

TECNOLOGIA, EMPODERAMENTO E RÁDIO COMUNITÁRIA

TECHNOLOGY, EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNITY RADIO

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Resumo: Este artigo irá oferecer uma visão geral dos contornos conceituais da mídia comunitária e rádio comunitária, destacando algumas das questões fundamentais que moldam o debate. Com a utilização de um estudo de caso, o artigo também irá mostrar como, no contexto da rádio comunitária, a mídia digital pode ajudar grupos locais a obterem uma voz mais forte em seus sistemas locais de comunicação, e as maneiras em que uma estação de rádio universitária, com seus estudantes e voluntários, pode desempenhar um papel importante para desenvolver um conteúdo de mídia mais diversificado e vibrante em sua área de atuação.

Palavras-chave: Mídia comunitária, Empoderamento, Tecnologia, Mídia estudantil, Radiodifusão online.

Abstract: *This article will provide an overview of the conceptual contours of community media and community radio, highlighting some of the key questions shaping the debate and, with the help of a case study, show how digital media in the context of community radio can help local groups to get a voice in their local media systems, and how a university-based radio station, and its students and volunteers, play an important role for a more diverse and vibrant media content available in their area.*

Keywords: *Community Media, Empowerment, Technology, Student Media, Online broadcasting.*

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Introduction

Community media, not for profit media outlets run by and for local communities, have often to fight to get access to the airwaves, either in radio and TV form. The last decade, though, has seen the inclusion of a third broadcasting sector in several European countries, Africa and South Asia, recognizing their contribution to more representative media systems. Moreover, the increase of more affordable digital media tools and larger areas covered by broadband connections has also helped to lower the barriers to online broadcasting and the emergence of web-based community media.

Community media: a definition

An in-depth analysis of the changing meanings of ‘community’ throughout time and places is beyond the intention of this article, but it is important to point out that the boundaries of this term have not been clearly defined even in the wider field of the social sciences, let alone the narrower field of media studies. This has led to ‘the difficulties associated with adequately defining the term ‘community’ (that) have confounded the study of community media’ (Howley, 2005: 5).

Thus, for example, we find community described by using criteria such as human ties and collective identity (Tonnies, 1963) or as a place with warm, cohesive and cooperative ways of living, with a strong sense of neighborliness as a neighborhood itself, or a village, a rural area, a town up to a city (Jankowski with Prehn, 2002). Members of a community share political, cultural and social interests, but do not live necessarily in the same area, constitute what has been called a ‘community of interest’. The latter has found a new dimension with the development of digital media and computer mediated communication, where people share interests and media content through web-based platforms and geographical closeness is not relevant. Cohen (1989:70, cited in Carpentier et al., 2003:54) has proposed ‘a shift away from the *structure* of community towards a *symbolic* construction and, in order to do so, takes *culture*, rather than *structure* as the point of departure’, (emphasis added) and highlights the importance of an actively constructed ‘community identity’. Indeed, a strong community identity plays a fundamental role in the success, or failure, of a community media project.

Among community radio practitioners, a recent handbook (Fogg et al., 2005) defines community at its simplest as ‘a group of people with an interest in common’, adding a further distinction between ‘inclusive’ stations (geographically-based) and ‘exclusive’ stations (interest-based) and favouring the first ones because of the issue of spectrum scarcity, especially in large urban areas where the FM dial is almost filled up to capacity. Moreover, ‘community’ has been limited to the definition of geographically situated audiences (Carpentier et al., 2003; Jankowski, 2003) and in prioritizing the communicative needs of local communities over regional, national and transnational systems. There is obviously space for overlaps, and a clear separation between these two categories, place and interest, is at times impossible. However, while defining exactly what Community Radio (CR) *is* can be elusive, many scholars have focused more easily on what CR *is not*. Specifically referring to radio, Lewis (2002:52) has argued that

Whatever sociological baggage ‘community’ brings in its train, its meaning when associated as a prefix with media or radio is determined by a set of political and bureaucratic definitions that place the resultant medium in an oppositional or at least contrasting position in relation to mainstream media. This guarantees it a position in the margins where life is hard, funding is precarious and keeping the station on air and supplied with programming is the over-riding concern.

Lewis places CR firmly in the ‘oppositional’ or ‘contrasting’ position, and also Downing has pointed out that the term community media is stronger in what it excludes – mainstream media – than it what it signifies (2001: 40).

Community radio

However, language – the rhetoric of CR, shall we say – is usually telling. Stations that fall into the category described by Lewis have been described linguistically in different ways, highlighting a particular characteristic that has been seen as relevant in their context. In the case of Western Europe, in Italy and France the emphasis has been placed on ‘libere’ and ‘libre’ (free) and later on ‘associatif’ (associative); in Spain on ‘municipales’ (municipal); in the Netherlands on ‘lokale omroep’ (local broadcasting); in the Scandinavian countries on ‘naer’ (neighborhood). In Latin America, community

radio has been named also ‘popular’ and ‘educational’, in Africa ‘rural’ and ‘bush radio’. With regards to its position towards regulation, it has also been defined as ‘illegal’ or ‘pirate’ and, finally, with regards to particular social groups, ‘student’, ‘university’, ‘campus’, ‘hospital’, ‘diasporic’ or ‘ethnic’ radio. (see AMARC 2005; Girard, 1992; Jankowski with Prehn, 2002; Lewis&Booth, 1989)

Is this just a matter of language? Not necessarily. Prehn has argued that ‘the different terms are not only due to linguistic differences, but are also based on ideological and conceptual distinctions’ (1992: 256) and Lewis (2005), drawing on similar lines, that ‘in each region of the world the history and context of political struggle and cultural marginalization has determined the particular emphasis and terminology’.

