

Role Of Community Media In Civil Society: A Study Of Community Radio And Its History

Ms. Kamini Kumari¹, Prof. Dr. Manisha Sharma²

¹Research Scholar, Journalism & Mass Communication,
IGNTU.

²Journalism & Mass Communication, IGNTU.

ABSTRACT

Ever since humankind evolved and started interacting, there have been several mediums of communication and they all play a vital role in the growth and evolution of mankind. Over centuries, media has adapted, modified and upgraded from bards⁽¹⁾ going door-to-door to sing praises, to radio and newspaper, to 24/7 television and internet. Community media is more niche wherein local content, culture and diversity gets promoted. It is the medium of intercultural dialogue that helps spread information and raise awareness locally. The urban population might be bilingual or may speak both English and Hindi fluently, the rural population still doesn't understand either. A local body or platform is still needed for spreading awareness and disseminating information. For any civil society to flourish, it's important to promote programmes and activities aiming at social gain and benefit of the community. Community media helps keep diversity and pluralism alive, and can be extremely effective in the socio-economic growth of a country.

Keywords: Community, communication, evolution, intercultural dialogue, information, diversity, pluralism, access, platform, mainstream media, monopolisation, civil society.

Introduction

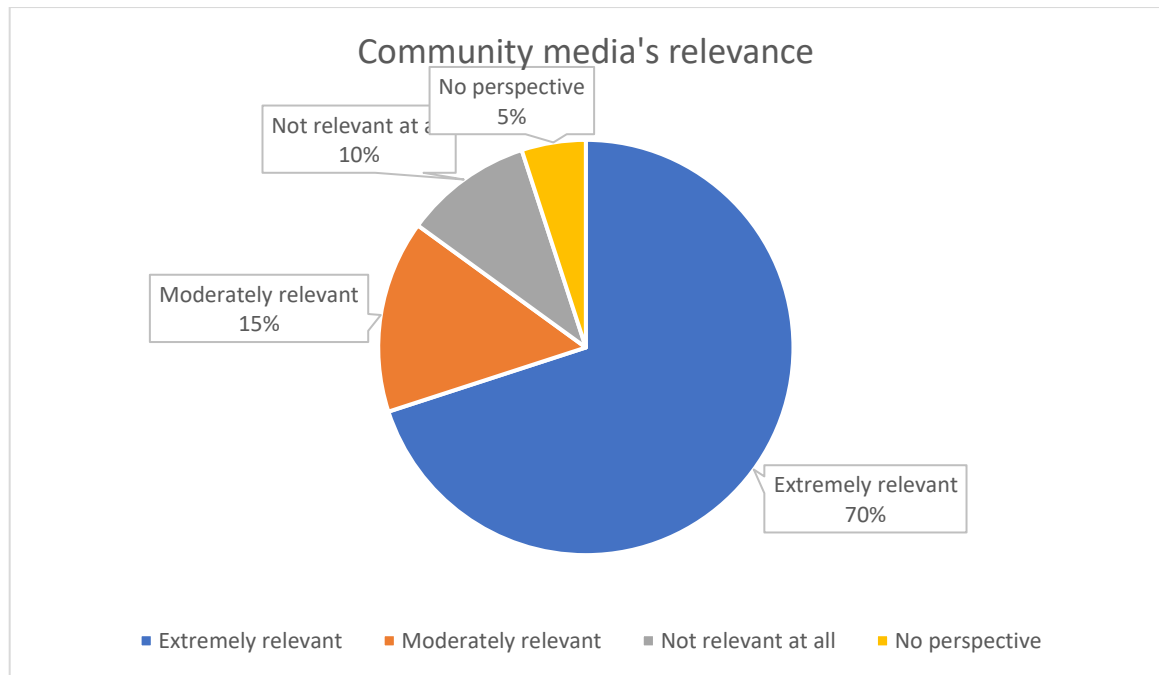
Media is a reflection of how we communicate in society. It refers to all means of communication – basically anything ranging from a letter carved in stone in the ancient era to a telephone call made to a friend in the present times, can be called media. When it comes to dispensing news, Indian media has been active since the late **18th century**⁽²⁾ wherein print

media started in **1780**, radio broadcast was initiated in **1927**, and the screening of Auguste and Louis Lumière moving pictures in Bombay initiated during the July of **1895**⁽³⁾. The Bengal Gazette was published in the country between 1780 and **1782**⁽⁴⁾. Over the next few decades, several newspapers made a mark on the Indian soil and played a vital role in redirecting public sentiment. From the 18th century to now, when electronic and digital media have taken over, another form of media rose to significance – Community Media.

