

# Community Radio as an Alternative Media for Disaster Management During Covid-19

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## Abstract

Covid-19 has brought the whole world to a standstill. The pandemic has caused a severe threat to mankind. This unexpected effect has made the situation out of control. The way people perceive things has taken a back seat, and communication is not an exception. Media is the only window to this lockdown world. This is said to be one of the worst humanitarian crisis. Newspapers are not being able to reach the readers due to the restricted movements; television despite its growing viewership is acutely facing credibility crunch and lack of authentic resources. Whereas social media and its various platforms are busy manufacturing stories that often are fake, fabricated and false. That's where the radio assumes its role as one of the best and most trusted means of communication in a country like India. The alternative community radio stations which are very well operational throughout the country have been doing their job silently yet effectively in educating the rural and tribal communities. The paper deals with the efficiency and the role played by the selected community radio across the country. The paper will assess the contents and effects of these programs during the national lockdown due to Corona. The Community radio has been used by the administration, health departments, to reach the communities which are far-flung in order to create awareness among the people. The community radio, in turn, has been very innovative in their broadcast and revivified the programs which were broadcast

in the testing times. The paper attempts to document the significant role played by the medium at this juncture and their effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Community Radio, Disaster Management, Covid-19, Innovation, Programs, Listeners.

## Introduction

Disaster is always traumatic, unexpected and flips away the world upside down. In early 2020 nobody across the world had ever dreamt of such a human catastrophe would occur and bring this fast-paced globe to a standstill. Thanks to Covid-19 which made it happen excruciatingly in all aspects of humankind. Disaster can be natural such as floods, earthquakes, tsunami, cyclone, and wildfire and so on. A manmade disaster such as pollution of air, water, land, animal habitat, aquatic life has been a blunder. Added to this virus (believed to be) which has created a nightmare for the whole mankind in its existence of six months or so.

This Novel coronavirus has affected the people not only physically but also psychologically, socially and economically. The recovery from this manmade disaster is not only about rebuilding the social fabric but also about rehabilitating individuals who have undergone the trauma to a large extent. The World Health Organisation has estimated that nearly four lakhs people have lost their lives and are mentally broken. The most important aspect at this juncture is the way things are communicated to the people. Communication plays a very crucial role in this period when people are in a completely chaotic environment. The various medium of communication such as newspapers, TV channels, social media and alternative media are being roped in to circulate messages, information to the outer worlds who are waiting with baited breathe for solutions to their questions.

Disaster frequently exacerbated by various mechanisms such as social and political consequences on the community. It is essential to learn from the disaster, and the community's role in such events becomes crucial. However, learning differs from case to case. The success of learning depends on the range of social factors such as stress, trauma, civic innovation and intimidation.

## Community and Disaster Preparation

During any disaster, the role and importance of education and learning seem to be very important and the organisations such as UNESCO, WHO the European commission has considered that only through proper education and information sharing, the society can be prepared for an emergency situation (Preston 2012). Communities' response varies from one to another; the way people respond, prepare and recover from the jolt differs significantly. In order to prepare for the crisis event, community resilience and capability plays a significant element in preparing them, especially in countries which particularly experience natural disasters. Increased community learning interest is usually politicised. Many theorists such as Wilson (2012), Sapirstein (2006) and Preston (2014) have argued that the community involvement and learning during any disaster has a steady path, and is deeply rooted in the social memory, they further state that there has been a dominant paradigm change in integrating the lessons and efforts in building resilience. However, in the age of rapid communication, information explosion and the age of social media, there

are new forms of civic engagements which are used but with no guarantee that the past will reflect the future. There is a need to elucidate whether communities learning will follow the old patterns or completely take a new course of action. There is a need for small incremental shifts of learning among the communities when such disasters strike. There is a need to provide a forum for conversation across various distinct groups, who can give insight as well as provide an impetus for questioning the authorities. There is a need for intervention of the groups with a radical approach, where communities can learn practices and also get influenced so that they can potentially be connected to face the onslaught disasters

### **Media role during a disaster:**

Media has a very high potential to play a significant role during a disaster. Media is not only a great carrier of news but also helps in disseminating it timely to the needy. They are the one who updates information regarding helplines, medical camps, emergency phone numbers. The dreadful situations can be suppressed and also compel the government to provide timely help for the needy. It also contributes to the preparedness and disaster mitigation by acting as an effective channel of communication. They also assist in many activities like sharing updates, collecting funds, monitoring and providing insights to the whole situation.

