COMMUNITY RADIO: Finding Empathetic Echoes in Non-Urban Spaces

Dr. Sam Vinay Rao,
Amity School of Communication,
Amity University, Haryana.
Dr. Pooja Rana,
Amity School of Communication,
Amity University, Haryana

ABSTRACT

"Community radio is a social process or event in which members of the community associate together to design programmes and produce and air them, thus taking on the primary role of actors in their own destiny, whether this be for something as common as mending fences in the neighbourhood, or a community-wide campaign on how to use clean water and keep it clean, or agitation for the election of new leaders.

UNESCO defines community radio as a broadcast station that "is operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community." The term community media refers to a diverse range of mediated forms of communication and electronic media such as radio and television, print media such as newspapers and magazines, and electronic network initiatives which combine the best features of both traditional print as well as electronic media.

For a community radio station to be a success, it is important, that it be just that - a station for the community that lends to the people, a 'voice'. In other words, a community radio (CR) should be a platform to express themselves without fear of restraint, governmental restrictions or curtailment, and where they can find a sympathetic ear to hear their woes and problems. It is with this objective that many of the CR stations were set up, beginning with some of the early pioneers in India commencing from Chennai, and higher North, from Nepal.

This paper examines some of the reasons for the popularity of community radio stations, the characteristic growth drivers for community radio, and what are the factors that enable a community radio station to be self sustaining and effective.
Keywords: Community, Voice, Transmission, Empowerment, Radio, Licensing.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the current spate of a renewed interest in community radio, a revival of sorts, Community Radio (CR) is not a new phenomenon. It finds its origin in Latin America nearly 50 years back. The first one started in Bolivia in 1947, and was popularly known as Miners radio since it was managed and run by the miners in Bolivia. In the same year, in Columbia, Radio Sutatenza/AcciónCultural, another pioneer in the nascent field of community radio, overcame initial birth pangs to imperceptibly but steadily, forge an identity of its own. Community Radio was promoted heavily by UNESCO, which in the early years of its inception, greatly contributed to its growth and expansion. For many years, UNESCO championed the cause of community radio, nudging it from 'ham' and 'pirate radio' status into a media vehicle for social upliftment and communication.

Although, without a shadow of doubt, pioneering work did begin in South America, the movement really gained impetus and popularity in Europe where it became a cheap and viable alternative to mainstream media. In Africa also, it enjoyed widespread popularity after the demise of apartheid, and relative freedom from state control.

For decades, radio has been the preferred media for local and cheap consumption. Not only is it portable, it has the benefit of tremendous reach and ready access; leading to coining of the oft quoted phrase - 'Radio by the people and for the people'.

"Community radio emphasizes that it is not commercial and does not share what it would call the prescriptive and paternalistic attitude of public-service broadcasting… The key difference is that while the commercial and public service models both treat listeners as objects, to be captured for advertisers or to be improved and informed, community radio aspires to treat its listeners as subjects and participants[i]."

Community radio has three main characteristics: it is non-profit making in nature, it is community owned and managed, and operates with community participation.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Internationally, community radio has its origins in Latin America. Widespread poverty, social injustice and a growing need to educate the community about such injustices led to early experiments in community radio which began in Bolivia in 1947 (known as Miner's radio) and simultaneously similar such stations began in Colombia in the same year, going by the popular name of Radio Sutatenza/AcciónCultural Popular.

Formal mainstream Radio originated with the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC), following in the footsteps of BBC, and was established in IK in January 1927. India has had very close ties with the BBC and in fact much of its programming philosophy and patterns are borrowed from it[ii].

Although initially, community radio maintained the dubious distinction of being considered as 'pirate' activity, the scenario changed after a historic Supreme Court ruling in February 1995 that airwaves are not 'public property'. Soon after in February 2004, Anna FM Radio, India's first campus community radio station was launched by Educational Media Research Centre (EMRC), with all programming content being handled by media students of the University[iii].

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Although the use of radio for development was a cornerstone of public service broadcasting policy in India, no attempt to solicit people's participation even through systematic feedback, until 1956 when, an experiment in Farm Radio Forums was conducted with the assistance of UNESCO in 150 villages across five districts of Maharashtra.

This experiment was structured on a Canadian model, and was designed to establish two-way communication between village audiences and programmer producers of the radio station. The theme of the rural radio forums was 'Listen, Discuss, Act.'

