ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

Expanding Discursive Spaces: Community Radio during COVID-19 and Beyond

VINOD PAVARALA ANIRUDDHA JENA

Vinod Pavarala (vpavarala@gmail.com) is the UNESCO Chair on Community Media at the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad. Aniruddha Jena (stapanjena@gmail.com) is a Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund (JNMF) Doctoral Scholar and Research Assistant to the UNESCO Chair on Community Media.

Vol. 55, Issue No. 49, 12 Dec, 2020

We acknowledge the documentation effort by Shruti Ravikumar that provided empirical inputs on the work done by CR stations in India.



Locating the ongoing migrant worker crisis in the politics of voice poverty and lack of access to spaces of representation, the article examines the role played by a grass-roots medium like community radio in India and elsewhere to provide discursive spaces for interest articulation for marginalised communities. Despite the lack of public funding and state support, community radio stations across India have risen to the occasion by broadcasting locally relevant information in local languages and helped mobilise communities to deal with the crisis. The article suggests that genuine democratisation of media may yet be possible with appropriate measures to address issues of information access and communicative equity.

The migrant labour crisis brought on by the unprecedented, sudden, and harsh lockdown restrictions imposed by the Government of India to deal with the spread of COVID-19 has

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

indeed stirred the conscience of the nation. Much has been written about the precarious economic conditions of the migrant workers and the misery, starvation, and death caused by the severe disruption in their lives and livelihoods. However, one of the little-understood issues underlying the relative powerlessness with which lakhs of these workers just started walking back long distances to their villages rather than mount any form of serious resistance in the very cities that they have built and sustained over the years is what some scholars have called their "voice poverty" (Tacchi 2008) and others have described as deep communication inequalities and "discursive erasures" (Dutta 2011).

"Voice poverty" can be understood as "the denial of the right of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making" (Tacchi 2008). As Nick Couldry has pointed out, the problem is not just the obliteration of spaces for articulating one's voices, but also the lack of recognition or utter disregard for the voices of the poor and disenfranchised in the context of neo-liberal economics and politics (Couldry 2010).

It is in this context that the emergence of voice infrastructures or infrastructures of knowledge production for, of, and by marginalised communities gains importance. Starting from Bolivian miners' radios in the 1940s, small-scale, local community radio stations now have a considerable presence across the world in Latin America, Africa, Australia, Europe, North America, and Asia. Estimates vary, but their overall numbers are certainly in the thousands, waging a battle in each of these regions to carve out a subaltern public sphere independent of the dominant public sphere where the government-controlled and private, commercial media have a hegemonic control over public discourse.

In South Asia, after decades of control over the airwaves by the state, since the late 1990s, there has been a civil society ferment for independent, third-sector broadcasting in Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan (Malik and Pavarala, forthcoming; Raghunath, forthcoming). In India, the Supreme Court judgment of 1995 declaring the airwaves to be public property, initiated a grass-roots struggle for community radio combined with intense policy lobbying and led to the opening of the airwaves to educational institutions and community-based organisations in 2003 (Pavarala and Malik 2007). With the policy in force for over a decade, India currently has 289 community radio stations in different parts of the country (MIB 2020). A number of these stations are located in relatively media-dark areas of India catering to the information and communication needs of the rural poor and the urban marginalised communities through relatively democratic, participatory processes and horizontal communication structures. These stations typically reach audiences within a radius of about 15 km-20 km, broadcasting locally relevant content in local languages. So, what role can such small hyperlocal media play in situations of crisis such as the present pandemic?

Even as there are extensive research efforts underway to create an effective vaccine against the novel coronavirus and experiment with different cocktails of drugs to counter the

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

symptoms, public health authorities have increasingly prioritised the value of information flows to citizens and the need to have sustained communication with people. The publicity machinery of the government and multilateral agencies got into the act quickly to put in motion the tried-and-tested IEC (information, education, and communication) strategies to drive home the public health guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Government of India, using mainstream media such as television, newspapers, commercial radios, and other technological means such as mobile phones and social media. Important as this dissemination of factual information from authoritative sources is, much of this process is vertical communication, from the expert to the laypeople, of homogeneous content without much regard for local and regional variations, and without community participation, except as passive consumers of information. There is enough literature now that provides a robust critique of such communication approaches to individual behaviour and social change (Servaes 2007; Howley 2010).

