



Scenes from a Community Radio Campaign, 1972–2009: Un/Masking Objectivity

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Three Decades, Three Roles

It's taken over three decades to get community radio recognized in the UK, and I've been involved from the beginning, in turn as practitioner, academic, and activist. I'd like to share some stories that illustrate how these roles can overlap and complement each other, sometimes openly, and at other times be mobilized under cover to lend support to the cause of community media.

Under cover? Let me explain. Basically, this kind of struggle is about getting a fairer deal for sections of society that are disadvantaged. As practitioners we know how media can set the agenda for public opinion, and the goal for activists has to be to win over majority opinion so that politicians are forced to act. Of course, the existence of community media is a response to the failings of mainstream media which, as many academic studies show, often marginalize, distort, or ignore the cultures and viewpoints of the social groups in question. Mainstream journalism doesn't do any better in its treatment of community media either, misunderstanding it or regarding it as a threat to standards of impartiality—that altar of professionalism once dismissed by Armand Mattelart as "soggy pluralism based on self-castrating notions of balance" (Mattelart & Piemme 1980, p. 337).

I'm painting a very broad picture here. The mainstream is not a monolith, and there are journalists and researchers who see the justice of the community media cause. If they are to run a sympathetic story, they need to back it up with expert opinion—enter the academic. But this academic has to be careful. Advancing a cause must not be seen to abandon the objectivity and balance that rules in academia as well.

To sum up: I want to ask how the practitioner/activist/academic triad, in attending to a field ignored for so long by academia and generally misunderstood or marginalized by mainstream media, can create the discursive space without which community media cannot be recognized.

Criticizing Television

Scenes: The word suggests a "stage" and a "performance." Teaching certainly involves performance, and that's where I started, teaching in secondary schools. Teaching should also be about

empowerment, and a television documentary about the medium's power to change lives, Richard Cawston's *Television and the World* (1962), changed mine. I got a job in educational television, and after a spell in a production company, went on to work for the Independent Television Authority (ITA), which regulated the commercial sector (ITV). Educational broadcasting was an area at the edge of the mainstream staffed by people interested in getting children—and adults—to take a critical stance toward the media, and in the ITA I was lucky to work under Brian Groombridge, whose seminal *Television and the People* (1972) captured the zeitgeist of participation. It was a time of rebellion within mainstream media, both BBC and ITV, as well as in the reality the media attempted to report. I joined other broadcasters in the Free Communications Group, meeting in secret to criticize the organizations we worked for, particularly the BBC's introduction of a new managerialism and the ITA's failure to enforce the franchise commitments of the TV companies. The BBC launched its pioneering access program *Open Door*, and outside the fortresses of mainstream broadcasting, video arrived. Groombridge encouraged my interest in it. My article for *New Society* was, I think, the first article in the serious press to discuss community television. I wrote about the Canadian National Film Board's *Challenge for Change* program that influenced John "Hoppy" Hopkins's video work in London and suggested that the cable companies' attitude toward community video would be a test of their intent (Lewis, 1972).

"What Are You Going to Pay the Station Manager?"

1972. I'm being shown to the elevator by the man I've just interviewed, a senior executive of the UK's biggest cable operator, Rediffusion. The company recently obtained a license to distribute local programming on its network in Bristol (population 500,000) in South West England. Five such licenses are on offer by a Conservative-led government; it is a cautious experiment to test whether this will boost subscriber interest at a time when improved terrestrial transmission by the broadcasters is draining cable profits—the satellite kiss of life is still a few years in the future.

Following up on my *New Society* piece, I'm writing an article for an educational weekly. My questions to Rediffusion have been about whether the company will allow or welcome community involvement. As we wait for the elevator, I have a last question: "What are you going to pay the station manager?" His reply was, "That's another interview," so we went back to his office.

Battles Lost and Won

1973–1975. Months later, as station manager of *Bristol Channel*, I'm embroiled in battles with Rediffusion's corporate center in London. They want an early launch, too soon in my view to allow training and *conscientization*—Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has just been translated into English. I lose that battle and another equally significant. I had been discussing with Professor Jim Halloran at the University of Leicester's Centre for Mass Communication Research the possibility of a research study to provide a baseline to measure the impact of *Bristol Channel*. Rediffusion vetoed the idea; instead, it was the neighboring project in Swindon that got the benefit of the Leicester research.

I do manage to win the "Battle of Baskerville Bold"—a reference to the typeface used on an art student's winning entry for our competition to design the station logo—in the teeth of opposition from

Rediffusion's PR division, who want the bold capitals of the corporate image. Our logo is accompanied by a jingle of guitar and a voice solo: "Everyone's got a story to tell and we'd love to know what yours is." "Who's this 'we'?" the executive asks on the phone from London. "I thought you were the manager there." Our participatory style is at odds with that of a commercial company. Industry gossip describes it as an "alliance of mercenaries and missionaries," and there is nothing participatory about London's shutdown of Bristol Channel at a week's notice with a year of the license still to run (Lewis, 1978, 1982).

