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Community Radio: The Benefits of a Locally-based Communication Medium

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About the Network

The Social Economy and Sustainability Research (SES/ESD) Network is the Atlantic Node of the Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships (CSERP) – one of six regional research centres across Canada, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), 2005-2010. The Network has a wide variety of academic, community and government partners representing Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador.

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Community Radio: The Benefits of a Locally-based Communication Medium

This report, written by **Ryan Hermens** and **Ivan Emke**, contains two sections: (i) a brief outline of some of the research on the value of community radio; and (ii) notes about one particular approach to community radio and how it has been used by social economy organizations.

Background and Literature

Advancements in information and communication technologies are becoming a hallmark of the 21st century. Around the world, to varying degrees, the internet, television, and mobile telephones are increasingly used to mediate the ways in which people work, live, transmit and receive information, and communicate with one another. However, the distribution of these new technologies is not uniform. The infrastructure and machines needed to partake of the technological revolution can be expensive and cost prohibitive. A daunting task facing contemporary society is “how to narrow this digital disparity between the rich and poor” (Megwa, 336). Indeed, the new technologies often serve to only deepen the inequalities which already exist in our world.

Within wealthy nations, where the use of new information and communication technologies seems ubiquitous, a different barrier exists: globalization and media consolidation have dramatically restricted and shaped the application and uses of the technologies. A precarious juxtaposition is thus created between the seemingly endless possibilities of technology and the limitations imposed by the companies that sell or provide the services.

Responding to the barriers of the dispersion of technology in poor nations, and the limits on the use of technology in rich nations, an older medium is gaining popularity as a means for

effective communication: low-power community radio stations. Because of the participatory and locally-based nature of community radio, it is an effective tool for fostering awareness of, and promoting appreciation for, the specific cultural contexts the stations operate within.

Broadcasting community originated content, recorded and produced by community members, allows the medium to encourage community engagement often more successfully than newer information and communication technologies which can reach wider audiences.

Broadcast radio is divided into three groups: commercial, public, and community (Sussman, 226). The characteristics of all three can vary, but generally, commercial radio stations are owned by a business and operated for profit while public radio stations are in part funded through governmental subsidies, grants, and sponsorships from local businesses (Sussman, 226). Community radio stations, however, operate on a smaller-scale and concentrate on events and issues within the community the station is a part of (Perry, 563). As opposed to commercial and public radio stations, the focus of community radio “isn’t about how far your signal reaches but how near” (Kelliher, 1).

The equipment required to establish a community radio station can be purchased for about \$10,000 and operating budgets can be minimized with volunteer labour instead of staff positions (Kelliher, 31). Because of the relatively low cost of launching community radio stations, they are accessible to a large cohort of organizations and groups, in many different cultural landscapes. In the United States, many are run by “civil rights organizations, by environmental activists, by church groups and school districts” (Kelliher, 1). But the benefits of community radio are not just experienced within industrialized countries. In South Africa, the use of community radio is increasing because “it is owned by the community, relatively affordable, and enjoys a certain unique intimacy with its owners and audience, pertinent to the

illiterate and rural population, and local culture and tradition” (Megwa, 338). And in many countries in South America, community radio stations are closely aligned with civil society organizations, community activism, and even unions. For example, some of the first community stations in the Americas were set up as radio stations in Bolivia that served rural mining communities, and that were financed by donations from the miners (or deductions from their pay, in the case of unionized miners) (O’Connor).

In the U.S., radio is the “most utilized medium for people over age 12” (Sussman, 226). However, in spite of the popularity of radio as a source of information, the number of those producing it is limited. In the U.S. in 2000, “the two largest radio group owners each had more than 440 stations” (Hamilton, 49). Within urban centres in developed countries, community radio stations provide an alternative to the increasingly corporate owned media outlets. And national communication policy in both Argentina and Uruguay have explicitly supported community-based radio stations as a way to decrease the power of the media monopolies in those countries.

Due to the participatory nature of community radio, underrepresented viewpoints are given an outlet (Sussman, 231). The people who engage in community radio “are the voices that have either been pushed out of the radio spectrum or never invited into it” (Kelliher, 1). Minorities who otherwise might be shunned by the mainstream media are able to foster awareness about their cultures and given a voice to articulate their experiences (Sussman, 235).

As an example, WSBL-LP, a station in South Bend, Indiana, was launched in 2002 to fill a void in the Hispanic community that was caused by the absence of a Spanish-Language radio station (Kelliher, 31). The station not only broadcasts “traditional and contemporary Hispanic

music but also English-language vocabulary lessons during the break” (Kelliher, 31).

Community radio enriches communities and helps to encourage discourse among different social, economic, and class groups; by celebrating communities, they can be strengthened (Kelliher, 32).

