

8. Science and Technology Communication through Community Radio

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Abstract. Radio has always been a powerful medium of Communication in India. By late 20th century, even before the advent of private and commercial radio channels, All India Radio had a reach of about 80% of the Indian masses. Listenership was somewhere between 40 % and 50 %. Now even after the advent of so many radio channels, the listenership of radio has increased only marginally. The reason varies from increase in population to advent of television, satellites, internet and other means of communication. However radio communication stands alone, since it may be the only means of communication in difficult times like power failure due to cyclones, earthquakes and other similar disasters.

Community radio catering to the needs of a few lakhs of listeners in the coverage area, can be of great help considering the regional, linguistic, religious and socio economic divides in a vast country like India. Reaching the unreached community, radio can also help in communicating scientific and technological advances to the underprivileged. Moreover by its very nature, participatory programmes can be arranged, since community radio can reach listeners in their own language, address their immediate local problems and suggest solutions. Education is spreading its wings everywhere and the real benefit of education will accrue only when day to day scientific and technological advances are brought to the knowledge of the people and their rights and privileges are understood by them. Community radio can be very effective because of the familiar language, easy reach, participatory nature and effective interaction.

In this connection, the experience of Kongu Community Radio or rather its achievements in science communication to rural people will be an eye-opener. Right from its inception six years ago, Kongu Community Radio has been incorporating scientific and technical programmes for the benefit of the listeners. A daily programme supported and catalysed by RVPS division of DST, Govt. of India, "Science for Women's Health and Nutrition" addressed the health problems and disseminated valuable information to the listeners, and ran for over one year. Another project supported by the same agency entitled "Understanding Planet Earth" has been running for more than 6 months enlightening the listeners the origin, glory and the threats to the Mother Earth. Not to be left behind in understanding the technological advances a series of 8 episodes on "Chandrayaan" was launched from the day on which the vehicle landed on the moon.

The episodes highlighted the evolution of rocketry, satellites, moon and space probes and the Indian spectacle of Chandrayaan explaining in simple language the nuances of space probe and space technology. Further, programmes on most important scientific discoveries through the ages are broadcast in lucid and simple style for the benefit of even illiterate listeners. Apart from this, awareness programmes on health, nutrition, pollution, global warming etc. are conducted and broadcast in suitable radio format for the benefit of school children and other listeners.

The Science Communication can cut across frontiers and reach the society effectively through Community Radio broadcasts.

Keywords: Community radio, Science communication, Participatory broadcasts

Introduction

All findings, inventions, innovations and achievements of science and technology have to be essentially directed towards the well being of the global society. With the entire world becoming a global village, the thrust areas of scientific and technological research is rightly becoming increasingly focussed towards the well being of the human race. Until the later part of twentieth century, most of the nations have been concentrating on protecting themselves from external threats and defence look the centre stage in their economy and expenditure. The scene has changed now, with most of the countries realizing the need for global cooperation and global protection. Any scientific or technological progress has to have its underlying focus on global issues for achieving this goal. Not only Nations, but individuals, groups, educational institutions, village, town and city administrations and governments also will have to make collective efforts in proper anticipation, planning and execution. The developing countries like India, are focussing their attention on how science and technology can address global issues like natural disasters, global

warming, energy conservation, new and renewable forms of energy, nuclear cooperation, space exploration among others. It is the inherent duty of everyone from ordinary citizen to top government executive to ensure that any local issue also will have to be tackled keeping in mind the global repercussions. The saying “Think globally and act locally” has to be the watch word for everyone.

Today, the so called “Fourth Estate” does not denote print and press media alone. Technological advancements in TV, Radio and other electronic media including internet, mostly due to satellite communications, also come under the umbrella of Fourth Estate.

