

Comprehensive Examination of the Evolution and Fluctuations in Malayalam Language Radio Programming within the United Arab Emirates: An In-Depth Analysis

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Abstract

This article delves into the historical context of Malayalam language radio programs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where Arabic predominates as the native language. Notably, approximately 85% of the UAE's population comprises expatriates, with 27% being of Indian origin. Between 1992 and 2014, the UAE experienced a surge in Indian language Malayalam radio stations, reaching a peak of 10 simultaneous stations. During this period, an estimated one million listeners relied on these stations for diverse content, including information, entertainment, and pertinent local updates. However, over the last seven years, there has been a discernible decline in the number of Malayalam radio stations. This paper aims to scrutinize the factors contributing to this decline. Methodologically, the study relies on multiple interviews with key stakeholders such as radio program directors, journalists, and organizers in the UAE. The identified reasons for the dip in radio listenership include: a) the ascendancy of social media as a primary source for instant information and entertainment; b) financial constraints stemming from exorbitant government licensing fees, posing a threat to the sustainability of radio stations; and c) market oversaturation due to inadequate market research preceding station launches. Through this comprehensive analysis, the article seeks to provide insights into the intricate dynamics influencing the progression and downturn of Malayalam language radio programs in the UAE.

Keywords

Community Media, Community Radio in UAE, Malayalam Radio UAE, Indian Language Radio in UAE, Gulf Radio, Ethnic Radio UAE.

1. Introduction

Radio has been a resilient and influential medium of mass communication since its inception, offering accessibility to news, entertainment, and information for people across diverse backgrounds and literacy levels. Unlike other forms of media, radio is both affordable and mobile, bridging gaps in communication and ensuring that even those in remote areas can stay informed. Its adaptability and reach have made it a cornerstone of communication worldwide.

Within this global tapestry of radio programming, ethnic communities have consistently found their voice through radio programs tailored to their cultural and linguistic identities. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a nation known for its multicultural mosaic, where over 200 nationalities converge, seeking to make a mark on the world stage. This modernity and growth, epitomized by the UAE, necessitates the ability to work internationally, making effective communication with this diverse population crucial (Gjylbegaj V and Jararaa, 2017).

Among the myriad linguistic communities in the UAE, one of the most prominent is the Indian expatriate community, numbering 2.62 million as of 2020 ("United Arab Emirates Population Statistics," 2020). These individuals often retain their native languages, creating a unique linguistic tapestry in a country where Arabic is the mother tongue.

To cater to the diverse linguistic preferences of the expatriate population, a variety of radio programs in languages like Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, Tagalog, Bengali, Pashtu, Russian, and Italian, in addition to English and Arabic, were launched. These radio programs became a vital source of information and solace, particularly for laborers and the illiterate, offering a sense of connection with their home cultures (KS Shruthi, 2017 "On Air- Chapter 1").

However, among these language-specific radio programs, Malayalam radio stations held a prominent position, peaking at a remarkable ten stations in operation. The UAE's Malayalam radio sector served as a lifeline for the largest expatriate group in the country, the Keralites, estimated at one million strong (Abdul Khader, 2019). These radio stations played a pivotal role in bridging cultural gaps, preserving language, and providing a sense of belonging for this substantial community.

The prominence of Malayalam radio stations in the UAE radio landscape underscores the significance of this medium in connecting diverse populations to their cultural roots. In contrast to other countries, the UAE's openness to hosting a multitude of radio stations in various languages, including private ones. This unique radio ecosystem reached its zenith with ten Malayalam radio stations concurrently operating, reflecting the profound influence of radio among the expatriate population.

The UAE's expatriate communities, including those hailing from the Indian subcontinent, have seen a steady influx of migrant workers since the 1970s (Abraham and Rajan, 2012; Rajan, 2017a, b; Chowdhury and Rajan, 2018). This demographic shift necessitated media outlets catering to the needs of these expatriate laborers, driving the establishment of language-specific radio programs.

According to Nielsen's 2018 report, radio engagement was widespread in the UAE, with 93% of the population tuning in every week, spending an average of nine hours per week listening to the radio. This engagement was particularly pronounced during peak commuting times on weekdays, highlighting the role of radio in daily life. Notably, around 96% of Indians in the UAE dedicated an average of nine hours per week to radio listening ("93% Of UAE Population Tunes into Radio Every Week," 2018).

Despite this robust radio culture, there has been a recent shift in the landscape. The number of Malayalam radio stations has dwindled significantly, declining from a peak of ten to a mere five functioning stations, with many closures occurring between 2016 and 2019. The objectives of this research are to unravel the underlying reasons for this decline and to analyze the implications for the expatriate community and media landscape in the UAE.

1.1 Research Objectives:

To comprehensively analyze mainly the factors responsible for the decline in the number of Malayalam language radio stations in the United Arab Emirates.

To understand the historical and contemporary roles played by Malayalam radio programs in meeting the communication and cultural preservation needs of the diverse expatriate community.

To assess the influence of changing media consumption patterns, notably the rise of social media, on the listenership of Malayalam radio programs.

1.2 Research Questions:

What are the primary factors contributing to the decline in the number of Malayalam radio stations in the United Arab Emirates?

How have Malayalam radio programs historically fulfilled the communication and cultural preservation needs of the expatriate population in the UAE?

To what extent has the emergence of social media impacted the listenership of Malayalam radio programs in the UAE?

1.3 Hypotheses:

The decline in the number of Malayalam radio stations can be attributed to factors such as shifts in media consumption habits, high licensing fees, and market oversaturation.

