

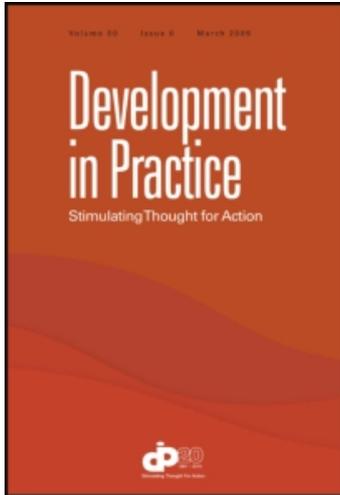
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Negotiating power: community media, democracy, and the public sphere

Saima Saeed

Given the centrality of communication to society, who 'owns' the media, who gets to speak on behalf of whom, and to what end are critical issues. The regression of 'mainstream' media from 'watchdogs' of democracies to business ventures resulting in Habermasian 'refeudalisation of the public sphere' is worrying. Community media re-engage communities on the periphery, opening possibilities for social change. The dominance of mainstream players in media governance, complicated by sustainability concerns of grassroots enterprises, result in legislation that impedes the potentiality of community media access and participation – as mapped in this paper with the case of community radio struggle in India.

KEY WORDS: Civil society; Governance and public policy; Gender and diversity; Rights; Technology; South Asia

Introduction

It is hard to conceive of a strong democracy without placing communication at the centre of things. The struggle for 'communication rights', its activism, and attempts at curbing it, are not just indicative of the importance that free media acquire in contemporary existence, but are also a yardstick by which social scientists could measure the effectiveness of the nation-state's commitment to democracy and its future. The power of the media in a democracy comes from it being the 'watchdog' of society, the 'fourth estate', supplementing the other three pillars of democracy – the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary – by providing the necessary checks and balances on issues that concern the masses. Alternately, it also provides a site of contestation, where citizens can express their opinion freely without any fear of coercion or control by the state on important policy matters played out in the 'public sphere'. For mass democracy, since its early articulations by Joseph Schumpeter and Max Weber, presupposes self-determination, plurality, and equitable participation in the political life of the nation by exercising a formal right to vote which is guaranteed to the citizens. This also translates into equal access to power, since all have an equal opportunity to stand and be chosen as representatives of the people.

Two things stand out in this project of democracy: first, that the maturing of mass democracy in most societies has gone hand-in-hand with developments in mass communication as a key player in the organisation of public life and opinion formation on issues that concern the 'citizenry'. Second, democracy can be seen as a political system where the state institutions

and civil society are two actors, even if at the two extremes of the spectrum, opposing each other but connected in the difficult negotiations of power that are played out every day. For our purposes here, these power negotiations involve a struggle between media control by the state and 'social access to media' by the citizens, with a view to shifting the balance of power from the core to the periphery or at least bridging the burgeoning gap between the two. In the final analysis it is a struggle for legitimacy between these actors.

Before analysing this, however, it is important that we engage with concepts of the 'public sphere', media access, 'communication rights', and 'civil society' and their organic interconnect-edness at a deeper discursive level to avoid oversimplification of these otherwise complex categories. The concept of a 'public sphere', developed in its most advanced form by Jürgen Habermas, unambiguously placed 'undistorted communication' at the centre of the schema:

By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of the freedom of assembly and association and freedom to access and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means of transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. (Habermas 1964: 198–200)

So, the liberal public sphere and the state do not overlap in the Habermasian conceptualisation. Instead, the public sphere is a specific sphere which 'mediates between society and state'; it cannot be conceived of as an institution, neither can it be 'manufactured' as desired. It has to develop as a structure 'that stands on its own and reproduces itself *out of itself*'. As Habermas himself noted, 'There can be no public sphere without a public'. Elucidating further on the public sphere as 'a communication structure' that acts like a 'warning system with sensors', he links it to the 'associational network of civil society'. Habermas goes on to define civil society and explains the relationship between public sphere, will-formation, and civil society:

