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Integrating Voices with a Vision and Connecting beyond Sight

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Abstract:

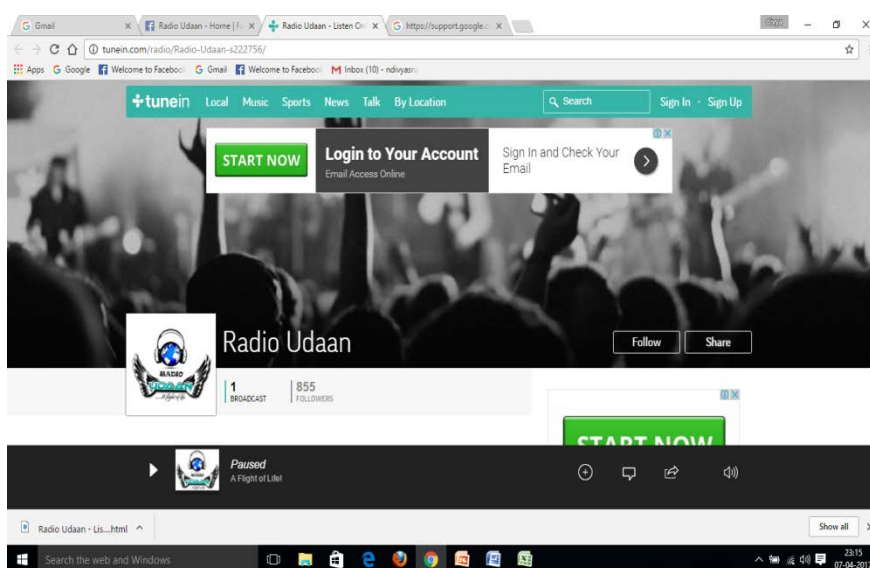
Internet radio is the tool of the twenty first century .It has immense possibilities as it can work not only as a radio for listening to programmes of education, information and entertainment but also through it one can access the huge web resources. This user – friendly system can be utilized not only by able-bodied persons but also by challenged individuals including those who are visually impaired.

Keywords: Internet Radio, Empowerment, Visually Impaired.

Voices with a vision - connecting beyond sight

Interactivity and the Website

“Udaan”, is a Hindi word for “taking flight”. Radio Udaan calls itself “A flight of life”. Each day this community radio based in India takes thousands of its listeners through myriad experiences with the help of its programmes. An initiative conceptualised, produced, and broadcast by persons with vision impairment, it has the distinction of being the first of its kind in the country.



The Radio Uddan home pages (at tunein.com/radio/Radio-Udaan-s222756/)

The Commencement of the Flight

In February 1995 Supreme Court ruled that airwaves were public property, triggering a slow transition from government-owned radio broadcasting prevalent in the country to private-owned ones. After that in December 2003 the Indian Government issued the first set of guidelines for community radio operation, restricting participation only to educational institutions. This disappointed the marginalized and voiceless communities who were hoping to benefit from the opening up. Anna FM was India's first campus "Community" radio station launched on February 1, 2004. It is run by the Education and Multimedia Research centre pioneered by Dr. R. Sreedher. And it was the shining example of real life community based radio.

Udaan: A Ray of Hope

Radio Udaan was born out of a desire to communicate with and reach out to a community of persons with vision impairment. An existing friendship among a few people who nurtured the same dream, despite being geographically distant, grew and took the final shape of Radio Udaan. This was the brainchild of Danish Mahajan, a state government employee from Punjab. Having already worked as director of Radio Voice Punjab, a similar internet radio for a year, Danish nurtured a burning desire to start one of his own. In conversation with others, (who later became the core founding members), a concept was discussed and decided upon. The internet would be used as the medium; software that complemented and was accessible with the screen reader used by the visually impaired was to be used. This was going to be a radio for the blind, by the blind, through which the community would reach out to others as well. Hailing from diverse backgrounds, the core team comprised of a social entrepreneur, an aspirant to the civil services of India, a post-graduate student, an employee from a government organization and a retired hotelier. The common thread was vision impairment and the vision to see the project through. Their first show was thus aired on Sunday, 2nd February 2014 at 7 pm.

