

No Stereotypes Plz- North East is India - The Role of Grassroots Comics in Community Empowerment

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Abstract

Community media has a massive role to play in the development of the society. In the human resource development perspective, youth is considered as a major human resource for channelizing their energy towards development of the country. Young people possess the energy, creativity and determination to drive development. Comics are stories, which are told visually. Everybody has a story to tell but not everybody has the medium to express it. Grassroots Comics aims at bringing change in the society by directly acting on the thought process, prejudices, stereotypes, and mindsets through nonthreatening local stories. Grassroots comics are mostly used as a campaigning means for grassroots organizations in India, Africa and Europe. The present research is conducted with the participation of youth living in Delhi who developed grassroots comics to communicate messages related to discrimination. The study also explores the relationship between Grassroots comics and youth development.

Keywords:

Grassroots Comics, Community Media, Community Empowerment, Stereotyping, Participation, Discrimination, North East.

Introduction

In India, youth constitute a large section of India's population. Youth is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood marked by perceptible physical, psychological, social and emotional changes. These changes bring a sense of curiosity, creativity, adventure and experimentation. It is important that they are given a major role in the process of development. Youth has always been a part of the progress and social change. They contribute ideas, take initiatives, articulate their needs and problems and assert their autonomy. A nation can progress when the energy of youth is channelized into positive work through active participation. Youth participation is an active process, meaning

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that a person or group in questions takes initiatives and asserts the autonomy to do so.

Participation and Development

Participation is a fundamental right and it is one of the guiding principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that has been reiterated in many other Conventions and Declarations. It can be strengthened by including youth in the project design, execution, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of strategies and programmes. The measures to improve Youth participation can be done by education, training and capacity building. Through active participation, young people are empowered to play a vital role in their own development in context to thinking, social and creative skills as well as in that of their communities, helping them to learn vital life-skills and to promote positive civic action. The skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (WHO-2003). They include such vital skills such as anger management, team building, learn to plan (think ahead) decision-making, solve problems and think critically and creatively. Youth centric information and materials can be developed with young people themselves, through both traditional and inclusive technology mediums, such as games, comics, social media, etc.

An Integrated Model of Communication for Social Change:

The guiding philosophy of communication for social change can readily be traced to the work of Paulo Freire (1970), the Brazilian Educator who conceived communication as a dialogue and the participation for the purpose of creating identity, trust, commitment, ownerships and empowerment. The model describes a dynamic process that starts with a catalyst/stimulus that can be external or internal to the community. This catalyst leads to a dialogue within the community that when effective leads to collective action and the resolution of a common problem which results in societal impact. Through this catalyst only, community dialogue is created which leads to

Recognition of the problem, expression of individual, vision of the future, assessment of current status, setting objectives, consensus on action and Action plan.

The Collective action takes place through a Community dialogue which includes assignment of responsibilities, Implementation through community media, Outcome and Participatory Evaluation. The Collective action leads to Individual change which includes skills, ideation, knowledge and behavior. It also leads to Social change which includes change in knowledge, attitudes, skills, beliefs, degree and information equity, collective self-efficacy, sense of ownership, social cohesion and social norms. The Individual and social change both leads to Societal Impact.

Community Media

In the development context, community media is a C4D tool, which makes use of participation communication to make sure that, community members are given platforms (public sphere) to talk about their concerns and also voice solutions to the identified problems. The current community media has variations of activities like alternative media, media education, community based media, participatory media, public access movement, radical media, tactical media, community based media movement and various channels to reach their objectives with the target audiences acting like change agents. When we talk about community media, we often refer to local, geographical communities: villages, neighborhoods, towns etc. But community can be also formed by a group of people who do not share the same location, but whose collective identity and sense of belonging to a community is based on something else than the place they live in. For example, Lewis (1993) suggests that there are communities of interest, tied together by mutual cultural, social or political interests. If we want to make the typology even more extensive, we might distinguish several different types of communities:

- Local community: It refers to group of people living in the same geographic location.
- Community of interests: It refers to group of people who share and defend same interests
- Ethnic community: It includes people with shared ethnic background but living scattered in different parts of the country or world, in so called “diaspora”.
- Ideological community: It means community bound together by shared ideals, beliefs and causes (social movements and other activist groups, political groups, religious groups).

