

COMMUNITY APPROACHES IN WESTERN RADIO POLICIES

It's about community, the radio will take care of itself.

(Phil Korbel, quoted in Community Learning
and Development Partnership 2004)

Introduction

Media and (tele)communication have from the outset been the objects of government regulation and policy, from the perspective of exerting control over the media or channels of distribution, allocating the spectrum, or providing a legal framework for public broadcasting and fostering public interests. In this regard, Ó Siochrú et al. (2002: 4) state that

regulation . . . is about the use and abuse of power. The real question is how regulation, by that name or any other, is shaped and implemented in a society, who controls it, how informed people are about it, and how they can participate in determining its priorities.

According to Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2000: 111), three periods can be identified when a certain paradigm of media regulation was hegemonic. The first was from the invention of media and of communication technologies until the Second World War. It was characterized by the absence of policy and later by *ad hoc* policy or, as Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2000: 111–12) put it, ‘emerging’ policies, clearly with national strategic and economic interests in mind. This *ad hoc* nature of emerging media policy led to distinct regulatory regimes for broadcasters, communicating one-to-many, for distributors of content, such as cable operators, and for telecommunication communicating one-to-one. The second period lasted until the 1980s and

can be described as the public service era, where intervention was justified by societal and democratic concerns and the public interest. However, technological advances in telecommunication, an increased presence of satellites and the convergence of media, computer technology and telecommunication challenged the then existing (national) regulatory regimes and the existing hegemonic state monopolies in broadcasting media and telecommunication. The third period is described by Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2000: 112) as the era of communication policy rather than media policy, signalling not only the convergence of media and telecommunication policies, but also the (relative) disengagement of the state, and the treatment of media content and communication more as a commodity than a democratic resource. This paradigmatic shift was accompanied by the privatization of state-owned telecommunication operators and the liberalization of the state monopoly on television and radio broadcasting.

State intervention in media and communication systems clearly has to be viewed in a historical context, which evidently varies from one country to another. In this regard, Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparative model is useful. They distinguish between the Mediterranean or polarized model, the north/central European or democratic corporatist model and the North Atlantic or liberal model. In the liberal model the market clearly dominates the media system, in the corporatist model commercial and public service media are combined, while in the polarized model the state exerts a high degree of control over the media, which are usually clearly linked to the dominant political ideologies.

Despite the general trends identified by Van Cuilenburg and McQuail and by Hallin and Mancini, the differences in historical trajectories structure and shape the way in which national media systems have developed and how certain regulatory regimes were adopted and implemented. The different paradigms identified by Van Cuilenburg and McQuail confirm a general trend, but cannot be considered absolute. Historical peculiarities have resulted in a great variety of national media and communication policies.

This is why Hallin and Mancini's attempt to define different models is also necessarily a difficult exercise. The UK situation is a case in point. While it is generally seen to be part of the North Atlantic liberal model, it also has one of the strongest public service regimes in the world, which to a degree also applies to commercial media. Furthermore, these macro-accounts of media-policy paradigms, although embedded in historical analyses and accounting for different underlying political ideologies and cultures, pay little attention to a non-Western perspective, implying that the dominant Western models are applicable elsewhere in the world (Curran and Park 2000). Finally, an exclusive focus by state-controlled public broadcasting on the one hand, and commercial media on the other, on the political economy of the media and communication 'industry' leaves little space for alternative media, situated in between or relatively independent of state and market.

In this case study we focus on the element of community in alternative media (or 'community media') and how regulation and media policies relate to this. Radio is an excellent case to illustrate the participatory potentials of media. As Fraser and Estrada

(2001: 1) point out: ‘To start a small radio station is not as complicated and expensive as many people think. There is enough experience in many countries to prove that it is within the reach of almost any community’. Much of the attention in the alternative radio literature (and funding for research) has been devoted to its potential for empowering communities in developing countries (see Berrigan 1979; Girard 1992; Siemering 2000; Fraser and Estrada 2001; Olorunnisola 2002).

