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Political Economy of Community Radio in India

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ABSTRACT The concept of mass communication is incomplete without the reference to technology that is to say 'No technology no mass communication'. In due course of time radio has turned into a vital agent of socio-cultural and political change. It is instrumental in creating social awareness and is a device of empowerment as well. No doubt the influence of radio on Indian society is phenomenal Radio has impacted on Indian society in big way. When the area covered by a radio station is reduced to just ten kilometres of aerial distance then we come across a unique concept known as Community Radio (CR). CR operates using Frequency Modulation (FM). In the realm of media and communication studies 'Political Economy' is generally referred to the studies that seek to correlate economic and political aspects of a communication system that operate in a global capitalist structure. It is concerned with understanding how communication figures in political economic formations more generally. Encouraged by the unparalleled and extraordinary demand for the CRS, the government of India plans to set up a large number of CRS all across the nation with a special focus on educational institutions.

KEYWORDS : Political Economy, Community Radio, FM

Introduction

The concept of mass communication is incomplete without the reference to technology that is to say 'No technology no mass communication'. It cannot be denied that among all means of mass communication radio is the most economical and by far the most readily accessible medium. Radio broadcasting comes with an inherent potential to penetrate deep into the mind and heart of the people which creates an intimate bond between the broadcaster and the listener. Radio according to Zulfiqar Ali Bukhari the first Director General of All India Radio (AIR), is the "Mirror of the Society". In due course of time the radio has turned into a vital agent of socio-cultural and political change. It is instrumental in creating social awareness and is a device of empowerment as well. No doubt the influence of radio on the Indian society is phenomenal Radio has affected Indian society in big way. The advent of television and the subsequent ICT Revolution has given tough competition to radio. However, the dawn of the present century has proved to be extremely productive.

Community Radio: Concept and Definition

Community radio can be defined in varied terms. Actually, when the area covered by a radio station is reduced to just ten kilometres of aerial distance, then it is known as Community Radio (CR). The CR operates on the technique of Frequency Modulation (FM). It was invented by Edwin Howard Armstrong and has completely revolutionised the radio industry. CR can truly be described as a medium "of the people, for the people and by the people". In fact, in a typical CR set up the members of the target community are involved not only in the organisation, administration and production of programmes but also in the development and shaping of its contents. Therefore, the CR can rightly be termed as the third model of radio completely distinct from public service and commercial services. UNESCO defines CR as 'a medium that gives a voice to the voiceless, which serves as the mouthpiece of the marginalised and is at the heart of communication and democratic processes within societies'. CRS are usually non-profit organisations that provide a public platform to individuals and groups to connect to the target community thus in the process they turn into the creators, contributors as well as consumers of the media messages.

6A CRS Approach

We can evolve a '6A Approach' for the operation in order to yield maximum dividends from a CRS which is elaborated as under.

1. **Availability** to communities for participation in programme design and contents
2. **Accessibility** to communities by providing a participatory medium of communication
3. **Affordable** by its communities by adopting ways to encourage the poorest members to participate fully through whatever means they can afford including sweat equity.
4. **Acceptable** to communities by catering to their needs and interests.
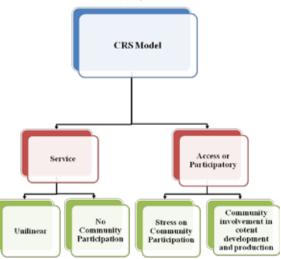5. **Accountable** to its communities through constant feedbacks that insists upon interactive dialogue and mechanisms for addressing and responding to complaints. Suggestions and concerns.
6. **Allow** or catalyse social, economic, cultural and spiritual development

The 6A CRS Approach

Models of CR

At least two distinct but overlapping models of CR can be discerned.

