Citizenry negotiation by means of radio in rural Nepal: some theoretical reflexions

Jacob Thorsen

Abstract

Following a civil war against the vast inequalities and widespread misuse of power, Nepal experiences a moment of major socio-political changes. Democracy has recently been reinstated, a fragile peace established and formulation of future policies begun. Numerous new radio stations have mushroomed in recent years and are envisaged to play a major role in facilitating community development and democratic processes. This paper brings up some of the theoretical reflexions on radio and citizenry negotiation in rural Nepal and discusses, from a theoretical point of view, what occurs with the arrival of an additional medium in a location unexposed to electronic media and dominated by illiteracy and inequality, and the foreseeable new communicational practices not previously possible that could spark citizenry negotiation in the community.

Introduction

Nepal currently undergoes fundamental socio-political changes. Nepal first gained democracy in 1990 but an escalating violent conflict gradually destabilised this. The parliament was dissolved in 2002 and the King claimed autocratic leadership in February 2005. The conflict was initiated in 1996 by Maoists protesting against the vast inequalities and widespread misuse of power in the country. In April 2006 mass protests of the »Janaa Andolan« (people's movement) spread through the country and as a result a constituent assembly was elected in May last year. The new elected parliament has declared Nepal as a secular state and thus ended the era of the world's only Hindu Kingdom.

Parallel to the political changes, independent radios are emerging in rapid pace and envisaged to play a major role in developing communities and facilitating negotiation of citizenry. The path of development and democratisation, however, is long and challenging. As this article is written (mid-May 2009), the Nepal Army has two chiefs, the president is behaving like a chief executive and the resignation of the prime minister has made uncertainty once more the only certainty of Nepali politics. Although Nepal's salient transition away from faith directed and feudal traditions, the current situation is one of several manifestations that Nepal's old-established hierarchical patterns, traditional loyalties and nepotistic attitudes are still intact. The April 2006 movement did prove civilian muscles to challenge the established order but a majority of the Nepalese population is still by and large excluded from the political structures and one of the reasons to the current turmoil.

Although a society has numerous influences, this article focuses on the theoretical reflexions on radio and citizenry negotiation in Nepal for two main reasons and one practical. Firstly, Nepal exemplifies a very timely case as new radio stations these years emerge rapidly and are seen to play a major role in community development and facilitation of citizenry negotiation. Secondly, Nepal experiences a moment of major socio-political changes. Democracy has recently been reinstated, a fragile peace established and formulation of future policies begun. Radio and media in general have been in the »eye of the storm« during the conflict, especially radios in rural areas, seen as major resources and symbolic factors to be gained by both sides of the conflict. Nepal thus provides an opportunity to follow the reinterpretation of the values of citizenry negotiation facilitated by radio in the midst of major changes. And thirdly due to practical constrains, empirical data related to the research of my PhD will be collected in Rolpa district during field studies autumn 2009 and 2010. This article therefore only contains some of the theoretical reflexions related to my research.

Bringing citizenry out of the empirical void

Contrary to mainstream debates on citizenship, which tend to be dominated by the commonly used *de jure* understandings applied by conventional state-centred approaches that concentrate on the legal bestowment of the state (Jones & Gaventa 2002), several scholars argue to bring the discussion of citizenship out of the »empirical void« (Kabeer 2005; Gaventa 2005). They challenge the liberal understanding of citizenship and argue to focus on the ways people define, perceive and act on notions of citizenship. This allows for an approach of socialization through community-based initiatives and a transformative understanding of citizenship, highlighting people's possibilities to claim rights and exercise agency (Hickey & Mohan 2004) and how rights, responsibilities and entitlements are perceived, shaped and struggled for by people. Citizenship is linked to social policy and the role people play in affecting and requiring services, perceiving people as active »makers and shapers« of policies (as opposed to users) whereby the notion of service providers (givers) is rejected (Cornwall & Gaventa 2001; Hickey & Mohan 2004).

Nepal's democratic experience since 1990 has opened the public space to almost everyone. This is seen in the upsurge of NGO's from a handful to roughly 5.000 today (Shakya 2008: 273) and the massive mobilisation of traditionally marginalised groups (poor, downtrodden, ethnic, so-called low caste, women, etc.) taking advantage of the open space to articulate their aspirations and make demands. Most notably seen in the April 2006 mass protests where literally people from all walks of life joined the movement, which eventually lead to the reinstatement of a popular parliament last year.

Nepal's democratic challenges

Although an awakened civil society and Nepal since 1990 has held many multiparty elections and experienced frequent alternation of power, the public remains highly disaffected from the political system and there is little real sense of democratic

accountability. One of the key political problems is the blurring of the line between the state and the ruling party. The state's main assets – that is to say the state as a source of money, jobs, health, education, and to some extent police and military power are put in the direct service of the elite and ruling party.

