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The COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown have made community radio broadcasting more important than before. Using case studies and interviews, we explored the kind of programming adopted by selected community radio (CR) stations in India during the pandemic and how they fight fake news. We also analyzed other issues they addressed during this period. We identified more dedicated programming services concerning COVID-19, fake news, and mental health using two-way communication by CR stations. The latter shared personalized and fact-checked information disseminated to the community. Issues related to rising domestic violence and mental health were also highlighted in their broadcast during the nationwide lockdown. Fake news percolated quickly in the communities where most members are illiterate and have little access to fact-checked information. CR stations indeed play a pivotal role in engaging the community in verifying fake news through personalized storytelling, using folk and traditional media, and engaging COVID-19 warriors from the community to authenticate the information.

With the rise in COVID-19 cases worldwide, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 (caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2) "a public health emergency of international concern" on April 16, 2020 (Wee et al., 2020, para. 9). India reported its first COVID-19 case on January 30, 2020, (Vara, 2020, para. 1) and eventually imposed a nationwide lockdown from "25 March to 17 May 2020" (Kumar et al., 2020, para. 1–2). India, like several countries, had to deal with the fake news epidemic and infodemic (Arao et al., 2020, para. 1; Kanozia & Arya, 2021; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021). Infodemic has been described as an overflow of false information that might eventually lead to an existential crisis (Kanozia et al., 2021, para. 2).

Theoretical framework

The dominant paradigm of development communication theories emphasizes the use of mass media

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(Servaes & Malikhao, 2008) while the participatory theory of development advocates democratization and participation at all levels referring to Freire's (1983) concept of conscientization. The media in India are used for disseminating top-down forms of communication as posited by the diffusion theorist in the initial stages of development (Singhal & Rogers, 2001). Due to the existence of heterogeneous groupings within the communities in India, an appropriate communication approach needs to be adopted and contextualized in contrast to those applicable in western countries (Pavarala & Malik, 2007). Consequently, alternative media platforms such as community radio (CR) have exhibited immense potential in the facilitation of the "community public sphere" (Forde et al., 2002, p. 65). McQuail (1983) stressed media's role in the democratic participation of people for development. This media democratization is ensured by creating a space for contextualization and localization of information. Consequently, spreading fact-checked information on COVID-19 using indigenous culture and dialect may be described as conscientization of information. CR stations in India have been ensuring access to information to marginalized sectors (Malik, 2015; Malik & Pavarala, 2020; Pavarala & Malik, 2007).

Although radio was supposed to play a pivotal role in development (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2006; Keefer & Khemani, 2011), Pavarala and Malik (2007) credit CR for its constant effort in the upliftment of the marginalized communities. It is the third-tier broadcasting in India after public service broadcasting and private FM broadcasting (Pavarala & Malik, 2007). In the same way that democracy is defined as governance of the people, by the people, and for the people (Haney, 1944), CR is run for the community, of the community, and by the volunteers of non-governmental organizations committed to the community (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 2002; Gumucio-Dagron, 2001). During emergencies and other calamities, CR stations have played a crucial role in disseminating information that serves most the respective communities (Sen, 2020). Folk tradition, local dialect,

personalized messages, and success stories have made them accessible to the grassroots. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the CR stations used folk and oral culture to spread information among the listeners (PTI, 2020). As the mainstream media remained mostly engaged with national issues, CR stations delivered localized information and answered queries of their listeners. CR stations shared information regarding the need for the imposition of lockdown, availability of supplies within the specific geographical locality, misinformation, and myths surrounding COVID-19 among their listeners (Mitra, 2020; Murada & Grover, 2021).

