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The state and community media

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The recent floods in Chennai and Tamilnadu highlighted the consequences of unregulated construction of IT corridors, gated communities, informal habitations on land adjacent to water ways and reclaimed marsh land. In the absence of any explicit help from the state, the Indian Army and ordinary citizens pitched in to help neighbours and strangers in the immediate aftermath of the destruction. Arguably, people acted as the Fourth Estate, and the widespread use of social media helped mobilise relief and self-help groups to identify areas and communities isolated by the floods, strengthen the networking of NGOs involved in relief work and augment the work of the army and the state. One of the outcomes of this disaster was a granting of a community radio (CR) licence for an emergency radio station, Peridar Kaala Vaanoli (Tamil for 'Radio in the Time of Extreme Calamity'), in Cuddalore (Ramakrishnan, 2015), one of the worst-hit areas located in coastal Tamilnadu – a turn-around that took little more than a day, a record of sorts for the CR sector that has to negotiate red tape and various 'clearances' from government departments in order to procure a licence.

The role of the state in facilitating the community media sector requires theorisation precisely because it plays a vital role in resource allocation, inclusive of frequencies, equipment, training and funding. Arguably though, for a sector that often is the primary means of communication for remote and/or marginalised communities, it is often a low priority for the state – and this is the case in both the developed and developing worlds. Rhonda Jolly (2014), in a submission to the Australian parliament, has outlined some of the funding dilemmas and the general lack of certainty in this sector, one of the largest in the world consisting of 360 long-term stations, 38 long term digital free-to-air services and 100 temporary community radio stations. The fact that the National Audit Commission recommended the cessation of federal grants to this sector on 1 May 2014, in the interest of 'good governance', reflects the whimsical, arbitrary and utterly cynical response from a government that seems oblivious to the real needs of communities in Australia:

The Commonwealth Government already provides over \$1 billion per annum to the operation of the public broadcasters. There is a limited rationale for the Commonwealth to also subsidise community radio services. Continued government funding of this area does not meet the Report's principles of good governance. (National Commission of Audit, 2014)

It is common knowledge that states throughout the world, committed to a neo-liberal framework for growth and development, have quite consciously opted for privatised futures based on a drastically reduced role for the state (Harvey, 2016). This has been accompanied by a reduction in support for 'voice' and the enabling of voice, issues that have been fulsomely explored by Nick Couldry (2010). The state's assault on the sovereignty of citizens in democracies includes the curtailment of the fundamental rights of citizens, including of the freedom of expression, the

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right to information and communication rights – curtailments that paradoxically have been accompanied by massive increases in state surveillance activities of its citizens in light of the global ‘war on terrorism’. This assault is characterised by the state’s power to allocate – or for that matter withdraw – public resources and expand regimes of surveillance.

Theorists of the state, such as Anthony Giddens, have attempted to understand the power of the state in terms of its ability to allocate resources, between ‘allocative resources, or control over material objects, and authoritative resources, or control over human beings’ (Lehman, 1988: 812). Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (2010: 281), using Foucault’s notion of governmentality, refer to the governmentalisation of the state that is effected through investments in the *technologies of government*, meaning ‘the complex assemblage of diverse forces – legal, architectural, professional, administrative, financial, judgmental – such that aspects of the decisions and actions of individuals, groups, organisations and populations come to be understood and regulated in relation to authoritative criteria’ – a perspective that defines the surveillance state. Such investments and disinvestments by the state highlight the paradox that is at the heart of democratic societies. At the very core of democracy is a belief in the sovereignty of citizens, the rights of individuals to exercise a range of personal freedoms, including speech and freedom from censorship (although such rights are also shaped by the sovereignty that states enjoy). This is an ancient conundrum explored by classical Western and non-Western political philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau, who took the side of the citizen, and Hobbes, Kautilya and Machiavelli, whose writings are supportive of the untrammelled, strategic power of the state over its citizens.

At the heart of the revival of the community media sector is the larger project of substantive democracy and sovereign citizens empowered to inter-subjectively determine the extent of the ‘public’ and the ‘commons’ in the context of the twenty-first century.

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