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Community Radio In Urban and Rural Settings

by

Alma A Rivera
CONFERENCE ON COMMUNICATION, TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT: ALTERNATIVES FOR ASIA
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PAPER

on

COMMUNITY RADIO IN URBAN AND RURAL SETTINGS
(Parallel Session, 1400-1530 Hrs, 26 June 1993)

by:

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COMMUNITY RADIO IN URBAN AND RURAL SETTINGS
By Alma A. Rivera

On the definitions and purpose of Community Radio:

Community radio simply means broadcasting within a limited socio-geographical area for people of similar background, characteristics and aspirations. It is the systematic use of radio in disseminating relevant and specific messages to specific target audience with considerations on the demographical factors of the area.

I would also say that it is manned by people who are dedicated to their work, especially in reaching out to the people with that desire of helping and doing something for the development of the community.

The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters or AMARC defines community radio as a medium in which the population is able to participate in both the management of the radio station and in the production of programmes by non-professional broadcasters. This type of radio does not aim to make profit. Due to its community service character, it is dedicated to local, cultural, social and economic development.

AMARC further describes Community radio to be participatory in the sense that local people can determine its orientation and administration. This type of experience in community radio exists around the world. Communities have set up radio stations of different types and models attached and in consonance with their culture. All these radios aim at the same goal: that is, development through participation. That is why the target community must be encouraged to participate in the pre-planning, production, feedback and evaluation of the whole set-up of the station.

Also, in one of the meetings of AMARC in Dublin, in August 1990, there was a declaration that community radio implies a democratic dimension and that it should be accessible. It is not the expression of political power but rather the expression or voice of the population. It serves as a third voice between state Radio and private commercial radio. It is an avenue of participation in communication, controlled democratically by the population it serves. Its mission is essentially one of community development and service.

The Concept and Philosophy of Community Radio:

The concept of community radio differs from the conventional broadcasting systems in three basic respects... one, the ability of the audience to come close to the system of communication, receive relevant communication materials of their choice and also to provide feedback; second, the ability of the audience to be actively involved in the production and management of communication system and, third, the ability to address the actual communication needs of the community is much fruitful than in a top down national broadcasting system. In this respect, radio emphasizes on treating the community as a development unit rather than aiming at vague national development.
Community radio must be guided by its responsibility to serve the people's interests and aspirations. That is to say: people must be reached where they are, at their present stage of socio-cultural and educational development, with their levels of interest and understanding. There should always be that conscious effort to help them attain their articulated needs. The intention is to promote human development through the airing of programmes designed to help people reach out to each other, air their problems and seek solutions to these problems. Community radio helps people acquire and integrate knowledge that they can use to make their decisions. It requires active people involvement in the process of information generation, processing, dissemination, utilization and evaluation. This is based on the assumption that people are not only recipients of development efforts but are the precursors of development as well.

AIBD's Role in the Promotion of Community Radio in the Asia-Pacific Region:

We at the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development recognize this need for the establishment and promotion of community radio...that is why we endeavor to organize and conduct seminars and workshops to further introduce and improve the know-how and understanding of broadcasters and broadcast officials as to what a community radio is and should be. In the past four years, we have continuously organized workshops on Community broadcasting, with emphasis on community radio, inviting Experts and Resource persons with personal experience in managing and running Community radio or community-based radio stations.

In an AIBD regional workshop on Community Broadcasting, held in Penang, Malaysia in 1990, several prototypes of community radios were designed, suitable to Asia-Pacific countries. In that workshop, 15 countries were represented. Consequently, two more workshops on community broadcasting were conducted by the Institute...the workshop held last year was in Papua New Guinea, meant for the south Pacific countries and the latest one, held in February this year in Sri Lanka was for the South Asian region. Participants in these workshops, who were all senior radio officers and decision makers worked out some proposals and recommendations on the how's and what's of community radio. They were unanimous in saying that active involvement of local population or those living within the community in the use of radio to facilitate community development is actually people empowerment...and here lies the success of community radio. With that in mind, AIBD hopes to continue in the promotion of community radio.

