

WAVES OF LIFE
A STUDY OF RADIO IN BHUTANESE REFUGEE CAMPS IN NEPAL

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Waves of Life: A Study of Radio in Bhutanese Refugee Camps in Nepal

Introduction

I had been in the Terai region of Nepal visiting the Bhutanese refugee camps for three weeks now and was still unaccustomed to the sweltering heat. I groaned loudly, wiping the sweat pouring off my face, as I realized that it was still before noon and the day's temperature had not yet neared its peak. "Come, let us break at my family's hut," said my translator, Vidhyapati, noticing my discomfort.

We treaded the bustling orange clay path running through the camp, dodging pedestrians, bicyclists and the occasional goat or chicken. We passed endless clusters of huts made of mud and thatch and wells where refugee women chatted while collecting drinking water for their families. We trudged through tiny gardens bursting with local fruits and vegetables that the refugees grew to supplement their meager rations. Finally we arrived at the hut, a mud and clay structure the size of a large living room with a thatch roof.

I was immediately greeted by a slew of Vidhyapati's family members, all of whom exclusively spoke Nepali. "Namaste!" I exclaimed in my thick American accent. They chuckled politely. "Priya is a friend of mine. She is here studying radio," Vidhyapati explained, as he took a seat on the clay steps of the well-kept hut. "I never listen to radio," his mother, commented. Her statement surprised me. I had spoken with refugees of all ages and backgrounds, but had yet to encounter an individual that did not listen to radio. At that moment I was distracted by an ethereal noise, seemingly disembodied from the cacophony of the camp. I turned in the direction of the sound and noticed that the neighbors, though nowhere in sight, had left a radio on outside. "Is that

common? Aren't they worried about wasting the battery?" I asked. "It is very common. I also do the same thing," Vidhyapati's mother replied. I was struck by the contradictory nature of her response. "Oh, I thought you didn't listen to radio," I said. "I like it in the background," she clarified. Though straightforward, I was puzzled by her answer. "If you don't listen to radio, why do you like to keep it on?" The elderly woman's brow furrowed, perhaps in deep concentration or in irritation from my persistent questioning. After a few moments, she finally responded – "Without radio, I feel lonely."

Radios are powerful objects. They transmit information to societies, nurture communities and, as in the case of the Rwandan genocide, even destroy them (Kellow and Steeves 107). Though in the Western world radio is often perceived as an outdated artifact or a source of entertainment reserved for travel between two places, it is a ubiquitous fixture in many developing countries and plays an integral role as an affordable, accessible and mobile information medium. But does radio's power go beyond its capacity to communicate to a wide audience?

Bhutanese refugees do not own much, but among their few possessions, you will most often discover a radio. For these refugees, residing in camps located in eastern Nepal, radio is the primary means of accessing critical information. It commonly covers crime and other important occurrences in the camps, floods during the monsoon season, fires during the dry season and riots in this politically tumultuous region. Besides from relaying news, radio stations deliver a variety of recreational programs, which consume refugees' listening hours.

I had traveled over 8,000 miles to assess the use of radio in the Bhutanese refugee camps. I was interested in the utility of such a medium for refugees, who themselves have

been mobile, face isolation in their host countries, have high rates of illiteracy and function on limited resources. For such individuals, radio's features make it highly adoptable and valuable. I immediately determined that radio was a heavily relied upon source for news and entertainment, but soon discovered that a critical aspect of its use had been overlooked. After my conversation with Vidhyapati's mother a realization occurred. Though his mother never paid attention to the programs, without radio she felt isolated. Such a sentiment suggested that the very presence of the radio had meaning. I had been fixated on radio's utilitarian function – as a means of communicating information between transmitter and receiver – and had missed its deeper significance. The purpose of radio went beyond supplying content. In fact, it was woven into the lives of refugees, and the nature of its incorporation reflected the refugee condition, their state of being and very existence. This paper expands upon the above premise, exploring radio's significance to refugees and the role it plays in their experiences.

