

Holding Politicians to Electoral Promises: The role of the Media in Rural Development

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Abstract: The journalist remains the hope for rural development and safeguard for the rural dwellers, whose needs draw the attention of the elitist regime and politicians only during period of political electioneering and mandate renewal. The rural dwellers are always subjected to period cycle of unfulfilled promises. The role of the Journalists becomes imperative and greatest agents of advancing grassroots development through an institutional and interventionist approach. It is believed that the gap in communication and feedback mechanism between the grassroots and the urban centres, can be narrowed by the constants and dispassionate intervention of journalists to frequently remind the politicians and the elitist class of their promises made to the rural people before they were given the mandate of electoral victory. It is the duty of the journalist to remind the politicians of their social responsibility towards the society, especially the rural folks and performance of how diligent and judicious they were able to manage public funds entrusted into their care, as well as commending government's efforts in alleviating the plight of the rural people when such obligations are fulfilled. This mediating role of the media is believed to be a platform of fostering a fledging relationship between the government and the grassroots. This paper looks at the "Holding Politicians to Electoral Promises: The role of the Media in Rural Development," in the context of the strategic role of the Media in dealing with challenges bedeviling rural development, particularly, rural India. The paper also seeks to address some of the challenges Journalists face as individuals in their quest to report on rural issues in one hand and the media as an institution faces in the era of commercialization and political interference in their operations.

Keywords: Journalist, Promises, Rural, Commercialisation, Grassroots.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is not for nothing that Mahatma Gandhi said the "The future of India lies in its villages," (Thadani, 2011) and that for the villages, by extension, the rural India, to developed, there should be physical and electronic linkages between both rural and urban areas. This vision of Gandhiji was a huge responsibility placed in the hands of communication and media with special reference to rural reporting. Communication has been identified as a vital means of development and the level of development in a given society depends on its effective application and delivery. The strategies for the use of communication in rural development and integration in India have, until recently, been approached from an uncoordinated perspective. It is true that India's economy is the fourth largest in the world but the growth pattern is not uniform, (Ramesha, 2018).

The economy is doing well in the manufacturing, services and communications sectors but critical sectors like agriculture, infrastructure development, community and social services in rural development are lagging behind. Stockbridge and Dorward, (2017), argue that development should be holistic and that without the corresponding development of the rural areas, the country can never claim to be developed.

India is considered an emerging economy with enormous economic power with high growth rates. This development can be seen as the cities and urban centres begin to reflect the marks of affluence. Unfortunately, the current development or

growth pole is not uniform; The level of development in the cities and the urban centres does not commensurate with what happens in the rural areas. About 60-70 per cent of the population lives in villages and rural areas. It means two-thirds of the population are not benefitting from the economic boom. The danger is that these visible symbols of development turn to make the system forget about the problems and challenges of the rural areas, (Ramesha, 2018).

The dire situation in the rural areas such as repeated crop failures due to unpredictable climatic changes, inability to meet the rising cost of cultivation, and the increasing debt burden among other factors, have led to frustration among the farmers. It has therefore become extremely difficult dealing with the challenges of rural reconstruction, (Thakur, 2018). The solutions to this problem include building larger irrigation facilities and improvement on old ones, better seeds and agricultural inputs, provision of fertilizer at reasonable prices to farmers, coupled with finance, infrastructural and marketing facilities. Agriculture being the mainstay of India's economy, it is imperative that a more comprehensive approach and time-bound programme are adopted to salvage the agriculture sector and not to be left at the vagaries of the weather, financial resources, and markets, (Dash, 2009), (Scoones, 2009).

Rural India and the Gandhian Approach to Rural Development

According to Shah and Chaturvedi (1983) Mahatma Gandhi, is noted to be the first Indian leader to champion rural development in India. On March 30, 1946 at the Prayer meeting at Urulikanchan before leaving for Delhi for final negotiation with the British, Gandhiji reiterated that, "we cannot retain power in Delhi without developing rural India." His concept of rural development meant self-reliance with very little dependence on foreign aids. His quest for indigenous industrial revolution led to the launch of the Swadeshi Movement using spinning and weaving to promote Khadi. The other emphasis was a curb on consumption as excessive consumption causes pressure on resources and adds to wastage and pollution. His thought-provoking statement, "there is enough on this earth to meet the need, but not the greed," has now become a universal slogan for ensuring environmental protection and sustainable development.

