

# The Power of the People's Voice: Challenges and Opportunities of Community Radio in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

Community radio, a powerful tool for social change, has emerged as a vital platform for marginalized communities. This study explores the role of community radio in Bangladesh, focusing on its impact on rural development, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and content analysis, the study examines the content, reach, and impact of community radio programs. The findings highlight the significant role of community radio in disseminating information, promoting education, empowering women, and fostering social cohesion. By addressing the information gap, community radio has empowered rural communities, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concludes by emphasizing the potential of community radio to drive sustainable development and social change in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Community radio, rural development, Bangladesh, Empowerment

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## Introduction:

In the context of rapid information technology development, the significance of community radio remains strong across various countries, including Bangladesh, despite perceptions of its decline due to globalization and electronic media. Established under a 2008 policy, community radios are managed by marginalized groups and focus on enhancing local culture through modern technology. These stations serve as the "Voice of the voiceless," operating on a non-profit basis to support the socio-economic and cultural development of their communities (Patil, 2015;

Obaid, 2019).

Community radio prioritizes community participation and ownership, reflecting local needs and ideas. Operating without commercial motives, it aims to improve the community (Jewel, 2006). Research shows that access to information through community radio empowers individuals and fosters socio-economic progress (Harun & Mahamud, 2014; Schramm, 1964). The success of community radio relies on freedom, participation, and community ownership (Reza, 2014). Unlike corporatized public media, it promotes transparency and accountability, contributing to

good governance (Ullah & Ferdous, 2007).

Community radio empowers women in rural areas by providing a platform for their voices and concerns (Nirmala, 2015; Sterling et al., 2009). It also assists NGOs in addressing marginalized communities' issues often ignored by mainstream media (Waters et al., 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic, community radio proved vital in disseminating health information, supporting local economies, and fostering collaboration between civil society, government, and the public (Rajana et al., 2020). This research intends to assess the societal contributions and pandemic-era effectiveness of community radio.

Despite the increasing prevalence of globalization and electronic media, community radio continues to play a vital role in Bangladesh, particularly for marginalized communities. However, while the potential of community radio to empower, inform, and support socio-economic development is recognized, there is a need to systematically investigate the *actual* societal contributions and effectiveness of community radio in Bangladesh, especially in the context of recent challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This research aims to address this gap by assessing the specific ways in which community radio has contributed to local communities, particularly during the pandemic, and how it has navigated the evolving media landscape.

### Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This literature review, while establishing the broad importance of community radio (CR) for development, cultural preservation, and empowerment (Khan et al., 2017; Wadia, 2007; Fleming, 2002), reveals a significant gap in existing research: the lack of understanding of CR's specific role during crises, particularly pandemics like COVID-19. Numerous studies

highlight CR's contributions to various aspects of community life, including information dissemination (Bora & Lakhendra, 2012; Obaid, 2019), social advocacy (Fraser, 2001; Myers, 2011), and community development (Al-hasan et al., 2011). However, these studies primarily focus on CR's general functions and do not adequately address its unique contributions during a global health crisis.

While some research mentions CR's role in disseminating information, it fails to explore *how* CR

adapted its operations and programming to meet the specific challenges posed by COVID-19. This includes a lack of understanding of how CR addressed the infodemic, provided accurate and timely health information, supported local economies disrupted by lockdowns and restrictions, and fostered community resilience in the face of widespread fear and uncertainty. For instance, while studies like Bora & Lakhendra (2012) and Obaid (2019) acknowledge CR's role in information dissemination in Bangladesh, they do not examine how this function was specifically tailored to address the COVID-19 pandemic's unique information needs. Similarly, while research highlights CR's role in development in various contexts (Moncef, 1998; Patil, 2010), it does not explore how CR contributed to maintaining essential services and supporting vulnerable populations during the pandemic.

This research aims to fill this critical gap by specifically investigating CR's role during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will delve into the *how* of CR's operations during this period, examining its contributions to:

- Health information dissemination: How did CR provide accurate and timely information about COVID-19, combat misinformation, and promote public health guidelines?

- Local economic support: How did CR support local businesses and livelihoods affected by the pandemic, facilitate access to resources, and promote economic recovery?
- Community resilience: How did CR foster community cohesion, address the social and psychological impacts of the pandemic, and promote community-led initiatives to cope with the crisis?

