News by any other name: community radio journalism in India

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Abstract

Community radio journalism is a cultural resource that offers a voice to local communities and works to democratise media landscapes. Despite its indisputable value, community radio journalism in India faces a unique set of challenges: the foremost being that, officially, it does not exist. According to government policy, community radio stations are prohibited from broadcasting any news and current affairs content. The situation is further complicated by the presence of a development discourse underpinning the entire rationale for the sector. Instead of serving their listeners, community radio stations are beholden to a nebulous ‘development’ agenda. Under such circumstances, it is unsurprising that community radio journalism in India is relatively unexplored in the literature. This paper aims to address this gap by exploring how community radio practitioners in India source content and work around their restrictions in order to provide their listeners with relevant information and news.

Keywords

Community radio, India, news, journalism, development, social change

Introduction

Community radio is considered to be a voice for the voiceless and a stronghold of alternative views. Similarly, community radio journalism also has a tradition of democratising the media and acting as a cultural resource to provide communities with a local voice (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell-Norton, 2002). In India however, community radio journalism faces a unique set of challenges: the foremost of which being that, officially, it does not exist. Government policy prevents community radio stations in India from broadcasting any news or current affairs coverage. Employing the concept of community radio as rhizome as a theoretical framework, this article explores the fluid and contingent nature of community radio news and journalism in an environment where it officially does not exist. Drawing on ethnographic research at two stations in South India, audience and broadcaster interviews highlight the resilient and contingent nature of community radio journalism in India.

Journalism and news in community radio

Community media have long been associated with alternative, grassroots forms of journalism. This section aims to establish a general definition of community radio journalism and a subsequent framework for analysis. There are numerous definitions of community radio journalism within the literature. In his seminal work, Radical Media, Downing (2000) suggests that the role of community media producers is to be in constant interaction with their audiences

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and to assist them in developing a critical worldview. Atton (2001: 112) takes a more specific stance, arguing that community media journalists should ‘present news that is relevant to those communities’ interests, in a manner that is meaningful to them and with their collaboration and support’. Forde (2015) suggests that there are four consistent traits of community media journalism that recur throughout the literature: firstly, they encourage civic participation and provide information to motivate citizenship; secondly, alternative journalism places emphasis on news that is immediately relevant to their audience; thirdly, alternative journalists fill gaps in mainstream news coverage; and finally, alternative journalism offers a critique of dominant media narratives and processes. These traits offer a broad working definition of community radio journalism from which to base this inquiry.

Building off this definition of community radio journalism, this research employs the rhizome as a frame of analysis. Alternative media as rhizome offers a useful theoretical approach to community radio news and journalism and is one of Bailey, Cammearts and Carpentier’s (2007) four theoretical approaches to community media. While Carpentier et al do emphasise the importance of considering these approaches together, they concede that the fourth approach, community media as rhizome, should be granted special attention (Carpentier, Lie & Servaes, 2003; Santana & Carpentier, 2010). Based on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) metaphor, community radio as rhizome refers to the fluid, contingent nature of the medium and the ways in which community radio connects various disparate elements of society to each other (Bailey et al., 2007). Deleuze and Guattari (1988) suggest a number of characteristics of a rhizome: connection, multiplicity, heterogeneity, no beginning or end, it is always between things, an intermediary. They see the philosophy of the state as arbolic: linear, hierarchical and static; in contrast, the rhizomatic is ‘non-linear, anarchic and nomadic’ (Carpentier, Lie & Servaes, 2007). This connection and heterogeneity imply that any point of the network can connect to any other point, while multiplicity suggests that rhizomes operate outside of fixed sets of rules (Santana & Carpentier, 2010). Therein lies the importance of community media: through the ‘catalysing role they can play by functioning as the crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate’ (Carpentier et al., 2003: 62). This mediated interaction need not take place at the individual level and can involve groups, organisations, and even interpretive communities (Carpentier, 2015). Indeed, community media as rhizome also accounts for the linkages and interconnections between community media and civil society, as well as with the market and state (Carpentier & Doudaki, 2014). A clear example of community radio news as rhizome is offered by Van Vuuren (2001). In her research on community radio in Australia, she observed the range of community connections that contributed to the news broadcast on just one station:

Weather reports are provided by local professional fishermen; a local taxi company gives traffic reports; a market report comes from the Brisbane-based wholesale fruit and vegetable market; and the station broadcasts a job search program with the assistance of employment agencies (Van Vuuren, 2001: 15).

