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Electronic Democracy: Between The Vision And Reality
- An Indian Perspective

By

Ammu Joseph
Seminar on
NEW COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES, WOMEN AND DEMOCRACY
Bangkok, 19-21 October 1995
organised by AMIC and Bangkok University

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY: BETWEEN THE VISION AND REALITY
An Indian Perspective

By
Ammu Joseph
Good afternoon. I would like to thank AMIC and Bangkok University for giving me the opportunity to be here today. I look forward to learning a great deal over the three days of the seminar.

I would also like to apologise in advance for possible shortcomings in my presentation. As I explained to Mr. Labrador on the telephone a fortnight ago, I have two excuses: first of all, I am a media professional and not an academic scholar; secondly, since I had only two weeks' notice and several prior commitments to honour in the interim, I have not been able to do as thorough a job of background research as I would have liked.

Nevertheless, I hope I will be able to provide some inputs for the discussions here by highlighting a few concerns arising from Indian experiences with new communications technologies vis-a-vis the practice of democracy over the recent past.

Since it is clear that everyone here has a background in the field -- in terms of practice or analysis or both -- I will steer clear of theory, with which I'm sure all of you are more familiar than I am, and confine myself to a description of the current situation in India with respect to the topic of this panel discussion, which is "Electronic Democracy: Between the Vision and Reality."
INTRODUCTION

In the context of the present debate on "electronic democracy," three parallel developments in India over the first half of this decade, I think, especially significant: the "liberalisation" of the economy, the "globalisation" and growing privatisation of the electronic media, and the long-delayed implementation of the goal of panchayat raj (local self-government) enshrined in the Constitution of India and its Directive Principles for State Policy.

It was in 1991 that the Indian government — under Prime Minister V. P. V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh — announced its New Economic Policy, which had as its avowed aim the rescue and reform of the nation's economy through a structural adjustment programme ostensibly designed to restore economic stability and promote accelerated economic growth. While the NEP was greeted with enthusiasm by the affluent minority of the Indian population (including a significant proportion of media practitioners), it also gave rise to serious concerns about the implications of the new economic regime for the poor majority — especially with regard to employment, food security and essential social services.

It was also in 1991 that India experienced what is often referred to as an invasion from the skies through television programmesamed into the country via satellite and made available to sections of the public through cable networks: close on the heels of CNN's telecasts of the Gulf War, watched mainly by the elite in the plush comfort of five-star hotels, came the Star TV network's multiple channels, devoted in the main to entertainment, with the BBC providing a lone alternative to the affluent intelligentsia.

Subsequently, of course, there has been a proliferation of indigenous private television channels -- national as well as regional -- offering mostly entertainment-oriented programmes in various Indian languages. Doordarshan, the government-owned and controlled, hitherto monopolistic, national television network, which had embarked on an increasingly successful commercialisation drive in the late 1970s and early 80s, responded to this unprecedented competition from inside and outside the country by stepping up its entertainment function — going to the extent of becasting MTV programmes — and offering more and more channels in multiple languages for different sections of the audience.

Meanwhile, in 1993, the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution was passed, making it mandatory for all states to hold elections for a three-tier panchayat raj (PR) system and thereby move to-
Towards fulfilling Mahatma Gandhi's dream of *gram swaraj* (village-level self-government). This long-awaited step towards decentralised governance through grassroots democratic institutions in rural areas was clearly a pre-requisite for the establishment of real democracy in India, especially in view of its size and diversity in terms of geography, history and, most importantly, the composition of its population vis-à-vis language, religion, caste or ethnic identity, economic circumstances, occupations, and so on.

The decentralised system of local self-governance that is currently being set up in the country — with some states having already held the necessary elections and others expected to follow suit over the next few months — incorporates affirmative action through reservations to ensure the political participation of hitherto marginalised sections of the population, including women (who are entitled to one third of all seats at all levels), scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes.

This, then, is the context within which the issue of "electronic democracy" in India today has to be examined. The question is whether and how new communications technologies — especially the electronic media — can and will contribute to the democratic process in India as we approach the new millennium.