Questions have been raised about the credibility and authenticity of the information that is being shared on the dominant media platforms (Singh 2020), which are going through a crisis of their own, struggling to manage financial and human resources. The government has been curbing any critical coverage in the mainstream media in the name of forging a national consensus. Efforts to manufacture consent on a national scale are evident in the government's appeal to the heads and editors of media outlets to not publish anything negative about the government's strategies to fight the pandemic (Sagar 2020). While these and other issues have been raised by some commentators, the very pertinent issue of whether the communication addresses the concerns of people on the margins has received scant attention. These are people whose communities are grossly under-represented and sidelined by the mainstream media as some of our conscientious senior journalists have repeatedly pointed out (Sainath 2020; Sharma 2020). These communities are locationally disadvantaged, living in the hinterland and backwaters of the country, deprived of adequate and timely information. Moreover, the linguistic marginalisation that these communities face is such that they receive very little communication in their own languages and dialects, some of which are even outside the purview of state recognition.

At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Chair on Community Media (University of Hyderabad), our team has been tracking the work of community radios around the world in addressing the COVID-19 crisis. Not only does the work provide a sharp contrast in approach and content, but underlines the value of hyperlocal media during these times.

Community Radio in the Times of COVID-19

Rising to the coronavirus (COVID-19) challenge, community radios (CRs) have been playing a key role in mobilising communities on the margins to protect themselves against the virus and offering locally relevant information. CRs have served as information tools for spreading awareness about safety precautions, symptoms of infection, testing, and quarantine

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

regulations; at another level, they have been debunking fake news circulating on social media and giving alerts on arrival of ration supplies and the return of migrant workers.

The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA), in its response to the crisis, has launched a new radio series dedicated to supporting consumers during the current pandemic. The association has worked to equip Australian consumers with the support, advice, and access to resources they need to make financial decisions during the pandemic (*Radioinfo* 2020). The Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) has been actively sharing vital resources, such as radio scripts and backgrounders, as well as designs for production of effective COVID-19 programming. The BNNRC is also developing structured interactions with health authorities to ensure accurate information goes out and myths are debunked (BNNRC 2020). In Mexico, CRs are effectively transmitting crucial information in indigenous languages to keep the indigenous communities updated during this crisis (Rios 2020). In Africa, community radio stations are sharing and reaching out to vulnerable communities with life-saving COVID-19 information (Obonyo 2020).

The CR sector in South Asia has been proactive in dealing with the pandemic crisis in the face of challenges of infrastructure and financial resources. It is suggested that it is because of the intimate relationship with the community that CR has emerged as a credible and vital link between the government and the grass roots (Sen and Malik 2020). In India, community radios are united, despite their diversity, in reaching out to the communities to ensure that the lives of people on the margins are not compromised and taken for granted (Mehra 2020).

Advocating Physical Distancing, Debunking Fake News

Social distancing or physical distancing (a phrase that is perhaps more accurate and divested somewhat of the connotations of the social divide in hierarchical India) is a useful measure that has been advocated by the WHO. The Government of India as well as local authorities across the country have been promoting and trying hard to enforce physical distancing to avoid the threat of community transmission. In its response to COVID-19, community radio station Alfaz-e-Mewat (AeM) has been broadcasting factual information across 225 villages in Nuh district of Haryana about the spread of the pandemic. The station director, Pooja Murada, revealed that "team AeM has been helping the communities in remote areas during this global health crisis." During the first phase of the nationwide lockdown, AeM aired a series, Ekis Batein, Ekis Din (21 Dialogues, 21 Days) and when the restrictions were extended, the station followed up with another series called 19 Din Aur Sambhalke (Caution for 19 days more). The idea was to sensitise and inform people about various aspects of the pandemic so that people can be fully aware of the essential things that might help them avoid getting infected or spread it to others. The station also broadcast a show called Savdhan (Alert) that attempted to take on and debunk disinformation and fake news in circulation on social media platforms. Another station in the

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

same region, Radio Mewat, has been airing a show called *Corona se Jung, Radio Mewat ke Sang* (Fight the battle against the virus with Radio Mewat) through which it not only provided critical information for the well-being of their listeners, but also became a key link between district and local administration and the mostly non-literate communities of the area.

