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Community Radio In Urban And Rural Settings:
Some Basic Issues

by

Felix Librero
COMMUNITY RADIO IN URBAN AND RURAL SETTINGS: SOME BASIC ISSUES*

Felix Librero**

Tentative Definitions

Concept. Keirstead and Keirstead (1993) have correctly pointed out that community radio may be defined in a variety of ways "depending on its role in a nation's media system." Community radio, they said, may be "defined technically in terms of low-power transmission to a homogeneous population area." Or, it may refer to the participation of community members more in the production of programmes rather than in policy and planning.

Other definitions, or more accurately, descriptions of functions, emphasize the fundamental intentions for which community radio is undertaken. For example, in its declaration of principles, the World Association of Community Broadcasters described community radio as follows (AMARC, 1988):


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Community radio responds to the needs of the community it serves, contributing to their development within progressive perspective in favor of social change. Community radio strives to democratize communication through community participation in different aspects of the radio's activity which may take different forms in accordance with each specific social context.

Another description (Librero, 1990) says that community broadcasting is the systematic use of radio for the purpose of facilitating consciously the development of people within a geographical area having clearly defined psycho-physical boundaries. This means radio broadcasting within a limited geographical area in which a group of people with vastly similar characteristics, problems and aspirations reside.

Philosophy. The guiding philosophy of community radio should be to serve the interests and aspirations of the community. We must reach the people where they are — at their current stage of educational development, levels of interest and understanding — in an effort to help them attain their articulated needs and aspirations. The intention is to promote human development consciously through the broadcast of programmes designed to help people diagnose their problems and clarify their objectives so that they may be able to make wiser decisions.

Community broadcasting helps people accumulate and integrate knowledge that they can use to make decisions. It is involving people in the community in 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.

The over-all philosophy of community broadcasting, therefore, is dynamic people involvement in the use of radio to facilitate and speed up the development of people. It is people participation; people empowerment.

Characteristics. In an effort to further define what we mean by community radio or community broadcasting, we have tried to identify some basic characteristics (Librero, 1990). While these are not applicable exclusively for community broadcasting alone, they are, or ought to be, major considerations in effective community broadcasting.

1. Community broadcasting is purposive. We have a well-defined purpose. We know exactly what we want to achieve in very specific and clear terms. We know how we are going to achieve these objectives. Everything we do must ultimately contribute to the achievement of our objectives.

2. Community broadcasting is audience-oriented. It is the audience's interest and aspirations that are the foci of the community radio broadcasts. People listen to radio with a sense of purpose if they know that they are the subject of the radio programmes they are listening to. By audience-orientation is meant that the audience is the basis upon which radio programs are developed; that they must be actively involved in the conceptualization, preparation, utilization and evaluation of the broadcasts.
3. **Community broadcasting is research-based.** Research tells us the hows, whys, whats and wherefores of community broadcasting and its effects on people. Through research we would know what our subsequent moves would be to achieve our objectives; how to treat information; what information to offer our audiences; and what information/feedback to pay attention to. A host of other questions can be answered through research, formal or otherwise. In short, what we are saying is that our programmes must be based on factual information rather than on mere assumptions.

4. **Community broadcasting is service-oriented.** It is the welfare of people that we are after. As material profit is to commercial broadcasting, so is service to community broadcasting. Certainly, in community broadcasting we are concerned with the viability of a community radio station. It must be able to earn its right to exist, even earn a profit. But this must be viewed as a means to achieve objectives, rather than an end.

5. **Community broadcasting is audience participation.** Listeners must feel that they are part of the whole process; that they are a very important part of the knowledge equation; that they must feel they are an important ingredient of the radio broadcasts. Participation gives people a sense of belonging; of purpose; of importance; of achievement. This makes them dynamic partners in the development process. In many cases, people know better than
planners what is best for themselves; what works for them and what does not.

6. **Community broadcasting has built-in monitoring and evaluation system.** The community broadcaster must automatically monitor and evaluate his performance because he is in the best position to say whether or not he is achieving his objectives, written or otherwise.

