

Community radio and emerging information networks¹

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to take a closer look at the workings of five community radio groups operating in the northwestern hills of Uttaranchal in India. Why is there a need for alternative knowledge platforms? What does it mean to work on information networks? Who are these people who comprise these groups? The article tries to introduce and analyse the processes and the experiences of the local volunteers in doing radio amidst their own community members. The article suggests that such initiatives, small and scattered as they may be, help in the creation of knowledge networks that help to form newer, hitherto unexplored spaces of dialogue and discourse.

Keywords: *India; Uttaranchal; community radio; knowledge networks; ethnographic action research.*

INTRODUCTION

A small village, Aampata in the Tehri Garhwal District of Uttaranchal, is abuzz with activity on an unusually animated Sunday afternoon. People of all age groups, big and small, some eager faced, others gripped with lassitude on a warm summer afternoon, are huddled in the community hall. They are staring at a VCD projection in front of them, their hands folded in abeyance, at a bearded saffron clad "baba", a new age "guru", on the screen.

The religious sermon of the hirsute ascetic sounds like a peculiar, monotonous buzzing of lazy flies in that trapped room. Yet, the pious audience, half of whom are dozing off, having sacrificed their siestas for a religious cause, tightly clasp their hands together and bow their heads, making the onlooker suspect that they just may have fallen asleep after all!

In the Panchayat room, next to this spiritual ambience, a team of young, restless people with radio sets and tapes in hand are sitting and performing "check tests" on their microphones. Their eyes are affixed on the tiny wooden door, eagerly expecting the religious gathering to break anytime and for their first audience to pour in. These young people are community radio volunteers from the neighboring villages and are a part of Hevalvani Samudayik Radio (Hevalvani Community Radio). They have come to this village today in order to play back some programs that they had recorded here, a couple of months earlier.

Needless to say, they are keen to hold a listening and feedback session with their audiences. They are also hoping, if they get lucky, to initiate some new interesting debates and discussions among their listeners. Everyone in the team is a bit baffled at this unexpected competition from a VCD run religious lecture. "I always thought that television serials and soap operas are the main competitor to our community radio. But now we have to live with this also," says a volunteer, irritated and impatient at the wait.

(Action researcher's notes based on a discussion with community radio volunteers.)

This is a story of a convergence of spaces that bring people together and of mediums both tangible and intangible that have played a subtle yet crucial role in connecting people, often sociologically termed as “communities”. Who is this group of religious devotees and why are they gathered together? Who are these young people and what are they doing in a strange village?

NETWORKS OF EXCHANGE

Over the centuries, just as in an urban scenario, as mobility has increased and information goods have made the knowledge exchange rapid and fast, some public spaces have shrunk and, unwittingly some new meeting grounds have emerged. One observes this in the case of the mountain communities of Uttaranchal too, even though the media onslaught is obviously not on the scale of its contemporary urban counterpart. Yet, new media forms such as television, telephones, and mobile phones have speeded up the communication flow to an extent. They have also created small, private, individuated spaces that take away the experience of a collective sharing from the community consciousness that was there earlier.

Migration from these hill communities to neighboring urban centres is great, and hence the need of the time is to create new collectives that can be grounding yet free flowing with the flux. Old meeting spaces such as village *melas* (fairs), village *pooja* (worship) ceremonies, etc are fast shrinking. The two instances cited above are small attempts at creating new spaces of convergence, mediated by factors that may not be defined as “cultural”, yet may be responsible for the creation of a new culture of information network societies.

“Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in the processes of production, experience, power and culture” (Castells 1996).

This article is an attempt at documenting the complex processes of one such small effort at evolving an “information network society” among the hill communities of Uttaranchal by voluntary Community Radio groups operational in five diverse regions of Garhwal and Kumaon. The ethnographic action research was done over the period of one year in 2004 when the radio groups started receiving support from UNESCO.

A SHARED PLATFORM: COMMUNITY RADIO IN UTTARANCHAL

In 2000, five community radio groups emerged in Uttaranchal, a newly formed hill state located in the northwestern hills of India. Himalaya Trust a local, non-government organisation based in the capital, Dehradun, provided assistance in giving basic equipment and technical training to these eager volunteers.