This research goes beyond general descriptions of community radio's importance to provide a detailed understanding of its crucial role during global health crises like COVID-19. By focusing on how community radio raised COVID-19 awareness, promoted stakeholder coordination, and supported rural livelihoods, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into its potential for crisis communication and community support, ultimately informing future strategies for optimizing its use.

### Research Gap

This study explores how community radio supports rural development, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. It investigates community radio's role in bridging the urban-rural information gap, focusing on COVID-19 awareness, stakeholder coordination, and maintaining rural livelihoods. The findings aim to better understand community radio's potential in rural development and inform future strategies for its optimization.

### Objectives of the Research

The main objective of the study was to assess the impact of community radio on rural areas in Bangladesh. The specific objectives were to:

- Analyze the socio-economic characteristics of community radio listeners in Bangladesh.
- Analyze the content and listening patterns of community radio programs.
- Evaluate the socio-economic impact of community radio on rural communities.

### Research Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to understand community radio's impact. Quantitative surveys provide broad, measurable data on *what* is happening (e.g., listener demographics, and program preferences). Qualitative methods (FGDs, case studies, content analysis, and observations) explore *why* and *how* these trends occur, providing in-depth insights into listener experiences and station operations. Together, they offer a more complete picture, with the quantitative data giving breadth and the qualitative data giving depth and context. This combined approach, focusing on multiple stakeholder groups, allows for a more nuanced understanding of community radio's role and impact.

The study involved three categories of respondents: Community Radio Staff: Managers and office bearers were selected. Members of listeners' clubs were included in the sample. Villagers and beneficiaries of community radio were selected. By combining these methods and sampling techniques, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of community radio in Bangladesh. From the 3 types of samples, the numbers of samples are given below:

Sample Category	Types of Respondents	Sample Size
Category 1	Station Managers and Officials	3x18= 54
Category 2	Member of Listeners' Club	70x18=1260
Category 1	Beneficiary	10x18=180
	Total Sample	1494

In the research study, 70 listeners of each community radio were interviewed through a pre-tested structured questionnaire. Since a minimum of 70 samples were taken from each radio station, and these respondents were chosen from the listeners' club of each community radio purposively and thus the total sample from 18 community radios was  $(70 \times 18) = 1260$  respondents. In each community radio station, taking 3 officials and managers, the total respondents were  $(3 \times 18) = 41$ . Lastly, taking 10 beneficiaries from all community radio stations, respondents of this category were  $(10 \times 18) = 180$  respondents.

Using the following sample size formula (Cochran, 1963:75), the sample size was calculated and obtained as 384.

Where,

$$n_0 = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

$n_0$  is the sample size,

$z^2$  is the abscissa of the normal curve that cuts off an area at the tails ( $1 - \alpha$  equals the desired confidence level, e.g., 95%),

$e$  is the desired level of precision ( $\pm 5\%$  precision,)

$p$  is the estimated proportion of an attribute that is present in the population, and

$q$  is  $1-p$ .

$Z$  is found in statistical tables which contain the

area under the normal curve.

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2 \cdot .5 \cdot .5}{.05^2}$$

= 384

When the total population of 18 radio stations represented 7500000 people having an average of 4, of 16000, at 5% error and 98% confidence level, the total sample would be 543 and the same population at 5% error at 95% significance level the sample would be 385. Therefore, in this research, the total sample in the case of listeners' club members was 1260, which was much greater than the scientifically designed sample.

## Analysis and discussion

This study reveals that community radio in Bangladesh, with 18 stations serving diverse communities, plays a vital role in local development and social cohesion. Aligned with the theoretical framework emphasizing community radio's role in empowering marginalized voices, the findings show high listener engagement (5,000 listener clubs) and significant reach (6.1 million people). This suggests that community radio effectively facilitates information dissemination and community dialogue on grassroots issues. The popularity of community radio, particularly among youth, indicates its potential to contribute to long-term social cohesion by engaging younger generations in local issues and fostering a sense of community ownership. However, the finding that more mainstream media discussion is needed highlights a gap in broader recognition of

community radio's contributions to development. Despite operational challenges, the dedication of local radio workers, as observed in the study, demonstrates the commitment to community empowerment and reinforces the potential of community radio to drive positive social change. Further research could explore the specific ways in which community radio programming addresses development issues and contributes to measurable improvements in community well-being.