7. **Community broadcasting has relevant and well-defined objectives.** We might do well if we focus our objectives to a few tangible ones and make sure that we make an impact on our listeners.

8. **Community broadcasting is an integrated element in the learning process.** It is not enough that we simply inform our listeners of new knowledge. We must be able to teach them to identify and solve their problems using the new knowledge that they obtain from our broadcasts. Such knowledge must, however, be highly appropriate to and supportive of their daily experiences and those of other development agents working with them. Sometimes it becomes very important to provide specific instructions on how to do certain things, as well as to explain why things must be done certain ways. This must logically be related to higher order knowledge — a synthesis as it were — which leads to new knowledge for the listener.

9. **Community broadcasting requires working relationships with various people and institutions concerned with community development.** By itself, radio can achieve
only so much. The role of radio is really supportive of the activities of change agents. On the other hand, community radio makes it easier for development agents to perform their tasks.

Community Radio and the Worldview of the Community

In a previous attempt to clarify the relationship between community radio and the members of the community within which the radio operates, Librero (1993) pointed out that the community radio must reflect the worldview of the members of the community. The following points were raised:

1. Community broadcasters are members of the community they live in. They speak the language of the community, feel and understand the problems of the community, have a complete picture of the aspirations of the members of the community. They must, therefore, be able to articulate the feelings, problems and aspirations of the community and relate these to a wider life outside of the community.

2. The community radio is involved directly and indirectly in the affairs of the community because one is affected by the other. Quite naturally, therefore, the radio station ought to reflect life in the community. In the same vein, the members of the community must be active in running the affairs of the radio station. It is this highly interdependent and interactive relationship that makes community broadcasting so relevant to the needs of the audience.
3. **The community radio must articulate community life.**

Certain aspects of community life may simply be taken for granted by community members because such aspects of life may have become so ordinary to them. However, in many cases it is these very ordinary things that sometimes make the difference. For example, positive traditional values tend to be overrun by current fashion trends including those originating from outside of the community. Yet, when the community radio highlights these traditional positive values the audience is reminded and come to its senses. A number of times we have heard ordinary radio listeners say: "Oh yes, we seem to be forgetting these things nowadays."

4. **Community radio must present a comprehensive view of the community.** For example, we present community life through reporting of events in news programmes, discussion of issues in public affairs programmes, articulation of problems and aspirations in drama presentations, appreciation of our traditions through cultural programmes, reflections of our ways of living in musical and variety programmes, emphasis on education and learning through educational programmes, and so on. Each of these programmes, however, cannot possibly present all aspects of community life. But together, they all can. What we want to achieve may be achieved through a combination of different programmes arranged in some logical manner as to present an overall picture of life in the community.
5. Community radio must also present a view in relation to the world outside of the geographical area of the community. A community becomes dynamic because of its interactive relations with its environment and other communities.

Multiple Roles/Functions of Community Broadcasters

Community broadcasting, as currently practiced in the developing world, does not carry the glamour of national broadcasting. Invariably, therefore, community broadcasters have to perform multiple roles/functions. Professional network broadcasters will find these multiple roles untenable, but the realities of community radio require that community broadcasters must perform the following in various degrees of emphasis:

1. To conceptualize the radio broadcast. In order to do so, the community broadcaster must have: a) familiarity with the problems of the community; b) wholistic view of community problems; c) ability to translate ideas into action; d) clear vision of the community's goals; and e) ability to articulate the community's aspirations and frustrations.

2. To translate program ideas to a coherent broadcast presentation. To do this the community broadcaster must a) know the basic characteristics of his audience; b) be skillful in putting together discrete pieces of information to form a logical whole; c) be familiar with the elements of
radio (voice, music, sound effects and silence); d) be familiar with the audience’s information processing characteristics; and e) have the ability to piece together a respectable presentation with minimum of expensive inputs, hardware and time.

3. To present the radio program. As a program host, the community broadcaster must have: a) mastery of the language of the listener; b) the ability to empathize with the listeners; c) understanding and appreciation of problems of the listeners and highlight useful experiences elsewhere and relate them to local conditions; e) ability to clearly point to a logical, achievable direction without having to say so.