This is illustrative of community radio’s role as what Potapchuk and Crocker Jr (1999) term a ‘bridge-building organisation’, which they see as essential to maintaining civic capital and collective collaboration. Applying the metaphor of a rhizome to community radio journalism offers insight into the ways in which community radio journalism draws from and connects various disparate aspects of the community, as well as the necessarily fluid and contingent nature of community radio newsgathering. Thus, it provides a useful frame for explorations into community radio journalism in India, an environment where community connections and contingency are particularly important.
Community radio in India

Having established a broad view of the role and characteristics of community radio news and journalism, it is now essential to situate the community radio sector in India. Community radio has had to fight for its small space within India’s megalithic media landscape. The space that community radio does occupy is tightly controlled by stifling legislation, specifically the Indian Telegraph Act (1885) alongside the India Wireless Telegraphy Act (1933), which make the possession of radio equipment without a licence illegal and effectively ensure that the exclusive rights to establishing, maintaining and operating radio and television broadcasting remain with the Central Government (Kumar, 2003; Pavarala & Malik, 2007).

Many scholars have noted the extensive legislative obstacles which have been placed in the way of Indian citizens obtaining their constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression (Gunaratne, 2000; Saeed, 2009; Sen, 2003; Thomas, 2011). A key breakthrough in the struggle for community radio, and indeed the media environment generally, in India was the Supreme Court’s historic 1995 ruling that the ‘airwaves are public property’ and should be used for public benefit (Pavarala & Malik, 2007; Sen, 2003; Singhal & Rogers, 2001; UNESCO, 2011). It was not until after this ruling, in 1998, that the state broadcasters – All India Radio (AIR) and television station Doordarshan – were granted relative autonomy from the government, despite the recommendations of two separate committees: the Chanda Committee in 1966 and the Verghese Committee in 1978 (Singhal & Rogers, 2001). This landmark ruling proved to be of critical importance not only to the public broadcasters and communication rights more generally, but also for the community radio movement.

The first direct step towards community radio in India took place in September 1996. A group of media professionals and policy experts gathered in Bangalore to explore the relevance of community radio for India (SANCOM, 2015). The ‘Bangalore Declaration on Radio’ made a strong case for community radio, describing it as ‘public service broadcasting in its most decentralised and its most democratic form’ (Sen, 2003: 2199). Following this, the push for greater communicative and media freedoms gained momentum across the country. Then in 2000, a group of activists, academics and radio practitioners met and established the first systematic case for the creation of community radio as a third tier of broadcasting in India, separate to the government-run and commercial sectors (Pavarala, 2013). The declaration resulting from the meeting, which was supported by UNESCO, known as the ‘Pastapur Initiative on Community Radio’ after the area in which the meeting occurred, defined community radio as having ‘three key aspects: non-profit making, community ownership and management, and community participation’ (Sen, 2003: 2199).