### **The Role of Community Radio in Bangladeshi Society: Case Studies**

Here out of 18 Community Radios, a brief profile along with its coverage, objectives, mission, vision, programs, achievement, and their development impact on the rural societies and transformation process of the 5 community radios were described to draw a token conclusion about the overall of the impacts of all the community radios in Bangladesh.

#### *Community Radio Meghna 98.4, Char Fasson, Bhola*

Meghna Radio, a community radio station in Bhola district, Bangladesh, has been serving the local population since 2015. It broadcasts essential information on weather forecasts, legal advice for fishermen, agriculture, education, adolescent empowerment, reproductive health, and hygiene. The station has also established 40 listeners' clubs to engage young people and promote media skills. By providing a platform for local artists and addressing the needs of the marginalized coastal population, Meghna Radio contributes to community development, empowerment, and well-being.

#### *Community Radio Chilmari 99.2, Chilmari, Kurigram*

Chilmari Radio, a community radio station in Kurigram, Bangladesh, has been serving the local population since 2011. It broadcasts a wide range of programs on news, health, agriculture, legal matters, climate change, and more, tailored to the needs of the community. The station has established 151 listeners' clubs, engaging a large number of people, including children. Chilmari Radio has received numerous awards for its contributions to community development, highlighting its significant impact on the lives of the people in Kurigram and surrounding areas.

#### *Community Radio Bikrampur 99.2, Deobhog, Munshiganj*

Bikrampur Community Radio, established in 2012, serves a population of approximately 800,000 in a 17 km radius. With 200 listeners' clubs and a dedicated team of staff and volunteers, the radio station plays a vital role in promoting education, economic development, and community engagement. It provides a platform for local voices, supports local artists and entrepreneurs, and contributes to the overall development of the region.

#### *Community Radio Naf 99.2, Teknaf, Cox's Bazar*

Naf Radio, a community radio station in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, has been serving the local population since 2012. It reaches approximately 1 million people and has established 125 listeners' clubs. The station broadcasts in local languages to ensure the participation of marginalized communities, including Rohingya refugees. Naf Radio covers a wide range of topics, including news, education, health, weather updates, legal issues, entertainment, and women's empowerment. It has played a crucial role in improving the socio-



economic conditions of the Teknaf area and has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic in delivering reliable information to the community.

*Community Radio Pollikontho, Chadnighat, Moulavibazar Sadar, Moulavibazar*

Pollikontho Radio, established in 2012, serves a population of approximately 500,000 in Moulavibazar District. With 769 listeners' clubs and a dedicated team of staff and volunteers, the radio station plays a vital role in bridging the information gap between urban and rural areas. It promotes human rights, gender equality, and awareness of marginalized communities. The station has received numerous awards for its services and played a crucial role in providing reliable information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Community Radio Listeners' Perceptions in Bangladesh: A few individual case studies*

Here in this part, a few cases of some beneficiaries' experiences were shared below. From the following cases, some of the major features of the different community radios and their ramifications and implications for the society and community were reflected in their life experiences with the community radios in Bangladesh.

*I am a regular listener of the Radio Pollikantho*

Ayesha Akhter Rumana, a 24-year-old student

from Moulavi Bazar, is a dedicated listener of Pollikontho Community Radio. She spends 3-4 hours daily tuning into various programs like "Ogo Bandhu Pashe Theko," "Shu-Shastho," and "Arshinagar." These programs provide her with valuable information on agriculture, legal procedures, health, women's issues, and environmental concerns. The radio station also plays a crucial role in combating misinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. By participating in discussions and listening to local artists, Ayesha feels connected to her community and benefits from the knowledge and skills gained through the radio.