Malayalam radio programs have played a central and enduring role in connecting expatriate communities in the UAE to their cultural roots and providing essential information.

The increasing prevalence of social media has likely influenced the listenership of Malayalam radio programs, potentially contributing to a decrease in traditional radio engagement among specific segments of the expatriate population.

In exploring these research questions and hypotheses, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of ethnic media in a diverse and rapidly evolving cultural landscape, shedding light on the challenges faced by traditional media outlets in adapting to changing media consumption patterns in the digital age.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is multi-faceted and encompasses key concepts and theories that are central to understanding the dynamics of ethnic radio and media evolution in the UAE.

Media Resilience serves as the backdrop, emphasizing the enduring nature of radio as a communication medium despite technological advancements. It highlights radio's historical importance as a medium that has adapted to diverse cultural contexts, making it relevant to the context of Malayalam radio in the UAE.

Ethnic Media is a foundational concept as it underscores the significance of radio programs tailored to specific linguistic and cultural identities. This concept recognizes the role of ethnic media in preserving cultural heritage and fostering connections within expatriate communities.

Media Convergence is vital for understanding the impact of digital media on traditional radio listenership. It acknowledges the evolving media landscape where social media and digital platforms coexist with traditional radio, potentially influencing audience preferences.

The Diffusion of Innovation Theory, developed by E.M. Rogers in 1962, aids in exploring how the adoption of social media as an innovative communication channel may have affected the listenership of Malayalam radio programs. It allows for an examination of the spread and acceptance of this innovation among different segments of the expatriate population.

Media Ecology Theory, (Marshall McLuhan) is applied to analyze how radio functions within the broader media ecosystem of the UAE. It considers how radio programs contribute to the cultural ecology of the country, influencing perceptions and interactions among diverse expatriate communities.

This comprehensive theoretical framework informs the research's data collection and analysis strategies by providing a structured approach to investigating the decline in Malayalam radio stations in the UAE. By examining these key concepts, theories, and models, this study aims to uncover the multifaceted factors contributing to this decline and to offer insights into the evolving landscape of ethnic media in a rapidly changing digital age.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Radio has persisted as a resilient medium of mass communication, offering diverse populations accessibility to news, entertainment, and information. In the unique context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the intriguing narrative of Malayalam radio programs unfolds, reflecting the dynamic interplay of cultural preservation, technological advancements, and economic considerations.

Diaspora media has evolved, becoming increasingly versatile by amalgamating various technologies and broadcasting content worldwide. This evolution allows it to experiment with identities, creating platforms that offer glimpses into society (Benson, 2013). While Benson's concept underscores the importance of media outlets serving expatriate communities in preserving their cultural connections, it does not directly address the enigmatic decline of Malayalam radio programs.

Complementarity of Diasporic Media (Hepp, Suna, Bozdag, 2012) highlights how diasporic media complements other sources of media for migrants, recognizing the economic aspect of "ethnic marketing." However, it does not delve into the specific reasons behind the decline in Malayalam radio programs. According to research, diasporic media has long been considered essential for migrants, complementing other media sources from their home country and host countries (Hepp A., C. Suna & L., Bozdag, 2012).

In the era of technological transformation, Anderson & Rodríguez, 2019, discuss the repercussions of these changes on traditional radio. They point to the declining relevance of traditional radio due to shifts in content consumption habits, including the rise of podcasts, music streaming, and web radio. While their research suggests that these technological shifts might contribute to the decline of traditional radio, including Malayalam programs, it lacks an in-depth analysis of this impact.

2.2 Expatriate Community in the UAE, Why Is Radio So Important for Them?

The UAE hosts a significant expatriate community, particularly from India and other Asian countries, a demographic insight crucial to understanding the necessity of media outlets catering to these communities, including Malayalam radio programs. The radio has been an integral part of expatriate Keralites' lives, providing them not only with information about India but also with insights into global socio-political transformations. It has played a pivotal role in shaping Kerala as a hub of erudition.

Notably, around 12 million of the 15 million expatriates in the Gulf region are Asians (Rajan, 2018) (Jain & Oommen, 2016). Many of these migrants are semi-skilled or unskilled workers, a demographic that further supports the demand for radio programs as an accessible alternative to costlier print media (Ozaki, 2012).

The UAE boasts one of the world's highest net migration rates, with a significant influx of workers from India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, the USA, and other countries in recent decades (Burns, 2005).

Furthermore, Bollywood movies enjoy immense popularity in the Gulf region, especially in the UAE, which has hosted Indian film awards. The local affinity for Indian cinema and music production is evident, with the industry reaching a value of approximately INR 48.9 million (Renuka, 2011).

The literature underlines the historical significance of radio for expatriate communities, portraying it as a source of comfort, information, and entertainment. It emphasizes the deep emotional connection between radio presenters and listeners.

According to a report, one key driver behind the proliferation of private FM radio stations is liberalization, with countries like Libya and Oman witnessing the emergence of private FM radio stations in 2007 (Mellor, Dajani, Rinnawi & Ayish, 2011). This liberalization trend has also led to an increase in the number of FM radio stations even in countries where they were previously absent. The UAE, for instance, hosts FM radio stations broadcasting in Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, English, Malayalam, and Filipino, a testament to the diverse expatriate population's media needs (Mellor, Dajani, Rinnawi & Ayish, 2011).

Additionally, Arab governments have permitted international broadcasters to utilize local frequencies for a fee as part of their licensing procedures (Mellor, Dajani, Rinnawi & Ayish, 2011).

