

Radio is a fascinating medium, and always will be!

In conversation with Dr. Arvind Singhal, PhD, professor of Communication and director of the Social Justice Initiative at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). He is also appointed as Professor II, Inland University of Applied Sciences, Norway.



You have done so much work in the field of communications, tell us something about how and where you started?

I was a student of science and engineering; but beginning in high school, I auditioned for All India's Radio (AIR) Yuva Vani service and soon became a fixture at the national radio network's headquarters in New Delhi's Parliament Street, hosting a wide variety of Hindi and English language programs. From Yuva Vani, which at that time was a cradle for budding broadcasters, I graduated to doing programs for AIR's General Overseas Service, first participating in talk shows and Quiz programs, and later becoming a Quiz show host. Soon I was doing weekly contracts with AIR in the capacity of stringer and announcer. A turning point for me was when I did a musical special on the Beatles (I believe in 1981) which received critical acclaim by Amita Malik, a prominent media critic. In her newspaper column, Ms. Malik noted that in "a sea of mediocre, dull, and boring" fare on AIR, what stood out as an exception was the Beatles special done by Singhal. She commended the "painstaking research" and the elegant hosting of the program—a historical narrative of the ascent of this Liverpool band from playing at The Cavern, an underground cellar, to the world stage—interspersed with their hit singles and albums. That affirmation, at a somewhat young age, I believe, propelled me to earn an MA degree from the US (after graduating as an engineer) in Radio-TV-Film production, followed by a PhD in media effects and social change, and now 27+ years as a professor.

Communications and social justice. Your views on the link and its applicability?

To truly understand the link between communication and justice, one need only look at our beloved Bapu—Mahatma Gandhi—and how he consummately and purposely used communicative symbols (such as salt and *khadi*) and symbolic acts (such as spinning, fasting, and cleaning latrines) to galvanize a nation, to turn global public opinion against colonization, and deliver India's independence through peaceful nonviolent non-cooperation. Seeking justice for one and all, especially for the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized, he invented a new vernacular that evoked new realities and possibilities—e.g. *Satyagraha*, *Harijan*, *Daridranarayan*, and the like. Essentially, as Bapu exemplified, all acts of justice are accomplished through agenda-setting and advocacy, social mobilization, word of mouth, and ethical persuasion. [On Gandhi's life as a consummate communicator, see <http://utminers.utep.edu/asinghal/Singhal-Mahatma%20is%20the%20message-IJCSR-2014.pdf>]

At the UTEP, you teach and conduct research on the diffusion of innovations, the entertainment-education strategy, the positive deviance approach, and others. Please share some light on them?

I am very interested in how new ideas, new realities, new practices spread (and/or communicated) in a social system—hence the interest in the diffusion of innovations. I was fortunate to have studied and collaborated for over two decades with Professor Everett M. Rogers, the guru of Diffusion of Innovations. We became highly interested in the purposive role that narratives, storytelling, and entertainment could play—given their popularity and commercial viability—in changing social norms and behaviors. We were fortunate to be involved in implementing and researching certain pioneering attempts of this social diffusion strategy (commonly referred to as the “entertainment-education strategy”) in several countries, including India, where we studied the effects of *Hum Log* (We People), the hit long-running television drama serial of the mid-1980s. This interest in unleashing the power of media-centered narratives, and integrating it with the Positive Deviance approach (which involves identifying individuals, groups, and communities, who have succeeded in overcoming social challenges against all odds) has continued for over three-plus decades, including in the design, implementation, and research on the hit *Doordarshan* and AIR television and radio serial, *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon* (I, a woman, can achieve anything!), broadcast over two seasons in over a dozen languages between 2014 and 2016, with an estimated reach of 400 million people. [For more on the Positive Deviance approach, see Arvind Singhal’s TEDx talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-NAvN-PLW0>]

In the present age of information and communication revolution, we still struggle with large communication gaps. What is your take on it?