Hevalvani Community Radio is located in the Heval river valley of Tehri Garhwal district. Situated at a distance of about 40 kilometers from the nearest city centre, Rishikesh, the group is comprised of 6 young active members from around the kasba (township) of Khadi.

Raibar Community Radio, its neighbor, operates from the Balganga river valley in Tehri Garhwal. This group is a mixture of young and old, one of its co-founder members being a 60-year-old animated lady who is also involved in other welfare and social activities in her village. Interestingly, the group operates from two distinct areas, one being the town centre of Chamyala and the other, an isolated village with no road access, situated atop a mountain ridge, Bangaon.

The peculiar location of the radio group makes it possible for the members to collect information from the well connected, burgeoning township of Chamyal and disseminate it. It is done with the help of their radio, amidst the villages that are far flung and in the vicinity of Bangaon, which is about an hour's climb through the forest and mud tracks from Chamyal.

Shristhi Community Radio has its roots in Uttarkashi, which also lies in the Garhwal region. Comparatively a younger group as opposed to the others, it is struggling to expand its voluntary support base, and the members are keen to involve the students of the Garhwal University that is located in Uttarkashi.

Mandakini ki Awaz Community Radio is located in the Mandakini river valley, Pauri Garhwal. The members work from a small village, Bhanaj, about a 5-hour drive from the nearest town centre of Rudraprayag. This group aims at creating an open and transparent administrative and governance information system. The radio group mediates between the people and the governing bodies (panchayats) in these villages, in order to create an open platform where policies, schemes and financial budgets can be made available for public discussion and scrutiny.

Pradeep Community Radio is located in Kausani in Kumaon district. Young and vivacious members of this group operate from Kausani, a small hill station near Nainital, and Garud, a neighbouring township. The group strives to work on not only community issues and concerns but through its radio programming focuses on collecting and documenting the oral history and traditions of the valley, for posterity,

Members who form these active radio clubs come from all walks of life, the one binding thread being their love for the medium and a desire to work towards a community owned and operated media and knowledge form.

"Why is it that some voices can never be heard? Why is it that people from my area are not being able to access important and timely information? Topographically, whether we like it or not, our communities remain very distant even from each other, let alone the other areas of the world. The youth in my village are never able to get any employment, education related news on time! Or if they do, they are unable to share it with others. Gradually, our community creative forms of entertainment and exchange are also disappearing. That is why I think community radio is that one medium that enables me to work on information network and needs of my community while at the same time, it gives me and others, an opportunity to interact with each other, personally," says Vipin Joshi, a young enthusiast from Pradeep Community Radio.

"For me working in community radio means sharing my experiences with others and learning from their ideas and thought processes. It is almost as if all of us are working towards not only preserving but also building a new heritage (viraasat) for our coming generations", feels Archana Raturi, co-founder and an active member of Hevalvani Community Radio.

(Action researcher's notes based on discussions with community radio volunteers)

THE VARIOUS ROLES OF COMMUNITY RADIO

Facilitating Dialogue

“Community” is a fluid term, even though it attaches a certain degree of cultural, spatial, traditional peculiarity to its “people”, its meaning may nonetheless be fast changing too. Given the distinctions and similarities of such a social complex, what motivates a group of young people to do work within their own communities and why?

Children from a village at a narrowcasting-cum-recording session

Shri Bhagwati Prasad is an old, retired, well-respected teacher of his village. He is considered to be a hardworking and a foresighted man and many come to him to seek advice on diverse topics ranging from marriage to farming techniques.

Bhagwati Prasad has grown up studying the changing cycle of seasons and its effect on his mountain soil since he was a child. That is why he seems to think that a very good source of supplementary farm income in his village could be had if everyone in his village and around him would start growing certain varieties of fruits in specific seasons. But initially everyone around him thought that the old man had grown senile. One cannot and does not practice horticulture without government aid. What if the fruits did not sprout? And if they did, who would buy them?