Expatriate Radio Programs in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar

When we look at the Gulf countries, we can see that Kuwait started radio programs about 60 years ago. Since 1964, Kuwaiti local radio stations have broadcasted in foreign languages for expatriates. Their aim is to help expats stay connected to their cultures. Languages like English, Persian, Urdu, and Pilipino are covered. FM 93.3, run by foreigners, keeps expatriates informed in their native languages. Programs include English, Persian, Pilipino, and Urdu broadcasts at various times. Short Wave 72.5 covers Kuwait and neighboring countries, focusing on major events. It offers a range of programming, including news, music, sports, documentaries, and education on topics like traffic and health. This initiative caters to expatriate needs, providing information and entertainment in their languages. (Kuwait News Agency, 2010, February).

Saudi Arabia has recently unveiled plans to introduce foreign language radio programs, with Cluster Arabia, a private company owned by an Indian national, at the forefront. This initiative will encompass English, Hindi, Malayalam, and Tagalog broadcasts, serving Saudi residents, pilgrims, visitors, and tourists. The diverse programming will encompass round-the-clock news, music, interactive content, and entertainment. Frequencies have already been secured for Malayalam and Hindi in Jeddah and Riyadh, and expansion plans are in motion for Dammam. Specifically, Malayalam will broadcast on 101.7 in Riyadh and 104.5 in Jeddah, while Hindi will be available on 101.5 in both cities, with English and Tagalog broadcasts expected to launch shortly. (Madhyamam, 2023, March 22).

Despite commencing operations later than the UAE, Qatar boasts a lineup of two private radio stations, including FM 98.6 and Radio Suno 91.7, which offer programming in Malayalam. Additionally, Qatar features Radio Olive 106.3 and One FM Radio 89.6, both dedicated to Hindi-language content, along with Qabayan 94.3 for Tagalog-speaking audiences. (Ahmad, R., & Hillman, S. 2021).

Evolution of Malayalam Broadcasting in Singapore

In 1941, Singapore Radio Station marked a historic milestone with the inception of its very first Malayalam broadcast, a weekly program that graced the airwaves for a mere half-hour every Wednesday, commencing at 10 pm (First Malayalam Broadcast 10 April 1941). Fast forward a decade to 1951, and the conspicuous absence of consistent Malayalam broadcasts had become a matter of considerable concern. It was during this time that Vilasini Menon, in the pursuit of her electoral campaign promises, vowed to address this glaring void. She made a resolute commitment to her constituency, asserting her determination to establish a daily Malayalam radio program within Singapore.

This commitment fueled a fervent and ongoing discourse within the Malayalee community. Beginning in the late 1940s and persisting through the 1980s in Singapore, Malayalees passionately advocated for an extension of broadcasting hours, recognizing the significance of their language and culture (Malayalam Broadcasts, the Straits Times, 24 September 1949). This protracted dialogue reflected the enduring efforts to foster a more comprehensive and inclusive

media landscape that could better serve the diverse linguistic and cultural tapestry of Singapore's populace.

2.3 Research Gap:

The existing literature falls short in exploring the impact and evolution of Malayalam Radio in the UAE over the past three decades, specifically in relation to its influence on the Keralite community. There is a notable lack of research regarding the historical development, growth, reach, and influence of Malayalam radio programs within the UAE. This research gap underscores an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to academic discourse. However, it is essential to emphasize that our study does not solely aim to address this gap. Despite the substantial Keralite population in the UAE and the significance of Malayalam radio programs in their lives, there remains a dearth of research examining the operational aspects of these radio stations as businesses and their broader societal and economic impacts.

2.4 The First Malayalam Radio Station

The first Malayalam radio station in the Gulf countries (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Sultanate of Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates) was established in Ras Al Khaimah, one of the emirates/states in the United Arab Emirates.

Two Indians, Basheer Abdulla and A.R. Chennamangallur, spearheaded the inception of a Malayalam radio culture in the UAE by launching the first Malayalam radio program from the Gulf region on May 9th, 1992, after two years of dedicated effort. Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Humaid Al Qasimi, the Chairman of the Department of Culture and Information in Ras Al Khaimah, played a pivotal role in the launch of the inaugural Malayalam radio program from the Gulf region (Abdurabb, K. 2023)

Their target audience was the 500,000 Keralites in the UAE at the time. They began a one-hour program comprising information, entertainment, and educational content, delivering news, current affairs, infotainment, dramas, serials, and other cultural programs. It took seven years to evolve into a full-fledged 24-hour program (Abdurabb, K. 2023)

Basheer Abdulla reminisced about the challenges they faced during the early days, "When we started, there were no cell phones or internet, which made it very difficult to get information and news from Kerala. Even Indian newspapers took until the second day to reach here. The concept of a radio program in the Gulf was widely ridiculed by others. The rules and regulations were stringent, and it took two years to obtain approval from the authorities. We had been trying to secure a license since 1990. Acquiring permission for a foreign language radio program was not easy, given that this was the first program from the Gulf region. I never anticipated that the program would be followed by many other operators" (Basheer Abdulla, Program Organiser, Ras Al Khaimah Radio, personal communication, May 25th, 2018).

During that era, Gulf conversations couldn't accommodate news from Kerala. As a response, they decided to create a weekly news feature program on Kerala. Other noteworthy programs included audience-requested film tunes, interviews, and light music (TKV Mani, first news reader, Ras al Khaimah radio- Personal communication May 18th, 2018).

