

Discursive absence: the case for community radio

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Abstract

The case for community radio must address a range of different areas - legislation, frequencies, regulatory structures, finance, public demand and political will – which, taken together, may be regarded as the discursive field of dominant mainstream broadcasting. Without campaigning pressure there is no discursive space for a notion which challenges the established norms. The article illustrates this with the example of the British campaign for community radio which had to overcome obstacles that can still be found in many settings today. In the early 1980s British activists faced the additional problem that radio received little attention within academic media studies.

Keywords

Discourse, community radio, activism, media studies.

Resum

El tema de la ràdio comunitària ha d'abordar tot un seguit d'àrees diferents —legislació, freqüències, estructures de regulació, finances, demanda pública i voluntat política— que, si s'agafen en conjunt, es poden entendre com el terreny discursiu de la radiodifusió generalista dominant. Sense campanyes de pressió no hi ha espai discursiu per a un concepte que desafia les normes establertes. L'article ho il·lustra amb l'exemple de la campanya per la ràdio comunitària al Regne Unit, que va haver de superar obstacles que avui encara es poden trobar en molts contextos. A principis dels anys vuitanta activistes britànics es van encarar amb el problema afegit que la ràdio rebia molt poca atenció dels estudis acadèmics sobre comunicació.

Paraules clau

Discurs, ràdio comunitària, activisme, estudis de la comunicació

When the case for community radio is being advanced, its proponents usually have to confront what might be called the discursive field of mainstream media. Michel Foucault has described discourse as a dense and complex set of practices, following rules, often unspoken, supported by links to neighbouring practices, with relations to power and articulated over a period of time (Foucault 1969/2008: 230). The nineteenth century classical scholar, Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College, Oxford and known for what at the time was a definitive series of texts of Plato, was satirised in rhyme that succinctly expresses the idea of discourse:

First come I, my name is Jowett
There is no knowledge but I know it.
I am the Master of this College.
What I don't know isn't knowledge

Beyond the boundary of a discourse, certain ideas are literally unspeakable: history, and contemporary times as well, provide many instances where, for example, the dominant discourses

on gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation make it extremely difficult for the oppressed to challenge the *status quo*.

Although this article draws on the British experience of campaigning for community radio over the period of the last four decades (the 2004 legislation came later in the UK than in most Western European countries), the issues faced then are still relevant in countries where similar campaigns have to be fought. Back in the early 1980s, British campaigners had to overcome a double obstacle. Not only was there no discursive space for the idea of community radio but radio itself had yet to be developed as a subject within academic media studies.

The opening argument in, and rationale for, *The Invisible Medium*, written at the end of the 1980s, makes the point:

“Radio is hardly noticed in academic literature [and] as a result, radio practice and policy lack a language for critical reflection and analysis. Why we have the radio we do, what radio we could have if things were different – these questions are as difficult to debate as the hidden histories are to uncover or the alternative practices to publicise”. (Lewis & Booth 1989: xiii)

Radio within media studies

To understand, first, this discursive absence in media studies, a comparison with well-established academic fields such as science and history shows how an infrastructure of a subject association, conferences, a journal, research grants and a strand of book publishing are needed to support study and research and, importantly, as will be discussed in a moment, provide a source of “experts” on which mainstream media can draw. That such an infrastructure had never supported the study of sound and radio was an inheritance of the transition from orality to a predominantly visual culture (Ong 1982) and a strong academic literary tradition. British media studies at this time were focussed on the press, television and film. Radio appeared as a mere chapter in media history.

This was to change: partly in the UK due to the work of the Radio Studies Network (a subject association for lecturers and researchers of radio within media studies formed in 1998)¹ and similar organisations across Europe, including the international radio research network, *IREN*, which helped raise the profile of radio within media studies.² The attention paid from the turn of the millennium to community and alternative media by the “new wave” of academic work was partly the result of the state reached by media studies at that point: theoretical connections were being made with work in sociology, anthropology and aesthetics, to name the major importations. Atton and Couldry, writing in 2003, offered an explanation for ‘why alternative media might now be emerging from the margins of scholarly attention’. They pointed to the revival of social activism, often on a global scale and using non-mainstream media production linked to the Internet, the apathy towards, or commercial appropriation of, conventional democratic processes and an increased interest by international agencies in local empowerment within development projects (Atton & Couldry 2003:579-580, cited in Lewis & Jones 2006:29).

