

Setting up a radio station for just Rs.50,000!

As India opens up a new sector that has long been the monopoly of the government, a hundred and one questions hang over the heads of those wanting to launch community radio stations.

But the biggest of these simply is: what does it cost to set up a small, low-powered radio station?

Says Venu Arora, director of projects of the Faridabad-based Ideosync Media Combine: 'The community production set-ups - studio with basic sound proofing using egg-trays and foam - that we've worked with at two projects in Uttaranchal (Havel and Mandakini) cost less than Rs.50,000, including using local carpenters for the basic structure.'

Arora explained that the production studios are 'very basic but very functional' and include just one computer and one studio microphone. Yet the community teams have been producing content with excellent production value.

Sajan Venniyoor, an official with public broadcaster Prasar Bharati, now on secondment with Unesco, points to options created by the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) and the UN-linked body.

He says: 'The ABU-Unesco 'radio-in-a-box' is not just a transmitter - it is a complete 'radio station'. All you need is a room to put it in and a decent antenna would probably help. It would be nice if the laptop was included in the \$5,000-6,000 (plus freight) package.'

The ABU-Unesco radio station of 30-watt output was demonstrated by ABU's Kuala Lumpur-based head of studio technology and training, Rukmin Wijemanne, at the Broadcast Engineering Society Expo in Delhi in the first week of February.

One issue that has come up is whether transmitters can be carried across various destinations to offer training.

Max Graef, director of the Britain-based RadioActive radioactive.org.uk, points to the options available. RadioActive specialises in providing equipment, training and technical assistance to set up community radio stations.

'It is true that there are ways to cut corners on the cost of setting up a community radio station. It depends on how reliable you want the equipment to be, how large an area you would like to cover, the local terrain, whether you have access to power, and what kind of capacity you would like to have in your radio studios,' Graef says.

RadioActive has itself set up stations for communities with very low budgets, for example, in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico, where a 30watt FM transmitter was set up atop a 15-metre pole at a cost of under 1,000 pounds sterling.

'To get a community on the air, with the ability to make radio programmes with a mix of interviews recorded in the field, live interviews, music, spots, jingles and other pre-recorded programming, the equipment listed above is more than adequate,' says Graef.

This station broadcasts to over 10,000 people in communities up to 25 km away.

Another campaigner interested in the field, Aaditeshwar Seth, questioned earlier Unesco estimates of Rs.1-2 million for setting up one community radio station.

Seth wrote: 'I know that FM PCI cards that plug into a regular desktop computer come for around Rs.7,500. They have an output of only 20W, but I believe that amplifier circuits can be built easily.'

Computer costs and the growing role of digital technologies in broadcasting have also lowered costs. Sturdy broadcast towers of 20 metres can be built for under Rs.15,000 too. Minor peripherals like speakers and microphones are locally available and costly sound-proofing might not be essential.

So will the realistic costs and India's already available skills in this field make things happen?

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