The initial one-hour Malayalam program was later handed over to Dubai-based Avatar Studio in January 1993, eventually falling under the management of the Dolphin Group in 1996. They rebranded the program as "Radio Asia in 1996."

2.5 Emergence and Growth of Malayalam Radio Stations in The Gulf

Malayalam radio stations in the Gulf serve not only as sources of entertainment and information but also as narrators of the Malayali people's journey to the Gulf. The Malayali, those who speak the Malayalam language and hail from Kerala, have long been known for their willingness to emigrate and resettle in pursuit of a better life, making them a global presence.

The Gulf region is home to one of the largest Indian diasporas in the world, comprising about six million Indian immigrants out of a total of 25 million worldwide. Given the deep cultural and historical ties between India and the Gulf region, and the significant influx of Indians because of the oil boom, it is not surprising that there is a thriving market for radio programming in languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, Tagalog, Bengali, Pashto, Russian, and Italian (Abdurabb, K. 2023)

The sentiments of nostalgia and homesickness, often born from the challenges of expatriate life, have influenced Kerala's culture profoundly. Leaving one's homeland, family, and the familiar scent of rain is a significant sacrifice made by individuals seeking better opportunities for their families. Consequently, it's understandable when they wax nostalgic about their past. Malayalam radio emerged in the Gulf to cater to these sentiments initially, with AM stations being the pioneers.

2.6 Growth in The Number of Radio Stations:

For Malayali expatriates in the Gulf, radio served as a vital connection to their homeland. They would eagerly set aside everything else to tune in to their favorite radio programs. For those feeling isolated, radio presenters became akin to family and friends. Consequently, shortly after the establishment of Ras Al Khaimah radio, other Malayalam radio stations began making their mark.

In February 1995, Shamal Media Services in Sharjah launched the second Malayalam program on the Umm Al Quwain Radio's UAQ 846 AM station. This venture operated successfully for nine years before discontinuing its broadcasts on April 30th, 2004, for reasons that remain unknown. Well-known artists like Asha Latha, K.P.K Vengara, and Albert Alex were integral to its daily programs (KS Shruthi, 2017).

Asianet Radio: AM 657

The third Malayalam radio program was launched on March 3rd, 2000, by Asianet Global. These 24-hour programs were particularly notable for their exceptional news coverage, featuring breaking stories and exclusive news content. Unfortunately, the program ceased operations on February 19th, 2018, as the new owners lacked interest in running Malayalam programs (Personal communication with Joseph Francis, the then operations director, Asianet Radio, 2018)

K.K. Moideen Koya, of Asianet Radio, expressed that the closure of the station, launched in the early 2000s, was a significant loss to the Keralite community in the UAE. At its inception, Asianet Radio was one of only two Malayalam stations. However, as the number of stations

grew, and with a limited demand of new advertisers, the advertising revenue had to be divided among them, resulting in diminished resources for each station (Abdul Khader, 2019).

Voice of Kerala – (AM 1152)

This radio station was rebranded (from the first Ras Al Khaimah radio station). It was re-launched in 2011 after several changes in the management. The program provided a variety of entertainment and information. Voice of Kerala was dedicated to showcasing Kerala's rich social and cultural history, which encompassed narratives of individuals embarking on oceanic journeys in pursuit of both Arab riches and better opportunities. For Voice of Kerala, the tales of migration held utmost significance, complementing their coverage of news and classic film hits (Personal Communication with Nasar Oorakam, founding director of Voice of Kerala Programs). However, they closed the program in 2017. (Saeed Saeed 2012 The National Daily Abdul Khader, 2019)

Pravasi Bharathi 810 AM

This program was launched in Abu Dhabi on 22 January 2016, and it was the first digital-radio station (Digital Radio Mondiale) in the Middle East and North Africa region.

K. Chandrasenan, Program-director of Pravasi Bharathi 810 AM in Abu Dhabi, says that annual frequency charges are too high. As an AM station [AM stands for amplitude modulation, which has a wider range than FM, which stands for frequency modulation], we pay up to Dh4 million per year in license fees, which we can't afford in the current market. (Abdul Khader, 2019)

Chandrasenan said that keeping Malayalam programs is very essential as Malayali community is one of the largest communities in the UAE as many programs are directly helping to create the awareness about the latest updates inside the country, especially rules and regulations. Malayalis who live abroad miss hearing news from their home country, which they first heard on the radio. At first, the idea of hearing anything about home was as empty as the Gulf's vast desert spaces. The only way for the expatriate to talk to his family and friends was through letters, which took weeks or even months to arrive. The Gulf Malayalam radio poured down on this dry, lonely place. (Personal communication- 2019 August 17)

Chandrasenan emphasized the importance of maintaining Malayalam programs, considering the significant Malayali community presence in the UAE. These programs play a direct role in raising awareness about the latest developments within the country, particularly regarding rules and regulations. Malayalis living abroad often long to hear news from their homeland, a sense of connection they initially found through radio broadcasts.

In the beginning, the prospect of hearing anything related to home felt as distant as the vast deserts of the Gulf. Expatriates had limited means of communication with their families and friends, primarily relying on letters that took weeks or even months to reach their destination. Gulf Malayalam radio filled this void in the dry and isolated landscape, connecting people with their roots (Personal communication, August 17, 2019). In Early 2022, the radio was closed due to heavy financial burdens, and they are entertaining the expatriate community through internet radio now.

Radio Asia - AM 1476

Since 1996, this station has mainly focused on the Malayali audience over 30s. The station hosted a few entertainment segments like serials, game, music reality shows and focused on

current affairs and news as well. It was closed in February 2020. Currently they have an FM station which is known as Radio Asia 94.7FM.

