Chapter five

Local Cable Channels: The Wired Site of ‘the Local’

5.1 Framework for Cable Television Regulation in India

The Indian legal system had the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 as the only piece of legislation to fall back on in cases regarding the media. The Act was an archaic piece of British regulation that had remained unchanged, like many other such regulations. Thus post 1947 the Article 19\textsuperscript{36} of the Indian constitution formed the basis for many judgments on matters relating to the press. The advent of broadcasting medium and spurt in media activity called for reform in the legislation process. In the year 1991, the economic policy of India in what is well documented now underwent a metamorphosis, liberalization of the economic environment happened. Global products came nearer home and Coca Cola was no more a taboo. During the Gulf war CNN became the source of information. Only a handful of cable channels actually beamed into India viz. CNN, BBC, MTV etc. These were all channels that were produced and uplinked from foreign locations and beamed through satellites into India. Doordarshan\textsuperscript{37} (DD), the government broadcaster was available only through terrestrial mode. To accommodate the satellite channels a network was necessary to transmit signals to people’s home through cables. Zee Television promoted by the Essel group became the first satellite channel of India. Thus the initial cable networks in the metros grew and they could transmit only limited channels. Before the

\textsuperscript{36} The Article 19 of the Indian Constitution of India provides for Right to Freedom, and one among them is the Right to freedom of speech and expression.

\textsuperscript{37} Although Television started in India in 1959 it was only on an experimental basis. National telecast by Doordarshan started only in the year 1982, and remained the sole television provider till the arrival of cable television.
introduction of cable television in India, broadcasting was solely under the control of the State. 'The Government of India was caught unprepared with the emergence of cable networks and broadcasting through satellites in the early 1990s' (Ghosh, 2013: 01). By 1992 cable networks were adding thousand of homes per month, the demand led to proliferation of cable networks across the country. Thus, unlike the western countries India saw cable networks grow rather than terrestrial transmission. DD was the only channel which had access to terrestrial network and satellite channels had to use cable networks for distribution. Unlike western countries where terrestrial networks was much more popular and private broadcaster transmitted through them in India it was under government control.

    DD no longer had the kind of monopoly that it had, it faced increasing competition from the satellite channels. Media liberalization in India stems from multiple acts of omission, that is, the state’s non-intervention in the social-political terrain charted by the availability of new technologies such as satellite broadcasting, rather than from a policy decision to end the state’s monopoly on broadcast news or to dismantle existing regulatory frameworks (Chatterji, 1991; Mehta, 2008). The explosive growth of private media in India made the government rethink its stance on legislation and finally we see the introduction of Prasar Bharati Act, 1990; Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act, 1995; The Broadcasting Bill of 1997; and The Communications Bill, 2000.

    5.1.1 Airwaves as Public Property (Supreme Court Judgment, 1995)

In one of the most landmark judgment in the history of Indian media, the Supreme Court in the case Ministry of Information and Broadcasting vs. Cricket Association Bengal passed the verdict that airwaves were public
property and should be used for public good. Till that time there were no clear regulations on airwaves and existing legislations were inadequate as the Supreme Court judgment notes:

The Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 is totally inadequate to govern an important medium like the radio and television, i.e., broadcasting media. The Act was intended for an altogether different purpose when it was enacted. This is the result of the law in this country not keeping pace with the technological advances in the field of information and communications. While all the leading democratic countries have enacted laws specifically governing the broadcasting media, the law in this country has stood still, rooted in the Telegraph Act of 1885 (1995: 228).

In the year 1993 the Board of Control for Cricket in India had called for bids for broadcast rights of the Hero Cup, a cricket tournament to be played in India. In the international bid, Trans-World International (TWI), a foreign firm won the broadcasting rights to the tournament defeating among others bids by DD. On the eve of the tournament DD tried to stop the broadcast of the match by denying TWI to uplink live matches from India. Consequently the case went to the Supreme Court where in an interim order was passed whereby DD was allowed to telecast matches in India and TWI to the foreign countries. Later, after the Hero Cup was over the case was taken up and judgment was passed. Some of the important points made by Justice Reddy and Justice Sawant (1995) in this case are:

a) Airwaves constitute public property and must be utilized for advancing public good. No individual has a right to utilize them at his choice and pleasure and for purposes of his choice including profit (pg. 226).
b) DD or All India Radio (AIR) has no monopoly in the matter of telecasting/broadcasting. Radio and television are only a medium through which freedom of speech and expression is expressed (pg. 226).

c) The right of free speech and expression includes the right to receive and impart information. For ensuring the free speech right of the citizens of this country, it is necessary that the citizens have the benefit of plurality of views and a range of opinions on all public issues (pg. 228).

The judges found it unacceptable that broadcast media can be monopolized both by private and government agencies. It was against the ideals enshrined in Article 19 of the constitution. The judgment gave importance to the listeners/viewers rights to receive information. The legislation in India was inadequate, and thus both the judges drew examples of broadcast media regulations and freedom of expression ideals from around the world, to come to a judgment. Thus, from the notion of government property, it transformed to public property and media regulations came to be seen from that perspective. DD and AIR were government run entities and after the judgment the question of autonomy came into the limelight. The judgment paved the way for the next phase of reforms in the Indian broadcasting sector.