COMCOM, CRA, CMA

1976. In a yacht belonging to EMI, moored in the harbor of Cannes, a scheme is being hatched over a bottle of wine. By now, all but one of the local TV experiments have been shut down by cable companies that see the hope of pay-TV disappear after a Labour government comes to power. The exception is the cable station in Swindon, a railway town, far from any mainstream TV center, where, as a local once told me, "It takes royalty to fall off a horse before you see a camera crew round here." That's one reason Swindon Viewpoint has succeeded brilliantly: It gave the town its own medium to use. The University of Leicester's research—the only social scientific research on the 1970s cable experiment—shows both good viewing figures and strong community participation (Halloran, 1975). The other reason is the management skill of my host, Richard Dunn, who has handled the relationship with his parent company, EMI, far better than I did with Rediffusion. (Dunn went on to run London's biggest commercial company, Thames TV).

Richard and I are attending Vidcom, a largely commercial event that gives space on the margins to community TV. So, in the unlikely setting of a company yacht, the Community Communications Group (COMCOM) is conceived. In the following months, anger among sacked cable TV staff and volunteers (how do you sack a volunteer?) combines with a growing community arts movement to form an organization that serves as a rallying point for the community media movement. Its first goal is to respond to a government committee, the Annan Report on the Future of Broadcasting (HMSO, 1977). Annan has suggested taking local radio away from the duopoly of BBC and commercial companies and creating a Local Broadcasting Authority to run the sector: "Local radio is a different animal and needs a different keeper" (Annan, 1977, chap. 14, p. 4). COMCOM agrees (of course, the duopoly doesn't) and proposes the addition of community radio, financed by 5% of the license fee, noting that if "non-commercial broadcasting should cease to be the *exclusive* domain of the BBC, it follows that the licence fee revenue should therefore cease to be the *exclusive* property of the BBC. It is not theirs by divine right" (COMCOM, 1977, p. 8, original emphasis). COMCOM's proposal anticipated by three decades the debate currently being carried on in the UK about "top-slicing" the BBC's license revenue. In its *Comments on the Annan Report*, COMCOM draws on experience from overseas. We obtain advice and information from the U.S. National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB), from Canadian community broadcasters, and from the recently formed Public Broadcasting Association of Australia. Studies commissioned by the Council of Europe¹ and UNESCO (e.g., Berrigan, 1977) also provide evidence that can be used in press articles to keep the idea of community media in public view.

¹ Paul Beaud's 1980 report, *Community Media*, summarized nearly a decade of these studies.

COMCOM'S focus turns to radio, the Community Radio Association (CRA). Subsequently, the Community Media Association (<http://www.commedia.org.uk>) takes over and the rest of the story has been told elsewhere: the broken promises and lax regulation of commercial radio exposed by evidence given to a Parliamentary Select Committee by COMCOM and the Local Radio Workshop; the dialogue with the Home Office; the cancelled pilot scheme in 1986; the "incremental franchises" of the late 1990s; the Access Radio pilot in the last days of the Radio Authority; Ofcom's launch of the community radio sector in 2004 (Local Radio Workshop, 1983; Lewis & Booth, 1989; Gray & Lewis, 1992; Everitt, 2003a, 2003b; Lewis, 2008).

The Trojan Horse of Academia

1980. Richard Hoggart, distinguished author, broadcaster, academic and Warden of the University of London's Goldsmiths College, has just delivered the keynote address to the radio industry's Radio Festival in Edinburgh, commending the idea of community radio. From the audience of professional broadcasters comes a question: "What exactly *is* community radio?" Hoggart looks confused. Evidently, my briefing— by this time I was a lecturer at Goldsmiths—has been ineffective. To my embarrassment, he proceeds to "out" me in front of the audience as the author of this section of his speech, passing the buck back for me to give the answer. It wasn't a bad idea, getting Hoggart's gravitas to sell the argument. But it turns out I've been unmasked as an activist, *parti pris*, one of the "usual suspects" as far as this audience is concerned.

Academic interest in participatory and community media was first encouraged by UNESCO, which organized a series of seminars on the topic in 1977 and 1978. The meeting at CIESPAL (<http://www.ciespal.net/home/index.php>) in Quito, Ecuador, showed that Latin American scholars were far ahead of their European colleagues at this time. Within the IAMCR (International Association of Media and Communication Research) a Community Communications Section formed in 1982. The next year saw the founding of AMARC² at a conference in Montreal.

In the UK, the first gleams of interest came from University Extra-Mural departments. The University of Bristol held a short series on community media, which I co-taught with a sociologist, and in 1978–1979, the University of London committed itself to funding a course whose aim was to identify a community that wanted or would benefit from a small-scale radio license. Course members turned themselves into consultants and gave advice on setting up a radio station to an adult education center in the East End, but the arrival of Thatcher's Conservative administration put an end to the plan to apply for a license.

In the years that followed the Edinburgh Radio Festival, a small group of us university lecturers continued to hover uneasily on the edge of this annual event. We were doubly marginal. In industry circles, our claim for radio to be a legitimate subject for academic study was met with skepticism. In the

² AMARC is the French acronym now universally used for the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (<http://www.amarc.org/>).

growing field of media studies, film and TV took precedence over radio, and as for community radio, it was "a marginal type within a marginal subject" (Lewis, 2002).