The constituents of Community Radio are drawing mostly on perspectives that originated and have blossomed especially from the 1970s onwards. A variety of different approaches, both at the theoretical and at the empirical level have contributed to different articulations of CR that share at least some basic features. Firstly, they are not run for profit, secondly, they have an outreach limited to a local area, and, thirdly, they usually have a high degree of participation of the targeted community in the running of the station.

Where academic literature started with claiming the necessity of a distinct third sector of broadcasting based on political and economical objections to mainstream media, through the years other concerns have emerged, adding new elements to the discussion. Concepts as identity, Localism and empowerment have shifted the emphasis from the content of the community media production to the process through which the content itself is produced.

Among scholars and practitioners there have been shared concerns about the concentration of media power in few national and transnational broadcasters, affecting the public debate on social and political issues and, therefore, democratic processes and political participation. Deregulation and commercialization, especially at the local level, have resulted in a concentration of ownership that has pushed further on economies of scale (affecting news making and music play listing) and in maximizing audiences.

Pressures on local media to be more open and accessible have had only temporary effects and, after a season of involvement of local communities in radio production mainly in public broadcasters, financial pressures and a concern on professionalism in their broadcast output, these initiatives have become rarer by the end of the 1980s. Beside democracy, access and participation, the ‘need’ for a distinct third sector has been claimed in order to have a media outlet for a local community to have a tool that puts at the centre of its mission the aim of promoting and preserving local identity, local cultures and act as a tool to discuss local issues in a two-way mode of communication.

Web Radio

The possibility of overcoming the barrier of traditional radio broadcasting, namely the use of relatively expensive FM/AM transmitters, coupled with the sometime difficult, or impossible, option of getting a license, did emerge in late 1990s, in what did remain for some time a rather unregulated territory, the internet. Web radio, using digital transmission of compressed and encoded sound via a streaming server, did make possible for anyone with an internet connection to become potentially a broadcaster. The relative simplicity of this process, requiring a computer, broadband connection and, for example, a popular media player as *Winamp*² made possible a mushrooming of web-based stations across the globe, carrying all the possible music and speech genres from very general to very niche audiences. The use of the *Shoutcast*³ plug-in and third parties streaming servers as *Live365*⁴, did help to establish thousands of streams, with copyright fees becoming a rather worrying issue for the mainstream music industry, much of it heavily regulated since then. On the listener side, the fact that internet access makes possible to transcend from geographical barriers, has helped link the local with the global, getting diasporic groups together, as well as connecting activist and grassroots groups (e.g. Indymedia) across the world. Where in the past distributing programs via CD duplication or satellite was a rather time consuming and expensive

² www.winamp.com.

³ www.shoutcast.com.

⁴ www.live365.com.

process, linking broadcasters around the world now requires a simple website from where the content can be uploaded, shared and, importantly, archived. AMARC, the World Association of Community Broadcasters, uses this feature regularly for events as Women's Day, Social Forums and social action broadcasts.

In fact, community radio stations have been at the forefront in harnessing the creative possibilities of webcasting and specialist community radio stations as the London-based *Resonance FM* have been extending their reach much beyond the five kilometers radius covered by their FM license (see also Atton, 2004). The possibility opened by the transition to digital audio have also meant adding the option of downloading audio on demand, subscribe to audio content (podcasting) and listen again outside the terrestrial broadcasting hours, shifting more control over the listening process to the listener. Web-based stations have also much lower capital costs (Tacchi, 2000; Priestman, 2002). However, live web streaming to a large public can be still an issue for small community radio stations with limited server capacity, due to economic constraints. Large bandwidth capacity still comes at a price, even though the costs are diminishing rapidly also in this area of digital media. Indeed, the download of audio on demand is still a cheaper alternative to a live streaming feed and this solution is used more often in the case of campaigns and shared news content platforms.

Having started more now more than 60 years ago, with the first community-based stations set up by grassroots activists in California as KPFA in Berkeley (Lasar, 2000) and by miners in Bolivia (O'Connor, 2004), community radio has gone a long way, spread across the globe and now is a vibrant and recognised sector in Australia, the Americas and much of Western Europe, but also spreading rapidly in Africa and South East Asia. The conceptual roots of the sector will be the focus of the next section, which will help to trace further the contours of community media.

