

Democracy, Autonomy and the Community Media

Abhilaksh Likhi

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[Examining Autonomy: The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in Assam (PP 8) is the fifth in the series of research papers on the theme of Autonomy in India. Readers interested in the theme and the series can get back to ***Resouces for Autonomy - Financing the Local Bodies*** (PP 2), ***Peace Accords as the Basis of Autonomy*** (PP 3), ***Debates Over Women's Autonomy*** (PP 4) and ***Autonomies in the North and the North East*** (PP 7)]

Democracy, Autonomy, and the Community Media

Abhilaksh Likhi

The growing demand for an alternative communication approach, as a part of the global human development strategy, continues to be debated. People centered development calls for a paradigmatic shift from western centric, top down approaches to inculcation of grassroots community participation, socio-cultural change and empowerment of the poor and marginalized. The aim is to build and institutionalize local capacity, transparency and enduring resource policies in the rural development programs of developing countries. Information is the most valuable democratic resource, and knowledge today is power in any economy. Thus, dissemination of information, access and the right to such information through communication and its technologies would be the key to support sustainable development.

The last three decades have witnessed unprecedented growth in the global spread of communication technologies and electronic mass media. This has been made possible mainly due to the digital revolution in the arena of computer networks, compression technologies and proliferation of satellite broadcasting¹. This has happened in a world that has been transformed by several important trends in the late twentieth century- the globalization of economies, widespread population migrations, emergence of multiculturalism and a nation state that has become culturally more heterogeneous in an interconnected and interdependent world. In the above context, radio and later television as the dominant medium of the so called "information explosion" during the 1970's and 1980's, became one of the most powerful forces for stimulating social change and technological advancement. Their global impact, however, largely due to the effects of entertainment programming through national broadcasting, was on people living in industrialized countries. The impact was, of course, felt to a lesser extent on those living in urban areas of developing countries.

Digital Disparity

By and large, the same pattern of distribution has been evident in the emergence of knowledge based economies of developing societies still plagued by illiteracy, poverty and backwardness. These societies are now increasingly relying on Internet, World Wide Web and satellite broadcasting for universal access to information, education and entertainment. These technologies are a part of the worldwide digital network called the 'information superhighway' that links converged media in the form of text, video, audio and graphics. A critical part of this social matrix are the rural areas of developing countries, particularly Asia and Africa. These together constitute almost three quarters of the world's population with almost 70% of the latter living in village habitations.

One of the key intentions of this paper is to argue and illustrate that the surfeit of communication technologies coexists with a massive reservoir of rural poor in developing countries. For the latter the information glut and the content of information are irrelevant, simply because they do not address their concerns and needs². Hence, the need for demand driven, responsive rural development programs wherein IEC (information, communication and education) activities become the fulcrum for the community.

Mapping Mass Communication Theories And Models

Etymologically, the English word 'communication' is derived from the Latin noun 'communis' and the Latin verb 'communicare' which means to 'make common'. Terms closely related to communication with similar etymological origins include community, communion, commonality, communalism and communism. The uses and understandings of communication as a concept have come a long way from its original association, first with 'means of transport' and then 'transmission'. Similarly, information is made up of bits of messages, verbal or non-verbal and is essentially unilinear. Communication, on the other hand, is not merely sending or receiving information, it is rather a whole situation, an experience; a human relationship in sum.

Dennis McQuail (1994) sees 'human communication' in linear terms as sending of meaningful messages from one person to another. These messages could be oral, written, visual or olfactory. He also takes such things as law, customs, practices, style of dressing, gestures, buildings, gardens, military parades and flags to be communication.

Communication has further been classified into several types: verbal and nonverbal; technological and non-technological; mediated and non-mediated; participatory and non-participatory etc. Most of these typologies, however, are mainly for pedagogic or instructional purposes and in actual practice there is much overlapping of the various types. One common typology, however, relates to the size of a social group or the number of people involved in the experience of communication. Such a typology ranges from the 'intrapersonal' and 'interpersonal' to the 'group' and the greater 'mass'.

The study of mass communication is one topic among many for the social sciences, and only one part of a wider field of enquiry into human communication. Under the name 'communication science' the field has been defined by Berger & Chaffee (1987,p.17) as a science which 'seeks to understand the production, processing and effects of symbols and signal systems by developing testable theories, containing lawful generalizations, that explain phenomenon associated with production, processing and effects'.