Review of literature

Studies have shown that CR stations have immense potential in disaster risk reduction and preparedness. Many rural areas of South Asian countries are prone to disasters and hence, the functioning of CR stations become more relevant (Sen, 2020). Examples of CR stations from countries like Nigeria (Ephraim, 2020), the UK (Coleman, 2020), and Bangladesh (Pavarala & Jena, 2020) exhibit their contribution to achieving community engagement in the dissemination and accessing of information during the COVID-19 crisis. There have been changes in the production processes and the programming content to cope with COVID-19 information needs (Coleman, 2020). The CR stations of these countries have demonstrated a wealth of technical expertise and commitment toward their communities despite financial constraints (Coleman, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has trained journalists from CR stations in Ethiopia by setting up a digital platform for the dissemination of reliable health information to their listeners (Genetu, 2020). The Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) has also been rallying behind the government in generating awareness on social distancing, violence against women during COVID-19, and fake news (BNNRC, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). The BNNRC has been facilitating two-way communication for

ensuring multi-stakeholder support for mitigating the risk and impact of the pandemic. The UNESCO Chair on Community Media conducted a series of online dialogues with community media practitioners, advocates, academicians, and researchers to discuss and formulate mechanisms of aiding the community media to operate during the pandemic (Hans News Service, 2020). Studies show that COVID-19 imposed restrictions in various nations had reasonable implications on their people's mental health (Gualano et al., 2020; Le & Nguyen, 2021; Mucci et al., 2020). Based on these studies, we delimit our study around RQ1: What kind of programming is being adopted by the CR stations across India to cater to the health information needs of their communities during this pandemic?

Another concern that needs the CR stations' immediate attention is the identification and awareness generation on fake news. Misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 and communal polarization are major causes of concern. There has been an unprecedented rise in the creation and circulation of fake news during the pandemic and lockdown in India and in various parts of the world (Arao et al., 2020; Corner, 2017; Kanozia et al., 2021; Kanozia & Arya, 2021; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021). The term fake news has been identified as false and misleading online posts that give an impression of being a real news report for misleading the reader (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Studies show that fake news travels faster than factual information given its use of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and messaging apps like WhatsApp (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Fake news also thrives on the receivers' biases (Stroud, 2008). Hence, fake news on treatment, the transmission of the virus, and religious vilification surrounding COVID-19 poses more threat to those facing "voice-poverty" (Pavarala, 2015, p. 15) compared to those who are politically aware. Fake news has had much of its impact during the pandemic in India (Kanozia et al., 2021; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021), raising vaccine hesitancy in the regions. Kanozia and Arya (2021) said that the reasons for vaccine hesitancy

in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are fake news, lack of data on vaccine efficacy, religious factors, distrust in government, public agencies, and structural barriers.

These studies identified maximum exposure to fake news and selective exposure to fact-checked information. Consumption of fact-checked information remains limited to people with higher political knowledge (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Shin & Thorson, 2017). The illiterate rural populace therefore remains most prone to believe fake news. The broadcast of fact-checked health information becomes more necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic for the lowest common denominator. CR stations using local and folk culture have the potential to dismantle these echo chambers. Despite its many limitations, "Community radio stations across India have risen to the occasion by broadcasting locally relevant information in local languages and helped mobilize communities to deal with the crisis" (Pavarala & Jena, 2020, para. 1). As a result, we also seek to address this RQ2. How do the CR stations address fake news and infodemic on COVID-19?

The policy regulations on CR station in South Asia has also remained a subject of study within development communication (Backhaus, 2019; Malik & Pavarala, 2020). The intersection of participatory development and diffusion of information through the CR stations in India requires more research (Backhaus, 2019; Bhat, 2018). The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) is a body constituted by the Legal Services Authorities Act of 1987 to provide legal services to the weaker sections of society (Das et al., 2020). In a report, NALSA reveals that there has been a spike in the total number of cases of domestic violence throughout India during the lockdown (Das et al., 2020). There has been an increase in women seeking assistance against domestic violence in India (Krishnakumar & Verma, 2021; Maji et al., 2021) as well as around the globe (Piquero et al., 2021). Most of the CR stations focus and broadcast shows on women's empowerment and women's health and nutrition (Nirmala, 2015). However, there is a

dearth of programs on managing fear, and resisting physical and verbal abuse or sexual exploitation at home during the pandemic (BNNRC, 2020a; Coleman, 2020). This study therefore seeks to address this RQ3: What are the other issues apart from health information addressed by the CR stations during the pandemic?

Community media researchers have mostly focused on case studies of the growth and development of CR stations stating their success stories, challenges, and vulnerabilities (Bhat, 2018; Karunanayake, 1986; Pandit & Chattopadhyay, 2018). They have also concentrated on the impact of CR stations on rural development (Likhi, 2013; Wabwire, 2013) and women empowerment (Nirmala, 2015). Our research uses case studies of select CR stations of India to analyze the way they address issues on verified health information and fake news.