The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. These 'discursive designs' have an egalitarian, open form of organization that mirrors essential features of the kind of communication around which they crystallize and to which they lend continuity and permanence . . . As long as in the public sphere the mass media prefer, contrary to their normative self-understanding, to draw their material from powerful, well-organised information producers and as long as they prefer media strategies that lower than raise the discursive level of public communication, issues will tend to start in, and be managed from, the center, rather than follow a spontaneous course originating in the periphery. (Habermas 1996: 359–387)

But Habermas is at pains to explain how this space for 'rational politics' was destroyed by the very forces that led to its creation, namely the access to economic and material power that helped the bourgeoisie of the day in fighting feudalism to create institutions free from repressive powers of the state. Scholars like Nancy Fraser criticise Habermas's notion of the public sphere, saying that the problem is 'not just that Habermas idealizes a liberal public sphere but also that he fails to examine the other, nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public sphere' (Fraser

1992: 115), in addition to being a 'masculinist conception of the public sphere'. The other questionable assumptions pointed out by Fraser include 'the assumption that it is possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to bracket status differentials and to deliberate as if they were social equals'; also the assumption that 'a proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away, rather than toward, greater democracy, and that a single comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics' (Fraser 1992: 117–118). This point of *publics over a public* is also what Gitlin means by 'sphericules' (Gitlin 1998: 168–174).

'Media for public service' deficit

Accelerated globalisation since the early 1990s has triggered unprecedented flows of not just trade and capital, but also of information, data, and ideas. Civil-rights activists and social movements have grown both in size and influence, resulting in new patterns of civic engagements and citizen participation driving larger debates on media and democracy. The debates have moved on since then from a demand for freedom of expression to media reform, media justice, a call for a more democratic mediascape, and the creation of alternative grassroots communication networks. Democracies' dependence on communication for collective decision making has been a subject of intense debate (Barber 1984: 197; Dewey 1954: 155; Scannell 1989: 163). Communication scholars like Hackett and Adam (1999), O'siochru (2005), Raboy (2004), and Thomas (2006) have all sought to establish the linkages between various movements that are articulating and radicalising the larger media-democratisation movement around the world. The expressions and terms used may differ from one region to another, but the larger issues remain the same.

A growing concern has been how powerful media conglomerates are increasingly moving away from the initial public-service model of journalism that was committed to providing not just entertainment but information and education. What is put on the platter today is a multi-cuisine mix of entertainment, sensationalism, sex, and violence, in short just about anything that sells. The space for development reportage, in-depth investigative journalism, and a thrust on social reform is steadily shrinking in the global newsrooms that have centralised production in the major cities of the world. The dynamics of 'industrialization of media', due to the processes of 'integration, diversification and internationalization' (Murdock and Golding 1973: 207–223), that lead to monopoly capitalism, have long-term ideological and political implications. Over time, these media corporations become so powerful that they begin to have direct influence on policy matters so as to swing decision making in their own interest. This kind of appropriation of the public sphere hinging on 'manufacturing consent' is a big challenge to democracies – something Herman and Chomsky (1988), Herman and McChesney (1997) and others have often articulated. The media has been noted to go on to consolidate for itself the role of a manager, arbiter, spectrum distributor, coordinator, as well as policy maker for this monopoly capitalism. All these roles are rendered more problematic as the nation-state does not enact a neutral role, but rather remains a highly interested player just like any other market player – essentially trying to control and manage the flow of information in its own favour to sustain itself as the power centre.

To that extent, Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) as a model that emanated from a focus on public good has been able to include a sizeable amount of public-interest programming without having to chase the advertising pie. But the system has had its own set of shortcomings that have prevented it from attaining its ideals and virtually crippled it from within, forcing many media reformers to look for answers beyond the media giants and PSB. The otherwise good model of PSB has been plagued by issues of *governance* and modes of financing the system. While it will

not be possible for me to address these systemic problems in detail in this paper, an overview is essential. Financially, the question of whether there should be a licence fee as a single source of funding or whether PSB should be run through government funds in the form of subsidies is a perennial issue that many nations have been seen grappling with. Following on from this economic question comes the more complicated need to insulate the PSB from government interference, yet at the same time ensuring that its directors maintain accountability in their use of public funds.