Group communication has over the centuries been extended by the tools of mass communication such as books, the press, cinema, radio, television and Internet. The term 'mass' denotes great volume, range or extent while 'communication' refers to the giving and taking of meaning, transmission and reception of messages. One definition

(Janowitz, 1968, pp.41-53) thus reads as follows: 'mass communications comprise the institutions and techniques by which specialized groups employ technological devices (tools mentioned above) to disseminate symbolic content to large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed audiences'. Besides, communication via the 'new' media such as digital video, cable, video-on-demand, teleshopping, computers and Internet is interactive in nature and asynhronomous, i.e.sending and receiving of messages is at one's convenience.

In the above context, the Western theories and models of communication have their origin in Aristotle's Rhetoric, the latter constituting of three elements- the speaker, the speech and the listener. Perhaps the most widely quoted definition of mass communication in terms of the Aristotelian Rhetoric ('who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect') is that of political scientist Harold Lasswell. Essential to this definition are the notions of transmission and transfer of information for intended effects or influence through persuasion. Infact, within the above framework of analysis, theorists like Charles Osgood, Wilbur Schramm and Shannon & Weaver postulate a mechanistic notion of communication as transfer of information from active sources to passive receivers. In recent years, however, the focus has shifted to 'semiotic approaches' that address the questions related to social interaction through signs and their meaning. The ritual model of communication put forth by James Carey, on the other hand, views the transmission of messages for purposes of social control through rituals, myths and values of a society.

Here it is pertinent to point out that 'mass communication' is generally identified with the tools of mass media. Infact, these media tools are only 'processes' and must not be mistaken for the phenomenon of 'communication' itself. Development communicators like Daniel Lerner, Everett Rogers and Wilbur Schramm have variously termed the power of mass media to propel change in developing societies as 'empathizers', 'diffusion of innovations' and 'magic multipliers' respectively. But the fact remains that within the process of development in rural areas of these societies, access to, distribution of and control over the tool of communication is heavily skewed against the marginalized and poor.

Therefore, interpersonal communication as a dialogue and a participatory relationship that should flow bottom up has emerged at the heart of a distinctly South American prespective.The key elements of 'liberation', 'participation', 'conscientization' and 'endogenous growth' have been derived from the writings of late Paulo Firere, the Brazilian educationist and scholars like Schumacher and Jan Servaes. These perspectives including those of dependency, multiplicity and 'another development' theorists challenge the Aristotelian model of communication as transmission They further envisage development and its communication as a process of mobilization of local resources with a view to satisfying local community needs.

More importantly, Dennis McQuail summaries a democratic participant media theory in a statement of principles as;

- a) 'Individual citizens and minority groups have rights of access to media (right to communicate) and rights to be served by media according to their own determination of need.
- b) The organization and content of media should not be subject to centralized political or state bureaucratic control.
- c) Media should exist primarily for their audiences and not for media organizations, professionals or the clients of media.
- d) Groups, organizations and local communities should have their own media.
- e) Small scale, interactive and participative media forms are better than large scale, one-way, professional media.
- f) Certain social needs relating to mass media are not adequately expressed through individual consumer demands or through the state and its major institutions.
- g) Communication is too important to be left to professionals.'(McQuail, 1987, p.123).

Rural Participatory Communication

Thus, it needs to be noted that the idea of community centered rural development has grown out of a body of relatively consistent research findings that focus on 'audience oriented' communication strategies. These play a catalytic role in creating decentralized media project structures that strengthen the process of participatory management in developing countries. Therefore, in my view, 'small media' also known as 'alternative media' or 'community media' (e.g., folk, street theatre, group radio, video, telecenters, internet etc.) appropriate to a community are now increasingly being structured to empower the inhabitants in rural areas. The aim is to strengthen capacity building and enable equitable access that initiates qualitative behavioral change. According to Roncagliolo (1991, p.207): 'the alternative is that which posits a cultural plurality in which every cultural expression has its place- those of our region and the entire world, including the cultural and ethnic minorities in the North and South.'

Herein, project strategies range from multifaceted communication campaigns to support for cultural community interaction as entry point activities that strengthen interpersonal communication. Over a time, participatory self-management methods have also been refined to incorporate needs of the intended beneficiaries. These include designing the project goals and selecting the appropriate 'communication mix' to support implementation in sectors such as education, health, poverty alleviation, agriculture and media literacy. For example, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and IEC (information, education, communication) are popular techniques, used and proven in the above sectors that involve bottom-up needs assessment through social/livelihood mapping, seasonal calendars, problem trees and baseline surveys. They serve as diagnostic profiles for the framing of communication support objectives in consonance with fragile eco systems (Gary Coldevin, 2003)

Besides, in today's strategically etched global information system, as wireless infrastructures spread and bandwidth expands, telecommunications and internet based ICT's (information and communication technologies) are being increasingly utilized as critical inputs in self managed projects. These instantly and affordably connect the poorest rural communities to global networks. As pointed out by Dennis McQuail 'they not only make possible decentralization and high capacity but also interactivity and flexibility' (1994, p21). The emphasis being on issues of 'diversity' and 'pluralism', suggesting that nations and regions cultivate their own responsive approaches to self determined developmental goals that emerge out of participatory processes.