Sindhu Biju, Programme Director, Radio Asia 94.7FM, said that our aim is to appeal to the music tastes of different ages by entertaining them with diverse blends of music while retaining a contemporary feel. (Sindhu Biju, personal communication, 20th August 2022)

Hit 96.7 FM

Since the race for Malayalam programs were continuing, During March 2004, Arabian Radio Network (ARN) launched their Malayalam program - Hit 96.7 FM - from Dubai Media City. They have Arabic, English and Hindi programs in their broadcasting station. This 24/7 program introduced several novel interactive programs like a blend of news, music and relevant information adapted to the region, keeping the region's culture and interests at heart.

The program offers valuable information to its audience, including traffic updates, news, music, active uplinks, as well as innovative features like SMS and database management systems. It is hosted by well-known RJs who are popular figures in the Malayalam film industry, such as Mithun and Nyla. (News Directory. September 2021).

101.3 Gold FM

This Malayalam station was launched from Ajman, UAE on **10th May 2010**. The station belongs to Channel 4 Network who broadcast Hindi and Arabic programs. This station has also featured ex- Malayalam films stars as their RJs. RJ Meera is an example. She was known actress in Kerala. (Gold FM website)

Radio Me - FM 100.3

This Umm Al Quwain-based station, launched in 2011 has made use of new technology to enhance the user's audio experience. Malayalam Super Star Mohanlal became its brand Ambassador. However, in 2016, it had been shut down.

Radio Mango 91.9 FM of the Malayala Manorama Group and Club FM 99.6 of the Mathrubhumi Group were the latest entrants to the Malayalam FM radio scene in the UAE. It was the first overseas broadcasting venture by The Malayala Manorama Group and the Mathrubhumi Group, which are the publishers of the two largest circulated Malayalam newspapers. However, Mango Radio was closed in January 2019 since the frequency was not reaching everywhere in UAE. Club FM is still active.

TABLE 1-

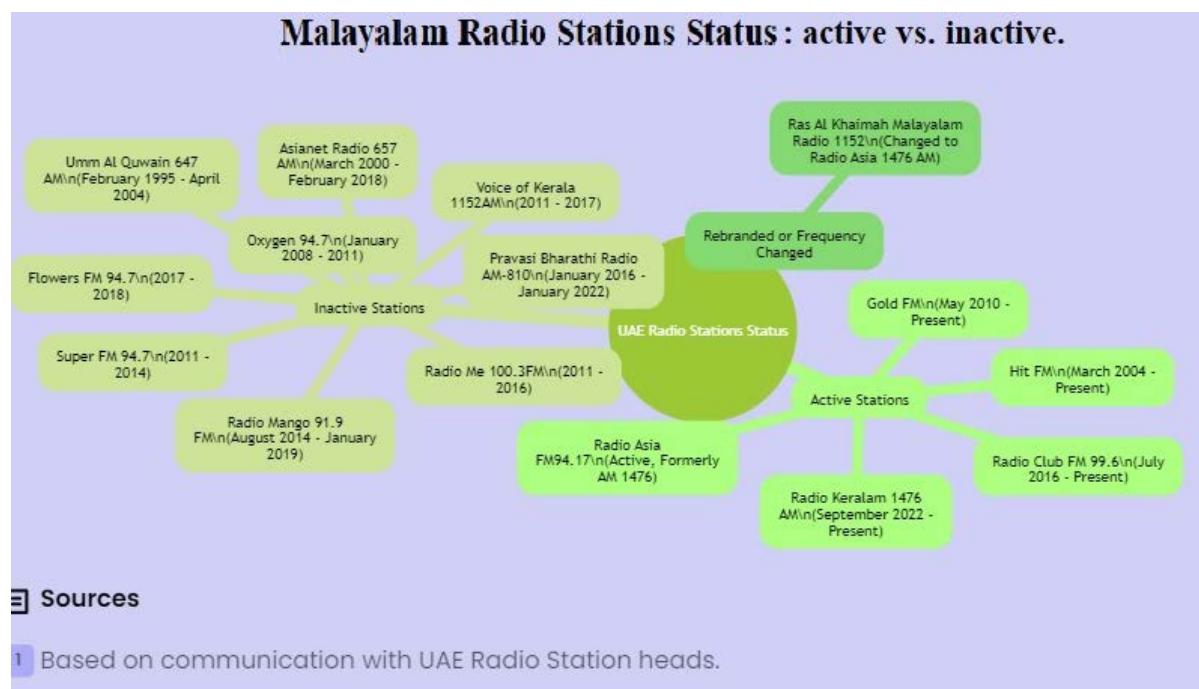
UAE radio stations status chart: active vs. inactive.

Radio Station	Launch Date	Closure Date
Hit FM (96.7MHZ)	March 2004	Active
Gold FM (101.3MHZ)	May 2010	Active
Radio Keralam 1476 AM	September 2022	Active

Radio Station	Launch Date	Closure Date
Radio Club FM 99.6 FM	July 2016	Active
Radio Asia FM94.17		Active (Previously Radio Asia AM 1476)
Ras Al Khaimah Malayalam Radio 1152	May 9, 1992	Rebranded as Radio Asia and later changed the frequency to 1476 AM
Umm Al Quwain 647 AM	February 1995	April 30, 2004
Asianet Radio 657 AM	March 3, 2000	February 19, 2018
Pravasi Bharathi Radio (AM-810 KHZ)	Jan. 22, 2016	January 2022
Radio Me 100.3FM	2011	2016
Voice of Kerala 1152AM	2011	2017
Radio Mango 91.9 FM	August 2014	January 2019
Oxygen 94.7	January 2008	2011
Super FM 94.7	2011	2014
Flowers FM 94.7	2017	2018

The listing is based on communication with UAE Radio Station heads (Acknowledged in the end).

