

The community radio movement in India

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India has been quite a latecomer to this promising channel of people empowerment through community media. Until late 2006, only educational institutions were allowed to set up *campus radio stations* having a transmission range of 10-15km. The scope was only recently expanded to also include non-profit agencies, agricultural research institutes, and schools, to set up *community radio stations* that would involve local communities in the content production process. The progress has been steady since then, although arguably somewhat slow. As of now, there are four stations that are broadcasting, and around six stations that are in advanced stages of their application approvals. I will first briefly describe the historical context of the CR movement in India, then outline certain inefficiencies in the current CR policy, enumerate a few practical problems in establishing and running CR stations in the Indian context, and finally connect the efforts of Gram Vaani and other organizations in addressing these problems.

Historical context

The importance of community media for community empowerment and democratization is well known. And voice based media are especially relevant in the Indian context, given the poor literacy levels in rural areas. However, despite radio being an efficient channel for voice-based community media, communities and independent organizations were forbidden to set up their own radio stations. Pioneering organizations such as Voices and Drishti Media therefore chose a concept called narrow casting to circumvent the policy restrictions. They worked with NGOs Myrada in Bangalore and Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (a women collective) in Gujarat to train rural community reporters to produce audio programs just like it would be done in a radio studio. But the programs were played out over loud-speakers in common community meeting points such as near temples and at Panchayat (village level governing bodies) meetings, or within “listener groups” of women working together in self-help-groups. The audio production was itself done in a small studio where eminent village personalities and local politicians were invited for interviews, local artists were called in for recording folk songs, and school children were invited to recite poems and famous speeches by great personalities. Namma Dhwani (meaning, our voices), the setup at the village of Buddikote near Bangalore, even pioneered a new concept called cable casting where they used the cable TV network in the village for broadcast. This was a daring step in many ways against the repressive government policies — since cable TV was run by local operators, Namma Dhwani could purchase air time cheaply for their own programs even though it could not run its own radio station. The channel of course did not have any video — just a blank blue screen — but given the high penetration of television in the community, it was a fantastic outreach channel.

Both the experimental setups near Bangalore and in Gujarat were extremely successful in empowering communities, making them realize their rights, and lobby for their demands from

local authorities. Given ready evidence, enterprising activists from organizations such as Drishti, Voices, Ideosync, Maraa, One World South Asia, and many independent individuals incessantly lobbied for a policy change to get permission for radio broadcast. Their efforts were rewarded in late 2006, but the policy still remains mired with many complications.

Community radio policy

Currently, there are a number of points of dissatisfaction amongst the CR community.

- Only non-profits more than 3 years old can apply for a CR license. Although this clause is present to help ensure accountability, it is restrictive for new organizations that want to venture into community radio in a dedicated manner. The older non-profits that are applying for licenses have been working in different streams such as micro-finance, low-cost housing, health, etc, and tend to look upon CR as an outreach channel for their existing programs. However, the vision and mission of CR is substantially broader and a niche domain in itself.
- The license process can take well over a year. It goes through the approvals of almost five different ministries, and if the application is stuck at any point, then there are hardly any avenues to find out. Updates are rarely available on the government websites. The entire process is also very inconvenient for the applicant organizations because they are often asked to supply more details within sudden deadlines, or required to appear in person in New Delhi without any warning. One of the most significant tasks during the application process is also a community survey that is supposed to be filled out by over 1000 respondents. Although surveys are definitely valuable to assess the information needs of the communities, the specific survey mandated by the government is available only in English, and contains a whole host of amusing questions that are completely irrelevant to community radio. Many people behind the CR movement strongly feel that a one-fits-all survey is not suitable in the diverse Indian context, and applicants should be allowed to design their own surveys based upon certain specific guidelines laid down by the government. Fortunately though, the government secretaries are open to suggestions, and the process will smoothen out over time.
- The FM transmitter equipment for the community radio station can be sold by only three authorized vendors. The third vendor, Nomad, designs and manufactures indigenous transmitters, and got approval only last year after a long struggle with the bureaucratic red tape. Prior to Nomad, the transmitter equipment was available at a prohibitively enormous cost from the other vendors. At Gram Vaani, although we know that even lower cost alternatives exist, but given the approval difficulties we have deferred our development efforts on the transmitter front to later, and decided to focus on other components of the CR technology in priority.
- The policy mandates that the CR station should be owned by a non-profit organization. This is very different from policies in Nepal where local communities can pool funds and apply for a license, or in Bolivia where it is mandatory for a CR station to be governed by a council of members elected from the community. This therefore becomes a push-based top-down approach in India, as opposed to a more desirable pull-based bottom-up approach in Nepal and Bolivia. The non-profit organization in India may or may not choose to listen to feedback from the local community, and there have been reports where

feedback from certain community individuals was neglected because these people did not participate in the other development programs supported by the non-profit organization. In the same manner, since the community also may not incur any clearly-observable liability from a failure of the CR station, it would affect their levels of engagement with the radio station. Unfortunately a circular problem, this does outline the complexities of participatory community development programs.

Other challenges for community radio stations

CR stations also face other challenges, the foremost ones being financial sustainability and technology.

- CR stations are permitted 5 minutes of advertising per hour. If well marketed, this could help cover the operational costs to run the CR station and pay salaries to the staff. But it is practically infeasible for resource-crunched CR station operators to acquire business skills and look for advertisers while they also produce good quality radio content. We feel that having a central agency like Gram Vaani look for advertising on their behalf will be very helpful. But it is also important to create other revenue streams for community radio. We have a number of interesting ideas based on coupling radio with telephony services, that we will outline in a subsequent post.
- The setup used by most stations is quite basic — just a computer and mic, connected to the FM transmitter via a mixer. Although simplicity is good, the lack of interactive systems such as telephones, field reporting tools, and content sharing, makes it harder to sustain engagement from the community. Even software used to run the radio station can have a significant impact on its success. Most CR stations currently use Winamp to play out radio programs, and have to resort to hacks to do live broadcast, or interleave advertisements between programs. A professional radio automation system is very necessary to scale activities, but currently there is no free and open-source system that provides a one-stop solution to playout, broadcast, telephony, SMS, and Internet content sharing.

The current push behind the CR movement

We are very glad that our Knight funding came at an opportune time to enable us to make a significant impact in the growth of community radio in India. Gram Vaani is among the early players in the area of improving technology for community radio, and building a business model around making CR stations financially sustainable. Please take a look at other included reports on details of the kind of software and hardware systems we are building for community radio. We will shortly also write about our current thinking on the business model of enabling services through radio and telephony.

The Gram Vaani team and other CR activists are also part of the Community Radio Forum, a pan-India collective whose most important mandate is to lobby for legislative changes on the CR policy front. The third annual meeting of the CR Forum was held last month at a small town called Orchha, in the Bundelkhand region of India. Orchha was chosen because the very first community radio station licensed under the new policy was established there by Development

Alternatives five months back. It was widely attended by almost all organizations in the community media space in India, including Gram Vaani.

The road is long, as all roads always are, but it has been a terrific start so far. The one thing I can definitely vouch for though, is that the enthusiasm and commitment of the CR community in India is undying, and will continue to push the horizons of community media indefinitely.