

Community Radio Movement in India – Few Aspects Requiring Attention

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Abstract *The Community Radio movement in India was ushered in with high hopes and expectations in the 90s' decade of the last century. It was foreseen as a convenient and comprehensive instrument of development of the masses at grassroots level. However, over the years several factors and developments have undermined the original primary goals of the medium and diverted it towards some not so important goals with passage of time, thereby depriving the organizations and citizens concerned about deriving developmental benefits out of the medium. The author makes an effort at trying to analyze why this is happening while at the same time discussing a brief development of the medium in the world of mass communication, specially in the Indian subcontinent. It is also sought to be seen if the Government of the country is somewhat wary of fully opening up this media for preventing release of a more mass-oriented media than other media. The author also attempts at highlighting the medium's significance and integral connection with development communication and advancement of the masses at the grassroots level of the society. The write up further includes an introduction to the medium's emergence in the western world.*

Keywords: *Community Radio, Public space, airwaves*

1. Introduction

"Community radio, rural radio, cooperative radio, participatory radio, free radio, alternative, popular, educational radio. If the radio stations, networks and production groups that make up the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters refer to themselves by a variety of names, then their practices and profiles are even more varied. Some are musical, some militant and some mix music and militancy. They are located in isolated rural villages and in the heart of the largest cities in the world. Their signals may reach only a kilometer, cover a whole country or be carried via shortwave to other parts of the world. Some stations are owned by not-for-profit groups or by cooperatives whose members are the listeners themselves. Others are owned by students, universities, municipalities, churches or trade unions. There are stations financed by donations from listeners, by international development agencies, by advertising and by governments." Waves for Freedom". Report on the Sixth World Conference of Community Radio Broadcasters. Dakar, Senegal, January 23-39, 1995.

Community Radio (CR) is a type of Radio service that caters to the interests of a certain area, broadcasting material that is popular to a local audience but is overlooked by more powerful broadcast groups. The term has somewhat different meanings in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia. In the UK, it originated in the many illegal pirate Radio stations that came about from the influx of Afro-Caribbean migrants in cities such as London, Birmingham, Bristol, and Manchester in the 1970s.

Therefore, "Community Radio" remains synonymous with "Pirate Radio" for many people there. In America, it is more commonly a non-profit and non-commercial service, often using licensed class D FM band transmitters, although pirate Radio outlets have been operated in many places. Canadian and Australian CR stations operate somewhat similarly to their American counterparts.

One of the most famous examples of CR is miners' Radios in Bolivia. They were funded mainly by the trade unions and operated mainly at a local and regional level. There were more than 25 such Radio stations during the period from about 1960 to 1985. Changes in government policy eliminated many unionized mining jobs after 1985 and some of those stations were sold or ceased to exist. In spite of many difficulties eight or ten stations continue to broadcast.

2. The Asian Context

In the Asian context, two types of CRs are quite prominent than others.

First – the service model in which the CR programmes are components of a larger system. Programme producers visit the field and produce programmes with the community which are broadcast over stations of the national or regional networks. Here CR activities are part of a larger system. The development broadcast units attached with the national or regional broadcasting institutions of India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea are examples of CR Programme Service Model. Programme producers of these organizations go to the community to produce such programmes which are broadcast over national and regional networks.

Second – In the other one the station is situated in the locale itself so that it can be physically close enough to the listeners or the target audience group itself. Such stations should practice the policy of 'open door system' by which better community participation can be ensured as people can just come in and air their programmes. Going beyond the usual routine broadcasting programmes, they may also organize community events, programmes etc. for making itself very much a part of the local life. So, the programme producers of these stations might be called in to play several important roles like organizing events, live recording of events etc. in addition to their normal duties of broadcasting. This is in a way necessary for a better and more interesting programme production for the community. Usually, these stations operate on a low budget with fewer staff for various jobs. In this regard Mahaweli Community Radio (MCR) is a great success story and a learning resource for anyone in this business. This station was set up as a means of providing the people who were evacuated and rehabilitated from the Mahaweli river basin in Sri Lanka for construction of a multipurpose dam there. The project aimed at providing the rehabilitated people with messages of development including new professional skills, coping with a hostile environment among others. It proved to be highly successful and till date remains an inspiring source for all of us who are in support of spreading CR stations across the length and breadth of the country.