By 2008, some 40 Community Radio Stations started in India owned either by the educational institutions or by the NGOs. The first NGO-operated community Radio was the 'Sangham Radio', licensed to Deccan Development Society, in Pastapur village, Medak district, Andhra Pradesh. At present there are approximately 150 Community Radio stations in India. In the same year, the Information & Broadcasting Ministry of the Government of India received 297 applications for community radio licenses, including 141 from NGOs and other civil society organizations, 105 from educational institutions and 51 for 'farm radio' stations to be run by agricultural universities and agricultural extension centers ('Krishi Vigyan Kendras'). Of these, 107 community radio stations have been cleared for licensing through the issue of Letters of Intent. As many as 13 Grant of Permission Agreements (GOPA) have been signed with license applicants under the new scheme.

UNESCO played a leading role in championing the proliferation of CRSs (Community Radio Stations) by organizing a workshop at Brighton Polytechnic in 1980 that brought together British, Chinese, Cuban, French and Ghanaian engineers. The purpose was to identify priorities and outline design concepts. The first requirement was a 10-watt FM transmitter that could run off a 12-volt car battery or even solar panels; and the second, was for a simple and cheap audio mixer, similarly powered, for bringing together sounds (voices, music and sound effects) into a single container programme, ready for broadcast.

FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Community radio, by its very definition needs an "active, socially effervescent population" who have a strong sense of justice and equality, if the radio is really going to be an instrument of 'social change'. Only real participation and a sense of ownership will lead to relevant programming and sustainability[iv].

Some of the factors that lead to success and more importantly, continued sustainability, is strong community participation. If we are to speak of community here we need to first understand what community is. According to Savita Bailur,

"Communities are not discrete entities but dynamic and cognitive"[v].

Individuals are 'faceless' and 'voiceless', but as a social entity, they constitute the voice of the people, that demands to be heard.

Community Radio channels the development efforts of rural folk and the underprivileged segments of urban societies, given its exceptional ability to share timely and relevant information on developmental issues, opportunities, experiences, life skills and public interests[vi].

An examination of the operating principles of successful radio stations in India as well as countries abroad, seem to indicate that four factors play a critical as well as catalytic role in the successful setting up and maintenance of a CR station.

(1) Economics of setting up a radio station: Since almost 95% of CR stations are set up in rural or semi-urban surroundings, cost of setting and maintaining such a station becomes crucial, as government subsidies towards such projects are few and rarely forthcoming.

(2) Geographical Location: Where stations are set up in areas which are extremely remote and access is daunting, chances of survival of such station are limited and rare. Most of the success stories examined are in villages or districts which are close to urban areas, and which can easily be accessed by day or night.

(3) Attitude: Like in all human endeavors, attitude becomes pivotal to the successful running of such stations. Only in situations where the public felt that the station was providing an essential and genuine service to the community, did the stations continue to thrive and expand.

(4) Community participation: This is naturally linked to the earlier factor. In places where the attitude of the community was positive and where members were motivated to participate actively, such stations did not just continue, they continued to grow, both in numbers as well as in programming hours and quality of content delivered.

Equipment and Infrastructure needed for a community radio station is relatively cheap (compared to mainstream radio), robust and easy to maintain. It does not need support from broadcasting engineers beyond the initial stages of installing and commissioning the station and then providing initial training, nor are costs prohibitive.

For a typical community radio station, the normal cost of the equipment is typically a little over US $20,000. For minimal broadcasting, there is even a suitcase available, weighing 16 kg, which contains a five-watt transmitter, a six-channel audio mixer, two compact disc players, two cassette tape recorders/players, and an antenna. The total cost is about US$3,000[vii].

With regard to licensing, initially licensing costs were 'somewhat vague', but not any longer. Currently, licenses are granted for a period of three years and since these are not-for-profit ventures, no license fee is charged, but the licensee however has to pay spectrum usage fee, as determined by the Wireless Advisor in WPC Wing of Ministry of Communications.

Surprisingly, the entire package is relatively small and portable. It is also essential that the equipment be rugged, be suited for all kinds of terrain and weather and be easily accessible for repair and routine maintenance.

Usual transmission equipment is comprised of a low-power FM transmitter of 20 to 100 watts. The production facility can range from a digital recorder to a simple studio that consists of an audio-mixer, DAT or other forms of digital recorders, DVD player(s) and microphones. In some facilities a simple loudspeaker or the community audio tower system (CATS) is used, either independently or coupled with a transmitter.

Because of the small size of units and relatively low operational costs, it is quite feasible to have a large, independently run and managed local radio stations. Citizen campaigners believe that thousands of low-powered community radio stations could be set up across India, each reaching out to an estimated 78.5 sq. km. That means that a country of India's size could have some 37,835 stations spread over some 2,973,190 sq. km. That makes for about 7,80,000 channels. If some were larger-powered transmitters, there would be enough frequencies for an estimated 23,175 FM stations. That's a whole lot of potential radio stations[viii].