Literature Review

The rapid integration of radio in society in the 1920s and '30s marked the beginning of the mass communications era, ushering in an age of technological connectivity, information sharing and entertainment (Lenthall). At its inception, commercial radio was envisioned as a means of enhancing social life within the home, educating and informing the masses, building communities and unifying nation-states. While many applauded radio's capacities, others highlighted its negative impacts and lacking features. Radio, for instance, eroded away at the individual – it imported the public sphere into the private domestic space and created and distributed a mass culture for consumption, shaped by the producers of its content. In addition to its potential to

homogenize and depersonalize society, the mass communication medium was an effective propaganda vehicle (Lenthall). Radio's relationship with society was hardly interactive or dynamic; some considered it predetermined and imposed. In 1932, Bertolt Brecht, German intellectual, poet and playwright, wrote:

Radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable, a gigantic system of channels — could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him (Brecht 25).

Brecht lamented the one-sided nature of radio and adamantly called for its transformation into a reciprocal device. His critique was premised on the technology of the medium, a frame of analysis that was prevalent in the early days of radio's introduction and typical of initial commentaries on media's role in society. However, in more recent times there has been a shift in approach. The discourse on media is no longer solely focused on its communicative capacities. There is greater emphasis on "ethnographic accounts of people's on the ground engagements with media" (Spitulnik 337). Furthermore, anthropologist, Debra Spitulnik, writes,

Over the past decade there has been a serious rethinking of the concepts of "audience" and "reception" within media studies. Most significantly, this work has rejected the familiar assumption that "the audience" is a unified aggregate that receives a fixed message. Scholars have increasingly shifted their attention to the fact that people use mass media and thus are not passive receivers but active

participants in ongoing communication processes. (Spitulnik 145)

In her own work, "Documenting Radio Culture as Lived Experience," Spitulnik examines radio in Zambia. She explores its role in daily life and the sociocultural meaning and context of its use. In particular, she focuses on radios' portability and how it factors into the nature of its functions, its presence and ability to create social spaces, its integration with and influence on social practices and its commodity status – how radio is associated with the “prestige” of the owner/user and the material, economic and cultural conditions of its ownership and use (Spitulnik 146).

Jo Tacchi, another prominent writer on radio has taken a similar approach in her piece, “Radio Texture: Between Self and Others.” Tacchi studied radio listening in domestic spaces, concluding that radio’s sound lends a presence that users form a relationship with, adding “a dimension of sociability to the lives of individual listeners in their homes” (Tacchi 27).

Both Tacchi and Spitulnik allow us to reconceptualize how we conceive of radio’s role and impacts. They promote a theoretical standpoint that moves away from the “individual interpretive moment of decoding a media message.” The comprehension of media content, Spitulnik notes, “may not be the only – or the most significant – aspect of what media “mean” in a given sociocultural context” (Spitulnik 338).

Background

The Plight of Bhutanese Refugees:

In the Western world, Bhutan is a country we do not often hear about in the news or encounter in our educational system’s textbooks. It is a small Buddhist country

governed by a constitutional monarchy (Hutt). It borders India and China and is seen as a buffer between the two political powerhouses. It is also located to the right of Nepal. In the 1890s the government of Bhutan began to contract Nepali farmers to cultivate the sparsely populated fertile land in its southern region and contribute to the country's food supply. In 1958 the government passed a citizenship act, granting those farmers status as Bhutanese citizens. The ethnically Nepali and primarily Hindu Southern Bhutanese grew in population over the years and began to take root in Bhutanese society – some even occupied important positions in bureaucracies. Their growth and successes were believed to have threatened the homogenous Buddhist state of Bhutan. In the 1980s the government began to take actions against their presence. A new citizenship act was passed that forced all Southern Bhutanese to provide documentation proving their legal residence. This was followed by an additional law, which stipulated that any Bhutanese citizen not donning the northern, traditional mode of dress would be subject to fines or imprisonment. The Nepali language was also banned from schools around this time. Those who protested were imprisoned, tortured or evicted from the country. In the early 1990s, many Bhutanese fled, but an even larger number were forced to leave (Hutt). Approximately 100,000 people settled at the borders of Nepal, forming seven refugee camps in the area (IOM).

