

Community Broadcasting: Publics, Participants and Policies

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Introduction

Overview

Community broadcasting is an established worldwide phenomenon, with thousands of terrestrial radios and television channels operating alongside their commercial and public service counterparts across the world. Association Mondiale des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires (AMARC), an international trade association of community radios, claims nearly 4,000 members from 110 countries.¹ Europe is an especially robust environment for community broadcasting, where more than 20 European Union (EU) states have some form of community radio or television. Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE), estimated in a survey of media regulators that there are more than 2,000 terrestrial community radios, and 500 community televisions currently broadcasting in Europe.² The rich history and multi-faceted development of community broadcasting form the background for this examination of the phenomenon.

Nicholas Jankowski (2002, 6) describes community media as: “a diverse range of mediated forms of communication: print media such as newspapers and magazines, electronic media such as radio and television, and electronic initiatives (...)”. Arne Hintz (2016) lists numerous forms included in research by members of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) Community Communication Section³ including "community, alternative, radical, social, citizen, citizens', activist, grassroots, DIY, civic, participatory, social movement-oriented, development-oriented, and civil society-based media". While community media is a term often used in describing broadcasters, there is an important distinction between broadcasters and other community media forms such as community theatre,

¹ For more information on this claim, see About AMARC at: <http://www.amarc.org/?q=node/5>.

² To view the report and methodology, see CMFE Community Media Mapping Project at: <http://cmfe.eu/?p=864>.

³ The IAMCR Community Communication Section can be referenced here: http://iamcr.org/leicester2016/cfp_coc.

community press, community film, and/or community telecentres⁴. Community broadcasting shares many of the same philosophies and attributes of other community media forms, but is a unique linear audio-visual broadcast service using electronic technology to deliver programs for mass audiences to consume via receiving devices. Community broadcasting in this volume describes community broadcasting entities located in democracies, generally beginning in the postwar era of the 1940s up to the present. The discussion generally describes those community broadcasters that are either illegally operating as so-called “pirates”, or legally authorized and licensed entities, who typically deliver their output on terrestrial frequencies and/or wired cable delivery systems.

Definitions of community media can be as varied as the many scholars, advocates and practitioners that offer them. Jankowski (2002, 7) offers a list of the main characteristics of community media:

1. objectives: to provide news and information relevant to the needs of community members, to engage these members in public communication via the community medium; to empower the politically disenfranchised;
2. ownership and control: often shared by community residents, local government and community-based organizations;
3. content: locally oriented and produced;
- media production: involving non-professionals and volunteers;
4. audience: predominantly located within a relatively small, clearly defined geographic region, although some community networks attract large and physically dispersed audience;
5. financing: essentially non-commercial, the overall budget may involve corporate sponsorship, advertising, and government subsidies.

Apart from the attributes generally associated with the phenomenon, the context of its location in society is also important. Howley (2010, 2) asserts that community media: “assumes many forms and takes on different meanings depending on the felt need of the community, and the resources and opportunities available to local populations at a particular time and place.” Varying philosophies and concepts also serve to illuminate the *raison d’être* for community media. Barry Melville (2007) of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBA)

⁴ ICT (information and communication technologies) telecentres provide an open space for communities to access and deploy various technologies such as computers and telecommunication networks. You can see more here: <http://www.telecentre.org/>.

describes community broadcasting as being “sustained by the principles of access and participation, volunteerism, diversity, independence and localism”. In supporting and promoting community media, advocates and practitioners abide by a set of principles encoded in the articles and publications of their trade associations. The AMARC Community Radio Impact Assessment (2007, 63) states: “Community radio should not be run for profit, but for social gain and community benefit; it should be owned by and accountable to the community it seeks to serve, and it should provide for participation by the community in program making and in management.”

Government institutions offer interventions that can influence the decisions of legislators and regulators in policy making, and also provide guidance for the sector. Peter Lewis (2008, 13) cites the Council of Europe (COE) list of “shared interests and common principles” of community media, compiled from submissions of participants at the 2005 COE Ministerial Conference in Kiev, Ukraine:

1. freedom of speech and media plurality
2. public and gender access
3. cultural diversity
4. not-for-profit
5. self-determination
6. transparency
7. promotion of media literacy

For scholars, theoretical perspectives of community media approach the subject from varying contexts, attributes, definitions and typologies, contributing to understanding the phenomenon. Still, there is much to learn about the publics, participants and policies of community broadcasting.