However, few will disagree that there is merit in regulating media ownership, concentration, and competition so that in a race for rampant commercialisation media, which is often labelled the ‘oxygen of democracy’, does not completely forego its role of being a forum for deliberative reasoning for its citizens. For Keane, ‘the maximum feasible *decommodification* and “re-embedding” of communications media in the social life of civil society is a vital condition of freedom from state and market censorship . . . In practical terms, the maximization of freedom and equality of communication requires efforts to “de-concentrate” and publicly regulate privately owned media’ (Keane 1993: 4–12).

Framework for media democratisation

‘The time will come when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will have to encompass a more extensive right than man’s right to information, first laid down 21 years ago in Article 19. This is the right of man to communicate’, Jean d’Arcy (1969)

Applying the conceptual framework, we can identify five key players in the project of media democracy – the nation-state, market, multilateral forums, local and global civil society movements. All exert their own push and pull, their specific forces, and influence in determining how we achieve, or at another level do not achieve, the goal of media democratisation. Two forces exert pressure in different directions: one, the state–market relationship inextricably intertwined where both expand in a symbiotic manner leading to a ‘refeudalisation of the public sphere’. The second and opposite pressure comes from the local and global civil society movements contributing to a ‘globalisation from below’, which demands communication rights and alternative media. The liberal-democratic state is often left with no option but to reregulate itself in order to legitimise its authority in a constant negotiation and exchange with all these players. *Legitimacy claims* often force states to incorporate civil society in policy making, even if by means of a token gesture, to generate favourable opinion and consensus for itself in a democracy. Communication-rights activists and scholars alike have gone a step further. They allege that media have not only failed to actualise such democratic values as participation, representative diversity, and genuine choice, but are themselves becoming a threat to sustainable democracy. Garnham provides a convincing argument that the value systems within which commercial media operate are ‘inimical . . . to the very process of democratic politics itself’ (Garnham 1990: 111). Hackett and Carroll have enlisted eight themes that are responsible for what they call ‘*media’s democratic deficit*’: public sphere failure, centralisation of power, inequality, homogenisation, undermining the sense of community, corporate enclosure of knowledge, elitist process of communication policy making, and the erosion of communication rights (Hackett and Carroll 2006: 2–10).

Four questions need to be answered:

- Are the existing media networks adequate?
- Are they able to fulfil the information and communication needs of the citizens?
- If not, then what are the political–ideological apparatuses that have historically impeded the growth of ‘alternative’ media?
- What are the possible solutions that could help break this colonisation of communication?

Through the 1990s, individual and scattered efforts on communication rights issues began to converge in larger campaigns and movements like the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), Campaign for Press Freedom (CPF), World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), and most notably in the Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS 2005: 11–44).

The idea that communication rights cannot be fully realised without a multiplicity of community media (be it print, television, radio, or the Internet) requires that such ‘alternative communication’ infrastructures be owned, maintained, and managed by communities. Scholars and activists like Atton (2003), Constanza-Chock (2005), Gumucio Dagron (2001), Krauss (1989), and Rodríguez (2001) have attempted to question the structure and content of mainstream media alongside efforts to build a critical mass for alternative media.

For the sake of clarification, I define ‘alternative media’, ‘community media’ or ‘grassroots media’ as:

- ‘Alternative’ to established procedures and conditions of media production;
- Free from interference by the state, market actors, and multilateral agencies;
- Produced by the local community in their own language for their own consumption on issues that they themselves deem relevant to their needs and so ‘alternative’ in content from the dominant media.

Kidd *et al.* (2005) – arguing for a counter-public sphere – rightly deduce that ‘faced with a systemic exclusion from the dominant media, counter-publics must create their own communications’. For Murdock (1999: 7–17), ‘rights to information’, ‘right to experience’, ‘rights to knowledge’, and ‘rights to participation’ are all ‘questions of representation’ about social delegation, about who is entitled to speak for whom, what responsibilities they owe to the views and hopes they claim to articulate, and more importantly, about how well these contribute to the exercise of full citizenship.