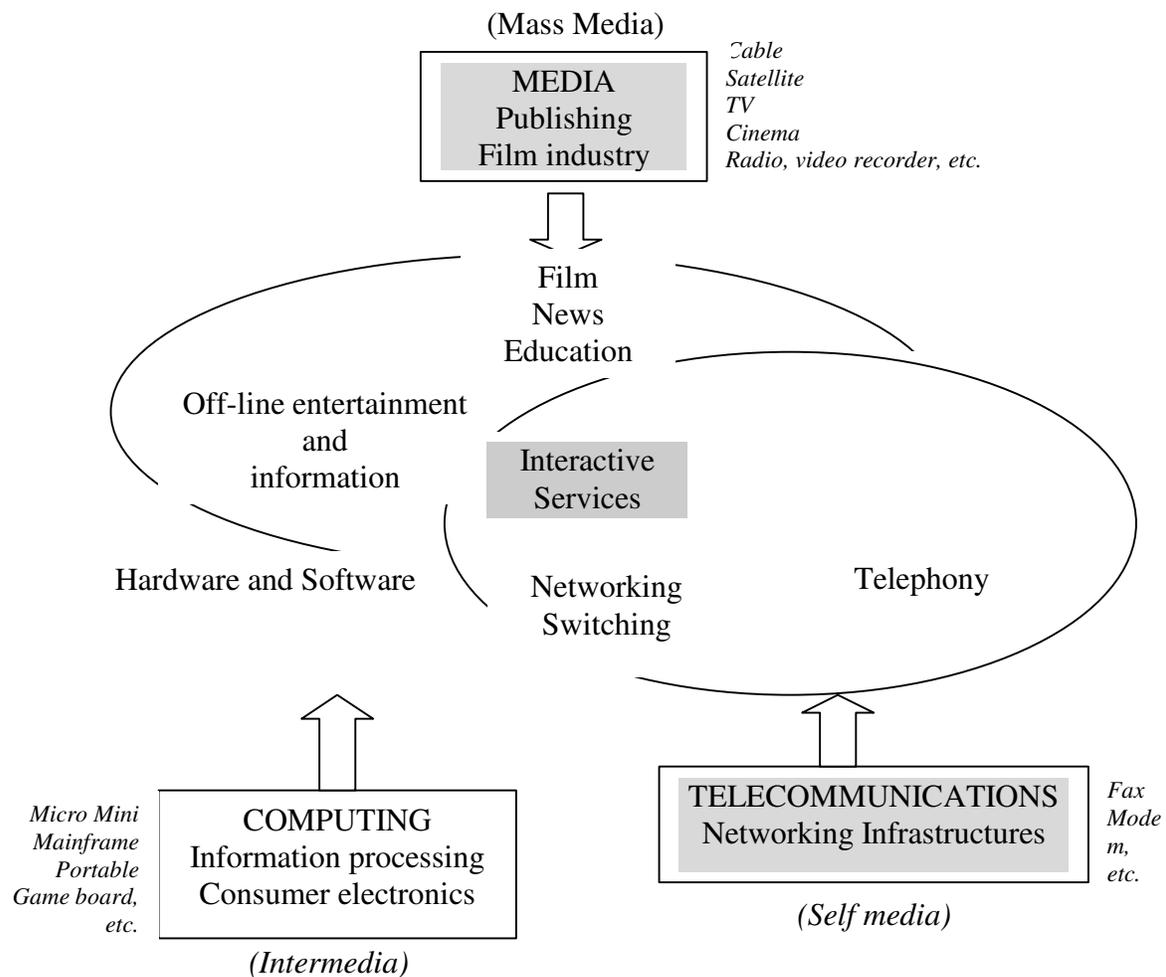
I will return to the complexity of self managed media projects, IEC activities and intricacies of theoretical perspectives on community media in the above context. It is important, at this juncture however, to make a brief comment about the centrality of the 'community' in the discourse on participatory communication strategies.

Shift In Focus

The communication approaches of 'innovative diffusions', 'empathy', 'magic multipliers', 'two step flow' and 'social marketing' of the 50's were congruent with the concept of universal and top down development. This formed a part of the western centric modernization paradigm. But current scholarly perspectives view sustainable development in developing rural societies as an integral and multidimensional process with emphasis on self-reliance; ecology and basic needs (Servaes & Malikhaio, 2003). These are undoubtedly insightful observations. Thus, with this shift in focus the attempt is no longer to create a need for the information that is being disseminated, but the effort is to share information electronically in the rural community for which there is need. Equally worthy of serious attention, as pointed out earlier in this paper, is the interactive nature of development communication strategies. The latter are now being fundamentally recognized as 'two way' rather than 'one way' and participatory rather than linear.