Chart 1-



2.7 Malayalam Radio in the Gulf: A Lifeline of Hope and Connection

In the ever-changing landscape of the UAE, where skyscrapers reach for the heavens and bustling cities never sleep, there exists a silent yet powerful force that binds together a diverse and ever-growing expatriate community—the Malayalam radio. It is within the airwaves of this

beloved medium that the diasporic voices find solace, comfort, and connection to their roots, transcending geographical boundaries and uniting hearts across thousands of miles. Remarkably, the radio personalities of this vibrant community have risen to celebrity status, akin to international movie stars, gracing events, and store openings as esteemed guests.

The radio's allure might seem perplexing to outsiders, but within the labyrinthine traffic jams that clog the Gulf's thoroughfares, it becomes abundantly clear. Here, where people spend hours ensnared in the labyrinthine web of traffic, the radio becomes a trusted companion, a source of information, entertainment, and solace.

KPK Vengara who worked for UAQ 846 AM Radio and Ras Al Khaimah radio for several years, reflecting on the deep-rooted connection, shared, "The listeners' love and support for programs brought us fame and recognition. Even today, we continue to receive love and goodwill because of the comforting words and messages from those good old days. (Personal communication, dated 15 November 2022)

Albert Alex, a former news reader at UAQ 846 Radio, recalls the radio's inception during a crucial period when the community faced various challenges and garnered limited attention from mainstream media. Many with modest means relied on these radio programs for the latest information and entertainment, all without cost. (Personal communication, 10 July 2019)

The profound influence of these radio programs goes beyond entertainment, delving into the realm of life-changing moments. Moideen Koya of Asianet Radio, recounts one such extraordinary incident. It unfolded during a radio show hosted by RJ Sathyabhama, focusing on the sensitive topic of dowry. A distressed woman called the studio, sharing her plight of being unable to afford her daughter's dowry. Miraculously, the very next caller expressed a desire to marry the woman's daughter without any dowry requirement. This heartwarming story caught the attention of Joy Alukkas, a renowned jeweler and the program's sponsor, leading to a mass wedding of 101 underprivileged girls in Thrissur, Kerala. It is a testament to the immense power of radio in shaping society's collective conscience. (Personal communication, 11 November 2019).

In the depths of Dubai's busy streets, radio programs like "Jeevitha Rekha" (Lifeline) on Asianet Radio have become lifelines themselves. Ramesh Payyannur, who worked for Asianet Radio for over 12 years, remembers an unsettling phone call from a remote desert region in Saudi Arabia. The caller, Shukoor, had been isolated for an extended period, resulting in near insanity. Stranded and abandoned by his sponsor, Shukoor had minimal human contact, relying solely on the radio for communication. This harrowing tale illustrates the radio's lifeline status for those facing extreme isolation and hardship (K.S, 2018)

During the early 2000s, when Radio Asia was the sole radio station, it held a special place in the hearts of Gulf Malayalis. Thousands would pause their cars to listen to the news before continuing their journeys. Nissar Syed, a former news reader with Radio Asia, reveals that some listeners were so fond of radio shows that they recorded them to share with family and friends. In 1990s, at eleven o'clock each day, Malayali employees in Gulf shops would temporarily close their shutters, while homes and businesses refrained from answering phone calls, all to savor the awaited messages from their homeland (Personal communication, January 2021)

While illustrating her experiences, Gayathri Devi, who was an RJ at Radio Asia, recounts a touching story in *On Air*, a book that was released in 2017 about Gulf radio. Sinaj, a young blind boy and a regular caller, had shown immense enthusiasm for the program and contest. Tragically, during the announcement of a radio contest winner, news of Sinaj's untimely passing due to an accident left the entire radio staff deeply shaken. Months later, Gayathri Devi received a heartfelt tribute from Sinaj's friend, Ziyad, who had desperately tried to contact her with gifts from Sinaj. The emotional connection between radio programs and their devoted listeners is vividly illustrated through this touching gesture.

Shalu Faisal, who was an RJ with Hit FM, shares a remarkable experience in the book *On Air* (K.S., 2018). Despite the evolving language and stylistic modifications in radio, a musical segment called "*Gramaphone*" resonated with foreigners, offering a glimpse into the golden hit songs of the 1970s and 1980s. During one show, Shalu received a message from someone contemplating suicide. Through their conversation, she was able to provide a lifeline to the distressed individual, an experience she treasures as one of the most significant in her life. She had narrated this story in *On Air*, a book that was released in 2018 about the radio programs from the Gulf.

In the heart of this extraordinary radio journey, Thansi Hashir, senior news reader with 101.3 Gold FM, shares a poignant experience. She encountered Kunjahammed, a man living a nomadic life in the Gulf, disconnected from any permanent contacts or possessions. He had arrived thirty years ago, hoping to secure a better future for his family back home. Despite his meager earnings, he never stopped sending money to his homeland, often going hungry and lived in shelters to ensure his family received their monthly allowance. Kunjahammed's story is a testament to the resilience and sacrifice of many who call the Gulf home. Thansi emphasizes how radio listeners often view RJs as "Xaviers," and her station has played an instrumental role in assisting listeners facing various challenges.