5.1.2 Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995

This regulation came into existence in 1994 to regulate the hitherto unregulated growth of the Indian cable sector. The cable revolution had already happened and the government was unprepared to meet the challenges of this sector. DD was only available through terrestrial mode and that is where the government had its monopoly. Co-axial wires carrying multiple channels was something Indian legislation had not
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foreseen. This regulation laid down guidelines for registration and transmission of cable channels. "The object of the Act [Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995] was to regulate the 'haphazard mushrooming of cable television networks'. Due to the lack of licensing mechanism for cable operators; this resulted in large number of cable operators, broadcasting programmes without any regulation (Ghosh, 2013: 01).

For the registration which was now mandatory an application for registration of cable operator has to be done along with a payment of fees decided from time to time to the Head Post Master of the designated Head Post Office of the area, within whose territorial jurisdiction the cable operator is situated. The registration certificate thus issued by the registering authority after inspection is valid for 12 months and can be renewed. This simple process was put in place and the process of registration was made decentralized.

Some of the important points that were addressed in the Act were the a) registration b) programme code c) advertisement code d) maintenance of register e) compulsory transmission of DD channels f) non-interference with other telecommunication networks. The Act also laid the norm for nature of offences and punishments under it, and gave power to the administration to act in matters of public interest. The programme code makes it mandatory through an amendment for 'Every cable operator shall, from the commencement of the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Amendment Act, 2000, re-transmit at least two Doordarshan terrestrial channels and one regional language channel' [Cable Television Networks (Regulations) Act, clause 8, 1995]

The Act also made it mandatory to keep a register. It states:
Every cable operator shall maintain a register in the prescribed form indicating therein in brief the programmes transmitted or re-transmitted through the cable service during a month and such register shall be maintained by the cable operator for a period of one year after the actual transmission or re-transmission of the said programmes. [Cable Television Networks (Regulations) Act, clause 7, 1995]

Under clauses 19 and 20 of the Act the government had laid rules for the intervention of administration to either bar any programme or even prohibit from functioning:

**Power to prohibit transmission of certain programmes in public interest.**—Where any authorized officer thinks it necessary or expedient so to do in the public interest, he may, by order, prohibit any cable operator from transmitting or re-transmitting.

**Power to prohibit operation of cable television network in public interest.**—Where the Central Government thinks it necessary or expedient so to do in public interest, it may prohibit the operation of any cable television network in such areas as it may...[Cable Television Networks (Regulations) Act, clauses 19-20, 1995]

The Act (1995) prescribed for programme codes and advertisement code as were prevalent for DD and AIR. The Act was the first step towards regulating the content and transmission of Indian and foreign channels by the broadcasters. Although there were several amendments to the Act later on, the structure of the Act remained same. It is in the light of this legislation that over the next decade and half cable television witnessed exponential growth in the market and flourished. Cable Operators now functioned under the purview of the law and the business was driven by prospects of profit. Cable Television has made deep inroads into the political economy of urban and semi-urban lives. The ongoing consolidation within the industry has been accompanied by high levels of volatility, seen equally in the all-too-common allegations of the
use of force between rival companies and operators, as well as in the high rate of mergers and acquisitions observed at different levels within the cable business (Naregal, 2010: 291).

5.2 Local Cable Operator (LCO) and Multi System Operator (MSO)

Satellite channels transmit signals which are accessed by MSO’s and the LCO’s buy these signals from the MSO’s and relay it to the consumers. Each MSO has under it several LCO’s and in some case if the MSO is owned by corporate houses, there might be hundred of LCO’s under it. In 2012, the government made it mandatory for the MSO’s to receive and relay signals and no LCO could downlink and transmit signals. That way the government could have better control over the MSO’s. In the case of MSOs, no resources are allotted by the Government for their operations. ‘And there are no restrictions on the number of MSOs which operate in a market, monopolistic tendencies are observed in some States’ (TRAI, 2013: 14). The MSO’s are in reality jumbo cable operators who have grown in size to achieve the economies of scale. The cable revolution in India has for the major part been driven by the MSO’s but large corporate MSO’s have also resulted in unhealthy practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Cable TV homes (% of all India Cable TV homes)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
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<td>Assam</td>
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<td>Bihar</td>
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<td>Gujarat</td>
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<td>Karnataka</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maharashtra &amp; Goa</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>MP &amp; Chhattisgarh</td>
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<td>UP &amp; Uttarakhand</td>
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<td>West Bengal</td>
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### Table 3: Distribution of Cable TV Homes


The cable television has been an analogue phenomenon since its inception where signals are transmitted traditionally through co-axial cables or optical cables. But through an amendment to the Cable Television Networks Regulation Act, in 2011 the government has made it mandatory for cable operators to transmit or re-transmit signals digitally encrypted through a Digital Addressable System (DAS). These digital signals would be encrypted at the audiences' home with a set top box. The process of digitization has been divided into four phases depending on geography. As Veena Naregal points out:

Despite evident signs of consolidation and ruthless competition, local cable operators continue to work on an informal basis. Undoubtedly, urban congestion and the difficulties of technical monitoring are contributory factors. Reliable estimates of reach and market share are,
therefore, hard to come by in the cable distribution business. For all practical purposes, both companies and local operators seem to work with two parallel sets of claimed figures: subscriber bases are inflated for publicity purposes and for the benefit of advertisers, but for the purposes of bargaining over dues either with government agencies or broadcasting entities, declared connectivity tends to be grossly underplayed (2010: 300).

