Chapter six

Conclusion

6.1 Interpretation

I have presented my case of the existence of a local media in Assam that is independent of the mainstream media discourse. The previous five chapters have been an attempt to understand this development in a systematic and theoretically grounded manner. The arguments for the theses have been backed up by my field work with local cable networks and media professionals as well. My objectives in this study were mainly to see the growth of local media not as a parallel to mainstream media, rather more as an offspring of the shortcomings of the mainstream media.

For the purpose of my study I had to rely on secondary data to connect the present growth in media in Assam to its historicity. I find that print in Assam was brought by the missionaries as part of a larger colonial exercise of the British. The administrative interest and expansion scheme of things were the main reasons for the introduction of letters in this part of the world. The Mission press set up at Sivasagar was a step in that direction, and as part of that plan the set up of ‘Orunodoi’ in 1846, the first journal, which gave the people of Assam the first taste of a uniform language for all. Modern education followed to this part of the world with printed books made available more easily along with the Bible. The era of the introduction of print served another purpose, the establishment of Assamese as a distinct language separate from Bengali. And the press at Sivasagar played an important role in defining the acceptance of the dialect adjoining to Sivasagar as the standard language. The first Assamese grammar book was printed from here in 1848. The first strands
of nationalism thus rode on the back of the press in Assam. Modernity as postulated by the west is symbiotic with ‘print-capitalism’, the idea forwarded by Anderson (1980) which according to him was the base of the formation of a community.

Thus, early press in Assam was a counter discourse to the dominance of Bengali as a medium of instruction and official language in administration and not necessarily the context that the missionaries started the press in the first place. Press was appropriated by the nationalists during this phase of history; we see the beginning of other journals in Guwahati, Calcutta where the intellectual class went for higher education, and even one in Majuli, where ‘Asam Bilasini’ was started by a Hindu religious institution. The role of the early press remained nationalistic in its outlook for a large part of its existence. The independence movement too saw an active participation, albeit the number of dailies in Assam was miniscule.

The next major event that I find important for the press in Assam is the Assam Agitation during 1979-85. As I have pointed out in chapter three, it saw the rise of a movement against illegal migrants, which was marked by active participation of the students’ body All Assam Students Union (AASU) and other nationalist organizations. Today, it is clear from facts that the Assam Agitation was a movement whose agenda was set by an over eager press, which saw active participation from journalist and editors of major news dailies. It is clear from the events that press in Assam for a large part remained a tool for nationalistic appropriation. The power of the press was proved in the success of the agitation, which led to the realization that press ownership was indeed important in the political realm. Post-agitation there was an increase in the activity of the press, and Assam saw an emerging boom in the decade of the 1990’s.
As I have mentioned in chapter four, the decade of 1990’s was also that of economic liberalization brought about by the Congress government at the center. This period was marked by the entry of foreign satellite channels into the country. Television which was the monopoly of the state broadcaster DD all along was breached. Cable networks started to spring up everywhere. This was a phase of consolidation in the Indian media industry. Indian companies in the later part of the decade also started to open television companies. And daily newspapers opened local editions in an effort to consolidate. Regional media witnessed a boom, in states such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Kerala, etc. we see the growth of a strong and vibrant news media.

The explosion of media during this phase in Assam therefore cannot be seen in isolation. Assam was already endowed with a press whose influence on the masses was proven. Media organizations started to grow from everywhere, whose owners ranged from politicians, businessman, contractors, etc. There grew an intrinsic relation between power and media. As I had quoted Boyce (1987) in chapter two, “as such the relationship could be said to have been symbiotic, with political class also depending on the press to disseminate their agenda, the real power rested with the constitutionally elected leaders (pg. 109). Press in Assam was distinctly under the influence of power, apart from the ‘Assam Tribune’ and ‘Janasadharan’ group none of the others are in the business of media. Most of them have sprouted in the last decade with the idea that media can be a useful tool in the exercise of power. Thus the discourse of power and media in Assam is an ongoing process.

In 2004, satellite television was launched, and within a few years we have seen a spurt in their numbers. The dynamics of the media sector changed very fast. We had already seen the newspapers trying to consolidate by opening local editions in important towns such as Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur etc. But these local editions failed to serve their
real purpose, as they were confined to being just reprints, and hardly contributed to the local sphere. The pages were made and designed in Guwahati based offices which were sent to the local offices to be printed. The only purpose these offices consequently served was of reducing the time lag; newspapers now reached the districts in the morning itself.

The onslaught of television looked like doing what the print failed to do i.e. reach the grassroots. North East TV started with the ambitious plan of reaching the whole of North East, by producing programme in every language possible. The late entrants did not make this mistake; rather they focused on Assam itself. As Murdock (1982) suggested people who were successful in other sectors of the economy thought they had the legitimacy to start new media. And even the advent of the new technologies could not release media from the clutches of the few capitalists. The dependence of the television on advertising revenue made news irrational and palliative. It was all a process of maintaining the social order and undisturbing the nature of the institutions that are in place (Murdock and Golding, 1977). And thus the relation between media ownership and media performance is a reality. The content of media therefore depends on the negotiation of power and money and the extent that advertisers have access to these means of propaganda.