But the old man did not give up. He planted 18 walnut trees around his house and then some oranges. Gradually he started a fruit nursery in the village. “I have very simple reasons for doing what I do,” he shares. “One, that when I die, these people will have something to remember me by. These trees will be my gift to them. Two, as you must have noticed, people in this area are very poor. When some guests come to visit or whenever any of us has to visit our daughters-in-laws, instead of spending money on sweets, we can now take them home grown, healthy fruits. And I distribute the saplings to everyone in the village, so that people do not steal any of my fruits. Sharing kills the temptation to do evil”, his toothless face and twinkling eyes are an inspiration enough for everyone now in that village to help him with the fruit nursery.”

But no one except people from his village and the neighboring areas know that one of their own people is experimenting with a new idea. They go on thinking that horticulture is impossible and useless without any outside aid.

One member of Hevalvani community radio happened to be visiting the village and heard of this industrious old man. Out came the recorder and the story was captured. The radio group has been playing this program in many villages since then and many curious listeners have shown eager interest in the initiative.

Through the medium of their community radio, there remain many more stories to be told, to be discovered perhaps, circulate and shared.

(Volunteer’s field notes)

The knowledge platform that community radio groups in Uttaranchal are striving towards could become one such space where stories from different regions and across ages can travel and inspire others. Creating shared networks also signifies a movement, all-encompassing of the various sections in the social structure of the society.

Mediating Change

These animated community workers are ambitious yet realistic about their endeavors. They realize that not only is it becoming increasingly challenging to rephrase the term “community” to specific, particular contexts, the fractured nature of the social fabric that they have lived and worked within is also an important consideration.

Societies and communities within them form groups on the grounds of dissension and distinction. Issues of caste, class, and gender define not just the personal identity of an individual, they also form the “sociality” around an individual identity- the age defined collective and cultural identity of the communities they are born within and are a part of. It is through social normative practices and beliefs around gender/caste/community rituals etc that individuals learn to identify and define their personal and social roles within their societies as well. And if one is working towards creation of a free and fair network of knowledge, it becomes important to address and work with the barriers that emerge from the cultural and everyday practices in one’s immediate social environment. Community radio, in this context, is not just limited then, to an information exchange medium, it also becomes a crucial public advocacy tool in one’s community.

This is a love story, but it is difficult to say whether it is a happy or a tragic one. Well at least it is simple....and predictable. In Baijnath, a village near Kausani in Kumaon, different caste people live together and mingle daily in work and in leisure with each other. And then one day a high caste Brahmin boy decided to go and fall in love with a low caste, harijan girl...and thus destroyed the illusion of equality that everyone blissfully lived under.

The couple revolted against all odds and got married amidst a roaring public storm. But there seems to be no happy endings here, for the boy’s family, once considered to be a very respectable one in the village, has now been socially exterminated from the rest of the community. Others consider speaking or interacting with this family a “sin” and any one, who breaks the line, is punished in a similar fashion.

This is an old story, relived many times over. Members of Pradeep CR decided to retell it in a different style this time around, by holding public meetings among the youth of the area and asking them what they thought about the whole affair and would they be willing to take a bold stand and revolt against such blatant and unjustified discrimination? People spoke as they often do at public forums, but a few were stirred. A few wanted to do something, if only make a radio program on this issue and gather wider public opinion about it by circulating the program in various colleges in the neighboring areas.

It is difficult to bring a ‘revolution’ and all of us work within our social constraints, and yet someone did speak. And many were heard and many others remained tacit, waiting for their “right moments”. But it was a beginning of a dialogue and that in itself is important. The debate may not have eventuated anything, but was pregnant with the possibility of it....and that is important.

(Volunteer’s field notes)

Towards the Creation of Knowledge Societies

In such a knowledge set up as the community radio activists in Uttaranchal are working towards, the user of information also becomes the provider of content, individually or in co-operation with others. People “choose” to come together on a shared platform, motivated and excited by diverse and conflicting ideas and thoughts. Such a process involves the formation of new communities, of new parameters that define the “peculiarity” that hold people together.