Kumar (2008) describes how Nepali leadership – whether at local or at national level – cannot be built apart from the constitutive social structure, which is predominantly undemocratic. Kumar describes »leadership« in Nepal as social category corresponding to power, authority and hegemony/domination, rather than a facilitator of collective interests (ibid: 25). According to Kumar, leadership in Nepal subsists within the confines of the *aphno manche* (one's own people) against *aruko manche* (other people), thus fostering groupism to compete for (state) power (ibid: 27). Thereby, intraparty rivalry and factionalism has replaced elections as a measure to achieve commonly acceptable political authority, and politics has been subsumed into the numbers game in which the hegemony of the majority prevailed and those who found themselves in the minority remained unscrupulously disaffected with the outcomes of the process.

One of the leading anthropologists in Nepal, Don Bahadur Bista (1991), describes how fatalism is dominating most spheres of Nepalese society to an extent people believe they have no sense of responsibility towards society at large (ibid: 80) or personal control over one's life circumstances as these are determined through a divine or powerful external agency. Fatalism, he says, has consequences on the sense of time and in particular such things as the concept of planning, orientation to the future, sense of causality, human dignity and punctuality, which again is related to the various forms of dependency (ibid: 4). He links »dependency« with the harmonious cooperative social behaviour within the indigenous groups and their sense of collectiveness (ibid: 99).

In Nepal collectivism also manifests in the social institution of aphno manche, which has the potential of being constructively used as a natural form of social

organisation, but it can also readily be subverted as seen in the Hindu caste system and experienced in today's politics. In particular it encourages problems of inclusion-exclusion, as group members gain particular privileges. A desired circle of aphno manche can even be purchased through traded privileges or by *chakari* (sycophancy) flattering influential persons (Bista 1991: 89). With aphno manche one finds exclusionary tendencies, factionalism, failure in cooperation, and corruptions in various forms leading to malfunctioning and dissatisfaction at every level.

The consequences of the little agreement between competing groups and collectives to abide by the rules of a democratic political system have consequences at also local level. In the absence of any real delegation of power, local bodies remains overtly dependent on central authority. The outcome is no developed national consciousness and a »democracy without citizens« to use Pfaff-Czarnecka's (2008: 73) terminology. A country that enacts shallow political reforms but has not fully conceptualised how to involve citizens in the ongoing transformation of the country. Hence, to a large majority of the population the public, citizenry, the state, the nation are all but abstract concepts.

Electro–magnetisation of public space

New and independent television channels and radio stations did also take advantage of the open public space after the coming of democracy in 1990. In particular new radio stations mushroomed in rapid pace in the slipstream of the April 2006 movement and counts today more than 200 compared to 45 (Onta 2006: 116) before the movement. A significant proportion of the new radios surface in rural areas not previously exposed to electronic media. These areas are in general the poorer and less developed regions of Nepal where adult literacy rate around 30 percent isn't unusual (UN: 2005), and where the consolidation of political and economic power typically is interlinked with the social institution of aphno manche and the Hindu caste system characterised by dominance/subordinance.

The arrival of an additional medium in a location unexposed to electronic media and dominated by illiteracy and inequality implies a change of the communicational platform in the community and a change allowing a number of new communicational practices not previously possible. In a society with dominance of primary orality all sound is inherently powerful (Ong 1982: 32). Speech is a form of sound that shares this common power. Like other sounds, it comes from within a living organism. A text can be ignored as it just is some writing on paper. But to ignore speech can be risky as our basic instincts compel us to pay attention. Writing, in comparison, is powerful in a different way: it permits people to generate ideas, store them, and retrieve them as needed across time in a highly efficient and accurate way. In Nepal it traditionally were the priestly Brahmans at the top of the Hindu ritual order that managed the mantras, rituals and sacred literature and has beneath them kings, warriors, merchants, peasants and labourers. Beneath everyone are the occupational groups considered the so called »impure« and »untouchables«. Officially abolished in 1963, caste-based discrimination, while diluted, remains even today in Nepal. The fact only very few have access to writing technology limits the development of complex ideas and the institutions that depend on them. Instead, sustained thought in oral settings depends on interpersonal communication, and storing complex ideas over a long period of time requires packaging them in highly memorable ways, generally by using mnemonic tools (Ong 1982: 284) such as the Hindu mantras for example.

