the attitude of future movie-goers.

## ‘Pravasi Bharatiya Divas was just a picnic’

In the end of it all, the hype didn't match the grim reality. With not more than 1,000 delegates taking part in this year's Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas celebrations that concluded in Hyderabad last week, there are a number of embarrassed faces among the organisers. With such a low attendance, a good 4,000 down from last year, many are now questioning the need for holding any such meet in the future. While most State governments participated in the meet with big pomp and show, even the small number of NRIs who came were there for different set of agendas.

SAM RAO explores what PBD means to the Indian in the US and comes across reactions ranging from ignorance to strong opinions on issues concerning NRIs, the organization, or the lack of it, at the function, the Pravasi Bhartiya Samman controversy.

### VOX POPULI

• **Said R. Anand:** Unfortunately things have been really hectic at work and I've not been following up on the PBD this year.

• **Sunil Erraballi,** founder, Frontier Technology: I was in Hyderabad but I didn't attend the meet. I was not interested in it at all. I think we NRIs are full of it and overrated, India is finally cooking on its own steam. I hate to quote Laloo Prasad Yadav but like he said it was a “picnic”.

• **Naren Pathak,** commissioner, City of Sunnyvale: Overall it might be a good thing to do from India's view point. It should be used as an opportunity to address the discrimination against PIOs as well. Many who are representing the Indian diaspora at the event are political and (have)

business interests. They don't represent Indian activism in the diaspora. There are serious human rights issues facing the Indian diaspora in Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, and other places that demand critical attention.

• **C. Shekhar** who visited Hyderabad and Bangalore after several years: During my previous visits, there seems to be a fallacy among the locals that all NRIs are millionaires and are coming back to India purely to explore investment opportunities. This seems to be the mindset of the officials of PBD. I think the PBD program is a good idea, unfortunately I think many of the locals (also) presume that all NRI's have the same plan which is wrong and in many cases a complete mistake.

• **K.V. Subbareddy,** IT professional: It is very good step to host such conference and have platform to share views between NRIs and the government.

• **Raju Rajgopal,** activist, also a recipient of the communal harmony award from the Indian Muslim Council: Since the change in the central government in Delhi, we were hoping that the meet would also be a venue to discuss issues of communal harmony and social justice. While we appreciate (that) the government finally acceded to our demand this year by scheduling a plenary session on these topics, I was shocked that the same government should have chosen to give the highest NRI award to Dr Sudhir Parekh, a staunch supporter of Narendra Modi, who had even invited him to repeat his *gaaurav yatra* in the US. This is a matter of shame for all the NRIs and diminishes the prestige of the Bharat Samman award itself. I fully support the walk-out staged by my some of my colleagues in protest against the award to Dr Parekh.

## Want sabzi, visit California's Bay Area farmer's markets

SAM RAO

Bay Area, Calif.

FOUND at the busy intersections of many California cities, farmer's markets brimming with fresh produce are an enlivening venue for daily chores.

A lifeline for small farmers, local producers and the organic food industry, California farmer's markets thrive on the patronage of first generation immigrants—especially those from Asia, who put great stock by freshness and are culturally familiar with market-shopping. Health-conscious Americans are not far behind, with awareness about organic food choices increasing. Especially on the weekends, even a medium sized farmer's markets can draw over a 1,000 patrons.

Round the year, on any given weekend, there are at least a dozen farmer's markets operational in the Bay Area. With a setup time early in the morning, these regulated markets see a line of pickup trucks and cargo vans pulling in and producers putting up tents and canopies—in prime visibility spots.

Instructions are shouted in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, even Punjabi—as vendors set up alongside certified Farmers Market Association representatives, who make sure everyone is registered and playing by the rules. Some non-profits like Art of Living or the local Humane Society also send volunteers.

The early birds arrive before opening time. From all national origins, they hover around tables waiting to snatch up the best produce. By agreement, vendors are not allowed to sell before the official opening time, however, several people begin bargaining and staking out their purchases.

At opening time, it's officially a free-for-all. Experienced regulars arrive just then and follow the lead of the energetic early-risers—making a beeline to the stands with the best prices and freshest produce.

A Fremont housewife answers in Telegu when asked what she is looking for—“Totakoora” (garden curry vegetables). Hard bargaining is part of the farmer's market experience and it's a welcome and relished interaction for both customers and the Chinese, Korean, and Tibetan vendors who have been doing business with each other for several years.

Food from all over the world is available in the Bay Area. Over the years, patrons of many nationalities and food habits have made direct connections with small farmers and traders. These farmers nego-



San Jose's evergreen farmer's market.

tiate wholesale prices from interior agricultural California and bring Chinese karela (bitter gourd, but not as bitter as its Indian version); the hard-to-find snake gourd; Indian cilantro; fresh methi and even tindla.

“I am looking for raw mangoes, which come only in certain markets,” explains an Indian restaurateur who makes raw Mango pickles locally.

Recently, East Bay's Sukhi's Samosas and Pickles have been making appearances at the markets around the area. “Unfortunately, most markets do not allow live preparation and handling of food nor frying in oil—we prepare samosas, seal them and bring them here” says Sukhi's manager.

Fresh eggs are a big draw including organic and free-range eggs. Locally-produced honey is available in different flavors: local wildflower; clover, or orange blossom. The prices compete with brands available at nearby supermarkets. Fresh and designer breads such as potato, rye, barley and soy-mixed can also be found, along with traditional whole wheat and stone crushed varieties. In the East Bay, Naans and Afghani style flatbread are snapped up.

Farmer's markets also feature live music. One day, a blues musician, the next a Latin Salsa band or an Andean pan flutist. Union City even experimented with a local Indian Bollywood band. The experience of a Bay Area farmer's market combines necessary shopping with entertainment, bringing an element of Asian marketplaces to immigrants' lives in California.