**Apon likes the health talk program of Radio Bikrampur**

*Sazzad Hossen Apon, an 18-year-old student from Munshigong District, is a dedicated listener of community radio. He enjoys a variety of programs, including those on agriculture, education, poetry, music, and health. The radio has inspired him to start roof gardening and has provided him with valuable information for his studies and future aspirations. Apon also appreciates the radio's role in promoting women's rights, environmental awareness, and healthy living practices. He finds the programs informative, entertaining, and motivating and believes they have a positive impact on his community.*

**Geographic Distribution of Community Radio Stations**

**Table 1: Distribution of Community Radio (CR) Center by Area**

Sl. No	Name of Community Radio Centre	District	Upazila	No. of Respondents
1	Radio Sundorbon	Khulna	Koira	70
2	Radio Lukobeter	Borguna	Sadar	70
3	Radio Meghna	Bhola	Char Fashion	70
4	Krishi Radio	Borguna	Amtoli	70
5	Radio Bikrampur	Munshigonj	Sadar	70
6	Radio Nalota	Sathkhira	Kaligonj	70
7	Radio Jhinuk	Jhinaidaha	Sadar	70
8	Radio Chilmari	Kurigram	Chilmari	70
9	Radio Sarabela	Gaibandha	Sadar	70
10	Radio Mohananda	Chapai Nobabgonj	Gomastapur	70
11	Radio Borendra	Naogaon	Bodolgasi	70
12	Radio Boral	Rajshahi	Bagha	70
13	Radio Padma	Rajshahi	Sadar	70
14	Radio Mukti	Bogura	Sadar	70
15	Radio Pollikontho	Moulvibazar	Shrimongol	70
16	Radio Shagordip	Noakhali	Hatia	70
17	Radio Sagorgiri	Chattagram	Sitakundu	70
18	Radio Naf	Coxesbazar	Teknaf	70
Total				1260

Source: Field data 2022

Area-wise location of the Community Radios (CRs) in Bangladesh has been portrayed in Table 1. It is found from the study, there are 18 CR stations in 17 districts in Bangladesh. For study purposes, 70 respondents, were interviewed from each CR station. The CRs in Bangladesh are sporadically located in various locations in Bangladesh, which do not follow any particular pattern.

### Age Distribution of the Respondents

The study categorizes the age of respondents into six groups. The smallest group, 2%, consists of 21 respondents aged 61 and above. These findings indicate that most respondents are under 21 years old and actively participate in Community Radio programs, highlighting the radio's crucial role in educating rural youth, who are essential for the future leadership and development of Bangladesh.

### Types of Gender of the Respondents

The study findings reveal that the majority 662 (53%) respondents, out of 1260 respondents were male. This number is higher than the female entrepreneurs by around 7%, which was 47%. This result reveals that more male students and other respondents were engaged with the community radio programs of Bangladesh.

### Occupational Pattern of the Respondents

The study findings reveal that the majority of the respondents were students. Besides a good number of respondents were housewives i.e. 260, which was followed by respondents belonging to 10% in business, 9% in agriculture, and 7% were involved in service. Very few respondents were found involved in day labor, fishermen, driving, and various professional groups.

### Educational Status of the Respondents

The study findings indicate that most respondents completed 6-9 classes of education, followed by 19% with HSC and 17% with SSC. Notably, 48%

of respondents had education below SSC, while 50% were educated at or above the SSC level. This is consistent with other findings showing that undergraduate students are the primary audience for community radio in Bangladesh.

**Figure 1-Status of Programs Broadcast by Community Radio**

Do You Listen to the Community Radio Program on Mobile?

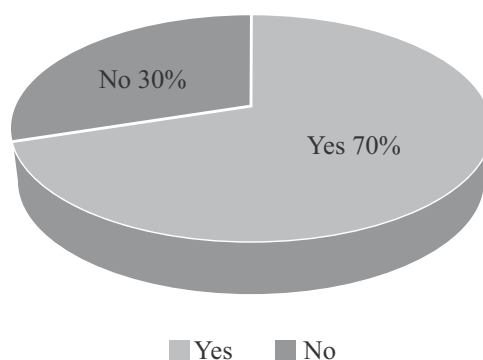


Figure 1 reveals that the majority, 877 respondents (70%) out of 1260, reported listening to community radio programs via their mobile phones. The remaining 30% stated that they did not use mobile phones to listen to community radio programs. This highlights the widespread use of mobile phones among listeners of community radio in Bangladesh.