Community media's presence in society

Community media is a more specific and niche category wherein local content, culture and diversity gets promoted⁽⁵⁾. It is the medium of intercultural dialogue that helps spread information and raise awareness in the local context. It takes the control of media from one particular group or company and puts it in the hands of everyone involved. It promotes and endorses information literacy, through active participation of those involved. Community media doesn't rely on a particular channel or paper to get information. It is free from any kind of censorship or control.

In order to establish its presence and relevance in society, 20 students studying in Delhi were asked to give their opinion. Out of them, 14 said that they found community media most relevant and that they would believe it over news channels and portals. It can be deduced that 70% of them feel that community media plays a major role in influencing one's opinion and disseminating the facts to a large audience.



Community media is independent from governments, corporate ventures, political parties and even religious outfits. The core strength of community media lies in the fact that it encourages voluntary participation. For any civil society to flourish, it's important to promote programmes and activities aiming at social gain and benefit of the community.

History of community media in India

Community media is not a recent phenomenon. It has been relevant since the primitive era. One can still find the cave paintings at Bhimbetka that dates to prehistoric era. One of the iconic paintings is of a group seemingly preparing for a fight. They are riding horses and elephants and are carrying weapons⁽⁷⁾. It's a perfect example of how communication worked even when human civilisation had just taken baby steps.

When it comes to India, various communities utilized the traditional media like paintings, theatre, songs, narrative forms, religious discourses and puppet shows for passing on messages⁽⁸⁾. These artforms have helped us connect with our ancestors and delve into their psyche as able communicators.

People in the ancient times communicated through sounds, gestures, word of mouth, paintings and other forms of traditional communication tools. And communities would adopt these means of communication to live their life and survive during those times. By this, the role and presence of community media is established in a concrete manner.

Moving back to present times, community media has taken a more focussed approach and caters to audiences who wish to hear and be heard. One of these forms is community radio.

Community Radio

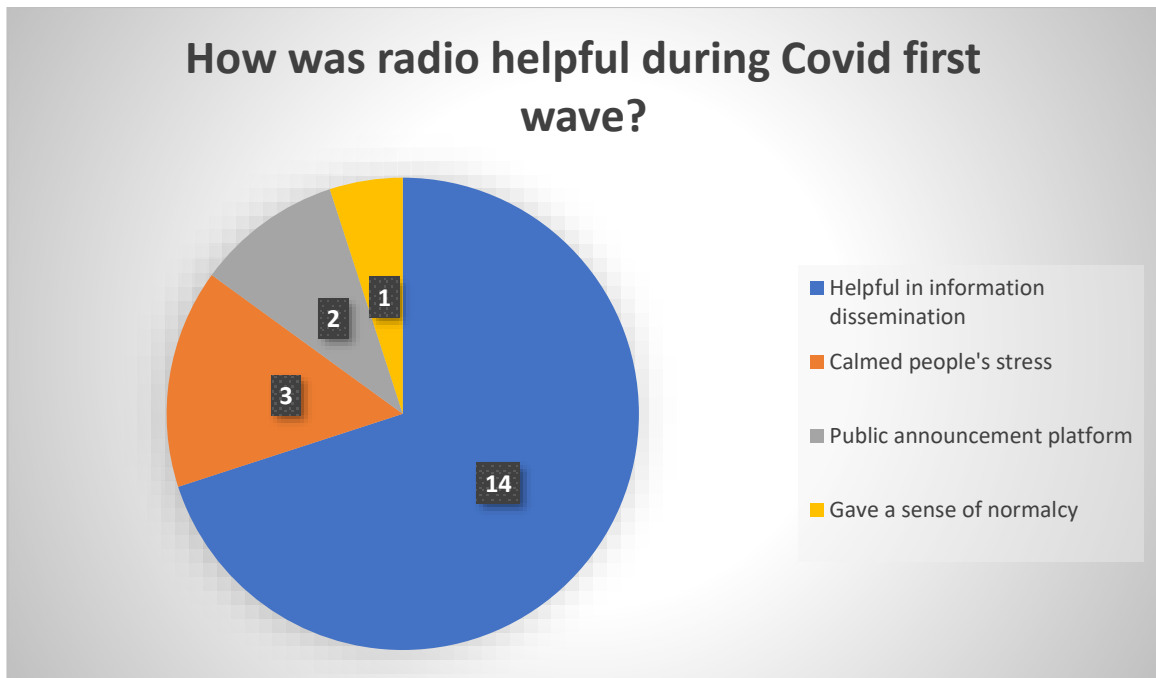
Radio is a popular medium of communication. Prior to the 1920s, the radio was used to contact ships out at sea⁽¹⁰⁾. It came in handy during World War I, and since then has been used to disseminate information to large groups. That period can be called the beginning of the usage of community radio.

