

# STRATEGY PAPER FOR COMMUNITY TELEVISION IN INDIA



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*for*



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## **Introduction**

India is witnessing a slow but steady growth of Community Radio ever since the government opened up air waves in 2003 to both educational institutions and later to the civil society sector. This was preceded by more than a decade-long advocacy campaign by the country's civil society demanding people's access to airwaves.

As per the official website of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (which issues community radio licenses) 171 CR stations are operational across the country, although most of the licenses are still held by educational institutions (<http://mib.nic.in/linkstthird.aspx>). Right from the hilly regions of Uttarakhand to the hinterlands of the Maoist-affected areas such as Chattisgarh, to the southern states of the country, the community radio sector has made its presence felt in the mediascape today. The government, by offering CR licenses even in what it once called 'disturbed areas', has demonstrated its openness to providing a voice to the grassroots and strengthening democracy .

It must be noted that while the government is exhibiting more openness to issuing licenses, broadcasting of local news by the CRs still remains a thorny issue.

## **Meet on Community Media**

The UNESCO Chair on Community Media, with support from its partners including UNESCO, UNICEF, Commonwealth Educational and Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) and International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) conducted a two-day meet on Community Media as a pre-conference event to the International Association of Media and Communication Research annual conference (IAMCR 2014) held in Hyderabad between July 15 and 19, 2014. The pre-conference, held on July 13-14, 2014 attracted over 100 community media experts, advocates, activists and practitioners from across the world.

During the pre-conference event, a special session on 'The Potential of Community Television in South Asia' was held on July 14, 2014.

Speakers at the panel discussion including Dr. Ankuran Dutta (CEMCA), Sajan Veniyoor (Media Consultant), Vasuki Belavadi (Community Media enthusiast) and Bazlur Rahman (BNNRC, Bangladesh) threw light on global experiences and how countries like India had missed an opportunity on promoting community television during the cable revolution in the early 1990s. It was time countries like India took lessons from the way policy was changed only after a number of narrowcasting initiatives in CR were demonstrated. The panel also discussed the various community video initiatives in India and the possibilities of community television.

## **Community Video/Participatory Video: The Global Experience**

Canada and the US were pioneers in making policy changes to accommodate public service broadcasting on the one hand and community television on the other to "make the new tool of video available for community expression and problem-solving via the new medium of cable television" (Community TV Policies and Practices Around the World (<http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cmcs/1pages/Community-Television-Around-the-World.htm>) way back in the 1960s. Several countries in Europe and South America followed suit with dual goals of local expression and freedom of speech that characterized the initial days.

Many other developing countries opened up community-access television on their own to fill local educational, developmental, and linguistic needs. Many developed over-the-air community

television (OTA) and used volunteers. This was mainly to offset the costs of equipment and also because of the realization that more local people participated. More local participation meant more relevant programming for the community. The movement by the Zapatista communities in Mexico is only one of the many examples that illustrate freedom of speech as a focal point for community access television.

Community Television Policies and Practices around the world, a seminal report released by the Canadian Radio, Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) in 2009 reflects research done in 30 countries on community access TV/ community television. According to the report, the community TV as was designed and governed by policies by different countries remained stable through the 1980s and 1990s.

However, with rapid advancements in technology, particularly the arrival of digital technologies and the enormous bandwidths that became available with it, different countries began to reassess their policies. While some opened up access for the publics, some decided to allocate them to the private market. Many western countries that missed the initial wave of community television have now taken advantage of the internet. Thus most western countries have community television in one form or the other. It must be noted that even in all these countries, community-based initiatives spread (although initially in small measures) rapidly enabling more parts of the population to access video technology and making videos of interest to their community.

The situation in the developing world was quite different. Most of them tended to focus on radio given its cost-effectiveness, simplicity of operation and ease of reception.

Beginning 2000, the development of handheld video cameras and availability of commercially licensed post-production software, coupled with falling costs of desktop computers has seen the rise of community-based video initiatives.

More and more communities in the developing world have been finding low-budget ways to produce appropriate video. One must admit that the process is still in a flux.

Different countries have evolved their own mechanisms of licensing community television, funding and operation and distribution.

