



STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RADIO IN INDIA

A NATIONAL CONSULTATION

New Delhi :: April 11-12, 2017

Organised by:



With support from:



Working Paper

DOCUMENTATION, RESEARCH & EVALUATION

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Introduction & background

Community Radio in India has evolved from a movement that began in the late nineties to a sector supported by Policy guidelines promulgated by the Government of India¹ that enables education institutions, agricultural universities, Krishi Vigyan Kendras (Agricultural research centres) and registered Non-Government organizations to apply for and receive broadcast licenses, the last revision of which was made available in 2006. Although it is over fifteen years since work began on creating an enabling environment for marginalized and alternate voices to be heard and diversify the mediascape in the country, the space continues to remain under supported in critical ways. In order to inform how Community Radio can remain open and available to marginalized communities in meaningful ways and support its growth, it is important to continuously map activities, understand the various contexts in which operational Community Radio stations are broadcasting, unpack the challenges faced in establishing and running a community Radio station and explore opportunities for expansion. This paper aims to establish the importance of research, documentation and evaluation in the community radio sector in order to inform policy, capacity building and technology decisions. Further this paper supports the value of participation within documentation, research and evaluation and provides a justification to invest in this area so that as community radio expands in the country, it remains firmly rooted in its foundational values of voice diversity, community ownership, human rights and social justice.

An online search for the meaning of **documentation** reveals a simple yet clear definition “*material that provides official information or evidence or that serves as a record*”. For the purposes of this paper documentation will mean creating and maintaining records of ongoing work and broadcast at community radio stations, using a wide variety of tools and methodologies for documenting this work to reflect the diversity of engagements that a community radio undertakes as well as recording challenges and successes.

¹ http://mib.nic.in/writereaddata/html_en_files/crs/CRBGUIDELINES041206.pdf

Research means re-engaging with ongoing work to reflect on and derive meaning from, to advance existing knowledge or posit new knowledge. This would go beyond collection of data and documentation and would include the systematic study of such data using well-articulated methodologies in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions or reaffirm older ones.

Evaluation means the summing up, appraising or according value and determining significance including through ranking, numbers or other participatory, approaches to knowledge generation. For community radio, this would lead to establishing whether or not the sector is meeting up to the desired outcomes and aspirations of those supporting it, of those running it, and of the communities that they are meant to serve, both at individual - at the CR station level - as well as broadly at the national and sectoral level.

Current issues relating to documentation, research & evaluation

While a lot of work in CR is related to broadcasting and community engagement, it is critical to document and research the practices for several reasons:

- i. It enables reflection on CR practice and deepens and enhances its work;
- ii. It creates a body of information that can be made available to those within and outside the community and the sector to help build an understanding of the role that CR plays in the life of a community and its potential to contribute to change;
- iii. It enables the CR to become transparent and accountable to the community it serves, and opens up spaces for monitoring and evaluation; and
- iv. It creates a basis for policy advocacy and reform based on the grassroots experiences of the stakeholders.

Three critical questions need to be examined when discussing documentation research and evaluation:

- i. What should be documented, researched and evaluated?
- ii. Who should do it?
- iii. How should it be done?

What to document, research and evaluate?

Documentation can cover all activities at the CR - application, licensing, equipment installation, broadcast, community engagement, and feedback. Management systems, processes and everyday practices within CR would be a good starting point for documentation. Maintaining simple logs and tracks of the people contributing to and working at the CR stations, as well as the content produced and broadcast would be helpful data for overall annual monitoring, research and reflection. CR stations may also document annual expenditure and resource mobilization, as well as time and resources spent in engaging with government structures for renewal of licenses or release of funds/advertisements in order to establish and reflect on funding requirements and costs as well as deficits in available resources. Documenting equipment and technology failures and challenges as well as enabling technological methods would inform innovation and contribute to knowledge on technologies useful for community radio.

In particular, for CR, it is critical to research audiences, participation and social change within the community, listening to and engaging with the CR station as well as of people contributing to and working with the CR station. Research may also be done to explore perceptions around diversity, freedom for cultural expression, self-efficacy, especially for expression of the most marginalized, equity and justice that the CR stations can establish. Additionally, based on desired outcomes of programmes, CR stations may also be interested in researching knowledge and awareness levels of their listening communities around different areas of concern and interest.