In late 2002, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting finally released ‘Community Radio Guidelines’. Far from being a victory for the community radio movement, the guidelines restricted licences to ‘well-established’ educational institutions and banned advertisements and news and current affairs programmes (SANCOM, 2015). Following this, India’s first community radio station was established at Anna University in Chennai. Anna FM began broadcasting in February, 2004, to the area surrounding the university (Ghosh, 2011; Nirmala, 2015; Prabakar, 2009). Stations affiliated with educational institutions, often referred to as ‘campus radio’, have been subject to some scrutiny and criticism over the years. Thomas (2010: 221) bluntly states that campus radio has ‘very little potential for becoming a tool for development’. Similarly, Prabhakar (2009) writes that activists are sceptical of the role of campus radio stations, in that expecting them to serve communities outside of their campus confuses the community radio mandate with that of public broadcasting. Despite the disappointment of such restrictive guidelines, the following years marked a renewed push for community radio with a number of stations exploring alternative methods of distribution including narrowcasting and cablecasting (SANCOM, 2015).
While community radio was treading water, another grassroots movement was taking root. India’s Right to Information (RTI) movement was another important milestone in the lead-up to community radio. The movement was also of vital importance to the broader media environment. Thomas (2011), who has written extensively on the RTI movement in India, even suggests that the RTI movement played a role in revitalising participatory democracy in India. The RTI movement began in central Rajasthan in the late 1980s with a small group of social activists and local people who took an interest in livelihood issues including the failure of the government to enforce minimum wage regulations, and the availability of subsidised foods (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). The critical tool of this movement was the *jan sunwai*, a type of public hearing in which local issues are discussed by members of the community. Thomas (2014) suggests that *jan sunwai* act as local public sphere based on local idiom, in contrast with Jürgen Habermas’s bourgeois and exclusive interpretation of the public sphere, and that its strength lies within its deliberate inclusivity in which all local people have space to share full accounts of their experience. The campaign for RTI laws incorporated the *jan sunwai* as well as other local information dissemination techniques such as street theatre to gain critical mass. In June 2005, the Right to Information passed and what started as agitation for basic livelihood-related entitlements became an important precedent for communication rights in India. Thomas (2008: 43) writes that the movement offered the ‘best hopes for the rural poor to fulfil their right to development’. The success of the RTI movement can be attributed to a number of factors: firstly, it was an indigenous social movement that occurred in response to local needs; second, it employed familiar, colloquial tools, including *jan sunwai* and community theatre; and third, the movement gained significant momentum and was supported by a large group of people who understood the need for RTI and were willing to mobilise themselves and others in pursuit of this goal (Thomas, 2011). It is worth noting that, while the RTI movement attracted significant attention in the mainstream media, the push for community radio was largely ignored (Saeed, 2009).

Finally, in late 2006, a second phase of policy guidelines for community radio stations was released (UNESCO, 2011). Alongside educational institutions, NGOs and agricultural science centres or *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* (KVK) were granted the right to apply for licences. News was still not permitted but limited advertising, up to seven minutes per hour of broadcasting, was allowed (SANCOM, 2015). In October, 2008, Sangham Radio in Pastapur village launched to become the first community radio station licensed to an NGO, with their licence held by DDS, the Deccan Development Society (Ghosh, 2011; Pavarala & Malik, 2007).

More than ten years after the updated guidelines were released, community radio in India now finds itself at somewhat of a crossroads. As of May 2018, there were just 217 operational stations (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2018); a somewhat meagre number for a country with the population size of India. Malik (2016) writes that the movement seems to have plateaued:

> It is neither growing nor prospering. While there is recognition and acceptance of its potential in the upper echelons of administration, it looks as if there is a decline in buy-in from grassroots practitioners and communities in India.

The sector is facing a number of internal problems associated with sustainability and independence. In addition, the contemporary regulatory environment is still rigid and tightly controlled. Compared to the free-for-all of commercial broadcasting, community radio must adhere to the strictest rules around revenue-generating advertisements (Thomas, 2010). Alongside this, the restrictions on news content remain, and licences are only granted to educational institutions, agricultural groups, and well-established NGOs. It seems as though there is little room for community media journalism under these stifling conditions; indeed, such structures appear to more closely align with the aforementioned arbolic, hierarchical approach of the state. Where
then does this leave community radio journalism in India? Is it, as the guidelines dictate, non-existent? Or does it, like the community radio sector itself, carve out a niche space to occupy?