The team

February 2014 Udaan, the first Internet-based community radio is launched, promoted by blind radio enthusiasts. It targets mainly the visually challenged. Radio Udaan is a voluntary initiative. The aim here being to disseminate information, entertain, empower, and educate the audience. It is democratic in its constitution. Everyone involved has a voice. From the core founding group to the radio jockeys and the listeners, everybody comes together when deciding what needs to be aired. They coordinate to network for content, manage software and platforms, handle web-hosting and design and take care of finance, administration, and marketing in perfect harmony. Each of them has a professional and personal life outside the radio, but they come together in time to get the show aired. While there are many voices involved in this initiative, the following is the core group:

Station Director	Ms. Mrinal Singhvi
Station Programme Manager	Ms. Jyoti Malik
Station General Secretary	Mr. Danish Mahajan
Station Joint Secretary	Mr. Saif Rehman
Advisor	Mr. Rajeev Bhambri
Media Spokesperson	Mr. Balanagendran
Executive member	Mr. Puneet Soni

The Stars of “UDAAN”

Radio Jockeys(RJ) are the stars of any radio station. Any radio programme becomes successful because of the of R.Js. Udaan has a wonderful team of R.Js and they are responsible for sparkling Udaan with their voice and words. There are aprox 25 numbers of R.Js working in several programmes in Udaan. While taking a scheduled Interview with these stars a researcher found out that of 25 members 22 were partially or fully blind and only 3 members have sight. We all know if we have the courage to conquer the world we can. It transpired from the interview with the R.Js that all of them were graduates from reputed universities. Many of them have qualifications like BCA,B.A English Hons, B.com and B.Ed. etc. and some of them are masters in different social science subjects. Many of them are fluent in Hindi, English, Punjabi and Tamil. They belong to diverse cities of India like Lucknow, Karnal, Kanpur, Chennai and Jabalpur.

An Interactive Session with the Station General Secretary Mr. Danish Mahajan

1. The concept behind this Radio Station?

Ans: The concept behind the establishment of Radio Udaan is to become the voice of the disabled. To create a connecting link between the disabled (Blind) and the non disabled (sighted); provide opportunities to the talents who haven't found recognition in the general Radio medium;

To boost the morale of the community through creating awareness and sharing of information.

2. Targeted audience.

Ans: Radio Udaan is "By the Blind, Of the Blind but for all." So, all Radio listeners who can understand either Hindi, or English, or both are our targeted audience.

3.How challenging it is .

Ans: Every field has a challenge; similarly Radio Udaan too has its own challenges to be dealt with.

* The foremost challenge that we face now is lack of adequate financial capital. As this is a voluntary organisation established in the best interest of the society, lack of financial resource poses some challenges.

* Promotional challenge; all of us know "Promotion" is the key to stability; although we run a medium, we are still facing the challenges of lack of available avenues of promotion to bring more "disabled as well as the non-disabled" towards Radio Udaan.

4.How you people create your program .

Ans: Apart from allotting some programmes with a special focus on the disabled, we always keep the larger population in mind while creating any programme. We focus on "Infotainment" (Information+Entertainment) which is liked by all.

5. Visually challenged people connected with Radio Udaan as R.J.

Ans: Radio Udaan is produced and thoroughly managed by the persons with visual challenges. At present, we have 25 RJs out of which 22 are visually challenged and 3 are sighted.

6.How programs are made for the Visually Impaired .

Ans: As we all are blind, those who established this Radio station, we don't find it something difficult in making programmes for the blind. We give special importance on creating awareness to the blind about technology, accessibility, socio-economic and political aspects.

7. What kinds of challenges are faced during shows.

Ans: Lack of adequate internet facilities with accessible applications create some disruptions during shows. Apart from that, the general

problems such as electricity are the serious challenges.

8. What is the effect on the blind people .

Ans: Radio Udaan is now listened to across more than 100 countries with an average listenership of 20,000 listeners per month. It has created a tremendous impact among the blind where the blind have begun to feel that they have now got a platform to voice their concerns. We have been given the privilege by the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, to promote "Accessible India" campaign.

9. Collaboration with educational institutions.

Ans: Radio Udaan collaborates with those who want to work for the disabled (Blind), but we don't merge with any institution in particular. For instance, we've organised "Radio Udaan Convention 2015" in collaboration with Narayan Sewa Sanstan, and later became a Radio Partner to Barrierbreak's Techshare 2016 conference.

Take A Look

“Over conversations on skype, we spoke several times about reaching out to other blind friends with programmes that interest us. The idea of Radio Udaan was really just something that fell into place one day”, says Danish Mahajan. Minal Singhvi echoes the thought. “ We would always discuss recent developments in the political arena in the country with the general elections round the corner, the inflation rate on the one hand and talk of what recipe worked best for dinner, on the other”. Saif, the musician in the mix shared rare pieces of ghazals by renowned singers and collected old forgotten melodies. Bala, the academically inclined all rounder read and researched avidly. Tech buff Jyoti Malikk volunteered enthusiastically, and had taken the entire responsibility of designing and keeping the website up-to-date with the latest goings on. Rajeev Bhamri, having successfully completed his professional tenure, now keeps himself busy with sending out e-mails diligently every morning, with the program schedule for the day. He is also fully responsible for the repeat broadcast of programs on the following day. “We had such a wonderful mix of ideas, why shouldn't we reach that lonely person who perhaps sits at home looking for a friend? Or share many more recipes and kitchen tips with the interested cook?” Danish continues. “There had to be a place where all of us could get together and do all this”. And thus, all six of them with their determination and a vision, came together to share the dream, and the responsibility to get radio Udaan to become a reality.