4. To evaluate the effects of broadcasts. The community broadcaster must have the: a) ability to relate his objectives to aspirations of his listener; b) ability to determine quickly existing and potential problems and identify their causes; c) ability to quickly and skillfully gather feedback information in whatever form, and interpret them accurately; d) ability to adopt various means of obtaining information under local conditions; and e) ability to know when and how to use feedback information from various sources. These skills come along with experience.

5. To modify the programme according to results of evaluation. The community broadcaster must accept failures, but must understand why failures happen in the first place.
He must be able to make the necessary adjustments as soon as possible but make them unobtrusively.

**Advocacy Role of Community Radio**

All other things being equal, we can say that the ultimate function of community radio is one of advocacy. This has been demonstrated in various parts of the world. For example, for more than 40 years, the Bolivian Miner's Radio promoted cultural and political development among workers in Bolivian mines (O'Connor, 1989; Girard, 1992).

In Australia, Aboriginal community radio is being used to revive, strengthen and transmit across generations the language and oral traditions of the aborigines (Seneviratne, 1993). Some "40 indigenous groups are producing programs for non-Aboriginal community radio stations around the country," reported Seneviratne (1993).

Similar patterns may be observed in Sri Lanka's Mahaweli Community Radio (MCR). MCR has been really tasked to promote development, particularly in the resettlement areas of the Mahaweli region.

In general, community radio has been used as an instrument of social policy in North America and Europe, development in Asia, preserving the Aboriginal culture in Australia, and social change in Latin America (Keirstead and Keirstead, 1993).
Exemplars of Community Radio

MCR experience. In recent years, the Mahaweli Community Radio (MCR) project of Sri Lanka has become very popular. The MCR system may not be the best model of a viable community broadcasting system, but it certainly is the best documented (Valbuena, 1993). In the last 10 years, a lot of reports have been published about the MCR system, but perhaps we can get a complete picture from the most recent publication on the subject (Valbuena, 1993), where people like Knud Ebbesen, EST Fernando and MJR David, who were very much involved in planning and implementation of the project, provided some rare insights into the entire MCR experience.

The MCR system during its early years put emphasis on community-based production. How was this done? In general, a production team spent some weeks in a community to observe and familiarize themselves with the community and its people, do research, and then organize a production. This production, which was generally a cultural presentation prepared by the community residents is fully tape recorded. The participants and other members of the community were also involved in determining which portions of the production would be included in a final one-hour show.

The one-hour show was then broadcast on a low-powered FM transmitter, in turn picked up and rebroadcast by the regional station of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation on a much more powerful AM transmitter. The one-hour show,
titled Rural Belt, was broadcast as part of the regional programming of the national broadcasting system of Sri Lanka.

Starting about the middle of the 80's, MCR began using the services of community volunteer producers. At that time, the MCR broadcasts introduced some changes to include specific segments such as the productions of the volunteers. Toward the latter part of the 80's, the volunteers started making demands for benefits similar to those given to the regular producers of MCR.

The MCR system can be difficult to replicate because of the costs involved. While the UNESCO-DANIDA funding was continuing, the MCR project was effective. Now that funding has dried up, the issue of project sustainability has arisen. In other words, the success of the MCR hinged on the availability of enough funding because its production procedures are expensive and difficult to maintain financially.

Philippine Tambuli experience. In the last year or so, another UNESCO-DANIDA funded project was launched in the Philippines, but this project adopted a completely different approach. The project is called Philippine TAMBULI. Tambuli is a Philippine acronym for the term which means "The voice of the small community for the development of the underprivileged" (Librero, 1992).

The Tambuli project is designed to set up community communication centers in 12 remote villages in the
Philippines. Each of these centers shall be composed of an FM radio station, a community newsletter, a communication training facility and a livelihood project. The livelihood project is designed to provide the necessary logistical support to the radio and newsletter.