While acknowledging the empowering potential of communication — enhanced by new technologies — I suggest that recent trends in the economy, society and media in India do not augur well for the promotion of real, meaningful democracy through new communications technologies, including the full range of electronic media.

**Hanging Priorities**

Let us look, for example, at television with which we in India are currently obsessed. I am sure that most of you are quite familiar with the history and changing priorities of television in India from 1959 onwards. But, just for the record, it was originally viewed as a "medium of education, rural uplift and community development." It was expected to help the country — in the words of Dr. Vikram Sarabhai — to "leapfrog from the state of economic backwardness and social disabilities in decades rather than centuries."

The continuing faith in the curative and rejuvenating potential of television was reflected in the following statement made at a 1973 seminar on the "Software Objectives of TV" organised by the All India Radio (which was then responsible for both broadcasting and telecasting): "Television must be utilised in the develop-
present process as an instrument of social change and national
mission, unhesitatingly upholding progressive values and involv-
ing the community in a free dialogue. Indian television has to
renounce the elitist approach and consumer value systems and evolve a
nationally national model."

However, this perspective soon gave way to political and commer-
cial expediencies. Television’s potential as a powerful tool to
be used for the spread of the ruling party’s political propaganda
was to be valued more greatly than its potential as a catalyst
for education, social change and democracy. With the advent of
cable technology, its utility as an effective medium through
which the course of electoral politics could be influenced in
favor of the ruling party became even more obvious. The massive
rapid expansion of television in India—said to be unparallel-
ed anywhere in the ‘Third World’—through huge investments
in hardware was, therefore, inevitable.

With its expanding reach (thanks to the growing number of trans-
smitters and their networking via satellite), the introduction of
our and the launch of a "national programme"—which together
vided a single massive audience that constituted a captive
market of an unprecedented size—the commercial potential of
vision became clear in the early 1980s. And there has been
looking back.

Maximisation of revenue is the primary preoccupation of those
in charge of the network and extraction of maximum political
age is the prime concern of those in charge of the govern-
ment, which owns and runs the network, there is clearly little
room for altruistic programming for the good of the nation, as
suggested during the early days of television in India.

As, in fact, quite remarkable how a technology (a hybrid
restrial-cum-satellite system), designed and intended as a
aid for the development of the rural poor, has been distorted
appropriated to provide entertainment and convey political
essages to the vocal urban consumer.

Skewed ratio of privately owned television sets (estimated at
and 28 million in 1993) to community sets (a mere 50,000)
icates the low priority accorded to providing wider access to
vision. It is estimated that despite all the investment and
ension, only about 20-25 per cent of India’s population has
ual access to television. This is all the more reprehensible
idering that Doordarshan is still a predominantly public
work, since its considerable revenue from advertising does not
set the massive amount of public funds that has gone into
enting its infrastructure.
ow does all this relate to the three recent developments outlined earlier? In her recent tract, "The Right to Communicate as a Human Right," Irene Leon of ALAI (Agencia Latinoamericana de Información, a South American communications initiative) extends the accepted dictum that information is power and states, "Without participation there is no democracy, and without information there is no participation." For participation to be effective and to become a real force in the public arena, she continues, social actors have to be not only properly informed but also able to freely express their points of view through the media and communications systems.

Ever since the political and commercial dividends of television gained precedence over its potential as an agent of social change and participatory democracy and development, the information content of television in India has steadily been eroded. With growing commercialisation, privatisation and globalisation, television has increasingly become identified with entertainment, with programmes designed primarily to cater to the tastes of the urban middle and upper classes. The dilution of the educational content of television naturally reinforces the existing disparities in conventional educational facilities which, in turn, hinder human development by accentuating inequalities in information levels and thereby help perpetuate exploitative processes.

Considering the direction in which the national television network has been moving over the past few years, and in the context of India's present, halting steps towards decentralised governance through PR institutions, it would clearly make sense to move towards decentralised broadcasting and community television. As would certainly help strengthen the belated and somewhat reluctant implementation of the local self-government ideal. The decentralisation of broadcasting could result in handing over the power and privilege of broadcasting to those who are at the top of the local hierarchies, citizens would be in a better position to participate in and influence community television than they would the present highly centralised broadcasting establishment.

