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COMMUNITY MEDIA POLICY

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Definitions and scope

This chapter is concerned with policies involving official recognition and financial support (or the lack of it) for community media, and with the regulation of media (radio, television) which use the airwaves in addition to using the internet. The rapid growth of social media has affected both mainstream and community media, and its relationship to the latter is discussed towards the end of the chapter.

Community media is a term which embraces a range of media – press, photography, film, graphic arts, theatre, radio, video – to name the media which up till recently have been the most prominent. All have in common three features: they are not run for profit but for social gain and community benefit; they are owned by and accountable to the communities they seek to serve; and they provide for participation by the community in production and in management. In the words of AMARC and Panos, "[It] is not about doing something for the community, but about the community doing something for itself, i.e., owning and controlling its own means of communication" (AMARC Africa and Panos Southern Africa, 1998).

The communities concerned may be geographically defined or, more commonly in this digital age, communities of interest, linked for example by language and ethnic origin, by gender or sexual orientation, by political ties, by lifestyle or by artistic and musical tastes. Community media can be seen as a subset of Atton's 'alternative media' (Atton, 2001), and other labels that have been proposed for this type of media are 'participatory' (Servaes, 1999; Gumucio Dagron, 2001), 'citizens' (Rodríguez, 2001) and 'radical' (Downing, 2001). The last label points to the use of media by oppressed or marginalized groups in political struggle.

The timeline of this discussion reaches back to the late 1940s when Radio Sutatenza began broadcasting in Colombia and Pacifica's KPFA came on air in Berkeley, California. Neither at that time used the prefix 'community' which, as a notion, expresses both coherence and difference, is both imagined and experienced materially. By the late 1960s, a period in which rebellion against the scale of corporate institutions was widespread, 'community' became attached to health, housing and law projects, to name but a few examples. In the same period, its use in relation to electronic media

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was canonized by the regulatory authorities in Canada and the US to describe cable TV channels set aside for use by community groups. By the mid-1970s, Australia had joined the US and Canada in making official space for community radio, but it was community video that first crossed the Atlantic in the same decade and enjoyed brief official recognition on cable networks in Europe. By the end of the 1970s, radio had become the most prominent expression of community media in Europe, whether in the *radios libres* of Italy, France and Belgium, or in the more ordered devolution in Scandinavia and the Netherlands. By the mid-1980s, the French radio landscape included, alongside a burgeoning commercial sector, a sector of community radio (*radios associatives*), officially regulated and funded by a levy on the profits of the commercial sector. Community radio developed in various guises and with differing means of support across Europe, struggling in post-communist Eastern and Central Europe, and finally, after three decades of campaigning, achieving recognition in the UK at the turn of the millennium. The campaign to achieve official recognition in the UK is used as a case study in the section that follows.

Alongside this timeline should be laid the international support for community media. The MacBride Report, commissioned by UNESCO, upheld the complaint of the developing world about the unjust effects of allowing information to be at the mercy of the free play of market forces and asserted the need for communication to be regarded as a matter of human rights (UNESCO, 1980: 172). The same injustice was to be found at the national level, where the absence of space for a voice in mainstream media led to a search for alternatives. UNESCO's concern to address the situation at both global and local levels was, during the 1970s, underpinned by seminars and by studies commissioned for its series *Reports and Papers on Mass Communication*. In the same period, the Council of Europe commissioned reports on a range of community media projects. The nascent research community formed by the authors of these reports was consolidated by the creation in 1982 of the Local Radio and Television Group (now the Community Communication Section) within the International Association for Media and Communication Research (http://www.iamcr.org/). The following year saw the founding conference in Montreal of AMARC (the French acronym now generally used for the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, www.amarc.org/), a meeting that was important in establishing global connections not only for academic researchers, but between community radio practitioners and activists in different parts of the world. The European branch of AMARC, AMARC-Europe, published a community radio charter in 1994 (Lewis, 2006: 27).