In October of 2006, the United States' government extended an offer to resettle more than half of the Bhutanese refugee population (IOM). Other countries, such as Australia, the Netherlands, Canada and New Zealand, began resettling refugees as well, though in smaller numbers (IOM). As there is no opportunity to obtain citizenship in Nepal and the Bhutanese government refuses to entertain repatriation, many refugees see

third country resettlement as their only option. Thus has begun the exodus of Bhutanese refugees from Nepal in pursuit of a life beyond the camps.

Media Landscape in the Camps:

Radio is one of the cheapest and most widely available mediums in the camps and is, therefore, most prevalent. Outside of radio, other technologies are limitedly used. Some refugees own televisions. They mark the few that have acquired electrical supply to their huts. Televisions are mainly viewed for entertainment and news. It should be noted that those I encountered were not functional. The refugees that owned the televisions reported that they were difficult to keep in working order, perhaps due to camp conditions. On occasion refugees use internet cafes located in the camps. Younger individuals visit gaming and social media sites. The majority of refugees, however, access the Internet to communicate with family and friends resettled in other countries. Additionally, some refugees own cell phones. They are most often used to share important information with other refugees, for work purposes or to contact refugees abroad.

Refugee Listening Patterns:

Refugees stated they listen to radio to pass the time, know about the world, stay updated on major occurrences in other camps and hear about resettled refugees. Most reported listening to a similar selection of programs aired on four major stations – Mechi Tunes, Pathivara, Saptarangi and Kanchenjunga. They commonly listen to religious programs containing Hindu hymns, radio quizzes on academic subjects, Githi Katha (a program that plays songs accompanied by narratives), Bollywood and Nepali music, Nepali dramas (soap opera like programs), Saranarhi Sandesh (a program dedicated to

refugees that consists of interviews about resettlement, Bhutanese refugee culture and achievements of the refugee community) and the news. With regards to the latter, news on the radio is mostly local and covers Nepali issues, however, significant information concerning the camps is aired, though in limited proportion. There is also a brief international segment on BBC Nepal, which otherwise mainly addresses national (Nepali) news items.

There are variations in radio listening habits based on gender and age group. Women primarily said they listen to dramas and music, while men stated they listen for the news. Adolescents listen to Githi Katha, quizzes and music, while children often listen to stories targeting their age group. Refugees of all ages and genders said that they listen to the religious and refugee programming.

Methods

I traveled to Damak, a Nepali town nearest to the Beldangi camps (Beldangi I, Beldangi II and Beldangi II extension). There I resided for one month with a Nepali family and traveled by local bus to the camps to conduct my work. My informant, Vidhyapati, and I traveled by taxi to visit the Khudunabari, Timai and Sanischare camps, which were located further away. Over the course of my research, I engaged in participant observation, administered 25 surveys and conducted 25 interviews with refugees, both individually and in groups. Surveys, which were more defined, contained a number of questions related to refugees' radio use. They were primarily administered in the beginning of my research in order to develop a foundation for the more open-ended interviews. The majority of insights discussed in this paper originated from interviews. At first, many refugees did not have much to say about their radios. Being so ingrained into

their lives, it was not something they overtly thought about. Information acquired from surveys was used as a starting point from which refugees would digress, revealing their rich and valuable experiences with radio. Questions included in the surveys were examined by Vidhyapati to ensure their appropriateness. They are as follows:

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your educational and occupational background?
4. What sources do you use to obtain information (radio, newspaper, the Internet, television)?
5. How do you maintain your radios (get batteries and make repairs)?
6. Do you ever share your radio with other families?
7. Do many people you know listen to radio?
8. Did you listen to radio before living in Nepal? If so, more or less than you do now?
9. If you listen to radio, what radio programs do you and your families listen to?
10. Do younger people and children listen to different programming? If so, what programs?
11. When do you or your family members listen to radio?
12. Who listens to radio the most in your family?
13. Why do you listen to radio?
14. What are some things you dislike about radio programs or you would like to change?
15. Is there any particular information or type of programming you wish could be heard on the radio?
16. Do you think things would be different without radios? How so?
17. Do you use the Internet or cell phones (how often and for what purposes)?
18. If you do not use these technologies often, why not? Are there any difficulties?
19. Do you have access to radio programs that focus on refugee issues?
20. If you do listen to them, when and why?
21. What type of information do these radio programs provide and what do you think of them? Are they useful to you and if so how?