Within the framework of the above paradigmatic shift in policy, practice and application of communication tools to rural community development, new forms of democratic communication institutions have been emerging in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Under the aegis and with the collaboration of civil society stakeholders, non-governmental organizations and international organizations like UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)³, these emphasize self-management, through ownership and operation, of ICT's by marginalized rural communities. The latter are enabled to network horizontally rather than vertically through converged multimedia systems⁴ (also see Table 1). Consequently, access to and effective use of these tools and networks of the new global economy would make media innovations possible. This in my opinion, would be a very critical input in achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals of poverty reduction, increased social inclusion and leading of a more fulfilling life for all the rural poor (Sachs, 2005).

Table 1: Convergence



Source: World Communication Report, 1998

Community As The Building Block

I also believe that as a result of the new potential that the ICT,s are said to offer the concept of 'community' (defined as having close, concrete human ties and a collective identity as contrasted to the absence of identifying group relations in a society) has been pushed to the front again. Firstly, because ICT,s such as the Internet have opened new ways of participatory communication for community networking. Secondly, within the discourse on globalization versus localization, the tremendous potential of possibilities in the digital arena makes the community the primary focus of rural development programs.

Besides, scholars are also currently examining the structural conceptions of belonging and sharing amongst communities formed in geo-culturally defined spaces

(real life and grounded in face to face interaction between members) as well as 'virtual' or 'online' communities created in cyberspace. For instance, newsgroups like *Soc.Culture.Singapore* offer a virtual forum on the Internet where actions of the government are discussed from a democratic perspective. Thus, both the economic and cultural perspectives, in this area of study, critically examine and ask the question- how can relevant information, that is available on Internet be made accessible to rural communities and thus serve the community, be the latter geographic, virtual or online (Lie, 2003)?

Before proceeding further, I wish to make a few points by way of clarifications. Given the constraints of time and space, my engagement in the paper ahead with perspectives on community media from UNESCO World Communication Reports 1998, 1999 and other documents by the same agency, replete though with rich materials and insights, is rather selective. What I wish to illustrate in particular is the extraordinary complexity of the whole range of means that communities use to communicate with each other, including the modern media of press, radio, video and television (including satellite) and traditional media such as graphic art, music, folklore and drama. This also involves questions about participation, access and control of a broad representative cross section of socio- economic levels, organizations, minority or sub cultural groups within the community.

What you read next (Table 2) is an abstract of the general communication and information indicators that constitute the fabric of communication services and their impact upon community media.

Table 2 [Please see at the end]

Theoretical Perspectives On Community Media

Community media today, according to one perspective, involves the use of communication tools that are oriented towards the community regardless of its exact nature. 'These are media to which members of a community have access for information, education, and entertainment when they want access. They are media in which the community participates as planners, producers and performers. In fact, they are the means of expression of the community rather than for the community'⁵. Thus, social groups use media to create and foster forms of culture that structure everyday life (Baran & Davis, 2000). Implicit in this perspective are concepts of 'community of interest' involving a sense of belonging other than geography, ethnicity in a physical space (also understood as user groups when such interest binds communities in cyberspace). There is also a notion of subjective 'community of meaning' that implies active construction of identity by its members within the social communication structure in which the individual is rooted.

Since access and participation herein are the key defining factors, the relationship between the community medium and the community transcends the ordinary one-way communication. A two way communication, consequently, enables

societal groups that are disadvantaged, marginalized or repressed to benefit from using the channels of communication opened by community media. This strengthens their internal identity and hence makes social change possible.

A second perspective about community media is based on the concept of alternative media. This concept introduces a distinction between mainstream and alternative media, where alternative media are seen as a supplement to mainstream media structures. Mainstream media are (such as national broadcasting or print media) usually considered to be vertically structured organizations that are carriers of a dominant discourse and are geared towards large, homogeneous segments of audiences. Alternative media (such as folk, street theater, video) on the other hand are small scale, oriented towards disadvantaged groups, horizontally structured allowing for facilitation of audience access and participation within the framework of democratization and multiplicity (Carpenter, Lie & Servaes, 2003).

Alternate media supplement mainstream media both on the organizational and content levels. The former can not only exist independent of the state and market but also provide air space to local cultural manifestations, ethnic minority groups and hot political issues in the neighborhood or locality (Jankowski, 1994) Besides, the orientation of community media towards giving voice to various social movements, minorities, counter cultures and an emphasis on self-representation results in a more diverse content signifying the multiplicity of societal voices.