It has been proposed that the Indian government must realize the potentials of CR stations in aiding its fight in pandemic by relaxing its regulatory practices (Dowerah, 2020b). Some CR stations in India like *Radio Madhuban, Radio Namaskar, Jnan Taranga, Radio Mattoli,* and *Alfaz e Mewat* have been organizing counseling sessions with experts, as well as campaigns to combat the stigma associated with the disease in rural areas (Dowerah, 2020a; Dutta, 2020; Lal, 2020; Patnaik, 2020; Ramachandran, 2021; Sharma, 2020). These CR stations have also been providing credible health information on COVID-19 and related fake news, supporting the government's effort to tackle the pandemic and disinformation. The use of local folk and oral culture in spreading the information on COVID-19 has also been uniformly followed by these CR stations (PTI, 2020). These CR stations have also been answering queries of their listeners on the need for the imposition of lockdown and availability of supplies within the specified geographical locality among other generic issues (Mitra, 2020). The deficit of funds faced by these CR stations has also become a major cause of concern for their sustainability during the pandemic (Dowerah, 2020b; Mitra, 2020; PTI, 2020). Hence,

for the present study, we have selected these five CR stations from five corners of the country to find answers to our research questions.

Objectives

Drawing from the various literature reviewed above we have focused on finding answers to the following research questions:

- RQ1. What kind of programming is being adopted by the CR stations across India to cater to the health information needs of their communities during this pandemic?
- RQ2. How do the CR stations address fake news and infodemic on COVID-19?
- RQ3. What are the other issues apart from health information addressed by the CR stations during the pandemic?

In the process, we explored the strategies adopted by CR stations in India in terms of programming to serve their respective community health information needs. We also analyzed the mechanisms adopted by the CR stations run by various voluntary groups in fighting against the fake news epidemic and infodemic. We also studied if the producers of the content are concerned with other pressing issues apart from the health information needs of their listeners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

We have adopted a qualitative method of case studies (Jankowski & Wester, 2002) of five purposively selected CR stations running their broadcast across five states of India namely, *Alfaz-e-Mewat FM, Radio Mattoli, Jnan Taranga, Radio Namaskar,* and *Radio Madhuban,* to analyze the three RQs. These five community radio stations have been purposively selected for their specific broadcast to generate awareness on COVID-19 during the nationwide lockdown in India from March 25, 2020 to May 17, 2020 (Kumar et al., 2020, para. 1–2). The five CR stations understudy is *Alfaz-e-Mewat FM* (in Nuh District of the state of Haryana, India) which was selected for its

continuous programming on awareness and information dissemination during the nationwide lockdown about COVID-19 (Ramachandran, 2021; Sharma, 2020). Another CR station *Radio Mattoli* was selected because it ran public service announcements daily and invited the police, health officials of Karnataka (a state in the western coastal region of India). We then selected the CR station named *Radio Madhuban* (in the Sirohi district of the state of Rajasthan in India) run by *Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Iswariya Vishwa Vidhlaya*, a spiritual organization due to its relentless COVID-19 appropriate broadcasts (Dowerah, 2020a). Further, the CR station *Jnan Taranga* was selected because it is one of the first CR stations set up in the state of Assam. This CR station set up in one of the northeastern states of India became also important for us to include in this study because its announcer single-handedly continued 333 hours of broadcasting during the 37 days of nation-wide lockdown in India (Dutta, 2020). The fifth CR station included in this study is *Radio Namaskar* of Odisha. This CR station has received several accolades for yeoman services during the cyclone *Fani* in the state of Odisha in India (Patnaik, 2020). This CR station has also rolled out several noteworthy programs during the COVID-19 (Lal, 2020).

