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India Blog Series: Voices of Change: Community Radio and News in India [1]

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Amid the cacophony of new technologies that seem to proliferate with each passing year, radio remains a beacon to the disenfranchised. It is arguably the most affordable medium, and its reach makes it a viable way of reaching rural and isolated areas in which residents typically feel marginalized. As Colin Fraser and Sonia Restrepo Estrada note in UNESCO's Community Radio Handbook ⅃,
Any notion that TV and other sophisticated communication technology will replace radio is unfounded, for radio is in constant expansion. Its waves reach almost every corner of our planet. It is the prime electronic medium of the poor because it leaps the barriers of isolation and illiteracy, and it is the most affordable electronic medium to broadcast and receive in.

Community radio in particular is meant to be a tool of empowerment. By definition, community radio is a third model of broadcasting, separate and distinct from commercial and public radio. It is low-power radio, by and large, and caters to specific, frequently underserved, communities in limited geographic areas.

It is no accident that in India it has been burgeoning for years. Per a UNESCO publication entitled "A Report on National Consultation on Community Radio Policy IIMC New Delhi," the struggle for community radio followed a decision by the Supreme Court of India that declared the airwaves public property, to be used for the public good. The judgment further stated that broadcasting media should promote freedom of expression and should be free of "Government monopoly or control, subject to regulation by a public body." For years advocates of community radio in India fought for the establishment of a new tier of not-for-profit radio stations, owned and run by local people, typically in rural areas, which would enable marginalized communities to use the medium to create opportunities for social change, cohesion and inclusion as well as for creative and cultural expression.

Initially, only educational stations were licensed, but a number of civil society groups have since gotten involved. They produce programs in partnership with the local population. Hundreds of languages are spoken in India, so community radio can have a real impact on peoples who are isolated by the vernacular.

One question, though, is how to finance those tools of empowerment. A report on community radio for the InterMedia Knowledge Center, published in 2010, stated that there were at least 70 community radio stations in India, run by universities, NGOs, and agricultural agencies. According to the same report, "visits to seven CRs as part of a study sponsored by the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA)

showed that they face common challenges to sustainability and growth: time-consuming licensing processes, weak transmission power, the need for more human resource training, and the perennial search for a viable CR business model." It is the perennial dilemma of community radio: their weak transmission power makes them feasible to establish (because they do not clash with other signals) but difficult to sustain (because they do not have the reach of other stations).

A number of funding ideas have been proposed for community radio stations in India. One recommendation in the UNESCO publication calls for the establishment of a CR support fund that would take a percentage of the earnings of private FM radio "to subsidize the infrastructure and capacity building costs of CR stations." What about revenue at the local level? Dr. R. Sreedher, a director at CEMCA, suggests selling micro-ads by, for example, having local residents pay to have birthday greetings mentioned on the air. He also recommends broadcasting classified advertising. While the revenue generated by such mechanisms is admittedly small, they are still valuable because they give listeners a stake in the stations that serve their communities. They also help to foster a greater sense of community.

Conspicuously absent from community radio is news, but there is evidence that it may be migrating to the digital realm. Currently, only All-India radio, which is run by the government, is authorized to broadcast news on FM. Joel Simon, Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, wrote in a CPJ Blog, "Circumventing India's Radio News Ban," that he heard two explanations for the prohibition: the sense that the government is concerned that irresponsible programming could fuel religious tensions and the belief that authorities have been slow to dissolve the government's radio monopoly.

Former BBC Producer and Knight International Journalism Fellow, Shrubhranshu Shuddery, works in a region of India where most people are poor and illiterate and the language is Gondi. Per Simon, Choudary has gotten around the ban on radio news by working with Microsoft and MIT to develop a system that allows tribal villagers to call a phone number on their mobile phones and record a message with news on it. Once the information is verified, it is disseminated by mobile phone, SMS message and a website, CGNet.

A similar venture could be launched in India involving journalism students. As Sundeep R. Muppidi noted in a paper ⏚ extracted from a study for AMIC-UNESCO, journalism education has traditionally been a postgraduate offering in India, although it has been increasingly offered as an undergraduate elective as well. The growth in private television stations in India has fueled a demand for journalism education; but are students getting enough practical experience in contemporary journalism? Apurv Pandit, writing in Medianama, a website offering news and analysis of digital media in India, thinks not. He wrote that many journalism students end up getting content writing jobs, writing advertorials for b2b publications and working in public relations.

Suppose there were a way to put the same students to work in underserved communities and galvanize their energy for the public good instead of advertorials. One way to accomplish that would be to create a corps of journalism students who would work on stories commissioned by local residents. Instead of recording the news themselves, as in Choudary's model, the residents would use mobile phones to propose the stories and the journalism students would do the actual reporting. Given that so much of journalism education in India is postgraduate, this program could serve as a practicum that would complete a student's journalism training. Students enrolling in such a corps of community journalists could then be given tuition credits

and other incentives in exchange for what would amount to a form of national service.

Democracy has never been a quiet pursuit. It is robust, raucous, and sometimes fractious. A service corps of budding journalists would arguably make the racket even louder, give a voice to the voiceless, and provide hope to the isolated and impoverished.

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