

Growth and diversification of mass media in India: Whose interests, whose ideas?

Abstract

This paper compares two distinct perspectives on the growth of mass media in India. On the one hand we have the institutional and business perspective commonly employed in the assessment of the growth and diversification of print, electronic, and online media. This perspective asserts itself in the media discourse measuring the growth in revenues of mass media, media diversity, consumption of media products, popularity and penetration of various types of content and the like.

On the other hand there is the development communication perspective, which is dominated by the political economic critique questioning the benefits the development and diversification of mass media has delivered to the masses. An ongoing research on 'NGDO perception of their relationship with their stakeholders' conducted by the author of this paper, addresses this aspect.

Preliminary findings with respect to NGDO interaction with mass media suggest that the appearance of 'development news' in mainstream media can largely be traced as the history of repeated press releases and other efforts made by the NGDOs. Respondent NGDOs also acknowledge that it is essential for them to get press coverage because it enhances NGO profile which in turn helps securing funding opportunities for their programmes and development interventions in the community. Although, the hard found positioning in the news may be advantageous for NGDOs' institutional development, it does lend itself to criticism whether it actually translates into a tangible and sustainable gain for the beneficiary communities serviced by these NGDOs—for instance, in terms of developing and fostering wider-community networks, addressing of local issues, access to markets for local products etc.

In a comprehensive model the authors map the higher levels of media interest at policy levels and corporate PR to its lowest ebb at the grassroots development activity. The drivers of mass media growth are deeply rooted in the modernity paradigm, which is quite paradoxical with the elements of participatory development and communication. Often it is assumed that growth of Internet Technologies and Interactive Online Media demonstrates potential to pull the traditional mass media out of the modernity paradigm by encouraging and accommodating participation of the masses. However, in India, access to these new media is by far limited to urban middle-class, whereas the emergence of a truly deliberative and participatory democracy would solicit an active participation of the vast majority of the rural population, in both consumption and creation of content.

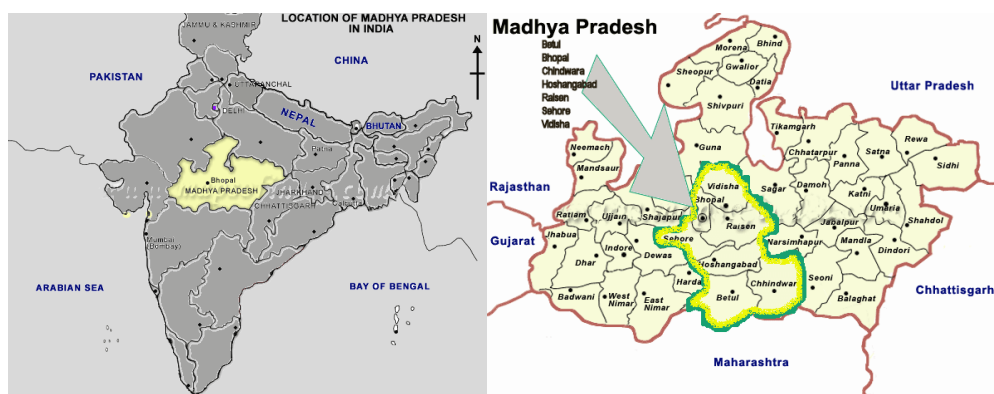
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Introduction

This paper is part of an ongoing research in the field of Development Communication with the objective of exploring Non-Governmental Development Organisations' (NGDOs) perception of their own communication with their beneficiary communities, and with other actors on the development scene, including administration and external (international) funding sources. One of the objectives for the main research was to interpret the significance and role of various actors from field NGDOs' perspective of their communication to get an insight into the *participatory approach* as in practice at the grassroots level. A significant part of the interviews has been in relation to the role of mass media and new media technologies in NGDOs' institutional development and impact on their interventions in the target communities.

Research area, data& respondents

Figure 1 Map of the Region



Eight ground level, Non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) were contacted in seven adjacent districts of central India, and data collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews organising field trips to the selected region (Figure 1), to gain an inner perspective on the relationships they have with their target community(ies) and other stakeholders in socio-economic development. The author of this paper, Munawwar Naqvi, is originally from this region. One major advantage of this to the current research is the researcher's familiarity with Hindi and its local dialects as also the local culture, alongside the researcher's previous experience of working as a communication consultant with local NGDOs and therefore being able to contextualise and interpret the frequent 'NGOspeak' occurring in the data. The narrative interpretation also reveals the roles of various other actors at the community level and the complexity of constraints within which NGDOs and/or community organisations work.