**Methodology**

This article draws from a larger project involving ethnographic research conducted at two community radio stations in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The state has a long history with local broadcasting and was the site of early farm radio experiments in the 1960s (Page & Crawley, 2001). Later, Tamil Nadu was a hub of activism throughout the push to establish community radio in India and was the location of the first iteration of community radio in India, Anna FM in Chennai. Further, Tamil Nadu is home to the highest number of community radio stations in the country: as of May 2018, there were 31 operational stations (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2018). The site stations for this research were selected based on their locations and ownership models – both rural stations with NGOs as parent organisations. The aim was not generalisation or broad representation of the community radio sector, but rather tracing a complex social phenomenon. The diverse nature of community radio stations means that it is difficult to generalise across any two stations, even if they are in close physical proximity to one another, let alone on a national or international scale. As such, the purpose of the multi-sited nature of this research was simply to explore how different stations take different approaches, rather than making holistic generalisations or recommendations.

The primary methods of data collection were participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. Participant observation took place throughout the research and occurred in several stages. Initially, observation was centred on the station itself, with a period of time spent at each station, observing and recording the activities of staff, as well as any visitors to the station, and any other happenings. The second phase of participant observation draws on Couldry’s (2006: 4) notion of ‘decentred media studies’: a form of media studies not necessarily focussed on traditional sites of media production and consumption. In a related, though more practice-driven article, Couldry (2004: 125) advocates for asking ‘open questions about what people are doing and how they categorise what they are doing, avoiding the disciplinary or other preconceptions that would automatically read their actions’. Following this, the second phase of participant observation saw the research move outside of the stations to incorporate the work that takes place outside traditional sites of production. This stage of participant observation was highly dependent on developing relationships with the key informants and involved work shadowing and what Kusenbach refers to as ‘go-alongs’ (2003). A cross between interview and participant observation, go-alongs involve accompanying informants on their everyday outings in order to understand their experiences of their physical and social environments (Kusenbach, 2003). Asking questions, listening, and observing while informants move through these environments represents a more active, focussed, and outcome-oriented approach, rather than just ‘hanging out with key informants – an ethnographic practice that is highly recommended in virtually all fieldwork manuals and textbooks’ (Kusenbach, 2003: 463). Observations from these events, as well as time spent at the station and on go-alongs, were recorded in comprehensive field notes that included pure observations, as well as emerging prospective theories or areas for further research and analysis. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest, periods of observation were selective and complemented by periods of reflection and recording, rather than attempting to capture absolutely everything. Participant observation formed a major part of the data collection and also contributed to informing the topics to be discussed during interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured and in-depth with open-ended questions aimed at collecting descriptive qualitative data. The questions were general and aimed at generating discussion rather than imposing definitions or interpretations. The aim here, as Couldry (2004: 125) explains, was to ask ‘open questions about what people are doing and how they categorise what they are doing,
avoiding the disciplinary or other preconceptions that would automatically read their actions’. So as to understand the day-to-day operations and activities of the stations, interviews took place following a period of participant observation, go-alongs, and work shadowing. Ratan and Bailur (2007) note that ethnography, through immersion in everyday life, can help illustrate and clarify discrepancies between what has been observed and data that has been collected directly from the participants through surveys or interviews. In addition to collecting specific data, interviews were also used to clarify what had been observed, and subsequent interviews were occasionally used to question any discrepancies between what was done and what was said. Several approaches to interviewing were implemented in a specific order. First, towards the end of the period of participant observation, focus group discussions were conducted with groups of audience members. Following the completion of these, group interviews were conducted with the staff at the radio station, followed by one-on-one, in-depth interviews with the key informants at the stations. The use of these three methods – participant observation, interviews with staff, and focus group discussions with listeners – acted as a way of triangulating data by testing sources against one another (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The data collected from both the interviews and participant observation was subsequently analysed using constructivist grounded theory. While grounded theory traditionally aligned with positivist and post-positivist research (Clarke, 2007; Spencer, Pryce & Walsh, 2014), it was adapted to constructivist inquiries by Kathy Charmaz (2014). She writes that, in contrast to Glaser and Strauss ‘discovering’ grounded theory, neither data nor theories are discovered, but constructed (Charmaz, 2014) Any resulting theories are interpretive portrayals, rather than exact representations of the studied world: ‘We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices... Participants’ implicit meanings, experiential views – and researchers’ finished grounded theories - are constructions of reality’ (Charmaz, 2014: 10). Interviews, fieldnotes, and documents were initially coded taking an open, line-by-line approach, before using axial coding to identify relationships between existing codes and synthesize the data in new ways (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, the data was re-coded based on thematic topics arising from the previous analysis of the initial coding phases. These thematic topics were placed in conversation with existing bodies of work and literature in order to build an understanding of community radio news and journalism in India.