The fact that there has been no attempt to promote local or community television through the provision of simple programme operating and playback facilities on a local transmitter -- which could be done at a reasonable cost -- suggests that there is little remaining interest in using television as a catalyst for education, social progress or participatory democracy, or in increasing access to it among the poor, especially in rural areas.
The present trend towards commercialisation and privatisation in the media is only likely to make the prospect of community television, or even public service television, ever more distant. It can also be expected to exacerbate the disparities between the urban elites — who determine the content of television as media professionals as well as consumers — and the rural poor. With competing networks and channels marketing programmes as commodities and therefore basing programming decisions almost entirely on commercial considerations, the current consumerist orientation of television, which leaves the majority of the Indian population out in the cold, is likely to be reinforced.

The latter are thus deprived of both access to television and the use of the medium for their own benefit. Further, those among them who are exposed to television programmes are not only saddled with irrelevant information that is alien and incomprehensible in their milieu but they are also fed with images that promote a consumerist lifestyle and create aspirations which cannot but result in frustration and discontent, given their economic and social realities. As a result, television in India today is not only not an agent of empowerment, it actually contributes towards the further marginalisation and disempowerment of the vast majority of the country’s citizenry.

HALF-HEARTED COMMITMENT

Meanwhile, the use of television and satellite technology for social development, especially in rural areas, seems doomed to forever remain frozen at the experimental stage. I am sure most of you are familiar with the landmark Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) that took place in India in 1975-76 and has been described as "probably the largest experiment conducted on human communication." This pilot project for the Indian National Satellite System (INSAT) was conceived as an experiment in the use of sophisticated space technology to tackle the problems of and gear up the pace of development in some of the poorest parts of rural India — SITE covered nearly 24,000 villages spread over six states. One researcher associated with the project described the experience thus: "For a whole year, rural India saw the light of day."

The official decision not to continue with this process after the year-long pilot project came to an end was a major blow to the development of rural television. Although INSAT is now a reality, it is clearly not being used in the way envisaged in the SITE project. Although India has gained considerable experience in producing educational and instructional material for the television medium over the years, most experts agree that the current
use of broadcast media for education is lopsided and that its benefits, if any, accrue mainly to those within the formal school and university systems, from which vast sections of the population are excluded on account of economic and social circumstances.

However, the now 20-year-old experiment in the use of communication via satellite to promote education and rural development continues under the auspices of the Development and Educational Communication Unit (DECU) of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). There are some signs that their efforts over the years may not have been entirely in vain. In February 1995, one transponder on one of India's INSAT satellites was dedicated to rural development communication. In addition, it has been announced that an exclusive satellite for rural development communication — to be named Gramsat — will be launched in 1997-98. However, going from past experience, it may be premature to celebrate this long-awaited dawn of rural broadcasting.

I was involved in documenting a recent and fairly exciting phase in this ongoing experiment to foster rural development through the use of modern communications technology. Some insights gained from that experience may be useful for the present debate.

In February 1995, a collaboration between DECU-ISRO and the Government of Karnataka resulted in a ten-day experiment in the use of satellite-based interactive communication for distance education. Although the stated aim of the experiment was to train "development functionaries," such as auxiliary nurse-midwives, a four-day segment was devoted to the "training" of women elected to gram panchayats (the first, village-level tier of the PR system) in Karnataka.

Thanks to the special interest of the person then in charge of the state government's Department of Women and Child Development and the consequent involvement of an independent film-maker and non-governmental organisations in the conceptualisation and production of the programme, this segment of the experiment made innovative use of modern communications technology to promote the empowerment of elected women. Over 600 women members of gram panchayats (GPs) in 19 districts of Karnataka participated enthusiastically in this exciting and largely successful experiment.

The main strengths of the programme came from the fact that it avoided the customary top-down, formal, instructional training mode and strove instead for an informal, participatory approach that would encourage women to think through and talk about various issues of relevance to their lives as women and as elected representatives. Also, while the programme conveyed necessary
formation about the structure and functioning of the PR system, as well as the rights and responsibilities of members, it paid special attention to issues relating to women’s status and political participation and to the concept and practice of local self-governance.