Researching Community Media

Community Media Studies

Since the 1970s, gaps and fallacies of the mainstream media had been widely discussed in developmental studies and in UNESCO's forums. They addressed the

imbalances present at a global level in the flows of communication between so-called developed and developing countries. During these discussions, representatives of developing countries were critical of the fact that a few Transnational Communication Corporations (TNCCs), located in the United States, Western Europe and Japan, controlled most of the media traffic across the world. The main concern of scholars as for policy makers (Berrigan, 1977; Mattelart, 1979; Hamelink, 1983; Schiller, 1976; Tunstall, 1977), were the potential effects of the consumption of foreign cultural products on local cultures and identities. Those issues, and wider ones concerning the democratization of communication, were exposed in the MacBride Report (UNESCO, 1980), which proposed reforms of national communication policies, 'South to South' information and communication channels, and a code of ethics for the mass media, with the ultimate aim of fostering a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Moreover, the importance of locally and participatory originated content in the developmental process was seen as a tool for activating participation in democratic processes and in fostering cultural identity. In Latin America, a major inspiration for scholars and practitioners alike was the publication of the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971). His principles of dialogic education were 'suggestive for radical media activists whose campaigns for access or independent community media went hand in hand with a critique of oppressive mainstream media' (Lewis, 2006b: 20). The 1980s were then characterized by issues of deregulation, privatization, commercialization and the internationalization of broadcasting media, as governments in the USA and much of Western Europe embraced the principles of market capitalism in the name of choice. The aim was to break state monopolies and benefit 'consumers' through the increase of the range of channels and stations. By the late 1990s, mergers, syndication and format clustering had transformed the media landscape in a more homogeneous, rather than a very diverse one. Advocates of the free market wanted to open public broadcasting to competition, make it more responsive to 'what the audience wants' and, possibly, with smaller public funding, allowing for further licensing for commercial stations. At the other end, media activists campaigned for a more open, accessible and wider outreaching public service, as well as

claiming the right to open their own radio outlets. Legally or illegally, there is no doubt that the total number of radio stations grew exponentially in the US in the 1990s, as in Europe in the late 1970s, where, in countries like Italy and France their number went well over thousands (for a more detailed account see Lewis and Booth (1989) and Jankowski (1992), and for the US Opel (2004)). In both cases, the absence of a proper regulatory framework for community radio, resulted later in a sharp decline in the number of the stations, mainly due to issues of funding, with their frequencies bought by local and regional commercial broadcasters. Again, despite the market rhetoric of choice and diversity, the communicative needs of minorities and niche audiences were not satisfied by either the public or commercial broadcasters, even in a context such as Great Britain where principles of public service have been incorporated also in the early regulation for local commercial radio. Not surprisingly, much of the academic literature produced at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s described how local broadcasting was becoming less local, more homogenous and increased the use of format clustering. (as in Crisell, 2002 and McChesney, 2000). It despaired about the trends in mainstream broadcasting and explored new ways of conceptualizing CR, focusing for example on identity and citizenship. In this sense, an important role is played by what the Colombian scholar Clemencia Rodriguez has conceptualized as 'citizen media'. Following an exploration of theoretical definitions of the concept of 'citizenship', which, she suggests, 'is not a status granted on the basis of some essential characteristic' and has to be enacted 'on a day-to-day basis' through participation in everyday political practices (2001: 31), Rodriguez sustains that 'citizen media' implies that a 'collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape'. Two other implications in this model are, first, that 'these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations, and second, that 'these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible' (ibid. 33-34). Moreover, Rodriguez has re-conceptualized how these media can impact on the participants' sense of themselves

It implies having the opportunity to create one's own images of self and of the environment; it implies being able to re-codify one's identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources; it implies becoming one's own storyteller...; it implies reconstructing the self-portrait of one's own community and one's own culture...; it implies taking one's own languages out of their usual hiding place and throwing them out there, into the public sphere and seeing how they do, how they defeat other languages, or how they are defeated by other languages (cited in Downing, 2001)

In other words, homogenization of culture on a global scale, as a result of the action of the private global media corporations, can be partially balanced by community media that support local cultural production, local heritage and improve social and political participation in those communities in their own language and in their own terms. As Curran (2005: 144-5) suggests, a truly democratic media system should also 'empower people by enabling them to explore where their interest lies', 'support sectional group identities and assist the functioning of organizations necessary for the effective representations of group interests' and 'provide a source of protection and redress for weak and unorganized interests'. Where this could be realized with any kind of media, radio has some comparative advantages among other solutions: it is cheap, 'pertinent in terms of language and content', also in targeting illiterates; 'relevant to local practices, traditions and culture' and has a better outreach in terms of geographic coverage in a local area (Gumucio Dagron, 2001:19).