Publics

Much like their media counterparts, community broadcasting organizations are typically composed of departments responsible for carrying out basic line functions such as programming, technical, marketing, and revenue development, with support and leadership from the administration and management functions. Though community broadcast organizations are known for a commitment to democratic principles, these organizations commonly are formed with a hierarchical structure, overseen by an elected board of directors. The board members are typically volunteers, who may be external cooperators, or hold regular positions within the organization, whether paid or unpaid. The board represents the owners of

the legal entity and/or license holder of the medium and has autonomous fiduciary responsibility for its successful operation, primarily through approving strategies, plans, and budgets prepared by management. Here it's important to note the distinction between free-standing "independent" community broadcasting organizations that are owned and operated by the license holder, as opposed to cable-access and government-owned open channel models, in which the aforementioned legal, fiduciary and management control of their operation rests with the commercial cable system owner or the government.

Community Radio

The current paradigm of community radio features a galaxy of remarkably similar, yet disparate forms of radio stations around the globe, often identifiable by their respective commitments to various ideals of community broadcasting, but more basically by their technical and organizational configuration. The term radio in this context generally refers to the traditional mass medium of audio production and terrestrial broadcast distribution currently found on the FM dial. That's the starting point for a wide-ranging discussion of what radio is now, what it was in the past, and what it will be in the future. Physically, a typical local FM community radio requires a simple studio for production, a link to a transmitter mounted on a mast, and the requisite office space to manage the enterprise. These terrestrial linear audio broadcasting stations typically (but not exclusively) transmit on the FM band between 87 – 109 MHz, and are received by FM radio receivers in homes, offices and autos, the same as for commercial and public service radios. Depending on transmitter power and height of the antenna above surrounding terrain, standard FM signal coverage areas range upwards of 100 kilometers in diameter, making it ideal for local broadcasting to cities and towns, as well as limited rural areas. Low Power FM (LPFM) utilizes the same technology as other FM configurations, but with substantially less transmitting power designed to serve a much smaller broadcast signal footprint (typically less than 10 kilometers in diameter). For regulators, LPFM offers a solution to the problem of over-allocation of FM frequencies because LPFM signals are able to fit between and within the geographic and bandwidth footprints of standard FM broadcasts, without causing interference. Whether communities are identified as a small neighborhood (or even a small group within a neighborhood), or as an entire city, either standard FM or LPFM can be configured to best serve the constituents.

The barrier to entry for technological considerations in radio is quite low, which has greatly contributed to the development of community radio worldwide. The equipment to produce and transmit audio output on FM frequencies is simple to use and cheap to buy, as are the receivers used by listeners to capture the transmitted signal. Deployment of simple antennae mounted on a mast means community radios can be located in a myriad of locations, and are especially suited for urban environments comprised of diverse communities. In Austria for example, the

FM spectrum is managed to provide specifically-designed broadcasting footprints that match the communities they serve. Most radios are “city-wide”, standard FM broadcasts covering a whole city and the communities within it. Radio Orange in Vienna has an FM signal covering most of the metropolitan area with more than 1 million potential listeners. In the USA and Hungary, LPFM systems are deployed to cover only a small portion of a city or town, such as KALY-FM radio in Minneapolis, Minnesota (see Figure 1) which serves the neighborhoods containing large numbers of residents in the Somali-American community (Prometheus 2015), and Civil Radio in Budapest, Hungary serving the neighborhoods of Buda west of the Danube River.



Figure 1: Broadcasters at KALY-FM in Minneapolis, Minnesota USA

Community Television

The current paradigm of community television can be viewed on the whole in the context of two distinctly differing operational models each having their own separate identities. First, the “access” model of cable-access TV and European open-channel TV, and second, the “independent” model of free-standing owner-operated TV stations. These typologies then serve to frame development of the form with regards to programming, policy, funding, sustainability, and impact in the respective societies in which they operate.