Moreover, our radio station has extended its generosity through programs like "Home for Eid," offering free air tickets to Kerala for individuals who hadn't visited their homeland in years, further strengthening the bonds between the Gulf and Kerala., she explained during a personal communication on September 11th, 2023.

In the Gulf region, while the influence of Malayalam radio has waned with the advent of social media, it remains a steadfast symbol of hope, unity, and empathy. Malayalam radio waves continue to provide a comforting link to one's homeland, a vital source of news and solace, and a profound sense of belonging that transcends geographical boundaries and endures through generations.

2.8 Listenership Decline and The Impact of Online Media

In a series of interviews with prominent figures in UAE's Malayalam media, the decline in radio listenership becomes evident. Savad Rahman, the Bureau Chief of Gulf Madhyamam daily, notes that initially, Malayalam radio programs had a strong following, particularly among the middle- and upper-class expatriates. This was due to the limited presence of local TV channels and the absence of social media platforms in the region. However, the rise of social media and easy online access to information have eroded the significance of radio programs. The decline in advertising and the shift towards platforms like YouTube and social media have also contributed to this trend. (Personal communication, June 18, 2020).

High Licensing Fee and Advent of Social Media:

High licensing fees pose another challenge for radio stations in the UAE. Nasar Oorakam, the former director of Voice of Kerala, Ras Al Khaimah, attributes the decline to the proliferation of online and social media platforms. He points out that the current market conditions make it unfeasible to pay the substantial annual license fee of AED 2 million and staff salary. (Personal communication, August 2020)

Furthermore, the sudden increase in the number of Malayalam stations between 2004 and 2012, alongside existing stations, strained the market, with all vying for the same commercial advertisements and facing hefty licensing fees. This situation was highlighted by Nisar Syed, a senior media figure in UAE's Malayalam media. (Personal Communication, July 2019)

Two Malayalam radio stations were reported to be closed in the UAE in one year. One of the radio stations was Radio Mango 96.2 FM, launched in 2014, (stopped broadcasting in mid-Jan 2019) and the other one was Voice of Kerala 1152 AM (Shut down in early 2018). Another station shut down in 2016 was Radio Me 100.3FM. High licensing fees is another factor that Koya attributes to the financial viability of radio stations (Abdul Khader, 2019)

The radio industry is facing a sharp decline in listenership, particularly affecting Malayalam radio stations in the United Arab Emirates. As younger generations increasingly turn to social media, online news, and streaming services for their entertainment and information needs, traditional radio stations have seen a significant decline in listenership and, consequently, revenue. Combined with the burden of exorbitant license fees, this trend has led to the closure of several radio stations over the past seven years.

Stations that have ceased operations during this period include Radio Mango96.2 FM, Asianet Radio 657 AM, Radio Me 100.3FM, Flowers FM 94.7, Voice of Kerala 1152 AM, and Pravasi Bharathi 810 AM, all of which have been in existence for varying lengths of time. Despite these daunting challenges, five Malayalam radio stations, including Hit 96.7 FM, Gold 101.3 FM, Radio Asia 94.7 FM, Club 99.6 FM and Radio Keralam 1476 AM, remain active in the UAE. Many of these stations have adapted by embracing digital platforms, establishing a robust online presence through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. (Abdurabb, K. 2023)

Entry of Internet Radio and Changing Landscape

The advent of internet radio has revolutionized broadcasting. Even AM stations, traditionally the bedrock of radio, now rely heavily on social media platforms for increased visibility and adapt to evolving broadcasting cultures. Several UAE radio stations, including Hit FM (96.7MHZ), Gold FM (101.3MHZ), Radio Asia 94.7 FM, Club FM (99.6) FM, and Radio Keralam 1276 AM, have active online presence and engage with listeners through social media.

Furthermore, platforms like Radio Garden (<http://radio.garden>), launched in the Netherlands in 2016, have expanded listeners' horizons. With over 33,000 live radio streams worldwide, Radio Garden allows people to access radio channels from around the globe on various devices. It has gained popularity among expatriate Keralites who use it to reconnect with their hometowns and relive nostalgic moments. In less than a year after Radio Garden's launch, 15,000 radio stations were added by September 2017. (Föllmer; Badenoch, 2018)

360 Radio, UAE's first online educational and entertainment family station, made its debut in October 2022. Operating primarily in English and Malayalam, the station promotes listening as a virtue and aims to foster understanding through educational and entertainment programs. It also serves as a hub for educators, students, parents, and administrators, offering talks, debates, and workshops to enhance subject knowledge and exposure. The station is operating from Ajman, UAE and owned by S&Z group. (Personal communication with Binju Kochunny, November 8, 2022)

These developments signify a shift in broadcasting culture and the enduring influence of online and social media platforms on the media landscape, challenging traditional radio's dominance.

3 Research Methodology:

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed to investigate the factors contributing to the decline of Malayalam radio stations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The research primarily relied on semi-structured interviews as the data collection technique due to its suitability for gathering in-depth insights and insider information from key informants within the radio industry.

Selection of Data Collection Technique - Semi-Structured Interviews:

The choice of semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection technique was motivated by several factors:

In-Depth Exploration: Semi-structured interviews allow for open-ended questions and in-depth exploration of the research topic. This was essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors influencing the decline of Malayalam radio stations in the UAE.

Insider Perspective: The research aimed to capture insider information and perspectives from individuals intimately familiar with the radio industry. Senior journalists, radio station directors, and program organizers were considered key informants who could provide valuable insights into the research questions.