According to an article in 'The Pioneer'⁽¹¹⁾, "the Community Radio Association of India (CRA), a recognized body of Community Radio Stations in India, undertook a survey during the Covid19 pandemic outbreak. Based upon the data received from 150 community radio stations, it was observed that the most important need of the vulnerable sections of the population was credible information about the pandemic in local languages and dialects and how they could protect themselves against the virus. Several radio stations were pivotal in arranging help, spreading information about hospital beds, oxygen cylinders and ICU wards⁽¹²⁾.

The Community Radio Facilitation Centre of the **Ministry of Information and Broadcasting** describes community radio as an effective tool to achieve plurality in media by ensuring participation of marginalised sections to address information poverty.

In many parts of India, radio is the primary source of news and entertainment. All India Radio, as the public service broadcaster, is the biggest in terms of radio coverage in the country.

When asked to a group of private firm employees about the popularity of radio and whether they listened to the programmes or not, a majority of them replied in the affirmative. The table breaks down the importance of radio during the first wave of Covid.



Out of the 20 people approached in Delhi with the question, 14 of them agreed that radio played an important role in information dissemination.

In the health sector, community radios address local health concerns while educating those living in remote areas on the prevention of diseases like HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria, encephalitis, among others.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has listed 251 operational Community Radio Stations in India⁽¹³⁾. Some of them include:

- Radio Mewat and Alfaz-e-Mewat in Haryana
- Radio Vikalp and Radio Jagriti in Jharkhand
- Radio Mattoli in Kerala
- Kissan Vani Sironj, Radio Mann and Vanya Radio Khalwa in Madhya Pradesh
- Radio VatsaGulm in Maharashtra
- Radio Dhimsa and Muskan in Odisha and
- Radio Awaz in Gujarat⁽¹⁴⁾.

Relevance of community media

Community media can play a huge role in the empowerment of civil society. It offers a new perspective and outlook towards a certain topic that might get overlooked by mainstream media. Community media enjoys local participation, bringing information even from the remotest areas. Language is another factor that helps community media score in the

popularity charts. A village in Bastar where locals speak languages like Halbi, Bhatari or Gondi, and don't even understand Hindi, let alone English⁽¹⁵⁾, it will be difficult for mainstream media to penetrate. Community media reaches to the local communities and talks to them in their language.

The urban population might have become bilingual or may speak both English and Hindi fluently, but the rural population still doesn't understand either. Take this survey for instance:

Share of English speakers in India in 2019

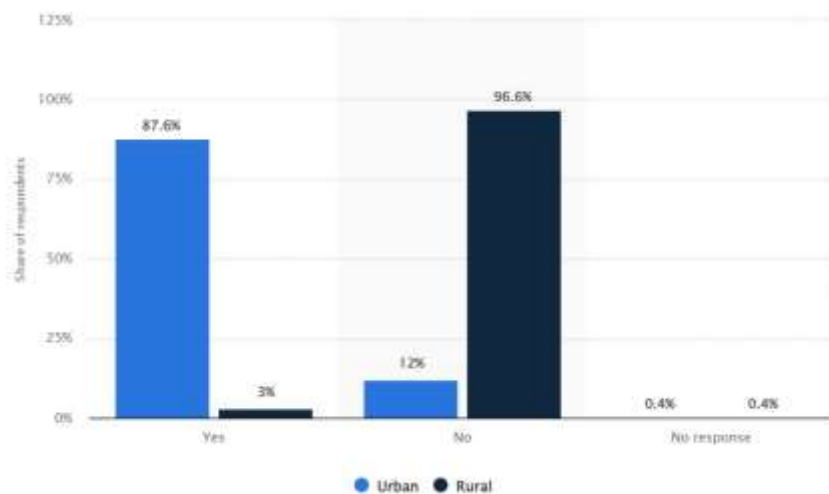


Image source: <https://www.statista.com/>

According to this survey done in 2019, rural population, when asked if they speak or understand English, 96.6 per cent respondents said that they don't know the language at all. The 2011 Census revealed that only 43.63% of Indians spoke Hindi and was their mother tongue. Evidently so, mainstream media can't have a far-reaching impact without the support of community media.