Political Economy of Media: Theoretical Framework

According to Scruton (1983), "In contrast to domestic economy, political economy studies the economic behaviour and interest of the entire state (p.359). Political Economy is a significant feature "of the science of

government" (Scruton, 1983). Engel (1843) believes, "Political economy came into being as a natural result of the expansion of trade, and with its appearance elementary, unscientific huckstering was replaced by a developed system of licensed fraud, an entire science of enrichment" whereas Johnson (1994-2005) elucidates Political Economy as "a branch of the social sciences that takes as its principal subject of study the inter-relationships between political and economic institutions and processes. That is, political economists are interested in analysing and explaining the ways in which various sorts of government affect the allocation of scarce resources in society through their laws and policies as well as the ways in which the nature of the economic system and the behaviour of people acting on their economic interests affects the form of government and the kinds of laws and policies that get made". In the realm of media and communication studies 'Political Economy' is generally referred to as the studies that seek to correlate economic and political aspects of communication system that operate in a global capitalist structure. The political economy paradigm of media has its foundations in the post industrial capital economies of that led to emergence of nation-states in the late eighteenth century. Political economy of communication, Graham (2007) claims is, "concerned with understanding how communication figures in political economic formations more generally" (pp.226-245). In fact, Canadian Economist Harold Innis is credited with adopting, for the first time, this term to demonstrate the "fact that throughout history certain privileged groups (priests, kings, bureaucrats, soldiers, scientists, etc) have enjoyed a monopoly of access to certain kinds of knowledge". Golding & Graham (2000) maintain, "A focal question for the political economy of communications is to investigate how changes in the array of forces that exercise control over cultural production and distribution or liberate the public sphere. This directs attention to two key issues. The first is the pattern of ownership of such institutions and the consequences of this

pattern for control over their activities. The second is the relationship between the state regulations and communication institutions". Actually, the core activity of political economy of media "Is to analyse how and in what ways the relation between media and the state has consequences for the range of expressions and ideas in the public arena." To be true the media and political system are so exceptionally interlinked together that it is rather impossible to separate both of them out because they are complimentary as well as obligatory to each other. Relating media's power with the political system C.S.Rayudu in *Media Communication Management* (Himalayan Publishing House: 1994) claims:

Journalism is so much a part of the political system that it influences the very structure of the system itself. Without mass media, there would be no political system as we know it. And as the source of so much information we have about the world around us, including the world of politics, the media has a great power to influence what we think about. Some of the older sources of information and influence, such as school, political party, and religious institutions, seem to be diminishing in importance as the politics becomes more media-oriented. Fundamental changes in a political system, like revolutions or changes in party dominance, come about slowly and are surely added by mass media but hardly caused by them. (p.235)

In the case of CR in India it has at least 126 community Radio stations. The govt. Of India through its Ministry of Information and broadcasting grants the licence. It is a best example of democratisation of media. In India involve the members of the broadcasting area in content development, and production and other aspects of broadcasting.

	Liberal-Pluralist	Radical-Marxist
Political program	Realistic, practical and pragmatic politics; supports responsible capitalism.	Idealistic and critical politics; criticises capitalism and supports versions of socialism
Type of political economy	Political. Political economy.	Economic. Political economy.
Locus of explanation	Late developing and Third World countries, mostly authoritarian	Advanced capitalist countries. Liberal or social democracies.
The role of the state	Primary. Dominant shaper of economic economic and media policies. Repressive state power threatens media freedom.	Secondary and derived.
The role of the market	Promotes diversity and countervails arbitrary state power.	Capital accumulation and concentration restrict media diversity and produce communication inequalities.
Media professionalism	Promotes media pluralism and freedom. Creed of credibility.	a) Strategic rituals. used to reinforce the established order;
		b) Tyranny of media professionals at the expense of public voices.
Examples	Blumler and Gurevitch (1995),Hallin(2000), He (2000), Lee (2000b,c,d), Waisbord (2000), Yoon (1989), Gunther and Mugham (2000)	Curran (2000), Garnham (1990, 2000), Herman and Chomsky (1988), Murdock and Golding (1991, 1997), Mosco (1996), Schiller (1992)

Two Approaches to Political Economy of Media
Table 1

Lee, C.C. (2000). Chinese Communication: Prisms, Trajectories and Modes of Understanding. In C.C. Lee (Ed.), *Power, Money and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (pp. 3-44). Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern Press.