An underlying assumption with which the research sets out is that any understanding of development communication would be incomplete without plotting out the role of traditional mass media and the emerging online media in the context of developmental interventions by ground NGOs. It is widely acknowledged in politics and academia that the public functions of socialisation, orientation, recreation, articulation, education, critique and control are contributed by the media (Just, 2009). One of the objectives of this ongoing research is to focus on the interaction between ground NGOs and mass media, and whether their perception of media changes significantly over a period of time. This in turn will be compared with the changes occurring in the media including its political economy.

Globalisation, media plurality and growth

Plurality in the media is contextualised both as critical to public sphere and to ensuring healthy competition.

Media plurality is an end in itself with its own normative justification, and is also a means to achieve communications freedom, which as an essential element of democracy is again not only an end in itself but also a means of guaranteeing the proper functioning of the public sphere. Democratic, social and cultural ends are pursued predominantly by content and user-specific objectives, economic goals mostly by objectives related to the promotion of competition and market-power control. (Just, 2009, p98)

Yang and Shanahan's (2003) study investigates the impact of economic openness and globalisation on domestic media growth. It furthers our understanding of the increase in the flow of information and information based products and services. A large number of media markets have been cited to have undergone significant structural changes like deregulation, commercialisation, privatisation, merger and concentration to gear up for international challenges and enhance national competitiveness (Albarran & Chan-Olmsted, 1998; Blankenburg & Ozanich, 1993; Demers, 1999; Herman & McChesney, 1997 cited in Yang & Shanahan, 2003). Some of the significant conclusions include *'openness of economy strongly correlates with any type of media penetration'*, and *'even over and above other political, economic and geographic factors, penetration of newspapers, numbers of personal computers, Internet hosts, and telephone lines increased with more economic openness'*; and that,

[c]onsistent with previous studies of economic constraints on media consumption, our study provides evidence that GDP per capita is the most significant predictor of any type of media consumption and penetration across countries. (Yang & Shanahan, 2003, p569)

The highest rates of economic growth in India have been recorded in the mid 2000s, which is mainly attributed to the huge increase in the size of middle class consumer population. While increases in literacy rates had started to peak prior to this period, media consumption has shown significantly rapid growth during the last decade. This corresponds more with the structural changes the media markets have undergone than with literacy rates.

Perception of media at the local NGDOs level

Findings broadly reveal that respondent NGDOs,

- do not look favourably upon having an ongoing involvement of traditional mass media within their programmes
- have a generally negative view of other NGOs who prefer to maintain long-term relationships with mass media and get good media coverage
- are wary of rampant corruption in the media circles
- feel that good media coverage does not necessarily translate into building better funding relationships; and although press coverage does enhance their profile in the larger community, it does not do so within their target communities
- are not enthusiastic about online media and its potential for participatory communication and democracy for the limitations associated with access to online media.

The general perception among research respondents is that regardless of developments on the media scene –including rapid structural changes that have occurred in the Indian media— there has been little to claim that diversification and growth in mass media and penetration of new media have had a significant and widespread impact on developmental activity at the community level. Moreover, over the last two decades, media is being seen more as corporatised entities, concerned more with making profit than with ensuring their role in the proper functioning of the public sphere.

[T]he corporatisation of the newsroom and the corresponding extension of corporate influences on journalists raises other ethical questions. Media companies have often demanded special favours because of their power over public information. The larger the media company, the greater the favours it can request and the more likely it is to

have “friends” who are given preferential treatment in the news. At the same time, there can arise considerable pressure for a corporation’s media outlets to promote the operations of other sections of the corporation (Richards, 2006, p11).

The impact of economic forces on individual journalists is poorly recognised when the discourse moves into the domain of code of ethics for journalism. While their employers’ objectives are profit driven, the journalists are expected to resolve ethical dilemmas at their level of operation. As is evident from the data, many journalists give in to the economic pressures sooner than later in their career.

“..nowadays, you know that of course everybody is after money...media is no different. And the total picture of media, what we see today is that in every nook and corner we will find one reporter. Reporter is either happy and when he is unhappy you don’t know.” (data)

The research respondent in the above quote has used the word ‘happy’ in the sense of ‘monetary satisfaction’. The same respondent also indicated during the interview that *“if you give them twenty five –thirty thousand they will be there.. okay.”* Such expectations of journalists from NGOs or any other institutions may not be isolated instances, but have been surely cultivated overtime by ‘better off’ institutions and/or individuals. In this respect, Shah has quoted Rahul Singh (a former editor of *The Reader’s Digest* and *The Indian Express*, that in India,

[b]ribing, or influencing, journalists by business houses or by the government is nothing new. Indian chief ministers have ‘discretionary quotas’ of plots of land - sold at much below the market rate - which they hand out liberally to their favourites, or those they want to influence, which includes judges and journalists. (Shah, 2011)

Shah also cites a report in *India Today* listing most of the chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh having used discretionary powers to benefit journalists and media barons in various ways, “Media house owners also got government adverts, subsidised electricity and prime commercial land to set up their offices. At present, more than 200 journalists occupy these government houses.” (Shah, 2011). Referring back to the data quoted above from research, it becomes apparent that NGOs need to make sure that the media personnel in their region are ‘obliged’ in cash or kind to be able to get press coverage for at least their major programmes. One would expect that increase in competition because of assumed availability of multiple media outlets would lessen this kind of corrupt practices, but this is not reflected in the data, at least not at this stage.

