

New media and Rural Communication: Case Study of a Kerala Village

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Abstract

The present study seeks to analyze the crucial role played by new media in rural communication. The study stresses the vital role played by new media in the lives of rural people. The main objective of the study is to find out whether new media influences them in their day to day lives. It also focuses on how they make use of new media and tries to find out the access of internet (internet service providers) in this area and also the relevance of social media among the rural masses. The survey is conducted among the people of Vettom Panchayath in Tirur taluk among the age group of 20-35 years reveals that the new media usage is centred mostly on entertainment purposes. Thus the result calls for increased intervention from governmental and nongovernmental organisations, local bodies in fostering new techniques of new media related to informative activities beyond mere entertainment.

Keywords

New media, rural communication, rural development, participatory communication, ICT, interactivity

Introduction

Development is the process of improving the living conditions of a society. Human development strives to ‘enlarge the range of people’s choices to make development more democratic and participatory’. These choices include access

to income, employment opportunities, education, health and a clean and safe physical environment. Each individual should also have the opportunity to participate fully in community decisions and to enjoy human, economic and political freedom. People's participation has historically been the ideological basis for a sound democratic society. The goal of participation is to empower communities to determine their objectives and take action to achieve them.

Participatory communication aims to facilitate the expression of people's needs and priorities through effective communication process where new media has a vital role to perform. The internet has revolutionized our society, people and their lives. In today's global economy, where computers and internet are so fundamental to production and participation, it is clear that if the right to development is to be taken seriously, that right must encompass the development of ICT infrastructure. People need information as an integral part of community development; information about their rights as citizens and about what has worked to promote development at the community level. Participatory communication has a long history in development communication and continues to grow and evolve with participatory development practices.

During the past three decades, the role of communication has undergone a dramatic change from a one-way, top-down transfer of messages to a social process of sharing and participation. This approach known as Participatory communication highlights the importance of cultural identity, dialogues, concerted action and participation at all levels, international, local and individual where new media acts as a catalyst.

Rural development is concerned with social justice, economic growth, and improvement in the living standard of the rural people by providing adequate and quality social services and basic needs. Present strategy of rural development mainly focuses on poverty alleviation, better livelihood opportunities, provision of basic amenities and infrastructure facilities through innovative programmes. The above goals can be achieved only through a proper sharing and active participation in developmental projects. The different methods of communication and media can facilitate development by encouraging dialogue and debate especially new media with its unique characteristics. Furthermore, they can give a voice to rural people thus enabling them to articulate their own development agendas. The spread of education and general awareness on one hand and the revolutionary changes in communication and information technologies on other hand have made media the most potent means of mass education and mass mobilisation in our time. Media is now being increasingly viewed as the most effective means of communication. In fact media now influences all works of our life -personal, social and professional.

The quest for rural development must lead us in the direction of empowering those sections of society who are in the need of being empowered. This is the real meaning of democracy and this is the area in which media can and media must play an important role. To understand what role media can play in rural development we have to understand media scenario in all its dimensions, we have to understand scope, reach and impact of media on society as well as the functions it is supposed to perform. We also have to understand how media influences social change in a developing society. But before this it will be worth to see how information technology has changed the face of media as well as the society which media caters to.

Theoretical background

The ICTs rests on two theoretical approaches: Participatory approach and Diffusion of innovation approach.

Participatory approach

Participatory approach tries to exhibit the democratisation of information through ICTs and the way information is consumed i.e. New media. New media through dissemination potentially affects the development and helps in shifting the monopoly centres to go down to the grass root 'levels.

Diffusion of innovation

Diffusion of innovation theory considers the role on ICTs in light of Roger's (1962) explanations of inculcating awareness and enthusiasm for technical innovations. The concern of diffusion of innovation is to explain the rate and the direction of the adoption of new technologies. This viewpoint is closely related to the need of generating communicative contexts which are akin to the people of that area, which will ultimately result in changing the behaviour and attitudes of people and hence ultimately in development.

The speed of technological developments in the fields of communication has no doubt changed the face of media and society in the past two to three decades. In the light of above observations, the present study seeks to analyze the crucial role played by new media in the participatory communication process there by leading to rural development in Vettom panchayat.

Vettom Panchayath is situated in Tirur taluk of Malappuram district .The area of this panchayat is around 15.43 square kilometres. The population is around 50,000, women outnumbering men. Nowadays various developmental projects have

been undertaken especially in educational sector that has improved the living standard of people over there.