The Gandhian model of development can provide solutions to India's rural problems which are linked to the basic needs of the people, such as 'Anna' (livelihood), 'Akshar' (literacy), 'Arogya' (health) and 'Acharan' (moral values) (Thadani, 2011), (Hopkins, 1998), (Shah & Chaturvedi, 1983). While the development programmes should aim at meeting these needs, it is essential to blend these activities with 'Dharam' not any particular religion but the essence of all religions along with a focus on moral values 'Acharan'. In the absence of moral values, particularly non-violence, non-addiction to gambling, drugs and alcohol and marital discord, the development may shape the future generations as demons, instead of citizens of a civilised society. If one can insist on adopting moral values, it will be easy to curb one's greed and with sincere efforts, there will be no difficulty in meeting one's needs, (Thadani, 2011), (Hopkins, 1998), (Shah & Chaturvedi, 1983).

Thadani (2011), Hopkins (1998) and Shah and Chaturvedi (1983) believe that India's natural resources, although degraded and abused beyond sustainability, still have the potential to support the people. They, however, suggested that there is the need for the citizens to discipline themselves to carefully manage their resources and environment. This calls for a radical change in India's planning strategy. According to Thadani (2011), Hopkins (1998) and Shah and Chaturvedi (1983), India's rural development programmes were planned by the Planning Commission situated at the state headquarters. This strategy was later changed and decentralised. This move has been seen to be too over ambitious as the district is seen to be too large an area for implementing a specific development plan. Considering the variation in the quality of India's natural resources and opportunities at the village level, it was recommended the planning should be at either block level or taluka level.

Such decentralised, 'micro level planning' should primarily focus on conservation and optimum utilisation of water resources. As water is the basic need, supply of safe drinking water for the rural people should be the priority. The argument is that if water can be transported, hundreds of kilometers, for the setting up of industries and to meet the demand in urban areas, then why not for the rural people? If the government can ensure safe potable water for them, major problems associated health, because a majority of the health disorders in rural areas is linked with contaminated water, can be solved. This can also reduce the drudgery of rural women who often have to walk barefooted to long distances, carrying headloads of water throughout the year. It is in the same vein that farmers also need water to maintain their livestock and the surplus can be used for growing trees and crops, (Thadani, 2011), (Hopkins, 1998), (Shah & Chaturvedi, 1983).

Thadani (2011), Hopkins (1998) and Shah and Chaturvedi (1983) posit that planners should also explore the possibility of making optimum use of the degraded land and unproductive livestock which are posing a threat to the environment. Wastelands spread almost over one half of the total land area in the country cannot absorb rainwater. The water and top fertile soil flow through agricultural fields into the river resulting in floods and droughts. In this situation, the efforts and resources of the development agencies are diverted towards relief measures. Livestock, when left free for grazing, denude the pastures and forests. This further accelerates the process of soil erosion, floods and global warming. Hence, planners should give priority to convert the wastelands and non-descript livestock into productive assets for ensuring employment and livelihood in rural areas, while enriching the environment. It is difficult to motivate villagers to adopt family planning without assuring good health. Child care through nutritional awareness camps and Anganwadis should become an important component of the health care programme. Literacy too cannot be ignored, because in the absence of functional literacy, rural people cannot adopt appropriate technology. Even if they earn surplus money, they may not utilise it in the proper direction. This can be harmful for the community, (Thadani, 2011), (Hopkins, 1998), (Shah & Chaturvedi, 1983).

As livelihood, education and health are inter related, there is the need to tackle them simultaneously. This integrated approach can provide an excellent opportunity for the development agencies and field workers to interact with the rural people, who in turn can be motivated to participate in development programmes. I am sure this new approach will bring about a radical change.