Obstacles to community radio

Where community radio is concerned, a circle of obstacles has to be confronted and overcome: these have to do with legislation, frequencies, regulatory structures, finance, public demand and political will. The gatekeepers in each of these areas have to be weaned from positions which accept the *status quo* and allow no room, no discursive space, for alternatives. While the arguments of each particular group of professionals have to be addressed, each ultimately depends, like the stones which sustain an arch, on the keystone of political will. It is pressure from public opinion that can force political change and, in this, the media play an important agenda-setting role. Winning over mainstream media support is therefore the task that must be undertaken by campaigners for community radio but this is difficult since community media’s very *raison d’être*

is critical opposition to the mainstream, its shortcomings, distortions and silences.

The British campaign for community radio arose out of the experience of community television on cable in the 1970s. The initiative, which licensed programming on cable networks in a few cities, came from a Conservative government and was intended to support the commercial cable industry. But despite the commercial motive and ownership, the programming of several of the stations, strongly influenced by American public access and Canadian community video philosophy, was participatory and challenged contemporary mainstream conventions. The stations’ ability to engage with communities at a local level attracted favourable notice from a government committee on the future of broadcasting (Annan 1977) but, on the return of a Labour government in 1974, most of the stations were abruptly closed by their commercial owners. This outcome had two different consequences.

In their public statements, Rediffusion ‘claimed, in closing their station in Bristol, that the experiment had served its purpose and had provided them with the experience and information they required’ (Halloran 1975:26) but the cable industry as a whole propagated the view of the episode as a failure and their interpretation was the one accepted by the mainstream media and successive governments: local programming had failed to stem the haemorrhage of subscribers as terrestrial broadcast transmissions improved in quality, and the cable companies failed to persuade the Labour governments of 1974 to allow pay-TV.

But for those in the five pilot cabled areas who had experienced the access offered, and for those who had assisted them, the episode was anything but a failure. The frustrations, as well as the positive discoveries that followed, sustained quarter of a century of activism and policy intervention. In the first instance it led to the formation of the Community Communications Group, COMCOM. Formed in February 1977, COMCOM, besides acting as an information exchange, campaigned for adequate funding for community media and for the statutory right to local community ownership of broadcast stations.

COMCOM published Comments on the Annan Report (COMCOM 1977), critical of the mainstream “duopoly” (BBC and commercial radio) and calling for a sector of community radio. COMCOM’s evidence to a Parliamentary Committee can be traced in the Committee’s report which included the recommendation that ‘future plans for broadcasting in the UK should encompass the possibility of frequency assignments to provide very low-power transmission facilities for voluntary community radio services within small communities’ (SCNI 1978a: xlix). This put the idea onto the agenda of the Home Office (the government department then responsible for broadcasting) and although the item remained low down in the in-tray of Ministers for a long time, it provided the focus for subsequent campaigns.

Courting officialdom

We can therefore see that, up to this point, a very small foothold had been won in official discourse; one which, however, had not yet accepted the activists' name for the medium in question. The careful cultivation of officials in the Home Office Broadcasting Department and attention to the bureaucracy of consultation and its deadlines that was continued in later years by COMCOM's successor, the Community Radio Association,³ was an example of the policy intervention that Raboy lists as a necessary component in his 'strategies for democratic communication' – but one that is often, he comments, neglected by activists (Raboy 1991:171).

Recognition by officials, whether in the IBA or the Home Office, was far from being sufficient to trigger political response and several Australian veterans of community radio, resident in Britain at this time, expressed their exasperation with the slow pace of reform. Australian community radio (then known as "public radio") was well developed. One of the founders of the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia (PBAA) had brought over the first few numbers of its journal, *Broadcasting Australia*, from which examples of successful stations were cited in *Different Keepers* (Lewis 1977) and in COMCOM's *Comments*. The Australian Liberal Party, equivalent to the British Conservative party, was in power when, in 1978, the Minister Tony Staley gave strong positive endorsement for public broadcasting: 'It is accepted that public broadcasters have a better appreciation of the interests, hence needs, of their broadcasting communities than anyone else, including government' (Staley 1978). This was a quote often brandished in subsequent years by the British community radio lobby.