It has also come to the notice that media has been exaggerating things and data to create panic among people through their unverified reports at a certain time. The desire to increase TRPs and sensationalise specific issues, which make us look back and check the ethics of journalism many a time. In recent time, people have reduced their reading time to some extent because of the unavailability of the newspapers of the leading media houses in the initial days of the lockdown. TV channels have lost their

credibility among their viewers due to lack of meaningful content and resources. Social media is the only window for the majority of them as it feeds them with huge content which is mostly fake, full of misinformation and unauthentic. Nevertheless, it still gives them a window to share and interact with the topics of their interests. But, there are many alternative media of communication, such as Community Radio, which has been silently serving the population living in remote areas. Media's role is to create a kind of confidence among its readers, viewers and listeners to instill a sense of strength, and solution-based precautionary measures during such a crisis. Media across the globe are striving their best to inform and educate the masses by providing relevant and timely information to them. The most needed helping hand of the media is to involve humanistic angle to journalism, where importance is to be given to humanity over professional urgency.

### **Community Radio in India**

The Supreme court judgment of making airwaves as public property way back in 1995, opened up a new era of alternative media in India, where running a radio station by the educational institutions, NGOs and communities added a new dimension of broadcasting involving the members of the community and also broadcast their choice of programs which they prefer according to their needs and requirements. The beauty of the medium is being hyper-local to the core and the variety which it offers to make its program more vibrant yet effective in their language. The main idea behind this medium was to break the monopoly of the government to the highly commercialized broadcasting network to a forum of the citizen group, which can more be democratized. These non-profit organisations in India are pushing a broader representation of the hierarchy and centralized radio network in recent years. Known with a wide variety of names

such as Rural Radio, Cooperative Radio, Development Radio or Community Radio, it propels to unite the linguistic, ethnic and economic diversity among the masses.

### **Community Radio usage during a disaster**

In the event of communications infrastructure and disaster, wireless systems being severely damaged due to natural calamity disaster, the only means of passing the information on to the victims are lost along with the blackout in a larger scale in such a situation, the only medium which acts as a resilient medium is radio. It plays a major role in collecting, sharing and transmitting detailed related information specific to the individuals and to the communities which have been affected. Community radio specialises in providing the local information for the local community; they act as a primary vehicle of information sharing for communities during such a period of time. They help in emergency relief as well as the post-recovery period of a disaster. They also play an important role in disaster risk reduction, preparing the community about the onslaught, mitigation through awareness-raising targets among various groups. Community radio has played a very significant role during the past destructions across the globe such as natural disaster such as the earthquake in Japan, New Zealand, the tsunami in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and in India too.

### **Role of Community Radio during the COVID -19**

One of the most underrated and most neglected medium in the Indian context is the Community Radio. Since its inception in 2006, this rural radio network has been struggling for its existence due to the stiff competition by the well-established traditional, electronic and social media which are mostly urban-centric and works on a

different business model. Community radio, on the other hand, which is people-centric, offers a different category of programs for a specific community it serves. The Covid-19 situation has brought great disruption to all means of media across the globe, and India is not an exception. Majority of the contents and news items in the mainstream media concentrated on the problems related to urban public and their issues. The whole of the rural and marginalized masses was neglected during this period. This is when Community Radio has come very handily to the lakhs of people living in rural India. Their sole medium of connecting to the outer world and to update themselves about the pandemic was their respective radio stations which were operating day and night with a wide range of programs to keep them posted about the government orders, health bulletins, interaction with government officials, healthy measures, relief packages, and so on. The recent survey by the state commissioned by the radio operators of India found that there was an increase of 23% of the listenership of radio, thanks to the technology, mushrooming of social media, radio in India especially, the podcasting has taken a new avatar by pumping a new lease of life for its existence and serving the community in a right manner during this period of time.

Though there has not been an exact data about the community radio listenership, there are a good number of stories pertaining to community radio and their activities across the globe during this pandemic appearing in various media. Our Indian scenario is not at all different, and we too are bombarded with a good number of activities and stories across the nook and corner of the country about the role and responsibility these community radios have undertaken.