The MCR was basically a brainchild of Knud Ebbesen, who during a visit to this country proposed that a CR should be set up alongside the Mahawelli River Development Project (MRDP) to function under the overall framework of Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) though would be an autonomous entity for all practical purposes.

CR aims at enhancing participation of the people in the development process and capacity building in rural areas, through education. It provides opportunities to the people to upgrade their skills and enhance their creative talents, besides preserving and promoting the traditional wisdom, knowledge and skills. Thereby they help to promote and project the local language, arts, craft, culture and traditions.

CRs bring within easy reach of the rural population, topical information in areas of agriculture, social welfare, education, health and environment and help in creating rural networks for the rural cottage and village industry. Access and participation are the foundations of CR. A CR which is well-integrated with the community becomes a forum where community members as well as programme producers can have continuous access to and have dialogues with each other. For the programme producers mainly, this opportunity provides an ideal environment in which one can be more spontaneous and flexible in responding to the needs of the listeners. In India, the campaign for legitimization of CR has been going on since almost the past decade. The Supreme Court of India judgment of 1995 that "airwaves are public property" came as an inspiration to groups across the country.

The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters' (AMARC) declared principle is that – CR

responds to the needs of the community it serves, contributing to their development within a progressive perspective in favour of social changes. CR strives to democratize communication through community participation in different aspects of Radio's activity which may take various forms in accordance with each specific social context.

3. The Indian Scenario

CR in India at the moment stands on the threshold of fundamentally changing the basic notion of the role media can play in the empowerment of people. But a major barrier continues to exist in the form of the lack of legislative framework, perhaps fuelled by the resistance of established interest groups.

Although the need for CR had been a long felt one, this judgment of the Supreme Court gave an important and well-timed fillip to its supporters.

In September 1996, VOICES, an NGO brought together more than sixty people representing All India Radio (AIR) – the government-financed autonomous Radio broadcasting organization with a pan-Indian presence - universities, NGOs involved in development activities, journalists, and members of the broadcasting establishments to debate the issue and formulate a strategy to pressurize the government to act upon the judgment by setting up a legislative framework for introduction, encouragement and facilitation of the CR concept.

The result was the "Bangalore Declaration on Radio". While advocating that AIR should allocate regular airtime to community broadcasting in the interim period, the group also "requested the government to grant licence to set up CR stations to NGOs and other non-profit making organisations."

Since then, AIR has made token efforts in this direction but the current situation remains that no regulatory framework has yet been set up for non-profit agencies. The first privately-owned FM Radio station that went on air in July 2001 (ironically, in Bangalore), was a commercial one.

There are several definitions available in the textbooks as well as the academic circle of mass media about CR – a medium that has immense potential to usher in peoples' participation with all aspects of the system right from programme content creation to airing them.

It should suffice to say that a CR is a medium usually owned by a community, run by representatives chosen or elected by the community broadcasting programmes which are basically concerned with the locally-important issues and problems. It is a not-for-profit media tool normally managed with funds from donations, grants from public trusts, underwriting of costs of programmes by companies or other business concerns from time to time.

The degree of participation may range from being involved in production, decision-making, planning levels of the system of communication. Self-management is a more advanced form of participation and here the community is totally involved and responsible for the communication system.

Whatever definition or description is there about the CR system, the prime aim of it is to broadcast programmes targetted at uplift of the immediate community in which it is set up and for whose welfare it is committed and responsible to carry out the programmes.

It was with great hopes and anticipation that the masses concerned in the Indian sub continent welcomed the 1995 Supreme Court of India's landmark verdict that 'airwaves' were public property and no party or agency even including the Union Government of India (Gol) was entitled to claim ownership right to it and not open it up for usage by interested people for a positive cause.

Even this verdict was the result of a long-drawn struggle for many years by a bunch of like-minded NGOs who could foresee the potential of this medium a long time back and thereby was demanding 'freeing' of airwaves of the country. It was dream come true for the people concerned.

And in December, 2006, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (MIB) of Gol had taken things to a new high by announcing that even NGOs and voluntary organizations with a good track record would be allowed to apply for licence and set up CRs.

