

Editorial Structures of Local Cable Channels in Assam: Legality of News and Content from the Grassroots

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Abstract – The cable revolution in India post 1991 was by no means a small achievement in democratizing the viewers ability to demand content from producers. At the click of a remote the audience was at home with global content with a plethora of choices in multiple languages. But what this largesse hid in plain sight was the systematic erasure of the local content from the screens. By local here I mean grassroots content from the communities. In this paper I study the local cable television channels in Assam by taking one such operator base channels called V&S network. This operated within a community or at best within a district for example and produced programming that was relevant to the immediate masses. The system of operation was a highly localized form of cooperative news and content gathering. This sort of media is termed as truly local which caters to the sections of the neighborhood. Despite legal hurdles local cable channels have thrived and survived although precariously.

Keywords – Channels, Media, Cable, Local, Programme, Community

1. INTRODUCTION

The increase in digitization process of television channels in the Indian cable space has led to a cartelization of content from urban centers. While the quality of content and signals has gone in the positive direction, what has suffered is diversity. Local cable operators (LCO) and Multiple System Operators (MSO) have long tried to neutralize this by operating channels at the grassroots level. While these channels have mushroomed over the years catering to local content, they have also faced legal and economic hurdles to sustain and survive. In this paper I Analyse these aspects of a local cable channel (LCC) called V & S Cable network based out of Dibrugarh, Assam and how it has negotiated the challenges.

2. V&S CABLE NETWORK

Dibrugarh district covers an area of 3,381 square kilometers in Assam. According to the 2011 census Dibrugarh district has a population of 1,327,748. It has a population density of 393 inhabitants per square kilometer. Dibrugarh has a literacy rate of 76.22%. Dibrugarh city is the headquarters of the Dibrugarh district. It is located 439 km. east of Guwahati. It is the gateway to the three tea-producing districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, and Sivasagar. The Brahmaputra passes by the city as it

emerges from the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh. Dibrugarh boasts of editions of several state dailies like The Assam Tribune, The Sentinel, Asomiya Pratidin, Janasadharan, Niyamika Barta, Dainik Asom and Dainik Jugasankha.

V&S Cable network is a super MSO registered in Tinsukia with their office in Dibrugarh and reaches almost the entire upper Assam districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar and Jorhat. With such a vast distribution asset V&S claims itself to be one of the largest in the North East.

3. ORIGIN

As part of my research I had interviewed the Editor Mr. Chandan Jyoti Kalita of VNS cable (constituent channels of V&S network) channel and also observed the functioning of the Local Cable Channels (LCC) that they run, an important constituent of the distribution network, in an effort to understand the equation between these two entities-the channels and the network.

Mr. Kalita says “we started on July 1, 2009. We have four channels VnS News, Aamar VnS is an entertainment channel with local singers and artists and VnS Bangla.

Then we have VnS Cinema, where people request the movies they want to watch, purely on request. VnS News started later only from July 10, 2009. On June 1, 2009 the three channels started together *Aamar VnS*, *VnS Bangla* and *VnS Cinema*." VnS is today a brand name in the upper Assam region. The fact that it provides a bouquet of channels gives it the edge over other networks. Martin Esslin talking about the idea of television genres says:

the language of television is none other than that of drama: that television—as indeed the cinema with which it has much in common—is, in its essence, a dramatic medium; and that looking at TV from the point of view and with the analytic tools of dramatic criticism and theory might contribute to a better understanding of its nature and many aspects of its psychological, social, and cultural impact, both in the short term and on a long term, macroscopic time scale (1982: 6-7).

VnS channels started late and was known by other names in its initial years and after several mergers and take over came to be what it is today. 'As rising levels of investment and competition from the big companies have pushed out many operators from the business, local operators in many parts of the country organized themselves to form pressure-groups and even co-operatives at the local and regional level' (Naregal, 2010: 301). The existence of the distribution networks depended on the identity of those local channels they had.

4. REACH

Talking about the reach and extent of the network Chandan Kalita says "ours is an underground cable network, which is the largest in the northeast, nowhere else in northeast will you find this big a network. Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Jorhat, the entire four districts is covered by us. We also send our programmes to Guwahati with software. In Guwahati, Nalbari, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Rangiya our programmes are telecasted. Basically we started off with Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Sivasagar which were our targets. And after that slowly it is expanding." The reach of V&S cable is massive, it has numerous LCO's under it and the four channels it produces are a driving force for its expansion. VnS News caters to news from the four districts, VnS Cinema acts as a movie on demand channel, *Aamar VnS* and *VnS Bangla* are niche channels catering to Assamese and Bengali speaking people respectively. Thus the size and influence of V&S Cable the MSO has been driven by its local content generation. As Sundaram (2005: 56) mentions "by the late 1990s, multi-service providers emerged, pushed by large television networks offering franchises to local players, but this only increased conflict at the local level between rival operators. For the most part cable distribution remains in the informal sector and a source of conflicts over intellectual property."