In reference to the Economic Survey 2006-2007, a report from the government of India, (Government of India, 2015), stated that, agricultural growth in recent years had fallen and so had investment and profitability of agriculture, including net sown area under crops, and the area under irrigation. This phenomenon is said to be a regular feature of crop failure. This is said to have put Rural India in crisis. Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, the distinguished agricultural economist said: "The agrarian crisis has its roots in the collapse of the rural economy... Unemployment leading to out-migration of the assetless is growing. The minimum support price mechanism is not operating for most commodities. At every level of the livelihood security system, there is a tendency to make profit out of poverty. Something is terribly wrong in the countryside...", (Scoones, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

One of the mandates of every government is to create the enabling environment for socio-economic development. The development of rural areas is a key that goes a long way to have positive effects on the socio-economic development of the whole country. One of the challenges facing the development planners and policy-makers of India is Rural Development. India has a large population of poor and rural people and the need to pay attention to rural development must be given high priority.

It is against this background that the problems in the rural areas as a result of the gap in communication and feedback mechanism between the grassroots and the urban centres, can be bridged by "the dispassionate intervention of journalists to constantly remind the wielders of power of the promises of their mandate, their social responsibility towards the society and stewardship of management of public funds, as well as commending government's effort when such obligations are fulfilled," (Taneh, 2015). This brings to the fore, the mediating role of the media as the platform for ensuring that a fledging relationship between the government and the grassroots is enhanced. Although the media are aware of the possible role mass communication could play in the transformation of their rural communities, lack of a well-designed strategy for the use of the mass media to effect the desired change have blurred efforts at effectively dealing with rural communication and economic transformation.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this paper is to look at Journalistic approach to rural India vis-a-vis rural development challenges and how journalists can use the medium of mass communication to alleviate the plight of the rural people by highlighting their problems. This study further seeks to specifically look at

1. The strategic role of the Media in dealing with challenges be-devilling rural development, particularly, rural India.
2. To address some of the challenges Journalists face as individuals in their quest to report on rural issues.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is conceptual, descriptive and qualitative in nature. Sources for this study are obtained from secondary data such as journals, theses, articles, working papers and conference proceedings on communication and rural development.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

History of Developmental Journalism

Developmental journalism in the media, print and broadcast, is part of the larger notion of using mass media tools for national development. Developmental journalism is kind of journalism synonymous with countries in Asia, some part of Latin America, and Sub Saharan Africa championed by leaders in government and society in general who were emerging Western colonialization. Developmental journalism has its origin in development communication dating back to the period of the agricultural extension carried out by large land-grant state universities in the United States. It eventually developed into a well-laid doctrine, and a 1964 seminar convened by the East West Center in Honolulu formalized the concept (Jayaweera & Amunugama, 1987). Journalists became a part of the picture simply because of their crucial role in communication. The term "developmental journalism" goes back to the Philippines in the 1960s. The Thomson Foundation sponsored a course called The Economic Writers' Training Course, Aug. 14 to Sept. 5, 1968, when the seminar chairman Alan Chalkley coined the term "development journalist."

According to Gunaratne (1978), developmental journalism as an integral part of a new journalism that involved "analytical interpretation, subtle investigation, constructive criticism and sincere association with the grass-roots (rather than with the elite)." He argued that developmental journalism was not compatible with either the libertarian concept, which defined the function of the mass media as providing information and entertainment, or the authoritarian concept, which stifled "criticism of political machinery and the officials in power" and imposed a "top-down approach to problem solving."

Fair (1988) looks at developmental journalism as news that relate to the primary, secondary or tertiary needs of a country's population; news that satisfies the needs of a country's population and contributes to self-reliance; and news that relates to development or to social, economic or political problems. Development journalism came under series of criticism and because of the negative connotations associated with the term developmental journalism, Shah (1996) suggests its replacement with the term "emancipatory journalism" to facilitate recognizing "a role for journalists as participants in a process of progressive social change." He makes this point in the context that "communication can contribute to participatory democracy, security, peace, and other humanistic principles that are at the core of the discourse on modernity." Emancipatory journalism "requires not only provision of socially relevant information but also journalistic activism in challenging and changing oppressive structures"; gives individuals in communities marginalized by modernization "a means of voicing critique and articulating alternative visions of society"; and encourages "journalists to abandon the role of neutral observer while reporting in a manner that is thorough, deeply researched, and historically and culturally grounded, and that promotes social change in favor of the dispossessed."