The refugees included in the research varied in age, gender and educational and vocational background. In addition to speaking with refugees, I also interviewed a United Nations High Commission on Refugees representative and radio staff at two local stations. IRB protocols were strictly adhered to. Interviewees were assured of their confidentiality and were only interviewed once consent was given. As I did not speak Nepali, spoken by both Nepali residents and refugees, Vidhyapati acted as translator.

After collecting data from interviews, surveys and field notes, I organized and analyzed the information.

Sound Company

Revisiting Vidhyapati's mother, I would like to consider her statement: "Without radio, I feel lonely." As it turns out, her sentiment was not unique; it was in fact widely shared. At times, Bhutanese refugees listened attentively – specifically to the news, the refugee program and recreational segments, such as radio quizzes and dramas. More often, however, they passively absorbed its sound while participating in other activities. Regardless of whether it was heeded, refugees typically left their radio on throughout the day. When asked why, many refugees responded that they felt lonely without it. A few other responses were given as well. Aarati, a young woman in her late 20s owns a small storefront adjacent to her hut, where she sells items including tea and candies. "I always keep the radio on. If the radio is off, I will feel much silence," she stated. Tulsi, a teacher at one of the camp's schools, explained that he feels a great deal of tension if he does not listen to the radio during the day. These perspectives were commonly expressed when refugees were questioned about their ceaseless radio use. Refugees have significant emotional ties to radio, such that when it is not heard and its presence not felt, a disturbance is created. But what is the reasoning for this connection and what does radio contribute in its pure audio presence that is otherwise lost in its absence?

In her piece, "Radio Texture: Between Self and Others," Jo Tacchi discusses the role of radio in the home and in individuals' personal and social lives. She states:

Radio is not a friend in the way that a person whom we are close to is a friend, and it is not the same as the physical company of another person; these terms are used as metaphors as expressions of emotion/ attachment to express a particular (and usually unexpressed) relationship with a medium that we are not normally asked to talk or even think about. (Tacchi 26)

In the case of Bhutanese refugees, radio might not have been described explicitly as a friend or other close person; however, it has clearly taken on a presence of its own.

Though mobile in nature, radios are rarely taken far from the domestic space. Individuals transport them in and outside of the home as they conduct rituals of their daily lives, be it cooking, cleaning, conversing with neighbors or passing the time. Even if one's own radio is not on, it can often be heard from a neighboring hut. It is, thus, a constant presence in the camps and in their lives. Refugees are bonded to radio partly because it is integrated into their lived experiences, but also because it is an extension of domestic life, taking on a familial and intimate role. Its tones, whether melodic songs or the voices of radio hosts, are familiar and assuring and the absence of its sound, overtly noticed, creates an uncomfortable silence.

Radio, of course, does not merely function as an accompaniment. Many refugees described that it allows them to escape from the prolonged monotony associated with their lifestyle. Refugees have limited outlets and repeatedly perform a small array of tasks and activities, given their restricted resources, lack of available pursuits and general isolation in their physical location. Outside of listening to radio, on a daily basis, women typically conduct housework, such as washing dishes, cooking and sweeping in the hut.

They also tend to the children and converse with neighbors and close acquaintances. Men remain at the hut, assist with work around the house or wander about the camps to socialize and interact with others. Few refugees have livelihoods, though some secure positions as teachers, shopkeepers and management in the camps or as laborers in the surrounding community.