The editor of VnS News explains the structure of V&S Cable thus "there is a cable organization of the four districts of the operators. V&S is an MSO. There is other MSO's functioning in all the major towns. Several MSO's got together and formed a super MSO called the V&S Cable private limited in 2008, a private company with about 150 shareholders. Mainly the shareholders are the MSO's of the three districts of Sivasagar, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh." It explains the whole story of consolidation, in most parts of India there is a fierce competition in the cable network sector. In some states the dominance of a single MSO is seen where all the other players have either sold off to the larger MSO or simply had to close operations due to competition. 'It has been observed that the level of competition in the MSOs' business is not uniform throughout the country; certain States (e.g. Delhi, Karnataka, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Maharashtra) have a large number of MSOs providing their services' (TRAI, 2013: 07). Larger the size of the MSO more the benefit for the customer as the MSO can pass off the benefit of economies of scale to the consumer, but gives rise to unhealthy competitive practices too which have adverse effect on the customer. And abuse of market dominance by these MSO's is rampant across the country. Some of the larger MSO's in the country are owned by big corporate houses giving them huge advantages over small town LCO's, who are at their mercy some of them include Siti cable owned by Zee Media group and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, Hathway cable owned by the Raheja group, the Hinduja brothers owned Incablenet, RPG group owned RPG Netcom, Sumangali Cable Vision owned by SUN group etc. These mammoth MSO's cover a large part of the country and therefore the consolidation process in states such as Assam became important for their survival. Chandan Jyoti Kalita talks about the process of consolidation in light of digitization, "there is an order from TRAI that signals should be made digital from 2014. Now what has happened is that small operators in smaller towns like Titabor, Lekhapani which are small pockets cannot afford the cost of putting up a digital console; it's a costly affair to transmit digital signal. For this reason V&S cable tied up with Gujarat Telelink Private Limited (GTPL) in a 60:40 share agreement in January 2012, where GTPL holds the majority share. And now we are called GTPL V&S. So GTPL provides the technological support to us. It provides the set top boxes for digitization, the process is already underway. We already have around 500-600 set top boxes installed. So at present we have both analogue and digital signals transmitted at the same time. We have 100 channels being transmitted at present." V&S cable although being one of the largest MSO in the region had to go for funding from external sources. GTPL is a Gujarat based corporate house with MSO presence across the country particularly in states of Gujarat, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and now in Assam. GTPL itself is again 50%

owned by Hathway Cable and Datacom, one of the largest MSO in India.

Thus small town LCO's spread over the region have no option other than to align with V&S Cable. Smaller LCO's simply do not have the right to compete in a capital intensive market. A report by TRAI on the monopoly of MSO's and cable operators in India says:

The size of markets catered to (across States, cities and even localities) by an MSO determines its market power and influence. One of the ways in which MSOs have tried to expand and increase their size (and influence) is by buying out LCOs and smaller MSOs. The joint venture/ subsidiary model has emerged as a result of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) of LCOs/MSOs by large MSOs. The MSOs have varying levels of ownership interest in these LCOs. Typically, MSOs provide more favorable terms and financial assistance to joint venture companies and subsidiaries. The point is that, by way of acquisition, joint venture or subsidiary, some MSOs have been increasing their presence and size leading to a situation of market dominance. There are instances where the dominant MSOs are misusing their market power to create barriers of entry for new players, providing unfair terms to other stakeholders in the value chain and distorting the competition. MSOs with significant reach (i.e. a large network and customer base) are leveraging their scale of operations to bargain with broadcasters for content at a lower price and also demand higher carriage and placement fees. Such MSOs are in a position to exercise market power in negotiations with the LCOs on the one hand, and with the broadcasters on the other (TRAI, 2013: 8).

5. LEGAL ISSUES

The LCO's and MSO's come under the purview of the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995. The Act has several loopholes and the MSO's and LCO's have been using them for their end. The existence of local channels itself has been questioned from time to time.

GTPL which has a large operation in Maharashtra runs four channels in Nagpur city including news channels. In an interview to 'Nagpur Today' Sameer Chaubey the CEO of GTPL says "we are running round the clock news channels as there are no such directives restricting us to do so. The current regulation suggests running round the clock through wireless medium like satellite's uplink and downlink. But at the same time, there is no restriction on wired medium showing news too as we do with fibre optics" (2013). Based on complaints the ministry has set up a committee to look into the issue of channels being run by LCO's and MSO's.

Chandan Jyoti Kalita talks about their brush with law "Dibr Live is a channel only telecasted in Dibrugarh.