Besides these six core members, the life of the radio is the radio jockeys. They identify the topic, create the content, visualise its production, and execute it all by themselves. Hailing From Punjab to Mumbai, Chennai to Chhattisgarh, Udaan's 25 jockeys are heard by people in 120 countries across the globe. From Australia, Israel, Canada, U.S., and U.K. to

neighbouring Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, Udaan's listeners are steadily growing in numbers.

Preparing the launch

With all the multi-faceted people on board, the logistics and infrastructure in place, there came forth a rush of ideas, possible topics, technology to be used, audience to target - they were on the move.

Since the founding members came from diverse backgrounds, bringing varied interests, it took very little time to put the whole schedule in place. Opinions were sought from the most important stakeholders: the potential listeners. An e-mail campaign was launched urging friends, and their friends in turn to contribute suggestions and preferences, so that nobody was left out in the cold. This was to be a radio of the people, for the people and by the people.

The mechanism

Radio Udaan caters to a multilingual audience. While its listener database extends to the length and breadth of the country and beyond, its broadcasts are primarily in Hindi and English, or often bilingual. It has been reported that listeners belonging to around 210 countries access this site.

A web-hosting site is used to broadcast the radio online. Since this was not available in India, it was bought from the U.S. This is a well thought of, intricately worked around process, because all the presenters are visually impaired and need to operate the whole system on their own. For this each platform and software chosen has to be accessible with what is the "eye" of the blind: a screen reading software JAWS (Job Access with Speech). This software enables a blind person to listen to everything that is otherwise visible to the sighted person on screen. While it is compatible with several platforms and softwares, there are challenges on several others. "Station play list" is used as the studio to operate and broadcast programmes. All the radio jockeys presenting the shows as well as others on the board of the station have learned to operate this, which enables them to single-handedly see a show to its conclusion.

The other media used is "Skype", which is the main channel of communication. It is what helps bring every listener to a live show, and make him/her part of it. To enable more than one listener to be part of a panel discussion or debate, a utility called "virtual cable" is installed with the Station play list. This enables the listeners to link with the studio and creates a virtual conference, which can then be recorded. To bring a show to its completion, software's are used to edit and enhance quality. These also are chosen carefully so that compatibility can be maintained with JAWS, the screen reader. Programs like "Goldwave" and "Adobe Audition" provide this service. When a recorded show is brought to the editing table before broadcast, it is heard, sorted for any excess ambient sounds, brought up to the required bit rate and embellished with music and fillers if required. The programme is then ready to go on air!

Formation of Programme

Two types of shows are aired on Radio Udaan: the live shows, which involve participation from listeners in real-time, and the pre-recorded shows that are recorded by the presenters in the comfort of their own homes and studio. This they do by either using the Station play list or other recording utilities that are commercially available. Shows that are on-demand, require listeners to send out their requests over skype , email or through SMS, which allows the RJ to organise and collect the necessary information, be it a piece of music, a song, a recipe or an advice.

The live shows have listeners connecting with the presenter through Skype, SMS or even the radio's Facebook page and What's app Group. The idea is to use every available /accessible channel to bring the listeners to the show.

There exists a vibrant Facebook page, which not only disseminates programme information, but also allows the listeners to post their views. A simple, well-maintained website enables visitors to get all possible information in the easiest way. You can get detailed information of a broadcast schedule for the week, leave a comment, ask for archived shows, and get to know your favourite radio jockey better. All this is handled by a person who is only listening to the screen. Here a "play" button allows a visitor to connect with the radio right away. There are also download links to numerous applications for various media players for the PC. You can tune in to play with Windows media player, Win amp, VLC media player and so on. There are tune-in applications for different operating systems on mobile phones as well. These make reaching the programme effortlessly.

Never challenged enough!