Radio, of course, consumes time by providing refugees with activity – they listen to programs for entertainment, both on their own and in groups. It also, however, constantly engages them, even while they are focused on other day-to-day activities, making the banal more digestible. When asked how life would be different without radio, it was commonplace for refugees to respond that there would be no way to “pass the time.” Though such a role might not be perceived as significant; a 2004 World Refugee Survey report on Bhutanese refugees found that the monotonous routine of camp life increased instances of depression, substance abuse, domestic and sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, suicide, crime and occasionally political extremism. Radio does not resolve the matter; however, it ameliorates refugees’ situation by absorbing them and reducing their feelings of idleness.

Radio not only diverts refugees from dwelling on the routine nature of their life, it also diminishes boredom by diversifying their lives. Cc, an unemployed male refugee in his early 30s, explained, “When doing the same thing every day, we feel there is no creativity or difference in life.” Radio transmits a variety programs and information that he feels lends much needed variation. Refugees live vicariously through the radio. It enables them to access different emotions and conditions of the mind and to also consider

various ideas and possibilities. Additionally, radio content, such as news, allows for alternative subjects of discussion, contributing to a more dynamic sociality.

Refugees also prevalently cite that radio eases tension and distracts from the hardships they face. The imported sound of the radio has transportive qualities. It enables their minds, unbound, to drift from the confines of the camp and, as Jo Tacchi elaborates, connects them to imagined or real places and times. Radio acts as a psychological diversion and, to some degree, an escape from their circumstances. It provides mental relief for refugees, who endure a variety of emotionally challenging obstacles due to their displacement and their current way of life in the camps.

Radio is a presence so integrated, normalized and depended upon that it is continuously necessitated by the refugees, who leave it on even when they are not listening and despite the substantial cost of batteries. Its sound provides continuous company that is consistent, engaging, comforting and soothing, thereby forging a significant relationship between refugee and radio. This relationship is shaped by refugees, who have absorbed radio into their domestic sphere as they harness it to combat negative side effects associated with their lifestyle. The company of radio is, thus, a construct, originating from the needs created by refugees' particular circumstances.

Radio Rituals

The noise produced by radio fills the home, but also extends beyond it, permeating the airspace of the tightly clustered huts spread throughout the camps. The sound emanates from these individual points, encompassing small radii. Though its reach may be limited, there are countless radios and, therefore, innumerable points of origin, blanketing the camp in a soundscape that is not disparate, but continuous. Radio becomes

a shared backdrop, adding dimension to the lives of refugees and intertwined with their daily existence.

When you zoom into the source of the sound, the seemingly independent, free flowing noise suddenly becomes anchored in space. The context of the sound is revealing. In the morning, many families listen to Hindu prayers broadcast over the radio as they wake up, shower and prepare for the day. In the afternoon, refugees tune into music as they conduct chores around the hut and also listen to programs for entertainment, both individually and socially. Young Children and adolescents listen to segments dedicated to their age group after returning home from the camp's schools and even while doing their homework. In the evenings, families commonly hear news aired on the radio prior to retiring for the night. These habits are consistent amongst Bhutanese refugees.

In "Media Technology and Daily Life," Herman Bausinger explains that technology "penetrates the everyday...is consumed and absorbed by the everyday" and is "an integral part of the way the everyday is conducted" (Bausinger 343). These statements hold true for radio's use in the camps. For refugees, radio is incorporated into the very structure of their quotidian experiences. Though refugees' application of technology is not novel— various technologies are embedded in most peoples' daily lives and factor into their ritual habits, radios' particular role and the extent to which it is relied upon illustrate their unique set of needs. Specifically, radio can be seen to set a rhythm for everyday life; its use is closely tied to certain times and events during the day and creates a general pattern for living. This is significant for the fact that there is little to lend order to refugees' lives, given the lack of activity and copious amount of time available to

them. Radio supplements the need for structure by cementing a daily routine. The schedule of its programs serves to schedule refugees' daily life, furnishing them with a sense of continuity and stability.

