Access to digital media in rural India: Case study of Mudunuru village

*Observation Post
Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao

Digital media is changing the face of the rural areas and the lifestyle of villagers. Life in the villages is no longer film or television-driven as was observed in the previous decades. With the wider access of mobile phones in rural areas, it is being used as a gadget for multiple communication and transactional tool.

With access to a range of applications, the mobile phone has become a single source for multipurpose applications, including interaction, networking, business transactions, branding, and product promotion. The availability and access to low-rate data has turned the digital media into a boom for enterprising villagers and it has opened the gates for business activities with new meanings.

Much has been talked about the waves digital or new media is making. However, it has now become a phenomenon, even in many villages of the country. This comes out of my observations over the last couple of years during my prolonged stay for several weeks in my village, Mudunuru.

Earlier not only did I have apprehensions about the process of diffusion of digital media but also about their adaption at the grassroots level. My village Mudunuru is located 40 kilometers away from Vijayawada city, in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, having a population of around 4000 people with around 2000 mobile phones. Few households have more than one mobile with women also invariably having one such instrument.

The mobile phone has become a unique level player that is used by cutting across the caste, community, and occupation. Though more than five percent of mobile phone users can't read or write. In fact, in one of the self-help groups DWCRA, comprising 1200 members more than ten percent cannot read and write. I feel that access to such digital devices, compri-sing the digital Apps has been much faster in the last few years and such digital media has double-edged potential as compared to the conventional mass media. While digital media have several benefits to expect, application, technology-driven content creation platforms like Reels, vlogs, and networking platforms would have some adverse implications also.

I remember in 1955 when I was in 10th class in my Mudunuru village a male student took a photo of a girl in the classroom hiding a box camera in between books for which he was reprimanded when he brought back the print of that photo.

No such incident has been heard in the last couple of years in the village since the proliferation of mobile phones with in-built cameras. Perhaps because thoughtfully mobile phones are prohibited in the classroom of schools and colleges. I'm also surprised that contrary to what I was apprehending there have been no instances of young using mobile phones for pornography as a menace.

A few examples of the kind of change that has been facilitated through social media include bringing people together with common interests or requiring similar responses or forming WhatsApp groups of people having similar interests. Multiple such groups have emerged in Mudunuru too.

Acting like nerves of civil society, these groups encourage, motivate or activate those people who are considered to be otherwise passive or introverted or leading a secluded life. A few examples of such vibrant groups include college students of the Mundunuru village, who

have formed the groups as per the subjects they are learning. Few groups are also formed based on the interest of the individuals. There must be more than a dozen such groups, I have observed in this village.

One such group called Mudunuru Snehitula Sangham has 160 members including those located far away from the village. It has a local administrator who keeps on posting regularly about the different happenings of interest in the village. Last month it not successfully mobilised over a million rupees within a week to help a villager who was admitted to the hospital with a brain hemorrhage but also ensured that he reaches home safely. I was impressed by such kind of power this network facilitates.

These groups are also providing the individual identity to the young and old residents of the village that was otherwise hidden. More than a dozen of unemployed drop-out youths have started the food-carts that has a facility for online payment through QR code. As per one of the estimates these young food sellers get three times more revenue than that a village panchayat.

Many street vendors while going around the streets use mobile phones connected to a loudspeaker that is fitted to a cycle and play a pre-recorded message to sell their products or services instead of shouting a high pitch to sell their products. Most of them provide the facility of Google Pay, and Paytm pay and display such transaction QR codes significantly.

Interestingly, neither the panchayat nor the revenue department or the *sachivalay* that collects annual taxes from local households, have such a facility. Neither of these offices in the village has a networking facility despite claims and proliferation of these offices in the village.

As compared to these self-motivated citizens and local vendors, the school systems haven't yet been active in availing such digital media facilities although some government departments pompously claim and advocate for using of these digital media platforms at primary and secondary schools.

The administrator, Satya Narayana of a WhatsApp group in the village periodically reminds all the members of the group to abide by decency norms and the prime objective of the group. He even ensures it by pointing occasionally threat of debarring such members who will violate the rules of the group.

The social impact of digital media on the lifestyle of the rural population is far more visible and irreversible as compared to others. It has motivated the young generation to explore new avenues of interacting, expressing, earning, and raising their voice for their rights.

Observation- Post is a micro level initiative where one tries to understand the process of diffusion-adaption and ripple-linkages. As an independent experiment, it offers perspectives unlikely to be captured in a structured research.