In the remotest parts of Koraput district of Odisha, Radio Dhimsa, a tribal CR station catering to the Desia (indigenous) community, has been carrying out wide-ranging activities, both on- and off-air, to empower the community to deal with the pandemic. While narrating his experience as the station manager, RJ Uday said that, "Desia people can't understand the information that is conveyed to them through mainstream media outlets because of language and cultural barriers. As a result, vital information remains out of reach for the community during these trying times. We have roped in local experts from the community and trained them to convey important messages in the Desia dialect." With the strong community bond built over the years, the station's staff and volunteers visited villages to demonstrate such things as physical distancing norms, proper wearing of masks, and personal hygiene.

Gurgaon Ki Awaaz in Gurugram (erstwhile Gurgaon), Haryana has been informing its listeners, mostly migrant workers who fuel Gurugram's Millennium City, about the availability of rations in the neighbourhood fair price shops, medicines, and providing counselling on psychological anxiety and job losses. It has emerged as a strong community voice during the COVID-19 crisis. In order to keep the tribal population of Sargur, Mysore updated about the novel coronavirus, Janadhwani CR has been bringing in doctors and other key health officials to share messages in Kannada and local dialects. Similarly, another Karnataka station, Sarathi Jhalak, in the Hoskote taluk of Bengaluru Rural district did some out-of-the-box thinking with its programming. In a panel discussion, they brought together a health expert, a police officer, a non-governmental organisation representative, a historian, and a philosopher to discuss past epidemics that had drastically affected the region and the lessons one could learn from those experiences, and also sought to address the spiritual well-being of the community (Chopra 2020; Bhatnagar 2020; Kumar 2020).

In Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, a relatively new station called Gunjan has been providing valuable information related to public health, hygiene, and lockdown regulations not only in Hindi, but also in Pahari and Garhwali dialects. Waqt ki Awaz radio station in Kanpur Rural district of Uttar Pradesh has broadcasted a 26-episode series relying heavily on WHO data to provide facts and figures, scientific information about the virus, and safety precautions that individuals and communities can take to prevent the disease from overwhelming their health and livelihoods.

It would be no exaggeration to say that community radio stations rallied around the national resolve to tackle the pandemic and minimise its impact on lives and livelihoods with a great sense of responsibility and community awareness, albeit against great odds.

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

Fighting against Odds

Community radio stations in India have been working against the pandemic at considerable risk and cost to their staff members, with no support from the government. On most days, restrictions on movement made it rather difficult for station personnel, especially women, to reach the station (except in places like Gurugram where the civil defence stepped in with transport help) without the privileges accorded to journalists of mainstream media. Not enjoying formal recognition as media in many parts of the country, community radio reporters found it a challenging task to get local administrators and authorities to speak to them over the phone or include them in social media groups meant for distribution of official circulars. Working remotely and transferring audio files via the internet also posed a financial problem with costs of data connection.

While in many countries, recognising community radios as a valuable public resource, governments and regulators extended emergency funding to stations and offered other kinds of financial assistance, in India, we had a half-hearted and uninformed Ministry of Information and Broadcasting getting the minister to reach out to the stations with a pre-recorded message on 22 May. The minister's short speech was full of rhetorical appreciation of the sector and bereft of any ameliorative measures to bail out the stations that have been rendering a critical public service. On financial support to the stations, the minister claimed that the government provides financial assistance for setting up stations and that the stations then must meet maintenance costs by raising advertising support. The community radio policy in India permits CR stations to broadcast seven minutes of advertising to every one hour of air time. The minister suggested that this could be raised to 12 minutes to an hour of broadcast. The announcement betrays ignorance of the fact that very few stations in the country are able to raise even five minutes of advertising per hour of broadcast time, because of locational disadvantages, the audience of low socio-economic status is perceived as the wrong demographic, and lack of marketing skills.