Media, access and professionalism

Despite all the virtues described by its advocates, academics have drawn attention to the ways that community media in general have to continuously challenge views of mainstream broadcasters and policymakers who believe that media production should be limited only to professionals, in order to achieve the highest quality. This has resulted in preventing non-dominant groups to participate in the process and circulate their views through the airwaves for a long time. Raymond Williams, for instance, has described the structural characteristics of mass media institutions, which, in his opinion, acted as barriers to wider social participation in media practices: professionalization, capitalization and institutionalization (1980, 54). Echoing Williams, James Hamilton (2001, quoted in Atton 2002:25) sustains that media should be also 'available to

ordinary people without the necessity of professional training, without excessive capital outlay and they must take place in locations other than media institutions or similar experiences'. These issues have been further conceptualized by McQuail in his *democratic participant media theory* (1987), where he argues that 'communication is too important to be left to professionals', therefore groups, organizations and local communities should have their own media. In this view, small-scale, interactive and participative media should exist primarily for their audiences, that would, in this way, exercise their rights of access to media in order to communicate, and their content should not be subject to centralized political or state bureaucratic control. McQuail envisages the democratic participant as someone who searches his or her way of social and political action outside of the traditional channels of participation, such as a political party and points out the failures of the mass media system in engaging with the communicative needs of citizens, especially those that are part of minority groups. Therefore, he suggests locally originated media that use horizontal structures of production and claims that the right to communicate should not be left only in the hand of professionals. Furthermore, van Vuuren (2002) suggests that, instead of focusing on the broadcast quality of the content community radio stations should be considered for their community development functions: 'these include the quality and the management of volunteers, the sector's training capacity and the nature of various networks of which community broadcasting is a part'.

McQuail's theory and the documents drafted up by practitioners, as the AMARC Charters published by community radio practitioners worldwide (see www.amarc.org), even if developed from two different starting points, share many concerns about the use of communication left only to State-influenced or commercially-driven, large-scale media. They show how discussions in the practitioners' arenas are echoed in contemporary debates in media theory and in the wider field of media and communication studies. Moreover, the contribution of practitioners in the academic discussions should not be underestimated:

We should also not forget that community media activists have established an evenly long tradition of study and analysis, offering valuable and self-reflexive contributions on the community media field, and evenly valuable

evaluations of the media landscapes and societies in which they operated [...] they too are centres of expertise and social innovation, and they are the best possible evidence for the epistemological argument that knowledge production is not the exclusive property of academia, but that civil society plays an evenly important role in the production of situated knowledges. (Carpentier and Scifo, 2010b: 118)

Raymond Williams has also considered the articulation of alternative forms of communication as different from the ones produced by the mass media: democratic communication should be therefore ‘genuinely multiple... [where] all the sources have common channels [and where those involved are able] to communicate, to achieve...active reception and living response’ (1963:304, in Atton, 2001:9). Furthermore, Jakubowicz (1993) has conceptualised a model of ‘representative communicative democracy’ by which members of a community, who don’t want or can’t access mass media productions means, could circulate their ‘views, ideas, culture and world outlook’ (ibid., 44) and become what Mattelart and Piemme have described as ‘direct instruments for active groups or movements to produce their cultural identity’ (1980: 336).

Thus, it is not only a question of the process of allowing audiences to participate in the production for ‘access’, as described by Williams, for its own sake. Access of community groups to the media is seen as important because these small-scale stations, with their local outreach, can be a tool that allows these communities to speak to themselves and shape their own identity and discuss issues relevant with their own channel. The introduction of local public and commercial stations is not seen as a solution to their communicative needs: they are described either as paternalistic and monolithic, as well as professional and institutionalized. In this sense, Lewis and Booth (1989: 9) have argued that ‘community radio is an open or implied criticism of mainstream radio in either of its two models’, that ‘within its own practice tries to offer listeners the power to control their own definition of themselves, of what counts as news and what is enjoyable or significant about their own culture’, charging mainstream broadcasters with ‘distortion, omission and marginalisation of the points of view of certain [minority] social groups’.

In short, community media aim to provide access on the community's own terms, meaning that they could 'make their own news, whether by appearing in it as significant actors or creating news relevant to their situation' (Atton, 2002:11), correcting imbalances of mainstream media where 'powerful groups and individuals have privileged and routine entry into the news itself and to manner and the means of production' (Glasgow University Media Group, 1980:114).

What we see then in the academic literature is a shift from purely political-economical objections to mainstream media (i.e. the need to create a more diverse public sphere in the face of a homogenized culture) to more emergent *identity*-based ideas about what CR might be able to achieve through the act of participation. Or, to put it another way, there has been a normative shift in the normative emphasis from a concern with *product* to one with *process*. What are then the implications for the 'normative' definitions of Community Radio?

Localism and the media

Academic research has been concerned with the fact the communication outlets are mostly in the hand of a few powerful institutions. For millions of people across the world they are the main source of news, entertainment and education and they contribute to shape views and political opinions on facts that may affect our everyday lives or, in other words, influence our public spheres and democratic practices. It matters then if local issues that people feel as relevant to discuss have less or no space in the schedule of the stations available on the local dial. Moreover, it matters, again, if commercial media are concentrated in fewer, and bigger, groups for whom audiences are a commodity to be maximized in order to appeal to advertisers and the public broadcasters are under-resourced or not existing at the local level.