The rural mass which constitutes 70% of the population in our country resides in the



villages and far-flung hamlets which has been completely neglected by the media. We do not see the many reports of the villages and their problems during this pandemic. Step motherly attitude is being meted out on them. It seems the mainstream media do not consider them to be a part of this problem of pandemic. The populace in these rural part has refused to buckle down under such lockdown. Instead, they have used the existing technology to their community's advantage, by combining internet and terrestrial broadcasting to get messages and also to broadcast across their communities. Various WhatsApp groups of the community radio across the country have been buzzing all through the day with a wide range of programs and activities undertaken by them. Perhaps we have witnessed a sudden and refined surge of this sector in terms of reach, programme and organisation.

### **Activities of Community Radio during pandemic**

Community Radio has been in the forefront in updating and providing information to its community members since the pandemic made its entry to the country. They have got on to their job by planning things very meticulously. Right from the content, programming, broadcasting, to reach out to the neglected audiences by other forms of media. Varieties of programs are lined up to make it more effective and reachable. Out of 238 community radio stations in the country overall, quite a good number are experimenting and have been very useful for its audience.

CR stations have been networking with the government and local authorities, in reaching out to the susceptible communities who are finding it difficult to cope with the present situation. Providing them with the accurate and timely information about Covid-19, analysing and documenting their daily concerns, identifying false information,

countering rumours, curating songs and skits in their local dialects, hosting quiz programs related to Corona, running various initiatives on schooling, nursing, combating domestic violence and so on. They have also opened up helplines much needed for the psychological counselling. The hours of broadcasting has gone up a little bit among these CR stations.

These Community radio stations are very well placed when it comes to an understanding the local needs and problems; they understand the local realities and are intimately have the ability to mobilise and elicit participation from the locals. The stations have been working tirelessly and are engaged in outreach activities in creating awareness marginalised communities in their area of operation to demonstrate the use of masks and the importance of sanitisation and social distancing. CR stations across the country have come up with their unique ideas to combat and educate the masses about this deadly pandemic. Several radio stations such as Radio Mewat (Harayana), Radio Namaskar (Orissa), Radio Mattoli (Kerala) Radio Active (Karnataka), Radio Madhuban (Rajasthan) to name a few who have been tremendously doing their job to the full extent in an innovative manner which is imitable and appreciable too. Many are of the opinion that the language of the station is hyper-local and thus helps in the demystification of highly complex and medical content is being done in their local languages, for example, the CR stations in Himachal Pradesh uses pahari dialect for broadcasting, information related to Covid-19, whereas folk singers are being roped in Karnataka to create awareness through their folk songs with changed lyrics, in West Bengal vital messages are being conveyed through Santhali singers.

The government has realised the importance of these community radio stations, as they have started to train the personnel and use this medium to project

the measures of the government, update them with new government measures, relief funds, health directives, doctors on call, distributions of ration and so on. Radio Mattoli, in Kerala, has been in the forefront in this regard, The community radio station since the initial days of the Covid-19 outbreak has joined hands with the health department and have developed 50 social spots for the community, these jingles are created with the assistance of school teachers, children's, local business people, health workers, village accountants. These social spots in their vernacular language have been a hit among its community members which not only entertains but also act as a catalyst to create awareness about the ill effects of Covid-19. The bureaucrats have been on these radio stations at regular interval attending live phone-in programs, solving queries of the community members which is very much missing in the mainstream media.

Education has been one of the areas which is very much affected due to this lockdown. School education, especially in the hilly regions and tribal settlement, was very much disturbed. Himgiri Ki Awaaz, the community radio station at Uttarakhand picked up the issue to act as a bridge between the community members and the government to facilitate the gap of conducting classes through community radio, which was well received by the student and parents of the community. By joining hands with an NGO, along with the government intervention, 15 minutes lesson were developed to keep the children engaged with a variety of content such as life skills, language skills, health issues among others. This was possible due to the popularity of the station among these communities, and Covid-19 had created a much-unwanted break to the education system.

Economy and the employment among the rural mass was also one of the worst

affected sectors due to the pandemic. The rural populace had lost its jobs, and many migrants were returning towards their native. At this juncture, community radio stations have lined up series of programs and also had a special slot for migrants, Gurgaon Ki Awaaz, had dedicated special slots to air issues related to migrants exclusively. The mainstream media was very negligent towards this major issue, but the radio programmes highlighted the standby shelters created for these migrants, the problems they face, the ration, the food distribution, the travel allowances and ferrying of migrants to their native was the core issue on air for days and weeks together. Certain radio stations like Radio Konark acted as a middleman among its listeners and milkmen in their village thus by standing by the milkman community to earn their livelihood by selling milk within the community and encouraging the local business which in the case would have affected both the parties.