Findings and discussion

The primary finding of this research is that, despite the ban, community radio news and journalism in India seems to be doing quite well. At both stations, discussions of news and journalism were common among both broadcasters and audience members. It is worth re-emphasising here that the phrases ‘news’ and ‘journalism’ were deliberately avoided during interviews and discussions so as not to lead or bias the responses. The use of such terms emerged organically from the broadcasters and the audiences themselves. There are several key themes for discussion that emerge from the findings of this research. The first theme discusses the constructions of audience by broadcasters and the ways in which audiences themselves construct news. The second area of discussion involves how broadcasters navigate the restrictions on news, which primarily takes place through provisions of ‘non-news’ and the use of alternative news broadcasting formats. Finally, this paper attempts to understand why the government has taken such a stance on news within its community radio policy and the implications of such an approach.
Constructions of audience

A key finding of this research relates to constructions of audience, both in terms of how audiences are constructed by broadcasters and how audiences themselves construct news. McQuail (1994) suggests that self-constructed images of audience are a way for journalists to manage uncertainty. Conversely, Gans (1979) suggests that journalists consider themselves audience representatives and thus see the audience as similar to themselves. Meadows (2010) contrasts earlier relations between producers of news and their audiences, which he sees as more intimate and with fewer barriers, with modern journalism and mass media, where public opinion is formed, rather than reported on. These murky constructions and barriers between producers and audiences bring to mind Anderson’s (2006) ‘imagined communities’, in which he suggests that communities are merely constructions created by their members based on shared attributes. Indeed, MacNamara (2013: 161) suggests that media audiences are ‘doubly assumed and imagined – assumed and imagined to exist and assumed and imagined to listen’. If community media is to be truly grounded within their communities, the audience-producer barrier, so prominent in mainstream media, must be ‘down’ (Forde, 2015). Further, there must be clear conceptualisations of local audiences if the content is to be relevant as it is this relevant content that facilitates the strong community connections that break down these barriers (Forde, 2015). What was observed at both stations throughout the research were clear conceptualisations of audience based on ongoing interaction and social relationships that act as rhizomatic links between different groups. This is demonstrated in the following comment from a broadcaster:

Earlier, we used to do agriculture-related programs, with whatever resources we had. But then we got feedback at one of the events we arranged. They asked us to give information about the seasonal crops, about what could be planted in which season, and how it can be maintained. So, we got messages from agricultural officers regarding the monsoon and suggestion for crops that are appropriate to be planted in monsoon. As per the listeners’ requests, we started broadcasting this information in the radio. We started changing our program schedule as per the listeners choice.

These connections directly impacted upon the content that was produced: broadcasters demonstrated a strong understanding of who their audiences were, and this was reflected in what they broadcast. When viewed through a lens of traditional, Western news values such as timeliness, significance, proximity, conflict, human interest, novelty and prominence (Masterton, 1995), information about seasonal crops may seem out of place. Nonetheless, it is locally significant information and, as Atton (2001) suggests, is an alternative construction of news appropriate for the alternative press.