Further, we have conducted email interviews (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Opdenakker, 2006) using questionnaires with open-ended questions to elicit responses of the CR administrator(s)/announcer(s) on programming management during the nationwide lockdown. We have sent some questions of interviews through emails to the administrator/announcer of the five selected CR stations after collecting their mailing addresses from their respective websites and other social media pages. The five respondents who were approached are Pooja Murada, Station Director of Alfaz-e-Mewat (poojamurada@smsfoundation.org), Fr Bijo Thomas, Station Director of Radio Mattoli (radiomattoli@gmail.com), Krishnaveni K-Production Head- Radio Madhuban (info@radio-madhuban.in), Station Director- Radio Namaskar

(radionamaskar@gmail.com), Station Manager-Jnan Taranga (info@kkhsou.in).

Reasons such as paucity of time, geographical barrier, and COVID-19 related travel restrictions prompted us to adopt this tool for eliciting the responses from the interviewees. Apart from *Jnan Taranga* and *Radio Namaskar*, respondents from the other three CR stations responded to our questionnaire. The questions formulated for the interview are (a) Do you regularly broadcast programs on health? (b) What is the response from the community after you broadcast programs on health? (c) What other kinds of programs do you think deserves attention right now? These three questions were e-mailed to all the five respondents stating that their responses would be included in a research paper and hence their response to the questions supports their informed consent. These questions were drafted drawing from the RQs and objectives of the study and related reviewed literature. Stake (2010) argued that being interpretative research qualitative research may sometimes suffer from biased interpretations; hence we have taken utmost precautions in not getting carried away with our biases. Again, Corbin and Strauss (2008) said that proper admission of the data and coding with proper analytical skills lessens the impact of any biases and helps abstract thinking. Hence, after receiving the responses we categorized the responses into three major themes. These themes are "regular health information broadcasts", "addressing issues of fake news and domestic violence", and "infrastructural deficits". As the interview was not an oral one and the responses were in written format hence transcription of the interviews was not required but the coding was adopted for identification of keywords and categorizing them under each of the themes.

This study uses both primary data and secondary data for analysis as while we received responses from three CR stations but we did not receive responses from the two other CR stations *Jnan Taranga* and *Radio Namaskar*. We had to make a conscious decision of studying their responses in secondary resources. Hence, we came across some

feature articles based on the interviews of the station manager and announcer of *Radio Namaskar* (Lal, 2020; Patnaik, 2020) and *Jnan Taranga* (Dutta, 2020; Gani, 2020) respectively. Consequently, we collated the responses of both *Jnan Taranga* and *Radio Namaskar* from these published secondary sources to include within the present study drawing from our objectives. Although the method adopted for the present study might be criticized for lacking rigor but due to several resource constraints, we had no other option but to adopt this technique. The incorporation of primary data and secondary data might affect the findings, hence the need for further in-depth research when the global pandemic is over.

Profile of the CR stations

Alfaz-e-Mewat is a CR station started by the Sehgal Foundation with support from the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India. It was set up as a CR station by the Institute of Rural Research and Development to give voice to the farming and agricultural community-based in the Nuh district (formerly Mewat) of Haryana (Murada & Grover, 2021). The word *Mewat* represents the land of the Meo Muslims, a community of Muslims with a rich history, culture, and language (Bordia, 2019). Alfaz-e-Mewat broadcasts at the frequency of 107.8 and caters to this community primarily involved in farming (Ghosh, 2016). With a listener base of agriculturalists, this CR station broadcasts programs on agriculture, education, local culture, and governance. The main program of this station revolves around the theme of water, soil, and forests and is titled *Tohfa-e-Kudrat: Jal Jangal Zameen* (Gift of Nature: Water, Forest, Land). It also runs regular programs on health intelligence with counseling sessions (Murada & Grover, 2021). The radio station also broadcasts programs to fight fake news title "Savdhan" (Beware). It has citizen information support toll-free phone numbers to help the listeners from around 225 villages to clear their doubts on misinformation and disinformation (Murada & Grover, 2021, p. 41). The CR station has also

initiated Radio School to help children from the marginalized section cope up with their studies during the school closures due to nationwide lockdown (Murada & Grover, 2021, p. 41).

Radio Mattoli is a CR station, set up at Wayanad district of Kerala (a southern state of India) inhabited by people from different communities ("About Radio Mattoli", n.d., para.1). This licensed CR station is being managed and run by a nonprofit organization, Wayanad Social Service Society since 2009 (Dowerah, 2020a). Catering to the marginalized sections of society such as the farmers, the Dalits (people belonging to a lower caste in Indian society), indigenous tribes, children, and women, *Radio Mattoli* acts as a training ground for their participation in broader issues. Hence, when it runs special programs on COVID-19, it includes interactive sessions with health workers in indigenous dialect, ensuring democratization of media through horizontal communication.