However, over the years things are not moving smoothly exactly on the way it was expected to initially because of several factors. This write up attempts at looking at these issues to what went wrong and how it can be put back on the right track again so that in the ultimate analysis it is able to contribute to the optimum level to the society which is pinning its hopes on the system.

4. Original Target Group is Bypassed

The All India Radio (AIR) website defines target groups for operating CRs in these categories such as --- 'Non-profit' organizations like civil society and voluntary organizations registered under the societies act and having a proven record of at least three years of service to the local community at the time of application, State Agricultural Universities (SAUs), Indian Council for Agriculture Research (ICAR) institutions and Krishi Vigyan Kendras along with well-established educational institution.

We personally believe that the first category of applicants should have been given more importance in the entire plan so that masses at the grassroots level could also have been involved directly in the process of development by means of participatory communication.

But a study of functional CR stations and Letter of Intent holders speak a different story. *(Please refer to Table No I & II)*

It becomes quite clear from the above data table that the original target groups have been left far behind in the run up to acquire licence for CRs and others are taking more advantage of the opportunity.

Of course, it is not that educational institutions, agriculture universities, hospitals, other institutions engaged in different kinds of educational programmes are not going to serve the purpose of disseminating meaningful messages to the masses. Besides, as there is no official bar for them in acquiring a licence and operate a CR station we can't blame them for doing so.

Only thing is that NGOs, voluntary organizations (VOs) who are formed by the masses themselves and are directly involved in the business of running a CR station in remote grassroots locations are not being able to reap the advantages of this medium with so much of potential.

Here, there can be an interesting side to it. The MIB probably is not at all interested in opening it up to the NGOs, VOs or peoples' organizations in reality even though officially it can't be declared.

The Gol is taking a safe bet in being comfortable with dishing out licence for CRs to educational institutions from school to university level, Krishi Vigyan Kendras as these institutions are considered safe places without ever fomenting troubles for the government.

5. No News & Current Affairs for C.R. in India

Despite the big publicity over 'empowering' the community through CRs, the MIB till date does not allow this medium to air news and current affairs programmes. At the same time private satellite and cable TV channels are allowed to do the same without any hitch. There may be two sides to this aspect.

First of all, the Gol may be scared of the apprehension that if the masses are served news and current affairs programmes from sources independent of government control the true picture of the society would be revealed to them and it shall indirectly lead the people towards a 'rebellious path'. That too at a time when the Maoists and secessionists are already creating a lot of trouble in several hundred districts of the country.

Also, there might be a feeling on the parts of the MIB or for that matter the Gol that the masses at the grassroots level who are the main target audiences of CRs are 'not capable' listening to and absorbing news and current affairs programmes and these would be sheer waste. Ironically this happens at a time when they same citizens are considered responsible enough to exercise their voting rights.

Secondly, and more importantly, all the important political parties irrespective of their ideology whenever they come to power at Delhi are never in favour of a complete decontrol of such a convenient and widespread true mass media which can be utilized for pushing through those parties' agenda to the masses

in the name of government schemes and developmental programmes.

And in the name of allowing CRs to be set up the MIB is in reality encouraging setting up of such stations at schools, colleges and universities, hospitals among others.

6. Lack of Awareness Among the Target Groups

On the other hand this is also true that there has not been enough publicity campaigns or drives about making the masses aware of the long term benefits of this medium. Even the organizations dedicated to this cause have not been able to do anything much in this direction.

Yes. It is true that the Commonwealth of Educational Media Centre, Asia (CEMCA) at New Delhi organizes a series of state and regional level consultations from time to time for stakeholders concerned for creating awareness as well as helping interested organizations through the whole process of acquiring a licence and operating a CR. Yet we believe these are not adequate enough.

7. A.I.R. Experience in CR

It may look highly surprising to many of us that it was the A.I.R. which set up five CRs in different locations of the north-eastern region. However, as it usually happens with any government bureaucratic set up, these stations are not serving the purpose they were actually set up for in the first place.

A senior official of AIR Guwahati in Assam (a state in India to which this author belongs to) who is known to this author was appointed as the head of one such station in a small town in Meghalaya (a neighbouring state of Assam in India) called Williamnagar close to inter state border with Assam. But he confided to me that he felt out of place and hapless as his mother tongue was different from the tribal dialect which was dominantly prevalent in that place. He admitted that he could hardly do anything worthwhile during his stay of about three years there. The experiences of the officials in the other four stations would also not be anything positive.