Community Radio in Urban and Rural Settings:

In 1988 Balit, in his publication on Re-thinking Development Support Communication wrote, "...no development strategy is complete unless communication policies and activities are incorporated into the diagnosis of needs and into the design and implementation of priorities for a development action." Community radio experiences in Sri Lanka and in the Philippines, and to some extent other government-owned community-based radio stations in other parts of Asia have proven the effectiveness of community type of broadcasting. The approach of community radio involving the intended beneficiaries for their own development has made the stations partners for development of the targeted community.
One of the characteristics of community radio is that it should have a well-defined purpose. In Sri Lanka, the community radio of Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, SLBC has been accepted by the rural folks of Mahaweli as partner of development for their community. The Mahaweli Community Radio was started in 1981. The concept was put to test in that year by Mr. Knud Ebberson, a Dane from DANIDA and it was sponsored by UNESCO. Consequently, the project was jointly funded by DANIDA, Unesco, UNDP and the European community. It was aired to help about a million people under the Mahaweli multi-purpose scheme.

Community radios in the Mahaweli Development Area has contributed to the achievement of development projects economically, socially and culturally. The system started as an extension of regional broadcast but later developed into full-fledged community radios. At present there are five radio stations within the Mahaweli Development Authority.

A few years ago, the Australian Air Force, RAAF, when stationed at Butterworth, Penang started their own community radio to cater for Australian Air Force's families living within a limited geographical area. The radio acted as the link between RAAF and its personnel as well as a communication system between families of RAAF. It featured popular music and songs, messages and also family news.

The station was managed by RAAF personnel and their families and was on the air for a few hours a day. The station knew what it wanted, how to achieve its objectives and was a fine example of an effective urban community radio station.

Another characteristic of a community radio is that it is audience-oriented. The audience's interests and aspirations are the focus of the station. People listen to radio with a sense of purpose—they know that they are the subject of the programmes that they are listening to.

In the rural area, this approach is most effective in attracting the listeners. In Malaysia, development agencies such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry for Rural Development and also the Ministry of health work very closely with Radio TV Malaysia or RTM to plan campaigns for agriculture extension programmes, opening of new land scheme and also health promotions. Since there are no community radio stations in Malaysia, the regional/local stations numbering to 14 stations tailored their development-type of programmes to the needs of their listeners in the rural areas.

Survey Research Malaysia, SRM in their 1992 Radio Diary Survey noted the increase of listenership as compared to their findings in 1991. The nett weekly radio listeners for 1992 is about 8.3 million or an increase of 57% for national Networks, meaning, Radio 1,2,4, 5 and 6 and the nett weekly radio listenership for 11 regional/local stations in Peninsular Malaysia, or excluding Sabah and Sarawak, is about 4 million, an increase of 43%, as compared to 1991.
According to SRM Radio Survey 1992, Radio Ibu Kota of RTM (RMIM-Metropolitan Radio), a station for Kuala Lumpur, Klang Valley in 1991 has listeners around 540-thousand and in 1992 increased to 700-thousand or about 30%. Again, though not in line to the characteristics of community-type of broadcasting, it has served the Klang valley very well, especially in the morning and evening - providing traffic situation reports for motorists. Working hand-in-hand with the Police Department, this station even provides traffic reports as monitored through helicopter-based sightings. Since some roads in Kuala Lumpur are prone to floodings during heavy rains, RMIM is widely patronized by the residents of Klang Valley to get information on which streets they could pass as well as find out the traffic situation.

RMIM also provides useful informations, in English, for tourists arriving in Kuala Lumpur. As it is, 75% of its broadcast are audience-oriented and audience participation are encouraged through phone-in shows.

In Thailand, the Extension Department of the Ministry of Agriculture has its own radio network for the farmers. Though it is not similar to community radio geographically, the target audience has been defined and the services provided has greatly helped the farmers to better their livelihood economically and socially. One of the big achievements of this station was turning the hilly tribes in the North of Thailand, the Meos, from cultivating poppies to farms of apples, peas, oranges and grapes.

Another community-type radio station is the one-kilowatt station of the University of Chiangmai, run by staff and students of the university. It airs local situationers, news bulletins of local interests and if need be, could hook-up with National Radio.