Radio Madhuban 90.4 FM is a community radio station operating in the division of Mount Abu Road in the state of Rajasthan in India. This CR station has been catering to almost 82 villages scattered around the area mostly inhabited by the indigenous tribes of Rajasthan ("About Radio Madhuban", n.d., para. 2). *Radio Madhuban*, operational since 2011, has been working for the development and upliftment of the local communities through the dissemination of information, education, and the generation of mass awareness. The main contents of this CR station program are on health and hygiene, sustainable development, organic farming, women empowerment, and skill development ("About Radio Madhuban", n.d., para. 1).

The northeastern region of India comprises seven states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura (Ali & Das, 2003). With a hilly terrain, the region is inhabited by various ethnic tribes descended from the Mongoloid race (Ali & Das, 2003). *Jnan Taranga* started operating as a CR station licensed under the Krishna Kanta Handiqui

State Open University situated at Guwahati in the state of Assam (Dutta, 2020). It is the first CR station to be set operating in the northeastern region of India (Dutta, 2020). It started functioning on November 20, 2010, at 90.4 FM and broadcasts programs on health and well-being, career, women empowerment, advancement of tribal people, environment and living, and lifestyle ("About Jnan Taranga", n.d., para. 1). Apart from programs on these segments, it also broadcasts a daily one-hour broadcast of *Monor Khabar* (mind matters), phone-in-program to answer queries of the listeners ("Broadcast Timings", n.d., para. 1).

Based in Konark, (Puri, Odisha), *Radio Namaskar* is the first CR station of Odisha. It has been broadcasting at the frequency 90.4 in the regional language of Odia and Telegu (indigenous language spoken in Odisha, an eastern state of India) ("About Us", n.d. para.1). Established by a voluntary organization named Young India, this CR station focuses on receiver-centric information dissemination among the community utilizing active community participation for development (Lal, 2020). *Radio Namaskar* has also been instrumental in the dissemination of development information and ensuring the flow of two-way communication between the policymakers and the community (Sahoo & Behera, 2017). *Radio Namaskar* focuses on gender equality, human rights, societal peace, and the upliftment of the indigenous culture (Lal, 2020). Some of the notable programs during COVID-19 are Jana Soochna (information about government welfare schemes, programs, acts, citizen entitlements ("Our Programs", n.d., para. 1).

Analysis and discussion

There are 316 licensed CR stations in India, and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has approved the renewal of all the CR stations ("Number of operational Community Radio Stations", 2020). Given the nature of the constraint of resources and other limitations, the scope of service being provided by these CR stations during this pandemic in India and around the globe is commendable (Coleman, 2020; Ephraim, 2020).

This study presents three key findings which are: (a) programs related to health have been a regular part of broadcasts by community radio stations during the pandemic. Moreover, (b) apart from their information needs on health, the listeners or the members of the community also seek information on social issues such as domestic violence, maternal and child health, employment opportunities and countering fake news. Further, it is also found that (c) these CR stations recognize that a lack of resources, both monetary and infrastructural, acts as a barrier to their dissemination of information during the pandemic. It has furthered the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor. The marginalized communities have been accessing community media more than the mainstream media for localized information. However, concerns about the existence and proper maintenance of CR stations have been cropping up more during the pandemic (BNNRC, 2020a; Genetu, 2020).

Health information broadcast during the pandemic

This study on the CR stations' responses to COVID-19 reveals a strategic focus on the choice of programs in coordination with the government and policy regulators. Apart from ensuring regular broadcast on health and other related information using community participation, the CR stations in India have also been catering to the entertainment needs of the community. The CR stations unlike the mainstream media attempt to send receiver--centric, contextualized information to the communities. This has created an enabling environment for the communities for ensuring the democratization of their information. This in turn has created a viable ground for political participation and voicing their opinion in the public sphere debates.