Raibar Samudayik Radio (Raibar Community Radio) held a narrow-casting session in the village of Chillialgaon. A huge, inquisitive gathering of young and old gathered to witness this gang of radio communicators with their big stereo system, amplifiers and microphones and waited impatiently for the “show” to begin.

“What is this box that you are carrying”, inquired an old lady to a girl volunteer with suspicion. “This is a stereo. We have come to play back a program that we recorded with Shri Bajram Kukreti ji last year. Would you like to listen to it?” the volunteer replied bemused at the old woman’s curiosity. The old lady’s eyes dilated in disbelief. Bajram ji, a much respected, retired old school teacher of this village had recently passed away and she could not believe that the dead could speak again. Was this a magic show? She hunched on her knees and squatted near the “black box”, her eyes fixed for the magic to begin any time now!

Children and youth gathered shyly around the instruments, scared to touch the gadgets but brimming with excitement to touch them and see what would happen! The narrowcasting began and everyone, enraptured, heard the story and experiences of their beloved Bajram ji whom they had so recently lost to fate. The men bowed their head in reverence and the women heard it in awe!

After the program, the radio group decided to make another program with their listening audiences right then and there and thus out came the recorder and microphones. Since the women members usually are too shy and apprehensive to speak on public platforms, the group focused their attention on talking to some and making them comfortable with the gadgets, telling them how they work and what they can do, encouraging them to play with these technological devices themselves. This not only invited an attentive response but also put them at ease and soon some of them were singing their forest songs into the microphones and requesting the volunteers to play it back so that they could hear their voices and that of their friends.

A peel of laughter would ensue each time a familiar voice boomed from the speaker! They stared at the cassette player as if it was some kind of a magic box that had miraculously captured a part of them forever. They squealed with surprise and glee as they heard each other’s voices and seemed almost convinced that this was some form of ‘black magic’!

Some looked proud at having been able to provide useful content that made the others grow silent and listen with attention. At the end of the recording session, most of them who had been extremely inhibited to speak in the presence of their community elders and men seemed to have shed all their apprehensions and were truly enjoying this new experience which made them feel free and confident.

(Volunteer’s field notes)

RESEARCHING CONTENT FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING: WAYS OF DOING COMMUNITY RADIO

An important element of the support provided by UNESCO to the CR groups was the introduction of research practice into radio programming. Any knowledge sharing paradigm has to premise itself on the understanding of the existing information patterns in a community that it attempts to work with. The research ought to acknowledge and identify the inherent social and cultural knowledge gaps and obstructions. Gender discriminations, caste divides, the distinctions between rich and poor in a village society (as in the case of an urban scenario as well) impacts the way information is accessed and utilized.

The ethnographic action research, supported by UNESCO, helped the radio groups in rethinking their program strategy to make it more directed and focused in addressing the tacit needs of communities.

Reflection of a CR field researcher

“When I set out to do research into the kind of radio programming we ought to be doing in order to make for an effective community media platform, I had many questions in my head. I feel that we live in an age of extreme poverty and I do not mean it in the sense of a financial lack. There are various forms of poverty- people have stopped thinking about what they do, our lives are dictated through social stereotypes and somewhere we do not feel the need to reflect on our actions any more. I think that the most pervasive form of poverty that has gripped our hill society today is social and cultural in nature. It is for these reasons that I decided to work with the youth in my village, through radio. This research is a way of increasing the scope of our radio not just in terms of making more community based programs, but in exciting new thoughts and ideas in people’s minds.”
(Field Researcher’s Notes- Pradeep Community Radio, Kumaon)

Three radio groups undertook an information mapping exercise in 4 village communities in Garhwal and Kumaon (see Table 1).

Table 1: An information mapping exercise in 4 village communities

Site No.	Research Site	Researchers per Site
1	Jardhar village, Tehri Garhwal	1
2	Bangaon village, Tehri Garhwal	1
3	Chaani village, Kausani, Kumaon	1
4	Baijnath village, Garud, Kumaon	1

Through this exercise, the researchers were able to identify some problem areas in the existing information patterns and were also able to focus on the subsections within the community who have restricted access to certain knowledge forms.