### Types of Programs Listened through Community Radio

Community radio serves multiple purposes in rural communities, acting as a source of entertainment (79% of listeners), education (65%), information/news (47%), and awareness-building (37%). Listening is most popular at night (62%) and afternoons (43%), with 45% listening for over an hour daily, 39% for 31-60 minutes, and 16% for 1-30 minutes.

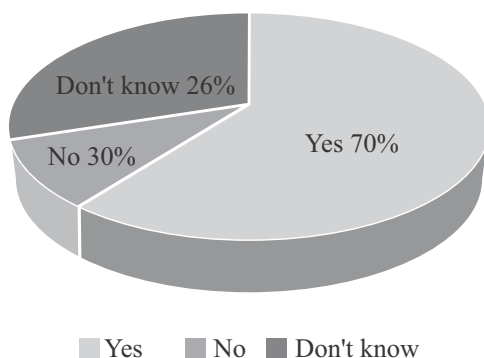
### The benefit of Listening to the Community Radio

Community radio in Bangladesh provides significant benefits, including increased knowledge (37%), access to diverse information (19%), and heightened awareness (18%). It also improves livelihoods, health, and social development by addressing issues like child marriage, promoting agriculture, and disseminating important information like COVID-19 updates, demonstrating its positive impact on rural and suburban communities.



**Figure 2- Community Radio's Impact on Livelihoods**

Whether CR Broadcast Any Programs for Improving the Livelihood of the Local People



Community radio has a positive impact on rural Bangladeshi livelihoods. A majority of respondents (64%) reported improvements, with specific benefits including increased employment (9%), improved agriculture (12%), and growth in agricultural production and business (9%). Direct benefits were experienced by 34% of respondents, particularly women, fishermen, and indigenous groups, while 23% gained increased awareness of handicrafts, social issues, and health.

### Community Radio's Role in Education

Community radio has a strong positive impact on education, with 85% of respondents listening to educational programs. Reasons for listening include general education (69%), language learning (18%), and school admissions information (7%). Other motivations include improving education quality, learning about talented students, and accessing e-commerce knowledge. Notably, 5% cited easy access through Facebook and ICT as a factor.

### Community Radio's Role in Healthcare

The study found that a significant majority (93%) of respondents were aware of health-related programs on community radio. People listened to these programs for various reasons, including

gaining professional knowledge (42%), learning about general health issues (40%), and seeking direct health advice (37%). This indicates that community radio plays a crucial role in promoting health awareness and providing valuable health information to rural communities.

### Community Radio's Role in COVID-19 Response

Community radio played a crucial role in COVID-19 awareness in Bangladesh. Nearly all respondents (95%) were aware of COVID-19 programs on community radio, which provided vital information on prevention (masks, handwashing, distancing), vaccination, symptoms, and other health issues, significantly contributing to mitigating the virus's spread in rural areas.

### Community Radio's Role in Promoting Women's and Child Rights

The study found that community radio plays a significant role in promoting women's and child rights in Bangladesh. A majority of respondents (85%) were aware of programs addressing these issues. These programs focused on raising awareness about women's rights, child rights, and adolescent health. The study highlights the impact

of community radio in empowering women, protecting children, and addressing the specific needs of adolescent youth.

### **Community Radio's Role in Addressing Violence against Women (VAW)**

The study demonstrates the significant role of community radio in addressing violence against women (VAW) in Bangladesh. A majority of respondents were aware of VAW-related programs and had listened to them. These programs focused on raising awareness about VAW, combating dowry and child marriage, and addressing other forms of women's abuse. This highlights the crucial role of community radio in empowering women and promoting gender equality.

### **Community Radio's Role in Agriculture, Fisheries, and Livestock**

Community radio plays a significant role in promoting agriculture, fisheries, and livestock in Bangladesh. Most respondents recognized its importance, with programs focusing on modern farming, increased productivity, and agricultural entrepreneurship. Topics covered include fish farming, poultry rearing, livestock care, crop disease control, forestry, and salt-tolerant cultivation.

### **Status of News Concerning Local Development by Community Radio**

Community radio is a significant driver of local development in Bangladesh. A majority (67%) of respondents listen for related news and information, with common topics including agricultural marketing, public hearings, infrastructure development, Asyran project discussions, and tourism promotion, demonstrating the breadth of local development information provided.