Table 1.

Total no of operational Community Radio stations up to August 31 st , 2011	113
***	67 %
Percentage of educational institutions of various categories and disciplines having operational CRs	
Percentage of non governmental organizations (NGOs) / Voluntary Organizations dedicated to public welfare causes having operational CRs	14 %
Others	19 %
Applications for CR licence received since 2004 till August, 2011	913
Letter of intent issued	349 applicants
Grant Of Permission Agreement (GOPA) sanctioned to 149 applicants	149 applicants
Number of rejected applications	295

Source: Website of Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India

*** This category includes postgraduate educational institutions like universities of the state and central government, TV and Film institutes, Open and Distance Learning university, private colleges of liberal arts and science and technology. The percentage of private colleges and trusts running CRs in various places of the country is comparatively more than those under state or Government of India supported institutions.

The above table is self-explanatory for all as it shows in reality how the original ambitious plan for empowering NGOs and voluntary sector organizations with grassroots links has been sidelined in the process and there is hardly any protest against this diversion.

Further, the table also highlights the existence of a widespread disparity in the number of total operational CR stations in different regions. It is revealed by the above table that few states in the South and West of the country are being able to avail far more benefit of the scheme whereas in the north (except Delhi and Uttar Pradesh) there is nothing much to write home about states in the eastern region.

That there is no balance in the government's efforts in streamlining such a powerful and convenient medium of immense potential for grassroots level empowerment to be spread across the country in an even manner is a cause of concern.

This further reflects the low level of awareness of the society about this new and emerging medium in different regions of the nation.

8. Revenue for CRs' Sustainance

The MIB has decided to allow a maximum of five (05) minutes of advertising per hour of broadcasting in CRs. However the rate of advertisement is very low compared to market rates. Even if we assume that these CRs are not-for-profit broadcasting media yet such a low rate is hardly of any use to the organizations operating them for even basic survival.

Of course this is a different matter for educational institutions whether in private sector or State Agricultural Universities, universities, colleges, Krishi Vigyan Kendra etc. where they can arrange funds for operating the CR from other sources.

The current rate of the Directorate of Advertising & Visual Publicity (DAVP – a GoI organization) advertisements for CRs is Rs 1 per second that translates into Rs 300/- per hour if we assume that they would receive advertisements for full hours of broadcasting which may not be the case always.

Besides, the CR concerned has to have at least three months of continuous operation with at least two hours of programme broadcast everyday before becoming eligible for empanelment with DAVP. Again, the request for empanelment would be considered only on a case-to-case basis by DAVP.

However, the organizations can seek funds for operating the station from multilateral agencies (including overseas ones with necessary Foreign Currency Regulation Act clearance) with the following conditions ---

- Revenue generated from advertisements & announcements can be utilized only for the operational expenses & capital expenditure of CRS.
- Permission holder shall be required to submit their audited annual accounts to the Government showing clearly, the income, expenditure incurred, assets & liability in respect of CRS.

But we believe that it would have been better to have in place a scheme from the MIB for providing at least a one time seed money for the intending organizations to start a CR station.

Also, the MIB may seriously consider reserving a certain percentage of the publicity campaign budget estimates of all schemes of Central government departments, institutions etc. to be given to CR stations for enhancing their financial status.

9. Growing Numbers

A look at the list of applications for grant of CR licence, those who have been granted Letter of Intent (LoI) – the first step towards consideration of licence for a CR followed by Grant Of Permission for Agreement (GOPA) and the rejected cases reveal a pattern which only reiterate whatever aspects we are discussing here.

Table 2. Status of I.o.i. Holders for c.r. (august, 2011)
Total nos 349

Educational institutions	Kvks	Ngos	Sau	Hos Pital / medical inst
160	17	51		3

- Other categories were taken into consideration.

According to the MIB regulations about the whole business of CR operations, a Letter of Intent (LoI) is issued once the SACFA clearance is acquired by the applicant following approval from the Wireless Protocol Committee (WPC) of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, GOI. This does not mean that they are cleared to operate a CR.