In-depth research of the overall sector, including but not limited to policy implications, technology and spectrum, CR capacities and functioning, community engagement and listenership, community empowerment and change, sustainability and resources etc - is also important. It would be useful to research implications of policy, and not just CR policy but other national and state policies and their impact on community radios, their functioning and sustainability as well as impact of changing policies on interests of CR listening communities, especially, the marginalized. Community radio research cannot and should not replicate research methodologies used for mainstream commercial and

national media where profit motives and return on investment or raising awareness, information dissemination, behavior change and audience reach are key parameters for study and, indeed, for measuring success. New methodologies linked to the core philosophy and principles of community radio need to be articulated in partnership with research institutions, CR practitioners and academicians.

Additionally, researching capacity-building needs and sustainability needs of CR stations would result in creating informed recommendations for CR policymaking and resource allocation for the same.

Evaluating community radio requires establishing different benchmarks. *What* is evaluated often determines the principles of action that those who are evaluated may begin to follow. For example, if numbers of audiences reached becomes a benchmark for success, CR stations may aspire to increase this benchmark at the risk of excluding others. While several aspects of community radio can be subjected to evaluation it may be useful to arrive at priority areas for evaluation through multi-stakeholder consultative processes. Some work around this has already been done and is noted in the case study section of this paper. Deepening and strengthening that work will be critical in taking community radio in India forward.

New areas for documentation and research must continuously be articulated, listed and supported as the sector changes and grows, including, for example, safety and security of community radio reporters, self-censorship and its consequences for community radio, and impact of lack of news broadcast on radio.

Who should document, research and evaluate and how can it be done?

At the outset, given its roots in community ownership and participation, community radio stations and its communities themselves may be encouraged to take on the role of documenting and reflecting upon their own practices. This may require creation of processes that enable critical reflection as well as building of capacities to document.

Ethnographic action research² has shown that, methodologically, it provides the greatest depth in terms of enabling a deeper understanding of social processes. Management logs, documentation of organizational structure and broadcast practice could be designed in collaboration with peers as well as with support and facilitation from other sector organizations. CR station reporters and active community members may be trained to regularly undertake ethnographic work to document everyday community radio content creation and broadcast processes. Given that multiple media are now available and digital technologies are relatively more accessible, these may be used for enabling regular documentation. Audio-visual techniques may also be used for this purpose. Innovation in this kind of self-documentation using video by CR has been initiated under the Our Practice Initiative with considerable success³.

Further, It is also critical to establish systematic processes for analyzing the documentation in order to come up with an understanding of the work being done and how the same may be strengthened. Additional partnerships with researchers and institutions with enhanced skills for research, documentation and analysis could be fostered to assist CR stations create meaningful articulations regarding the work they are doing.

Periodic national level research processes must be supported through a consultative and transparent mechanism to enable learning with regards to the potential and the challenges faced by community radio in India. It is also important for the Government to support research and documentation in the CR sector. If the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting commissions studies by independent institutions, the findings must be shared widely with the various stakeholders and their implications discussed in a transparent manner.

² <http://ear.findingavoice.org/>; <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001394/139419eo.pdf>

³ http://ideosyncmedia.org/Publications/Our_Practice_IPDC.pdf

Self-evaluation/Peer review

Some pioneering work has been done in this area. A selection of self evaluation and assessment tools already exist: The Self Assessment toolkit for Community Radio stations and Practitioners developed by CEMCA⁴ and the CRCIT⁵ by the UNESCO Chair on Community Media and the Self-Assessment Guide⁶ by Ideosync need to be regularly used by CR stations for at least three to four successive years, and at regular intervals thereafter. Additionally, there is need for work on building capacity for CR stations to analyze the findings made available through the use of self-evaluation tools. Resources need to be made available for such work to enable self-evaluation to become meaningful for CR stations. A system of peer review using these tools was initiated by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry and results of the same may be studied to strengthen the process and undertake more such programmes without necessarily tying the reviews, assessments and evaluations with access to funding support.⁷

Further, while these self-evaluation findings may be useful for the CR stations themselves, it is important to collate these findings to provide meaningful insights for the sector as a whole and develop an overall evaluation of impact of CR on Freedom of Expression and social change indices.

A process of community audit and systems and technologies for the same should be explored to enable listening local communities to audit and provide annual feedback to their community radio stations while attempts must be made to demystify research and strengthen the capacities of communities to undertake participatory research on their own.