Discursive space: The case of the UK campaign for community radio

Activism has been as necessary in this field as in other alternative movements. To gain a place on a government's policy agenda, it is necessary to win over public opinion, which in turn means gaining mainstream media attention. The campaign over three decades to establish community radio on a permanent basis in the UK will be used to illustrate the problems of creating a discursive space enabling the phenomenon to be recognized and debated by different sectors of opinion (for a

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fuller account of the campaign, see Lewis, 2012). The campaign had its origins in the experimental cable TV pilots in the early 1970s. Influenced by North American experience, British community video practitioners took advantage of the licences awarded to commercial cable companies by a Conservative government to experiment in community programming. The cable companies were losing subscribers as improved broadcast coverage rendered their service redundant. Local TV, they calculated, might win back viewers, and good behaviour might earn the eventual reward of pay TV. The return of a Labour government in 1974 put an end to those hopes, and all but one of the pilots were abruptly closed down. The consequent anger and frustration led to the founding in 1977 of the Community Communications Group (COMCOM), whose comments on an official report (the Annan Report) on future directions for broadcasting included radical proposals for a community radio sector (COMCOM, 1977). COMCOM's Local Radio Working Party gave evidence to a Parliamentary Select Committee resulting in the recommendation for future provision of "low-power transmission facilities for voluntary community radio services within small communities" (SCNI, 1978: xlix). The Annan Report took sufficient notice of COMCOM's comments to suggest that the expansion of commercial local radio should include some licence awards to local community trusts. In a number of cities, groups were formed to apply for such licenses, but only in Cardiff was such a group successful – and there too community control was short lived, ending in take-over by a commercial chain (Lewis and Booth, 1989: 108f).

These two attempts to introduce community programming into mainstream media had contradictory results: on the one hand, they raised consciousness among community groups across the country, launched a campaigning movement and gained the attention of officialdom. On the other hand, mainstream media reported the results as a failure: the collapse of the cable industry's hopes due to political change were attributed to ineffective communication at the community level. After the Cardiff episode, word went out in the radio industry that community programming was an audience loser. In any case, most mainstream broadcasters dismissed these new forms of media intervention as 'amateur', while their trade union regarded them as a threat to professional standards. It was decades before the arrival of the internet facilitated 'user-generated content' and 'citizen journalism' and obliged professional media to notice and co-opt the genre.

Community radio advocates had to confront a series of interlinking objections to their proposals. Legislation did not allow for such a type of broadcasting. How would it be regulated? How would stations be financed? How could frequencies be found? Was there sufficient demand to justify such an extension of existing services?

At this time, COMCOM profited from presence in the capital of several Australian activist/practitioners whose experience (Australia had officially recognized community radio in 1974) and radical approach helped launch a number of ad hoc campaigns. Perhaps the two most effective interventions were the commissioning of a report from a former broadcasting engineer which refuted the official claim that there were no spare frequencies in London, and the exposure by COMCOM's ally, the Local Radio Workshop, of the failings in the public consultation procedures of the then regulator, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), and the inadequacy of the coverage of local affairs by London's local radio stations (Local Radio Workshop, 1983).

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After COMCOM ran out of energy, the formation in 1983 of the Community Radio Association (later to become the Community Media Association) helped build a relationship over a long period with officials in the government department responsible for media and with successive regulators. The offer by the government of a pilot experiment in 1985 attracted over 200 applications. Even though the scheme was cancelled, the question about demand had received an answer. An increasing volume of pirate radio, most broadcasting musical genres but including some social, linguistic and political groups, supported the argument that the needs of certain communities were not being met. The popularity of pirate radio also caused some concern to commercial local radio stations which demanded response from the IBA and the government.

