

ALFAZ-E-MEWAT: a week of listening
Community Radio Station.
Ghaghas Community Center, Nuh, Haryana.

By Julia Thomas

On most weekday evenings, a live program is aired on Alfaz-e-Mewat community radio station. This program is sometimes a mix of songs requested by listeners, other times people share their reflections on a recorded program. A team member with headphones on awaits calls, simultaneously taking notes and chatting with folks. The surrounding community of Ghaghas has fallen quiet, but the station is abuzz with activity, signaling that people are keenly listening in.

As part of a yearlong, experiential research project on grassroots media in different countries, I was lucky to have the opportunity to spend approximately one week with the team at Alfaz-e-Mewat. An article in the popular English daily, *Hindustan Times*, published in September, made me very curious about the nuances behind the station's programming and its day-to-day operational processes; so I decided to learn more about the radio team's approach to programming and the response from listeners.



At its very core, a community radio station has to shape its programming around the needs of its audience to inspire their active engagement. Effective community radio, as defined by José Ignacio Lopez Vigil, a member of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, is when the programming “fosters the participation of citizens and defends their interests” and “truly informs and helps resolve the 1,001 problems of daily life; and all ideas are debated in its programs and all opinions are respected.” In short, its main purpose is “to build community life.”

Alfaz-e-Mewat seeks transparency in its programming. Topics range from gender issues, education, and agriculture, to folklore, development, music, and so on, along with inviting an exchange with the surrounding community. Watching the staff members interact with listeners, it becomes clear how central this is in the station’s daily operations.

Six years ago, the radio began with a one-hour broadcast; today the station has thirteen hours of daily programming and seems to be widely respected throughout the community.



“Whenever there is a live program, I call in,” Asloop tells me, while we sat outside in his village just a few kilometers from the station. He is lovingly called the representative, or mascot, of the station, as he is one of its oldest and most dedicated listeners. And sure enough, every night at 6:00 p.m., when I sit and listen to incoming calls with a staff member, Asloop rings in, and he brings many others along with him.

The people I spoke with in the community, most of whom were women, said that they enjoy listening regularly to the programs aired on Alfaz-e-Mewat. Some of them have been dialing in for a few years, while others only more recently. An all-time favorite mentioned by several people was the regional folklore program, *Kisse Kahani*. The program, which encouraged people to avail government schemes for

in-house toilets, was extremely effective and continues to make an impact even after its broadcast date. Listeners told me they tune into the program and have persuaded others around them to join in as well. Staff and community members confirm that 80 percent of the households who listened to the program now have toilets in their homes. In addition, while a lack of household toilets is no longer such a looming issue, people told me they think it would be helpful to broadcast the program once again for those still without access to a toilet within the privacy of their home.

Another program aired while I was at the station was based on sexual harassment in the community, an issue that is widespread but taboo and, hence, difficult to talk about. In approaching this story, Alfaz-e-Mewat reporters adopted a well-thought-out and long-term approach. Over the course of one year, staff members Fakat and Anuradha spent a few days each week with local schoolchildren in their mid-teens; in the course of their interaction, they split them into two groups based on gender. They led discussions and worked over time on team-building experiences, establishing a relationship of open exchange with the students, eventually to the point where they could broach a subject like sexual harassment—even from the perspective of those who had been the harassers. The team was able to record the students as anonymous sources, as well as disguise their voices for the program.

Such attention to community needs is central in Alfaz-e-Mewat's programming and the very essence of the station. This emphasis laid on building relationships and engaging listeners through interaction seems to be driving the station to produce more programs and bring in more community journalists. Staff members I talked to mentioned that they would like to see even more community members working at the station, but most of the time a rotating group of five members runs Alfaz-e-Mewat. Moving forward, this sort of inclusion is becoming key to greater participation.

Though programming revolves around the voices and issues immediate to the community, external experts frequently speak on the program too. After a midmorning, live panel on International Human Rights Day, questions and discussion centered on the theme of rights and the possible actions to be taken to secure them, such as: what are the rights of senior citizens? Why do we celebrate human rights? Why can't people exercise their rights in rural India? Alfaz-e-Mewat poses questions and encourages discussion to find answers to the questions.

By spending a week listening in, visiting community members, spending days and evenings with the staff, and traveling by motorbike to neighboring villages, the extent of the work and the dedication to this labor of love was clear to me as part of a much larger goal. As in journalism, in community development, this fusion is both rare and powerful. A big thank you to Sehgal Foundation and the team in Ghaghas—Fakat, Mufeed, Sohrab, and Mubina—for allowing me to participate and experience the community love that is Alfaz-e-Mewat.

(Julia Thomas, [Watson Fellow](#), visited Alfaz-e-Mewat from December 6–10, December 14–15, 2017)