For the majority of refugees, the camp is a liminal space. Many refugees intend to resettle in other parts of the world. Despite Bhutan's rejection of repatriation, there also exists a strong number who wish to stay in Nepal until pressure is exerted on Bhutan to accept them. Thus, despite the fact that refugees have occupied the camps for over two decades, the space is still conceived of as temporary. However, refugees' attempt to construct a framework for daily life is not only demonstrative of their need for regularity, but also of their efforts to establish themselves in the camp. Furthermore, even though most refugees do not consider the camp or the huts they reside in to be their home, radio rituals can be seen to contribute to a sense of home. We must first conceptualize what home is to understand the latter concept. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas, "Home is not only a space but involves regular patterns of activity and structures in time" (Douglas 289). If we conceive of home in this way, the familiar routine radio provides can be perceived to unconsciously create a semblance of home. Furthermore, radio's contribution to a common domestic pattern throughout the camps effectively synchronizes refugees' daily routines. Perhaps radio, thus, can be understood to function as a cohesive force in the camps. Regarding this notion, communications professor, David Morley, states, "The order of the day is the infrastructure of the community" (Morley 16). His statement suggests that individuals' daily itineraries make up the social framework of a community and are the basis for which its members interface. Considering Morley's statement, radio can be seen not only as integral to the

infrastructure of the home, but to the community as well.

Tuning Time

Radios situate refugees not only in space, but also in time. As previously stated, programs provide an itinerary for the day, organizing their time over the space of the day. Radio also factors into how they perceive or detect time; it is part of the timing of the day – the programming schedule indicates morning, afternoon or evening. Additionally, it enables refugees to manipulate how they experience time. Radio demarcates time, with each program equaling a single unit. Subba, a male refugee in his late 30s, explained, “If you have two hours on your hands, that is equal to about four programs. So, listening to radio makes time pass faster.” Subba describes an interesting phenomenon: radio changes the pace of time, or tempo, seemingly increasing it. It accomplishes this by breaking down time into chunks that are more easily digestible. Furthermore, radio’s ability to engage refugees also contributes to the sense that time is transpiring faster. The latter concept is easily understood. People commonly cite that “time flies” when they are having fun or inches by when bored. The capacity of radio to speed up time is important to refugees who desire to escape their present conditions and bypass the monotony intrinsic to their lifestyle.

Elaborating upon media technology’s relationship with time, anthropologist, Francisco Orioso states, “Cultures use television precisely as they use time. This is possible because time is the common structure between mass media and culture” (Rothenbuhler and Coman 38). The same is true of radio. It is a medium of time, but furthermore, I would like to argue that it is the means by which the refugee community experiences and interacts with time and lends agency to these interactions. Where it has

been emphasized that refugees are subjected to lengthy periods of empty time, radio lends a minutiae of control guiding refugees as they organize, interpret and manipulate it. Radio, however, is not limited to mediating how refugees relate to time, but also their surroundings and the world at large.

Compact Connections

When asked how life would be different without radio, refugees stated that there would be no way to pass the time. Many also responded that they would not be able to learn about major occurrences in the camps, the world nor about the lives of resettled refugees. Radio informs refugees on these various subjects and simultaneously functions as a bridge, connecting them to other refugees both within and beyond their borders and the globe. In the following sections, radios underlying connective capabilities will be explained.

Camp Communications:

During my visit to the Bhutanese refugee camps, an unfortunate event transpired. A young man, Ram Kumar Gurung, was gunned down right outside of his hut. He was transported to a local hospital but, tragically, did not survive his injuries. Shortly afterwards, all seven camps were abuzz with rumors. Deeply affected and concerned for their safety, refugees frantically sought answers to understand why and how the incident occurred. To gather information and stay abreast of the situation they continuously remained tuned into their radios.

From my discussions with refugees and conversations with my informant, Vidhyapati, I learned that in the midst of critical and concerning times refugees are incessantly glued to their radios. In addition to informing refugees, it gives them a sense

of security, where they otherwise might fear the possibility of being completely unaware. It therefore mitigates anxiety due to potential uncertainty. Furthermore, the compact medium of the radio has the ability to link refugees both within and between the separated camps. By keeping refugees informed of significant events in the community, radio allows for them to remain connected to each other. These connections may be weak. They are indirect and do not allow for two-way interaction. However, they are crucial to refugees during critical situations, enabling them to relay and receive information all through the network of the radio.