The community radio station is managed by a multi-sectoral community media council, and staffed by volunteers from the community. So far, one radio station has been set up and now operational in Batanes, the smallest and northernmost province in the Philippines. Another one is being set up in Laurel, Batangas, south of Manila.

In the Batanes radio station, volunteer broadcasters include teachers, government officials, rural youth and officers of a farmers' association and as homemakers' group.

Essentially, the approach taken by the Philippine project is to promote community radio through independent rural-based production and broadcast operations. The radio station is independent of Manila-based national networks, and is owned by the community.

**Gut Concerns About Asian Community Radio**

Asian broadcasting systems were originally organized as means of propagating government thinking and were designed to simply inform people. They were not designed to provide feedback, nor to serve as means for people to articulate their aspirations and their frustrations. The structure of these broadcasting systems is one of a highly centralized
management within a huge government monopoly. This condition has spawned what could be hidden factors that tend to negatively influence the growth and development of community radio in Asia (Librero, 1991). There are five of these hidden factors:

1. Managers of national broadcasting systems in Asia, and perhaps elsewhere, perhaps perceive that if community radio stations are allowed to proliferate they might lose administrative control of the broadcasting system. This fear may not be completely unfounded because community radio stations are likely to press for operational autonomy from the national service. Autonomy could mean that the national broadcasting system will have no control over the community radio stations.

2. In the area of politics, the proliferation of community radio stations in the countryside may have given some local political kingpins the belief that if they control these community radio stations, they might become more powerful which is not far from the truth. National political leaders may be concerned that if this happens they will also 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 radio station and use it to promote anti-government propaganda. Quite possibly, this fear might be more psychological than real.
A community radio station which is actively run by the community will be amply protected by members of the community. On the other hand, an opposite scenario could be possible. Suppose that a community is not in agreement with the national leadership on national policies about development programs at the community level, the community radio station will certainly articulate this disagreement and push for the position of the community. Under this situation, the radio station could conceivably be in danger from being taken over or shut down by government forces, not anti-government forces. In any case, rebels would much prefer taking over national broadcasting systems than many small community stations.

4. There may be a certain amount of fear among the leadership of the national broadcasting systems that they might lose budget control over the operations of community radio. This is based on the assumption that community radio stations would become autonomous and, therefore, budget allocations and disbursement of funds would be decentralized. This, of course, is a non-issue if the community radio station is not owned by government.

5. 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 always honestly welcome critical
voices from some hot-shot small community radio station. This breaks the myth of government power and authority.

Practical Issues at Hand

1. **Common definition of concept.** Our concept of community radio is evolving, hence we do not have as yet a final definition. This may continue for quite sometime yet. Perhaps we can arrive at a common definition and understanding of community radio if we develop a research-based literature on the subject. Much of the literature today deals with experiences worldwide over the last four or so decades, but I believe that when what are now referred to as community radios began decades ago they were not known then as community radio. It was only recently that the term community radio appeared in the literature, and many of the experiences cited, for example, by the World Association of Community Broadcasters, were referred to as community radio.

2. **Training programs in community broadcasting.** Much of the available expertise in radio broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific is in national or network broadcasting techniques. We have a dearth of expertise in community radio. There is, therefore, a very real need to organize training programmes in community broadcasting. The AIBD started with one course in early 1990, but there has been no follow-up course.
3. Autonomy for community radio. For community radio to be effective, it must be made to operate independently of national broadcasting organizations. While it should conform to broadcasting rules and laws, its programming and ownership should be left to community residents to be operationalized under the basic assumption that the community residents are in the best position to decide what they want to do with a community broadcasting system for themselves.