The benefits of community radio are not just measured in what the stations broadcast; their very existence functions to foster community engagement. KBOO, a community radio station in Portland, Oregon, has been broadcasting since 1968 (Sussman, 223). In a case study of the station, Sussman identifies four community functions that KBOO serves: “*public transmitter of progressive politics and diverse local culture*” (228), “*provision of radio training*” (229), “*political education and mobilization*” (230), and “*community building/sustaining and outreach*” (231).

The priorities of community radio are fundamentally opposite to those of commercial radio, it “[originates] locally and [focuses] tightly on local needs” (Kelliher, 32). In the pursuit of transmitting diverse local culture, KBOO strives to “first fulfill the needs and interests pertinent to the least empowered people in its signal area” (Sussman, 236). This practice is contradictory to the model used by most corporate and public stations who strive to increase listenership by broadcasting content that focuses on the dominant groups within their signal area (Sussman, 228).

Within the context of urban areas, community radio stations can function as important resources that engage, celebrate, and foster community participation. Rebellious against media consolidation and a limiting of voices in corporate media, “community radio offers a refuge for people yearning for a more democratic society” (Sussman, 237). As a community resource that

relies on community members to fund, operate, and generate content, community radio helps to create community (Sussman, 225).

In developing nations, where the trouble is the absence of media—not the consolidation of it—community radio stations fulfill important functions (Megwa, 349). The presence of a community radio “gives listeners a sense of community and identity, conquers language barriers, serves as a reliable source of development information, and creates action space for people to connect with their local leaders and institutions” (Megwa, 338). Susan H. Perry writes:

Radio has always played a major development role in Africa and within the past decade has begun to figure prominently in peace consolidation across the continent. The supremacy of the medium is unchallenged in Africa, where 97 percent of the population relies on radio rather than television as a source of news and entertainment (562).

The affordability of community radio allows it to “serve as an interface between new information technologies and rural and poor communities” (Megwa, 337). The digital disparity between the rich and poor is thus decreased partially by the establishment of community radio. Simultaneously, the presence of a community radio station is beneficial to the community within which it broadcasts because of its use as a means to disperse information.

In some places in Africa, “women and children have come to value information as their most cherished possession in the quest for personal safety” (563). Wars, conflicts, and fighting have destabilized many regions; through the use of community radio, local residents are able to alert their fellow community members about areas of the town to avoid or other information that keeps them away from danger (Perry, 563).

By focusing on community events and occurrences, community radio is able to provide “direct and indirect assistance to their communities” (Megwa, 347). The content can be molded and revised to fit the specific cultural contexts. Programs can be produced that “feature debates on issues important to the community—HIV/AIDS, alcohol, smoking, teenage pregnancy, malaria, car hijacking, government notices, employment opportunities, school studies, and development initiatives” (Megwa, 347).

Community members can be empowered through their participation in the production of community radio. Many local residents are “trained as announcers, producers, journalists, and station managers to provide radio programming for their rural constituents” (Perry, 563). Community radio can also serve as a platform for social critique. In South Africa, community radio, as argued by Eronini Megwa, has “emerged as a challenge to state-owned and controlled media a tool to empower the disadvantaged majority of the country” (338).

Communication and information technologies are dramatically reshaping the ways in which humans interact. The technologies, however, are not a panacea; a disparity exists between those who can and cannot afford to take part in the technological revolution. Among the latter, though, the bounds of technology are not limitless. As a substitute to newer technologies, the moderate cost of community radio helps to alleviate the divide between the economic situation of different regions, classes and organizations. The accessibility of community radio fosters a locally-based, community resource that supports communities in ways corporate radio and media outlets cannot.

Despite the inherit and vast differences between developed and developing countries, rural and urban communities, and rich and poor regions, the benefits of community radio are

wide-reaching. Providing alternatives to corporate and state-controlled media—or, as is the case in some communities, providing a media outlet at all—community radio is a useful tool in the dissemination of information and entertainment that reflects the needs of otherwise disadvantaged and ignored groups. Community radio stations “are popular, affordable, and accessible to their owner communities” (Megwa, 349).

One Model for Community Radio

As mentioned above, there is a variety of purposes that community radio can serve, just as there are a range of ways that community radio can be organized. In this section, we outline one way that we have used community radio in Atlantic Canada over the past number of years for a number of projects. These projects used the Special Events category of Industry Canada’s guidelines to get permission to broadcast, on low-power FM, for a limited period of time. During the broadcasts, a wide variety of community partners and individuals participated on-air, and communities were able to hear their own issues, discussed by their neighbours, on their “own” radio station.