There were similar findings in terms of the audiences’ perceptions of the work of their local community radio stations. As far as the audience members who were interviewed were concerned, they were listening to news. It was timely, local news, specifically relevant to them. It was their news. One audience member was particularly adamant about the news broadcast on their local station, exclaiming, ‘But there are lot of news broadcasted in the radio!’ The specific, local nature of the news content was also appreciated:

They report if there is any incident in the locality and warns us to be careful. Even if we don’t happen to cross that particular area, we can know if any accidents happen in the locality through radio. They instantly deliver news, and each programme gives us new information that is very helpful.

Such hyperlocal news fills a critical gap in media coverage, particularly in rural areas. The specific, local nature represents a key aspect of audience conceptualisations of news, alongside timeliness and direct relevance of the content to the audiences. This aligns with two of Forde’s (2015) consistent traits of alternative journalism, discussed earlier, through its immediate local
relevance and addressing a gap in mainstream news coverage. In an earlier work, Forde (2010) writes that news and current affairs coverage on community radio fills a critical gap in local news coverage that is overlooked by mainstream media outlets. She notes that ‘this model of “journalism”, or more accurately, news provision, sits more closely with newer forms of citizens’ journalism and audience-driven journalism than the traditional formats of news production’ (2010: 188). Returning to the Indian community radio sector, Pavarala, Stalin and Venniyoor also see the provision of local news and information as a key aspect of community radio programming, and thus the ban on news and current affairs represents ‘a restriction on freedom of expression’ (2011, p. 76).

The implications for freedom of expression hint at the broader impact of hyperlocal journalism on community radio audiences. Not only does hyperlocal journalism fill a critical gap in news coverage, but the close relationships and ongoing communication between community radio broadcasters and their audiences serve other purposes. A recurring theme throughout the focus groups of female listeners was the notion of empowerment and the community radio stations’ facilitating roles. Participation in their local community radio stations, even at the level of simply being interviewed for a programme or volunteering to conduct listener surveys in their local village, had a profound effect on women. One female listener discussed the first time she was invited to take part in a programme:

In the beginning, a negative attitude to talk and participate in the radio was there. But my in-laws came and saw the programme at the station. My husband too. The respect we get in the station and the exposure to what they do in the program changed their attitude. Now also in our home, they wish and send us to participate. In many homes they support them.

Participating in radio and news production was an empowering experience for many of the female listeners, who were able to exercise their right to communicate and be heard. The concept of voice is key here. As one female listener put it, ‘We speak in many places and that’s different. But in radio, people listen to what we speak.’

Hyperlocal journalism and the relationships between community radio broadcasters and their audiences clearly have broader implications beyond news coverage. As Malik (2012) wrote in a piece for media watchdog The Hoot: ‘Indeed, for those who have traditionally been unacknowledged and silenced, socially and culturally, the opportunity to have one’s voice heard can be an imposing experience of self-worth’.

‘Non-news’

As mentioned, the key finding of this research is that, from the perspective of broadcasters and audiences, community radio news and journalism is alive and well, and even prominent within the broadcasting schedules of the stations. At both stations, broadcasters discussed gathering and broadcasting community ‘news’ without hesitation. Similarly, audience members discussed tuning in to the stations specifically to hear local news. How can this be the case in such a strict regulatory environment? A lack of enforcement is not the case, with several stations recently receiving warnings about their content (Seshu, 2017). A potential reason for this somewhat lax attitude towards the news restrictions could be the provisions made for community radio stations to broadcast what the policy terms ‘non-news’.