The studied CR stations focused not only on COVID-19 related awareness and health behavior practices but also on mental health issues. A special program was also run by Alfaz-e-Mewat during the

declaration of the first phase of lockdown of 21 days in India. It was titled *21 Din, 21 Baatein* (21 Days, 21 Things) primarily focusing on the broadcast of messages by health experts followed by poems on techniques to maintain proper hygiene, the benefits of yoga, and self-learning to manage psychological stress (Ramachandran, 2021; Sharma, 2020). The CR stations aptly use community participation in creating context-based content leading to "horizontal patterns of interaction" (Pavarala & Malik, 2007, p. 190). Pooja Murada, the Station Director of Alfaz-e-Mewat FM, said that most of their programs have been prepared with personalized messages from the members of the community. She added that feedback from the community is received and recorded through the integrated voice recording system which is then broadcast to raise awareness on the issue of the pandemic. The CR stations also identify the facts and fakes around such messages to manage the fear, the mental and emotional health of their listeners. The respondent also added that during the lockdown, COVID-19 received most of the broadcasts.

Father Bijo Thomas Karukappally, the Station Director of Radio Mattoli, said that his CR station brought changes in its regular programming. They incorporated content around COVID-19 busting myths disseminating facts surrounding it. *Radio Mattoli* has been facilitating the local administration in combating the pandemic by generating awareness among its listeners. The respondent added that programs focus on clarifying misinformation related to treatment and health behavior among its listeners. Another CR station, *Radio Madhuban* disseminated information on the effective use of the Aarogya Setu mobile application (Jena, 2020). The latter is a mobile application developed by the National Informatics Centre under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology for tracing and mapping tested COVID-19 patients ("How AarogyaSetu Knows", 2020). These CR stations share localized information and create space for felt needs among the listeners.

It was during the 37 days of lockdown imposed in Assam that the announcer of *Jnan Taranga,* Manoj Deka continued 333 hours of programming (Dutta, 2020; Gani, 2020). During this period, the focus was on creating awareness not only on COVID-19 but also about the menace of misinformation and disinformation (Dutta, 2020). *Jnan Taranga* responded to COVID-19 programming by keeping its focus on the cultural fervor of its listeners thereby fostering cultural empowerment of its community. The phone-in programs ensured receiver-centric content. Aside from programs on women's rights, agriculture, skills development, disaster management, and minority rights, *Radio Namaskar* also aired a program titled *Janile Jiniba* (If you know, you will win) on women's health and nutrition (Radio Namaskar, n.d.). Krishna, the Production Head of *Radio Madhuban,* said that her CR station organized a 10-day special series on how to boost one's immunity. She stressed that they have been receiving positive feedback from listeners, as evident in more phone calls inquiring about several issues. During the national lockdown in India, *Radio Madhuban* re-scheduled its programs to constantly engage with its community. This CR station has been running a weekend program on health information titled *Aap ka Swasth Aap Ke Hath* (Your Health is in Your Hands) which focuses on the phone-in interaction/consultation with a general physician on issues about COVID-19.

As we did not receive the email response from N. Ansari, the head of the CR station *Radio Namaskar*, we had to analyze his perspective from various secondary resources (Kumar, 2020; Lal, 2020; Pradhan, 2021). Ansari said that due to affordability and accessibility, most rural people prefer radio over television for their entertainment (Kumar, 2020; Lal, 2020; Pradhan, 2021). He said that due to the restricted access to mainstream media among the community, the listeners depend on the CR stations for receiving localized information and filtering myths related to COVID-19 (Kumar, 2020).