In the next section of this paper, I develop the arguments built in the conceptual framework to map the contours of the contemporary media industry in the Indian context. After that, I chart the progress of the community media movement in India, taking Community Radio as a case example, framing some of the current debates around community radio in the larger paradigm of media policy and governance.

Mapping the contemporary mediascape

The history of the evolution, proliferation, and distribution of communication for the last 150 years has been not so much a fight for freedom of the press, but that of its commodification; that is, communication becoming increasingly integrated into a capitalistic mode of production and reproduction – something against which Marx and Engels warned: ‘the first freedom of the press consists in it not being a trade’ (Marx 1842: 61). Neo-liberal market economies are known to produce unrepresentative media systems. Speaking from a Cuban perspective, Leonardo Acosta saw the commercially dominated mass media as an ‘ideological-industrial complex devoted to the justification and perpetuation of the capitalist system’ (Acosta 1973: 141). For Mattelart, the problem with the commercial media is the ‘verticality of the message’ that it produces, which is an ‘expression of a hierarchical culture, corresponding to the class divisions it perpetuates’ (Mattelart 1971: 121).

Contemporary media and cultural flows point to the following four trends that seem to stand out at the macro level. First, media production and distribution are becoming increasingly deterritorialised, outside of the narrow confines of the nation-state. This heralds the emergence

of a more fluid, networked, transnational media governance regime involving both state and non-state actors. This, in turn, tends to produce what Monroe Price calls a 'market for loyalties', which differs from the past 'in the scope of its boundaries, and the nature of the regulatory bodies capable of establishing and enforcing rules for participation and exclusion' (Price 1994: 667). The second trend is that the control and technical know-how of these communication technologies lay in the developed world, while their services are made to permeate into the developing world in a selective and slow manner. The third trend is that the belief that information and communication technologies (ICTs) will usher in greater media access seems to be losing purchase as fresh forms of 'digital divides' are surfacing. The fourth trend, linked to the above, has been a subsequent weakening of the public broadcasting systems worldwide due to stiff competition from the private media conglomerates.

Citizen versus consumer

The inherent contradictions in mass media played out on the twin and opposed axes of the economic and the political are not new. The political realm addresses the individual as a *citizen* who enjoys certain rights in a system that aspires towards achieving social good. The market, on the other hand, sees the individual as a *consumer*, which, as Murdock (1992: 19) puts it, 'encourages people to seek private solutions to public problems by purchasing a commodity. It urges them to buy their way out of trouble rather than pressing for social change'. This difference is also reinforced by Garnham: 'We would find it strange if we made voting rights dependent upon purchasing power or property rights; yet access to the mass media, as both channels of information and forums of debate, is largely controlled by just such power and right' (Garnham 1990: 111). The tensions that result from these bipolar and competing selves of citizen and consumer underscore the individual's dilemma. As the chasm between the two grows, *we have more consumers than citizens in the public sphere, and economic values overshadow the political*. Media systems in this framework increasingly serve the needs of the market, rather than the citizen. Audiences themselves become commodities, products for sale to advertisers, as studies on the relationship between media, advertising, and audiences amply prove (Acosta 1973: 141–149; Galbraith 1975: 53–55).

'Transnationalisation' of India's contoured media market

These global trends have been reflected and replicated in the Indian mediascape since the opening up of the Indian economy to the much debated dictates of 'liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation' in 1991. Both print and broadcasting media, which were previously both limited in number and regulated by the state, saw the steady entry of foreign players waiting to woo the untapped pool of Indian audiences. Doordarshan (the national broadcaster) failed to capture the nation's imagination, despite the potential of its vast technical network of 1400 terrestrial transmitters covering more than 90.7 per cent of India's population, coupled with its radio wing (the All India Radio network) providing coverage to 97.3 per cent of the population.

After liberalisation, the national broadcasting system was reregulated to adapt to the changed scenario, private players were allowed to enter the market, and the state was in a hurry to expand the economy. However, this did not necessarily lead to diversity of ownership, as a few media companies began to control most of the production and distribution. To put things in perspective, let us begin with a snapshot of the rate of expansion of different media in Indian households (Table 1).