⁴ http://cemca.org.in/ckfinder/userfiles/files/SAT_978-81-88770-11-3_19-9-2013.pdf

⁵ <http://ucommedia.in/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/CR-CIT-Version-2.0.pdf>

⁶ <http://ucommedia.in/news/doing-it-better-a-self-assessment-guide/> ;
http://ideosyncmedia.org/Publications/Ideosync_CR%20Self%20Assessment%20Guide_English_4th%20Feb%202014.pdf

⁷ <http://crfc.in/a-case-for-peer-reviews/>

Self-regulation/Code of Ethics

Some initial work has been done in the CR sector through training and capacity building programs undertaken with some CR stations where CR station staff and volunteers developed their mission, vision and ethical guidelines⁸. Ethical guidelines have also been articulated and written up as a set of guidelines by CEMCA⁹. However, there is little by way of research and documentation of challenges faced by CR stations while trying to meet these guidelines.¹⁰ Work needs to be done to assist CR stations adopt these guidelines. A self-regulatory body needs to be established with membership of not just practicing CR stations but also academicians and capacity building and research organizations invested in the sector to help evolve guidelines distinct from state run and commercial media. This would also help create an identity for the sector. Adherence to these ethical and self-regulatory guides should become the benchmark for renewal of CR licenses. And, community radio associations and networks must play a role in promoting adherence to these ethical guidelines among their member stations.

Sharing of Practices

Ongoing work has shown that community radio practitioners adopt and learn from each other as well as from those working in academia and with other institutions. Sharing is also required with other countries as regional and international good practices help strengthen understanding at the local level. Peer-based learning and sharing systems need to be strengthened and sustained.

Some systems and processes have already been created like the Community Media Manch¹¹ - an online learning and sharing platform. The UNESCO Chair's CRUx (CR User

⁸ <http://www.unicefiec.org/document/community-radio-learning-the-skills-a-complete-manual-for-community-radio-trainers>,
http://ideosyncmedia.org/Publications/CR_Training_Manual_UNICEF_IMC_2014.pdf, pages 210-215

⁹ http://cemca.org.in/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Low-Res_EPG_for_CR.pdf

¹⁰ Malik, Kanchan K. "Our Media, Our Principles, Building codes of practice for community radio in India" *Journalism Studies* Vol. 16, Issue 5, 2015: Pages 750-764
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054195>

¹¹ www.manch.net.in

Experience) platform is another effort in this direction along with EDAA¹² (Ek Duniya, Anek Awaaz) by CEMCA. These opportunities for horizontal communication within the sector need to be supported and sustained to enable broader sharing and peer based consultations. Simultaneously there need to be processes put in place to collate the learnings emerging from these sharing platforms and understand what practices are being adapted and why.

Community Grievance Redressal

CR must adhere to principles of freedom of speech. Unacceptable broadcast must be identified and objected to by listening community. A system of ombudsman within the local community radio must be supported to adjudicate complaints and redressal of grievances. There need to be transparent and well publicized ethical guidelines that uphold non-discriminatory and progressive ideas of equality, social justice, and the rule of law which must be followed by all CR stations while addressing grievances.

There are international experiences in this regard and work should be supported to bring those experiences to bear while creating self-regulation and grievance redressal mechanisms into the Indian sector.

¹² <http://edaa.in/>

Recommendations:

1. There must be processes put in place for exchange visits among CR stations to encourage horizontal learning. Existing platforms for sharing, learning, and collaboration must be sustained and strengthened.
2. Capacity-building efforts must be put in place for developing research and documentation skills within CR stations.
3. The sector must work towards a CR Consortium which should adopt a code of ethics that would reflect the core non-negotiable principles of the CR sector in India.
4. Self-Assessment and Peer Review exercises must be facilitated and encouraged as a tool for co-learning and continuous improvement.
5. The government should support research and documentation in the CR sector, and if such studies are commissioned, the findings must be shared with various stakeholders and their implications discussed in a transparent manner.
6. Research, Assessment and Evaluation methodologies for the CR sector must be distinct and different from those adopted by mainstream media and must be in keeping with the core participatory principles and philosophy of community radio.
7. Systematic processes must be put in place such that documentation, research and evaluation informs policy-making and support for the CR sector.