Surely, an affinity with the life of its local area is a pre-requisite of almost any radio service – whether the 'local' area is as large as a country, or as small as a particular suburb. With academic discourses on CR, however, there is a particular emphasis on the tangible editorial benefits of extraordinary vicinity – and the way that this can transform the relationship between producer and listener. Atton, for example, points out that in an idealized CR arrangement:

Local people would not only become primary sources and major interviewees in stories, they could also become news-gatherers. Reporters would build up networks of local people (...) and encourage them to supply leads for stories' (2002: 116)

A community radio station that is built up with the aim of satisfying local communicative needs, locally controlled, is seen by its practitioners as distinctive from mainstream media. Lewis has argued that the prefix 'community' has the function to assert an emphasis on 'priorities of local systems, populations, groupings over against the larger units of nation, region or transnational corporation' (Lewis, 1984: 140). Thus, for example, the activities of a borough, district or metropolitan council, or neighborhood community forum – activities which might fall below the editorial 'radar' of even a local public or commercial station – would gain due attention.

Indeed, it is not just that local activities are given more attention. It is that they actually become *the central* concern of CR. In sharing decisions on programming policies through participatory structures, they aim to place the community as the central subject of their activity. The Bolivian scholar Gumucio Dagron argues that 'It reinforces the social tissue through the strengthening of local and indigenous forms of organization', installing 'cultural pride and self-esteem' (2001:34). Space given to local issues and to community groups is seen as relevant for enacting a dialogue on local issues, therefore contributing to the enhancement of democratic processes, and has been envisaged as a possible counterbalance to invasive global media. These concerns have been highlighted earlier in describing UNESCO's activities and the effects of digitalization and mergers on the content of broadcast media. Couldry asks whether we get the types of information that we need if we want to be 'active citizens' (2001:16-17) and what kind of information flow reaches us in a media environment offering even more channels through internet-based and other digital platforms. As in the 1970s, community radio today is seen as 'one of several efforts to reverse the societal trends towards still larger units and concentrations power' and an 'awareness of the locality or community as a potential basis for social renewal' (Prehn, 1992: 259). In other words, as opposed to mainstream media, community radio can strengthen local identity and interest in local affairs through the production on programs that sound more 'authentic'

to its listeners. An ‘informed citizen’ would therefore be one who has not just a higher awareness of politics per se, but of politics locally: someone who is, as it were, ‘in touch with their grassroots’. It is also assumed that this generates a virtuous cycle of change: increases social and political awareness and could help to motivate citizens to participate in local politics and community organizations.

As Polish media scholar Karol Jakubowicz highlights

It has become ever clearer to me that community media are a vital and indispensable element of the media system. This is a matter of media pluralism, pure and simple. (...) The leveling of old social divisions and stratification means that many people are no longer willing to accept the role of passive receivers of content, nor will they accept old-style paternalism of the media as “the voice of authority”, or of the elite. Individualization and fragmentation mean that people want to escape the old regimentation of society and of mass media. Hence the need for individualized and personalized modes of communication, also using the new technologies. Growth of social networks and declining trust in authority – and whoever claims to speak for authority – promote involvement in communities of choice, including of course communities created by media and online social networking. People prefer to turn to their peers for opinion, advice and models, instead of following the “elite”. (Jakubowicz, 2010: 1-2)

How this can happen in practice is then examined in the next section, where the case study of the British community radio station *Siren FM* will be discussed.

Case Study

Siren FM, Lincoln (UK)

Siren FM was the first British full time community radio license to be issued to a university, where the first license to a student radio station was issued to Canterbury’s CSR FM, a shared venture between the student unions of the University of Kent and Canterbury Christ Church University. At the time of writing, a number of other universities in Britain have obtained a full-time community radio license as Demon FM (De Montfort University, Leicester), Blast 106 (Belfast), Radio LaB (University of Bedfordshire), The Source (University College Falmouth), SoundArt Radio (Darlington College of Arts) and 107 Spark FM in Sunderland, with some of them having a long experience in Restricted Service Licenses (RSL), which allow to broadcast on AM or FM frequencies to a local area for two times a year (in London this is limited to one) for up to 28 days a year. These licenses are often a showcase of work done during the

academic year. Student-led radio has been present in Britain since the late 1960s and has still a very active presence, often broadcasting only to the campus areas or, more recently, through internet broadcasting. Among others, the experiences of the predecessor of Sunderland's station, Utopia FM, and its community media projects, including ones making extensive use of digital media to empower local communities to are well documented in academic research (as in Mitchell, 2002).

Community radio in the British context

Before exploring more in detail the case study of Siren FM, a brief context into British Community Radio might help the reader to familiarize with the overall context where Lincoln's station operates.

Activists and local media practitioners had been advocating for a third sector of radio broadcasting, alongside BBC and commercial radio, since the mid 1970s, coinciding with similar movements in Western Europe and the discussion at the policy and academic level that has been outlined earlier in this article. After almost 30 years of lobbying, and a last-minute aborted experiment in 1985, the Community Radio Order was approved by the Houses of Parliament on 19-20 July 2004. Based on the approved legislation, the media regulator Ofcom, has to evaluate applications to run a community radio service based on seven selection criteria:

- the ability to maintain the proposed service for the duration of the license;
- the provision of a service which caters for the tastes and interests of the members of the target community;
- the broadening of the choice of radio services available in the area;
- the provision of evidence of demand and support for the proposed service;
- the delivery of 'social gain' to the members of the target community;
- the accountability to the target community;
- the provision of access to facilities and training that could be used by the target community (Ofcom, 2004).