The "Political Economy of Media approach" according to Totale (2003) is "Empirical in the way that it uses the simple communication model, but it also contains some theoretical aspects". He classifies political economy approach to media in "three key dimensions" namely: (1) examination of how the different economic structures of the media, together with governmental policies and regulations influence the content of the media; (2) The second key dimension examines the aforementioned power structure and how media content enforces, challenges and influences existing class and social relations; and (3) while the third is the `prescriptive mission' of the political economy approach: The assumption that public good is not served by an untrammelled free market, that controls have to be in place. Furthermore, he brings out at least four major "strengths" political economy approach to media such as (a) It deals not only with the big players in media, say for example Rupert Murdoch, but also a variety of smaller institutions as well as factors such as time and money constraints, and the need for profit and even the structure of various organisation; (b)

It has a strong belief in the 'Liberal Theory of the Press' – that the media should be out protecting the public from political untruths, and should help to construct an informed society; (c) in many ways it is more realistic about the economic factors than the critical approach, and it believes that the dominant ideas are representative of culture, rather than strictly there to enforce the ruling class's dominance over the proletariat; (d) it realises that society is not made up of a group of individuals who agree on common values of society, as in the pragmatic approach, and so is a better judge of the current political climate".
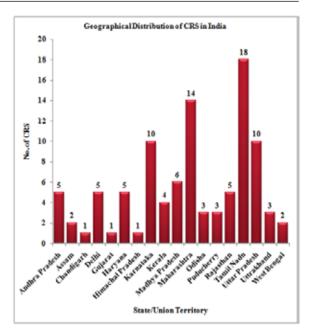
The Indian Context
At the moment, India boasts of at least 126 functional CRS. Firstly, it was FM and then of late it is CR that has completely revolutionised broadcasting in India. In fact, before FM or CR, All India Radio (AIR) catered to the needs and demands of the nation by broadcasting a bouquet of contents. However, being a national broadcaster, as expected, it could not meet the aspirations of small sections of the society. Hence, a desperate need was felt to limit the area of broadcast that would serve the interest of small but identifiable populations. The CR phenomenon is still in its infancy in India. The media liberalisation and softening of government control over the airwaves paved the way for CR in India. Initially, the approach of the government was a cautious one but slowly and surely CR has now got a firm footing in

India. The Government of India assigned the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting the duty of not only granting licences but also of strengthening the CR across the length and breadth of the country. It was also entrusted with the task of consolidating the CR network across India. Anna University grabbed this opportunity and immediately applied for the setting up of a CR station. In fact it holds the distinction of being the first campus-based CR, *Anna FM* in the country on February 01, 2004. Whereas, the first organisation CRS is, *Sangam* in Pastapur village, Medak district, Andhra Pradesh, which started transmission on October 15, 2008.

The government of India issued, in December 2002, the policy guidelines for establishing CRS in the country. Regarding the objective(s) of CRS the policy document specifically mentions that it is mandatory for the CR licence holder(s) to involve the community members of the service area in all aspects of broadcasting including content development and production. Community here implies the people living within the broadcast coverage area of the license holder. To obtain permission from the Information and Broadcasting, government of India for setting up CR, the permission seeker ought to specifically mention the target community. It is also obligatory for the CR license holder to offer CRS services absolutely on free-to-air basis. The CRS is a best example of the democratisation of media because it is owned the people, run by the people and for the people. Encouraged by the unparalleled and extraordinary demand for the CRS, the government of India plans to set up a large number of CRS all across the nation with a special focus on educational institutions. Currently there are five functional CRS in the national capital of Delhi including DU Community Radio of School of Open Learning (Delhi University), *Apna Radio* (Indian Institute of Mass Communication), CR of Jagan Institute of Management (Rohini), CR of Jagan International Management School (Vasant Kunj) and *Jamia Community Radio 90.4FM* of Jamia Millia Islamia.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the technological and policy challenges the CR movement in India should be provided with necessary impetus so as to flourish. However, a huge country like India – with a mosaic of religions and socio-cultural – there is a pressing need to broaden the horizons of CR so that it really turns into a "people's medium". Herein comes the crucial role of the government of India to not only evolve but also to formulate effective CR policies that would be helpful in strengthening as well as consolidating and expanding the CR network in the country.

S. No.	STATE/UNION TERRITORY	No. of CRS
1.	Andhra Pradesh	05
2.	Assam	02
3.	Chandigarh	01
4.	Delhi	05
5.	Gujarat	01
6.	Haryana	05
7.	Himachal Pradesh	01
8.	Karnataka	10
9.	Kerala	04
10.	Madhya Pradesh	06
11.	Maharashtra	14
12.	Odisha	03
13.	Puducherry	03
14.	Rajasthan	05
15.	Tamil Nadu	18
16.	Uttar Pradesh	10
17.	Uttrakhand	03
18.	West Bengal	02
TOTAL (NINETY EIGHT)		98

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF CRS IN INDIA
Table 2

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