In the case of satellite television in Assam, advertising revenue dictated a lot of the decisions, and even their existence. The introduction of TRP’s emphasized on the importance to grab viewers’ attention with programmes that border on entertainment and information. There was another flaw; the local did not matter in their scheme of things. All the advertisers were based in Guwahati, channels were based in Guwahati, and TRP’s were calculated based on Guwahati. Thus Guwahati, apart from being the power center became the center of all that is broadcasted. As a result the ‘local’ as a space blanked out of view. What is happening
in the interiors of the state is nobody’ concern as long as they don’t bring in the revenue.

As theorists have argued for the perfect model that serves the interests of the people, different theories based on commercial interests, guardianship model etc, have been found to be wanting. The era of public service broadcasting based on a guardianship model, which thinks its role to inform and educate the masses, is over. While third world countries have toyed with the idea of development communication (Melkote, 1991) model as best suited for its purpose and remains an important paradigm in achieving the development goals of society. But one of the most important role of media has been to give space to what people believe should be the function of the media. The Public Sphere (Habermas, 1986) model gives ample space to media to do just that. A sense of community ownership, participatory culture characterizes the idea of a public sphere model, although it does not necessarily mean that media is owned by the community, it helps in fostering that feeling.

The phenomenon of LCC’s should be seen in this context, which I have argued for in chapter five. LCC’s are basically channels that co-exist with any cable network. The two LCC’s that I studied resemble a unique form of ‘small media’, which although is owned by operators, is actually sustained by the interests of the consumers. This consumer-audience equation has led to programming which is interactive. The ‘local’ which has lost out in the mainstream media gains importance here, infact the local becomes the site for production of ‘culture’. Be it school programmes, a local match, neighbourhood programmes, inaugurations, local festivals etc. are at the center of LCC’s programming. The government always eyes independent spaces with concern and the existence of LCC’s is in a legal tangle, it is ambiguities in the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act 1995 that allows the operations of these channels. Yet, they become important means of public information
used by the administration from time to time, and can be found in most towns in Assam. The reach of the LCC’s have increased with consolidation in the industry, and as seen in the case of VnS reaches four districts and Guwahati too through a complex chain of shareholding and agreements.

The survival of these channels does not just depend on advertisements, rather in its ability to attract participation from its audience. Advertisements for most parts remain local as well and the advertiser knows the audience that the message reaches to. And this knowledge of the audience has made programming focused, and multi-lingual. At a time when most of the satellite channels are resorting to cutting down in the number of languages, VnS has specific channels for Assamese, Hindi and Bengali audience. In case of BTN we see that it has leveraged its news collection mechanism to open a print daily, media whether it’s print or electronic does not make any difference to them so long the end remains same. The goodwill of the LCC also benefits the daily and vice versa.

The salient features of the study in a nutshell:

1. Press in Assam is an outcome of the nationalist pursuits in nineteenth century Assam

2. The Assam Agitation, in substantial parts, was a result of the agenda set by the press with its nationalist leanings

3. Local editions of dailies only reduced the ‘delayed news syndrome’, rather than localizing content

4. Press in Assam is used as a tool for political influence
5. Boom in media saw the influx of dubious capital, an easy way to increase and maintain the status quo

6. Unstable existence of media entities is due to complex nature of ownership, and uncertain capital

7. Television ratings dictate the content of televisions, while print content is dictated by its fear of losing out to television

8. The growth of local content through LCCs has facilitated an emergent layer of the press and media at the grass root level.

9. The existence of LCCs is explained by the global/local dichotomy of the Guwahati media and LCO’s

10. LCCs act as local sites of resistance and space for production of local values and codes

6.2 Implication of the Study

I have tried to present the existence of both the Commercial model and the Public Sphere model of media concurrently in Assam. Although it cannot be proved that the failure of one has led to the rise of the other due to the difference in market that they cater and the technology that they use to reach their audience. There is a complex intertwined nature of the presence of characteristics of both the model at the same time. The LCC’s are commercial and as yet act as a local public sphere. The pattern of audience and their intrinsic connection with the networks provide for a wired ‘local space’, the very wires that carry ‘globalized’ programmes of satellite channels to the homes of the audience in Assam.
My thesis is an attempt at understanding the very course that press has taken in the course of its 150 year old history. At a general level, this study tries to put in theoretical perspectives the nature and functioning of the press that are at work in complex media environment in Assam. The impact of globalization on regional media has made it to act more and more in consonance with global ideas of media. When regional media saw a boom in the 1990’s and early 2000 it was attributed to localization of content. Regional media started off with being champions of local space, but the pressures of the market economy has led to a change in their policies. Media which is dependent on revenues for survival cannot invest in areas where there are no revenues. The existence of the ‘local’, in globalization parlance, to be in direct contrast to the global space made it unattractive. Globalization harped on homogeneity, while ‘local’ meant giving recognition to heterogeneity. The increasingly hybrid concepts of ‘glocal’ and ‘glocalization’ are forwarded as new models of acceptance of the ‘local’, while in reality they hide the ‘local’ under the garb of commercialization.

The growth of media is an ongoing process, and for a state like Assam it is at its infancy. My study may thus be regarded as an attempt at understanding the tangential direction of this evolution, the various strands of media systems that exist and the perceptible location of the audience. Due to lack of time and resources I had to limit the number of case studies. Future studies surely can throw light on the sustainability and pertinence of these networks in the long run vis-à-vis the existing media.