

FM Radio and the New Urban Public in Nepal

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The residents of Kathmandu have gotten so used to a range of FM radio broadcasts that they tend to forget that as late as October 1995, Radio Nepal was the only radio station that broadcast programs from within Nepal. On 16 November of that year, Radio Nepal started FM Kathmandu (100 MHz) with its own programs. After being on air for some months, FM Kathmandu's program slots were sold to various private operators and this arrangement continues to date with Classic FM having recently bought all broadcast hours.

With countries like India and Sri Lanka in the region who have enjoyed a much longer tenure of democratic freedoms, one would have expected either of them to have hosted the FM revolution in South Asia. But in all of the countries in the region, FM radio has gone the furthest in Nepal because of the relatively more flexible legal regime for broadcast media. On 18 May 1997 Radio Sagarmatha FM 102.4 (owned by the NGO Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists or NEFEJ) became the first independent station to get a licence. It started its technical testing phase four days later and its regular broadcast on 24 March 1998. Some months later, on 14 October 1998, Kantipur FM 96.1 became the first independent commercial station to go on air (now on 24 hours a day). This was followed by the launch of another commercial station, K.A.T.H. FM 97.9 (owned by Image Channel FM) on 7 January 1999. Eight months later, on 18 September 1999, Metro FM 106.7 (owned by Kathmandu Metropolitan) started its operation. In September 2000, another commercial radio, Himalayan Broadcasting Corporation FM 94, went on air. From January 2001, one of the former slot operators of FM Kathmandu, Hits FM 91.2, has started its technical testing broadcast.

Three FM stations outside of Kathmandu started broadcasting regular programs in the year 2000. Radio Lumbini FM 96.8 in Manigram near the central Tarai town of Butawal is owned by Lumbini Information and Communication Cooperatives Limited. Radio Madanpokhara FM 106.9 in the village of Madanpokhara in Palpa district in central Nepal is owned by the locally elected village development committee, and the commercial Manakamana FM 92.9 in Hetaunda in the central Tarai is owned by Creative Eyes Multimedia and Entertainment Company. Apart from Radio Madanpokhara, all the other FM stations are located in urban Nepal.

FM Radio and the Urbanscape : Seven Considerations

First: FM radio has certainly increased the amount of news available on radio to urban listeners. Since these FM stations are not supposed to broadcast their own official news bulletins (as per one of the conditions mentioned in their licence), none of the stations call their news-oriented programs 'news'. In terms of content, these programs vary a lot: they include a reading of the headlines and some main news from major newspapers of the day, economic reports, sports results, and reportage about literary activities, institutional events, art exhibitions and other happenings in the Kathmandu society at large. By focus-

ing mostly on the 'non-political', these FMs have already stretched the definition of news.

Second, FM radio has increased the amount of what can be called 'everyday life' information. This includes information about special events, traffic flows in the city, weather forecast, flight schedule, bus schedule, market prices for vegetables and fruits, air pollution readings, health tips and horoscopes (for those who believe in them). In addition, FM radio has provided 'live' information about events such as elections, religious gatherings, and national celebrations.

Third, FM radio is assisting the distribution of knowledge in new forms over the radio waves. This is being done through programs designed to cater to various curiosities - about contraceptives and careers, music and movies, stage and sports, language and literature, health and hobbies and so on. Some of this new knowledge is executed through 'quiz' formats, while others come in the form of chat programs and musicals. Some of this new knowledge is superfluous but it being on air is a kind of knowledge democratization at work. Music production has received a shot in the arm due to FM radio.

Fourth, FM radio has increased the amount of social analysis available on radio through various programming formats. In the form of a monologue it comes as anonymous or attributed response from persons walking on the streets ('vox pop' in radio parlance) or as commentary from noted social critics such as Rhituraj, Chatyang Master, D. P. Bhandari and Kishor Nepal (alas, they are all male!). As dialogue, such social analysis comes in the form of one-to-one interviews between the host and her guest or in the form of multiple dialogues between the host(s), guests and listeners who call in by phone (e.g., *Dabali* in Radio Sagarmatha). Frequently, others have participated in such discussions by sending in their queries by mail, fax or email before the programs go on air. Such analysis can also be found in feature reportage focused on a specific theme as innovated by the early team of 'Hamro Khaldo' in Radio Sagarmatha. Some of the subjects covered by these programs have never been discussed over radio before, and others have received critical treatment impossible to find on Radio Nepal. This kind of analysis is being done in Nepali and Newari already and will emerge in other languages as the FM revolution spreads across Nepal.

Fifth, FM radio's interactions with government officials and politicians have added to the collective knowledge of urbanites regarding (mis)governance in Nepali society. Similarly, discussions with practitioners of other professions have demystified specialist knowledge, intellectually empowering the community of listeners.

Sixth, FM radio has increased the amount of oral history available on the radio. This has been achieved through programs that present the life history of a 'big' person in his own voice (*Mero Katha*) or through a profile of a 'subaltern' made by a reporter. Alternatively, personal history often related to love tragedies (but occasional successful romances) has become very popular in the form of letters to host Kalyan Gautam ("Dear Kalyan" is how these letters begin in *Mero Katha*, *Mero Git* in Hits FM). Interviews by Bhairab Risal with older folks in *Uhile Bajeka Palama* are also of this genre.