Before the IBA was replaced by the Radio Authority in 1990, it was able to satisfy some of the demand through its 'incremental franchise' scheme which allowed a few community radio stations to operate within already existing coverage areas. The introduction by the Radio Authority of a temporary license scheme (RSLs) for up to a 28-day period for the broadcasting of cultural events and religious festivals also went some way towards meeting demand, as well as allowing experience to develop among a wide range of communities (Stoller, 2010).

The final stages of the progress towards the creation of a community radio sector were, first, the Radio Authority's Access Radio Project, launched initially for one year in 2001 and extended until 2003; from nearly 200 applications, 15 were chosen. And second, following the positive evaluation of that project (Everitt, 2003a, 2003b), the Community Radio Order of 2004, which gave legislative status to the notion of the 'social gain' community radio stations were expected to deliver. Its main objectives were: "the provision of broadcasting services to those otherwise underserved; the facilitation of discussion and the expression of opinion; the provision of education or training of volunteers; and the better understanding of the particular community and the strengthening of links within it" (Ofcom, 2010: 7). A decade later, more than 200 community radio stations are licenced and broadcasting (http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/radiolicensing/html/radio-stations/community/community-main.htm).

We can now summarise the elements that led to the successful conclusion of the campaign. There had been persistent pressure from the Community Media Association and, in the past decade, sympathetic response and constructive ideas from civil servants and regulators. But for politicians to be persuaded, there needed to be a level of favourable public opinion that reached a tipping point. It helped that the successful record of the RSL scheme had brought community radio to the attention of local media and local MPs and that commercial radio was willing to accept the creation of a separate sector given certain constraints (limitation of coverage area and advertising).

But the role of the academic community should not be overlooked. The growing volume of international attention and research translated into a new wave of published studies of community media on both sides of the Atlantic around the turn of the millennium: the marketing decisions of publishers complemented the funding strategies of research agencies, all of which contributed to a discourse that promoted community radio to a matter of public debate.

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Policy issues

Policy issues will continue to be discussed here from the perspective of broadcast community radio, the medium which most prominently impinges on national media policies because frequency space is a consideration. Community television is less common; in Europe, it is often found on cable networks which do not affect frequency allocation, and in significant numbers only in the Netherlands, Italy and Germany. A mapping exercise by the Community Media Forum for Europe (CMFE) in 2012 recorded 2,237 community radio stations and 521 community television stations on the continent (http://communitymedia.se/europe/table.htm).

A key issue is the recognition of community radio as a separate sector of broadcasting. The US, Canada and Australia (where 'public radio' was the label at first used for community radio) were the first countries where this occurred. A famous policy statement of 1978 by the Australian Minister responsible for broadcasting included the words "it is accepted that public broadcasters have a better appreciation of the interests, hence needs, of their broadcasting communities than anyone else, including government" (cited in Lewis and Booth, 1989: 134). The Australian and North American examples provided encouragement for British activists, and may have contributed to South Africa's post-apartheid licensing framework in 1993. In Europe, the Scandinavian countries, France, Germany and the Netherlands found their own separate ways to this important step in the early 1980s, but many countries still do not have legislation which recognizes community radio as a separate sector, for example Spain and Poland. This is the case in other Eastern European countries, while Hungary, which led the way in Central Europe, has recently experienced a worsening of government relations with this sector.

Recognition for community radio as a separate sector is a necessary, though not always a sufficient, condition for the fair and transparent award of licenses and should make possible a funding system which does not compete unfairly with mainstream broadcasting. The most significant source of funding for community media is volunteer labour, an expression of community support and participation. Alongside that, local sources are an essential reflection of that support but a search for a variety of sources of funding is regarded as a sensible strategy and a national source of funding is an important guarantee of the stability of the sector. The French system for supporting *radios associatives* involves a levy on the commercial audio-visual sector which supplies a fund administered by the regulator, the CSA. In the Netherlands, the central government transfers funding to local authorities for support for community media – though not all municipalities make use of it effectively. In the UK, a Community Radio Fund is disbursed by the regulator, Ofcom. Despite the recommendation by the evaluator of the pilot Access Radio project that some £8m would be necessary to support the sector, the £0.5m shared among the original 15 stations in 2004 has not been increased to match the needs of the 200 stations now in operation.