Although the process has seen lot of hiccups and delays the last day has been fixed on December 31, 2014 to finish the last stage of the process. The process of digitization would enable the government to keep a tab on the number of consumers; hiding the numbers from government and the channels would become a thing of the past.

The above discussion on the regulatory framework provides the direction that cable revolution took, without legislation in the initial years and under the gaze of government eyes later on. The rise of the LCO’s made media in India a decentralized entity, where the neighbourhood guy was responsible for what we watch and how we do it. I now try to analyze through two case studies the role these operators have played in the localization of the media process, by operating local channels in their neighbourhood, and contributed to the emergent media of Assam.

5.3 Case Studies

On April 28, 2012, two professors from Tezpur University met with an accident on National Highway 37, near Kaliabor in Nagaon district. The news was flashed by the satellite television channels within a few minutes in the form of running news ticker. This piece of news subsequently, did not go beyond the ticker of the satellite channels. But within a few hours, one of the local cable channel (LCC) of Nagaon, ‘Nagaon Talks’ had the
visually of the accident up and running. This incident brings into focus the reach and content of the LCC's. What is missed by the satellite channels might be important in a local context. In an era where communication technologies are becoming commonplace and information is demanded instantaneously, the idea of Guwahati as the news center seems distant. The 'local' has emerged as the site for creation and dissemination of information.

Assam today has around 250 registered LCO's and MSO's. Every town has one or more LCO who compete with each other for the share of households. In some case, a single locality has two operators existing. Larger towns generally have MSO's and have many cable operators under them. Cable networks originated in the early 1990's, and ever since have vied for space with the state run DD. The influx of numerous satellite channels in the late 1990's saw the popularity of such network grow and every person of considerable economic and political clout opened a network.

In this section I analyse the functioning and growth of two such local cable channels (LCC) run by cable networks in Silchar and Dibrugarh in Assam. LCC's are not a new phenomenon in India, and most cable networks have one. The most popular form of such channels is ones which plays songs and movies. During the initial years of the cable television entertainment channels showing popular Bolywood songs and films were rare, and these local channels catered to that need. Movies were also screened in some of these channels at specific hours, and the best part of having a LCO was the convenience of calling up and requesting for a particular movie. And more often than not these requests were obliged with and thus the popularity of these channels soared. In the process cable networks came to be identified with the channels that they had of their own, a recipe for enhancing the number of subscribers. Cable networks faced intense competition from rival networks and the only way
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to resist it was value added services, the local cable channels served that end. In course of time some of larger networks and MSO’s, people who could afford, opened cable news channels too. These channels would be the one stop destination for all kinds of local events that would be happening in the area. The area of collecting news therefore would remain the boundaries of the reach of the network. Therefore the existence of the channels would be symbiotic to the network itself. The local news bulletin was something innovative, and also earned extra revenue through local advertisements. “By insisting and sometimes even supplying footage of a local event, such as a cricket match, inauguration of a public amenity or a celebrity visit to the area, they (LCO) can have these items included in the evening news bulletin. This may be a way of getting personal publicity for himself or of rising in the estimation of the local boss; either way, it was a practice that the MSOs encouraged during the early days to cultivate local contacts and expand their networks” (Naregal, 2010: 303).

The race to give something extra to the consumers and also the lure of advertisements led to such local channels coming up in most of the towns of Assam. In most cases it would not be full blown channels, the cost for such a set up was prohibitive, but 30 minutes to 1 hour packages that would be made daily, re-telecasted several times over the day.

5.4 Barak Television Network (BTN)

BTN Cable is a major MSO for the Barak valley region of Assam. Situated at Silchar, the capital of Cachar district, BTN cable is located strategically in the commercial hub of the region. Cachar district is located in the southernmost part of Assam. Administratively divided into two subdivisions viz. Silchar (Sadar) and Lakhipur, Cachar district occupies an area of 3,786 square kilometers. According to the 2011
census, Cachar has a population of 1,736,319 and a sex ratio of 958 females for every 1000 males. It boasts of a literacy rate of 80.36% higher than the national average. Bengali is the official language in the district with majority of the people primarily speaking Bengali.

Silchar, is the district headquarters of Cachar. It is 343 kilometres south east of the state capital Guwahati. It is the second largest town of the state in terms of population. As of 2011, Silchar had a population of 178,865.

**Figure 1:** Map of Assam (study areas highlighted)

Source: www.mapsofindia.com
5.4.1 Origin

The network company and the channel were started in 2003. Pre-2003 there was three MSO’s in Silchar and finally all the three merged into one company called BTN. One of those networks was called the United Cable Network and they had a local channel called UCN. After United cable Network closed down BTN came into existence. Late 1990’s and early 2000’s was the period of consolidation and mergers in the cable network space, across the country. Competition had become stiff, and bigger networks were gobbling up the smaller ones and forming larger networks or MSO’s. BTN is also a result of such merger between rival networks.