Refugees Beyond Borders:

Though the story of the shooting pertains to the camps, refugees are also concerned with matters beyond their borders. Many stated that they were primarily interested in international news, followed by news regarding the surrounding community of Nepal. Provided that refugees have lived in Nepal for over twenty years and Nepali news dominates the radio, their preference for international news might seem unusual. However, it makes sense for a number of reasons: they are an isolated and sometimes ostracized community in their host country, are unable to integrate or acquire citizenship, do not view Nepal as their home and intend to resettle in other countries spread throughout the globe.

When asked why they listened to radio, refugees would consistently assert that they wanted “to know more about the world.” Initially, I was not sure whether refugees were able to absorb the international news. It consists of a very brief segment of the evening news and does not last more than a few minutes. However, I later realized the specifics of the content were less relevant. For many refugees, radio is one of the only

outlets to the larger world. Listening to radio provides a way to transcend their barriers and access the global, which they are increasingly becoming a part of as their friends, neighbors and family move to other countries and as they prepare to do so themselves. Even if the information it airs is not retainable, in the act of hearing about other countries refugees can gain a sense of the world as a whole and even begin to imagine a global society. Significantly, as refugees prominently rely on radio for information, it would seem that their perception of the world is largely shaped by the framing of the radio.

Bridge to the Diaspora:

While designing my research project, I discovered that one of the community radio stations broadcasted a program targeting Bhutanese refugees. The program, intended to represent their community and culture, contained multiple segments comprised of interviews with refugees on topics including life in Bhutan, the culture of Bhutanese refugees, issues in the camps and successes achieved by the refugee community. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, the body overseeing the camps, it was one of the only programs of its kind internationally. I was fascinated with the idea of a community driven refugee radio program and was interested in determining the role this program played in the lives of refugees.

Interviewing refugees, I learned that most listened to the program primarily for the same reason: its segment on resettlement. The program often featured interviews with refugees that had settled in countries around the globe. Radio, it turned out, did not merely connect refugees in the seven camps; it also connected them to the diaspora.

In the wake of the resettlement process, thousands of refugees have vacated the camps and those who remain behind now belong to a deeply fractured community.

Despite being thousands of miles apart, the radio keeps them linked. It imports the diaspora's audio presence into the homes and community of refugees, allowing them to hear the voices of those who have left. When refugees first started to resettle in 2007, radio was the only means by which refugees could hear from the diaspora. Now, it is being supplemented and even surpassed by cell-phones and the Internet. Unlike radio, these technologies allow refugees to directly interact with their friends and family abroad. However, access to cell-phones and the Internet is limited due to their associated costs and, to some degree, the level of technological proficiency required. Thus, radio is still relied upon by many to connect to the diaspora.

The interview segment also allows for refugees to envision a future life. Refugees, the majority of whom will resettle in other countries, are ravenously curious about the lives of resettled refugees and the countries they inhabit. This segment provides a glimpse into their own future and enables them to conceive of a new home as well as the possibilities that await them. On this subject, anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai, states:

More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of "possible" lives than they ever did before." One important source of this change is the mass media, which present a rich, ever changing store of possible lives, some of which enter the lived imaginations of ordinary people more successfully than others. Important also are contact with, news of, and rumors about others in one's social neighborhood who have become inhabitants of these faraway worlds.

(Rothenbuhler and Coman 18)

Stuck in their present conditions, the radio connects refugees to an imagined future and gives them hope for a better life.

In some ways, the radio itself has become the physical embodiment of the connections created. Without it, there is a sense that refugees are cut off from society and disconnected from the world. They, thus, remain tuned in to retain a link to each other and the world beyond camp borders.

Refugee Radio: Questions Unanswered

The refugee program, known as Saranarathi Sundesh or “the message of refugees,” presented itself as a more complex organism than expected. Its function to connect refugees to the diaspora and an imagined future was evident; however, I had entered the field believing the program would be a source of empowerment for refugees. Community radio programs such as Saranarathi Sundesh, after all, are intended to amplify the voices of marginalized collectives and promote their issues in the communities they reside in. In the end, I could not determine whether the program empowered refugees. However, a series of questions materialized that I believe require further exploration in order to determine the programs’ definitive impact.