Review of literature

1. Kapil Kapoor, Avadhesh K. Singh • (2005) • Indian Knowledge System – Nature, Philosophy and Character • Indian Institute of Advanced Study • Volume 1

The power of knowledge has been recognised in the Indian civilization way back in time right from the Vedic period. The Indian knowledge system boasts of a large body of intellectual texts in the form of manuscripts and scriptures. These scriptures were meant to be reference points for generations ahead. Kapil Kapoor and Avadhesh K. Singh, in their book, have

rightly said that India's knowledge tradition is ancient and uninterrupted, from the Vedas (Upanishads) to Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi. The ancient method of imparting knowledge, Smriti, solely depended on one's memory. But our scholars ensured that knowledge was passed down generations as accurately as possible. The texts were analysed and re-arranged in various permutations and memorized by a number of scholars. The authors acknowledge that our ancient tradition has always given great value to knowledge.

2. K Howley • (2009) • Understanding Community Media • SAGE Publications • Vol 1

In the book, Howley has stated that the term "community media" encompasses a range of community-based activities intended to supplement, challenge, or change the operating principles, structures, financing, and cultural forms and practices associated with dominant media. This may include a several entities such as community radio, participatory video, publishing, and online communication. The author has mentioned that community media plays a decisive role in shaping and informing disparate efforts. Thus, it's an important factor that has played a role in shaping public views and sentiment. Community media is a multi-pronged platform with tools such as radio, television and other broadcasting means. In the author's words, community media assumes many forms, and takes on different meanings, depending on the "felt need" of the community and the resources. It has successfully highlighted the importance and relevance of community media for local populations during this global age.

3. Moitra, A., Kumar, A., & Seth, A. • (2018) • An analysis of community mobilization strategies of a voicebased community media platform in rural India • Information Technologies & International Development, 14, 116–133

The authors have identified community media as a pivotal tool and an indispensable part of civilisation. They have rightly stated that "community media platforms a contextual character that enables people to understand the messages more easily and act on them. Second, as marginalized groups along caste, class, and gender lines and representation on these platforms, these groups become empowered to raise their voices against local power structures. community media platforms promote good governance and accountability by facilitating multistakeholder dialogues. Fourth, these platforms help build cohesive communities by providing

community members with a forum in which to articulate shared cultural identities and discuss topics of mutual interest. While such pathways of bringing about developmental impact through community media have been demonstrated by many initiatives, research into the processes of driving adoption of community media platforms among rural and low-literate populations has received much less attention.

Conclusion

India is a diverse country, with several languages spoken. The dialect, culture tradition, customs – everything changes as we traverse the length and breadth of the country. What might work in north India, may not have the same impact in south India. Community media acts as a bridge between the gaps. It gives opportunity to the locals to make their own programmes or webcasts. Local coverage means a lot more content of interest for the local population. English or Hindi media is just a fraction of what the country represents in its entirety. Community media gives a platform to communicate, discuss, question, debate and disseminate knowledge. A civil society benefits a great deal from a medium like that.

The often-used phrase ‘lost in translation’ rings true when it comes to media. Geographical distances also play a role in that. It is quite possible that one section of media may not know anything about the local practices in the remote areas of each state. Community media brings the locals to a common platform. In a situation like the global pandemic Covid19, it was community media that reached tribal areas and made people aware of the health scare in their own language. Otherwise, in a country like India, it would have become difficult to control the situation.

Mainstream media caters to the fast-paced generation that doesn’t have the time or patience to sit back and read. They want everything on the tip of their fingers. This is evident with the rising popularity of web portals, Twitter and Facebook pages, where news is served in the form of short videos or reels. Youngsters consume news in the form of Twitter posts, or scroll through their Facebook feed to watch a small video or clip about a topic. What’s trending on Twitter quickly transforms into a raging topic. This has had both positive and negative impact. During the intense wave of Covid_19 in April-May in 2021, people spread information and asked for help through social media. Several famous personalities used their personal social media pages to disseminate information

regarding hospitals, beds, oxygen cylinders, ventilators and any other help. News channels also ran scrolls giving out as much relevant information as possible. The same goes for newspapers and radio channels. The flip side of the coin meant that there were truckloads of false news, hoax messages and doctored videos which were also circulating in the name of news.

Community media and media have an important role to play in terms of striking a balance between a lawless land and a civilised democracy. A civil society is not just a society with law-abiding citizens. It's a bunch of things that make for a society, including schools, colleges, cultural institutions, places of worship, clubs, hospitals and many more such things that are directly linked to the public. It's important that the balance remains for everything to function in tandem with the other. For our growth and development, it is important that the fourth pillar of democracy remains strong. To many, community media might seem to be a thing of the past, but its far-reaching presence is as much important in 2022 as it was several decades ago.

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