journal of alternative and community media

Sustainable community media: The challenge of upholding the public trust

Andrew Ó Baoill[*]

National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

Salvatore Scifo[*]

Bournemouth University, United Kingdom

'We mortals,' argues John Durham Peters (2000: 271), 'really love only personally, and yet not to love all people is unjust'. Peters is grappling with the constraints (and nature) of 'authentic' communication across time and space, the impossible demands we make of communication to foster communion, empathy, and dialogue. Similarly, Freire (2004) notes a paradox in the quest for liberatory pedagogy, that 'whereas faith in humankind is an a priori requirement for dialogue, trust is established in dialogue' (91) and argues that humanism must be grounded in 'the concrete, existential, present situation of real people' (93). That call – for humanism, for materiality, for the particular – is one that runs against the dominant neoliberal capitalist impulse, which tends rather to fragment and abstract, as publics are turned into audiences, and thence to consumers and (in Smythe's (1977) formulation) audience commodities. That tension between the particular and the general undergirds a recurrent preoccupation of political economists of media, that of the subsumption of human communication to the demands of capitalism. James Carey (1997: 73) goes so far as to claim that 'the entire history of modern communications is the turning of the resources not only of information but of meaning itself into a phenomenon of the market.'

As Jane Mansbridge (1996: 59) has noted, 'we need … a public discourse not completely overwhelmed with the massive resources of existing forms of domination'. That is a challenge that community media scholars and practitioners will recognise. Indeed, our initial call for papers for this project included mention of an assertion from Chris Atton and James F Hamilton (2008: 26) that the 'general political-economic dilemma for any critical project is that it needs resources with which to work, but those crucial resources are present only in the very society that it seeks to change or dissolve.' Community media projects are often attempts to address this tension, through a focus on the local that is seen as both valuable in itself, a moral claim about the nature of human interaction, and also linking to broader social and political movements. Writing about what she terms citizens' media, Clemencia Rodríguez (2001) has suggested that such projects can contribute to the 'swelling of the democratic' (22) through their construction, in the aggregate, of a media space she compares to a 'colorful quilt [taking] a myriad of different shapes and eclectic forms' (27). Rodríguez recognises that many such projects are individually ephemeral, rising and falling in response to a range of factors, but forming part of a greater (if only loosely articulated) whole.

Email: andrew.obaoill@nuigalway.ie
Email: sscifo@bournemouth.ac.uk

A recognition of the natural life-course of activist and volunteer projects can be healthy, recognising that eternal life and continued growth are not necessarily the metrics of success we should adopt. However, for many projects, questions of resilience and sustainability of the organisation and its work are important: the resources leveraged by these projects are often hard-won, and are understood to be held in trust for the broader community, and for future generations. In such contexts, the tensions between mission and practice are central to any understanding of the ethical practice of community media. The papers presented here bring a number of perspectives to bear on these questions, and help illuminate the challenges faced by practitioners as they grapple with these issues.

As with many such projects, much is owed to the various institutions that have supported its development. The genesis of the project occurred during a Moore Institute Fellowship at NUI Galway, a reminder of both the institutional supports and human interactions that underpin successful projects. The call from Susan Forde and Chris Atton for proposals for special issues of the journal provided an early focus for our collaboration. Further conversations and progress on the project have continued with the backdrop of subsequent IAMCR conferences, and at a conference at NUI Galway on resilient community media, sponsored by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, earlier this year. It has been heartening to note how the topic resonates with work being undertaken by many others. The significant level of interest in our initial call for papers, and the large number of proposals received, resulted in some hard decisions about what to include (and exclude) in preparing this issue – and in the welcome decision of the journal editors to approve the production of not just one, but two, issues on this topic, the second of which will be published early next year. Even so, several worthy projects have had to be omitted due to capacity constraints.

Maintaining community media organisations requires ongoing attention to a number of factors, including funding, governance structures, changing political and economic conditions, all while building, consolidating and extending relationships with target communities. The articles in this issue, through a range of perspectives and approaches, reflect on questions of resilience and endurance as they arise in alternative, radical, oppositional, and community-grounded media, exploring the various interdependent factors that can impact the ongoing stability and health of community media projects.