The management of a community radio station is entrusted to the Community Radio Council (CRC). The CRC is a multi-sectoral body, which obtains its mandate from the community to run the station. CRC is trained for the purpose for managing the station.

Community radio is distinguished by its limited local reach, low-power transmission and programming content that reflects the educational, developmental and cultural needs of the specific community it serves.[ix]

If community radio, on the face of it, is so easy to run and manage, why aren't there a surplus of stations being manned and run at various sectoral levels?

Although the equipment required is not daunting and the core staff for daily operations and broadcasting is resource meagre, problems in securing licenses and permissions will deter any but the most obstinate and dogged pioneers. Says Fredrick Noronha,

> "Each application for setting up a low powered FM radio station will have to be referred to the ministries of home affairs, human resources development, and even - hold your breath - external affairs and defence! Licenses will be issued only after getting the "requisite clearances" from these ministries.[x]"

Tamil Nadu has a maximum 27 CRS followed by UP with 21, Maharashtra at 17 and MP at 14. Among these, the Educational institutions operate 68 CRS, NGOs operate 98, Krishi Vigyan Kendra and State Agriculture University are operating seven CRS.

KEY ISSUES

The lack of variety in programme orientation is generally attributed to the 'self-censorship' of the market, which uses entertainment as the sole criterion for selection.

The Chanda Committee Report of 1966 pointed out that faulty instruments of both transmission as well as reception were "rendering rural services ineffective". They added furthermore that community listening was suffering on account of maintenance of rural sets[xi].

Those who were in charge of maintenance were very often not trained or technically oriented to maintain the equipment which although simple in construction nevertheless demanded a rudimentary understanding of electronics and telecommunication.

In 2007, UNESCO estimated that India would have 4000 CRS with the new policy. Not even 5% of that target is achieved even after 8 years. While bureaucracy and red-tapeism are of cited reasons for slow growth or even freezing of enthusiastically started CR programs, by far the biggest reason for low to moderate success of CR stations in India is cost. Yes, to an urban audience the cost may seem very minimal, even negligible, but to a village inhabitant, this cost is very often, prohibitive.

"Cost and affordability are factors that are somewhat difficult to assess. Rajinder Oraon of Purushottampur claimed that he had to spend as much as Rs 125 to convert his radio set, while another man in the predominantly dalit village of Goradih Khas complained that many times the choice may be between buying batteries for the radio or paying school fees for the child"[xii].

High spectrum fees also serve in diminishing interest in both the initialization of such stations as well as maintaining it.

In April 2012, the Government had hiked, or rather, spiked the spectrum fee from 19,700 to Rs. 91,000. This fivefold increase in the license fee provoked widespread protest from functional community radio stations[xiii]. Although the courts promised they would look into the matter in 2013, this incident is a clear pointer that very often, actual practices are at dissonance with stated claims, however earnest they may be. In 2012, the then Minister of Communications Shri Kapil Sabil announced that the Government in order to improve the "interest of the common man" would waive off the spectrum fee, but much action in this respect was taken subsequent to his statement.

Gender seems to play a major role in community listenership. Since many of these programmes are broadcast during the day, that is the time when the women of the house are busy cooking and performing other household chores and are too busy to listen to the programme, or even if somewhat free, prioritization of such content is low.

Also, in many of the rural areas, girls have emerged as dependent content providers, as well as ensuring the smooth running of the CRs. Many of these girls after marriage, on account of domestic pressures, become less involved with the stations and they slowly steadily ease out of their creative responsibilities. If we are to speak of CR, then this media offshoot has been truly instrumental in taking empowerment of women out of the textbooks and into the area of grassroot training and sustainability effectiveness.

"Empowering women has been defined in various books and articles as a means of strengthening them to confront family, community, caste, religion. In this regard, Namma Dhwani or "Voices" of Karnataka, which was India's first cable station and funded by UNESCO, not only created awareness amongst the listeners, but also enhanced leadership qualities in women.[xiv]

According to Yalala Nirmala, radio educates women about their political rights, voting, women's reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions, and Assembly, Parliament, etc. It empowers them to fight back the domestic violence, male preference attitudes with men, gives them courage to speak their opinion on all issues, to express their interests *(ibid)*.

"Woman empowerment is a process that enables a powerless woman to develop autonomy, self-control and confidence and with a group of women and men, a sense of collective influence over oppressive social conditions[xv]."