Taking the field manageability and other related matters purposive samples were used for the present study. 250 samples were collected, out of which 238 were successfully coded and analysed. The sample involved people from different walks of life including the most popular fishing community, agricultural labourers, educated youth, the employed and unemployed.

The questionnaire was used as an instrument to facilitate the survey for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire was distributed among the people of Vettom panchayat. Microsoft Excel Software was used for initial data entry. To test the probability level of significance of association between the variables, Pearson Chi-square test was used.

Analysis and findings

The study focuses on the role of new media and its role in rural communication. Thus the study is titled "New Media and Rural Communication-A Case Study of a Kerala Village". A detailed account of the sample in terms of various demographic variables is given below.

Sample description by gender and age

The sample contains more females (57.14%) than males (42.86%). In respect of the respondents' age, the sample was divided in to three categories. They were (1) in the age group of 20-25 years (2) 26-30 years (3) 31-35 years. Majority of the respondents (53.78%) belonged to 26-30 years category. 38.66 % belonged to 20-25 years category and 7.56% to 31-35 years category (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample description by gender and age

Gender	Age Group			Total
	20-25 Years	26-30 Years	31-35 Years	
Male	42	52	8	102
Female	50	76	10	136
Total	92	128	18	238

Sample description by education

Based on education, the sample was divided in to three groups; (1) Primary level (2) Secondary level (3) Graduates and above. A lion share of respondents (47.05%) belongs to primary category. 36.97% of the participants belong to secondary level category and the rest 15.98% belongs to graduates and above category (Table 2).

Table 2: Sample description by education

Education	No. of persons
Primary	112 (47.05)
Secondary	88 (36.97)
UG & above	38 (15.98)
Total	238 (100)

Figures in parenthesis denote percentage

Sample description of income

Based on income, the sample was divided in to three categories.

Table 3: Sample description of income

Level of income	Number of persons
Up to 5000	124 (52.10)
5000-10000	82 (34.45)
Above 10000	32 (13.45)
TOTAL	238 (100)

Figures in parenthesis denote percentage

The above data shows that majority of the respondents belong to the monthly income category of below 5000 rupees.(52.10%). 34.45% belong in the income group of rupees 5000-10000.Only 13.45 % earns above 10000 rupees per month.

Media exposure

To understand what role media can play in rural communication, we have to understand media scenario in all its dimensions, we have to understand scope, reach and impact of media on society as well as the functions it is supposed to perform. The study also tried to find out the peoples' exposure to different types of media (Table 4).

Table 4: Media exposure

Type of Media	Usage Strength
Print	218
Radio	104
TV	238
Internet	154

The data collected from the respondents show that TV is used by all of them. At the same time the print media has not lost its relevance among the respondents showing (91.59%) usage. The result shows that radio is however declining its prominence (43.7%). However it is evident from the observation that internet is used as a popular medium of communication (64.7%). Rate of internet usage is very commendable although it is a rural area. The data revealed that the unique characteristics of new media such as interactivity, speed, efficiency etc made the respondents attracted towards internet.

Table 5: Gender and respondents first preference of media

Gender	Type of Media			Total
	Print	Radio/TV	Internet	
Male	32(31.38)	20(19.61)	50 (49.01)	102
Female	56 (41.18)	50(36.76)	30 (22.06)	136
Total	88 (36.97)	70(29.41)	80 (33.62)	238

Figures in parenthesis denote percentage. P value = 0.055403.

From the above table, it can be observed that majority of the male population preferred internet medium (49.01%). While majority of female population considered print media as their top preference. From the above data, it can be observed that all media gains somewhat equal relevance among the respondents.

As the probability value of 0.055 is greater than 0.05, it is evident that the association between gender and preference of media is not significant. In other words, gender has not significant role in determining the preference of media.

Media preference by education

Table 6: Education and respondents first preference of media

Education	Type of media			Total
	Print	Radio/TV	Internet	
Primary	50(44.64)	49(43.75)	13(11.61)	112
Secondary	31(35.23)	12(13.64)	45(51.13)	88
UG and above	7(18.42)	9(23.68)	22(57.90)	38
Total	88(36.97)	70(29.41)	80(33.62)	238

Figures in parenthesis denote percentage, P value = 0.817338.

The above findings show that majority of the primary group selected print media as their most preferred medium (44.64%). The majority of the secondary category selected internet as their top preference (51.13%) while majority of UG and above category opted internet as their top preference (57.90%).

As the probability value of 0.8 is greater than 0.05, it is evident that the association between education and preference of media is not significant. In other words, education has no significant role in determining the preference of media.