A first study commissioned by Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), to gather evidence on the impact of the community radio sector, with particular attention 'to social gain and economic impacts, efficiency outputs and sustainability' (2007:2),

revealed that stations had ‘delivered important social gains across a range of issues, but particularly in respect of volunteering, work placement and training opportunities.

Among other things

- linguistic diversity had been embraced by several of the stations and specific programming and support systems for those without English as a first language had been put in place;
- the stations had recognized the part they can play in helping to foster social inclusion and active citizenship, with a number of socially relevant outcomes (as described in detail in the report in pp.8-15);
- some of the stations targeted the more vulnerable members of their community, the old and the young, and provided ‘light hearted programming’ designed to boost feelings of well being in socially deprived areas.

Another study, commissioned by the sector’s representative body, the Community Media Association (CMA) and funded by the Arts Council England (ACE) and the DCMS, had the aim to investigate the place of the arts in community radio, explore how the developing relationship between community radio and the arts could benefit individuals and communities, and identify the benefits of arts output and activities to community radio stations and to artists and arts organizations. The findings of this research (Cochrane et al., 2008), confirm the difficult journey of community radio in its attempt to find ‘the space between’ the worlds of the broadcast industries, the arts and cultural industries and the voluntary sector. Nevertheless, it stated that

‘community radio opens up the airwaves to a much greater diversity of voices and offers a space for more participatory and inclusive arts practices to be shared (...) The independence, autonomy and human scale of community radio – run by, with and for communities – provide credibility and authenticity in engaging with people (ibid., 61)

Finally, Ofcom’s first ‘Annual Report on the Sector’ of community radio (Ofcom, 2009), lists a sample of social gain objectives achieved by the stations. Some of them do so simply by targeting in their programming people ‘underserved’ by other local media in the area, for example ethnic minorities or other groups as the old and the young, gay,

lesbian and transgender communities, asylum seekers, and the visually impaired. What also emerge are the ‘many opportunities for local people to take part in discussion and express their views’, ‘offer a wide range of training opportunities’ and ‘strengthen links within their community’ (ibid.22-23). Moreover, they also promote awareness of local services, local economic development, employment opportunities, social inclusion, support for community events and local artistic talent. (ibid. 24.-25).

What emerges from these early reports on community radio practice is then that its work is recognized as an important contribution to social and cultural development in local communities, and its participative, inclusive and local ethos is seen as an important factor for community cohesion.

Siren FM

Since 2000, Siren FM had been broadcasting in the area through the use of RSLs (Fleming, 2010). When Ofcom called for applications for a full-time community radio station, the University decided to try to move a substantial step forward. The station was awarded a full-time community radio license by Ofcom in March 2006 and started broadcasting in August 2007 on the 107.3 FM frequency, to the city of Lincoln and the surrounding areas (a 5 km radius) as well as online at www.sirenonline.co.uk

According to the description given to the media regulator

SIREN FM’s aims are to provide an enjoyable broadcasting outlet and voice for students, schools and community groups in Lincoln by improving media literacy and communication skills, integrating the University into the wider community. SIREN’s new objectives are to develop social action broadcasting, provide an increasing outlet for the local youth music foundations, support social cohesion and to play a part in the University’s outreach and wider participation projects. (Ofcom, 2007)

Among its key commitments it also includes the provision of programs by and for ethnic minorities, radio production summer schools for children, collaborations with the local BBC radio station, BBC Radio Lincolnshire, and the commercial station, Lincs FM, and promoting local bands.

What makes stations embedded in a University unique is that they are also part of the learning opportunities available at a number of levels. Lincoln includes the possibility of participating to Siren FM’s activities as part of a Foundation Degree in

Community Radio, a two-year course that can convert to a full BA after three years. The BA modules that make use of the station are Media Production, where at the end of the second year students have to produce in teams a 30 minutes magazine program and, at the end of the third year, they have to work with schools, helping and supervising them to produce a program to be broadcasted live on Siren FM. Journalism students also participate as part of their work in News Reporting, having to do news shifts and, in their final year, they have produce a weekly hour long program over two semesters. Finally, Lincoln has been the first university in the UK to start an a MA in Community Radio, aiming to form future community radio staff members in what is expected to be the only growing sector, in terms number of stations, in the near future.

How does it work: Siren FM's studio

Siren FM is part of the Media, Humanities and Technology faculty at the University of Lincoln, in a complex that hosts also undergraduate and postgraduate Journalism and Media Production students. All of them attend Digital Media modules as part of their courses, but where Media Production includes also learning to operate professional broadcast editing applications and the use radio broadcast digital mixing desks, Journalism students learn 'only' how to professional digital recorders and digital audio editing suites. The 'heart' of the radio station is a digital playout system that allows to create hour by hour logs, including music, as well as drop-ins, pre-recorded items, and jingles, that can permit to run continuously on a 24-hour cycle and make possible to choose a whole range of parameters for every part of the day or week. This works almost in the same way as a conventional playout system of many other commercial radio stations and BBC radio stations.