The exact market shares of the MSOs are not available because in the analogue platform the number of subscribers cannot be accurately ascertained due to non-addressability and the lack of transparency in reporting of subscriber base. Once DAS is implemented, the cable TV services will have to be provided through a set top box and it will be possible to obtain the exact number of customers through the subscriber management system of the MSO.
5.4.2 Reach

BTN is an example of a large cable distribution network and therefore such companies harbour the hope of growing further. As in the case of another cable channel operating in Guwahati, Prag News has been one of the largest in reach in lower Assam region of the state. And recently in 2013 it succeeded in becoming a satellite television channel. Monish Das one among the two directors of BTN says “there was a lot of hope and ambition for us. We hoped to start off as a local channel and slowly and gradually grow to become a satellite channel. But being in a small town there are lot of problems. Broadcasting from Silchar, the kind of money that is required to run a satellite channel, enough revenue won’t be generated to be sustainable. Thus we abandoned the plan and have stuck to local news. The geographical area that we (network) reach is covered by our news coverage. Today we reach almost 80% of the household of the Cachar district.” For all purposes opening a satellite channel based in district towns is impractical. All the revenue comes from Guwahati and satellite channels in turn have to be dependent on cable distribution networks to reach the people across the state, which is costly. We have seen what happened to Prime News (chapter IV) when it failed to provide the cable networks the distribution charge. For, smaller towns that way it makes commercial sense to stick to its area of operation. The cost of channel distribution is free as such channels belong to the network themselves. The only cost they bear is the cost of hiring extra people for the news production and presentation process.

5.4.3 Revenue

Local cable channels (LCC) such as BTN have to rely on local markets for revenue. The larger the area of coverage more is the opportunity to
garner advertisements. Advertisements although is a major issue for these local networks, they are impeded by their smaller reach to get big clients. Small advertisements which include anything from coaching centers, swimming classes, birthday wishes, anniversary wishes, inaugurations, local events, astrologers, doctors etc. form the bulk of such advertisements. These advertisements are mostly in the form of banners on top and bottom of the screen, and also running tickers which are booked on normally a weekly basis. These kinds of advertisements are generally textual advertisements, and some cases may even carry smaller images. Interestingly, this sort of advertisements which are the staple of local cable channels which have become popular on the web are also seen on satellite television, especially during cricket matches. Normal advertisements that we see on television are also made and have become popular on LCC of late. With the easy availability of technology and trained people making advertisements have become easier. The LCC themselves double up as the advertisement agencies giving complete solution to the customers, right from production to equipment to distribution all in a package. These advertisements again are not sold on time slots but on weekly basis, the more the money you pay the longer it runs and the frequency increases too.

Monish Das says “there is not much profit as earlier times. You have to pay the pay channels. What has happened with advertising in BTN is that with the upcoming satellite channels from Guwahati all the big companies are giving them advertisement. Earlier in the absence of these satellite channels the advertising used to come to us, now we have lost it. You see all the companies have their offices in Guwahati where the advertisement revenues are generated. The satellite channels get all that.” Although he points out to the loss of revenue from big industrial clients based in Guwahati, the clients know what they get when they advertise through BTN. The coverage area is defined by the distribution company, and whenever any company has to launch any product targeting this
specific audience, BTN becomes the default choice. As Neyazi says (2010: 921) "vernacular modernity has enabled both media producers and consumers to claim cultural autonomy."

They provide a specific known market unlike the satellite channels where the target population is not defined; nobody knows who watches those advertisements as TRP is available only for Guwahati city. So, any client who wants to target specific area knows which LCC's to advertise in. BTN is today the largest MSO in the Cachar district and its reach ensures local advertisements and revenues.

5.4.4 Programming

Martin Esslin talking about the idea of television genres says:

the language of television is none other than that of drama: that television—as indeed the cinema with which it has much in common—is, in its essence, a dramatic medium; and that looking at TV from the point of view and with the analytic tools of dramatic criticism and theory might contribute to a better understanding of its nature and many aspects of its psychological, social, and cultural impact, both in the short term and on a long term, macroscopic time scale (1982: 6-7).

The purpose of genres in LCC's is double fold. Firstly, to become conduits of entertainment, localization of the existing genre of television programming and secondly, to connect with the people and keep them hooked, audiences who are also consumers of their networks. This two pronged evolution has defined how in the initial days of LCC's it was only about bolywood song and dance videos and occasional movie screenings, and how it later evolved to interactive programming and reality shows. The LCC might be considered to be the early starters of reality programmes when they would cover local events, school functions and neighbourhood competitions.
The Director of BTN explains their programming thus "we have live talk shows on health, where doctors answer to the queries directly which the viewers ask by telephone, we have dance and song programme by kids, also we organize programme by local artists, we go out on the streets and parks to record. We also have live shows like during Durga Puja, the Dashami festivities, Republic Day, some renowned artists programme are also telecasted live. Among the local viewers the popularity of BTN is huge, and that is the reason people are still not converting to Direct to Home (DTH), this local touch is absent in DTH." And this local touch that he talks about is the growth centers of new culture. Peter Manuel's work shows, cassette culture opened new markets, produced new artists and music forms, and hugely expanded the market. Both in production and circulation, cassette culture stood at the borderline of the property regime, a feature that clearly anticipated the form the 'global' decade of the 1990s would take (Sundaram, 2005: 56). LCC's created new genres, and new stars, who the audience could relate to. These new breed of artists who became known through their neighbourhood performances opened up new markets and cultural forms.