As their names imply, the access TV models offer access for people to the facilities for production, the training necessary to obtain the skills for production, and the delivery of their programming output. In the case of the cable-access Public Educational Government (PEG) model that originated in the United States and Canada, the local commercial cable operators,

as a condition of their exclusive distribution franchise contract with the city or county, are required to provide for access to erstwhile content producers from within the cable system coverage area. The PEG moniker refers to a hybrid combination of previously separate channels on disparate platforms for standard public access to individuals and groups, educational services delivered over broadcast media, and local government output of information and coverage of government activities. The inclusion of this access requirement became almost standardized in cable systems contracts in the build-up of the cable TV paradigm in the USA and Canada (Linder 1999). The funding mechanism for this cable access PEG model is typically included as a provision in the cable system operator agreement with the local government and can be a fixed annual fee or an amount based on a formula related to the number of subscribers and revenue for the commercial cable operator.

The European open-channel version of access television offers the same opportunities for access, training, production and delivery as the cable access model, with one very important difference. Open channels are typically owned and operated directly by the media regulatory agency with jurisdiction over the distribution area. The media regulator constructs and operates the production facilities and, where feasible, also the delivery systems, either terrestrial or cable. In other cases, the regulator will reserve channels on local commercially-owned cable systems for their open channels. The media regulator in the case of open channels takes full responsibility for funding all aspects of the open channel operations, typically contained in an annual budget allocation. The open channel models of ownership and control apply to both radios and televisions primarily in portions of Germany and Scandinavia.

The independent model of community television is distinctly different from the access model in that they are owned, operated, and licensed independent of commercial cable systems operators, local governments or media regulators. Independent TV stations are typically founded by individuals and/or community groups for many of the same reasons as their access counterparts, but in these cases they are able, due to favorable circumstances in their societal environment, to establish free-standing community media organizations with direct access to available terrestrial broadcasting frequencies and cable channels. These broadcasters typically own and operate their own facilities for production and training, then rely on the external operators, such as commercial cable operators and/or commercial terrestrial tower/transmission operators for distribution of their output. Access to these external distribution systems is typically mandated as a provision of their licensing agreements with the government media regulatory agencies, and/or local governments' agreements with commercial cable systems operators.

Jankowski (1998) in his examination of community television delineates between the pure access model philosophy, and the more community-oriented independent model. In some states (for example Australia, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland and Austria), these independent channels, while not owned or operated by units of government, are funded primarily from the local city governments in which they operate, bolstered by additional funds from regional/national government funds supporting arts and culture. Where government funding is not typical, these televisions (like their radio counterparts) must rely on sponsorships, advertising (where permitted), donations from supporters, and project-based funding grants for their financial sustainability.



Figure 2: Broadcasters at OKTO TV in Vienna, Austria

Participants

For participants, community media can be understood simply as a space where they are able to express themselves to their community, or as complex as a method of response to issues of the larger world around them. Carpentier (2011, 355) notes: “Participation occurs (or can occur) in a variety of social realms, which generate a multitude of interconnections of discursive and material practices.” In a typical community broadcasting organization, the main source of labor is volunteer participants, mostly part-time workers in their free time apart from personal and professional commitments elsewhere. These participants are primarily producers of programs, but they also can fulfill unpaid duties in the other functions of the organization, as their skills

and experience warrant. Volunteers are the engine that powers the community broadcasting phenomenon, and without them the model would be fundamentally changed and likely unsustainable.

Beginning with perhaps the simple goals of access and participation in media spheres, the motivations and interests of these participants can also include individual development, community development, promotion of local arts & culture, political ideology, alternativism to mainstream channels, and promotion of their group identity, just to name a few. The views of the participants generally construct the philosophy of the independent community broadcasting organizations, and in some cases, also the policy that governs them. In the case of cable-access and open channels, participants may have similar interests and motivations, but the owners and managers are merely service providers, albeit with a directive to fulfill many of the aforementioned objectives, but not necessarily connected philosophically to the participants and their communities.

Regardless of why they come, volunteers remain the driving force of the sector. OFCOM (2015) reports that in the UK in 2014, more than 20,000 volunteers worked a total of more than 2.5 million hours participating at 230 local community radios. This computes to an average of 87 volunteers per channel working 10 hours per month.⁵ Large organizational examples from the enclosed case studies include TV OKTO in Vienna, Austria, that claims more than 500 volunteer participants and 100 programming groups (OKTO 2015), and student Radio R in Brno, Czech Republic, which reports more than 150 active volunteers (Radio R 2015). Small examples of community broadcasters include Radio Ypsilon in Hollabrunn, Austria, and Radio Bomba in Plzen, Czech Republic, each estimated to have fewer than 30 volunteer participants.