Some experts argue that that a journalist's main task was to inform and give his/her or readers the facts. His or her secondary task was to interpret, to put the facts in their framework and, where possible, to draw conclusions. The development journalist, was seen as to have the responsibility of a positive one that one might call "promotion," not only to give the facts of economic life and to interpret those facts, but also to promote them and bring them home to the readers. The journalist must get his or her readers to realize how serious the development problem is, to think about the problem, to open their eyes to the possible solutions by punching that hole in the vicious circle. Chalkley (1968) also points out that developmental journalism was not for the elite but for the ordinary people. Therefore, the task of a development journalist was to use simple terms and to avoid jargon.

Moreover, the social responsibility theory rests on a concept of positive liberty unlike the libertarian theory that was born of a concept of negative liberty (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm 1956). Both developmental journalism and public journalism clearly condone positive liberty.

The libertarian theory, which was born at a time when the state was regarded as the chief foe of liberty, and the social responsibility theory differ on the view they take of the nature and functions of government: The latter holds that the government should help society to obtain the services it requires from the mass media if a self-regulated press and self-righting features of community life are insufficient to provide them. On this matter, developmental journalism seems to be more in agreement with the social responsibility theory than public journalism.

The social responsibility theory differs from the libertarian theory on the nature of freedom of expression as well: the latter considers this a natural right while the other considers it a moral right rather than an absolute right. Both developmental journalism and public journalism would tend to agree on freedom of expression as a moral right. The social responsibility theory and the libertarian theory differ fundamentally in their view of the nature of man. The latter regards man as primarily a moral and rational being who will hunt for and be guided by the truth. The social responsibility theory views man not so much as irrational as lethargic. Therefore, the more alert elements of the community must goad him into the exercise of his reason. Both developmental journalism and public journalism assigns to the journalists the role of those "alert elements."

Finally, the social responsibility theory puts far less faith than the libertarian theory in the efficacy of the self-righting process. Both developmental journalism and public journalism would agree with that view.

Communication in Development

Thomas (2002) also looked at the role of Communication interventions in poverty alleviations in rural area and in the context of communication resource model as the dominant model exemplified by the early UNESCO approaches such as the diffusion model and the approaches to development communications that have been fed by notions of 'marketing' and 'communication inputs'. The latest approach to this paradigm is the IT intervention in development model which considers information as an adequate and complete resource in development, Moemeka, (1997). Mass Communication scholars have posited that Journalists remain the pillar of hope and greatest agents of advancing grassroots development through an institutional and interventionist approach. The argument is that journalists have what it takes to stringently use and apply effective information process and feedback mechanism to liberate the rural populace from ignorance and get them off the hook of perpetual servitude and stunted economic growth.

This overconcentration of development programmes in the urban centres has been the greatest disincentive toward sustainable development at the grassroots. The concept and theory of media ownership has also tended to divert the obligatory and conscientious role of the media from social surveillance towards the projection and delivery of the vested interest of ownership syndicate which decodes prominence in news reporting. Media scholars and other critics have identified the rural populace as the major victim of this tactical institutional flaw.

Critics are of the view that "rural dwellers draw the attention of the elitist class and the wielders of power only during period of political transition and mandate renewal, when the rural dwellers are tossed with pretentious orgies, noble sentiments and patriotic phrases, and unfulfilled promises".

However, beyond what Jeffrey Shrank, a mass communication scholar calls "educated guesses of news managers" and their palpable indifference towards practical engagement and understanding of the intrigues of grassroots reporting, reporters have tended to compromise their role as dispassionate leaders of public opinion and custodians of the conscience of society.

Analysts have attributed the indifference of news reporters towards rural reporting to the privileges and advantages offered by urbanization and city administration. According to Peter Golding, Journalistic apathy towards practical engagement an exploration of development potentials in the rural areas, undermines the moral and professional obligation of journalists as society's watch dog".

Golding further advocated for a more liberalized approach towards participatory journalism, a more reflective form of professional commitment. There are, however, obvious challenges that reporters are bound to face in covering the rural areas, one of such major challenges is the absence of basic amenities such as electricity and other needs for civilised living. Most rural dwellers live in bare subsistence and as such suffer virtual isolation in terms of basic news coverage. Most reporters believe that rural areas are not news worthy and gloss over the rural populace and concentrate their news report on the already thriving urban centres.