The question addressed here relates to how different Western countries have integrated alternative radio (or not) and their focus on serving the community, in their media policies at a national level. The media policies of three Western countries – the UK, the USA and Belgium – on alternative radio will be explored briefly from a historical perspective. Whilst the USA is a prime example of a liberal media policy environment, the UK combines a strong, but highly regulated, commercial sector with an equally strong public service tradition. Belgium, in being positioned in the middle of continental Europe, presents a particular case, and is relevant for several reasons. It has a strong and dominant public service tradition, but since it is a complex federal state, regulation of the media is the responsibility of the different communities/regions. As a result there are interesting divergences between the north and south of the country; the north has modelled itself on a northern European regime and the south has adopted the pattern predominant in France and the south of Europe more generally.

Whilst these three cases have very different (media) histories and are embedded in distinct regulatory paradigms, it will become apparent that in each case alternative radio has experienced difficulties in establishing itself between the market and the state-controlled media system. We will describe the context of alternative radio in order to determine what we understand by this specific ‘third’ type of media, with a special focus on its relationship towards communities and their participation *in* media.

Serving the community

From the emergence of radio as a medium, its potential to be more than just a broadcasting instrument in the hands of powerful elites has been clear. Writing in 1930, Brecht (1983: 169) refers to this saying:

Radio must be changed from a means of distribution to a means of communication. . . . Radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable, a gigantic system of channels – could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear, but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him.

According to Partridge (1982: 10) the term ‘community radio’ was first coined in a pamphlet entitled *Possibilities for Local Radio*, written by Powell (1965). The idea of locally embedded small-scale radios produced and controlled by citizens had been around for much longer. Localism is considered to be one of the defining

characteristics of alternative radio and media that serve the community. Howley (2005: 2) defines ‘community media’ as

grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity.

This definition associates alternative/community media with a wider set of notions and practices, such as participation *by* communities *in* their self-controlled media, and producing content *for* the communities they serve (Kidd 1999). From this perspective the term alternative media also refers to internal democratic rules, practices of self-management, and the development of alternative ‘non-mainstream’ formats and content. In this regard, Prehn’s (1992: 259) emphasis on participation as ‘involving people directly in station programming, administration and policy activities’ is highly relevant. By linking these rather strict characteristics, a clear and pure ideal-type conception of alternative media that serve a community emerges. As Chapter 1 showed, reality is, however, much messier and does not let itself be framed so easily.

Howley’s definition nevertheless is useful, as it neatly describes the kind of (alternative) radio stations this chapter addresses: community-focused, non-commercial,¹ experimental, participatory, internally democratic radio initiatives driven (mainly) by volunteers. The relevance of such a narrow definition of alternative media (as community media) is most pertinent in a policy context, where this type of independent radio is often forgotten – or rather ignored – in favor of the interests of commercial local radios on the one hand, and of public service-type radios on the other. Simultaneously, the communities that are (or could be) served by these alternative media are equally quickly forgotten, in favor of markets and (national) publics.

Western policies towards alternative radios serving the community

The US case

Whereas in Europe the boom in alternative radio stations serving the community can be situated in the 1970s and 1980s, in the USA the 1960s were the period of growth for these stations. This was preceded by a long tradition in the USA of amateur radios prior to World War I. In 1927 the Radio Act was voted by Congress, aiming to end the perceived chaos on the airwaves. The act established the Federal Radio Commission, which was given the task of issuing licences. It was replaced by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) in 1934 (see Hilliard and Keith 2005: 30–1; White, 2003). This intervention to regulate the chaos and anarchy on the airwaves provoked a fierce battle amongst commercial stations to get hold of a licence.