In Bhutan, they have what they call a five-year plan, ending in 1997. One of the main thrusts of this plan will be expanding radio broadcast services, especially on the FM band, to other parts of the Kingdom. This is to be able to reach out to more rural population of the country.

China has over 2,500 country-run and more than 50-thousand township run rediffusion stations, aside from the more than 450 radio stations mainly scattered in the cities. These stations offer special programmes for farmers and the rural population.

In India, the government-owned All India Radio has set-up its local radio stations or “People’s Stations.” It means the stations were set-up within the targeted audience, and all planning and programming efforts at production and presentation of programmes are for a specified audience.
In the Philippines, there are many established community radio stations as well as community-based government and privately owned commercial stations.

DZJO, owned and operated by the Bayanihan Broadcasting Corporation is a fine example of community radio. Established in 1968, it is located in Infanta, Quezon, south of Luzon. To give you a clearer idea about this community radio, Infanta is about six hours of back-breaking bus ride from Manila. The area has no big commercial establishment and the main livelihood are agriculture, forestry and fishing. I haven’t been to Infanta, Quezon myself but I have gone to some nearby towns and I could say, Infanta and the underlying towns around it, due to their geographical location need developmental efforts to be comparable to some other towns or urban areas in the country. This radio has become part and parcel of the rural people’s socio-economic day-to-day life, providing practical and attainable advices and even act as platform and communication link for cultural interactions. It applies rural development communications in its programme content, strategy and techniques. It follows a personalistic approach towards its listeners to create a close bond of friendship.

Another example of Community Radio in the Philippines is the one located in Los Banos, Laguna, with the Call sign DZLB. This is the educational broadcasting station of the University of the Philippines' branch in Los Banos. As it is located just south of Metro Manila, or only about an hour drive from Metro Manila, DZLB listeners are considered urban but has its own share of regular listeners. Its programming are categorized as non-formal anri informal education.

The Philippine Broadcasting Service, PBS, has its own network of provincial stations, independent of the national broadcast in Metro Manila. Somehow, the provincial stations of the government fill-in the service-oriented concept of public broadcasting with the welfare of the community as the primary purpose of going on the air. PBS has established stations in the so-called non-commercial areas of the archipelago. Hence, PBS has stations in the southernmost part of the country, Jolo, Sulu, in a fishing village in Leyte and in the midst of non-Christian minorities in Kalinga-apayao in Luzon.

Audience-participation is another characteristic of community radio. In an urban setting, RMIC in Kuala Lumpur, in their phone-in shows encourage people, ranging from the man-on-the-street to the city Mayor, professionals as well as housewives to call in the station. In this sense, people feel that they play an important part of the radio broadcast, and a sense of belonging, of purpose, of importance and of achievement. Feed-backs and suggestions from the audience do help the planners, administrators and also development agencies to achieve their targeted planning.
In a rural setting, again, citing the Mahaweli experience, audience participation in radio broadcasts has helped solve many domestic problems. Audience participation in community radio in Sri Lanka means the rural people fully participate in the production process of the radio programmes. The people of the community share their experiences with the development authorities. Since the voices on the air are voices and views of "their own people", listeners were more receptive to what is given them. It is a matter of listening from friends and neighbors, and not being "talked-down-to".

Community radio has its own monitoring, evaluation and research systems. Before broadcast begins, research would tell the audience composition, needs and the objectives of the various agencies involved. It would have a thorough study on the demography of the area. Broadcast would be monitored and evaluated to gauge its achievement, impact and result. Due to the closeness of the station to the community it serves, constant monitoring and evaluation is done easily.

Broadcast and Narrowcast

The technology of the 20th century is undergoing an intensive acceleration; a condition so acute it is almost anarchy. On the one hand, technology is extending and multiplying the applications and permutations of mass media, and on the other, technology's sheer speed of development is making the by-products and off-shoots of mass media almost obsolete overnight.

Technology has advanced at such a pace that communication skills have been enhanced and information has acquired a rapidity which is astounding. The proximity is no longer a mere global village but virtually a family unit. Such is the nearness that technology has brought in its wake. Technological revolutions have brought us satellites, laser beam, fiber optics, micro-chips, telex, fax, digital equipment, hard and softwares and other technological innovations.