But the presence of Australian colleagues pushing for initiatives was their most important and stimulating contribution. From them the campaign learned how the regulator openly publishing a frequency plan could stimulate demand for local coverage; it learned of the broadcasters' wasteful practice of simulcasting, a term till then unknown to British activists, referring to the doubling up of transmission on both AM and FM; of short-term experimental licences, an idea which COMCOM put forward to the Home Office over a decade before their transformation to Restrictive Service Licences (RSLs) by the Radio Authority (Home Office 1980: 7.36).

Foreign experience

Foreign experience and examples were important to the British campaigners even if less so to traditionally xenophobic officialdom. COMCOM obtained advice from the USA's National Federation of Community Broadcasters and, in the second half of the 1970s, reports on community media were commissioned by the Council of Europe through its Committee for Out-of-School Education and Cultural Development. The programme resulted in reports on a range of European projects, available in English

and French,⁴ intended as Jankowski notes, 'as materials for policy debate and decision-making by European governments' (Jankowski 1991:166). The Council of Europe had yet to acquire the weight of influence in media matters it later gained but what it did achieve, since the reports' authors were brought together in meetings to discuss them, was the creation across Europe of a community of interest in the subject, although it was too soon to call it a research community. Unfortunately the Council of Europe's distribution policy was, and still is, woefully ineffective and archival access is almost impossible. The result is that works are little known in the UK. Yet the repeated refusal of British publishers at the time to recognise the field of community media meant that recourse to these international outlets was the only available publishing strategy.

The founding conference of AMARC⁵ in Montreal in 1983 was important in establishing global connections between community radio practitioners and activists in different parts of the world, as well as for academic researchers. During the 1990s AMARC-Europe made several submissions to EU policy consultations as well as being active in securing funding for support in Central and Eastern Europe. The Local Radio and Television Group, formed at the IAMCR⁶ Paris conference in 1982, became an important base for the development of theory and its first published outcome, *The People's Voice* (Jankowski et al. 1992), was edited by researchers from the Netherlands, where Jankowski and colleagues had been carrying out qualitative research since the mid-1970s, and from Denmark where government policy on community media was enlightened and well developed. In the same year Girard's *A Passion for Radio*, an AMARC project, provided a useful collection of case studies (Girard 1992). UNESCO'S interest also brought a global dimension to the nascent field. At a time when it was deeply engaged in the debate surrounding the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) at a global level, UNESCO'S seminars in Belgrade in 1977 and in Quito the following year, as well as its commissioning of studies on community media, promoted ideas and examples from Europe and Latin America.

Allies in the mainstream

Another of Raboy's "strategies" was 'support for critical initiatives coming from within the dominant media institutions' (Raboy 1991:171). The mainstream is not a monolith and, in this early period, the occasional article sympathetic to the campaign appeared in the press while, in mainstream broadcasting, some spaces had already appeared in which non-professional voices were allowed to express themselves. Access broadcasting was part of the contemporary *zeitgeist* and at least one member of the Annan Committee, a Labour MP and former broadcaster, understood the activists' philosophy. In retrospect the phrase "access" accurately conveys the guarded condescension of the gatekeepers but the actual presence of dissidents within the mainstream must not be ignored. An editor of the BBC's

Community Programme Unit, set up to broadcast non-professional contributions, once described his section as being 'as far to the edge of the BBC as it is possible to be without falling off'. These individuals, because of their sympathy with alternative approaches, were at odds with those of their trade union colleagues whose high technical standards led them to dismiss anything "amateur" on the grounds of "poor technical quality".