The local thus emerged as the site of popular culture, encouraged by LCC's. Localization has definitely helped hitherto marginalized groups to participate in the public sphere (Neyazi, 2010: 920). Local festivals such as Durga Puja are covered live on BTN and become important spaces for public gathering. The public is formed on television through BTN and the channel becomes an important conduit for people's expression of festivity and joy throughout the area of coverage of the LCC.

5.4.5 Threat from DTH

DTH television was introduced in India in 2003. Dish TV led by the Zee TV group was the first service provider in the country. In the initial years
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of operation DTH was not a threat as it was costly compared to a connection from LCO's. Dish TV as part of its marketing strategy in the initial years also stayed away from the metros and concentrated on the rural sectors where LCO were weak or where they did not reach. Analog cable service was always hindered by its limitation to reach remote area by cables. DTH could provide only 48 channels when it first started out in comparison to the average of 60 channels that any LCO provided. By the end of 2005 DTH could garner only one percent of the total television household in India. This was a dismal figure for the DTH players. But by 2013, with six big players in the fray and an average of 200 channels DTH has penetrated into 23 million household and around 23 percent of all television household in India. LCO were at increasing risk of losing out to competition that they could not take on economically.

Monish Das accepts the challenge “yes, there is competition. Earlier we could just play any song or movie through our channel, but now we have to go from street to street and make programmes to keep up the popularity of the channel. We have to visit and make programmes on Durga Puja\textsuperscript{38} or say Id or Christmas, the coming of DTH has made us to do this sort of programmes. And due to this popularity of it (BTN) hasn’t faced any threat from DTH.” Survival depends on innovation and adaptation for the LCO’s. During the late 1990’s and early 2000’s when the LCO’s were at the peak of the television revolution in India, they were run on whimsical decisions. Every unemployed youth with money wanted to open a cable network, every politician wanted to invest in one and LCO’s had to keep people in power happy for they had to collect money from people and operate without any hindrance. Thus, LCO’s became powerful people in society, they could hike subscription fees whenever they liked, disconnect people’s connections on late payments, force people to pay up for extra channels and so on. For the most part television distribution remained extremely fragmented; cable was largely retailed by

\textsuperscript{38} Durga Puja and Bihu are the two major festivals celebrated in Assam.
smaller independent players in the neighbourhood, which frustrated efforts to corporatize as in other countries. ‘Cable television had actually grown through local ownership (local youth wired their locality and took feed from satellites), who would collect money from consumers’ (Sundaram, 2005: 56). But there was no alternative to the neighbourhood LCO. Only when they started to face competition that things started to improve.

Cable TV subscribers constitute approximately 60% of the total TV homes in the country, whereas the share of DTH is about 35% (see Figure 3). Cable TV networks on the other hand operate on a regional basis and can choose channels to be supplied according to the demand in the area served (TRAI, 2013: 12).

Figure 3: Growth of Cable TV and DTH Subscribers in India
5.4.6 News Production Process

BTN has a unique way of collecting news from the ground. It has a few reporters of its own who are actually videographers who are always on standby to collect news. The concept of journalists is replaced with video journalists and he/she doubles up as the reporter. But that is as much as the town area of Silchar is concerned. Outside Silchar in different parts of the district BTN depends on the LCO’s for news. “We have full time reporters who report. But in places outside the town like Sonai, Dhalai etc, it is the operator in those places who collect news. In the town we also use the reporters of our sister concern the newspaper Dainik Prantajyoti. So even in midnight anything happens our reporters are there. Here is a flow of information from Dainik Prantajyoti to BTN and vice versa” says Monish Das. BTN, due to this unique arrangement, gathers news at a fraction of the cost, and without the necessity of managing numerous reporters. The LCO’s who have news collectors provide it to BTN in return for the free transmission of BTN which acts like a value added service.

Infact, taking advantage of this BTN has ventured into the print sector with the publication of its Bengali daily Dainik Prantajyoti in the year 2009. Monish Das reveals that there is a flow of information between the organizations. Whatever comes to Prantajyoti is used by BTN and vice versa. As a matter of fact both the organization is housed in the same building. Dainik Prantajyoti is a broadsheet daily publication of 12 pages with Paresh Dutta, a veteran journalist as its editor.

But unlike the streamlined process in the print daily the editorial process in BTN is elementary to say the least. The editor also acts as the anchor and the script writer. The news editor at best is a person who in the first shift acts as the local reporter too. Journalism in the process is not the important thing but putting together a package of local events and
happenings becomes the motto. It's after all the purpose of the channel that is more important to BTN than the journalistic process itself. The Hindi term *jugaad*, which literally means 'getting by', 'making do', or 'improvising', is an appropriate description of the dynamics of Indian media liberalization (Roy, 2011: 765).