Seventh, FM radio programs have encouraged cross-media reference as a routine practice of urban knowledge. While newspaper content has long been read over FM radio, programs aired have influenced the print media as well. For example, since FM reports highlight local sports events, broadsheet dailies have had to follow suit by increasing their cov-

erage of local sports. Additionally radio program hosts are bringing Internet content to listeners who do not have direct access to the net and more radio programs are increasingly becoming available in the Internet.

These seven points hardly exhaust the new knowledge urbanscape FM radio has helped to generate in Kathmandu. But my intention is not to be exhaustive. Rather it is to point out suggestively how FM radio is contributing to a new kind of urban public domain in Kathmandu.

FM Radio and the New Communities

In this section I highlight FM radio communities and discuss their significance for the new urban public sphere. Why highlight these communities some of which are 'imagined' at best? What have they got to do with the new contours of our urban life? As will be clear from the examples discussed below, FM radio is not only what goes on air. It is as much what happens off air. If the programs aired are engendering a new public sphere, then the communities that produce them and the communities, in turn, produced by them are important elements of that sphere. The skills, intentions and desires of these communities define for us some of the broad contours of our own experience of the new city.

First in the list of real communities is FM owning institutions. While Radio Sagarmatha is owned by an NGO, commercial companies own Kantipur FM, K.A.T.H. FM, HBC FM, Hits FM, and Manakamana FM. Locally elected government bodies own Metro FM in Kathmandu and Radio Madanpokhara in Palpa. Radio Lumbini is owned by a cooperative. Companies, cooperatives, local governments and NGOs are real institutional communities that have taken up the new challenge of managing an FM station (this variety in ownership is an important indication of the pluralism possible in radio in the region). The stations might not have all the skills necessary for optimum operation but they are certainly learning on air. Off-air they have even tried promotionals such as blood drives, child health camps, music awards and anti-pollution campaigns to bolster their on-air image.

The group of program producers who either work as freelancers or are employed by various FM stations comprises the second real community. When serious talk about FM radios started in Nepal some seven years ago, many wondered where the people who would run these stations would be found. That worry was genuine but exaggerated. After all, we have found the people - program producers, technical experts, reporters, talk show hosts, and music jockeys - indigenously, however inadequate their present skills might be. Apart from individual producers, we also now have institutional program producers. For instance, Communication Corner headed by Gopal Guragain in Kathmandu currently produces a half-hour program called *Kayakairan* that is simultaneously broadcast over the three FM radio stations outside of Kathmandu three times a week. Its aim is "to bring listeners from outside the Valley emotionally close to the center by providing them up-dates on happenings in Kathmandu". While the program cassettes have to be sent by bus at the moment, with infrastructural developments, those stations will be able to download the programs from the Internet directly.

The third real community comprises of a different type of producers - lyricists, musicians, singers and others related to the music industry. They have benefited from the FM

boom, as there are now more outlets for their creations. Equally, the stations can choose from a larger pool of talent. But this subject deserves a separate treatment by more knowledgeable analysts.

The fourth real community comprises of a few FM activists. The Community Radio Support Centre (headed by Raghu Mainali) of NEFEJ provides support to any institution interested in opening a community radio station. The Centre will do feasibility studies for them and give hands-on training to program producers. Communication Corner, the Centre for Development Communication, Nepal Press Institute and some other organizations have done research on different aspects of FM and have produced some useful manuals. Mainali has also filed a writ in the Supreme Court challenging rules imposed by the government on FM stations that, according to him, violate the Constitution of Nepal and the National Broadcasting Act 2049. If the Court agrees with him, it will become easier to establish and run FM stations.

FM radio has also given birth to new imagined or transient communities whose own importance cannot be underestimated. Constituents of these imagined communities come in two forms. First are news communities: people and institutions that are interested in having news about their activities broadcast over radio and people who listen to such broadcasts. In examining my incomplete records, I was surprised to find just how many members of this community sent news of various happenings to Radio Sagarmatha's *Halchal* program during a two-month period in mid-1999.

The second imagined community consists of listeners of specific programs such as Upendra Aryal's musical *Bihani Yatra* or Kalyan Gautam's *Mero Katha, Mero Geet*. He is by himself. But he knows that, at that very moment, there are many others listening to the same program. He will never meet most of them, yet he will feel like he is one with them - an imagined community of the sort that has been made famous in social science parlance by Benedict Anderson. FM radio has created many such imagined communities of fans of particular stations, specific programs or their hosts. At times, a letter of praise or complaint against the host for being partisan toward other members of the imagined community breaches the anonymity, but it is never seriously done. On other occasions, such imagined communities become a bit more real when, for instance, some FM fans went to Sundarjal for a picnic to celebrate the new year 2000, or fans of Prakash Sayami's program on 'eternal' Nepali songs met to advance their common interest. Faces were put to known voices heard over the airwaves but the community was a transient one at best. The fans soon returned to living their own individual friendships with FM. As critic C.K. Lal put it nearly three years ago, FM is a good friend to have in the city when families consist of atomized individuals.

Management, production, training, researches, publication and support skills that have been developed in the context of FM radio are important assets not only for the field of media but also for urban life and Nepali society at large. Many of these skills have been transferred from other professions and they in turn will be passed on to other trades. Whatever might be their trajectories, the communities that possess them are real and they are here to stay. The imagined communities are also no less important for without them the circuit of FM broadcast will not be complete. The future of our collective urban imagination is richer by their presence whatever the politics of taste for FM programs might be.