Fake news and domestic violence

Aside from mainstream media institutions, legislators and regulators, licensed CR stations can also aid in the fight against fake news. Fake news not only threatens the multicultural fabric of a country (Laskar & Reyaz, 2021) but also creates difficulties for the government to manage any crisis. All the community radio stations analyzed in this study reveal their active role in answering queries related to myths surrounding COVID-19, disapproving misinformation, and disseminating fact-checked information. They use phone-in programs to reach out to their listeners to combat fake news. During the pandemic, Alfaz e Mewat, broadcasting primarily in a Muslim-dominated district, initiated a special program titled *Savdhaan* (Careful). This program cautioned its listeners from getting misled by any fake news on COVID-19. As there have been a surge of infodemic and fake news targeting minorities (especially the Muslim community) in India, this program became more indispensable. Such programs can educate the people and caution them from falling prey to misinformation and disinformation targeting communal polarization as well (Kanozia et al., 2021; Kanozia & Arya, 2021; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021; Pradhan, 2021). *Radio Namaskar* has also launched campaigns for raising awareness on domestic violence, child marriage, and violence against women Pradhan, 2021). It also disseminated information related to employment opportunities among the quarantined migrant workers returning from major Indian cities due to the lockdown (Kumar, 2020; Lal, 2020; Pradhan, 2021). Dende (2020) stated that the trust of citizens in public institutions in the Democratic Republic of Congo was extremely low during the initial months of the Ebola virus outbreak in 2018. This prompted the Internews and provincial networks of community radio in Congo to continue with their rumor-tracking bulletin during COVID-19 (Dende, 2020). Key association with fact-checkers has proven effective in Congo to tackle fake news during COVID-19. A similar approach also needs to be adopted by the CR stations running COVID-19 programs to inform their listeners about various kinds of fake news.

Localization of information

In another study, Bhattacharyya (2020) argued that social media has exploded in popularity in recent years and India is leveraging the power of social media as a tool of development communication. India should therefore ensure social justice and community empowerment by initiating and maintaining the proper functioning of community media channels. Strict policy regulations on CR stations in India in terms of news broadcast has remained a subject of criticism among CR researchers (Bhat, 2018; Malik & Pavarala, 2020; Pavarala & Malik, 2007; Raghunath, 2020). While there have not been many regulations on the mushrooming of online news portals involved in spreading information and sometimes misinformation (The Hindu, 2021). However, regrettably, the Indian government's policies on CR stations are stringent to the extent of authoritarian (Pavarala, 2015, Raghunath, 2020). Bhat (2018) argues that the fear among the policy regulators is mostly around the CR stations getting utilized efficiently to the extent of giving voice to the voiceless and thereby creating space for deviant opinion. Further, Pavarala and Malik (2007) argue that the community-based mediums are perceived as enabling tools for rural and marginalized people, aiding in their holistic development. The issues related to access, participation, and representation of marginalized voices are equally necessary for managing their health and survival amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The use of local dialects and indigenous cultural art forms play a pivotal role in fostering stronger communal ties leading to cultural expression, community discussion, and conscientization. To ensure a smooth flow of communication, Alfaz e Mewat broadcasts programs in local languages like *Haryanvi, Hindi,* and *Mewati. Radio Mattoli* is also the first CR station in the state of Kerala to broadcast in the indigenous tribal language, *Paniya* (Dowerah, 2020a; Rajappa, 2018). *Radio Namaskar* broadcasts its programs in Odia and Telegu which

are the local languages spoken in Odisha (Lal, 2020). *Jnan Taranga* broadcasts in indigenous languages of the northeast region of India such as *Assamese, Karbi, Missing*, and *Bodo* (Dutta, 2020; Gani, 2020). These CR station attempts to recognize the importance of the community's indigenous language as a means of communication. It consequently acts as "the tribal drum" referred to by McLuhan (cited in Pavarala & Malik, 2007, p. 153), creating kinship between the content generators and listeners. The emphasis on indigenous languages, their oral traditions, culture, and ethnic identity creates a conducive environment for easy percolation of fact-checked information and fighting fake news.

The Station Director of Radio Mattoli (personal communication, June 5, 2020) said that there is an urgent need for the distribution of radio sets among the inhabitants of the tribal hamlets to keep them abreast with regular updates on information related to the pandemic. Further, most of these CR stations find that lack of universal access to affordable radio sets posing as a potential barrier to community engagement and listenership. There are neither enough financial resources nor scope for self-reliance among both the senders and receivers engaged in CR stations (Mitra, 2020). There have been instances of community radio stations distributing radio sets to listeners based in the remotest of places to ensure a smooth flow of information (TNN, 2020). One of the primary aims of community radio stations across the world is to try and learn to be sustainable (Sullivan, 2007). However, the lack of advertisements and funds during the pandemic is a major barrier to sustainability (Mitra, 2020). Despite its shortage of resources and government support, CR stations in India have immense potential in building solidarity and raising the "aspirations" of their communities (Srinivasan & Ramos-Martín, 2018, p. 297). Although being a huge country compared to Nepal, India cannot boast of having more CR stations compared to it (Dowerah, 2020b). Hence, continuous efforts from stakeholders such as UNESCO Chair of community media in the University of Hyderabad, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters

(AMARC), and Community Radio Association (CRA), India are being taken for facilitating the CR stations. They have also pressed the government of India, especially during the pandemic for resource allocation toward its licensed CR stations for their sustainability and better program production (Dowerah, 2020a; Mitra, 2020).