In many of the radio stations in rural areas, it is the womenfolk, who have made decisive inroads into traditionally male dominated bastions. Marginalized women, deprived of their rights implicit in the decadent caste system, now find themselves armed with a new weapon that brings them social recognition, popularity through a hitherto undiscovered platform. For example, Radio Ujjas, launched by KMVS, an NGO working with rural women in 150 villages in the Kutch district, proved to be immensely popular, not just with women, but with the community at large.

COMMUNITY RADIO - INTERNATIONAL

Community Radio has not just had a successful run in India alone.

In other neighbouring countries, community radio stations run by NGOs have impacted the community by reducing illiteracy and closing the awareness gap amongst the female population. In Bangladesh, legal aid services as well as PSMs on public as well as personal hygiene served as information drivers amongst a hitherto marginalized and socially backward commune.[xvi]

The Government of Bangladesh approved 14 community radio stations after the Prime Minister's office signed an MOU among 14 community radio stations on 27th May, 2014.

In relatively small countries like Afghanistan, CR has been successful in uniting voices, even in such a landlocked, remote and strife torn community. In Afghanistan, the illiteracy rate is nearly 74% and on account of the Taliban, the Internet which could be a primary source of education for many was banned, with exceptions being made only to Govt. Sources, a few NGOs and the media. But even in the face of so many restrictions, CR managed to break ground. As researchers Bruce Girard and Jo Van der Spek mention, even in as remote a country like Afghanistan, community radio could be a viable option and according to them,

"Community radio can be the missing link in a three-tiered public service radio system made up of national, regional and local radio stations".

In other countries also, many community radio stations, which initially started as "rogue" or "pirate" stations, gradually attained legal acceptance, and subsequently, respectability and popularity. A case in point is Radio Perola which began as a clandestine operation and then attained legal status after numerous voices of dissent and protest. On April 13, 2002 two days after the coup in Venezuela, after President Chavez was reinstated, there was an explosion of radio stations. From 13 community radio stations, it went up to 170 stations in June 2005, a massive increase in the span of just three years.

SUCCESS STORIES

One of the most successful stories of CR is "Mana Radio" a radio station broadcasting in Telegu, funded by World Bank, which went on airing October 2002. An outstanding feature of this success story, which adds to its credibility, is the fact that it was completely run and managed by women self-help groups.

Another successful CR story is the "Chala Ho Gaon Mein" which was started by Alternative for India Development along with their technical partner 'Manthan'. The 30 minute programme was broadcast every Sunday on FM Band and covered 45 villages in Lesliganj and Panki Blocks of Palamau of Jharkhand.

In spite of the comparative success of the programme, once again cost and affordability were the driving factors in determining listener choice and purchases. Although FM Radio chips were available for as little as Rs. 100 and the cost of converting an existing set into an FM was done at the meagre cost of Rs. 125, many farmers still complained that although this amount may seem negligible to an urban mind, this could lead to a critical decision as to whether to pay the school fees of a child or purchase a radio[xvii].

In the South Sangham Radio, a pioneer in the field of CR was launched in Telangana in October 2008, the USP of this station being the fact that it was initiated by DDS (Deccan Development Society) an NGO that worked with the poorest of Dalit women who constituted the core Technical and content creation staff of this station.

Another initiative in Orissa, provided a considerable psychological and financial boost to marginalized women in Orissa, when they became involved with the Indira Gandhi NSS awardees and Ex NSS volunteers.

The CR programmes aim to enhance the psychological, economic, cultural, political, and social status of their female audience (Bandelli, 2011).

In the South, another radio station, 'Puduvai Vaani' established by Pondicherry University, Puducherry, began its transmission in 2009. This station made great strides in its primary objective of using indigenous media to educate, create awareness, and in the process, also provide light entertainment to the local inhabitants.

In a neighbouring country, Nepal, the first non-governmental radio station, 'Radio Sagarmatha' was set up, with the help of the United Nations. Deploying a 500 watt transmitter and covering an area of approximately 400 square kilometers, Radio Sagarmatha was ahead of its time in scope, ideas as well as operations.

CONCLUSION

Community Radio in India has been something of a neonlight experience. Flickering into popularity for a short period, usually in remote, far flung areas, then disappearing almost as quickly as it surfaced. Although we have looked at some stations which have overcome tremendous odds and obstacles, both from the community as well as from state, government and nodal agencies, the few random success stories cannot be cited as a striking example of a growing and proliferating trend. While it can be stated in some optimistic quarters that community radio is poised for a take off, it will require more than optimism and an unquenchable morale in order for this unique indigenous medium to make a significant dent in the community in terms of eradicating illiteracy, empowerment of women and the marginalised and of awareness creation. Both NGOs and the Government need to work hand in hand to support, not just financially, but in numerous other ways, if Community Radio is to achieve the same landmark success as it did in the Latin American countries.

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