The engineering divisions at the BBC and its counterpart in commercial broadcasting, located in the regulatory agency or Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), had always maintained what one might call a "Rolls Royce" standard where frequencies were concerned. Community radio campaigners were met, like Alice in her attempt to join the Mad Hatter's tea party, with cries of 'No room! No room!' The broadcasters' transmission planning was based on the expectation of a very high level of reach for broadcast signals. COMCOM was fortunate in finding a former Head of Network and Service Planning at the IBA who now worked as a technical consultant and, commissioned to report on frequency space in the London area, demonstrated that a dozen community radio stations with coverage areas of three to four kilometres were possible.

Unmasking objectivity

In the early 1980s a keynote speech is being delivered to a conference of British radio broadcasters and a handful of academics interested in radio. The speaker is Richard Hoggart, distinguished author, broadcaster and academic and the co-founder, with Stuart Hall, of the field of cultural studies. The audience is more representative of the commercial industry than the BBC but must now endure a staunch defence of the BBC, especially its Radio 4 channel of speech, news and drama. Hoggart has not changed his mind much since, two decades previously, he dismissed the teenage enjoyment of commercial pop music in milk bars as 'a peculiarly thin and pallid form of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry rot amid the odour of boiled milk' (Hoggart 1957/1984:248). In the course of his address now, he slips in a commendation of community radio and in the questions that follow he's asked 'what exactly *is* this sort of radio?' Hoggart looks confused, turns to where I'm sitting in the audience and, to my embarrassment, proceeds to "out" me as the author of this section of his speech, expecting me to supply the answer. At this time he was Warden of the University of London's Goldsmiths College where I taught and had asked me to brief him on the topic – not well enough, evidently, and the result was exposure as an activist, one of the "usual suspects" as far as this audience was concerned.

This anecdote illustrates another tactic in the battle for discursive presence. If journalists and broadcasters who are sympathetic to the community media cause are to run a 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 as also abandoning the objectivity and balance that rules in academia. Getting Hoggart's *gravitas* to sell the argument was a reasonable idea but it misfired. On another occasion two years later I had better success.

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 whose job is to find out what line I'm going to take. The programme producers have invited me as an academic, the expert to lend balance, since also on the show are members of the Local Radio Workshop (LRW) whose interventions at public meetings have cast them in the role of extremists. The LRW has been pressing London radio stations to accept programmes it's been producing with campaigning groups (anti-nuclear, feminist, minority ethnic), the kinds of productions that don't fit easily into mainstream radio that practise what Mattelart and Piemme called a 'soggy pluralism based on self-castrating notions of balance' (Mattelart & Piemme 1980:337). On air I expound reasons why the LRW's work should be supported and I don't mention they are allies of COMCOM.

Academic engagement with community media followed a sequence of overlapping stages as the field took shape. First came practice; a form of direct action which challenged the assumptions, values and practices of mainstream media and in which, as in all practice, theory was implicit. Next came description; sometimes in the form of a rescue operation to place on record a project whose ephemeral existence and lack of funds to carry out research meant that the experience risked oblivion. At the same time demarcation was also necessary. Here the need was to classify adjacent types of media practice in order to establish the boundaries of the community media field. For example, the claim by BBC local radio to be 'serving neighbourhood and nation' needed to be challenged, the relationship to "access broadcasting" clarified and pirate origins explored.

Public demand

'How the public could be expected to demand something of which it had no concept, no model and no experience, was not explained.' The question was asked by the founder of BBC radio, Frank Gillard, when, in 1962, the government blocked the plans for local radio on the grounds that there was no demand for it (BBC 1977). Gillard and the BBC got their way five years later and the success of local radio justified his foresight. In fact, the popularity of BBC local radio may be one reason why the idea of community radio did not at first appeal. Only when budgetary pressures led the BBC to cut and dilute its local radio services did the case for community radio become compelling (Lewis & Booth 1989).

Three moments allowed the demand for community radio to be tested. The first was in 1985/86 when a Conservative Minister proposed a pilot trial of community radio in 21

locations in the UK. 286 applications were received, a strong indicator of demand, but the government changed its mind and the pilot was cancelled. A few years later (the second moment) the IBA introduced a scheme of “incremental franchises” which would be available in areas served by commercial radio where there was frequency space and where the applicant could offer a service different from the area’s main licence holder. Again, the number of applications exceeded the licences on offer. A few community groups gained licences but did not survive long before being converted into conventional commercial stations via collaborations or takeovers. Thereafter, short term licences (RSLs) became a popular way for communities to mark cultural or religious festivals and to rehearse the administrative and programming arrangements needed for broadcasting.

