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## The great Indian information divide

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PEOPLE NEED information continually — from weather news to local, regional, national and international happenings. Radio is still the basic media for mass communication in a developing country like India with a penetration of 98.5 per cent, according to recent surveys.

Maybe that is the reason why for decades, India's radio stations have been centralised, government-controlled, over-dependent on relays and lacking in editorial independence. A truly people's radio would perceive listeners not only as receivers and consumers, but also as active citizens and creative producers of media content. There is dangerous delay to open up the Indian airwaves to a wider diversity of voices.

The centralised broadcasting fails to provide users with demand driven information. A woman at a village meeting in district Hissar in the Haryana sums up: "We have to have programmes that are useful — we want to know how to save our apples. We are not interested in hearing just parliamentary news and so on."

An alternative to centralised-broadcasting could be community radio sta-



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tion, which serve a defined geographical area of a village or groups of villages, and is owned and managed by organisations serving a given community. This concept is generally referred to as community radio, rural radio, co-operative radio or development radio. Commonly, it is associated with low-

power broadcasting but essentially Community radio is a vibrant community broadcasting system to enhance pluralism and diversity.

Unfortunately, in India, broadcasting is a central subject and national control extends from issue of licensing to program policy for even the re-

motest radio station in the country! Radio Broadcasting has been controlled by the central government and the regulations framed in the 1885 Indian Telegraph Act had remained unchallenged until 1975.

The Supreme Court judgment pertaining to the use of airwaves in 1995 is an important milestone, as it permits individual citizens to set up their own broadcasting media organisations and operate freely. The ground reality is different — not many such ventures exist since the procedure of start up is extensive. The winding paper work and a high 'spectrum usage fee' discourage any venture to bloom.

Additionally, only recognised educational institutions can apply, to start stations with a reach of approximately five km radius. Village schools do not have the resources to initiate such ambitious ventures. There are no provisions for stations run by villagers under these guidelines. This only deepens the divide between the 'information deprived' and the 'information overloaded'.

Time has come to review these regulations, which need revision and the licensing procedure to become less protracted and more democratic so ordinary people and groupings can relay and produce demand driven media content.