Community Radio (CR)

Radio has always been a powerful medium of communication in India. By late 20th century, even before the advent of private and commercial radio channels, All India Radio had a reach of about 80% of the Indian masses. Listenership was somewhere between 40 % and 50 %. Now even after the advent of so many radio channels, the listenership of radio has increased only marginally. The reason varies from increase in population to advent of television, satellites, internet and other means of communication. However radio communication stands alone, since it may be the only means of communication in difficult times like power failure due to cyclones, earthquakes and other similar disasters.

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CR in India

Community radio in India is a relatively new entry in the field of communication. Through the ultimate aim of establishing several thousands of CR stations has not yet been achieved, to-day there are only a little less than 100 community radio stations in India. This has to be compared with more than 6000 community radios even in less populated countries. The reasons are multifold, but some of them are worth mentioning. The fierce competition for setting up profitable commercial radio stations, the hesitation on the part of stake holders in investing on a not too attractive venture in terms of revenue investment, fear of the sustainability, fear of adherence to the policy rules and regulations for CR in India, lack of awareness on CR and its usefulness are some of the major inhibitions forestalling increase in the number of CR stations. But it can be gainsaid that quite a few community radio stations in India are living up to the expectations of the Government of India.

The first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru wanted Indian citizens to develop what he termed as “Scientific Temper”. Ever since Independence, Science and technology has shown a steady growth, though the impact has not reached million of people in the country and it is imperative that effective communication is necessary to carry forward the message of science and technology to their own place of living since most of them have little opportunity to go elsewhere and get information. In this respect CR stations can play a vital role in effectively communicating information regarding science and technology. Though this may not be the only or primary function of a CR station, it can serve the purpose at the grass-root level reaching the under-informed.

Impact of CR Stations in Tamilnadu

Among the Community Radio stations on air in India, Tamilnadu tops the list with more than 18 stations. In fact the first CR in India started its broadcast way back in 2004 at Anna University, Chennai followed in Tamilnadu by Kongu Community Radio at Kongu Engineering College, at Perundurai near Erode. Anna Community radio started its scientific broadcasts targeting women’s health and nutrition which went on air daily for 1 year with the support of RVSP division of DST, Govt. of India. The broadcasts brought together women of the coverage area and experts in the field of women’s health and hygiene and Anna CR has now embarked on the second phase of the same programme.

Kongu Community Radio, functioning from Kongu Engineering College situated in a village in real rural surroundings, also look up a project on “Science for Women’s Health and Nutrition” again with support from RVSP

division of DST. The programmes saw participation of women in capacity building workshops, content development, awareness programmes, with guidance and advice from experts in the field. The programme which ran for 1 year successfully has helped to build a strong listeners' base for community radio. The station is now broadcasting a series of episodes on "Understanding Planet Earth" again with RVPSP support. It has helped listeners to understand several aspects of earth, right from its evolution, upto the present day state of the earth. These programmes have been successful in creating awareness on the dangers and disasters facing the earth and the possible ways of combating natural and man-made disasters. All these programmes saw active participation of variety of people mostly women from all walks of life.

Another community radio operating from PSG College of Technology, Coimbatore for the past 3 years has also made impressive progress. PSG Community Radio, through situated in an industry-heavy urban area has been playing a major role in disseminating vital information on community health, global warming and other socially relevant programmes. Currently PSG CR has launched its "Understanding Planet Earth" programme with the guidance and assistance from RVPSP division of DST, Govt. of India.

CR from Holy Cross College, Trichirappalli has also been involved in broadcasting socially relevant programmes which have become popular among their target group of listeners. There are quite a few other community radio stations in Tamilnadu which are providing the science and technology inputs required for their respective catchment areas. In this way the community radios have been playing a major role in disseminating scientific information needed for the particular section of the society in their coverage areas.

Organizations like Commonwealth Educational Media centre for Asia have been providing yeomen service by educating, monitoring and evaluating the performance of CR Stations. It will not be out of place to mention here that realizing the unavoidable expansion of community radio stations in India, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has launched some courses on "Community Radio". Community radio has also entered the curriculum of Rajiv Gandhi National Institute for Youth Development (RGNIYD) in all their post graduate programmes with a few credits. This Institute also runs Ilanthalur Community Radio from its campus for youth development. Surely, the concept of CR is taking roots in India.