The software was a combination of pre-recorded footage (which included interviews with GP women as well as songs and plays to convey information and ideas) and live interaction between women participants in the districts and a studio-based panel in Bangalore. To enhance its effectiveness, the televised programme was integrated into a face-to-face training programme at the district level, where participants could interact and dialogue with resource persons in an informal atmosphere.

The wide reach of the technology, its capacity to enable participation (through its one-way video, two-way audio teleconferencing facility) and its consequent implications for large-scale, good quality distance education make it especially exciting in the context of PR because of the large number of people, including men, entering the system in different parts of the country and our need for awareness and information in order to effectively fulfill their role as elected representatives of the people of our rural communities.

Nevertheless, despite the success of the experiment, and the fact that hardware, software and technical know-how are now available within the state, there seems to be little official interest in scaling the programme so that many more—if not all—of the 35,344 female elected representatives to GPs in Karnataka can benefit from the substantial investments made to conduct the experiment. This is despite the fact that virtually all the men who took part in the experiment expressed their strong view that not only all GP women but their entire communities should be exposed to the programme. In fact, many of them went so far as to say it ought to be telecast on Doordarshan so that everyone, as a whole has a better understanding of PR institutions, especially, women’s role and rights within them.

With the lack of official interest in extending the programme to cover more elected women, the Department is going ahead with the creation of 11 video modules—currently being made by the same film-maker—for use in Phase II of its ongoing face-to-face training for GP women. What the government is going to do with the 19 dish antennae and televisions acquired for the experiment and, presumably, still in place at the district training centres is anybody’s guess.

It is obvious questions that arise from this experience relate to
political commitment to the use of new communications technologies to promote democracy. Are lip-service and seemingly endless experiments indications of commitment? What are we to make of the fact that while Doordarshan blithely spawns channel after channel (the latest count is 19) to cater to the entertainment and enrichment needs of the urban middle and upper classes, a 20-year-old process — that began with SITE — which has demonstrated the need for and feasibility of effectively using modern communications technologies for the benefit of the rural poor remains in a perpetual state of experimentation?

WHO RULES THE AIRWAVES?

Another all-important question in the context of "electronic democracy" is: who controls the airwaves? A landmark judgement by the Supreme Court of India in February 1995 has laid down some guidelines on this issue, which may be relevant here. Among the important aspects of the judgement are the following:

1. It recognised the fundamental right of a citizen to have access to telecast an event.
2. It declared airwaves to be public property, but said that since they are not in abundance the access to them needs to be regulated to ensure fair distribution in the public interest.
3. It said that in a democratic society the airwaves should be free from state monopoly and control.
4. It called for a law to regulate the use of airwaves. The setting up of an independent body, consisting of representatives of all interests in society, was suggested to regulate access to the "skies."
5. Contrary to the general impression, the question of whether private organisations can have access to airwaves for commercial purposes was not before the court. However, the court said that the airwaves should be used in such a way that public interest in a pluralistic society is served.
6. The hurdle in the way of access to uplinking facilities was cleared to the extent that the government can no longer monopolise them, but it does not follow that anyone can demand them as a matter of right. It will be left to the independent broadcasting authority, proposed by the court, to decide each case on merit — the bottom line being the extent to which the grant of uplinking facilities would serve the public interest.

Pointing out that state control means government control, which in turn means control by the political party in power, the court said the "broadcasting media should be under the control of the public, as distinct from the government." The judges said that the authority to run broadcasting "should be operated by a public
statutory corporation, or corporations, as the case may be, whose constitution and composition must be such as to ensure its/their impartiality in political, economic and social matters and on all other public issues.

In the context of "electronic democracy," there is still the question of who will get to represent the public -- of a country of India's size and diversity -- and how far their definition of the public interest will match the needs and aspirations of the majority of the population. The past record of India's ruling elite -- inside and outside of government -- has not been exemplary in this regard. Besides, there is the unresolved question of who can afford -- socially, economically and politically -- to claim their right of access to the airwaves.