The third and finally successful moment came at the turn of the millennium as an initiative by the Radio Authority before handing over its regulatory role to Ofcom. In 2001 a pilot scheme for “access radio” was announced, the name chosen in preference to “community radio” so as not to offend the BBC/commercial duopoly which claimed their local radio was entitled to that name. Nearly 200 licence applications were received, again illustrating the strength of demand, and 16 were chosen. The one-year pilot period was extended, an independent evaluation gave a positive judgement (Everitt 2003a & b) and the evaluator’s recommendations became the basis for the 2004 Community Radio Order which launched an official sector of community radio that now includes more than 200 licensed stations.

Conclusion

For the notion of community radio to be accepted into the mainstream media discourse a number of discrete areas were identified at the start of this discussion which might be said to be the separate battlefields where dominant views had to be contested. These were legislation, frequencies, regulatory structures, finance, public demand and political will. Regarding the last area, endorsement by a Labour government in 2004 was largely due to a senior official’s vision, that of the Chief Executive of the Radio Authority and a former Head of Radio at the IBA. Although Tony Stoller gives little credit to the community radio lobby in his account (Stoller 2010), he can justly claim to have played an important role in securing the passage from incremental franchises and RSLs to the access pilot scheme which ultimately led to the Community Radio Order of 2004. By that time, however, a considerable amount of pressure had been built up at a local level by community radio campaigners where Members of Parliament, always naturally attentive to local media, had taken note of the possibilities of local and community radio. Patient lobbying by the Community Media Association over decades had its effect. Academic authentication for this form of media also played a part in persuading the mainstream media to take seriously what it began

grudgingly to accept as “user-generated content”. In a very short time, the arrival of social media changed the landscape but that takes the story beyond the scope of this study. Once political will is won over, the separate battlefields take on a different appearance: frequencies are found, regulatory arrangements made, legislative formulas agreed. What has not been solved in the UK is the funding aspect. The two hundred community radio stations are, as one station manager put it, ‘running on empty’: the original £0.5m available to support the sixteen pilot stations now has to be eked out for the 200. A letter to *The Guardian* newspaper from a conference in 2007 pleaded for the government to ‘adopt an interdepartmental approach’ and claimed that ‘there is not the understanding at the highest levels of what this local form of public-service broadcasting involves, nor the political will to place it within agendas dealing with housing, health, crime prevention, employment, education, regeneration and community development - the very areas in which community media have a proven record’ (http://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/sep/26/radio.media#article_continue). That battle has yet to be won.

Endnotes

1. <<http://www.meccsa.org.uk/networks/radio-studies-network/>>
2. IREN, an international radio research network funded between 2004-2006 by the EC FP6 within thematic priority 7 “*Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Society*”, and in the research domain: “*New forms of citizenship and cultural identities*”. After the end of the project, IREN partners formed the Radio Research Section in ECREA, the European Communications and Research in Education Association. <<http://www.ecrea.eu/divisions/section/id/13>>.
3. Now the Community Media Association <<http://www.commedia.org.uk/>>
4. Beaud 1980 provides a summary of the reports and includes a complete bibliographical list but the listed publications and Beaud’s report are rarely to be found in public library collections and perhaps can only be successfully accessed through contact with the Council of Europe’s archivist in Strasbourg.
5. AMARC is the French acronym now generally used for the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters <<http://www.amarc.org>>.
6. The acronym now stands for International Association for Media and Communication Research but at that time “Mass Communication” were the words in the title, revealingly indicative of an emphasis which left little room for interest in small-scale media.

References

- Four entries in the list below are followed by LC and a reference number. This refers to the Collection in the Archives in the library of the London School of Economics, named as the Lewis Collection. Documents in the Collection can be viewed by arrangement with the library (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/home.aspx>) and the table of contents is accessible at <http://archives.lse.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=LEWIS>
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