The following table shows a summary of how community television operates in different countries in terms of licenses, funding and distribution.

| <b>Country</b>  | <b>License Category</b>  | <b>Funding</b>                           | <b>Distribution</b>        |
|-----------------|--|--|----------------------------|
| Canada          | Community cable, low-power                                       | Cable subscriptions, provincial (Quebec) | Cable/OTA analog (UHF/VHF) |
| Usa             | PEG (Public/ Educational/ Government Access)/ national satellite | Cable subscriptions                      | Cable/satellite/some Web   |
| The Netherlands | Local public   | Primarily federal                        | Cable/some Web             |
| Germany         | Open channel   | State                                    | Cable/some Web             |
| Austria         | Private cable  | Municipal                                | Cable/Web                  |
| Belgium         | Public nonprofit   | Municipal                                | Cable                      |

|                    |  |   |   |
|--------------------|--|---|---|
| The United Kingdom | Restricted Service License (RSL)/cable/ national satellite | Municipal/Cultural  | OTA analog (UHF)/Cable/Web, digital satellite |
| Denmark            | Shared commercial/ community                               | Federal   | OTA analog, UHF                               |
| Norway             | Cable/university/ national nonprofit                       | Federal/advertising   | Cable/OTA/digital OTA                         |
| Finland            | Cable  | Municipal/ Advertising/viewer donations                       | Digital cable/Some Web/mobile phone           |
| Sweden             | Open channel   | Memberships   | Cable/Web                                     |
| Spain              | Local nonprofit  | Municipal/ads/ Donations                                      | OTA analog, UHF                               |
| Italy              | Unlicensed (pirate)  | NGOs/hobbyists  | OTA analog, UHF                               |
| France             | Local, nonprofit/ national cable & satellite               | Donations/ employment programs                                | Digital OTA, UHF/ cable/satellite/ Web        |
| Mexico             | denied   | NGO/video sales   | Screenings                                    |
| Venezuela          | Community  | Federal/municipal/ advertising                                | OTA analog, UHF                               |
| Brazil             | Community  | Membership/NGOs   | Cable/screenings                              |
| Uruguay            | Community/municipal/ closed circuit cable                  | Cable subscriptions   | OTA analog and digital, UHF/cable/ screenings |
| Bolivia            | Private community  | Advertising/ viewer donations, video sales, international aid | OTA analog, UHF and VHF/screenings            |
| Peru               | Local commercial   | Advertising   | OTA analog                                    |
| Colombia           | Community  | Cable subscriptions   | Cable   |
| Israel             | Community (local cable and national satellite)             | Federal/municipal   | Cable/satellite                               |
| Nepal              | Cable  | Cable subscriptions   | Cable   |
| Australia          | Community/national satellite                               | Memberships/ads federal                                       | OTA analog, UHF/satellite/some Web            |
| New Zealand        | Community  | Memberships/ads/ federal                                      | OTA analog, UHF/satellite                     |
| Fiji               | Community  | NGO/donations   | OTA analog, VHF                               |
| South Korea        | National public/ private/cable                             | Federal   | OTA digital VHF /cable/satellite / Web        |
| Japan              | Cable  | Occasional municipal  | Cable   |
| South Africa       | Community  | Federal/ads   | OTA analog, UHF                               |
| Benin              | Local public   | Ngo   | OTA   |

( From Community TV Policies and Practices Around the World <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cmcs/1pages/Community-Television-Around-the-World.htm>)

## Community video in India

One of the earliest community video/participatory video initiatives in India dates back to 1984 when Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) launched the Video Sewa project. Since then women members in this under-developed region of Gujarat have been producing videos that educate, inform and motivate other women into action.

In early 2000, Deccan Development Society launched a participatory video project focusing on local, traditional, sustainable farming practices with about 10 Dalit women wielding the camera. Around the same time Byrraju Foundation also launched the 'Finding a Voice' PV project that focussed on basic issues such as health, literacy, education, livelihoods etc in two districts of Andhra Pradesh. They tied up with the local cable so that 69 more villages could watch programmes made by members of the communities. The other notable initiative has been Video Volunteers (2009) which has rapidly grown to be a formidable community video experiment across the country. Through its projects such as India Unheard, VV seeks to train community video producers "to produce videos that effect positive change through social action". The videos are distributed through the internet and several videos have been telecast by national and regional television channels. Digital Greens is yet another initiative that has been launched recently in many parts of the country. Focussing mainly on agriculture, Digital Greens has community producers (farmers themselves) who share their agricultural practices and experiences with other farmers in the region.