In most countries, the license fee for community radio is considerably lower than that for mainstream radio, and tax concessions are another method of central government support. What is not common is to find a recognition of the wide spread of social needs met by community radio reflected in sources of government funding *other* than that of a Media Department. One might expect work done by stations in

education, public health and social cohesion, for example, to be officially recompensed through continuous support from the respective government departments, although many stations do succeed in winning grants for specific projects in such fields. South Africa's creation of a Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) is an unusual attempt to organize funding from a wide range of sources for the community radio sector (Buckley et al., 2008: 224). A comparative European study for the UK's Community Media Association on factors which contribute to a successful sector noted that countries where there was a strong representative association, in receipt of funding from central government, is an important asset (Edmonds and Buckley, 2005). A similar point is made by Rüdiger Maack, of Deutsche Welle Akademie, interviewed by Mersch (2014).

European measures

Advocacy on behalf of community media at a European level began in the late 1980s with the lobbying of the European Parliament by the Féderation Européenne des Radios Libres (FERL) as a result of which a resolution by an Italian MEP, Barzanti, called on member states to support community radio, described, confusingly, as independent local radio. In the 1990s, AMARC-Europe made a number of submissions to the European Commission's calls on media policies concerning concentration of ownership and media plurality. On AMARC-Europe's temporary decline at the end of the millennium, the Community Media Forum for Europe (CMFE) took up the leading advocacy role at this level. Founded in 2004, the CMFE participated along with other civil society organizations at the 7th European Ministerial Conference on Mass Media Policy in Kiev in March 2005, at which conference themes included freedom of expression and information in times of crisis; cultural diversity and media pluralism in times of globalization; and human rights and regulation of the media and new communication services in the information society.

Since then, the CMFE has played a key role in securing the European Parliament Resolution (European Parliament, 2008) and the Council of Europe Declaration (Council of Europe, 2009). Both of these are strong and detailed statements, summarizing the social benefits of community media for, among other things, strengthening cultural and linguistic diversity, as instruments of social cohesion, media pluralism and local creativity, as well as a means of encouraging civic dialogue; member states are called upon to give their support to this form of media. Subsequent interventions of the CMFE have attempted, with some success, to use these statements to affect national policies in Europe. A recent initiative was the ranking of European states in relation to their treatment of community radio and television.

An area of concern to the CMFE and to their members across Europe is the planned move to digital transmission. Whatever technical system is adopted, digital transfer poses problems for community radio. The geographical area covered by digital platforms is too large to be useful for smaller stations, and the entrance fees are likely to be beyond their budgets – as is the case in the current UK scheme. Moreover, the switchover from the FM band does not necessarily promise additional gains for community radio given the desire of other interests, such as mobile

telephony, to move into the vacated frequencies. Not all European governments accept the need for digital transfer, and there is disagreement about the most effective system, with the UK in the awkward position of having been the first to adopt a system, DAB, which has since lagged behind the more recently developed systems (DAB+, DRM) in efficiency. The future possible distribution platforms for community radio in Europe are the subject of a useful study by by Christer Hederström of the CMFE (Hederström, 2014).

Community media and social media

The growth in the use of social media raises in more acute form the question that distribution of community media over the internet has already posed: What is the relationship between virtual and local communities (Fenton, 2012)? Most community radio stations now combine online and over-the-air presence with social media, but there are important differences between the two forms. Community media are collective enterprises owned by the communities they serve, and often their overall contact, both in listenership and production, is with a range of different constituencies who must argue and compromise to achieve a democratically agreed solution. Co-presence is an important feature of this interaction, and so is the physical availability of a meeting place and the technology used to train volunteers. These volunteers can participate at different levels in the organization, as presenters, producers, trainers or members of management. While social media, on their own, are unlikely to be able to offer any equivalent opportunities, most community projects, like most organizations in general, now maintain a presence on Facebook and Twitter. (see, e.g., Johnston, 2014)