"First the report is brought from the field and dumped in the computer, then the script writer writes the story and then it is given voice over after editing. The Directors have no role, the editor looks after it, if there is any complicated news then they show it to us." The show that is put up is for an hour daily, except on days when there are local events to be produced live. This package is repeated twice on the same day and once the next morning, till the next package is produced. For, all purposes the editor Moni Bhattacharjee remains an editor for the hour only, and the live streaming programmes are unedited feeds.

5.5 V&S Cable Network

Dibrugarh district covers an area of 3,381 square kilometers. According to the 2011 census Dibrugarh district has a population of 1,327,748. It has a population density of 393 inhabitants per square kilometer. Dibrugarh has a literacy rate of 76.22%.

Dibrugarh city is the headquarters of the Dibrugarh district. It is located 439 km. east of Guwahati. It is the gateway to the three tea-producing districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, and Sivasagar. The Brahmaputra passes by the city as it emerges from the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh. Dibrugarh boasts of editions of several state dailies like The Assam Tribune, The Sentinel, *Asomiya Pratidin*, *Janasadharan*, *Niyamiya Barta*, *Dainik Asom* and *Dainik Jugasankha*. 
V&S Cable network is a super MSO registered in Tinsukia with their office in Dibrugarh and reaches almost the entire upper Assam districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar and Jorhat. With such a vast distribution asset V&S claims itself to be one of the largest in the North East.

5.5.1 Origin

As part of my research I had interviewed the Editor Mr. Chandan Jyoti Kalita of VNS cable (constituent channels of V&S network) channel and also observed the functioning of the Local Cable Channels (LCC) that they run, an important constituent of the distribution network, in an effort to understand the equation between these two entities—the channels and the network.

Mr. Kalita says “we started on July 1, 2009. We have four channels VnS News, Aamar VnS is an entertainment channel with local singers and
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artists and VnS Bangla. In Dakhineswar in Kolkata the rituals that are done there, people of this region can’t afford to go there to watch them, so we for the first time started showing those rituals and recitations. They have recording discs there and send them to us and then we telecast. Then we have VnS Cinema, where people request the movies they want to watch, purely on request. VnS News started later only from July 10, 2009. On June 1, 2009 the three channels started together Aamar VnS, VnS Bangla and VnS Cinema.” VnS is today a brand name in the upper Assam region. The fact that it provides a bouquet of channels gives it the edge over other networks. VnS channels started late and was known by other names in its initial years and after several mergers and take over came to be what it is today. ‘As rising levels of investment and competition from the big companies have pushed out many operators from the business, local operators in many parts of the country organized themselves to form pressure-groups and even co-operatives at the local and regional level’ (Naregal, 2010: 301).

The existence of the distribution networks depended on the identity of those local channels they had. As the networks took shape and got larger in size so too the channels started to get more ambitious and even branch off into niche channels like cinema or language specific content. VnS News is one of the most popular among the channels. The distance between Guwahati and Dibrugarh both geographically and content wise gave ample space for other news channel to grow. Mr. Kalita points out “the logic behind the news channel was that they (satellite channels) are only Guwahati based. They only make news from there; they never show the problems of the people living here. What they do is they make it there and push it to us, the smaller towns. But our target was to make it here and push it to Guwahati, so that the problems that arise here are being heard in Dispur (administrative capital) and this was our main purpose. And it is a success. For e.g. small and far away places such as Lekhapani, Makum etc. their problems are never highlighted or never heard of,
sometimes they never realize places such as those exist. Only during elections people know them.” The grudge with Guwahati based satellite news channels is clear; VnS is a means of resisting imported images from power centers. Appadurai and Breckenridge have argued that ‘most societies today possess the means for the local production of modernity’ (1995: 1).