In the summer of 2005 amid heated debates in Parliament, the Government of India announced an end to its five-decade-old policy banning the publication of foreign newspapers in India. As a result of its liberal investment policies, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the Indian media sector has been steadily on the rise (Table 2). Not surprisingly, the logic behind limiting FDI to 26 per cent in news and current affairs has been to exercise control over what is published and broadcast, rather than arising out of any real concern with promoting diversity and equity of ownership – a policy measure that is often couched in the rhetoric of keeping editorial and management control in the hands of resident Indians for safeguarding Indian culture and values.

Since 2002, Indian media ventures have raised millions of dollars in foreign funds. Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) analyses have estimated the size of the entertainment and media industry (E&M) in India at Rs 437 billion (\$8.74 billion), making it one of the country's most promising growth stories (FICCI 2007: 22). These changes unfold against the backdrop of a booming market for advertising in India. According to an advertising outlook report, the advertising industry is set to grow 61 per cent by 2010, with advertising spending climbing to Rs 367.31 billion (\$7.34 billion) from Rs 227.21 billion (\$4.54 billion) in 2007, recording 17 per cent growth (ZenithOptimedia 2007).

Another defining feature of this trend towards globalisation is rampant horizontal and vertical integration among and across different media companies. It is against this that the current Broadcasting Bill 2007 seeks to restrict 'accumulation of interest at national, state or local level in the broadcast segments of the media' and to ensure 'plurality and diversity of news and views' (BRSB 2007: 11).

Community radio movement in India: policies and prospects

Frequency Modulation (FM) broadcasts, used by community radio in India, were first introduced in Madras in 1992, but a commercial approach only came to the fore in 1993 when time slots began to be leased to private companies. To widespread dismay, in July 2005 during the second round of allocation of broadcast circles, FM stations were handed over to the 'highest bidder'. The idea behind Phase II of the FM licensing was, in the words of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 'to attract private agencies to supplement and complement the efforts of All India Radio' (New Delhi, 13 July 2005).¹ Not surprisingly, Sun TV, a huge commercial success in the south of the country and owned by a politically powerful family, got as many as 23 FM circles. The highest bidder certainly could not have been a group of 'adivasis' from an unknown little village in Bihar or Jharkhand.

That the history of broadcasting in India is full of instances of delayed and even restrictive legislative inputs which have failed to achieve the constitutional mandate of freedom of

Table 1: Reach of mass media in India

Mass media	2005 (Audience in millions)	2006 (Audience in millions)
Press – newspapers	216	222
Satellite TV	207	230
Radio – FM	76	119
Cinema	51	39
Internet (users who logged in every week)	7.2	9.4

Source: National Readership Study 2006 (NRSC 2006).

Table 2: Permissible Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the Indian media sector

Mass media	Permissible foreign investment (%)
Newspapers and periodicals (dealing with news and current affairs)	26
Publishing/printing scientific & technical magazines, periodicals, and journals	100
Cable TV networks	49 [†]
TV news and current affairs channels (uplinked from India)	26
Direct-to-home TV	49
FM radio	20
Film	100
Advertising	100
Telecommunication (basic, cellular, value-added services, and global mobile personal communications by satellite)	49 [‡]
Telecommunication (ISPs not providing gateways, infrastructure providers, electronic mail, voice mail)	100

Source: Secretariat for Industrial Assistance (2004).

[†] This is inclusive of both FDI and portfolio investment. Companies with minimum 51% of paid up share capital held by Indian citizens are eligible under the Cable Television Network Rules (1994) to provide cable TV services.

