
Book Review

Pavarala, Vinod and Malik, Kanchan K., *Other Voices. The Struggle for Community Radio in India*, 2007, London/New Delhi/Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, ISBN 978-0-761-93602-2.

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Community radio broadcasts fill the air in countries around the world, and in many places, not least in the so-called developing countries, it has played a significant role in development and in social-, as well as media, change. Southern Asia, however, has long lacked community radio, even though some stumbling attempts have been made in, for example Nepal, Indonesia and most recently in Bangladesh, just to mention a few. The same goes for India, which did not have community radio until November 2006 when the *Community Radio Policy* was finally approved by the union cabinet. In the book *Other Voices. The Struggle for Community Radio in India*, authors Vinod Pavarala and Kanchan K. Malik give an account of the road towards this goal, and try to establish "good workable models" (p. 44) for the continuing work of organizing, funding, regulating and providing content for the community radio broadcasts in India. Through four case studies of community radio projects the book also seeks to investigate the possibility of radio helping to establish counter public spheres and the potential of these counterpublics to expand "the discursive space and facilitate collective action that could prove emancipatory" (p. 34).

The purposes of the book are far-reaching; thus its analysis relies on a wide range of sources. The vast amount of material has been generated through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews; heard throughout the book are voices of lobbying groups, representatives of various civil society organizations, programme coordinators, content producers and policy planners, as well as the other voices, those of listeners to and participants in community radio development. The ethnography is also combined with document analysis of official publications, reports, declarations and policy documents as well as the authors' "personal experiences, observations and insights" in working with community radio (p. 40). These accounts form a sprawling, exhaustive and theoretically informed account of nearly every thinkable aspect of Indian community radio.

The wide scope of the book is however sometimes accomplished at the cost of its depth, analytical as well as empirical. One example of this is Chapter 2, in which the authors compare different national policies and regulation designs for community radio. Here one could ponder on the choice of cases. All countries in the comparison are English-speaking nation-states and are fairly 'developed', liberal – neoliberal – market economies. The countries of choice are Australia, Ireland, South Africa, Canada and the US, which the authors motivate by explaining that they have "long-term experiences" or "a significant breath of vision" (p. 45) in community radio policy. However, in order to provide "lessons for policy in India" (ibid.) it would also have been useful to include a deviant case. For example it could have been helpful to study community radio policy in a country that has failed to establish a durable policy and enable basic conditions for community radio production (one case could be Sweden, for example). Comparisons with countries differing from India in other respects could also have given analysis more depth, for example smaller countries, with different demographic structures and geographical conditions effecting policy-making. It would also have been highly interesting to see comparisons to a case of non-liberal policy, or policy from a country that is not as pervaded by neo-liberal economics and politics as the chosen countries are.

Another problem with this chapter – also concerning the depth of the analysis – is the question of context. Context is, as the author's themselves acknowledges, an important snag in this type of analysis, and should have been elaborated on more fully. Societal, economic and media framework are virtually absent in the policy analysis, which makes it – I would argue – hard to draw any certain conclusions of what lessons India could learn and how it should borrow ideas from policy-making in other countries.

The real benefits of the book are to be found in the last three chapters, which present the ethnographic fieldwork. Here the authors analyse how community radio has been mobilized, mainly by civil society organizations, for participatory development. As one of their informants states: "community radio in India is not about playing alternative rock music, it is a source of strength for poor people for addressing their basic needs" (p. 178), and how this is done is shown in a concrete manner through lucid prose, which makes the Indian community radio tangible for the reader.

As the authors rightly acknowledge, community radio should not be seen as a "quick fix" (p. 182) for complicated social problems. Their ethnographic study bears witness to a deeply felt understanding of this. In the village of Goradih Khas, for example, an informant shouts angrily: "Can we eat radio? Nothing will come out of this", and in the village of Rajhara another informant states: "We have nothing to eat or drink. There are no wells or roads. Kids are going hungry. What

do we gain from listening to radio? Can a radio drama reduce our hunger?” (p. 162). Nevertheless the authors propose that *if* community radio enhances “genuine participation” (ibid.) it can be a tool for development. They also gives numerous and convincing examples of this. For example they show how problems with water have been solved in several villages, as a direct result of radio giving voice to the voiceless, rendering it possible for them to put pressure on decision-makers or informing and empowering villagers to take action themselves.

Of the four radio projects under study, three are being carried out by women-only collectives, or self-help groups. This means that women are speaking to other women on the air, which gives the social issues in which the community radio under study intervenes a firm connection to the life-worlds of Indian women. Not only water issues, as mentioned above, but also superstitions and child-marriage have been discussed and denounced on the air, as have tobacco use and alcoholism (which is mainly a male problem that affects women and children). The gender dimension within community radio for development is also thoroughly discussed in the book (especially in Chapter 7).

These chapters of the book are a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on communication for social change, and increase the understanding of alternative media in non-Western societies.

However the question of whether community radio could *transform* the dominant public sphere and lay the ground for a more *complete* societal transformation is another matter. The authors believe it can, even if they are clear that the community radio projects in their study have a long way to go before they can produce any “tangible results in terms of sustainable goals of social change” (p. 251). And theoretically community radio in India *could* of course be able to reach such a goal; it *could* be possible for it to function as a base and training ground for agitational activities directed towards wider publics (following the argument of ‘counterpublics’ or subaltern public spheres as outlined by for example Nancy Fraser, 1992). However there is no evidence of this in the book. And whether or not it facilitates collective action and offers realistic emancipatory potential – on a larger scale and in the long run – is an empirical question that only time will answer. The authors might, in my view, be a bit overly enthusiastic about the revolutionary potentials of the medium.

And what alternative do they have, since, as they state in their narrative, all other media only provide “empty entertainment” to passive audiences and “diminish the freedom and diversity of information [. . .] allowing the state and the market to have unfettered control over the minds of the people” (s. 105)? The Manichean opposition between alienation on the one hand (in the form of dissemination through the media apparatuses of the capital and state) and participation on the

other is seen throughout their account. Here I would like to make a short remark: I am not as certain as the authors. I am not convinced that participation necessarily and automatically equals more freedom; I am not sure that a participant is automatically emancipated, that being a participant is a subject position outside or beyond the games of power. The expectation of activity and the injunction “you may, you are allowed”, as expressed in this quote from the very last paragraph of the book: “Community radio *allows* citizens to be *active*” (my italics) does not – in my opinion – stand opposed to discipline or equal freedom.

On the whole, however, the book is a stimulating and interesting read, as well as a useful one. It gives new perspectives and knowledge about Indian community radio and participatory media production; it also provides hope and offers solid models for making community radio in India and other places.