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Article

**Community Radio reaches the unreached during the pandemic:
Stories from Alfaz-e-Mewat**

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Abstract

India's 316 plus community radios as on March 2021 have shown immense power in disseminating information and at the same time fighting misinformation during the pandemic. In these trying times, community radios, one of the oldest forms of oral communication have reached out to hard-to-reach populations with very little penetration of mainstream media and have effectively communicated the much needed information helping curb the spread of COVID-19.

The article will highlight the contribution of community radios during the pandemic, with special emphasis on Alfaz-e-Mewat(Rural Voices of Mewat) FM 107.8 operational in district Nuh, Haryana, which falls under Aspirational Districts put forth by Niti Aayog and how the COVID-19 programming at Alfaz-e-Mewat's covering diverse aspects such as information bulletins on the outbreak of the virus, programs addressing fake news, featuring positive deviant behaviour of locals and frontline workers during the pandemic, and messages on governance and entitlements evolved bringing stakeholders, both villagers and administration, together.

Community radio's content development strategy is based on participatory model where the communities and government trust the medium and come forward for a collaborative partnership. The

use of positive deviant approach to share local stories inspires many and as empirical evidence shows us, there is a cascading effect of these practices in the community as locals lead by example.

Introduction

Discoveries by various physicists, scientists, and technicians around the globe led to the development of wireless telegraphy and later to radio broadcasting – transforming dots and dashes to the spoken word. Radio has been evolving since its invention toward the end of the nineteenth century. Marconi's invention was popularly known as wireless telegraphy, working on the principle of telegraph without wire. Morse code dots and dashes were used to send messages from one point to another via radio waves, and specialists were required to translate the dots and dashes into words.

During the First World War, radio technology was more refined with the use of radio waves that, by transmitting audio from one point to many, made broadcasting possible. The year 2020 marks the 100th year of organized broadcasting. In these last 100 years, radio broadcasting matured and became much more accessible. Radio is now commonly heard in cars, on mobile phones while traveling, and on home radios where people can tune in to their favourite radio channel using a digital platform.

From amplitude modulation (AM) to frequency modulation (FM), and bigger-size transmitters and receivers to smaller ones, this basic technology is affordable and accessible at the bottom of the pyramid. Radio has played an important role in communicating with communities at the last mile, people who either live in media-dark areas or remote villages, or are affected by disasters.

What is Community Radio?

As the name suggests, community radio (CR) is the radio of a local community. CR functions best when local people produce and broadcast their own programs and participate in the operations of their station. In this community space, people who live within the broadcast range meet and collaborate to decide on their audio content.

UNESCO sees the CR medium as giving voice to the voiceless and serving as the mouthpiece of the marginalized. CR is at the heart of communication and democratic processes within societies. The notions of transparency and good governance take on new

dimensions, and democracy is reinforced (*Community Radio Handbook*, Colin Fraser & Sonia Restrepo Estrada, UNESCO, 2001).

Community Radio in India

In an age of development and growth, it is imperative to strengthen the bottom of the pyramid. In a country as vast and diverse as India, achieving this inclusion is difficult. As is often said, two Indias exist within the same country, and it is important to take measures and action to bridge the ever-increasing gap to include the poor. The basic building blocks for achieving this is to spread information and create awareness. A tool to accomplish these is community radio.

Discussions about CR in India began in the 1960s, beginning with the Chanda Committee Report 1966, which initiated the debate to end the monopoly of All India Radio (AIR). Then came the historic judgment of Supreme Court in 1995, calling upon the government to draw up regulations for granting licenses to private broadcasters and establishing an autonomous and independent authority responsible for supervising all operational aspects of broadcasting. "Pastapur Initiative on Community Radio Broadcasting" in 2000 urged the government to recognize community broadcasting as a third tier of broadcasting service, distinct from public and commercial broadcasting.

Starting from the emergence of radio clubs to having a national broadcaster, from AM band to FM band, and opening it to different sectors, all these developments paved way for the birth of community radio in India, and has grown with each passing year. Now 298 radio stations serve as the sole source of information in many areas—the media-dark areas and aspirational districts of the country.

Role of CR in disaster

Radio has proven to be an effective medium that has emerged as a savior during tough times. Receiving information at the right time can reduce the impact of a disaster and save lives. Historical evidence describes case studies of radio providing support for soldiers and civilians during World War II. Radio signals saved many lives during the Titanic shipwreck. More recently, community radio took an active role during the Nepal and Bhuj (Gujarat) earthquake and the Chennai floods, where the temporary radio started broadcasting directly from the office of the district collector to save people who were stuck in the floods.

When the entire world stood challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the local community radio stations continued their broadcasts to keep people informed and connect local authorities with the community. These community radios became the bridge between medical departments and the local people.

