

Abstract No: communityradioIndia07/ABS/115

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Abstract:

Community Radio: Policies, Power and Possibilities

One doesn't have to be a Marxist to tell that the large media conglomerates and transnational companies are disconnected from the lives of communities where they operate from. Worse still, the much talked about 'Digital revolution' in the contested topography of the 'information society' has resulted in new forms of cyber-capitalism and digital divides. Contrary to this, community radio provides a framework, not only to re-engage those communities which exist on the periphery, but also gives a chance for civic transformation, participatory democracy and mutuality. Community Radio is a counterpoise to the egotistical profit driven media accountable to their own selves. It has been observed that the hegemonic dominance of mainstream broadcasters on media policymaking and governance, coupled with operational challenges often faced by community groups, have often resulted in legislation that restricts the enormous potentiality of community radio access, participation and representation.

My paper reviews the existing policy scenario in the CR which needs a careful assessment. In 2006, the Ministry of Information announced elaborate policy guidelines on the Community Radio services in India. It took them four years (Dec 2002-06) to realize that CR cannot be limited to a handful of "established educational institutions". But like with most other policy guidelines this too is wrapped in contradictions. To begin with, an applicant to CRS has to 'fit' into stringent requirements before one can hope to get anywhere close to it. In any case, if the applicant is not a public-funded educational institution, then, sanction rests on the discretion of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Defence Ministry, not to forget a third ministry which allocates the radio frequency! In a clear case of over-regulation and unwarranted fears no news and current affairs program are allowed. In the absence of these, the fear that, CR will be reduced to mindless FM 'song' stations with frivolous entertainment is not entirely baseless. The same set of regulators had no problem when in July 2005 FM stations were handed over to the 'highest bidder' in the second round of allocation of broadcast circles. Little surprising, Sun TV, got as many as 23 FM circles. The highest bidder certainly could not have been a group of 'adivasis' from a remote village in Orissa. It doesn't take too much scholarship to realize that the role of any CR policy should be to ensure that there are necessary checks and balances to make certain that CR serves the interest of the public. But here it seems to be the other way round.

I have tried to voice some obvious and not so obvious questions that arise from the above positions- The role and implication of community radio license policies on its distribution and reach. Who are the beneficiaries? What lessons can be learnt from previous and present hetero-regulation and self-regulation mechanisms at the local and global level? And finally what recommendations should be made at the policy level if the CR movement were to be strengthened?