Audiences

The burdens carried by commercial and public service broadcasters mentioned above are symbiotically dependent on attracting and maintaining large audiences to their output. Commercial broadcasters cannot survive in a competitive marketplace without substantial audience figures they can offer to prospective advertisers, and public service operators will face substantial questioning of their efficacy if they fail to deliver large audiences from every corner of their country. Community broadcasters typically have a much smaller remit, mandated only to reach the communities they serve. These third-sector broadcasters, whether large or small, radio or television, are programmed mostly by amateur volunteer participants, and simply not held to the audience delivery expectations of their professional counterparts. Furthermore,

⁵ OFCOM conducts an annual survey by requiring each licensed media organization to produce a standardized report of their operation.

because the ethos of community broadcasting begins with the philosophies of access and participation, community broadcasters are often judged not by the audience they deliver, but the level of participation by their community members.

Programs

Free from the burden of profit that commercial media must provide, or the constraints of serving governments like public service media, programs on community broadcast channels can be as varied as the people who produce them. Following the general categories of information, opinion and entertainment, programs then can be seen to serve the interests and fulfill the motivations of the volunteer producers. From political ideology to gardening, the range of program subjects and ways to present them is limited often only by the producers' imaginations. This variety of outputs also fulfills key elements of the community media philosophy, including access and participation, freedom of expression, diversity, and media pluralism. Similar to the dynamic of the relationship between why volunteers participate and the characteristics of their media organizations, this same dynamic is common between the characteristics of the broadcasting organization and the programs it transmits. Some independent broadcasters have a singular philosophy promoting their specific cultural representation or political ideology, while many others are a mixed-model of encouraging a diverse array of programs from many parts of the community it serves. Similar to this latter model, most cable-access and open channels are committed to a pure access philosophy, simply providing the facilities for transmitting whatever participants produce, with limited curation.

Policies

While the ethos of free expression, the human right to communicate, and diversity of program content are the bedrock of community broadcasting philosophy, content produced by participants and transmitted by community broadcasters is not without constraint.

Governments, as stewards of the public communications and broadcast infrastructure, have a responsibility to adhere to the mandate of responsibilities given them by the citizens of their nations. Those responsibilities are encoded in the law, managed through the rules and regulations enforced by media regulators, and apply to all users of the public terrestrial airwaves and cable systems rights-of-way. Community broadcasters as license holders are subject to penalty from media regulators just as their commercial and public service counterparts for violations of policies regarding pornographic content, hate speech, slander, and incitement. Codes of practice and organizational ethics also preclude many types of content, including certain forms of advertising, religion, and even politics. In discussing the separate but interconnected roles of community radio and television, the policy and regulatory requirements for electronic broadcasting places them in relative competition with commercial

and public service broadcasters for finite delivery capacities, and plays a major role in their development (or lack thereof). This “third sector” context of comparison to commercial and public service broadcasting, and how it affects the development of community broadcasting is perhaps the most common frame for examining and understanding the phenomenon (McChesney 2004), and challenges policy makers to serve the interests of communities as well as commercial and state interests (Girard 1992).

Funding

Funding is a key element to the success and sustainability of community broadcasters, and one of the most difficult challenges. The social, economic and political environments in which community broadcasters operate greatly influences funding opportunities and strategies, as does the policy that governs them. Independently owned and operated broadcasting organizations commonly aspire to maintain a mix of revenue sources, including one or more of the following: annual government funds, government project-based and fee-for-service funds, community donations, memberships, sponsorships, advertising, special promotional initiatives, and more. Government funding schemes are usually competition-based by the respective media regulator, who disburses the allotted funds based on an assessment of annual broadcasters’ proposals for performance. Funding levels can range from adequate (Austria, South Africa, France, Ireland, Australia), to inadequate (UK, USA), to virtually non-existent (Italy, Spain, Central/Eastern Europe, most of Latin America, Africa, Asia). In the case of cable-access and open channel models, funding is commonly not an issue for communities, because they do not own or operate the media, which are funded by the respective owners of the channel as a service for the community users.

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