However, a legacy of educational radio, based in universities, assured a distinct voice over the airwaves (Sterling and Kittross 2002: 78). The educational broadcasters won a substantial victory when the FCC decided in 1941 to reserve part of the spectrum for community and other non-commercial broadcasters. Pacifica Radio (KPFA) in Berkeley, California, generally considered to be the first community radio station in the USA, took this opportunity and started transmitting in 1948. Many others would follow suit. KPFA has been described as ‘an independent non-profit station supported by listeners subscribers many of whom were pacifists and anarchists’ (Partridge 1982: 17). The Pacifica Foundation aimed, amongst others,

to encourage and provide outlets for the creative skills and energies of the community [and promote] a lasting understanding between nations and between the individuals of all nations, races, creeds and colors; to gather and disseminate information on the causes of conflict between any and all of such groups.

(Pacifica Foundation 1946)

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 provided a framework for a national public network, and also created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which was given the task of funding and supporting local as well as national radio. However, most of the federal money went to the National Public Radio (NPR), which served as a platform for syndicated programmes made by others and broadcasting to a national audience. Despite this, the 1970s saw a dramatic rise in the number of alternative radio initiatives, mainly run and operated by volunteers on a small scale. It is fair to say that alternative radio in the USA profited at first from the liberal ideology at the heart of US media policies, which led to a permissive and open regulatory environment for community initiatives.² However, this does not mean that the emergence of (local) alternative radio in the USA went uncontested. Both commercial and public broadcasting organizations persistently fought the presence of alternative radio on the airwaves. The FCC was not insensitive to the combined lobbying power of the commercial and public broadcasters, and in 1978 decided to revoke the low power (10 watt) licences. This resulted in the silencing of many smaller and poorer stations (Hilliard and Keith 2005: 186). The only way for alternative radio to survive was to obtain a 100 watt licence, which for most was too expensive.

To resist the attacks of the commercial and public broadcasters the National Federation of Community Broadcasters was set up in 1975 to represent and defend the interests of US alternative radios that serve a community. Not surprisingly, many unlicensed or pirate alternative radios emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Pioneering examples include Black Liberation Radio in Springfield, Illinois, which went on the air in 1986, and Free Radio Berkeley, California, which started broadcasting in 1993 (Sakolsky and Dunifer 1998). These so-called micro-radio stations provoked immense resistance from both the commercial and public broadcasters who feared competition from these stations and especially frequency interference (Hilliard and Keith 2005: 191). Due to a lack of funds or because of fines and seizure of equipment by the FCC,

most of these micro-radio stations had a hard time sustaining their activities. In 1996 the Grassroots Radio Coalition, a very loose association of stations, was founded to 'react against the increasing commercialization of public radio and lack of support for volunteer-based stations'.³

At the end of the 1990s public pressure and street protests in favour of low power FM (LPFM) stations were growing. These resulted, in 2000, in the FCC granting legal recognition to LPFM radio services and allowing them to file an application (in selected states at first, but this was extended in 2001).⁴ However, Congress intervened in the FCC ruling, not only banning 'anyone who had operated an unlicensed micro-station from applying for a legal low-power station' (Hilliard and Keith 2005: 197), but also calling upon the FCC 'to study the economic impact of these new stations on corporate radio outlets as well as the . . . possibility of interference problems' (Sakolsky 2001). This provoked outrage and division within the micro-power radio movement. As a result of Congress's obstructive tactics, lobbied for by the large commercial broadcasters, only a very limited number of licences were granted. Many micro-stations continued to transmit illegally but suffered heavy police and FCC repression. For example, San Francisco Liberation Radio was raided in October 2003 after criticizing the Bush administration's war in Iraq and Free Radio Santa Cruz was closed down in October 2004.⁵

The UK case

In 1951 the UK Beveridge Report on the future of broadcasting stated: 'Use of VHF could make it possible not merely to give the existing BBC programmes to people who now fail to get them, but to establish local stations with independent programmes of their own' (Beveridge 1951: 78). Those envisaged as possibly operating such alternative stations included 'a Local Authority, a University or a specially formed voluntary agency' (Beveridge 1951: 79). However, given the hegemonic public service logic of the time (cf. Van Cuilenburg and McQuail 2000), things did not develop. The hegemony of the public broadcaster was first challenged by pirate radio stations, broadcasting from ships, for example, *MV Caroline*, *MV Olga Patricia* and *MV Mi Amigo*, anchored outside territorial waters. After a (short) period, from 1964 until 1968, of unprecedented success, they were all closed down following the voting in of the Marine and Broadcasting Offences Act in 1967.