Community media is any form of media that is created and controlled by a community, either a geographic community or a community of identity or interest. As an alternative medium to public and commercial media, they occupy an important space in citizen participation. The “International Association of

Media and Communication Research” states that community media "originates, circulates, and resonates from the sphere of society". As media created by civil society, there is an implied component of civic engagement in the production of community media. As an alternative medium to public and commercial media, community media engage in a social agenda amplifying views and concerns about context specific issues and facilitating public platforms for debate and discussion. UNESCO recognizes that the presence of community media is a sign of media pluralism, diversity of content, and the representation of a society's different groups and interests. Other forms of Community media like posters, street theatre, games, Grassroot comics, participatory videos, technology have encouraged open dialogue and local transparency.

Grassroots Comics

Cartoons can communicate more effectively than ten thousand words. Grassroots comics refers to development communication tool that strengthens community voices by representing local issues and concerns. The comics are drawn by the community members themselves to communicate their own ideas, views and stories about different development and social issues in their respective area or community. They are also easy to make, reproduce, and can be distributed in numbers. The basic materials are just a pen, paper and access to a photocopying machine. The final comics are then posted on locations such as the village's meeting place, offices, bus stops, school seven on trees to encourage local debate. Grassroots Comics have given a new direction to representation of silent majority thereby creating a revolution in itself. Everybody has a story to tell but not everybody has the medium to express it. The most important thing in these comics is that it creates a bond between the creator of the communication and the readers because of its local relevance.

The Grassroots Comics movement started in India in the late '90s when a group of cartoonists, development journalists, and activists sought to use comics for the betterment of society. The movement has then expanded to other countries, like Tanzania, Brazil, UK, Finland, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia. This voluntary based movement has served as one of the most popular communication tool for several organizations and peoples movement.

Grassroots comics works with rights-based approach and strives for empowerment of common masses. It gives voices to people in a non-threatening way, which gives a space for dissent in a society. It also aims at bringing a change in the society by directly acting on the thought process, prejudices, stereotypes, mindsets through nonthreatening local stories. Grassroots comics are best suited for local campaigning and peer communication in local languages. The comics have been successfully used in

campaigns involving human rights, health education, corruption, environmental concerns, etc.

No Stereotypes Pls-North East is India

No Stereotypes Plz: Northeast is India: This is a campaign to end all stereotypes and discrimination against the northeastern states people using grassroots comics. This campaign was initiated by World Comics India in 2014 with the support from National Foundation of India (NFI) in collaboration with wide variety of organizations like Bosco Institute, Jorhat, Development Communication department, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, Gun Survivor Network, North East Support Group and Helpline etc.

People from north east India are stereotypes, bullied and discriminated on the grounds of their looks, food, tastes, dressing etc. The identity of India often excludes the northeastern region, which is often viewed as different, remote and conflict-ridden area. The issue of racism against people from north east India makes headlines only when a major incident like the brutal killing of Nido Tania-a twenty-four-year-old teenager who was killed in 2014 by localities of Delhi because of his different looks.

Significance of the Study:

Many strategies like television, social media, radio and newspapers have been used for disseminating information to youth. Community Media is one medium which is more participatory, interesting and activating. It provides a platform for experiential learning to the community members and also has a great impact on the audience as it involves them in the process.

Objectives

1. To develop Grassroots comics with young people for communicating messages on a particular issue with their participation.
2. To create awareness about discrimination and enhance the life skills of youth using grassroots comics.
3. To elicit the audience views about the potential of the grassroots comics as a tool for disseminating messages.
4. To study the impact of Grassroots comics on the youth who were actively involved in developing comics

Methodology-

Phases of Study-The study was carried out in two phases:

Phase 1-Development of Grassroots Comics

Phase 2-The Exhibition of Grassroots Comics

Phase 1 -Development of Grassroots Comics -

Documentation of the entire process was done in terms of:

1. Introducing the participants to each other
2. Orientation to the grassroots comic's concept
3. Decide the theme
4. Propose storylines and characters
5. Break the story into four parts
6. Drawing Exercises (face, body, objects, background)
7. How to write and place texts in comics
8. The visual script
9. Inking exercise
10. Critique session and Distribution

अरे गुप्ताजी!