There were reports in the media about the escalating of domestic violence and child abuse during the lockdown. In order to tackle this issue and to provide a 'safe place' for counselling and to heal the trauma, Radio Mewat, the community radio station initiated an exclusive program to show compassion towards the women who were the target of such offence. The team of seven reporters of this station individually visited the 15 houses daily and could cover 3000 households in that community to check on their well-being and welfare.

The critical issue which was covered in CRS included a wide variety of them such as, ensure the measures of the government in remittance of jandhan funds into their account, to provide free rations actually was able to reach the entitled, combating fake information under the title Sawdhaan, to address the floating false rumours and information in Whatsapp so that listeners can

identify the truth and fake news, translation of the government orders in their respective dialects, phone-in programmes, stories related to the advisories to the farmers about the harvested crops, were the major crust of the programs on the majority of the stations which came very timely for its listeners to cope up with this lockdown.

The outbreak of this coronavirus has pressed scores of CR stations on a fast track; the emergence of this has prompted the soul searching activities among its functionaries. Community radio has been serving diverse communities, including multilingual programme services to cater to the needs of the people. New kind of servicing among these stations has emerged which include preparedness, new conversations, new themes, public education and also to think and act. The restrictions of movement by individual came as a striking thunder and the station presenters were constrained to prepare program from their homes and broadcast it with limited movements.

### **A silver lining in the cloud**

Despite many hurdles, we can see the way these CR stations have contributed for the welfare of their respective communities, keeping aside their personal lives and working for an extended period of time only for the community members though they had to face much hardship every day. One such instance is the contribution of Manoj Kumar Daka, of Jnan Tarag community radio in Guwahati, Assam, who has run the community radio amid lockdown for 333 hours (March 25 – May 2), these silent warriors are never given their due respect which really shows the bad state of affairs to this medium. The presenter at Radio Madhuban was the only lady who had to attend to the broadcasting as all her seven employees were not able to come to the workplace due to lockdown, her husband used to wait outside the station for hours together so that she can finish her four-hour

programme every day. The stations have also played a pivotal role in shattering the wrong notions against the Covid-19 especially related to communal disturbances involving religions too. The programs were created in such a way that the wrong notion about a particular community could be dismissed through them.

### **In need of helping hands**

Running a community radio is a very difficult task when the well-managed big organisations are sacking employees and winding up their business houses due to the pandemic, just imagine the status of a non-profit community radio set up in the country. They have been fighting their own challenges such as sustaining themselves for years together, lack of internet facility, poor infrastructure, technological hindrances, lack of government aid, less advertisement, untrained professionals. In spite of all these pitfalls during Covid-19, they have emerged as one of the best media of information and caretakers, especially for the marginalised and the rural communities. They have proved that for them what matters is the community service and nothing else. They may be of low cost but not low in information. One of the reasons why this pandemic could not spread its tentacles to the rural parts of the country is perhaps the timely information and the work of these silent corona-warriors whom the other media had neglected. Looking at the success of their model of working, the government has come forward to assist them in their operations in the future. They feel that community radio stations need to be used as one of the media during such a crisis.

### **Conclusion**

As a part of the programming on Covid-19, the team work with various CR stations across the country have committed themselves to deliver the essential information to their communities. The multiplicity of their

contributors who are innovative and trying things beyond their reach proves that the CR is not just about making radio programs, but it is about serving their communities. Though the whole country was forced to stay indoor due to lockdown, these CR stations were on air supporting their listeners, in the best creative manner through folk tales, songs, skits in their own dialects disseminating vital, verified and village level information to face this deadly virus. They have gone beyond their mandate of giving 'voice to the voiceless' to helping save lives and giving livelihoods'. Such initiatives with CR stations are very crucial and empower the local voices

and strengthen the local resilience to work towards appropriate, culturally sensitive, gender-responsive engagements during times of disasters. Time and again, these stations have proved their capability as one of the strong media during such disasters and have taken their social responsibility to a higher level. With a little financial support from the government, days are not far that they can establish themselves as one of the most effective media of communication. CR in the country does not enjoy high patronage they have been carrying out an essential role during this period with an unparalleled zeal and enthusiasm.

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