The next step is to obtain and sign the Grant of Permission Agreement (GOPA) following which Wireless Operating Licence (WOL) is issued from the WPC and frequency status is allotted to the applicant. Within three months from issue of the WOL the station has to be made operational.

If we look closely at the three tables of LoI and GOPA clearance holders and rejected cases, it becomes clear that the NGOs have been getting a raw deal in the whole business.

It becomes more curious and interesting that in the Rejected List table it is seen that the percentage of NGOs is comparatively much more than those in the LoI, GOPA and Operational CR list.

10. Possible Solutions

Coming back to the question of NGOs not being able to utilize such golden opportunities we have a couple of suggestions in this direction which might help us in improving the situation in the near and distant future.

First of all – the government, MIB to be specific should emphasize on more publicity to these provisions for the benefits of NGOs and voluntary organizations so that they can reap benefit of the scheme.

Secondly, there is far higher responsibility for the organizations and NGOs who are well-established and engaged in operating a CR successfully till date. That is – they must shoulder the responsibility of making this awareness spread to the widest possible level of the society and the grassroots. Otherwise we would be lagging far behind in the way towards empowerment of the society as a whole.

And as successful NGOs, voluntary organizations as well as being role models of the society they have a social responsibility for carrying out such a kind of campaign for the benefit of everyone – at least the grassroots people.

11. Reflecting a World View of Community Members

As we all know that it will be quite irrelevant if a CR dishes out something which is only remotely connected with the community. Thus, a CR through its well-planned and arranged set of programmes, must present a comprehensive view of the community life including how it is influenced either by forces within or outside the community. It is not enough that simple vignettes of community life here and there are presented now and then in disjointed fashion.

The method can be strengthened by these steps ---

✓ Ideally CR broadcasters are expected to be members of the community and thus speak and breathe the same language, culture etc. So they are also supposed to be able to understand the community's problems and empathize with them and have a comprehensive picture of their aspirations of the members. They must therefore be able to articulate the feelings, problems and aspirations of the community and relate these to a wider life outside the community.

✓ The CR is involved with the community's everyday life directly and indirectly and both of them are

affected and influenced considerably by each other. That is why the programmes aired by the CR must reflect the life of the community and the community members must also play an active role in running the CR's affairs. This high degree of interdependence and interactive relationship actually is the secret of success of CRs and make CR broadcasting so relevant to the needs of the people.

✓ The CR must articulate community life. Certain things in the community might be simply taken for granted by the people. But many a times these small but important things make a major difference like reminding people of s

✓ CR must present a comprehensive view of the community with all its glory and problems which can be presented in numerous styles depending upon the innovativeness and creativeness abilities of the producer or programmer. For example – reporting of events of a news programme, discussions of issues in public affairs programmes, articulation of problems and aspirations in drama presentations, reflection of our ways of living through musical and balladic presentations.

Even though these programmes individually can't bring in the expected achievement in a short time, a combined effort of all the presentation styles and aspects can actually acquire the results over a period of time or in the long term assessment. We might be able to achieve those results with a logical and judicious combination of all these programmes to present an effective, overall and comprehensive scenario to the community members.

✓ CR must also present a view in relation to the world outside of the geographical area of the community. A community becomes dynamic mainly because of its interactive relations with its environment and other communities. But interaction among communities can only be possible if there are open channels of communication among them. These channels are provided by the structures of communication networks. Hence, networking becomes very necessary in community broadcasting.

12. Development Communication and C.R.

The path that theories of development communication have taken bears an eerie resemblance to the one taken by developmental theory at large. For decades, they have rested on presuppositions that have little or no bearing with empirical observations. These mimic in different ways the following pattern.

The rural, the marginalized and the disenfranchised need to be helped. And this help must come in the form of outside intervention. This help can take the form of aid, technology, education, political rights, and in the case of communication specifically, ideas and information. This overall approach of "exogenously induced change" assumes the receivers to be a monolithic mass of morons who are incapable of articulating their own needs, their own notions of change and their own definitions of development.