5.5.2 Reach

Talking about the reach and extent of the network Chandan Kalita says “ours is an underground cable network, which is the largest in the northeast, nowhere else in northeast will you find this big a network. Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Jorhat, the entire four districts is covered by us. We also send our programmes to Guwahati with software. In Guwahati, Nalbari, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Rangiya our programmes are telecasted. Basically we started off with Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Sivasagar which were our targets. And after that slowly it is expanding.” The reach of V&S cable is massive, it has numerous LCO’s under it and the four channels it produces are a driving force for its expansion. VnS News caters to news from the four districts, VnS Cinema acts as a movie on demand channel, Aamar VnS and VnS Bangla are niche channels catering to Assamese and Bengali speaking people respectively. Thus the size and influence of V&S Cable the MSO has been driven by its local content generation. As Sundaram (2005: 56) mentions “by the late 1990s, multi-service providers emerged, pushed by large television networks offering franchises to local players, but this only increased conflict at the local level between rival operators. For the most part cable distribution remains in the informal sector and a source of conflicts over intellectual property.”
The editor of VnS News explains the structure of V&S Cable thus “there is a cable organization of the four districts of the operators. V&S is an MSO. There are other MSO’s functioning in all the major towns. Several MSO’s got together and formed a super MSO called the V&S Cable private limited in 2008, a private company with about 150 shareholders. Mainly the shareholders are the MSO’s of the three districts of Sivasagar, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh.” It explains the whole story of consolidation, in most parts of India there is a fierce competition in the cable network sector. In some states the dominance of a single MSO is seen where all the other players have either sold off to the larger MSO or simply had to close operations due to competition. ‘It has been observed that the level of competition in the MSOs’ business is not uniform throughout the country; certain States (e.g. Delhi, Karnataka, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Maharashtra) have a large number of MSOs providing their services’ (TRAI, 2013: 07). Larger the size of the MSO more the benefit for the customer as the MSO can pass off the benefit of economies of scale to the consumer, but gives rise to unhealthy competitive practices too which have adverse effect on the customer. And abuse of market dominance by these MSO’s is rampant across the country. Some of the larger MSO’s in the country are owned by big corporate houses giving them huge advantages over small town LCO’s, who are at their mercy some of them include Siti cable owned by Zee Media group and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, Hathway cable owned by the Raheja group, the Hinduja brothers owned Incablenet, RPG group owned RPG Netcom, Sumangali Cable Vision owned by SUN group etc. These mammoth MSO’s cover a large part of the country and therefore the consolidation process in states such as Assam became important for their survival.

Chandan Jyoti Kalita talks about the process of consolidation in light of digitization, “there is a order from TRAI that signals should be made digital from 2014. Now what has happened is that small operators in smaller towns like Titabor, Lekhapani which are small pockets cannot
afford the cost of putting up a digital console; it is a costly affair to transmit digital signal. For this reason V&S Cable tied up with Gujarat Telelink Private Limited (GTPL) in a 60:40 share agreement in January 2012, where GTPL holds the majority share. And now we are called GTPL V&S. So GTPL provides the technological support to us. It provides the set top boxes for digitization, the process is already underway. We already have around 500-600 set top boxes installed. So at present we have both analogue and digital signals transmitted at the same time. We have 100 channels being transmitted at present." V&S cable although being one of the largest MSO in the region had to go for funding from external sources. GTPL is a Gujarat based corporate house with MSO presence across the country particularly in states of Gujarat, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and now in Assam. GTPL itself is again 50% owned by Hathway Cable and Datacom, one of the largest MSO in India.

Thus small town LCO’s spread over the region have no option other than to align with V&S Cable. Smaller LCO’s simply do not have the might to compete in a capital intensive market. A report by TRAI on the monopoly of MSO’s and cable operators in India says:

The size of markets catered to (across States, cities and even localities) by an MSO determines its market power and influence. One of the ways in which MSOs have tried to expand and increase their size (and influence) is by buying out LCOs and smaller MSOs. The joint venture/subsidiary model has emerged as a result of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) of LCOs/MSOs by large MSOs. The MSOs have varying levels of ownership interest in these LCOs. Typically, MSOs provide more favorable terms and financial assistance to joint venture companies and subsidiaries. The point is that, by way of acquisition, joint venture or subsidiary, some MSOs have been increasing their presence and size leading to a situation of market dominance. There are instances where the dominant MSOs are misusing their market power to create barriers of entry for new players, providing unfair terms to other stakeholders in
the value chain and distorting the competition. MSOs with significant reach (i.e. a large network and customer base) are leveraging their scale of operations to bargain with broadcasters for content at a lower price and also demand higher carriage and placement fees. Such MSOs are in a position to exercise market power in negotiations with the LCOs on the one hand, and with the broadcasters on the other (TRAI, 2013: 8).

5.5.3 Legal Issues

The LCO’s and MSO’s come under the purview of the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995. The Act has several loopholes and the MSO’s and LCO’s have been using them for their end. The existence of local channels itself has been questioned from time to time. The fact that they are not registered with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting but take local clearance from the Post Offices makes them fall outside of the purview of rules for satellite channels. The rules are quite vague and have been interpreted locally by administrators. GTPL which has a large operation in Maharashtra runs four channels in Nagpur city including news channels. In an interview to ‘Nagpur Today’ Sameer Chaubey the CEO of GTPL says “we are running round the clock news channels as there are no such directives restricting us to do so. The current regulation suggests running round the clock through wireless medium like satellite’s uplink and downlink. But at the same time, there is no restriction on wired medium showing news too as we do with fibre optics” (2013). Based on complaints the ministry has set up a committee to look into the issue of channels being run by LCO’s and MSO’s.

Chandan Jyoti Kalita talks about their brush with law “Dibru Live is a channel only telecasted in Dibrugarh. Earlier there were two channels UATV which was started in 2006 by all the cable operators put together and only telecasted in Dibrugarh. That was mainly a news based channel.
There were a lot of problems created by the Deputy Commissioner in Dibrugarh then, who raised objection of how cable television can transmit news. Then we renamed our programme as *Tathya Pravah* (flow of information). The news was sent out as information.” This epitomizes how sensitive the legal grounds of LCC’s are. But VnS News now has been running without any objections raised since its inception in 2009, and it no longer uses subversive methods anymore like *Tathya Pravah.*

“The Directorate of Information and Public Relation (DIPR) of the state regularly publish press releases through us. But they haven’t interfered with us till date. After 2006 when there were a few questions raised after that nothing of that sort has happened. So there are messages from the Army like Operation *Sadbhavana* etc. press releases including other government agencies too. The satellite channels are not interested in those kinds of welfare messages. Our reporters are also called for press conferences with the same status of conventional reporters” these remarks by the editor tell a lot about the present state of legitimacy that is there, but which rests on very thin grounds of omission rather than clear directives in the government regulations.