As discussed, the Government of India’s Ministry of Information and Broadcasting specifically bans news, current affairs and anything remotely ‘political’. Categorising community radio news and current affairs as inherently political is problematic: as Tacchi (2011: 118) argues, it is instead ‘vernacular information sharing and discussion around local interests... this is not political, as seems to be assumed (that news = politics) in the Indian policy’. This hard-line stance was slightly softened in 2017 when the government allowed community radio stations to
broadcast bulletins produced by All India Radio, the state broadcaster. The move was heavily critiqued by activists as it completely missed the point of their calls to allow community radio stations to broadcast original news (Seshu, 2017). The recommendations underpinning this policy identified several categories that are considered ‘non-news’:

‘(a) Information pertaining to sporting events excluding live coverage. However live commentaries of sporting events of local nature may be permissible; (b) Information pertaining to Traffic and Weather; (c) Information pertaining to and coverage of cultural events, festivals; (d) Topics pertaining to examinations, results, admissions, career counseling; (e) Availability of employment opportunities; (f) Public announcements pertaining to civic amenities like electricity, water supply, natural calamities, health alerts etc. as provided by the local administration; (g) Such other categories not permitted at present that may subsequently be specifically permitted by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting from time to time’ (Bhawan & Marg, 2014: 10).

One could argue that most of these categories form a solid basis of the day-to-day content of community radio stations and, in a hyperlocal setting like community radio, could even be considered ‘news’. Forde, Meadows and Foxwell (2002) argue that news, in the context of community radio, often refers to events of interest in the local area or public service announcements, categories which could potentially include all of the ‘non-news’ mentioned above. This could explain broadcaster attitudes towards news: what they consider ‘news’ could easily fall under a category of ‘non-news’.

A further method of circumventing the restrictions was the avoidance of news bulletins in a traditional format. Neither station broadcast regular news bulletins, though both offered topical information including market prices, dam water levels, traffic, and weather at the same time each morning. Such an approach is by no means unique to India. A more extreme example took place during the 2005 coup in Nepal, which saw a complete ban on news broadcasting. Community radio stations circumvented this ban by broadcasting educational programmes on topics such as the rights enshrined in the Nepali constitution, the processes for suspending these rights and the Geneva Convention, as well as employing local comedians to sing the news, methods that enabled them to continue broadcasting throughout the despot’s 15-month rule (Girard, 2007).

Alternative formats were also observed by Forde, Meadows and Foxwell (2002) who, in their study of Australian community radio, found that most community radio stations did not have dedicated news and current affairs programming but instead delivered local news and information throughout the content of various other programmes. This was indeed the approach observed at both stations, which would explain both the broadcasters’ and the audiences’ attitudes to news coverage. The news is there, it just may not take the form of a traditional, on-the-hour bulletin. Van Vuuren (2001: 78) suggests that community media function best when contributing to community development processes and, as such, the ‘news imperative – with its emphasis on professionally produced “hard”, “serious”, political and controversial information’ could be reduced. This concept of community development is of particular importance in the context of the community radio sector and is a significant influence on the value placed on news and journalism.

Development and news

Journalism has been widely employed as a tool of development. Manyozo (2012) observes that development journalism has been implemented as rural journalism in India, given the large percentage of the population in impoverished, rural areas. Similarly, community radio has also been primarily used as a tool for development, because, as Ashish Sen (2007) observes, community radio has demonstrated its ability to empower communities, particularly poor and rural communities. By this logic, and given the development goals of the government, one would
assume that local journalism and community radio are a match made in heaven, from a development perspective at least.

So why then has the government taken such an approach to news? A potential reason is that community radio journalism potentially represents a source of narratives of dissent or resistance, particularly seeing as those rural, poor communities served by community radio stations are the same communities that struggle to access resources and assistance from a government so focussed on development. Mohan Dutta suggests that narratives of resistance that are often co-opted by discourses of nationalism and homeland security and portrayed as ‘threats to security’ (Dutta, 2014). This has been observed elsewhere in the community radio sector in India, where licence applications from ‘troubled regions’ have fallen victim to the Ministry of Home Affairs and its overzealous approach to national security. Pavarala (2013: 3) observes that the entire northeast as well as those areas affected by Naxalite insurgency are served by a minimal number of stations as compared to the rest of the country. Interestingly, Moitra, Kumar and Seth (2018: 126) observe that the groups who would benefit most from community media platforms are ‘women, those in Naxal areas, and groups marginalized by caste or class’.