[‡] Subject to licensing and security requirements.

expression guaranteed to all citizens (under Article 19 (1) (a) of the *Freedom of Speech and Expression* of the Constitution of India) is well recorded. The first ‘real’ attempt at legislation towards media freedom was the Akash Bharti Bill, which was introduced in Parliament after much pressure, only to lapse with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha in 1979. The same Bill – in a later version called the ‘Prasar Bharti Bill’ – was enacted but was not notified. What followed was a long legislative vacuum that was broken only as late as 1997 with the Gujral Government managing to notify it to make it a law. The Bill sought to give day-to-day functional autonomy to All India Radio and Doordarshan. But the next government, the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) led by Vajpayee, wanting to keep airwaves under its tight control, let the ordinance notifying the Prasar Bharti lapse and even went to the extent of disbanding its board of trustees. The Communication Convergence Bill 2001 met a similar fate with the dissolution of the 13th Lok Sabha. The Broadcasting Services Regulation Bill (BSRB 2007) – the latest in the long line of broadcast regulations – was kept secret for a long time and only after much public outcry was a draft copy posted on the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting website in August 2007 to invite public comment.

However, the ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ came in the form of three developments that can be seen as milestones in the struggle for a more democratic mediascape. First, the Supreme Court’s landmark judgement delivered by Justice P.B. Sawant and Justice S. Mohan on 9 February 1995 in the case between the Union of India and the Cricket Association of Bengal, which unambiguously ruled that ‘*the airwaves or frequencies are a public property*’. Second, the passing of the Right to Information (RTI) in June 2005, which most scholars see as a culmination of what started as the agitation for minimum wages by Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan, or the Organization for the Empowerment of Workers and Peasants (MKSS) in the late 1980s (although MKSS began intervention only in 1994 when a worker

from Kot Kirana, a village in Rajasthan, complained that he was being denied his wages).² For social activist Aruna Roy, who spearheaded the movement, its victory crystallised 'the links between information, accountability, democracy and ethics' (Roy 2000). And third, the passing of the Community Radio Bill in 2002.

Mainstream media's differential responses

The mainstream media's response and coverage in the case of RTI and community radio policy 2002 is worth considering. While the RTI was extensively covered by the media, especially newspaper and television, notably by NDTV 24X7 (a channel that has stood out as a televisual public sphere that has fought rigorously for democratic values, fairness, and balanced reporting since its inception), the coverage of community radio stations (CRS) in the mainstream media was conspicuous by its absence. The media never saw it as their own issue, with the result that discussions around community radio offering fresh possibilities remained in the 'private' spheres of a few NGOs and universities that were staking a claim for their own community radio stations.

Political economy of community radio in India

Though the community radio movement to free the spectrum to allow for CRS began in the mid-1990s, the Supreme Court judgement of 1995 declaring that 'airwaves are public property' gave it a legal impetus. The government's role in the management of radio consists of spectrum allocation, awarding of licences to players it deems fit, and determining the strength of broadcast infrastructure. After a lot of delaying tactics, the government passed a community radio policy in 2002, which came under immense criticism from radio activists in the country. In a *public petition* to the Prime Minister 'Urging the Inclusion of the Right of the Communities within the Community Radio Policy', it was noted that the 2002 policy was 'discriminatory towards communities'. The policy holds that only well-established educational institutions or organisations can apply for a community radio licence. So, what has been given in the name of community radio is in reality campus radio.³

The argument put forward was that the age-old governmental concerns about 'security', 'frequency interference', 'spectrum shortage', and 'sustainability of CRS' were 'unfounded and irrational'; if the concerns had been valid, it would not have been possible for government 'to open up 357 frequencies to the commercial sector in Phase I & II of FM licensing' and plan ahead for a Phase III. Within 10 years, 'the migration from analog to digital broadcasting will make the whole argument irrelevant'. Caught on the back foot, the government had no choice but to make amends. Finally on 16 November 2006, the Government of India notified a new Community Radio Policy that permits NGOs and other civil society organisations to own and operate community radio stations.⁴ But, suggestive of the government's inability to free the airwaves, news is banned on community radio in India.

Three initiatives run by locals, mostly women, in their own language supported by local NGOs and sustained on shoestring budgets, are worth examining. Some of these grassroots initiatives have been put on record by Indian scholars, notably in the book by Pavarala and Malik (2007), but more debate needs to be generated outside of academia if the subaltern 'counter public sphere' is to join the struggle for media democratisation.