Flexibility: Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility in adapting questions and probing further based on the interviewee's responses. This adaptability was crucial in ensuring that all relevant aspects of the research topic were thoroughly explored.

Sampling Process:

The sampling process for selecting interviewees followed a purposive sampling strategy, which involves selecting participants who possess specific knowledge and expertise related to the research topic. In this case, individuals with substantial experience and insights into the Malayalam radio culture in the UAE were targeted.

The following steps were taken in the sampling process:

Identification Of Key Informants: A list of potential interviewees was compiled based on their roles and positions within the radio industry. This included senior journalists, radio station directors, and program organizers who were likely to have valuable insights into the research area.

Contact And Recruitment: Potential interviewees were contacted and informed about the research objectives and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were invited to take part in the semi-structured interviews.

Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews: A total of eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants. These interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants and conducted in a manner that allowed them to express their perspectives freely.

Data Analysis: The information gathered from the interviews was transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns related to the decline of Malayalam radio stations in the UAE.

Overall, the utilization of semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling ensured that the research collected rich and relevant data from knowledgeable informants, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing the Malayalam radio culture's decline in the UAE.

4. Results, Discussion & Analysis

For the analysis, a total of four hours and twenty minutes of interviews were conducted at various locations in the UAE and Kerala. The interviewees were individuals who had experience working in or launching radio programs within the Malayalam radio industry in the UAE. They were asked to provide insights into the industry's early days and its current state, with a focus on listenership trends, the political environment, regulatory factors, and sources of revenue. Subsequently, these interviews were thematically analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the decline of Malayalam radio programs in the UAE.

4.1 Factors Contributing to the Decline of Stations

Overcrowding of Programs: The proliferation of Malayalam radio programs in the UAE resulted in the sharing of advertisement revenue among numerous stations. Consequently, individual radio stations experienced a decline in their revenue. The FM band became overcrowded, with 51 stations broadcasting in different languages, often causing interference between stations due to their proximity.

Loss of Advertisement: The reduced number of advertisers utilizing radio as a medium to reach their target audience was another significant factor. The absence of accurate audience measurement tools for radio listenership discouraged advertisers from choosing radio as a preferred advertising platform. In more developed radio industries globally, precise, and objective measurements are readily available to assess listenership.

High Licensing Fees: Private operators of Malayalam radio stations were burdened with high frequency charges imposed by the government. These fees became increasingly challenging to sustain due to declining revenue, leading to the closure of many radio stations.

Lack of Variety and Research: Most FM programs in the UAE Malayalam radio sector followed a uniform model. Additionally, insufficient research and content updates to reflect changing times were observed. It appears that an excess of radio stations was launched without conducting comprehensive market research and surveys, resulting in market oversaturation. Stations that successfully retained their foothold in the market began engaging viewers through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Listenership Preferences: The growth of online newspapers, social media platforms like Facebook, and communication apps such as WhatsApp, which collectively boast extensive audience reach, contributed to a decline in active listenership. This shift occurred when there was no longer a dearth of local TV channels or social media presence.

Younger Listenership and Social Media: The younger generation demonstrated a preference for streaming services for music and turned to social media for news updates. This transition in consumption habits reduced the demand for radio content.

In summary, the decline of Malayalam radio programs in the UAE can be attributed to factors such as overcrowding of programs, loss of advertisement revenue, high licensing fees, lack of content variety and research, shifting listenership preferences, and the rise of social media as a primary source of entertainment and information for the younger demographic. These dynamics have collectively reshaped the radio landscape in the region.

5 Limitations

Generalizability: The findings of this study could not be directly transferred to other diaspora communities or media in other regions because cultural, demographic, and socioeconomic factors varied significantly.

Language Limitation: The study was confined to Malayalam language radio programs in the UAE. Insights from radio programs in other languages within the UAE community were not fully considered.

Availability Of Data: The research was constrained by the availability of relevant data, as certain financial and operational details of media companies were not publicly available.

Time Limitation: The results of the study were influenced by the time period in which the research was conducted. Rapid changes in media and technology could have affected the relevance of certain strategies over time.

Bias And Subjectivity: Despite efforts to maintain objectivity, the researcher's interpretation of the findings and selection of sources involved some degree of subjectivity.

Depth Of Analysis: Given the complexity of media entrepreneurship and the dynamics of the diaspora, the study might not have fully explored every nuanced aspect within the chosen framework. The study did not consider external factors such as changes in government policy, economic conditions, or unforeseen events that could impact the diaspora community or media enterprises.

6 Conclusion

The emergence and subsequent proliferation of Malayalam radio stations in the UAE were initially fueled by the country's liberal regulatory environment, which began in the early 2000s, and the substantial audience base encompassing individuals from diverse backgrounds who relied on radio as a primary source of information and entertainment.

However, the landscape of media consumption underwent a profound transformation with the advent of social media and the digitization of news and entertainment content. This shift led to a changing dynamic among listeners, who began to devalue radio content in favor of alternative digital platforms. Concurrently, regulatory fees imposed by the government added financial strain to radio operators. The rapid expansion of radio stations in the absence of comprehensive market research oversaturated the industry, leading to a significant decline in revenue.

Therefore, the once-thriving Malayalam radio industry in the UAE experienced a marked decline. The decline, while influenced by various factors, underscores the profound impact of technological advancements and shifting consumer preferences in reshaping the media landscape. The case of Malayalam radio stations in the UAE serves as a valuable illustration of the challenges faced by traditional media in the digital age.

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