A few principles of effective crisis-and-risk communication are emphasized by the radio licence holders to implement in case of emergencies. Radio broadcasters are trained on the principles of "Be first," as crises are time-sensitive, and information must be shared quickly; "Be right" emphasizing accuracy of the shared information; "Be credible," ensuring that the level of honesty and credibility is supreme at all times; "Express empathy," which trains broadcasters to be courteous, kind, and responsive to the listeners and their calls; "Promote action," which helps restore order, reach out to line departments with information and restore sense of control; and "Show respect," because respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Abiding these principles at the time of disaster and emergencies helps build rapport and trust of the listeners on their community radio.

Community radio proves vital in times of disaster due to its geographical reach and localized nature.

"Community radio is proven to be an effective tool for disaster management as it has been the most efficient means to deliver information that are suited to the needs of the community and packaged in their own language. It has helped build awareness and strategies so that the communities are better prepared and are able to participate more actively in disaster management. Community radios have played a big role in disaster management in Indonesia, Japan and Nepal as these countries are prone to natural disasters."

(Prativa & Sandhya, 2010)

A few prominent examples are the role of Anna FM during and after the tsunami in 2004. The CR assisted communities in providing vital news and information. Though CRs are not allowed to broadcast news, the CR decided to extend help to communities in distress. They sent student volunteers to disaster areas. The affected communities were given a platform to share their grievances. Information was broadcast about distribution of relief materials and future outbreak of epidemics.

Another station, Kalanjam Samuga Vanoli established in 2005. Supported by United Nations Development Programme under the Tsunami Recovery Support Programme, the aim of the station was to act as a warning system for the impending calamities, preparing the communities on disaster preparedness and social development. The station served a key role in dispelling the false Tsunami alert of 2007. A team of volunteers recorded questions and concerns from the panic-struck communities and took them to the disaster management cell and then narrowcast the responses back to eight villages. The station ably bridged the information gap within the community.

Many CRs further played a vital role in Uttrakhand Floods of 2013, the super cyclone in Odisha, and presently in the COVID-19 pandemic that has engulfed the entire world. These unsung broadcasters have yet again reached out and served various unreached communities in this pandemic. The article will now shed light on the critical role played by CRs in the pandemic through a case study of Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8, operating in the Nuh district of Haryana.

Role of CR during pandemic: Alfaz-e-Mewat

Community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8, established by S M Sehgal Foundation, a rural development NGO having five key programs; water management, agriculture development, local participation and sustainability, Transform Lives *one school at a time*, and Outreach for Development, was at the community forefront from the onset of the pandemic. The station's first broadcast started in February and was the sole source of information for people during lockdown. The station is led by a group of community reporters and the broadcasts cover local developments in the local language. Interviews have featured doctors and people from the health department talking about the spread of the virus as well as making regular announcements about government ration schemes. The station covered all relevant aspects of the pandemic. The trust and credibility portrayed in the medium stemmed from mapping the community needs and identifying the most vulnerable of the groups. The radio became a bridge between the administration and communities and helped people access the various government entitlements extended during lockdown such as monetary help in bank accounts, dry rations, etc.

During such disasters, community radio's role becomes all the more vital. The very first broadcasts at the station were done with the district magistrate, the chief medical officer and

senior medical officer of the nearest hospital to speak directly to the people. Some were live and interactive sessions, with listeners asking questions. Since officials cannot possibly go to every village, this medium allows them to communicate to the maximum number of people.

Using a bottom-up approach, several local issues were mainstreamed to the broadcast area. Several communications theories were redefined through the work of CR stations during the pandemic. Community radio's content-development strategy is based on participatory model where the communities and government come forward in a trusting, collaborative partnership.

Using a positive deviant approach to sharing local stories inspires listeners. Empirical evidence shows a cascading effect of these practices in the community as locals lead by example. The effectiveness of community radio broadcasts can be seen through the lens of the 7 C's in preparing the content of communication: Clear, Concise, Complete, Correct, Concrete, Coherent, and Courteous, which are supported further by empirical evidence. The COVID-19 programming ensures that listeners in the broadcast range, who are completely cut from the outside world, receive timely updates on the pandemic, clear information from the credible sources of information on the do's and don'ts to follow to safeguard people from COVID-19, a range of programs on positivity, i.e. mental health. Such coherent and collaborative content generation suits the local context and enhances the capability to handle the situation by local authorities and village institutions. The communications strategy of "being there" translates to community radios broadcasting non-stop during the pandemic.

People have called the station asking for solutions to their concerns and issues, and the radio acted as a bridge between people and the government in new ways. From the view of public opinion processes i.e. opinion, belief, attitude, and value, the content broadcasts went a long way in substantiating communication theories and practices. The broadcasts exemplify timeliness and, given their local and contextual nature, garnered much closeness with the community, leading to positive behavior changes in some cases. The pandemic catapulted the process of digital India in various spheres as well with radios forming an experimentation field for testing the feasibility of online education. The need now is to learn from these diverse experiences and look at innovations in the field such as radio-enabled learning in rural areas, working with the internet connectivity statistics.