Namma Dhwani: Namma Dhwani – meaning *Our Voices* in the local Kannada language – is a community media partnership between the community of Budikote village on the outskirts of Bangalore and two NGOs (VOICES and MYRADA) with the support of UNESCO. Its management committee comprises 10 women and 2 men, who in turn represent the

members of their Self Help Groups, amounting to approximately 230 women and 25 men. The remarkable thing about this station is that, despite its limited resources, it was able to cover the 2005 Panchayat (village) elections live. One of the founders, Ashish Sen said, 'probably for the first time, people voted for candidates and not symbols' (Nitya Jacob 2007). Left to themselves, it is unlikely that these women and men could have achieved this degree of participatory parity and direct intervention by exercising their right to vote that Namma Dhvani opened for them.

Ujjas radio: Ujjas – which means light in Gujarati – is a community radio in the Kutchi language that began with NGO Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan's (KMVS) efforts to empower rural women in blocks across their district. Mundra Mahila Vikas Sangathan first set up Ujjas Mahiti Kendra and in 1993 published a newsletter, *Ujjas*. By 1998, the community realised that to reach more people across the district, they needed to have access to radio. All India Radio began broadcasting their 30-minute radio serial, *Kunjla Paanje Kutchji*, from 16 December 1999 (see Bhattacharya 2007).

Today, Ujjas reporters are spread over all blocks in Kutch, visiting every village. They sit with the community on Thursday evenings when the programme is aired to initiate discussions to share their lived experiences, in a sense challenging the routine practices of mainstream media.

Deccan Development Society (DDS) radio of Dalit women: Seven Dalit women of Pastapur, Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, along with the Hyderabad-based Deccan Development Society (DDS) got together to train other women in the use of video, and eventually set up a project that now has a full-fledged radio station. Their station, located in Machnoor Village, has a 100 watt transmitter and a reach of more than 25 km. The women themselves design the content of the programme, with inputs from other people in their community. Dalit women have historically existed at the outermost peripheries of society, caught in centuries-old social and economic ostracism, caste-based discrimination, and parochial traditions. For them to be able to shake off the fetters and dare to tell their stories is an expression of freedom and justice in its truest sense.

Conclusion

The case studies of community radio stations presented in this paper provide the conceptual apparatus to understanding community radio formations, configurations, and conflicts, as well as the organisational patterns prevalent at the moment. Though in a country like India where no one civil-society group or NGO can be representative of the whole, any attempt at homogenising these various experiences or any effort to come up with an 'effective model' should be looked at with scepticism.

Among the problems that plague community radio, perhaps the biggest is sustainability. The reason for this is that almost all community radio projects in India have been grant-driven. The greatest challenge for NGOs running these programmes is to make them financially viable instead of depending on a spiral of endless grants. Pessimists have even gone to the extent of calling it the 'NGO-isation of community radio in India' in what is seen as a politicisation of the movement. The point being made here is that unless we attain a critical mass in terms of a large presence of community media as an important stakeholder in media policy making, including national licensing, regulatory, and legislative processes, we cannot hope to ensure communication rights for all, because *empowerment* cannot be 'given'. It has to be negotiated by the people themselves lest it create new forms of economic and political dependency which don't necessarily contribute to the life and development of the communities in question.

For what would be worse than for the poor Dalit women of Medak or Budhikote to 'own' community radio stations, but to have no money to buy tapes and batteries for the production of the next day's programme?

Notes

1. The policy guidelines on expansion of FM radio broadcasting services through private agencies (Phase-II) is available at the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting website: <http://mib.nic.in/informationb/CODES/frames.htm>.
2. The enquiry traced the company, Bhairon Nath and Sons, to government employees from Bhim, a small town in Rajasthan.
3. The full public petition to the Prime Minister and the comments of the signatories are available at www.petitiononline.com/comradio/petition.html.
4. The revised CRS policy 2006 entitles NGOs and other civil society organisations to operate a 100 watt (ERP) radio station, with a coverage area of approximately 12 kilometres radius. A maximum antenna height of 30 metres is allowed. Community radio stations are expected to produce at least 50% of their programmes locally, as far as possible in the local language or dialect. The stress is on developmental programming, though there is no explicit ban on entertainment.

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