The rural areas however provide countless opportunities for news coverage. Rural areas are noted for a fledging sense of native heritage and cultural values that could be tapped into news. Using the human interest approach to news reporting, the arts, economy, culture and conditions of living of the rural people can be weaved into prominence in news reporting, with the objective of giving the rural people a sense of belonging. What rural reporters need to effectively comb the rural populace for news is empathy. Rural reporters must have a conscientious appeal by feeling the pulse of the rural dwellers to write about them.

Their living conditions notwithstanding, rural dwellers deserve to be adequately informed and mobilized because they constitute the bulk of the country's population, and they need accurate and reliable information to function effectively in our fast growing and technology-driven society. Another means of stimulating the interest and strategy in rural reporting is for reporters to avoid guesses and speculative journalism. They must engage in practical and thorough investigation of the rural areas and rouse their sensitivity towards issues affecting their wellbeing. Since the rural reporter may be of an entirely dissimilar background and orientation from the rural areas he or she is covering, there is need for indepth research that will help him or know the information need of the people.

A rural reporter, who does not indulge in persistent research and familiarisation with the development needs of the rural people, will only become an agent of misinformation and disinformation. Such incautious and unguarded reporters end up compounding the development problems of the people and sometimes incite crisis. Information source is therefore, important to the rural reporter. The most reliable sources of rural information include; agricultural extension workers, rural farmers, rural health workers, libraries, community leaders, traditional and religious leaders and government departments.

According to a renowned Mass Communication Scholar, Prof Ikechukwu Nwosu, "the best way to achieve a high level of accuracy and avoiding the dangers of relying on half-baked information is through an in-depth knowledge of investigative journalism".

Rural reporting therefore requires active involvement and sacrifice on the part of the reporter beyond the conventional news approach. The reporter must seek to break new ground and bring to the fore interesting and challenging aspect of the people's lives.

Rural reporters must comment on issues of economic interest to the people, such as health, agriculture, education, culture, commerce, transportation, festival, religion, among others. Perhaps, rural reporters are best disposed and at the forefront of mobilizing the rural communities towards achieving the imperatives of national cohesion.

Additionally, a development-oriented mass media should focus not only on the Economics of development, but also on military, political and cultural aspects. Thus, developmental journalism has to focus on more than economics because all of them-military power, political power, cultural power, just to mention a few, have to do with development in one way or another. Journalists should get people to reveal their inner agenda because that constitutes drama that would make journalism more similar to literature.

Furthermore, mere economic growth data will never do without accompanying dispersion data. Journalists must look at the income of the bottom 50 percent or 10 percent, as well as of the top 10 percent or 1 percent including focusing on relations, not only differences; and do so not only within countries, but also between countries. Thus, the journalists must cover both differences and relations. They must substantiate the relational aspect between the rich and the poor: how, for instance, wages may be frozen but not prices so that those who live from moveable prices for their goods and services benefit whereas people on constant wages do not.

A development-oriented press must focus on the totality of concrete life situations. This means focusing on concrete life situations as when British television took up the development problematic by selecting a family unit from each of five world regions to represent the well-to-do, the middle class, the working class, the poor and the dirt poor.

A development-oriented journalism would never forget the dimension of democracy. "The task of the media is to report what the system is doing. Democracy can only function when there is a free flow of information between people, the system and the media. Using the media to make the people visible, both as objects and as subjects, becomes one task. Using them to expose the system through investigative reporting is the second. Using the media to expose the media that fail to do their job is the third." The development journalist may have to do investigative reporting more subtly where such reporting may antagonize government sources: the report can contrast government statements with development reality without necessarily implying that there is a link between the two.

There is always the possibility of reporting about development, not critically in terms of problems, but constructively in terms of positive programs. Success stories may contribute to a general sense of optimism that can generate more momentum for democracy and development. People in similar situations elsewhere can benefit from such success stories if the report is adequately concrete.