The explicit positioning of community media as independent from state and market supports the articulation of a third perspective that considers such media as a part of civil society. A starting point for defining community media as a part of civil society can be found in a model (Thompson, 1995) that describes the public and private domain, in contemporary western societies. In the latter, the organizations relating to the state are seen as constituting the public domain and privately owned economic organizations geared towards profit or personal/family relations are considered to be a part of the private domain. Based on this distinction, civil society can be defined as a group of intermediate organizations e.g. charities, political parties, pressure groups, cooperatively owned enterprise that are positioned somewhere between the public and private domains. By defining community media as a part of civil society, these can be defined as a 'third voice' between the state media and the commercial media (Servaes, 1999). They enable different societal groups and communities the opportunities for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in the public sphere, thus entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro participation.

The fourth perspective envisages community media as a rhizome (that unlike trees, or their roots, connects any point to any other point). Herein, community media not only play a pivotal role in civil society but can also establish a strategic linkage with state and the market without losing their identity. Such media thus can play a catalytic role by functioning as the crossroads where communities of different types of movements meet and collaborate, e.g. women's, peasants, students, and/or anti-racist movements. Besides, they can not only function as an instrument, giving voice to a

community related to a specific issue, but can also function as a facilitator, grouping people actively in different types of struggles of equality (or other issues involving sustainable development).

Thus, the aim and purpose of community media could be envisaged as 'expanding the services of mass media, challenging mass media systems and their implications, offering alternatives to mass media systems and doing things that mass media systems cannot do'. (Lewis, 1984, p.1). [UNESCO's Third Medium Term Plan (1990-1995)]. Consequently, this attempt to supplement mainstream media and rethink the meaning of public sphere in civil society through community media may relate to various purposes. These being the motive, sources of funding, regulatory dispensation, organizational structure, criticism of professional practice, message content, relationship with the audience, composition of the audience and the range of diffusions.

Evolutionary Profile

In the above context, the modern history of community media has to be seen against a background in which the ideological functions of the state were increasingly being taken over by the commercial exploitation of communication. In earlier centuries, the struggle for the 'freedom of the press' had won a space where professional practice operated in commercial institutions largely free of state control. Electronic media, first radio and then television, were in Europe, following the model of the telegraph more closely controlled resulting in strict licensing policies and public service monopolies. These systems were transferred in the colonial phase to the Third World countries including Asian countries that adapted them on independence without little modifications. The American free market model was also exported to countries in the United States' sphere of influence. Europe too has throughout this century experienced the pressure of American cultural influence.

From the perspective of 'community' or 'indigenous cultural identity', these developments in communication had negative effects, whether the agency was state linked or commercial. For example, despite bringing undoubted benefits, John Reith's BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), centralized and south east dominated was an alien voice in the regions of the British Isles as was commercial radio advertising to a Bolivian paisano or Toronto programming to Inuit of the Canadian North.

This one way bias of national broadcasting systems was countered over the years in several countries. For instance, a seminal project in Fogo Bay, Newfoundland used film and then video to allow a fishing community, under the threat of economic extinction to argue its case for funding aid from the provincial government. Similarly, in Quebec where assertions of French language rights and cultural identity formed a rising tide of political protest against Ottawa, video use multiplied astonishingly. Among the Latin countries of Europe, especially France and Italy, the Quebec experience was admired and initiated. At the same time plans for cabling new towns and suburbs in Europe- in Bologna, Grenoble, the Netherlands and Sweden, for example, assumed that the community on small format video would be the *raison d'être* of the systems.

In the 1970's video was not the only medium in which communities were expressing themselves. In Northern Europe (Britain, Netherlands, Scandinavia) cautious moves were made towards localizing the public service radio provisions. But in Belgium, France and Italy where state broadcasting monopolies had been most rigid and centralized, 'radio libres' exploded uncontrollably.

The fate of community radio in Europe provides a good illustration of an alternative medium's dual opposition to both public and commercial services. The original motivation for most community radio initiatives in the region was the negative experience of mass media suffered by a variety of marginalized political and social groups. This was the case even with a country like Britain which was one of the first to decentralize its radio monopoly. In other parts of Europe, steps towards community radio have typically started with a deliberate legalized response to pressures for access and a means to reflect social pluralism. In post Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, AMARC, the world organization of community broadcasters recently noted that 'the trend is towards large scale commercial radio and despite interest in alternatives to models offered by centralized socialism and free market economy, the prospects for any rapid and sustainable development of autonomous and non commercial community radio are dim' (AMARC, 1991, p.26.)