The support for setting up costs mentioned by the minister have also been disbursed so scantily over the last few years that the funds allocated under the ministry's much-vaunted Community Radio Support Scheme (CRSS) goes mostly to organising national sammelans in Delhi and funding awareness workshops across the country with the objective of encouraging more organisations to apply for a CR licence. That, despite these workshops, there are still only under 300 CR stations in the country of our size (as against 350 in Nepal) calls for another in-depth analysis of the reasons, including insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining a licence. The long-standing demand of the community radio movement that the government establish an autonomous community radio support fund, as it exists in many other democratic countries, with transparent grant-making for a range of needs, including setting up costs, acquisition of infrastructure, salary support, volunteer training, and content production, has fallen on deaf ears. The Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP) of the ministry, which had started issuing government publicity advertisements on various welfare schemes at considerably low rates, has been defaulting

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

on prompt release of payments. During the current pandemic crisis, there have been suggestions that if the government at least releases the payment of arrears to stations, leave alone emergency funding, it would be a big help.

It is in this context that we also propose that the government seriously consider mobilising a minuscule proportion of the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) to strengthen community radio stations operating in relatively deprived regions of the country. India, as a signatory to the Constitution and Convention of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), is obligated to see how the benefits of new communication technologies extend to marginalised communities in the country. The USOF was created in 2004 with the funds generated through the Universal Access Levy (UAL) as a percentage of the revenues earned by telecom licensees. We suggest, for instance, that these funds could go towards subsidising the high costs of internet connectivity for community radio stations.

Conclusions: CR in Crisis Communication and Beyond

Participatory media such as community radio, produced and managed by local communities, are proving to be a vital tool in times of disasters and crises. With its underlying philosophy of empowerment of marginalised people, CR is attuned to disaster management approaches that are centred on vulnerable sections of society. There is enough documented evidence about the critical significance of community radio in dealing with disaster risk reduction and disaster management from Asia, especially South and Southeast Asia. There are exciting stories as well from Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean of how local communities have used their own communication competencies to share information about impending natural disasters, rehabilitation efforts, and to build resilient communities that adopt practices of sustainable development so that they become less vulnerable to future disasters (Pavarala 2013). It has also been pointed out that community radio plays a crucial role in enabling communities to assess the risk of disasters and prepare for an appropriate response (Chawla and Ramakrishnan 2020).

It is to be noted that community radios are able to deliver during natural disasters or public health crises such as the coronavirus pandemic because of certain key characteristics that define them. First, their proximity to the community, often bolstered by decades of grass-roots mobilisation work in which the parent organisation has been engaged, is a primary advantage. Second, eschewing inputs from professionally trained broadcasters, community radio programmes are mostly produced in partnership with and the participation of community members. Third, unlike the one-size-fits-all models of dissemination of information, the content of CRs is contextualised locally, sharing relevant experiences and information that large-scale, centralised media cannot. Lastly, the programming in community radios is mostly done in local languages and dialects, with CRs in India today echoing the sounds of Marwari, Kutchi, Bundeli, Bhojpuri, Haryanvi, and Desia, rarely ever heard over the airwaves.

As the badly bruised and battered migrant workers (now labelled, ominously, as "the

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

returnees") emerge out of their village quarantines trying to fend for themselves and their families, the questions to raise are: Where and how do they speak? Who will listen to them? What infrastructures for articulating their voices would they find open for them? In India where Internet penetration is still only at about 40% of the population, community radio certainly has the potential to offer discursive spaces for those left out of the digital dreams. However, we have much ground to cover if genuine democratisation of media spaces in the country can be achieved. This includes urgently addressing issues of information access and communicative equity, creation of a level playing field in the infrastructural domain, provision of public funding for community media, and forging enabling policy formulations to support these measures.

References:

Bhatnagar, Gaurav Vivek (2020): "This Gurugram Community Radio Station Is Playing a Key Role in Times of COVID-19," *Wire*, 14 April, <u>https://thewire.in/media/this-gurugram-community-radio-station-is-playin...</u>.

BNNRC (2020): "COVID-19: Community Radio Broadcasting Coronavirus Prevention Education in Bangladesh," Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication, 18 March, <u>https://bnnrc.net/covid-19-community-radio-broadcasting-coronavirus-prev...</u>.