1982. I'm in the hospitality room of Capital Radio, waiting to take part in a live discussion about broadcast access. I refuse a drink and fend off the questions of a researcher, who needs to find out what line I'm going to take. The program producers have invited me as an academic, the expert to lend balance, because also appearing on the show are members of the Local Radio Workshop, whose interventions at public meetings have cast them in the role of extremists. LRW have been pressing London radio stations to accept programs they've been producing with campaigning groups—antinuclear, feminist, minority ethnic—the kinds of productions that don't fit easily into the "soggy pluralism" of London's local radio. On air, I discard the mask of objectivity and let rip.

Radio Studies Network

1997. It's 2 a.m. in a bar in the Hyatt Hotel in Birmingham. The MD of the Radio Advertising Bureau (RAB) has just agreed to give me £2,000. The Hyatt is the place where the Radio Festival elite are lodged. I make do with a bed and breakfast the other side of the tracks. But this is unbelievable: The RAB's two grand brings us to the £10,000 target we need to launch the Radio Studies Network. Between them the BBC and the Radio Academy, an industry organization funded by both halves of the duopoly and signaling Hollywood rather than academia, have given us £3,000. The industry £5,000 is exactly matched by smaller contributions from eight university media studies departments. The money buys administrative time to set up the Radio Studies Network, founded at a conference late in 1998 and hosted as a project at the London School of Economics. This begins to put radio on the academic map within the field of media and cultural studies, and with it community radio—and by extension, community media. Conference papers expand the field: *The Radio Journal* provides a publication outlet³ when the three issues of its Volume 3 are dedicated to community radio.

Using International Networks

The industry contribution to the Radio Studies Network, plus a subsequent £7,000 from the Radio Academy to create a radio research database, was a significant step. Dialogue with broadcasters is as an essential precondition for successful academic research. It was achieved also at the European level in the International Radio Research Network (IREN) project. Created within the framework of the European Commission's research program, the network included 13 institutional partners coming from 10 European countries, who set themselves the task of mapping academic radio-related research projects across Europe and opening a dialogue with broadcasters. One IREN partner, a broadcaster as well as an academic, was a member of the Radio Committee of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which led to dialogue with the EBU and contributions to its conferences.⁴

³ <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals.php?issn=14764504>

⁴ For an attempt at dialogue with a broadcasting readership, see http://www.ebu.ch/union/publications/diffusion_on_line/2004/pdf/online_26_e_IREN.pdf

In the end, however, dialogue with broadcasters is not sufficient to change policy. In the UK, as the radio research community established its Network, it was the Community Media Association (CMA) whose patient lobbying wrung concessions from the government. At the European level, while community radio advocates may advance the claim for the sector to be recognized as a local form of public service, the public service and state broadcasters represented in the EBU have plenty on their hands without needing to listen to that argument.

The current shifts in European policies have been achieved through the lobbying of the Community Media Forum for Europe, whose membership is a mix of practitioners, policy makers and academics. Its latest achievement is to have won acceptance of a declaration on community media by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers (http://www.cmfe.eu/docs/Declaration_Community_media_adopted_CM-11-02-09E1.pdf).

Conclusion

Where community radio and community media are concerned, one can trace the sequence of stages as the field came to be constituted: First came practice, a form of direct action that challenged the assumptions, values, and practices of the mainstream, and in which, as in all practice, theory was implicit. But the task for observers and commentators was then to describe and demarcate the field. This had to be done within mainstream media as well as in academic work. Within the latter, the task was to make connections within existing theory and to develop new theoretical perspectives. And all the time, at other levels, public and media understanding had to be won for policies that would create an infrastructure both for the object of study (e.g., regulatory policies) and for study and research itself (academic policies). Achieving this needs the triad of activists, practitioners, and academics.

The AMARC-Europe conference in Bucharest in December 2008 was titled *Community Radio in Europe: Broadcasting on the Edge*. By contrast, in academic and policy-making circles, community media are too often seen as being "on the edge of broadcasting"—with a consequent marginal position in funding and policy priorities. In fact, the "third sector" should more truly be positioned at the center of social policies concerned with health and housing, young people and regeneration, migrant and minority ethnic communities, lifelong learning and media literacy, and so on. Getting policy makers to think outside the "media box" when they deal with community media is a key task.

I'll end by referring to Marc Raboy's (1991) article, *Strategies for Democratic Communication*. (Though Thede and Ambrosi's book is out of print, I see Amazon lists it). All this time later, Raboy's five types of intervention (pp. 168-171), which, ideally, should work "in complementarity" together, are a useful summary of what we should be doing:

At the conclusion of IREN's 30-month EU-funded existence, the network of radio researchers was able to regroup in the Radio Research Section of ECREA <http://www.ecrea.eu/divisions/section/id/13>

1. Ongoing critical analysis of media by academics
2. Media literacy as “popular education” (nowadays, we might say “lifelong learning”)
3. “Creation and support for autonomous media”
4. “Support for critical, progressive initiatives coming from within the dominant media institutions”—mainstream practitioners include “both devils and angels”
5. Policy intervention

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