In this issue, we bring together articles that focus on the so-called Global North – in particular anglophone-dominant nations – with a set of articles that examine the state of community media in Latin America. The Latin American legacy of community media is well-established – some of the earliest known examples of what would now be termed community radio come from working-class communities in Bolivia and elsewhere – while countries like Canada, Australia, and the United States have long-established community media sectors.

In the first article in this collection, Charlotte Bedford examines a recent change in ownership of Radio Adelaide, the oldest community radio station in Australia, as the University of Adelaide withdrew from its longstanding involvement with the station, part of a pattern we have seen elsewhere. Her study documents the challenges of the transition for the station, including issues of governance, staffing, and funding, along with fundamental questions of how these can be reconciled with the communitarian goals of the station. Gretchen King also deals with stations in crisis, in this case two Canadian stations experiencing conflict over the role of volunteers in governance and programming. King points to declines in public funding for community radio, which she situates within a broader neoliberal regulatory and political context.

Jason Loviglio shifts our focus from the level of the station, to the programme production team, with his examination of The Center for Emerging Media, in Maryland, USA. The centre, which had produced a radio show for broadcast on a local public radio station, saw that collaboration ended, ostensibly because of declines in audience ratings. Loviglio, though,

identifies a number of other factors, which will resonate with many familiar with tensions in defining the mission of non-commercial media projects. In their collaboration for this issue, Heather Anderson and Clemencia Rodríguez mine the Australian experience to argue for the need for the emerging low-power community radio movement in the United States to be firmly rooted in local communities. Diana Coryat similarly argues for the centrality of processes and relationships to the success of community media, in her examination of projects in Colombia and Ecuador.

Pablo Fisher, in his examination of Argentinian stations, turns our focus back to the public policy environment. While community radio stations have proven adept at surviving in challenging environments, often by leveraging a multiplicity of revenue sources, to thrive, Fisher argues that sustainability depends on a supportive policy environment, which enables stability and planning. In his examination of the Venezuelan Bolivarian model, Rich Potter argues for understanding facilitating maximal self-governance as an overarching goal of community media, and as with Fisher examines the importance of multiple funding streams as a factor in ensuring the sustainability of a community radio sector that can serve civil society.

Janey Gordon, in her article, draws attention to an emerging challenge for community radio – the increasingly multi-platform nature of listening, and the slow decline of FM transmission. Her piece offers a reminder that funding challenges and the regulatory environment are not the only conditions shaping and constraining the community radio sector, and that technology must also be considered.

Together, these articles offer a range of perspectives that – like Rodríguez's metaphor of citizens' media as a quilt – together shed light on the manner in which conflicts over mission, volunteer and community engagement, and structural conditions, come together to shape the nature, and the sustainability of community media projects.

We are grateful to the journal editors Susan Forde and Chris Atton for their support in bringing this project to fruition; to Ben Green, Managing Editor of the journal, for his ongoing assistance; and to the anonymous reviewers for the care and attention they brought to their work. A project like this, of course, depends on the contributors, and it was a privilege, first, to have such a broad range of perspectives and approaches reflected in the submissions received, and then to be trusted with a set of papers that will, we hope, provide real value to the field. The papers presented in this issue, of course, are just the first set, and we look forward to the publication of the second issue on this theme in the near future.

References

Atton C & Hamilton J (2008) *Alternative Journalism*. London: Sage.

Carey J (1997) Communications and economics. In: Munson ES and Warren CA (eds.) *James Carey: A Critical Reader*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 60–78.

Freire P (2004) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed. 30th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Continuum.

Mansbridge J (1996) Using power/fighting power: the polity. In: Benhabib S (ed.) *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 46–66.

Peters JD (2000) *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Rodríguez C (2001) *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Smythe D (1977) Communications: Blindspots of Western Marxism. *Canadian Journal of Communication* 1(3): 1–27.