4. Viability of community radio. The issue of viability may be closely related to the issue of autonomy. Is the community in a position to operate and maintain, on a continuing basis, a radio station? This is a real and serious issue. I believe, however, that the UNESCO-DANIDA project in the Philippines may have come up with a way of dealing with this issue of viability. In the Philippine project, one of the components of the community communications system is a livelihood project, which is supposed to provide for the logistical support for the media components. What the Philippine project is doing now is establish the system after which the community takes over. This should not be difficult to achieve because from the very beginning the personnel who are operating the components of the system are volunteers from the community. They will simply continue performing their tasks as the project gradually pulls out within five years, at which time we expect that the livelihood component shall have been firmly established.
5. **Technologies for community radio.** Most of the community radio stations today broadcast on low-power FM transmitters. There is a very good reason for this. FM transmission requires less power than AM transmission does. The associated hardware are small and low-cost. Two important characteristics of the hardware for community radio are portability and durability. They must be light and durable, and can be easily transportable to enable producers to undertake on-site productions. Engineers should also consider manufacturing solar-powered transmitters designed for the Asian countryside. These solar-powered transmitters can be very handy in remote areas where there may be no electricity.

**Where Are We Heading in Community Radio?**

From my vantage point, I see two possible directions for community radio in the Asia-Pacific region over the next five years.

**Networking to increase impact.** In the Asia-Pacific region, community broadcasters will network as a matter of necessity. In an earlier paper, I have outlined four levels of networking in community broadcasting (Librero, 1993), as follows:

1. **Networking among broadcasters.** There appears to be a need for community broadcasters to be in constant touch with one another for three reasons. First, we need to keep
abreast of developments in the field of broadcasting. Through the network we may be able to exchange ideas and share expertise. Second, we need to keep abreast of developments in the world out there -- this is our broadcasting environment. We can only relate to the world if we know what is happening out there. Information and perhaps perceptions in the outside world are things we must be able to provide our audiences with. Finally, we need to know who is doing community broadcasting. Community broadcasting need not be a lonely crusade if we know who else is doing it in other parts of the country as well as in other countries.

2. Networking between the radio station on one hand and other institutions in the community on the other. The radio station cannot do everything alone. It has to establish an effective working relationship with the various agencies and institutions within its area of operation. The radio station needs the information inputs from the institutions in the community, while these institutions need the radio station as a conduit for information dissemination. The relationship is synergistic but one ought to be administratively independent of the other.

3. Networking among community radio stations at the national level. Today in our respective countries there may not be too many community radio stations. If there are any, they need to interconnect with each other. They have to know what the other is doing. In the process, community
radio stations may together be able to paint a complete picture of the countryside. This is a major step towards national understanding and unity.

4. Networking among community radio stations at the regional level. The network at this level will essentially be a means of sharing information and experiences across national boundaries. Broadcasters need to know what techniques may be working in other countries so that they may experiment on these in their own environments.

Toward neighborhood radio productions. Increasingly, community broadcasters will seek active participation of community residents in out-door productions. This approach, which may be called neighborhood radio production, is now being adopted by the UNESCO-DANIDA project in the Philippines.

With some prodding from TAMBULI project personnel, community residents are given pointers on how they could possibly put together a radio program with the use of minimal amount of hardware such as ordinary tape recorders which abound in the rural areas. Actually, they use the sing-along machine called Karaoke. The production group, which is usually assigned by the village head, puts together a set of songs, poems, and other items that they perform (Tabing, 1993). The process is very crude, but it has been found to be effective in the Philippine rural setting.

This approach is actually similar to the Mahaweli experience, except that in the Philippine approach the
community residents take full responsibility and control of the production. The actual output is broadcast in the radio station, even if the technical quality is not perfect by normal engineering standards.

Concluding Statement

Community radio has become very important and popular in the last few years. Of course, the concept is still evolving, and we still have to agree on a common definition. The current interest in community radio is probably an indication that there is a strong need to operationalize the concept of access to communication resources. Community broadcasting is one concrete way of doing it. And the effect can be clearly observable.

We need to continue evolving ways and means of improving the effectiveness of community radio as a tool for articulating the problems and aspirations of people in the community. Towards this end, I suggest strongly that we start working on research-based body of literature on the subject. Furthermore, let us develop the simple hardware for community broadcasting as much as we are developing the hi-tech hardware for global broadcasting. After all, these two distinct directions in broadcasting today do have a meeting point somewhere — the point where we shall have globalized community radio.

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REFERENCES