In addition to the BBC experimenting with local stations, the Sound Broadcasting Act of 1972 had transformed the Independent Television Authority into the Independent Broadcasting Authority, giving it responsibility for radio too. However, while this theoretically allowed community stations to exist, it also provided a very strict regulatory framework that was only beneficial for commercially driven local radio. UK community initiatives that had emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s were left operating illegally and campaigning for official recognition. Many of these pirate stations were,

or soon became, advertising-funded radio, even though in many cases they were fulfilling a community role. In 1983 the Community Radio Association (CRA) was founded to represent alternative radio stations, serving a community, with government, industry and regulatory bodies. In 1997 the CRA changed its name to Community Media Association (CMA) to accommodate alternative television initiatives that serve a community.

Despite the lobby efforts of the CRA/CMA, the – by definition – illegal pirate stations were targeted repeatedly by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), which continually tried to shut down their broadcasting. A recent example is Dimension FM, a pirate radio in Telford in Shropshire. Dimension FM started operating in 1999 and played mainly underground electronic music that was largely ignored by mainstream radio at that time, but also had some comedy, prank and phone-in programmes. The station broadcast every weekend and as it managed to increase the power of its transmitter Dimension FM reached a growing community of loyal fans (Figure 3.1). In December 2003 the DTI organized a raid on the station, closed it down and prosecuted two of its collaborators. Their programmes are archived online.⁶

The idea of a third way, complementing the commercial and public broadcasting services, was finally accepted in 2002 when the Radio Authority issued licences for 15 of what were then called ‘access radios’. These licences were renewed in 2004. The 2003 Communication Act and the 2004 Community Radio Order could be considered turning points in the history of alternative radio in the UK. After a round of consultations, the newly formed media regulator, Ofcom, began to grant full licences for alternative radios that serve a community in March 2005. Subsequently, in June 2006, 107 alternative radio stations were licensed in the UK.⁷ A Community Radio Fund was introduced, managed by Ofcom and financed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Ofcom 2005). It primarily funds core competencies, such as financial management, fundraising and administrative support.

An interesting example of a thriving licensed alternative radio is the East London-based Sound Radio, which claims to ‘reflect, as far as is possible, the make up of the East London community to whom we broadcast’.⁸ Sound Radio is partly funded by advertising, but uses this to provide access to the airwaves for 10 different (diasporic) communities in the London area. It has English, Afro-Caribbean, Latin American, Kurdish, Bangladeshi, Jewish, Turkish and African programmes. Unlike most alternative radios, Sound Radio broadcasts on AM rather than FM. This allows it to reach a much wider audience, as current FM regulations restrict alternative radios to a radius of 5-km from their antennae. In addition to their AM broadcasts, Sound Radio, similar to many other alternative stations, streams its programmes on the Internet, which is proving to be an efficient way to bypass regulatory restrictions, and to attract an international (diasporic) audience beyond the UK.

As in the USA, this limited and fairly restrictive legalization does not mean that there are no longer any pirate stations. In June 2006, some 30–40 pirate stations were active in the London area alone, mostly playing underground music. Several websites are



Figure 3.1 Support for Dimension FM (source <http://www.dfmotions.com/radio/courtcase.htm>).

dedicated to mapping the ongoing and fluid landscape of pirate radio in the UK's capital.⁹

The Belgian case

From the outset Belgium's spectrum was guarded by the state and no non-public stations, commercial or otherwise, were allowed to broadcast. Just as in the UK, this state monopoly on broadcasting was first challenged by purely commercial initiatives, broadcasting from ships in the North Sea from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Examples of this were the *Mi Amigo*, the *Magdalena* and the *Jeanine*, ships from which programmes produced in Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK and even Spain were

broadcast; they played mostly hit parade music introduced by popular DJs. In the late 1970s and early 1980s a new challenge emerged from terrestrial local FM pirate stations. Some of these were alternative media born out of the anarchist punk movement, the environmental movement and the student movement, challenging the formats and content of the public broadcaster, but most were commercial or eventually evolved into commercial stations (Drijvers 1992: 107–8).