They are the perfect sponges, absorbing all the wonderful messages directed at them, and whether through the "two-step flow" (E.M. Rogers cited in Hartmann et al., 1989: 26) or by the sheer strength of the "great information multipliers" (W. Schramm cited in Hartmann et al., 1989: 26) characteristic of the media, incorporate them into their daily lives.

As a result of this external support, the world becomes a more equitable place sooner rather than later. And all of humanity is indebted to the development and developmental communications experts for eternity. Unfortunately, the world has not changed much. Basic inequities remain (where they have not increased), and so do similar theories. However, what has emerged is a more sagacious view. "Real societies are too complicated and local conditions too varied for universal solutions to be applicable, though the dimensions of the problems of development are now better understood."

A challenge to this dominant, top-down trend in developmental communication has been present for some time, but has not been able to influence communication policy planners in the third world countries. This alternative view outlines a framework where "the status distance between teacher and student, communicator and audience, is abolished. Communication functions more as a dialogue in which the former learns as well as teaches, and the latter is enabled to understand better the causes of his oppression and

thereby to do something about it."

A constructive dialogue can take place only amongst equals. And to be able to do so implies the partnership and participation of the entire community in all processes of media production and dissemination. It is this approach that CR actually exemplifies.

CR also strikes at the heart of the tool with which status quo in a society is maintained - the control of knowledge. Those who have access to such knowledge are loath to give it up. And to give up control over something as important as broadcasting can be very threatening to existing power structures.

The limits of representative democracy and of broadcasting's representative public service role within it are essentially the same; power accrues to the representatives, not those whom they represent.

Moreover, media producers thrive on the mystification of the production process and its associated technology. The possession of this 'specialised' knowledge grants them a position of power. In practice, production processes can be carried out by anyone with just basic training.

When production shifts to the community, the demystification of technology occurs simultaneously. No longer can technology remain distant from the people that it is expected to serve. No longer is the process an esoteric one to which a privileged few have access. No longer can the dominant grammar of the media be sustained, for now it can be redefined by the audience itself.

This process then results in the emasculation of the dominant media production industry and its proponents. Consumers of a particular product becoming producers of the same is the worst nightmare of those who gain from established economic structures. It has also been observed that "knowledge of the operational aspects of mass communication increases interest in the media, and creates a critical awareness in listening to the messages they carry."

An audience that is critically aware of the way in which media products can be designed consciously to suit a certain end and may not necessarily represent the 'truth', is a dangerous one to contend with for those who stand to gain by it. At the same time, if communities are empowered enough to create an alternative media of their own, the mainstream media industry stands to lose the very basis on which it exists, its consumers. It is an unequal world, and it is in the interest of some to keep it so.

Against the argument that this is the sole barrier to community media being widely propagated, is the one that even if these legislative reforms were to take place, the deeply embedded hierarchical social structures within which CR would have to operate would mitigate the beneficial developmental effects of it. While lobby groups and advocates of community media continue to pressurize the government to formulate laws that would make free the airwaves in the truest sense of the term, it is the second hurdle which is infinitely more difficult to overcome.

Hierarchies have an inherent characteristic of being extremely tenacious. Indeed, change of social structures occurs over time and may only take place when the benefits of such a change for all are made obvious to all. In a similar vein, it is possible that the group currently influencing public policy on broadcasting in India will not lose as much power as it fears.

13. Conclusion

The CR does not seek to replace other forms of broadcasting. It simply gives a voice to the peripheral millions. A three tiered broadcasting model, with the national, private and community media playing complementary roles, has a precedence in other developing nations and much can be learnt from such systems. When CR does take off, it will be a rewarding exercise to observe the ways in which its active presence can be causally related to an improvement in the condition of the marginalized sections of society.

However, while it may be tempting to romanticize the power CR grants and the benefits it can bring, it is important to understand that it must only be as 'useful' as the community wants it to be.

To use the exogenous 'we must teach people how to use this new tool' approach would be to merely replicate the follies of the past. Organizations and lobbyists, who are impatient to use this tool in what would

hopefully be a more liberal environment, must be careful in this regard. If it is to be a true CR, it must be wholly and completely left in the hands of the community concerned. Even training and workshops to familiarize members of communities with the technology must facilitate an independent interpretation of the way it can be used. CR can be successful only if it liberates people to communicate with themselves. In their own language, in their own form and on their own terms.

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