

GlobalOriya.com: A case study in sudden failure of community media in India

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Abstract

Internal migration within India increased significantly after economic liberalization in 1991. The effect of liberalization really took effect on the ground in India around the year 2000 when the internal migration from the relatively poorer regions of north and east to the more prosperous regions of south and west saw a huge spike in numbers. GlobalOriya.com was an early initiative in community media for the internally displaced population of the eastern province of Orissa (now called Odisha) outside of the province. This was a very successful initiative, which spread to have a dedicated and engaged readership of more than 8000 members in little over three years. However, it died a sudden death in early 2007 when different factors combined to lead to its demise. It is an excellent case study of what can go wrong in an otherwise successful community media initiative. This paper details the journey of the initiative from the perspective of one of its founders and disseminates the learnings from this experience aiming to help other community media organizations become much more robust against such sudden failures.

Introduction

India is a country of immense diversity with its plurality of languages, religions, ethnicities and geography. The second richest country of the world in the 17th Century, India was reduced to a third world country by the time it obtained Independence from the British rule. Growing at a very modest rate of 3.5 percent, India continued to remain a land of abject poverty in the initial decades after Independence. The economic liberalization of 1991 started years of rapid economic growth, and brought huge internal migration from the relatively poorer regions of the north and east to the more prosperous regions of south and west. Many community media initiatives sprang up to cater to these internally displaced communities. Globaloriya.com was one such early community media initiative that rose to become a very successful venture. However, this initiative collapsed around the beginning of 2007. This sudden death of a successful community media initiative imparts huge lessons for all such ventures and this paper tries to communicate those learnings.

Internal migration in Independent India

India is a huge country of almost 1.3 billion people, a subcontinent with its diversity of languages, religions, ethnicities and geographies. The best way to understand India is through its multitudes of languages. Each language, primarily spoken by an ethnic community within a certain geography, carries the culture, history and sensibilities of the community within that geography. With 122 major languages and 1599 other languages (Wikipedia n.d.) the diversity of thought and culture that India carries within its borders is simply mindboggling.

There are 30 languages in India which have more than 1 million native speakers. Out of these, 22 are 'scheduled' languages which means they are sanctioned by the Indian constitution to be used for official government business. These primary languages roughly correspond to the different provinces of India. The British colonial government started the idea of organizing India into linguistic provinces (called 'States' in India) in 1936 when they created Orissa (now called as Odisha) by combining the areas where Oriya (now called Odia) was the primary language. This concept was formally

institutionalized in Independent India in 1956 with the formation of new states based on language.

At this time the speakers of each language were concentrated in their respective states. There was minimal movement of people speaking different languages between the states. The economic base of the country at Independence was abysmal. In the first three decades after Independence from the British, India grew at a modest growth rate of 3.5 percent. Often termed as the “Hindu Growth Rate” (Sabysachi Kar 2007) this was not enough to lift the mass of the Indian population out of poverty. Growth increased to 6 percent in the 1980s, primarily driven by public sector enterprises that reduced the inequality between the states. The public sector was driven by the political need to direct resources to the backward regions of the country. However economic inequality rose sharply between different states after 1991 (Nair 2004) in response to the program of economic liberalization which was carried out by the government of Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao. Growth after liberalization was driven by the private sector, which pushed the resources to already developed areas in the quest to reduce cost and increase competitiveness. This led to a sharp rise in economic inequality between states with poorer states of the north and east of India becoming poorer and the relatively prosperous states of south and west of India emerging richer. This led to a natural movement of people from the poorer states to richer states with its associated issues of community bonding for the displaced populace (Bhagat 2009). Internal migration rates increased rapidly and peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

With people moving from their ancestral regions where their languages carried their native cultures and sensibilities to a different region with a different language and culture, internal migrants yearned for their native customs, cultures and languages in their new place of settlement. This issue was magnified in the initial years of liberalization from late 1990s to early 2000s since the provincial media was largely confined to their respective states. The few national media outlets that existed in those days were largely catering to metro news with the news from the hinterlands of poorer states largely ignored. Landline telephones did have some penetration. However, the interstate calling rates were prohibitively expensive for most people and prevented internal migrants from talking regularly to their nearest and dearest ones who remained in their native places or from getting satisfactory ‘real time’ updates of happenings back home. Mobile penetration at this time was also negligible and social media was not at all in the horizon. All these combined to make internal migrants feel a sense of ‘being left out’ in the evolving conundrum of emerging India.