Marginal Voices

During the research, I realized the significance of informal and formal networks of information that exist in the village. Some people read posters/hoardings, listen to radio or watch television, others sit in a tea shop and discuss newspaper reports while the women (those who are illiterate) may have other fluid channels for discussing topical/pertinent issues like conversations with each other while working in the fields or while going in groups to the forest to fetch wood etc. The real issue is that of “accessibility” in terms of the kind and nature information that is readily available to some in the community while it remains distant and unapproachable to the others.

In Chaani, I worked with the women to find out how they understand and use the information that they get through television, radio, informal exchanges etc. I found that these women were frustrated at being mere passive receivers of information. They had critical concerns and were seeking a platform to voice their needs. The mindless depletion of natural resources, deforestation and environmental degradation were issues that touched their lives intimately. The women are the ones, in our hills, who fetch fodder, work in the fields, take care of livestock and hence issues of biodiversity are close to their lived reality. Yet they are hesitant to voice their concerns publicly in a big forum. Their diffidence does not come from lack of knowledge, but because of the way their roles as women, in their family, village, community at large are perceived and framed. Some of the older women are "illiterate" and hence feel that the traditional/experiential knowledge that they possess is irrelevant in today's contexts. Through a simple process of community radio-recording their voices, making programs on small environmental initiatives undertaken by them in their village forests and narrowcasting it in a weekly village meeting, gave them much needed corroboration and legitimacy to speak and be heard by others in their community.

(Field Researcher's Notes- Pradeep Community Radio)

The research pushed the radio volunteers to extend the scope of their work by challenging their own thought processes and personal prejudices as well.

Critical Questioning

Through this research, I worked with the harijan (low caste) community in my own village, Jardhar. It was a personal journey for me in the sense that even though I have lived and grown up in this village, I never so much as gave a thought to this particular subsection in my community, even when I sought out to do community radio initially. I was very hesitant in the beginning in how to approach them- how could I, a high caste Rajput, work with these people? Even though caste discriminations are not as apparent as they used to be a decade ago, the inherent distinctions emerging from community practices, persist even today. But personal, intimate conversations and interviews with the group made be comfortable with my initial doubts and fuelled my curiosity to probe deeper to see where the roots of this discrimination lie today. I feel that economic poverty is one of the many reasons that account for the backwardness of the low caste hill community in our villages. Much of governmental intervention and aid is directed for the benefit of low caste communities and yet there are a host of issues that hamper their growth. Lack of education, limited accessibility and lack of transparency/accountability in government schemes, social perceptions and caste constructs of "how harijans are supposed to be"- all these are important pointers through which we must address caste issues in today's contexts. I feel that our radio could become a crucial tool to facilitate a dialogue between different subsections within the community. Our radio must provide a dynamic platform, representative of the diversity of voices that exist within our community. As a small beginning, Hevalvani (the radio group) must be able to throw up existing realities and evoke critical community discussions across a cross-section of people.

(Field Researcher's Notes- Hevalvani Community Radio- Garhwal)

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

It is interesting to note how so many new communities have emerged, infantile but nonetheless eager to evolve and grow. There is a community of radio activists, who come from different spheres of life, carry diverse and disparate experiences and are keen to exchange and barter their learnings for that of the others.

There is a subsection of the existing social structure that is able to find a voice through the community of radio activists and, for the first time maybe, is making an attempt at being heard. There are those who have sat up and are showing a willingness to not just articulate their own thoughts but also to listen to what a host of others have to say.

Social groups that have been considered as “outsiders” to the community sphere for a long time, NGOs, researchers, community media activists, now have an entry point to engage with and be a part of the collective experiences and processes. And in this network of ‘new communities’ a reservoir of hidden, lost, unpreserved knowledge forms is surfacing, a new language is being discovered that could be spoken and understood by everyone.

Endnote:

- ¹ The article is based on findings from research undertaken among community radio groups in a network of ICT initiatives with support from UNESCO. The author is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in the article and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organisation.

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