Does the program represent Bhutanese refugees?

It is difficult to say whether Saranarathi Sundesh truly represents refugees. Though the program literally features their voices, it is produced by a local Nepali, Gopal, and funded by the Open Society Foundation headquartered in the U.S. Refugees participate in the program. They are interviewed for its various segments, but they do not contribute to its production nor shape its content. I was not able to gather how refugees felt about this fact, or if they were even aware. Most refugees said that they listened to

the program because it represented “the voice of refugees.” They also stated that there was nothing they would suggest to change or amend it. Still, I feel more exploration of this issue is required to comprehensively grasp refugees’ attitudes towards the programs.

Is there a sense of community ownership of the program?

Radio primarily features Nepali news and Nepali individuals. Saranarathi Sundesh is the sole space they have on the radio, but is it a space they feel they own, that belongs to them, or is it simply a space they occupy much like the land they live on?

What are the programs’ impacts on refugees?

Saranarathi Sandesh does connect refugees to the diaspora and also lends to an imagined future, but what are its other impacts? Does the program strengthen the refugee community? More specifically, does it increase the number of connections within their community and does it enhance bonding? Additionally, the producer, Gopal, mentioned that he often interviews elderly Bhutanese refugees about their lives in Bhutan as well as about their traditions and culture. Does the program assist in keeping the Bhutanese culture alive? Does it effectively function to pass down cultural knowledge from older generations to the younger generations born in the camps? Gopal also stated that the program shares the successes of refugees in the community. Does this information advance refugees? Does it inspire them or feed them ideas?

Does refugees’ presence on radio impact their presence in Nepal?

Citizenship is required to be a member of the community, however, it is not for radio. Does the program restore power lost due to refugees’ lack of citizenship? Broadcasted through the radio, refugees become integrated into and occupy the community space of the radio. How does this translate to their physical community? Does

it increase locals' tolerance of refugees? Are they becoming more accepted into Nepali society? Does being heard through the radio normalize or legitimize their presence in the host community? To answer these questions, the attitudes of Nepali citizens toward refugees and the refugee program must be examined.

Answering the above questions will reveal the beneficial aspects of Saranarathi Sandesh as well as its limitations. Ultimately, balancing these various factors will determine whether the program does in fact empower refugees.

Conclusion

Our perceptions of mass media often reduce the medium to a device of communication. The extent of its function is dependent on its capacity to distribute information and its impact is rooted in the nature and assimilation of its content. Anthropologists, however, have expanded our understanding of media, examining the ways in which it penetrates our quotidian lives, contributes to our sociality, embodies and shapes cultures and factors into our very identities and perceptions. In this paper, I have characterized radios' use in Bhutanese refugee camps in accordance with this broadened frame of analysis.

I have suggested that radio lends something more than information. The depth and magnitude of radio's impact are most adequately understood when considering its absence. Without radio there would be silence, isolation, uncertainty, awkwardness, loneliness, a sense of emptiness, tension and idleness. Refugees would also suffer from a lack of company, context, structure, calm, a sense of stability, an escape, diversity, rhythm, routine and connectedness.

The presence of radio provides company and a framework for daily life, structuring the domestic space and community. Additionally, it is an integral part of how refugees perceive and interact with their environment. It impacts their relationship with time and contributes to a sense of home. It is also an extension of their senses. It functions as their eyes and ears where they are not present. It bridges refugees within the camps and to the diaspora, while also providing a window to the surrounding community and world. Radio also contributes to the formation of refugees' imagined futures. It imports visions of the world, providing them with the hope of a life outside of the camps. In a way, radio can also be thought of as facilitating refugee's future. Exposing them to the outside world, which they will soon be a part of, might enable them to better integrate into other communities once they resettle.

In determining the capacities of radio, it is also important to understand its limitations. Therefore, more research is required to examine whether radio is an empowering force for refugees. Though a technological device, radio has become a presence in refugees' lives – one that mediates how they experience and navigate their reality.

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