Participation in mass media and media ownership

In the context of 'voices of development' in traditional media in India, as well as for the adoption of alternative media to these voices of development, Prasad (2006) asserts that,

[r]ural women in India have begun to successfully use alternate media to promote gender justice and sustainable development. Community media in various forms—radio, video, television, information and communication technologies such as the Internet and Web-based networks—are enabling rural women to debate about their rights and empower them through knowledge about different social, political, economic and environmental policies and programmes (Prasad 2006, p231)

The examples cited therein (Prasad, 2006, p232, 233) as community radio (*Namma Dhwani, Radio Ujjas*) are simply programme slots on local stations of All India Radio which is a state owned enterprise and has traditionally been seen as an epitome of government monopoly of the Indian media scene for much of the history of post independence India. The concept of 'community owned radio' is still in its infancy; at best the examples above can be cited as 'community related content on national radio' with some involvement of the communities in production. The 'ownership' aspect is still in ambiguous territory. A UNESCO report informs that an earlier policy which allowed only 'reputed educational institutions' to have radio stations, was modified to one that permits civil society organizations to have their own transmission. Ownership over content and channel was an issue contested by NGOs; they could use campus radios and buy time on All India Radio (AIR) earlier, but did not own the transmitters (UNESCO, 2007). After the above modification, they were expected to own their own radio station.

However, assertions such as above in the academic domain, paint an idealised picture of media and development in India, especially when viewed *visavis* the data collected from NGDOs in my research domain in central India, where NGDOs appear to be largely sceptical of any direct involvement of media. For example,

"We know that they won't play any positive role in this," (data)

and similarly,

"media is not sensitised to development. The development news usually finds a place in the classifieds, in a very little inch-by-inch square-that's all; or maybe two classifieds or three classifieds- not more than that."(data)

Some even come out as strongly as,

"media is least bothered about the development of the people. They are politically motivated people, they hardly talk about development...hardly. And if they do then it

is more often by the government initiatives -that's all. NGO or non-government initiatives are normally not covered by the media. It is only the development efforts made by the government. They are praised or obliged by the media, otherwise not."
(data)

There is very little media interest at the local level, compared to the coverage given to larger players like International NGOs and government policy (Naqvi & Papoutsaki, 2011). An overview of the situation reveals conflicting views in terms of representation by media and within media. If there are local editions of newspapers, they would generally be at the district level, if at all, and the lack of literacy prevents print media operation at the purely micro level (Naqvi, 2004). One needs to acknowledge that there are different kinds of participation in the media systems—each with its own characteristics (Denning, 1990). In reference to the media production skills being imparted to women groups as cited in Prasad (2006) above, there is a general suspicion among scholars whether greater professionalisation translates into greater democratisation. This may be attributable to the assertion that the structure of the medium and the nature of social relations it supports may be of more consequence than the nature of content produced (Schudson, 1987).

The shrinking costs of disseminating content over vast and extreme geographies have given a situation where anybody can interact with almost any kind of media product. However, the high levels of capital investment and technological know-how required to participate in mass-media systems prevents most people from meaningfully participating in content creation (Hamilton, 2000). The findings with respect to NGDO interaction with mass media suggest that the appearance of local 'development news' in mainstream media can largely be traced as the history of repeated press releases and other public relations efforts made by the NGDOs (data). Respondent NGDOs also acknowledge that it is essential for them to get press coverage because it enhances NGDOs' profile which in turn helps securing funding opportunities for their programmes and development interventions in the community. Although, the hard found positioning in the news may be advantageous for NGDOs' institutional development, it does lend itself to criticism whether it actually translates into a tangible and sustainable gain for the beneficiary communities serviced by these NGDOs—for instance, in terms of developing and fostering wider-community networks, addressing of local issues, access to markets for local products etc.

Another aspect which stands out clearly from the ground NGDO respondents' account of media coverage is that, the focus of development news coverage resides higher up in the development hierarchy (i.e., if we take into account all stakeholders at international, national

and local levels –see *Appendix 1*). For instance the news of an international NGO's initiative or a new government initiative will be readily disseminated by the media, whereas there is high uncertainty for ground NGDO initiatives being covered by the media. The respondents believe that NGOs with a high media profile are those who operate primarily from a 'media managed' position, and some of these NGOs are nothing more than media managed profiles –having no concrete plans or effective programmes in the communities.