5.5.4 Editorial Practices

The editorial structure of VnS channels is visibly better than BTN. Because VnS has a larger reach and has four channels it requires more people to man the channels. All four channels have a common Editor in Chief, Mr. Anjan Kalita who looks after all the channels and each channel in turn has an editor who is in charge of the day to day programming. The network is run by a director and at present Mr. Sanjoy Deb holds the responsibility. So, the hierarchy of the network and those of the channels are clearly demarcated in operations. But the legacy of the early days
clearly persists, creating problems for experienced journalists from the print media who have been inducted to upgrade these local bulletins into more professionalized news coverage (Naregal, 2010: 304). Chandan Jyoti Kalita, who is the editor of VnS talks about the news gathering process, “we have video editors, we have reporters. The reporters send the news to us, and then the video editors edit it. Then the editor in chief checks the script on a daily basis and then it is made into a package after voice over by the anchors and new readers. All the decisions about the news are taken by the editor in chief solely. The same news generally runs for the whole day repeatedly. The evening 7 pm prime time starts with Assamese news of one hour followed by the 8 pm Bengali news and then 9 pm news in Hindi. This package of one hour is repeated the whole day.”

The people associated with the process of news are mainly local reporters of other media houses. Otherwise a pure distribution company like V&S Cable has no grounding in producing programmes and that too news. People from the journalist community are hired to give that element of legitimacy to the content generated. It is interesting to note, at a time when satellite television channels based in Guwahati are limiting their programming to single languages, it is LCC’s which drive content generation in multiple languages. The experience of making content at the grassroots is that these operators know their audiences well, in most cases the programmes are produced at the advice of the neighbourhood audience. And thus the programmes produced are popular and made with the confidence of the audience. They drive growth both for the channel and the network too. As Neyazi points ‘localization of consumption involves taking news to the grassroots by including local happenings, such as crimes, marriages and inauguration ceremonies, obituaries, etc. (2010: 917).

Again, Aamar VnS one of the entertainment 24x7 channel is an Assamese language channel which focuses on interactivity. “We have
programmes like *Baate Ghate*, asking people questions on the road, then *Silpir Prithivi*, where singers and artists are called in the studio for interview and entertainment. We have programmes where old song requests are played out. The requests are done over the telephone, which is a live programme” says Kalita. I observed that one feature of the four channels was the continuous display of names of people whose requests are being played out. There is a deliberate attempt to make the viewers feel connected to the channels. They act like people’s channels. VnS also boasts of two in house studios to record the programmes. One studio is used specifically for news production while the other is for all kinds of shows including talk shows.

The reporters in VnS are salaried people. The reporters are paid by the respective LCO’s. For each market it is the operator who engages the reporter. So VnS does not bear any expense. The advantage as the reach of VnS grows and more the number of LCO’s so too the number of reporters and the area of coverage goes up. Each LCO thus takes equal responsibility and interest in coverage of news as their popularity depends on the transmission of their area news. It acts like a co-operative in its operation where news gathering to transmission process is all tied in an equation of shared responsibility for shared benefits. It’s a give and take policy where the LCO’s know their futures are tied to the well being of the smooth running of the LCC’s.

### 5.5.5 Growing Popularity

Chandan Jyoti Kalita claims “even outside Dibrugarh VnS is very popular. In small towns like Sonari, Nazira, towns of Jorhat, in Demow etc. without VnS people cannot imagine cable service. People wait for VnS programmes. We also telecast deferred live programmes of *Bihu* etc.
and other important occasions for the people.” It is the smaller towns and villages where the cable networks focus more. The urban centers are already saturated and with DTH trying to penetrate rural areas where cable networks do not reach, have made them to do programmes keeping in mind these audiences.

VnS has tied up with Guwahati based Prag cable network by which VnS programmes are sent to Guwahati for telecast. At present VnS news is the only channel to be telecasted in Guwahati. So each home that Prag network goes VnS is present too. The owner of Prag Cable network is also a shareholder of VnS and thus it fits into their scheme of things. VnS News of upper Assam thus reaches Guwahati through a complex chain of shareholding, merger and acquisition process, a common phenomenon in the survival process of the cable networks of the country.

Thus in this chapter, I have analyzed the status of the local channels in the media scene in Assam. The questions of legality notwithstanding these channels are important cogs in the local media economy. Increasing competition in the satellite channel space and too much dependence on a single center of growth has muffled people’s voice in media in Assam. What these local channels do is therefore add to the local sphere, giving voice to the voiceless, where opinions of the local citizens matter more than anything. The economic structures of such networks make it necessary to go to the masses for their legitimacy and in turn existence and revenues.