Allow the "people" to talk. This means giving a voice to the people. A useful approach is for journalists to sit down with people from high to low discussing the meaning of development thereby generating "an enormous range of visions" as well as "how-to" insights. Thus, people get a voice as experts in line with the seven preceding ideas. Community cable channels in the United States enable this to happen to some extent.

Go one step further, and let the people to some extent run the media. This means giving people some media control. Letters to the editor and the op-ed pages have space constraints. The next stage is to let people write and produce much of the newspaper or broadcast/television program thus enabling them to provide their own knowledge, experience and expertise. The extent to which this happens can become a criterion of mass media quality in a country.

The media should allow people run more of society, and then report on what happens. This is what ought to happen in a democracy. People's movements and organizations do precisely this. Development-oriented media should report more on what popular movements are doing – not only their successes but their failures too.

While no definition of developmental journalism may satisfy everyone, it is hard to disagree that Galtung and Vincent's proposals, as well as Shah's thinking on emancipatory journalism, provide a reasonable framework to understand the essentials of the concept.

Servicing the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs.

1. Enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government.
2. Safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government.
3. Servicing the economic system primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising.
4. Providing entertainment.
5. Maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests.

The social responsibility theory asserts that the press has been deficient in performing some of the tasks mentioned above. It also says that some of the tasks should not take "precedence over such other functions as promoting the democratic processes or enlightening the public" – something that both developmental journalism and public journalism would agree on. It asserts that the one function should relate to "good" entertainment, (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm 1956).

The Commission on Freedom of the Press, which is associated with the social responsibility theory, called on the media to:

- a. Provide "a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning."
- b. Serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism."
- c. Project "a representative picture of the constituent groups in society."
- d. Be responsible for "the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society."
- e. Provide "full access to the day's intelligence."

4. RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTIONS

The following suggestions were made to enhance communication in development:

1. The need for communication specialists to use communication in development to change the narrative as a means of pushing rural development agenda.
2. called for the training of more Rural Journalists to specialise in rural reporting with dedicated space in their media to air rural issues. There should be some balance between resource allocation for rural reporting and commercialisation, specialisation and life style focus of modern journalism.
3. There seem to be too much focus on the commercialisation of journalism than to rural development. The coverage of poverty related issues in the media can only receive better attention if it is related to any political scandal or repercussions. Journalists do not see the need to report on rural issues and it is only few journalists in the world, who

report or cover poverty related issues. Rural journalism was a theme of the late 70s. It needs to be revived but focused on the training of the most vulnerable people who would be motivated by their own challenges to do good rural stories to help alleviate poverty.

4. The need to dwell on integrated, participatory communication projects such as paying attention to communication projects that are at the centre of community development and that address the critical needs of the community. The reportage must consider the pro-poor and pro-justice nature of the projects and the political support it ought to receive.

5. The need to consider investments in community-based communication projects since Communication can no longer be seen as a luxury. It is central to development efforts. Governments need to invest in community media projects just as they support local development initiatives such as the Panchayat system in India. While in the Indian case, there have been recent initiatives aimed at locating information kiosks in rural centres – it is nevertheless necessary that such initiatives be open to and accessed by all people, rather than by the privileged few. Support for local cultural diversity, and right to language needs to be seen as integral parts of investments in communication for community.

5. CONCLUSION

The journalist remains the hope for rural development and safeguard of the rural dwellers whose needs draw the attention of the elitist regime and politicians only during period of political electioneering and mandate renewal, when the rural dwellers are subjected to another period of unfulfilled promises. The role of the Journalists becomes imperative and greatest agents of advancing grassroots development through an institutional and interventionist approach. It is believed that the gap in communication and feedback mechanism between the grassroots and the urban centres, can be narrowed by the constants and dispassionate intervention of journalists to frequently remind the politicians and the elitist class of their promises of their mandate, their social responsibility towards the society, especially the rural folks and performance of how diligent and judicious they were able to manage public funds entrusted into their care, as well as commending government's efforts in alleviating the plight of the rural people when such obligations are fulfilled. This mediating role of the media is believed to be a platform of fostering a fledging relationship between the government and the grassroots.

The indigenous people must be involved in local planning for communications. It is observed that the views of the poor people are not considered in the decision-making process or allowed to participate in communication initiatives for the community.

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