Although the prime objective of CR station is horizontal and participatory communication shifting the focus from the elitist top-down diffusion model (Melkote, 2018). It is seen that the diffusion of technical software among the rural communities to ensure the speedy transformation is contradictory to the generic identity of CR broadcast. The democratization at all levels of planning and broadcast cannot be ensured during most of the COVID-19 broadcasts due to various guidelines laid down during COVID-19. Hence, the use of local language for broadcasts was the only mechanism of contextualization of the content.

Conclusion

WHO states that a major lesson learned during the pandemic is that Risk Communication for Community Engagement (RCCE) is integral to the success of responses to health emergencies (WHO, 2020). Consequently, community engagement through CR stations may facilitate the smooth handling of the COVID-19 outbreak challenges for the public health systems around the globe. In this context, CR stations have been ensuring democratization of information for the rural populace in developing nations. Hence community radio is perfectly placed to provide local specific health and welfare updates efficiently responding to the COVID-19 crisis. We can draw similar experiences from countries like the UK, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh about CR's role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Uniform strategies of communication dissemination are not feasible for multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic countries. Unlike mainstream media organizations, CR stations address diversity, exemplifying its role as a community public sphere. The latter acts as a discrete form of space for the marginalized, unlike the mainstream media which usually ignores

the communication needs of individual communities. CR stations that produce programs in their responses to COVID-19 to meet community-specific needs are consequently enabling cultural empowerment and cultural citizenship. To manage the pandemic, it is necessary to explain the various scientific jargon to the grassroots public. Percolation of information regarding the maintenance of social distancing, wearing of masks, regular handwashing, and reduction of vaccine hesitancy in developing countries may become less difficult once personalized information is disseminated. The community public sphere needs to be strengthened with resources to transfer the dialogues of the community in the public sphere debates. This study is limited in analyzing the programming responses of CR stations to COVID-19 and could not include the responses of the listeners. This gap can be further researched to find out if CR stations are meeting their community's information needs while striving for cultural empowerment. Nevertheless, this study can become a vantage point for further research on the community media's role in community engagement during pandemics and disasters.

The CR stations that were studied are either managed by NGOs, voluntary organizations, or educational institutions. Proactive community participation in conceptualizing and sharing contextual information on COVID-19 is not ensured properly. With an increase in dissemination of Public Service Announcements (PSAs) on COVID-19 and the popularization of government policies and interventions, these CR stations are acting as mouthpieces of government and health regulators. Despite its many pitfalls and policy obstacles, CR media in South Asian countries like India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are either donor-dependent or NGO-led. This NGOization leads to defocusing of spectacle from the community to their funding bodies. The process of communication used during the pandemic by the CR stations seemed to not comply fully with democratic or participatory communication. Due to various limitations imposed by COVID-19 protocols, the use of local language can be seen as mere lip service to make CR stations a community public sphere. The meager scope of

interaction and participation by the listeners in programming limited the scope of democratization of CR stations during the pandemic. The half-hearted policies and interventions of the government of various South Asian countries also echo the fact that the fear of dissent and deviant political participation withholds the government to relax its licensing and news broadcast policies for its CR stations. Traditionally, oral and folk traditions have largely dominated the programming contents of CR stations but the COVID-19 protocols and standard operating procedures (SOPs) issued by the government have raised concern for the sustainability of CR stations. Social media has accentuated the creation of filter bubbles which results in fact-checked news items not percolating. Fact-checked news items, in the first place, do not percolate to the marginalized community as easily as fake news. CR stations can play a pivotal role in engaging the community in the verification of such fake news surrounding COVID-19 and other related issues. CR stations can emerge as a major factor in breaking the chain of fake news which is practically a shadow pandemic.

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