In practice, then, the free market does not seem to be able to satisfy the complete range of communities of taste and interest. As for public service broadcasting, as it increasingly feels the pressure of competition, intensified by cuts in public subsidies or support, by privatization and deregulation, certain areas of programming may be vacated. This could be taken over by community radio specifically and community/ alternative media in general with advantage.

At the international level, attempts to redress the imbalances of news flow and unequal resource have taken the form of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) which has its origins in the theories of dependency and cultural imperialism. Locally, alternative and community media projects have been motivated by a desire to empower marginalized social groups whose condition, needs and voices are ignored by the authorities and by mainstream media. Nevertheless, UNESCO's fifth General Conference in 1989 adopted a resolution with three interlinked concepts i.e. (a) free flow of information; (b) wider and better balanced dissemination of information and (c) an increase in the communication capacity of developing countries. This not only extends the hope for a conducive environment for working towards an equitable global information flow, but also addresses issues of community empowerment through local self governance structures, IEC activities and media literacy in rural areas of developing countries.

Project Profiles

Within the above framework, therefore, the dynamics of community media involve the need for media technology for self empowerment of the people, especially women, to

demystify the process of mass communication. Democratic grassroots involvement in small scale media enables people to formulate their own definitions of needs and goals and in J. Nyerere's phrase, 'develop themselves' (1973, p.60).

The Kijl De Wijk Project is one such initiative located in the North Belgian part of Antwerp called Seefhoek. The project supported by funding made available to a group of social organizations has two main objectives: to give media training to communities living in this area and to improve the image of the area. The purpose is to allow the participants to function in complete autonomy when registering and interpreting the events deemed important by them in their immediate neighborhood. The main structuring components of the KdW project are participation and empowerment through media synergy without media centrality. With high degree of orientation towards the local community, the project uses the geographical approach to community development to provide access to inhabitants through training workshops on group video and radio. This acquaints them not only with media technology but stimulates them to discuss problems that they consider relevant to the community's well being.

Similarly, the Telecottage movement in Scandinavia and Hungary was initiated to fight against marginalization of remote rural places in the information society. This has led many international organizations to support such locally improvised multipurpose community telecentres in rural areas of developing countries in both Asia and Africa. These kinds of public community places provide different kinds of telecommunication services (phone, fax, computer, and photocopies) integrated with the use of Internet, community radio and e-mail access. They are distinguished from telephone call centers by their emphasis on a broad spectrum of information services, and by their explicit support to community centered self management (Pfiester, Roman & Colle, 2000). This also entails small group training in ICT proficiencies like networking and information data navigation.

In the same vein, the Kotemale Internet Community Radio project is a pilot project jointly implemented by UNESCO, Ministry of Telecommunication & Government of Sri Lanka, The Sri Lanka Telecommunication Regulatory Authority, The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and the University of Colombo. The core of the project is a community radio station, radiating with a one KW transmitter, 15 hours on weekdays and 20 hours of programming on weekend days covering about 60 villages and three towns in the South Central region of Sri Lanka. The community radio provides access to the Internet, and helps raise awareness about the Internet among the community members while programming for health, education, agriculture and various life skills. Free public access to the Internet is supplemented by facilities like the radio browsing program in the local language and a community website for database development. The Mahaweli, Tambuli and Sagarmatha radio projects in Sri Lanka, Philippines and Nepal respectively are other such similarly oriented projects.

A very pertinent purpose of the projects highlighted in the preceding paragraphs is objective of promoting rural community empowerment and addressing the issue of 'digital divide'. This is being achieved by combining community broadcasting with the

Internet and related technologies. Implicit in these projects is the notion that connectivity for development is far from being only a question of infrastructure, hardware and software. The human dimension is critical too. By reaching out to the illiterate and uneducated these centers become an inclusive 'info rich' force for development of a need-based demand for learning, information and knowledge. With universal access (Jayaweera, 2003) as the fulcrum such centers help in the development of cultural identity of communities. They also act as a vehicle for peoples self expression or serve as a tool for diagnosis of a community's problems (Melkote, 1991).

A very strong movement to promote community radio in India began in 1996 (though decentralized television pilot projects were launched in Khera, Gujarat and Denekanal, Orissa earlier by the government) when a group of communicators and academicians held a conference and pronounced the Bangalore Declaration on Community Radio. Consequently, under UNESCO's special project, 'Women Speaking to Women', a non-governmental organization, the Deccan Development Society with funds and technical expertise established a station in Pashtapur, hundred kilometers south of Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh. Studio facilities are being locally used to produce and distribute audiocassettes on numerous issues related to women's empowerment.