Radio and its revolutionary impact on the perception of sound, has inspired magnetic audio tape, and within a single generation the sub-medium of the popular 1/4 inch spool tape is being replaced by cassette tape. Now even the magnetic tape and in some areas, the cassette tape is considered out-dated with the presence of the compact disc. Radio has also created the minority interest-medium of FM stereo broadcasting, and the small transistor radio with this transmission has also upset the listening habits of people all over the world.

Through the different types of content, the mass media have shown the capability of quite specific, individual characteristics. We are moving towards a whole conglomeration of minority media, and minority or special interest groups in place of the faceless, nameless masses.
Everywhere, people around the world are calling for greater participation in communication. Radio, the most widely available medium can allow this participation. Through radio, the right to communicate is expressed on an immediate and local level. Radio's simple and inexpensive technology makes it accessible to the whole population. Community radio, an alternative to state and commercial radio, has proven itself to be an efficient educational medium with the ability to make a valuable contribution to the protection and development of local cultures. Community radio understands the medium as it operates in different situations and contexts as could be found in Latin America, Africa, the United States, Europe and Asia. Community radio is tolerant of different cultures, as well as the financial, social and political realities. In short, community radio, due to its characteristics, understands the meaning of community participation and is committed to the democratization of communications.

Hidden Problems of Community Radio in Asia

The majority of Asian broadcasting systems were originally established as a means of propagating government thinking, and were designed just to inform the masses. In short, it was one-way traffic. They were not designed to provide feedback to the radio stations, nor to serve as a means for people to articulate their aspirations or even their frustrations. The structure of these broadcasting systems is one of a highly centralized management within a broadcasting system that is a huge government monopoly. This condition has spawned certain hidden factors that tend to negatively influence the growth and development, for the matter, the existence of community broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific. I can cite at least four factors on why the increase or growth of community broadcasting, specifically, community radio is stunted:

1. Managers/owners of national broadcasting systems in Asia and perhaps elsewhere, perceive that if community radio stations are allowed to proliferate, the national network might lose administrative and financial control of the broadcasting systems in their countries. This fear may not be completely unfounded because community radio stations are likely to press for operational autonomy from the national Network. Adding to this is the fear of national broadcasting networks that community radio spells competition as far as funding is concerned as it would take a part of the budget pie.

2. Fear of political repercussions. In the area of politics, the proliferation of community radio stations, especially in the countryside has given some local politician the belief that, if they control these stations, they might become more powerful politically - which is not far from the truth. National political leaders may be concerned that if this happens, they will lose control over local politics, and there could be political warlordism.
3. It has always been pointed out that community radio stations are security risks. It is presumed that anti-government forces might just take over the station and use it to promote anti-government propaganda. This fear might be more perceived than real. A community radio station, which is actively run by the people themselves will be amply protected by them...as the station belongs to them. On the other hand an opposite scenario could be possible, especially if the community is not in agreement with the national leadership on national policies about development programmes for their particular community. Under this situation, the community radio station could conceivably be in danger from being taken over or shut down by government forces, not anti-government forces.

4. Finally, community radio empowers people. Having access to a communication channel like radio, people can become more vocal and critical of government policies that they think are not justified. In Asia, as elsewhere, national leaders do not honestly welcome critical voices from hot-shot small community stations as this breaks the myth of government power and authority.

Conclusion

There is always a misconception regarding the definitions, roles and functions of community-type of broadcasting. As such, a local radio system with unlimited coverage area, undefined target audiences, non-systematic programme planning and with a non-monitoring and evaluation mechanism - has been accepted as community radio. In more affluent environments, the local radio operates on a commercial basis and wishes to be accepted as community radio. The concept of community radio in fact is not new to the broadcasting scene. The only reason why this system is less popular in Asia is due to the reasons given earlier and the misconception from the would-be organizers.

At the moment, the system of community broadcasting, with radio as the medium differ from one country to another due to socio-economic, political and traditional-cultural reasons. Financial constraints is and in the future still be a problem. However, I would say, Community Radio, be it in an urban or rural setting, is and should be there where it is really needed, like a guiding hand, a bridge or link for the people and between the people and agencies of development...a focal point to bring progress and development to the people of a community.