GlobalOriya.com fills the void for Oriya migrants

Against this backdrop, a bunch of young fulltime working professionals in Bangalore started an e-newsletter, GlobalOriya.com, in 2003 as a spare time activity. This web-based e-newsletter tried to fill the void riding on rising desktop computer sales and decreasing broadband connection rates. The media initiative leveraged the nascent reach of internet in India among the well-educated Oriya migrant population and quickly spread among Oriya migrants in different metro cities of India as well as outside of India. The internet media initiative provided non-resident Oriyas news about their home province. It also provided news of their intimate communities in cities outside of Orissa by depending on news sourced from among the community citizens based in respective cities. GlobalOriya.com also highlighted successful personalities from within the migrant Oriya community to inspire other community members. It had a dedicated section on Oriya literature with Oriya poems contributed by the migrant reader population.

This web-based newsletter quickly grew to be a powerful voice of migrant Oriyas. By late 2006, it had close to 8000 engaged readers who were very vocal in their appreciation of the newsletter. It harnessed the energy of young members to fight for the cause of migrants. It fought alongside other community groups to successfully petition the Indian Prime Minister and the ruling party bigwigs to establish institutes of higher education in Orissa. It also successfully lobbied to start direct flight connections between Bhubaneswar (capital of Orissa) to Bangalore and helped hundreds of migrant job seekers from Orissa to be job ready and then eventually get high paying corporate jobs in Bangalore through its weekend coaching sessions.

With its tremendous success to work for the cause of Oriya migrants, Globaloriya started to be noticed widely. Orissa state government departments started contacting Globaloriya to help spread the cause of Orissa outside the state. Globaloriya established a charitable trust to take its activities forward. With the establishment of the charitable trust, it started getting advertisement revenues. This success story inspired migrant Oriyas in other cities to work for similar causes.

Sudden shut down of GlobalOriya.com

Amidst all these successes, GlobalOriya.com published an appeal from a Bangalore based trust to donate for the construction of a Hindu temple in Bangalore. In the absence of any formal vetting process for advertising or editorial content, the appeal was published in good faith, in the newsletter, as community-generated content. Subsequently, police contacted the editor to advise that the temple trust was under investigation for misuse of donations. This was hugely surprising for the newsletter team since they had not anticipated any wrongdoing by the trust who provided the appeal information for publication. In the Indian legal system, however, ignorance is no excuse.

During the police investigation when police made the editor aware of various legal provisions around collection of money, the Globaloriya trust realized the enormity of the compliance activities that are required to be done to perform as per all applicable rules and regulations of the land. The founders of the newsletter realized that at the scale of the community media undertaking they had embarked on could not be properly managed as a spare time activity or financially sustained with their fulltime job commitments, and so shut down the newsletter.

Learnings for community media organizations

Many useful learnings from the sudden downfall of GlobalOriya.com are applicable to all the community media organizations. The first among them is the need for a core team of full timers. First among them is the need to attract to the organization a team of people who are committed to work in community media on a fulltime basis, and for this work to be paid as revenue growth permits. It is immensely important to realize that community media is just not about a hobby; it is a serious stuff. The time commitment required to adhere to all applicable rules and regulations needs full timers. Full timers will also be able to avoid conflicts of interest between the paid daytime jobs and activities at the community media. Hence, the biggest learning for all community media enthusiasts is to be clear on the priorities in life and view community media as a fulltime occupation to be successful in the long run. GlobalOriya.com failed in part because of an absence of participants who aspired to become full time community media professionals.

The second biggest takeaway from the story of GlobalOriya.com is to be aware of the need for professional development of people in key management positions, especially about applicable laws and procedures governing community media in the country that they operate. A host of laws bind media organizations, and this needs awareness. It is critically important to have a legal and finance cell or to tie up with consultants in this area for compliance. Good governance arrangements and editorial practices help to minimize the legal exposure of community owners and employees.

The third lesson is about growing at a sustainable speed. The moot question to ask even when community demand and acceptance may be very high is, “Can we afford to grow at this speed?” Look at the bigger picture. How many of your contributors are full timers and how many are volunteers? What happens if volunteers stop contributing after some time? Would you be able to maintain the pace when they stop the help? The bottom line is to maintain a pace that you can sustain for the long run.

One of the other important learnings is to be ready to fight the daily petty battles involving the community. Growth brings competition, jealousy and petty community politics. It is not only about doing positive things, but also about defending against negative stuff. Are you ready for it?

These are important lessons to remember while starting a community media outlet. The passion to do something positive for the community many times makes us blind to these aspects. It is important that we keep these aspects in mind to be a truly successful organization in the end.

Conclusion

Community media gives its practitioners a huge sense of satisfaction in terms of contributing positively for the community. However, the passion needs balance with practical wisdom to make the initiative a sustainable enterprise. The sudden failure of a highly successful community e-newsletter GlobalOriya.com imparts powerful lessons for community media enthusiasts in this direction.

About the Author

Subhransu Mohapatra is a mechanical engineer based in Bangalore, India. He is originally from the Orissa province of India and among millions of Oriya people who had to migrate to richer metro cities of India outside of Orissa in search of a livelihood. He was the founder editor of GlobalOriya.com.

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