While communication technology has become widely available, and accessibility to television, radio, and mobile telephony has dramatically increased—consistent with the democratizing vision of the late Vikram Sarabhai and in recent decades of Sam Pitroda, the disparities in a country such as India are of a magnitude that are hard to completely overcome. Further, the commercialization of media and fragmentation of audiences’ means the markets will cater to those who have “purchasing power,” and this in generally continues to perpetuate the socioeconomic inequality gaps. That is one reason social diffusion strategies like “entertainment-education,” which can reach large audiences at low cost and have the potential to be commercially viable, need to be given more attention. Also, here community-based radio stations (like Alfaz-e-Mewat) can play a key role.

What is the alchemy between media production, reception, and social change?

The alchemy between media production, reception, and social change is that media producers and those who research the effects of media reception must work together. As my Dutch colleague, Martine Bouman, has argued, media producers are often like peacocks—flamboyant and creative. And researchers are like turtles—slow and deliberate. They have a very hard time working together. Media production should be preceded by formative audience research, and media reception should be succeeded by summative evaluation research. These processes should occur collaboratively. The alchemy arises when we create a culture of collaboration between peacocks and turtles to harness the advantages of each.



Singhal (extreme right) during a 2015 visit to Alfaz-e-Mewat.

The media landscape in our country has proliferated greatly. What are the challenges and avenues that lie ahead in the coming years?

As media production and consumption turns digital, the ME in MEDIUM will increasingly dominate. On one hand, if there is a level playing field, it represents a democratizing function of media. On the other, in a world of disparities, it becomes a source of hegemonic domination and increases fragmentation, customization, and individualization. These challenges, over time, can be overcome, but they will then likely morph into other forms.

We have evolved from the traditional magic bullet and agenda-setting theories of mass media to the so called more inclusive and participatory theories of communication. Do you think it is evolved in spirit too or is just disguised in form?

I think we have made great progress—in thought, theorizing, and in practice—from the days of the magic bullet theory. There is greater diversity of points of view, and accompanying practice that recognizes the value of audience ownership, not just buy-in. We still have a long way to go. However, approaches like the Positive Deviance approach that the wisdom to solve the problem lies with people and innovations hide among least likely suspects, are turning traditional top-down, change agency-driven worldviews on their head [For more, see [http://utminers.utep.edu/asinghal/Articles%20and%20Chapters/Journal%20Articles/Singhal-PD-Turning DOI on its head-Vish-Barnett-2011.pdf](http://utminers.utep.edu/asinghal/Articles%20and%20Chapters/Journal%20Articles/Singhal-PD-Turning%20DOI%20on%20its%20head-Vish-Barnett-2011.pdf)]

There is lot of diversity in media and its forms but many voices still remain unheard. Why is it so? Sections of society who do not fall in the mainstream, as the LGBTQ community, sex workers, and minorities haven't still found safe spaces to express themselves. What can be done?

The Internet, digital platforms, and social media are slowly changing this mediascape as every individual, group, or community now has the means to communicate with the world—whether through Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, or in other ways. However, societal norms, especially on issues that are taboo (not easily talkable) are foundationally very difficult to dislodge. Gandhiji started his *Harijan* newspaper about 100 years ago, and we are still a work in progress. The process of societal change often takes a few generations. However, the new media seems to be accelerating this pace of change.

Your journey in communications began with one of the traditional mediums, i.e. radio; do you think this media still holds value in today's digital world especially at the grassroots?

Radio is a fascinating medium and always will be, because it allows for a listener to constantly create images in one's head about the unfolding content. I remember as a six- or seven-year-old, huddling with my brothers and grandfather around a bulky radio set in Lucknow, listening to Houston Mission Control say, "The Eagle has landed," referencing the first moon landing! While the citizens of North America and Western Europe followed this historic moment on television, there we were—adults and children—following this on radio. A large information divide existed then between audience members in well-to-do countries and developing ones, which is now being observed between urban Indian media consumers and those in more rural parts of India. There will hence always be a place for radio, and especially a role for small grassroots community radios like Alfaz-e-Mewat, where the line between listeners and producers, between local needs and wants, and between reality and imagination, will be blurred in the ether of airwaves!

(Interview by Pooja O. Murada, director, Communications, S M Sehgal Foundation)