The development of new ways of communication – in this case by means of radio – implies a tremendous increase in cultural interaction, including those excluded before due to caste or illiteracy for example, and hence homogenisation between previously less connected and hence more divergent cultures. Since communication can only take place if a common platform emerges and develops, communication imply a kind of bridge-building, resulting in the development of shared codes and means of communication. Susan Douglas (1999) describes, for example, how the emergence of radio in the USA in the 1930's played a pivotal role in helping people to imagine themselves and their relationships differently and constructed imagined

communities and cultivated both a sense of nationhood and validation of subcultures. With the radio it is possible for the first time to enter a space that is outside the »normal« limit for interaction. According to McLuhan (1967) the radio medium creates an intimate relation between the radio host and the listener and has especially in the beginning a suggestive impact (ibid: 330). An example is when *The War of the Worlds* was broadcasted in the USA in 1938 and people were fleeing their homes around the country to escape the invading Martians so realistically portrayed (Douglas 1999: 165). In other words radio as well as other electronic media transforms the »immediate« (taken for granted/no object or space intervening) into mediated possibility of what to know and to think by shaping the individuals attention, emotions and the semiotic nature of individuals' relationship to the world around them.

Space restructured

Electronic media such as radio circumvent the invariant relationship between information and space as they assimilate a substantial part of the knowledge previously reserved to an exclusive group in a determined location, such as Brahman priests in temples for example. In societies dominated by primary orality, communication through writing and books is »automatically« restricted to those who know the required access code, and even among those who have knowledge of the basic code, messages can be directed at different groups by varying the complexity of the coded message. Society becomes divided into the distinct sets of information systems on the basis of different levels of reading ability and illiterates are therefore excluded from all print communication (Meyrowitz 1985: 75).

Electronic media, however, has no such constrains and involves an access code appearing more »reality like« than sentences and paragraphs do, whereby it is not required to penetrate a complex superimposed filter of printed symbols to »enter« the communication situation (ibid: 76).

»Listening forged powerful connections between people's inner thinking selves and other selves, other selves from quite faraway places. This interior "I" began oscillating with the voices of those never met, never even seen« (Douglas 1999: 31).

Group identity is based on shared although special information one has in regard to others in the group. The more separate information the more separate groups, which in its extreme is manifested in the Hindu caste system. The ability of electronic media to coalescence many separate situations homogenises group identities. Electronic media blur the lines between physical encounters and mediated ones and give access to information only attainable being physically present in a situation. According to Meyrowitz (1985) they provide a sort of »side stage view« in revealing backstage information of performers.[1] In such overlapping of front and back regions new regional behaviour develops, which Meyrowitz calls *middle region behaviour* when the dividing line between onstage and backstage behaviour move in either direction whereby the nature of the drama changes accordingly. The more rehearsal space that is lost, the more the onstage drama comes to resemble an extemporaneous backstage rehearsal; when the backstage area is increased in size, then the onstage behaviour can become even more formal (ibid: 47). The electronic media's merging of private and public spheres, along with its ability to reveal backstage information, leads not only to new regions but also more importantly, new behaviours and new roles. As place and information access become disconnected, place-specific behaviours and activities begin to fade (ibid: 148).

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[1] Meyrowitz is influenced by Erving Goffman's (1990) writings and his dramaturgical perspective in which he portrays life as theatre, using this metaphor as a toll to analyse and describe social interaction.

An important factor in this change is the media's ability to reveal team's secrets, hich were formerly linked to its backstage, in the sense of placement. Increased access to group's information-system has both the effect of decreasing importance of traditional groups ties and increasing importance of other types of association (Meyrowitz 1985: 131). Radio in Nepal has in this regard a unique position, taking into account the country's mountainous and inaccessible topography, high levels of illiteracy, multiple ethnicities, castes and languages and a radio receiver's relatively low price. Radio, along with other electronic media, restructures time and space so to speak, as the perception of distance is redefined because aural perceptions media are represented in parallel spaces simultaneously no matter geography, caste, gender, age, etc. This gives scope for a decrease in the local bodies dependency on central authority and delute the aphno manche and caste based group consolidation of political and economic power in favour of new and inclusive group formations.

Senselessness and imagination

The blurring of social roles through media's demystifying effect allow the exposure of backstage behaviours and group secrets that otherwise should have been learned through socialisation – or never learned at all. This leads to a decrease in extreme behaviour and in Meyrowitz' view more homogenised behavioural patterns, which might offer some answers to why the individual deals with growing feeling of displacement and mediocrity in the modern society. The electronic media has, so to speak, altered the social landscape and the world might suddenly to many people seem senseless, as it for the first time in modern history is relatively placeless (Meyrowitz 1985: 308).