“The four-panel comic is simply titled “Arrey Gupta Ji”. It begins with two young people from the northeast looking for a house on rent in Delhi. The landlord refuses. “You people eat dogs and do drugs,” he accuses them. “Have you been to the northeast and seen all this? How can you say that?” the two ask him. “Guptaji told me,” replies the man, pointing to his neighbour who, in turn, claims to have heard it from one “Sharmaji”. The youngsters drive home the point that the men are working on plain hearsay. Finally, the landlord relents, and Guptaji, too, asks them for leads on tenants. This comic, by Jamia Millia Islamia student is among the several made during a workshop with her development communication MA class.”

Phase 2-The Exhibition of Grassroots Comics

An exhibition of selected comics was showcased at various universities like Department of Social work, Jamia Millia Islamia, Bosco Institute Jorhat, Assam, Department of Development Communication and Extension, Lady Irwin College (University of Delhi), IIMC and public events like Raahgiri, a Sunday gathering of the citizens at Cannaught Place, Delhi. The Opinions of 100 Audience were elicited through Questionnaire and Opinions of 20 Participants were elicited through Qualitative method. The Audience was collected via Volunteer sampling. The participants were collected via purposive sampling

Findings-

Majority of the respondents said:

1. The audience found the comics very visually appealing and engaging. The black and white layout was appreciated.
2. The visuals were found to be realistic and made the comic appear very attractive.
3. The language was very simple and message was very clear.
4. It caters to real life stories and improvisations. It is time consuming and requires active participation.
5. It can be exhibited in villages and public places. The Emphasis should be given on discussion and sharing of experiences.
6. The copies of the comics should be provided in selected Teen Clubs for youth to use and explore it further.
7. It is an effective tool of edutainment because it has effective components like relevance of topic, content of script, visuals, slogans which makes the issue understandable through educating and entertaining audiences.
8. It is a participatory approach and it allows individuals to express themselves in their own unique visual way. The freedom to participate is always there.

Transformation in Life Skills among Participants

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique refers to a participatory monitoring and evaluation tool that involves participants of a programme or

project narrating their own stories about what they perceive to be “significant change”. The uniqueness of the MSC technique lies in its flexibility and unstructured approach to yield unexpected outcomes that can complement the existing monitoring and evaluation system. The technique was developed by Rick Davies in the mid-1990s to meet the challenges allied with monitoring and evaluating a complex participatory rural development program in Bangladesh, which had diversity in both implementation and outcomes. The process of the technique is the collection and systematic selection of stories. This involves asking participants to write stories, focusing on the most significant change which has occurred as the outcome of an initiative, and why they think that change occurred. These stories are then sorted down to the most significant as determined by different selection phases until only one story is selected. The selected story describes a real experience, reviewed and selected by the people charged with the success of the project or program. The participants enjoy the story telling process and usually bring to it a high level of enthusiasm. The stories of significant change written by the participants help to assess impact and reflected people’s association with grassroots comics. The involvement has influenced their thinking skills and Self negotiation skills like decision making, choosing stories, self-awareness and critical thinking. Following is the most significant story selected from various stories depicting the increased level in the confidence, leaning abilities and self-negotiation skills.

Most Significant Change Story-

It is very important to understand peoples need. I feel I understand them in a much better way than before. The art forms and expression used in this campaign helped me to gain better understanding about the issue. When we started showing our comics to people, I realized the power of this tool. People were really amazed on how easily we were talking about issues through comics. They were engrossed in the subject matter of the comic and started asking questions leading to a dialogue. During the entire process, I learned how an ordinary thing can do wonders if used properly. Drawing is like a stress buster. I think now I can relate to issues and personally can feel the change in me, I am very confident and would like to be a catalyst for social change specially using grassroot comics.

Conclusion-

The concept of engaging youth to prepare Grassroots comics was very effective. This method of developing comics can be replicated in future projects. The field experiences of the youth during their course work had given them enough understanding of using grassroot comics in addressing issues in a practical and unbiased manner in respective communities. The young people gained an experience of negotiating with each other. They were able to visit communities to understand grass-root realities. Youth also enhanced their leadership, oral and visual communication, and training skills. These young people were able to develop expertise as Master Trainers in explaining the concept, importance and correct use of the grassroots comics. The campaign has helped the youth to share their own experiences in a visual form. The collection of comics developed by the youth belonging to the categorized and labeled communities from the north eastern region of India is an appeal to the society to rediscover ourselves as human beings.

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