Children As Media Producers (CAMP) is an initiative of the UNESCO Chair on Community Media that seeks to build capacities of children and adolescent/youth in participatory media to tell stories of the world they see from their perspective. Videoshaala by Drishti, WAVE (Women as Video bloggers for Empowerment) among others are making their presence felt through their experiments.

### **Cable TV: A lost opportunity?**

Cable Television in India has a very interesting history. Entrepreneurs first established the cable network in the early 1990s in metros like Bombay (now Mumbai) and 'distributed' programmes played back on a VCR to their subscribers. Very soon this enterprise spread to other cities. A couple of more aggressive entrepreneurs imported equipment that would enable receiving of foreign channels on the Indian soil. That is how foreign channels made their presence in the early 1990s. The then government, which had initiated the liberalization process, decided to allow entry of foreign channels into India thereby providing a choice to the viewers besides Doordarshan, the state-owned television channel which was a monopoly on terrestrial transmission. The cable enterprise spread its tentacles so quickly that in response to demands from the citizens of the country, the government had to pass an Act in 1995 that would regulate the Cable TV industry.

Satellite and Cable TV had penetrated to over 80 million households by early 2000 (in analogue mode) and the figures today stand around 130 million. This does not include DTH subscribers.

Although cable television had made massive inroads, neither the government, nor the civil society attempted to capitalize on this technology on a large scale. This was mainly because video continued to be a capital intensive technology until almost 2005. By the time digital camcorders, smart phones became relatively affordable (although some still question the same), the cable TV had gone digital with only a few MSOs dominating the market. This meant that the Small Cable Operator, who at one point of time had a channel or two to distribute programmes of his choice can no longer do so.

## Community Television: The way forward

While a couple of initiatives in countries like India seem to be doing well, most others are still at the experimental stage, struggling for funding and sustaining them. Distribution of the already produced content still remains in the community-screening mode, internet or an occasional pact with a regional channel. Television in India today has terrestrial, satellite and cable, DTH as the main distribution modes, although other avenues such as VoD etc are yet to take off. Same is the case with IPTV given the low internet penetration and abysmal bandwidths even where present.

Nepal already has a vibrant community television sector. Bazlur Rahman of Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) is optimistic that the policy will be in place by early 2015. Recently in the UK, OfCom has recently started issuing licenses for local community television, with about 19 across the country already in operation. India sure has lessons to learn from them.

As Dr. Ankuran Dutta (CEMCA) pointed out, CV initiatives in India may want to exploit the internet with the government expressing keen interest in providing decent bandwidth to all the village panchayats in the next couple of years. India may want to look at the following recommendations to ensure a vibrant community television in the country.

- More participatory video initiatives and experiments with technologies need to be encouraged and promoted in the country with state or funding from multi-lateral agencies.
- The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which has taken up the task of supporting the CR sector could look at community video as an emerging tool for democratization and support initiatives both for seeding and sustenance.
- Community video/ participatory video initiatives across the country need to network and form alliances to strengthen the movement, share experiences and provide their expertise to other initiatives.
- There is an immediate need for the civil society/NGO sector to partner with other movements and foreground freedom of expression to push for policy level changes. Advocates may want to take lessons from the CR experience and push for policy changes to coincide with the announcement of a policy given the growing presence of CV/PV initiatives across the country.
- Policy level advocacy could include one or all of the following:
  - a) Free access for communities on state-run regional channels.
  - b) An amendment to the Cable TV Regulation Act including a 'must carry' clause for community produced videos
  - c) Declare CTV as a third tier and provide a channel at the regional level. Doordarshan has a narrowcasting division (NCD) that can be suitably used by local communities to produce relevant programming. Right now NCD only produces agriculture-based programmes for a limited number of hours.
  - d) Providing subsidized internet access to communities involved in community video initiatives.
  - e) Tax exemptions to communities that initiate community video practice.
  - f) Begin work on a draft policy drawn from experiences of neighboring countries like Nepal where CTV has already taken root and Bangladesh where it is in the process of taking shape.