One could argue the civil war, political vacuum and the increasing number of electronic media are rudimentary to why many Nepalese people these years »sense senselessness« and a »quest for identity«. As people by and large still are excluded from the political structures and cultural identities thus are felt deeper and stronger than political ones (Lal 2002: 115), several groups – many along ethnic lines – claim

autonomy and right to self-determination, as especially seen in the lower belt of Nepal, Terai. Before the era of the electronic media this quest was almost unheard of in public, suppressed or negotiated and struggled for in physical space. With the emergence of radio, however, numerous representations of social situations and positions are possible in an altered space. The electromagnetic spectrum to a vast majority still is an abstract concept in line with the public, the state and the nation. An ethereal dimension usually occupied by oracles and an imaginatory reality with hopes, dreams, aspirations or fantasy objects such as Martians.

Appadurai (1996) describes how conceptions of the future play a far larger role than ideas of the past group politics today although primordialist projections onto the past are not irrelevant to the contemporary politics of imagination (ibid: 145). Agency is not only structured by collective norms, values, experiences and previous practise but is also guided by a future element and people's imagination. As radio has both local physical representation (building with studio facilities, antenna and local staffs) as well as »ethereal representation« (»invisible voice« from faraway places) radio becomes, in collaboration with other media and civic and state agents, a vital agent for transformation of imaginatory and abstract concepts such as the public, the state and the nation into real-life practise.

Discrepancy exposure

As radio gradually becomes embedded in people's day-to-day life and merge the spheres of backstage and frontstage behaviour, discrepancy and hypocrisy is exposed which over time will lead to the birth of new behavioural patterns. I hypothesise the exposure of discrepancy highlights (Bourdieuian) fields requiring further capital (economic, cultural and/or social) to achieve consistency. These »fields« might at first glance appear »Meyrowitzian senseless« because they alter space, subjective time and sensitive bounds as they are not necessarily bound to a certain place, caste, family or face-to-face collectivism such as manifested in the social institution of aphno manche. However, maybe »senselessness« actually

contain elements that are in disguise of exactly the opposite and what paradoxically and hence should be labelled »purpose« as these fields contain elements of reason and a sketch of the abstract and (need for) modern composition of independent institutions and separation of powers.
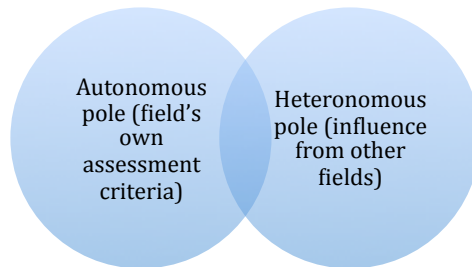

Figure 1: Bourdieuian field

A »field« in a Bourdieuian sense is characterised by a certain structure and inner autonomy with norms and hierarchies in which each actor has a certain position in relation to one another. However, no field is completely autonomous and is influenced by other fields and Bourdieu distinguishes between a field's autonomous and heteronomous pole. The autonomous pole is defined as the field's own logic in which actors operate according to the field's own assessment criteria whereas the heteronomous pole is influenced by other fields such as the market, politics and the media.

Media has also an autonomous and heteronomous pole in which the autonomous pole has norms for professional journalism and press ethics whereas the heteronomous pole is influenced by for example commercials from the market and legislation by the politicians. High professional standards, autonomy, community representation and minimal editorial influence from the state and market are obviously all influential on the radio's ability to facilitate citizenry negotiation.

In addition to media's sidestage exposure disclose inconsistency, I argue the media increasingly will take a prominent position in an increasing number of field's

heteronomous pole and thereby challenge the field's autonomous pole by facilitating public dialogue, public access and exposure to the different state institutions as well as challenge the many different social institutions of aphno manche that infiltrate today's politics in Nepal. Radio as well as other media ensures consistency (neutralisation/exposure of inconsistency and hypocrisy) and space for civic and facilitative public-service practitioners to assure Nepal with its multiple communities can pursue different experiences of and aspirations for development.

Final remarks

As radio enters into people's day-to-day life and merge the spheres of backstage and frontstage behaviour the listener experiences the private situation is morphed with the public as an extended space where radio provides a »horizon of knowledge« that assists the individual to exercise agency in a public domain. Thereby, potentials for diversity and multiple perceptions of the world are furthered and imminent and immanent forms of development gradually transcend into a kind of social contract between citizens and authority where each stakeholder has his or her share in the transformational process.

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The author

Jacob Thorsen is PhD student at Department for Information and Media Studies at Aarhus University and his research topic is *Negotiating citizenry by means of radio, poor and marginalised people's aspirations and strategies in rural Nepal*. Before his PhD he has worked with development and community radio in Latin America and recently four years in Nepal.