Dealing with this complex process is done each day with ever-present challenges. India is a country with power generation deficiency. Since all of the people involved in this endeavour work out of their homes, intermittent power supply often plays spoilsport. Internet connectivity also faces the same challenge. Since the listeners live in the farthest recesses of the country, reaching everybody with clarity is imperative. Often listeners do not have access to a computer and hence use their mobile phones to listen to a show. This causes compromising on the bit rate of the show. What was originally broadcast at 128 kbps was brought down to 64 kbps to enable the listener on the mobile to catch the show clearly. None of this has deterred the radio from connecting and growing!

The show on air

The journey started with airing of four shows each evening, beginning at 7 PM and ending at 11 PM. Each show was of an hour's duration. The radio operated the same schedule through the week. They also had the distinction of a repeat broadcast. Shows from the previous day were aired every afternoon from 2 PM to 6 PM. This allowed the listeners who missed the live show to catch up with the happenings. But now the scenario is totally changed and the list of programme is drastically changed now. it now airs 24 hour non-stop.

SHOW LISTS

- All is Well
- Andaaz apna apna
- Badalta Daur (public debate)
- Badalta daur (Group Discussion/Direct talk)
- Bollywood Blast
- Book World
- Community Colours
- Dilon ki daastan
- Dil se Dil tak
- Geet Gata Chal
- Inspirational wings (Season III)
- Kagaz Kalam Dawaat
- Lets Play 20 20
- Live Antakshari
- Magic of Maths
- Mrs. Confusion
- Nazarana Pyar ka
- Point Of View
- Post Mortem
- Sham-e-Gazal
- Sports Center
- Sur Sarita
- Tech City
- Udaan Top 10
- Vocabulary Dose
- World this week
- Zindagi Khoobsurat hai

A variety of topics are chosen. There is the eternal connector - music. Since India is such a vast land of diversity, its music is just as diverse, and Udaan provides programs that encompass all genres.

There is a programme, which teaches the listener the finer nuances of classical music. The ever-popular music from Indian cinema, which ranges from old melodies to the more recent favourites are also aired. These are aired both recorded on a theme chosen by the RJ, and an on-demand by the listeners.

Everybody wants to be a part of the ongoing events on the political, economic, and cultural front in the country and the world. They get their opportunity by participating in live discussions, debates and through question-and-answer sessions with subject matter experts. A feather in the cap was a live panel discussion organised during the recently concluded general elections in the country . Udaan gathered on its floor blind journalists, subject matter experts, and the common person/people. Each brought with him/her an opinion, thought, and hope for a better tomorrow. It was for the first time that a gathering of blind persons such as this was witnessed. It was indeed as historic as the elections that took place.

There are shows to bring together the best practices in the kitchen. Effective tips, recipes, and ideas are shared too. The diversity of the country prompted a live show “when you make a “date with a state””. Here, one state is identified and listeners share information exclusive to that state. There are other shows purely providing entertainment in the form of musical game shows, puzzles, and book-reviews.

There are shows where universal harmony and brotherhood find a place of importance. In this time of universal turbulence, this forges a bond not to be broken.

Many troubled souls find solace in talking to a blind counsellor who candidly answers deeply personal questions assuring anonymity. A talk show brings listeners face-to-face with achievers, ordinary people who have made through life’s tough journey and have become role models among the people with blindness. A sports show keeps the audience in sync with the latest national and international sporting events. A show dedicated to teaching English has also been introduced to enhance ease of communication in this global language.

With rapidly changing technology, blind people find it extremely difficult to keep pace. Subject matter experts bring to the listener the knowledge to stay abreast. These are extremely popular shows.

For aspirants appearing for competitive exams, there are shows related to banking services, civil services, and any other topic as the situation demands.

The shows are aired as per its popularity and demand. Some shows are aired for a limited duration. They make way for newer shows. This keeps the interest going, while allowing more and more persons a chance to see themselves out there.

Aspirations

Radio Udaan has fulfilled the dreams of many persons with vision impairment. They have successfully brought together people from almost every corner of this vast country, and given

them a common platform by way of this virtual community. A modest start with minimal funds contributed by the core members, this community radio has surged forward full throttle. With every service rendered voluntarily, there is a constant change of guard where the presenter is concerned. Most individuals here hold jobs that keep them otherwise occupied and employed. The radio has realised the dream of a blind person rejected by primetime radio from being a radio jockey, only because of the lack of sight and a perceived inability of operating their complicated equipment. A lot more can be done here. With professional training, the radio jockeys can acquire skills that would give them the confidence to do better each time. Better technology and reach can take this endeavour to scale bigger heights. With a modest initial listenership of 5000 daily. This platform has the capacity to be an employer of many people with vision impairment. An inflow of funds from various agencies and external sources could help the station reach that goal too. Remember," Radio Udaan" is the flight of life. And the ascent has only just begun!

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