'One of the reasons because I went for a system like this is that when students and volunteers go out to a job or a work experience it doesn't look very much different from the way they have learned it at Siren' - says Andrew David, Radio Station Manager -. 'I do know that other community radio stations, who are not as well resourced as we are here at the University of Lincoln sometimes struggle because the desk system is not as robust, and the microphones are not as robust, and indeed where the playout system

might not be as strong as robust as resilient, because that's what you need for a very disparate group of volunteers, some of whom will have a very high grasp on technology, others, well, just looking at a PC mouse scares them, but speaking to a microphone might not'

The playout system includes 'carts', based on a database, where volunteers and presenters save material, and each of them is allocated one, where they can edit, manipulate and move their own files around. Importantly, the music database is carefully stored in a 'safe zone', which can be accessed only by two or three members of staff, where other members can only import and listen. It integrates news bulletins as an incoming feed (Siren FM uses Sky Radio news on the hour), but can eventually accommodate other external feeds. Siren's website includes a 'listen live' option to listen the station's output via Internet and is planning to introduce a 'listen again' option on a eight-day cycle, as well as include a podcasting section.

In the studio, the station uses a 'split' desk, so that the computer sits in the middle, with plenty of space for the operator to put scripts or keyboards. There are three digital playout channels, two CD channels, and two mini disc channels on the left side of the desk, where on the right hand side there are the microphones, one for the presenter and three for guests. There is also another channel, that gives a feed from another production room, so that news bulletins be prepared in there can be simply broadcasted by fading up the related channel. Then there is an effects channel, which permits the eventual addition of reverbs and other audio effects, to be eventually used as a pre-production tool rather than live, and an ISDN phone line, feeds telephone calls into the studio.

Even though there are plenty of digital mixing desks available in the market, Siren FM uses an analogue one. 'The reason why I went for an analogues desk is reliability. – says David - I have used several digital desks in the past, at the BBC, at they tend not to as resilient and as forgiving with our work crew who are volunteers. This applies also to our choice of digital recorders and microphones. We have chosen robust ones that would not fall over and break, as some cheaper products would do. Choosing cheaper options would not add value to the whole radio learning processes.

Finally, in terms of digital audio formats the stations has opted to use .wav files, instead than 10-times more compressed mp3 files because the quality of the output is much higher and assures professional broadcast quality.

Media literacy and empowerment

In a relatively short amount of time, the station is having a positive impact on the media literacy levels and the boost of digital media production skills of the local community. Among its volunteers, a woman with no formal academic qualification, was enrolled into a Foundation Degree course, re-entering into an educational cycle, as David recalls

That's because of the confidence she was given, because of the environment she is working in a community radio station and the fact that she was entrusted with what appears to be some extremely expensive equipment with no questions asked. We take all comers, we take anyone that would like to try anything with radio, which is a medium that works well with people who have limited confidence. You can build confidence in radio very quickly. Volunteers don't necessarily need writing skills, they just need to be curious. This woman, who is now on the foundation course, moved from a situation from which she has been in and out of care homes, and an education system saying she would never amount to anything, is not alone because here at the community radio station environment at the university we have the ability to say "Look at it, take it, try it". Enabling people by saying "Look we trust you, you can use it and you don't have to leave a deposit, you don't have to leave your passport" actually opens up all sorts of extraordinary opportunities for those people to whom the system might have said "No, you are never going to amount too much". We want them to say "We can do this!". I like to say that we are a 'can do' organization.

Siren FM also opens up the station's doors to approximately 50 to 60 schoolchildren between the age of 9 and 16 during summer time. These children do usually have already basic digital media skills and the first thing that is done is providing them with a digital audio recorder and tell them to interview students on campus. In this way, they can have a very 'hands on' work experience in digital audio recording, mixing and editing with professional radio tools.

Siren FM produces also programming done by and for ethnic minorities living in the area. The first of this kind at the station was put together by members of the Polish community who had moved from Poland to find better job opportunities in the surrounding areas of the East Midlands and in Lincolnshire. It included highly

motivated young people, many of them with postgraduate degrees, who could not find work in their own country, and had instead found one in the agricultural sector in the fields of Lincolnshire's countryside. Siren FM's first ethnic community program ran for 18 months, and included Polish music, culture, and news, with a team of fifteen people. With economic conditions gradually changing for the worst, the group had to give the program up, but the idea had raised the interest of another ethnic minority groups. In fact, soon a group of Russian women came forward. What they wanted to do was to produce a program where they could teach their children in Russian and English about their own culture. Luckily, one of them happened to be a former television journalist in Moscow, and had already acquired broadcast skills back in Russia. She needed only to upgrade her skills in audio, learn how to produce audio material, and then the program was produced in English and Russian.