Earlier there were two channels UATV which was started in 2006 by all the cable operators put together and only telecasted in Dibrugarh. That was mainly a news based channel. There were a lot of problems created by the Deputy Commissioner in Dibrugarh then, who raised objection of how cable television can transmit news. Then we renamed our programme as *Tathy Pravah* (flow of information). The news was sent out as information." This epitomizes how sensitive the legal grounds of LCC's are. But VnS News now has been running without any objections raised since its inception in 2009, and it no longer uses subversive methods anymore like *Tathy Pravah*.

"The Directorate of Information and Public Relation (DIPR) of the state regularly publish press releases through us. But they haven't interfered with us till date. After 2006 when there were a few questions raised after that nothing of that sort has happened. So there are messages from the Army like Operation *Sadbhavana* etc. press releases including other government agencies too. The satellite channels are not interested in those kinds of welfare messages. Our reporters are also called for press conferences with the same status of conventional reporters" these remarks by the editor tell a lot about the present state of legitimacy that is there, but which rests on very thin grounds of omission rather than clear directives in the government regulations.

6. EDITORIAL PRACTICES

The editorial structure of VnS channels is visibly better than other such local cable news channels. Because VnS has a larger reach and has four channels it requires more people to man the channels. All four channels have a common Editor in Chief, Mr. Anjan Kalita who looks after all the channels and each channel in turn has an editor who is in charge of the day to day programming. The network is run by a director and at present Mr. Sanjoy Deb holds the responsibility. So, the hierarchy of the network and those of the channels are clearly demarcated in operations. But the legacy of the early days clearly persists, creating problems for experienced journalists from the print media who have been inducted to upgrade these local bulletins into more professionalized news coverage (Naregal, 2010: 304). Chandan Jyoti Kalita, who is the editor of VnS talks about the news gathering process, "we have video editors, we have reporters. The reporters send the news to us, and then the video editors edit it. Then the editor in chief checks the script on a daily basis and then it is made into a package after voice over by the anchors and new readers. All the decisions about the news are taken by the editor in chief solely. The same news generally runs for the whole day repeatedly. The evening 7 pm prime time starts with Assamese news of one hour followed by the 8 pm Bengali news and then 9 pm news in Hindi.

This package of one hour is repeated the whole day." The people associated with the process of news are mainly local reporters of other media houses. Otherwise a pure distribution company like V&S Cable has no grounding in producing programmes and that too news. People from the journalist community are hired to give that element of legitimacy to the content generated. It is interesting to note, at a time when satellite television channels based in Guwahati are limiting their programming to single languages, it is LCC's which drive content generation in multiple languages. The experience of making content at the grassroots is that these operators know their audiences well, in most cases the programmes are produced at the advice of the neighbourhood audience. And thus the programmes produced are popular and made with the confidence of the audience. They drive growth both for the channel and the network too. As Neyazi points 'localization of consumption involves taking news to the grassroots by including local happenings, such as crimes, marriages and inauguration ceremonies, obituaries, etc. (2010: 917). Again, Aamar VnS one of the entertainment 24x7 channel is an Assamese language channel which focuses on interactivity. "We have programmes like *Baate Ghate*, asking people questions on the road, then *Silpiri Prithivi*, where singers and artists are called in the studio for interview and entertainment. We have programmes where old song requests are played out. The requests are done over the telephone, which is a live programme" says Kalita. I observed that one feature of the four channels was the continuous display of names of people whose requests are being played out. There is a deliberate attempt to make the viewers feel connected to the channels. They act like people's channels. VnS also boasts of two in house studios to record the programmes. One studio is used specifically for news production while the other is for all kinds of shows including talk shows. The reporters in VnS are salaried people. The reporters are paid by the respective LCO's. For each market it is the operator who engages the reporter. So VnS does not bear any expense. The advantage as the reach of VnS grows and more the number of LCO's so too the number of reporters and the area of coverage goes up. Each LCO thus takes equal responsibility and interest in coverage of news as their popularity depends on the transmission of their area news. It acts like a co-operative in its operation where news gathering to transmission process is all tied in an equation of shared responsibility for shared benefits. It's a give and take policy where the LCO's know their futures are tied to the well-being of the smooth running of the LCC's. The onslaught of television looked like doing what the print failed to do i.e. reach the grassroots. (Das, 2015: 156)

7. CONCLUSION

Thus in this paper, I have analyzed the status of the local channels in the media scene in Assam. The questions of legality notwithstanding these channels

are important cogs in the local media economy. Increasing competition in the satellite channel space and too much dependence on a single center of growth has muffled people's voice in media in Assam. What these local channels do is therefore add to the local sphere, giving voice to the voiceless, where opinions of the local citizens matter more than anything. The economic structures of such networks make it necessary to go to the masses for their legitimacy and in turn existence and revenues.

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