Chawla, Amarpreet K and N Ramakrishnan (2020): "Community Radio: An Important Mechanism for Disaster Risk Reduction," *CR News*, 23 April, <u>http://uccommedia.in/news/community-radio-an-important-mechanism-for-dis...</u>.

Chopra, Sonia (2020): "How Community Radio Is Helping India," *Radioworld*, 15 April, <u>https://www.radioworld.com/columns-and-views/how-community-radio-is-help...</u>.

Couldry, Nick (2010): *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*, London: Sage Publications.

Dutta, Mohan J (2011): *Communicating Social Change: Structure, Culture, and Agency*, New York: Routledge.

Howley, Kevin (2010): Understanding Community Media, California: Sage Publications.

Kumar, R Krishna (2020): "Keeping Tribals Abreast of the Latest During Pandemic," *Hindu*, 5 April, <u>https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/keeping-tribals-abreast...</u>.

Malik, Kanchan K and Vinod Pavarala (forthcoming): *Community Radio in South Asia: Reclaiming the Airwaves*, New Delhi: Routledge.

Mehra, Preeti (2020): "On the Margins, but the Frequency is Right," *Business Line*, 17 April, <u>https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/specials/india-interior/on-the-marg...</u>.

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

MIB (2020): "State wise Details of Operational Community Radio Stations in India as on 31-03-2020," Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/List%20of%20289%20Operational%20C....

Obonyo, Raphael (2020): "In Africa Stations Spread Lifesaving Information," *Radioworld*, 3 June, <u>https://www.radioworld.com/columns-and-views/guest-commentaries/in-afric...</u>.

Pavarala, Vinod (2013): "Community Radio as a Tool for Disaster Risk Reduction – I," Uccommedia, 16 July,

http://uccommedia.in/news/community-radio-as-a-tool-for-disaster-risk-re....

Pavarala, Vinod and Kanchan K Malik (2007): *Other Voices: The Struggle for Community Radio in India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Radioinfo (2020): "Community Radio Supports Consumers Coming Out of COVID," 4 June, https://www.radioinfo.com.au/news/community-radio-supports-consumers-com....

Raghunath, Preeti (forthcoming): *Community Radio Policies in South Asia: A Deliberative Policy Ecology Approach*, Palgrave Macmillan.

Rios, Lorena (2020): "Mexico's Community Radio Network Shares Critical COVID-19 Info in Indigenous Languages," *PRI*, 21 April,

https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-04-21/mexico-s-community-radio-network-... indigenous?fbclid=IwAR1POdL2S65iVuPcfQNknnosFiRAhjcuNeX1SDB9eATvf0NnWTcBeOQ lNpU.

Sagar (2020): "Speaking Positivity to Power: Hours before Lockdown, Modi Asked Printmedia Owners, Editors to Refrain from Negative COVID Coverage," *Caravan*, 31 March, <u>https://caravanmagazine.in/media/hours-before-lockdown-modi-asked-print-...</u>.

Sainath, P (2020): "PM Modi Does Not Believe in Accountability to Media: P Sainath," *Newsclick*, 11 May,

https://www.newsclick.in/pm-modi-does-not-believe-accountability-media-p...

Sen, Ashish and Kanchan K Malik (2020): "CR Leads the Crusade against Covid-19 in South Asia," *CR News*, 23 April,

 $\underline{http://uccommedia.in/news/cr-leads-the-crusade-against-covid-19-in-south....}$

Servaes, Jan (2007): *Communication for Development and Social Change*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Sharma, Kalpana (2020): "Coronavirus is Also a Crisis for Indian Media, and a Chance at Redemption," *Newslaundry*, 8 April,

https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/04/08/coronavirus-is-also-a-crisis-for-...

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

Singh, Bhupen (2020): "Media in the Time of COVID-19," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 55, No 16, 3 April, <u>https://www.epw.in/engage/article/media-time-covid-19</u>.

Tacchi, Jo (2008): "Voice and Poverty," 4 June, https://eprints.qut.edu.au/17927/.