In any case, the judgement applies only to the question of who can have access to broadcasting from within India -- not to what is beamed into the country from outside. The question of who controls the airwaves internationally is fairly clear: in 1992 the sales revenues of the top 20 media companies -- all located in the United States, Japan and Western Europe -- amounted to US $ 102 billion -- that is, $ 20 billion more than the combined GNP of the 45 least developed countries. The recently announced US $ 19 billion merger deal between Walt Disney Corporation and the Capital Cities/ABC network is equivalent to the extra amount that UNICEF estimates would be needed to meet worldwide needs in basic health, nutrition and primary education.

The implications of the "globalisation" -- or, more accurately, Northernisation -- of the media for the economies, societies and cultures of Southern countries are extremely serious but perhaps beyond the scope of this particular presentation (though I hope we will be able to discuss them during the course of the seminar, because recent debates on women and the media -- whether at Toronto or Beijing -- do not seem to have paid adequate attention to the real meaning of the much touted term "globalisation").

THE DOWN-SIDE OF LIBERALISATION

To get back to the situation within India, so far, the proliferation and increased use of new communications technologies in the country has not in any way altered the existing pattern of access to the media and/or information in favour of the majority of the population. The electronic media -- ranging from satellite television to E-Mail and Internet -- are still accessible only to the already privileged classes and cater almost exclusively to their information and entertainment needs and desires. The information gap between the haves and the have-nots is unlikely
to narrow in the near future — in fact, I believe, it is in real
danger of widening given current trends in the economy, society
and the media.

Radio still has a much wider and deeper reach than television in
India, thanks to its relative low cost and more decentralised
network. In addition, despite government control over its news­
casts, it has historically played a more responsible role than TV
in terms of catering to the information and education needs of a
more representative spectrum of the population in the rest of its
programming. But even that role is currently under threat, with
the advent of FM Radio, which is largely in the hands of private
interests. If Akashwani follows Doordarshan’s example in re­
sponding to competition from its private rivals, radio too may
soon become irrelevant to the majority of the population.

The question of who controls the media and the airwaves in prac­
tical terms is important in the context of “electronic democracy”
because we have seen, time and again over the recent past, how
the proliferation and privatisation of indigenous media produc­
tion and distribution networks -- not to mention the “globalisa­
tion” of the media -- do not necessarily mean that the public
interest is always served.

One example that immediately comes to mind in this context is the
use of audio and video tapes, cable networks and even E-mail for
political propaganda, including messages intended to generate
communal tension and hatred, if not violence. Another is the
media’s handling of the caste issue during the incendiary pro­
tests against the decision of the Janata Dal government under
former Prime Minister V.P. Singh a few years ago to implement the
Mandal Commission’s recommendations regarding reservations for
backward classes in certain categories of government jobs —
which revealed quite clearly the interests represented by large
sections of what is considered the independent media.

CONCLUSION

I know I have emphasised certain negative aspects of the
situation with regard to new communications technologies vis a
vis democracy in India. This is not because I am not aware of
the inherent potential of these technologies to serve the public
interest and promote democracy. I am, in fact, conscious of the
fact that they have been used and are increasingly being used as
tools of empowerment and democratisation by a number of citizens’
groups, including women’s groups. I have chosen to paint a
somewhat depressing picture because I think it is necessary to
confront reality before we can think of effective ways of chang­
ing reality to match our vision.

I am sure nobody here needs to be reminded of the fact that the readiness of a society to use a technology for equitable social development is far more crucial than the "possibilities" of the technology itself. As Chris Duke observed in a 1992 UNESCO publication on the Impact of Modern Communication Technology: "... technology per se appears to be a not very important factor, and far from being a determinant, compared with political will and social purpose."

What I hope to communicate is my conviction that if we want to harness new communications technologies and use them to improve the situation of women as well as to promote the concept and practice of democracy in our countries, we must simultaneously work to create the necessary political, economic, social and cultural climate that will enable the benign use of these technologies for the public good.

Thank you.

END

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Ammu Joseph is a freelance journalist, media analyst and consultant based in Bangalore, India, who has co-edited with fellow journalist Kalpana Sharma a book entitled "Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues" (Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1994), which examines the coverage of women's issues in a cross-section of the Indian press and "women's programming" on Indian television.