Similarly, Namma Dhawani is a community multimedia center located in Bangrapet Taluk of Kolar District in Karnataka (in collaboration with UNESCO's funding arm International Project for Development of Communication⁶, NGO's Myrada and Voices). It transmits cable FM and makes narrowcasted loudspeaker programming for the local community of approximately 20,000 inhabitants.

Outside the fold of international agencies like UNESCO, there are outstanding examples of rural community multimedia projects. These are successfully contributing towards strengthening the democratic process by providing access to different viewpoints and helping solidify local development efforts in India's rural landscape⁷. ITC's e-choupal project is very popular with farmers in India that provides connectivity to relevant global market information. Video SEWA's participatory videos, which use folklores to enable women's empowerment, reaches millions of rural women for multiple purposes of teaching, organizing and inspiring (Singhal & Devi, 2003). On the same footing, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation's 'Village Knowledge Centers' (information kiosks) have been established to be run by individuals on a semi voluntary basis and to take advantage of ICT,s to the rural poor on issues of health, relief information, inputs on agriculture, transport and revenue records.

I am firmly of the view that going by the complex nature of these community media projects in the developing countries, be it radio, video, telecenters, multimedia centers, more case studies need to focus on the production of local knowledge not merely for the message and its effective communication only. They also need to examine the micro processes of making messages, the people involved in this process, the question of who controls the process and who is empowered by it. Lastly it is also important to evaluate the actual result in terms of communicating particular messages

through IEC activities. It goes without saying that economic self management and a communications technology infrastructure would be critical prerequisites in analyzing participatory communication modes in such projects.

Besides, another interesting linkage to critically probe would be the integration of such media projects and IEC activities with systems of rural local self governance in the wake of factors such as illiteracy, poverty and backwardness. For instance, in India, by the 73rd Amendment, 1992, the Constitution of India now provides for such bodies to act as institutions of self-governance. The latter have now been given a constitutional status in the federal continuum. Power now devolves, backed by legislation, from the Center to States and then to the village level for participatory decision making. Crucial to any examination of 'integration' mentioned above would be the impact/role of the regulatory communication dispensation e.g., the Ministries of Information & Broadcasting, Telecommunications and the Department of Information Technology in the Government of India in a quasi- federal structure. It would also be pertinent to keep in mind, in the above context, the implications of the recently introduced Right to Information Act, 2005.

Looking Ahead: Imperatives and Impediments

My key intention in this paper is to show the potential that community media holds for offering alternatives to mainstream media systems in development of cultural identities of communities, as well as serving as a tool for diagnosis of a community's problems in the rural landscape of Europe and Asia. Also, that wherever civil society exists, such media are important features of the 'public sphere' yet not sufficiently recognized by the political executive and communication policy planners. The framework of analysis becomes more intricate in the Asian context in the backdrop of socio-cultural factors such as illiteracy, poverty, density of population and backwardness.

Using insights from the Democratic Participant Media Approach to the study of community media, I have argued that the issue of 'digital divide' can be more effectively addressed by combining community broadcasting with Internet and related technologies through rural community owned multimedia centers. The issue of the latter's integration with systems of rural local self-governance in Asian countries needs a closer examination. While acknowledging the insights offered in studies conducted by UNESCO and other agencies, I believe we need to further critically evaluate production of local knowledge through such projects for purposes of access, control and management by the rural community. What is needed now is also the creation of a 'public sphere' in which there is room for non-commercial media that are global in extent and association. In my view we need to take Jane Sarvaes (2003) seriously when he points out that more attention should be paid to any number of individual rural communities in any nation state. He also adds that we have to focus on their use of new means of communication for interaction, social action and in devising participatory decision making strategies.

It is also pertinent to state that community media in the West developed as a critique of, and alternative to, mainstream broadcast media. Groups that supported alternative media have historically had extra-parliamentary origins, whether in the Europe, North America, Latin America or Africa. Asia, however, has seen no such significant extra-parliamentary movement (Jayweera, 2003). Community multimedia projects here have been mostly associated with externally funded development projects and have been driven exceptionally by international agencies like UNESCO, which has been at the center of the communication and development debate- with its thrust on participatory communication as a two way process.

Thus, theoretically speaking, authentic participation and communication, as a part of the above process in Asia, are hall marks of an engagement with democratic decentralization. But in actuality, participation, access and self management in community media projects (as also IEC activities in government sponsored rural development programs) require a more equitable sharing of both political and economic power. The latter often decreases the advantage of entrenched elites, vis-à-vis, the marginalized and poor communities in rural areas. Structural changes such as in the areas of land reforms, primary education, health, media literacy and social security however, involve redistribution of power, within or outside the rural local self government systems. These reforms should occur first in order to firmly establish participatory communication policies for rural community development. This alone would make it possible to take a holistic, integrated, multidisciplinary and intersect oral approach in analyzing communication problems in rural areas. Only this in turn would enable designing and planning effective multimedia communication strategies in support of the broader goal of sustainable development.