From a policy perspective, a distinction should be made between developments in the North and the South of Belgium, as media regulation and policy became defederalized in 1971. However, one notable exception was frequency allocation, which continued to be regulated at federal level until 1990.

In the north of the country, an opening for local non-public radio, including alternative radio, was created in May 1982, allowing some pirate stations to become legal. It is evident, however, that consecutive regional governments ignored the specificity of alternative media serving a community. For a long time media policy in the North of Belgium was based on protecting the interests of the Dutch-speaking public broadcaster. Non-public radio was by definition considered to be commercial, thereby disregarding the specificity of several alternative stations. The legislation was primarily geared to preventing commercial stations forming networks and limiting their impact on the media landscape. In the struggle to defend the interests of the public broadcaster, the demands of alternative radio stations for a distinct statute did not carry enough weight to be supported by the major political parties (Carpentier 1994; Drijvers 1992). This was confirmed when the monopoly of the public broadcaster over the territory of North Belgium was finally lifted in 2002. The fiercely competitive commercial interests involved to obtain a regional or provincial radio licence, and the lack of transparency in the allocation process, relegated the very few alternative radio stations in the north to the margins of the FM spectrum. Furthermore, their broadcasting range was severely restricted (to 15 watts).

Radio Centraal,¹⁰ an alternative radio in Antwerp that has over 150 volunteers and runs without advertising income, has been most vocal in condemning the lack of media policies towards participatory media in consecutive North Belgian governments and the persistent conflation of alternative radio and commercial radio at a local level (Carpentier 1994). Ironically, the North Belgian media regulator, which has the power to sanction radio stations, recently condemned Radio Centraal for boosting its signal beyond the strict limits set by the law, but reduced its penalty because of the specific nature of the station. In its decision it stated: ‘As it appears that Radio Centraal does not generate commercial revenues, it is accepted that in this particular case even the minimum fine would disproportionately penalize the station’ (Vlaams Commissariaat voor de Media 2005, authors’ translation). This amounted to an – albeit implicit – official regulatory recognition of the distinctiveness of alternative radio in the North of Belgium.

A very different picture emerges when we examine the south of the country and Brussels. First, the south was much quicker to allow commercial stations to compete

with the public broadcaster at national level (1991). Some years earlier (July 1987) the French-speaking public broadcaster had been given permission to broadcast advertising, and a specific statute for alternative radio was created within the regulatory framework (Ministère de la Communauté Française 1987). This was largely due to the efforts of existing alternative stations, some of which formed the Association pour la Libération des Ondes in 1978, struggling for the ‘liberation of the airwaves’ and representing French-speaking alternative radios in the south and in Brussels. These included Radio Panik, Radio Air Libre and Atelier Radio Arlon. The Audiovisual Decree of 1987 even cautioned about being ‘especially careful to facilitate the existence of associative creative radio¹¹ stations’ (Art. 30, authors’ translation).

A Conseil Supérieure de l’Audiovisuel (CSA) was set up as the regulator and a Fonds d’Aide à la Création Radiophonique (FACR) was created to finance specific projects. The fund has supported between 15 and 40 radiophonic projects annually since 1994 (depending on its financial position). It was initially financed from a percentage of the revenues from public service channel advertising. The new media decree voted in February 2003 also included commercial radio networks in the funding mechanism of the FACR, although it has to be said that commercial broadcasters fiercely resisted this attack on their advertising revenues. The role of FACR is to promote:

radiophonic creation in the French-speaking community in Belgium. It intervenes in the production costs of original and creative radio, valorizing the patrimony of the French-speaking community in the area’s of information, documentaries, cultural programs, fiction and music.