Finally, another program has been produced by members of the Muslim community living in the area, more specifically by an Egyptian woman that has put together a children's program, with the collaboration of her family and other young Arabic-speaking children. 'It is full of fascinating things because it makes interesting listening – says Andrew David - You can understand things even if you cannot understand the language. You can hear the interaction between Farda and her children. They are singing children tunes, learning the alphabet, and also do children's cooking, done by the children'. As for the other minority communities living in the area, he adds 'We have had opportunities to look to other languages, but this process needs to be driven by the community and not by my wish list. I have learned to say that rather than saying 'We must do this. We must do that' we have to develop it in a way that the people that comes through our doors say 'Can we try this? Can we try that?'. Currently, we have a very popular program put together by a LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual) group in Lincoln and that again was put together by a small group of people saying 'Would you be prepared to broadcast it?' because normally, of course, other local radio stations would not catch it'.

In the overall context of the media industry, community radio stations 'open up the technical sphere of communication as a tool for those who, under other

circumstances, might never assumed an active role within it' (Mitchell&Jones, 2006: 153), confirming their potential of making media systems more pluralistic and more democratic.

Content-driven radio

What makes Siren FM different from student/college radio is also a different approach to the management structure. Instead than opting for rotating station managers chosen yearly via elections of the Student Union, the University decided to hire a professional broadcaster with over 30 years of experience in BBC local radio, privileging continuity over a medium term plan of development of the station, than the challenges (and opportunities) of a turnover system still very much in use in most of the stations based in universities. David has been keen to steer the content production towards the commissioning of content-driven radio, rather than music-driven radio, a model often applied to student radio experiences (see also Scifo, 2007)

What we have done is to go back to the early days of BBC local radio and the way it was set up by Frank Gillard⁵, which was to give the audience a way to speak their own mind. What we do is that we enable our reporters, our volunteers, our presenters, to understand very clearly how that works in the context of radio, enabling people to feel that they have a voice. We would also like our audience to think 'I want to learn something new every time that I listen to the radio'.

David believes that the station volunteers, and the students, can be also well positioned in terms of employability in the changing contexts of radio in the digital realm, instead than looking at a music-driven environment that would train people for its entrance in a mainstream radio broadcaster. He recalls a speech by the Director of Radio Academy⁶, Trevor Dann, outlining the features of the next generation of 'entrepreneurial broadcasters', those who have an eye on how to make good quality radio, which has also a market not only on FM, but especially online through podcasting and on-demand services. With less pressures in terms of audience ratings, but more keen

⁵ Frank Gillard (1909-1998) developed the first BBC Local Radio stations, who started to broadcast in 1967.

⁶ The Radio Academy is a registered charity dedicated to the encouragement, recognition and promotion of excellence in UK radio broadcasting and audio production. (www.radioacademy.org).

to have learning and empowerment processes experienced by its volunteers, community radio stations are a ‘nursery slope’ for future broadcasters that can experiment new formats, also for niche audiences, having the knowledge that, with the advent of digital media, and digital media players, traditional terrestrial broadcasting, and a career through a mainstream broadcaster, is not the only way forward in this context. Students can enrich their experiences, learn a number transferable skills, boost their self-confidence and digital media production skills, learn how to do research for a program and go out of the station to search and record their content.

Suggestions for further research

The last decade has seen an exponential growth of interest and publications in the area of community media, and this has facilitated the circulation of different models of how media outlets run by and for a local community can give ‘voice to the voiceless’, make media systems more democratic, facilitate social inclusion and empower social groups through digital media production, in this specific case applied to radio. With the staff members focused on making sure the station survives, and the volunteers mostly focused on programming and training, what is usually an issue is time (and funding) to do qualitative research, even some basic audience and reception study. A good idea would be to get in contact with a community radio station in the area to research what listeners make of it. This would both contribute to a small, but growing, area of research, as well giving valuable information to the station itself. With the number of stations, and approaches, increasing in a number of countries across the globe, further research on bottom-up approaches to media production, the importance of a pluralistic and more democratic media system, and the empowering and creative possibilities of this sector surely deserve a closer look, both from students, scholars and practitioners alike.

Conclusion

The community media sector has gained recognition across the globe with the inclusion of community radio into a number of regulatory systems and the growth of academic research in this area (Bailey et al., 2007; Carpentier and Scifo, 2010a; Coyer

et al., 2007, Day, 2008; Forde et al., 2009; Gordon, 2009; Howley, 2010; Pajnik and Downing, 2009; Rennie, 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2009a and 2009b), which has been demonstrating the empowering potential of media outlets run by and for local communities. The addition of hundreds of new stations, as well as the spreading of social networks, participatory communication platforms and the constant decrease of media production tools, as well as the amount of work necessary to learn how to record, edit and publish media content through digital media tools is contributing to the enlargement of the possibilities of access to the media, also for marginalised groups in the society. Those whose views have been underrepresented in the mainstream media have now a number of possibilities to get their voices heard, as well as learning skills that are permitting them to gain confidence and transferable skills that might help to play an active part in their local communities and in a more pluralistic media system, as well as increasing their chances of employability.

As the author of this article has stated elsewhere, ‘community media are not outside the processes of convergence and are now (like many other media organizations) using a diversity of technologies to realize their objectives. But more importantly in this context, through their participatory-democratic frameworks they develop projects that focus on communities, and use whatever technology available to give voice to these communities.’ (Carpentier&Scifo, 2010b).

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