[T]here is increasing agreement that the fundamental flaw in development theory and practice is the logic which has initiatives of the development process emanating from government or NGO programmes being controlled by urban-technical elites in alliance with international development agencies. Since a small group of educated urban-technical elites have the control, the economic, educational or other resources for development remain with them or are channelled to those of their own social status (White, 2000).

New media and Internet technologies

It is evident from the data that most NGDOs believe that the Internet is still a far cry for communities they work in –access to digital technologies and computer literacy being the primary cause among others. They also believe that ground NGDOs themselves lack the resources within the organisation to create excellent visual content and can't afford outsourcing these skills. When the researcher pointed out some photographers and media producers looking to collaborate with non-profit organisations, they put forth the excuse of having to allocate resources into maintaining a standard website which will be accessible to little more than an urban middle class and may not create an environment for the target community(ies) to engage with the core message. They however, agree that a 'good' website does help in securing funding opportunities, attracting partner organisations and influencing external audiences.

The target communities serviced by respondent NGDOs appear (from data) to not interact on their own with digital technologies except where some environment is provided by the NGDOs themselves which is usually at their administrative offices. It can be assumed that this interaction will grow with the penetration of digital communication technologies, improved infrastructure, increasing affordability and computer literacy. The general trend that is visible elsewhere in this respect can be traced as (Williamson, 2002),

Access > Literacy > Interaction with Content (Consumption) > Content Creation

From the NGDO responses it appears that the first two stages are the most critical for online media to play a vital role in communicating with the target communities and increasing their participation in developmental activities. Access to online media is primarily limited by poor infrastructure of services coupled with lack of affordability for the communities being served by the ground NGDOs. Next comes computer literacy which takes a lower priority because the NGDOs are more concerned with basic literacies for the community and this is demonstrable in their education programmes both for school going ages and adults. In this scenario, generally referred to by the respondents, the environment is not conducive for any independent 'interaction' with online content except where NGDOs or their partner organisations have provided for some spare nodes at their offices. Then too the interaction is more like a guided tour of online content, let alone any participation in content creation.

On the other hand interaction with online media content (consumption) as well as content creation has grown rapidly in the so called urban middle class over the last decade. Although it appears that development of capabilities for content creation in online media (even ignoring the digital divide) would be supportive of true democracy, the discourse on digital technologies quickly moves into the domain of the political economy of the Internet. A major critique appears to be 'the expansion of capitalism via the structure of online technologies', while penetration of online media seemingly enhances social values and goals. Fisher (2010) pointed out that the Fordist (modernist) discourse on technology thematically engaged with enhancing social goals of security, stability, and equality by 'mitigating the *exploitative* nature of capitalism' however, the post-Fordist discourse focuses on 'mitigating the *alienating* nature of capitalism by enhancing individual goals of personal empowerment, authenticity, and creativity' (Fisher, 2010, p.219). Thus the latter discourse attempts to legitimise the unobstructed expansion of capitalism. This position is amply reflected in the structure of the Internet.

[D]espite the variety of ways in which alternative media have been practiced, what has remained consistent throughout this development is a vanguardist or consumerist relationship with readers. (Hamilton, 2000, p363)

A similar theme is from Fuchs (2009), who argues from a Marxist perspective that "class occupies a central role in a theory of media and information, and in a critical theory of ICTs and society." In a more recent paper, the author (Fuchs 2010) furthers the argument identifying users of the Internet as the new exploited class for the new media capital. The users of platforms like MySpace, Youtube, and Facebook are the surplus-generating labour which, if withdrawn, would have vastly negative consequences for the Capitalist interests.

The interaction of Internet users with the new media, especially at the content generation level is a 'commodity'. This is similar to the case of media advertisement models where audience is sold as a commodity.

[I] would argue, in the case of the Internet, that the audience commodity is a producer commodity. The category of the producer commodity does not signify a democratisation of the media towards participatory systems, but total commodification of human creativity (Fuchs, 2010, p148, 149)

The Internet has recently emerged as a corporate dominated arena and therefore pinning hopes of building a participatory society through it are already riddled with uncertainty.

Conclusion

"No one in communication can be neutral on the issue of whether markets equal democracy and that market-driven communication equals democratic communication." (McChesney, 2000, p114). Considering all the major aspects of diversification, plurality, media conglomeration, etc. media growth is a 'market phenomenon' ushered in primarily by privatisation and deregulation at the policy level. Growth of both mass media and new media has so far served corporate interests far better than democratic ones.

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Appendix-1 Media interest mapped against stakeholders in development in India (Naqvi & Papoutsaki, 2011)