As the CMFE put it in a paper to a Ministerial Conference of the Council of Europe:

> Community media have a recognized name and established network of active citizens, experience in promoting social justice, integration and social change … What is important is the growing availability of different media, with different strengths and weaknesses, with different infrastructural and regulatory needs. Also important is that these media need each other to build strong communications.
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> (CMFE, 2013)

Academics and policy

In conclusion, the role of academics in policy formation is worth a brief mention. A widely held view among British media academics is that current government reliance on specialist research agencies and polling organizations is marginalizing critical academic policy intervention of a kind that was possible in the period that led to the creation of Channel 4 at the end of the1970s (Freedman, 2008: 102). Georgina Born, for example, has noted the increasing difficulty academics experience in intervening in policy debates. In policy-making circles, Born claims, academic research suffers from a "waning public profile and legitimacy", an indication of which is the fact that "the

role of the public intellectual and policy adviser has been taken over by the increasing numbers of freelance consultants and think tanks" (Born, 2008: 692). Another reason, according to Born, for the failure of academics to make an impression in the policy arena is "the closure of channels previously available to academics for communicating policy-relevant findings in the press and political weeklies" (691). She singles out *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, whose media sections are "staffed by editors whose 'common-sense' falls within the neo-liberal consensus and for whom there is comfort and kudos in speaking the same language as the industry – pro-market and pro-corporate … the quality of the media coverage is superficial, collusive and unanalytical" (693).

Like Freedman, Rennie makes a comparison between academic policy input in the 1970s and the present. A changed political climate, she notes, nowadays favours business and community partnerships, yet there is still a relegation to the inferior status of community media due to the continuing legacy of the public service broadcasting ethos. This attitude can no longer be justified, given the "decentralized broadcasting environment" within which public service broadcasting now exists (Rennie, 2006: 89).

In the UK, academics interested in media policy have formed a Policy Network within MeCCSA, the Media Communications and Cultural Studies Association, the representative organization of the subject area in the UK (http://www.meccsa.org.uk/). Prompted in the first instance by the need to counter the proposal in the government's *Digital Britain* report to 'top-slice' some of the TV licence for funding services outside the BBC, the Leveson enquiry and its aftermath are now a main focus for the Policy Network. MeCCSA, since its founding a little over a decade ago, has maintained important contacts with government research policy. Several members of MeCCSA's Policy Network have formal consultancy relations with official parts of government, *pace* the arguments of Freedman and Born. The concentration of the Policy Network's effort on defence of the BBC and on the Leveson enquiry has sidelined consideration of the community radio sector and the case that could be made for improved funding, given its role as a local public service. That omission serves to make the point that the impact of academic policy intervention as a whole may be limited, but even more so are the voices within that sector which speak for community media interests. Community media is still a minority interest in academic media study, demonstrating the truth of Rennie's comments about the status of community media vis-à-vis public service broadcasting.

Further reading

Howley, K. (ed.) (2010) *Understanding Community Media* (London, Los Angeles: Sage) discusses a wide range of theoretical and policy aspects by contributors from across the world.

Lewis, P. M. (2008) *Promoting Social Cohesion: The Role of Community Media*, Report prepared for the Council of Europe's Group of Media Specialists on Media Diversity (MC-S-MD), retrieved from http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/Doc/H-Inf(2008)013_en.pdf. A survey of community media at the time including arguments for its place in a broadcasting ecology.

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Articles on community radio can often be found in both the *Journal of Radio and Audio Media* (http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/hjrs20/.U4dLY_RDs2Y) and *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* (http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-journal,id=123/).

Key websites: AMARC (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters), http://www2.amarc.org/, and Community Media Forum for Europe, http://www.cmfe.eu/.

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