Income and media preference

Table 7: Income and respondents first preference of media

Income	Type of media			Total
	Print	Radio/TV	Internet	
Up to 5000	55(44.35)	40(32.26)	29(23.39)	124
5000-10000	20(24.39)	20(24.39)	42(51.22)	82
Above 10000	13(40.63)	10(31.25)	9(28.12)	32
Total	88(36.97)	70(29.41)	80(33.62)	238

Figures in parenthesis denote percentage. P value = 0.912594.

The above findings show that majority of the people of the category up to 5000 selected print media as their most preferred medium (44.35%). The majority of the 5000-10000 category selected internet as their top preference (51.22%) while majority above 10000 rupees category opted print as their top preference (40.63%).

As the probability value of 0.9 is greater than 0.05, it is evident that the association between income and preference of media is not significant. In other words, income has no significant role in determining the preference of media

Details of internet providers

From the findings it is clear that internet is a popular medium among the respondents. The data gathered also reveals that 80.51% of respondents make use of private internet providers. Only 19.49% uses public sector providers (Table 8).

Table 8: Details of internet providers

Type of internet connections	No. of persons
Private Internet providers	124 (80.51)
Public Internet providers	30 (19.49)

Figures in parenthesis denote percentage

From the above, it can be assumed that the private internet providers are attractive to them when compared to public sector internet providers. The results further showed that people are using internet through mobile phone and thus depending private internet providers who assure them a speedy and efficient service. The leading private internet providers are Vodafone and Idea. The public sector internet providers are losing their ground.

Users of social media

From the findings, it is clear that most of the internet users are using social media as a tool for communication. Out of the total internet users (154 respondents), 142 are using social media.(92.2%). The findings further stresses that internet is mainly used for surfing social networking sites such as face book, Skype etc. In this area a large number of people working abroad and hence social media acquire greater significance.

Purpose of internet usage

Table 9: Purpose of internet usage

Purpose	No. of persons	Percentage
only for entertainment	120	77.92
only for information	24	15.58
Both information and entertainment	10	6.50

It is evident from the study that most respondents use internet for entertainment purpose (77.92%). 15.58% uses internet for information. People using Akshaya centres and other agencies for services such as passport, Aadhar card, e-manal, marriage registration, aid from matsyafed etc. Only 6.50% use internet for both information and entertainment.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study had addressed itself to determine the role of new media in rural communication. The study aimed to find out the different ways of media exposure

among them. It also tried to find out whether variables such as gender, education and income had any significant role in determining their preference of medium.

The findings revealed that the Print, TV/Radio and Internet showed their presence as communication tools in this area. The results reflect that TV is the most popular medium among the people. Print media too plays a significant role among them.

The study revealed that 65 % of the total population are using new media as a tool for communication, a spectacular show when compared to other parts of rural India. This shows the acceptance of modern technological methods of communication by the people of this area which further enhances their capacity to know things better and faster. It also concluded that variables such as gender, education and income had no significant role in determining the peoples' preference of media.

It concluded that the usage of internet is also popular in this area. The study also revealed that private internet providers are more favourite to them which they consider speedy and efficient. Mobile phones are increasingly being adopted across the area. In survey all families were said to have access to at least one mobile phone in which most of them had an internet connection mostly provided by private agencies. This shows that the public sector internet providers are losing their ground

The study also explicit that the new media is used by the majority for entertainment purposes and the reach of social media is expanding every day. Social media acts a vital socializing tool among the participants such as facebook, skype etc. The study also concluded that the peoples' participation is very poor in new media regarding informative and other developmental purposes.

For the technological development to be favoured in the internal regions of rural areas, it is necessary that a desire for their use exists. Such a desire can be moulded only through awareness programs and educational endeavours.

The study put forward new insights in to the significance of new media in rural communication. The study identifies and recommends best practices for initiating necessary changes including communication, new media usage and also to adopt people friendly techniques so that they become active participants of new media.

It is important that the new media is used as a tool to enhance the traditional means of communication or the traditional media. Traditional media needs to be

applied through new media. New media has the potential to revive traditional media, which can be used as a catalyst for bringing change, revival in rural development.

The developing countries like India can meet the challenge only through developing alternative concepts of media programming, which have roots in their own social and cultural settings. This demands a great amount of will to experiment on the part of entire gamut of media industry including the new media and also to strengthen public sector undertakings like BSNL.

It is important that knowledge is made friendly through the means acceptable to the local populations. It needs to be made to fit into their systems and seep into the existing cultural values and traditions of knowledge. In finding ways for technology to be of service to people, one must not overlook how culture and the arts help build communities and shape national consciousness resulting in sustainable development.

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