Alfaz-e-Mewat came up with short audio capsules on mental health and positive thinking through its program *21 din 21 baatein* during the 21-day lockdown. The program, *Aaj ka hero* (Today's hero), which addressed the reluctant population—some of them elderly, by profiling a community member to narrate their personal accounts of how they are staying indoors and protecting themselves and their families.

Through this, the radio station highlighted that it was okay to be afraid of falling ill and staying indoors during prayers. In keeping with the recommended use of minimal staff during the pandemic, the radio station ensures that only one person runs the show each day on a rotational basis, with equipment properly sanitised.

To counter false information on WhatsApp and other social media, the station started *Savdhan* (Alert!). These programs and initiatives during COVID make the fight with the pandemic everybody's fight. The staff at the station played a key role in keeping a positive attitude and practicing what they share on the radio with listeners. When a staff member's parents returned from *jamaat* (religious congregation) in Nepal and were under a fourteen-day quarantine in the facility set up by the district authorities, the staffer took his parents to the quarantine centre and followed the protocol before re-joining his family. This was during the time that a lot of attendees from the Tablighi Jamaat hosted in Delhi tested positive and many of them acted irresponsibly and travelled back to their native home. Nuh, which is among the aspirational districts of the country, is characterized by low literacy rates and inadequate health facilities, was once a red zone but soon bounced back to being a green zone. The radio broadcasts shared provided critical information for listeners in the coverage area of 225 villages. In addition, a citizen information and support centre toll-free helpline operated by the parent organisation also busted myths and misinformation and dispelled rumours and 'fake' news.

The help provided was a two-way street. Just as the community tuned in to the radio to access vital information, the radio station team sought help when it faced a technical glitch that put the transmission at halt. The community mechanic lent a helping hand to rectify the problem and reinstate the broadcasts.

Rural schoolchildren tuned in to radio for education amid the pandemic with *Radio School*. The *Radio School* program, started by community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat, has been the only source of information for a number of children in the villages of this district. The program

has episodes on the subjects of math, English and science for primary and secondary classes. Government school teachers also made their recordings as part of a campaign facilitated by the State Education Department, along with educational content from *Sesame Street*, NCERT, and contributions made by volunteers and interns.

Education has been severely affected by the pandemic, especially in rural areas. Rural students were not able to keep up with education due to a lack of access to digital devices such as smart phones and laptops. Poor network connectivity and conducive spacesacted as added constraints. The on-the-ground initiatives by teachers were able to reach out to some, but still left a large chunk of students devoid of education. The station's *Radio School*program served as a lifeline for rural kids.The station reporters even used the content for their kids, and several callers shared that children are benefiting from the curriculum broadcasts of NCERT.

Challenges during the pandemic

Radio stations have faced a lot of challenges as they work against the tide, in unusual circumstances, even in total lockdown, alongside their own struggles for financial sustainability and a sort of identity crisis.

Given the total lockdown, without ample notice beforehand, mobility was at a standstill. When CRs were seeking work, they were not recognized as a media organisation, which posed problems of non-access to authorities. Local authorities were reluctant to share the information about positive COVID cases, only the messaging on handwashing was clear. Amid the tsunami of misinformation and fake news, CRs were negotiating unknown territories, using their existing training to handle such information. Initially there was confusion on who should wear a mask and who should not.

Thanks to technological advancements, the radio staff made use of remotely managing broadcasts from their homes. Their capacities were continuously built by partner organisations who floated COVID-19 response programs and campaigns to prepare ground reporters to accurately handle the subjects.

Over 220 programs were made at the station, and over 1,500 calls were received from March through August. More than twenty experts were part of various broadcasts and about forty media articles talked about the essential role of community radio during the pandemic.

The way forward

As CRs have represented a potent force to reckon with during this pandemic, it is essential that, going forward, CRs revisit their roles as they have the trust and credibility within their coverage areas to bring community to the centre stage. CRs will have to focus on life post pandemic for a considerable amount of time, returning to a “new normal” and preparing communities for the long battle at hand. Collaborative radio programs will look at life through the landscape of the pandemic and reimagine content to cover areas such as livelihoods, education, violence, and mental stress. The name of the game is sustaining the safety campaign, bringing out different conversations from diverse groups of the community, and comprehending and demystifying government advisories for the ease and sake of community members.

Community radio is the premier medium of the poor because it jumps the roadblock of isolation and illiteracy. CR is the most affordable electronic medium of communication for the poor and marginalized. Radio's role and importance has long been discounted but, as an old saying goes, 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.' CRs have proven to be tough and essential during the pandemic, and remainpositioned uniquely to reimagine communication theories and strategies and serve the people at the bottom of the pyramid with crucial information in new ways. ((Hore, 2020)).

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