### **Artistry and Cultural Representation**

Community radio in the study significantly showcases local talent and culture, with local artists featured prominently and local culture highlighted in 93% of programs. Popular program types include music and modern songs, followed by news, educational content, and storytelling. While less popular, health and agricultural programs still have significant appeal, demonstrating the diverse content offered.

### **Research Findings**

Community radio in Bangladesh plays a crucial role in empowering rural communities and addressing their diverse needs. These stations provide a platform for local voices, promote education, healthcare, and agriculture, and foster community development. Key findings from the research include:

#### *Diverse Programming:*

Community radios offer a wide range of programs, including news, education, entertainment, and social awareness.

Community radio empowers marginalized groups, particularly women, youth, and indigenous communities, by providing a platform for local voices and businesses. It encourages agricultural innovation through programs on modern farming and livestock care, offers vocational training and skill development in areas like handicrafts and business management, and strengthens market linkages by broadcasting information on trends and opportunities. Community radio also contributes to employment creation by engaging local people in station operations, empowers women entrepreneurs through programs on financial literacy and business management, and

promotes economic resilience, especially during crises, by disseminating information on assistance programs and alternative livelihoods.

#### *Promoting Local Culture:*

Community radios showcase local culture, traditions, and talent.

#### *Addressing Social Issues:*

They address issues like women's rights, child rights, and gender-based violence.

#### *Improving Livelihoods:*

Community radios promote agriculture, entrepreneurship, and skill development.

#### *Crisis Response:*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, community radios played a vital role in disseminating information and providing support.

### **Conclusion**

Community radios in Bangladesh are instrumental in bridging the gap between rural and urban areas. The findings from this study on Bangladeshi community radio offer valuable lessons for policy and practice in other developing nations. The demonstrated success in bridging the rural-urban gap and driving local development by focusing on locally relevant issues (women's empowerment, sustainable agriculture, etc.) can inform similar initiatives in other contexts. The high listener engagement and the formation of listener clubs highlight the effectiveness of participatory approaches and can be replicated elsewhere. The study's emphasis on youth engagement provides a model for fostering future community leadership. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi experience can

inform policy discussions on supporting community radio through appropriate regulatory frameworks and resource allocation, enabling these stations to effectively serve their communities and contribute to national development. The findings underscore the importance of recognizing and investing in community radio as a key tool for empowering marginalized communities and promoting sustainable development in resource-constrained settings.

### **Recommendation**

To further strengthen the impact of community radio, the following recommendations are suggested:

#### *Sustainable Funding:*

Explore diverse funding sources, including government grants, corporate sponsorships, and listener contributions.

#### *Capacity Building:*

Invest in training and development programs for staff and volunteers.

#### *Technological upgradation:*

Equip community radio stations with modern technology and digital tools.

#### *Policy Support:*

Advocate for supportive policies and regulations to foster the growth of community radio.

#### *Community Engagement:*

Strengthen partnerships with local communities to ensure relevance and impact.

### Scope for Future Research

Future research on community radio could be expanded to explore several key areas. Beyond long-term impact assessment, audience segmentation, digital transformation, sustainability models, and policy analysis, research should investigate the evolving role of digital integration in community radio. This includes examining how stations leverage online platforms and social media to expand reach, engage younger audiences, and facilitate interactive programming. Additionally, given the vulnerability of many developing nations to natural disasters, future studies should focus on community radio's crucial role in disaster management. This includes researching how these stations disseminate early warnings, provide critical information during emergencies, and facilitate community recovery efforts. These expanded research areas will provide a more comprehensive understanding of community radio's potential and inform strategies for maximizing its effectiveness in the 21st century.

### Limitation of the Study

The strong point of this study was that this research study was fully concentrated on evidence-based content. Due to time and resource constraints and the hectic engagements of the research team, many of the aspects relating to the impacts of the community radios could not be covered in this study. However, the study put huge importance on field data, and data covered all the community radios of Bangladesh. Therefore, the findings of the study more or less represented the whole of Bangladesh. One mention-worthy limitation of the study was that in the present study, all data could not be utilized at full scale due to the volume of the

study.

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