Table 2: Selected General Communication And Information Indicators

	World	Sub-Saharan Africa	Arab States	Southern Asia	Eastern Asia	South-Eastern Asia and Pacific	Latin America and Caribbean	Eastern Europe and CIS	Industrial countries	Developing Countries
General Indicators										
Est. midyear population 1996 in millions	5,787.4	604.9	260.4	1,337.7	1,805.7	3,516.6	484.3	343.5	1,228.7	4,538.7
GNP/Capita	4,880	518	2,162	426	1,323	617	1,533	2,013	18,158	1,141
Human Development Index, 1995	0.772	0.386	0.636	0.462	0.676	0.683	0.831	0.756	0.911	0.586
Est. adult illiteracy rates, in % of population, 1995	22.6	43.2	43.4	59.8	na	16	13.4	na	1.3	29.6
Tertiary education: enrolment in millions	7.4	0.9	5.6	3.2	na	4.5	7.0	na	18.0	4.3
Postal Service										
Domestic services: dispatched letter items/capita, 1995	69	6	5	na	na	17	16	31	380	na
International services: dispatched letter items/capita, 199	1.6	1.1	2.6	na	na	0.5	1.1	1.6	6	na
Press										
No. of dailies, 1994	8,896	157	135	2,790	404	3,650	1,199	na	4,088	4,808
Est. circulation / 1,000 inh., 199	96	10	44	27	na	56	44	na	44	286
Newsprint consumption, kg/inhab., 1996	20.9	1.6	2.9	1.9	7.5	6.8	10.7	6.7	78.2	5.2

	World	Sub-Saharan Africa	Arab States	Southern Asia	Eastern Asia	South-Eastern Asia and Pacific	Latin America and Caribbean	Eastern Europe and CIS	Industrial countries	Developing Countries
Media										
No. of radio receivers/1,000 inh., 199	364	166	264	88	215	156	384	412	1005	185
No. of television receivers/1,000 inh., 1996	228	35	138	55	248	150	223	317	524	145
Computers										
No. of PCs/1,000 inh., 1996	43.6	na	5.7	1.2	6.5	8.3	17.5	18.2	156.3	6.5
Internet										
No. of hosts, in thousands, 1996	16,253	104	9	4	135	77	164	246	15,818	435
Estimated no. of users/1,000 inh., 1996	4.8	na	0.2	na	0.5	0.6	1.3	2.6	17.9	0.5
Est. no. of people on-line, in millions, 1999	158	1.1 ⁴	0.8 ⁵	na	na	26.6	4.6	na	125.1	na

1. Estimate based on 7 countries only
2. Estimate based on 3 countries only
3. Figures based on 4 countries only
4. Include African Arab States.
5. Refers to the Middle East.

Source: World Communication Report, 1999

Notes

¹ Binary language is at the heart of digital communication. It uses two numbers 1s and 0s called, 'bits' to exchange information and these are the building blocks of the digital information system. For more details about digital technologies involved see Dennis McQuail, 'Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction', London, Sage Publications, 1994, p.21

² Also called the digital divide or digital disparity, which calls for equitable access to and sharing of communication infrastructure between developed and developing countries. For more information about the Theory of Information Gap see Stanley. J. Baran & Dennis. K. Davis, 'Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment and Future', Canada, Wadsworth, 2000. Pp.296-297

³ UNESCO has been concerned with communication since its inception in 1946 and in advancing free flow of ideas by word and image. See UNESCO, 'UNESCO's contribution to Cultural Diversity and Communication for Development.' In J.Servaes.(ed.), Approaches to Development Communication, Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 1999, p. 143.

⁴ The basic and limited definition of multimedia is media in which spatial data (text, image and sound) are merged with temporal data (voice and video) by means of the computer. See Jeane Paul Lafrance, 'Multimedia: Products and Markets', Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 1999, p.143

⁵ F. J. Berrigan, 'Community Communication. The Role of Community Media in Development', Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 1979, p.8

⁶ UNESCO's main operational instrument for upgrading the communication capacity of developing countries is this agency. It collaborates with strategic partners such as private governmental and non governmental agencies for alternative funding.

⁷ The right to information and the practice of democracy through rural local self governance has been discussed by noble laureate Amartya Sen. See John Dreze & Amartya Sen, 'India-Participation and Development', New Delhi, Oxford Press, 2002, pp.347-375

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