(FACR 2005: 7)

In addition to alternative radio organizations, individuals and other non-profit organizations can submit proposals. Furthermore, since 2002 the public broadcaster has been required to (re)transmit a minimum of 20 hours a year of productions funded by FACR.

In France, a very similar system of intra-sectorial cross-subsidies exists, whereby part of the revenues of the ads on commercial and public radio is channelled to ‘les radios associatives’. A fixed (very low) percentage of the revenues goes into a fund to support, amongst others, alternative radio (Cheval 1997). This has given rise to a thriving and vibrant alternative radio sector in France (see, for example, Radio Gazelle 1992).

Conclusion

Overall, and especially in countries with a strong public service tradition, alternative radio is a recently recognized distinct media sphere, complementary to public and commercial broadcasters. In countries with a liberal tradition, such as the USA, alternative radio has a longer history, but this does not mean that there was/is no struggle or

conflict regarding the right to communicate. A common thread in the cases studied is the difficulty involved in local alternative radio legitimating its existence on the FM band alongside commercial and public broadcasters. Unlike these latter, alternative radio movements have little lobbying power and are usually positioned as rogue and unprofessional actors within the broadcasting community. All too often the argument of spectrum scarcity and FM frequency interference is used against them. This has resulted in a tumultuous history of struggle both in Europe and the USA.

In many ways this is surprising given the particular attention alternative radio, serving a community, has received within international discourse on media and communication and also within developmental discourses fostering democratization in developing countries. In this regard, UNESCO has for many years been a driving force in advocating open access to the airwaves, participatory communication and the use of radio to foster development and empower disfranchised and marginalized communities (Berrigan 1979; ICSCP 2004: 55–7; Lewis 1993; Fraser and Estrada 2001). More recently, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) rather vaguely called for ‘support to media based in local communities’ (WSIS 2003: Article 23j). Thus, it is high time that Western governments implement their own discourses on open access to media and communication tools aimed at democratizing developing countries within their own media environments and thereby recognize the democratic and participatory potentials of alternative radio. This would amount to allowing alternative radios ‘to empower their listeners by encouraging and enabling their participation, not only in the radio, but in the social, cultural and political processes that affect the community’ (Girard 1992: 2).

This case-study also shows that the theoretical models and typologies to compare media systems and regulatory regimes urgently need to be expanded to accommodate alternative radio as valuable democratic media with the right to exist separate from the public broadcasting system and the commercial market-driven radios.

Notes

- 1 By non-commercial we mean ‘not for profit’. This does not, however, imply that no commercial activities are undertaken. Whilst most alternative radios are partly supported by those participating, as well as the audience in some cases, and in some countries by grants from the government or sponsorship deals, these funds are rarely enough to sustain a 24-hour radio station. Thus, for most alternative stations it is paramount to organize additional activities that generate funds in order to break even and invest in new equipment.
- 2 For a good overview of this early period of alternative radio in the USA, see Walker (2001).
- 3 See <http://www.grradio.org/about/index.html>.
- 4 See <http://www.fcc.gov/mb/audio/lpfm/index.html>.
- 5 For an overview of recent evolutions in the micro-power movement, see <http://www.diymedia.net/>.

- 6 See <http://www.dfmpromotions.com/radio/>.
- 7 See <http://www.commedia.org.uk/about-community-media/community-radio/>.
- 8 See <http://www.soundradio.org.uk/about.php>.
- 9 See <http://www.martinpayne.co.uk/radio/pirates/> and <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/pir8radio/>.
- 10 See <http://www.radiocentraal.be/>.
- 11 In French, alternative radio stations are called *radios associatives* or *radios culturelles*.