Kongu CR and Science Communication

Apart from DST supported programmes on Science for Women's Health & Nutrition and Understanding Planet Earth, coming back to the efforts taken by Kongu Community Radio in popularizing science and technology, mention has to be made of a few of its programmes. A programme on science and technology popularization called Arivial Paarvai (Scientific Vision) is being broadcast every Sunday for the past 4 years regularly, touching upon the various aspects of science and technology. A series of 8 episodes on India's prestigious space probe "Chandrayaan" was broadcast from the day on which the Moon Impact Probe of Chandrayaan landed on the moon. These episodes highlighted the advances in space probe by different nations of the world, the need for such explorations and finally the aim and achievements of the Indian space venture "Chandrayaan". Based on these episodes, a book entitled "Science Reaching the sky: Chandrayaan" was released. The copies of the book were distributed at World Classical Tamil Conference held at Coimbatore in June 2010 to the delegates who attended the session in which the Project Director of Chandrayaan Mr. Mayilsamy Annadurai delivered a lecture. In an ongoing programme, the most important scientific discoveries right from the days of Archimedes are being broadcast every week to enable listeners to appreciate the significance of important scientific discoveries in all fields. More than a hundred discoveries will be highlighted in this series. Efforts are on for bringing out a compilation of all these episodes in the form of a book.

Awareness Programmes

Apart from this broadcasting activity, Kongu Community Radio has been in the forefront in organizing awareness programmes for school children and villagers, on health, nutrition, eye and dental care, HIV AIDS, climate change and global warming. The station crews of Kongu CR have been consistently engaged in taking the message of science to the masses directly, by arranging special programmes and lectures for school children and others. In this aspect, about 3000 school children and 300 teachers have benefited by Kongu CR's outreach programmes on climate change and global warming. All India Radio's Kodaikkanal FM radio, the most popular radio channel in Tamilnadu went on air with exclusive live phone-in programmes on "Global Warming and Climate Change" one of which had the station-in-charge of Kongu CR as its expert presenter. Kongu CR has provided inputs on science and technology to the television channels also highlighting scientific advancements, global warming, natural disasters among other things. Radio professionals from BBC, AIR, Doordarshan, China Radio Tamil Service and dignitaries from USA,

Korea, China, Canada, apart from officials, educationists and enthusiasts from all over India, have visited the studios of Kongu CR and appreciated its efforts in enlightening the community.

Kongu CR also has trained radio professionals and media persons. With the assistance of Chennai wing of Internews Network, a 7-day workshop on “Emerging issues in HIV testing” for radio professionals in Tamilnadu was held at Kongu CR station. Another programme on “Role of Media in Earthwise Living” was organized for local media professionals and reporters. Nature walk by school students was successfully organized to inculcate love of nature in young minds. Video clippings, posters and handouts emphasizing the need to protect the beauty and nature of earth were profusely used to create awareness on energy saving and global warming. Many of the programmes emphasized the ways in which the problems should be addressed and tackled. Feedback and responses received and surveys conducted have shown appreciation for these programmes.

Conclusion

Community radio stations can definitely help in taking the concepts of science and technology to the common man and can involve them directly because it is the only channel through which one to one correspondence can be established. The only constraint today is the inadequacy of number of CR stations in India. When more CR stations are established and if each CR station broadcasts at least 20 % of its programmes for popularization and communication of advances in health, science, technology and agriculture, it should be possible to effectively transmit useful information to listeners throughout the country. If every willing citizen is able to participate in well organized programmes, community radios can effectively cut across barriers, reach the people from nook and corner and communicate advances in science and technology in all relevant fields like education, agriculture, environment and energy.

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