In most rural communities today, the majority of the communications tools that exist are focussed on the stories of others. Television, radio, internet, newspapers (even the weekly kind), are generally giving communities other peoples’ stories. There is a lack of locally-controlled and locally-operated media. To help to address this, we bring in a portable FM “studio,” complete with a transmitter and an antenna. We get approval from Industry Canada to broadcast (on a frequency that they provide), at about 35 watts of power, which goes about 20 kilometres (depending on the topography and the weather). We broadcast for 3-5 days, about 10 or 12

hours per day. We get community groups involved, local musicians, students from local schools, organizations, businesses, and anyone else willing to participate, and also do telephone interviews with people from elsewhere. One of the regular components is a webcast as well, which can connect the community to people who are from there but who now live elsewhere.

The typical content of such broadcasts include the following:

- Interviews with local leaders
- School students reading poetry, doing local stories, interviewing elderly folks
- Local musicians (both live and they bring in their CDs)
- Interviews with researchers doing work in the area (which gives them a chance to explain what they are doing, and allows the local people to understand the projects better – and it forces researchers to discuss what they are doing in more general language)
- Interviews with members of local voluntary organizations, civil society groups, social economy actors, etc.
- Lots of drop-in interviews with young folks, who just want to hear their voice on the radio, and dare each other to say something on the radio

In order to gauge the value of these broadcasts, we sometimes conduct surveys to evaluate the responses of the local listeners. For example, the following table is from a survey of listeners to a community radio broadcast in Bay St. George South, NL.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Did listen	Did not listen/ NA
I learned something new during the community radio broadcast	27.9%	44.1%	22.1%	4.4%	1.5%	68	35
I gained a new respect for the actions and abilities of local leaders during the broadcast	22.9	51.4	22.9	1.4	1.4	70	33
Since listening to the broadcast, I now have more hope for the future of my	11.6	39.1	30.4	14.5	4.3	69	34

community							
Since listening to the radio broadcast, I am now more interested in community affairs	17.4	53.6	23.2	2.9	2.9	69	34

In general, the responses to these questions were very encouraging. For three of the four statements, close to three-quarters of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. In terms of additional hope for the future, just over half of the respondents felt that the programs had increased their sense of optimism. It could well be that the programs fed into a pre-existing sense of dedication and hope within many of the listeners, rather than having “caused” the increased hope. Nevertheless, whatever the origin of the hope, the fact that the programs increased their confidence in the community and in the leaders of the area is clearly significant. It is evidence of the efficacy of this use of communication technology for community development assistance.

If we were to summarize some of our learnings from these events, they would include the following:

- Youth will get engaged and talk about their community, if given the chance
- For a mass medium, radio can be intimate and non-threatening
- People want to hear their own stories, from voices that they recognize as their friends and neighbours
- The communication tool of radio takes on a new significance when it is used for local purposes; it is seen in a new light, with new possibilities
- Social economy organizations can use community radio to tell the rich stories that they have to share

- People miss the community radio stations when they leave, which has spurred a number of communities to work on getting their own long-term community stations (and has resulted in an increase in community capacity)

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SES/ESD Network Research Goals

- . Contributing to the theory and practice of social economy in the Atlantic region
- . Internal bridging, bonding, mentoring & capacity building
- . Encouraging use of the “social economy” as a framing concept in the region
- . Linking Atlantic partners with other parts of Canada and the world

SES/ESD Network Research Themes and Questions

Conceptualizing & describing the social economy in Atlantic Canada

- . What does the social economy look like? What needs does it address?
- . How can we best capture this sector conceptually?
- . What, if anything, makes it distinctive or innovative? How interconnected are its facets, & to what effect?
- . What are the characteristics of social economy organizations?
- . What are the implications for government policy?

Policy inventory and analysis

- . How are different understandings of “social economy” reflected in government policy?
- . What needs are not being met, & what changes are needed in regulatory environment?
- . What indicators can we develop to aid in policy development?

Community mobilization around issues of common concern (natural resources; food security; inclusion and empowerment)

- . Do social economy organizations contribute to social inclusion, the democratization of the economy, & empowerment?
- . What inputs are needed to overcome obstacles & build capacity?
- . What can we learn from research on mobilization around food security, empowerment & inclusion, community management of natural resources & energy?

Measuring and Financing the Social Economy

- . What can social accounting, co-operative accounting, social auditing, & other techniques contribute towards a better understanding of the work and contributions of social economy organizations?
- . Where do social economy organizations obtain the financing that they need?
- . What do social economy organizations contribute toward financing the social economy?

Modeling & researching innovative, traditional, & IT-based communication and dissemination processes

- . How can social economy actors best communicate?
- . What can our Network team members contribute by developing & modeling processes and techniques?
- . What can be gained from exploring technology as an equalizer vs. technology as a barrier?



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