There are a several other reasons that represent significant challenges for the sector and may also impact upon how news is prioritised among stations. Given the restrictions on ownership models, limited to established NGOs, educational institutions and KVK, a major challenge is the ‘NGOisation’ of the sector. Stations are expected to conform to the agenda of their NGO parent body who, in turn, are under pressure from donors to ‘scale up’ operations and demonstrate impact (Malik & Bandelli, 2012; Pavarala, 2015). Subsequently, news and current affairs coverage may not be a priority. A more systemic problem associated with this is the community radio sector’s underlying, and potentially outdated, focus on development. Pavarala (2015) argues that there is now a need for the sector to move past its developmentalist agenda, which he sees as a legacy of postcolonial nation-building, and focus more on the development of communication rights. A comparative study of the community radio sectors in Nepal, Bangladesh and India revealed that while community radio stations in Nepal have a strong focus on local journalism in their content, community radio stations in Bangladesh and India tend to focus more on ‘information provision and providing links to welfare/development services’ (Arora, Ramakrishnan & Fernandez, 2015: 33). This raises further questions about the fundamental purpose of community radio. In this case, a development agenda overpowers the potential of community radio for journalism, activism, communication rights, and acting as an alternative public sphere. News and current affairs coverage could be considered unfortunate collateral damage.

An overarching development discourse could be observed throughout many aspects of the day-to-day operations of the community radio stations visited. An example of this was discussed in one of the audience focus group discussions:

I very well knew about everything before. The information given on radio could be considered as additional qualification.

I hear a lot of informative news from the radio but I cannot tell that I learnt anything new. They tell information that I already knew.

But in present situation agriculture is not in its full glory. There is no rain and there is no conditions favourable for doing agriculture. So the information told in the community radio is not useful at all. Even though the programs broadcasted in community radio reaches people, it is neither useful nor impactful as there is no rain and no agriculture.

Here we can see a clear disconnect between the broadcasting priorities of the station and, by extension, its parent body, and the realities of their audience. The development agenda could be
observed through the provision of information about increasing yield and treating pests, but the lack of local contextualisation meant that such information was irrelevant to the audience. Taking a different perspective and applying the traditional ‘news values’ (which are, according to Masterton’s (1995) seminal article: timeliness, significance, proximity, conflict, human interest, novelty and prominence), a focus on development without appropriate local contextualisation strips community news of its news value.

Conclusion

Despite the restrictive environment of development imperatives, ownership structures and strict government legislation, it seems as though community radio news and journalism is alive and well. Though it may not necessarily take the form of a slick three-minute bulletin on the hour every hour, there is news and journalism in community radio in India, and it is seen as a key aspect of the day-to-day activities of stations. Close relationships and strong networks with audiences help community radio practitioners engage in hyperlocal journalism from the margins that results in news that may not conform to mainstream, large-scale definitions, but nonetheless serves to let local voices be heard and contribute to the democratisation of the public sphere. The primary threat to community radio news and journalism does not necessarily come from overzealous restrictions on news, but rather an overarching development discourse that imposes programming imperatives and fails to account for the local broadcasting environment. As for next steps though, opening up the legislation to allow news broadcasting remains a priority for academics and activists. A key recommendation of UNESCO’s National Consultation on Strengthening Community Radio in India, specifically called on the government to ‘Relax content restrictions on community radio, and permit free collection and broadcast of local news and information over CRs.’ Successive governments have failed to make community radio a priority in India, despite the valuable work being done in the sector. But at least there is some comfort in the fact that hyperlocal, community journalism has found a way, despite the odds.

References


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