

PROMISING PROSPECTS, AND THE HURDLES ALONG THE WAY

Sharing and Archiving Community Media Content Online

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Community media, most pithily defined as broadcasting “for, by and about the community” (UNESCO 2001), produce an extraordinary range of politically, culturally and artistically valuable and topical content. Defined by a mission to serve and represent communities rather than generate profit, independence from commercial and governmental interests, and a participatory, volunteer-driven model (Coyer/van Beek 2010: 136-138), they have in particular demonstrated an “extensive and sustained” engagement with migrant groups through (often minority-language or bilingual) community programming as well as programs with an explicitly intercultural or anti-racist focus. (Titley 2010: 141-145) Given its focus on community building and bottom-up production models, this media sector should in theory benefit especially from the increased availability of interactive digital platforms for sharing and archiving content. Since on-air broadcasting is an inherently evanescent medium, digital archives can play a key complementary role in preserving and sharing the stories that are told on community media.

Even if the impact of community media is by intention primarily local, online access to their content can also expand opportunities for (intercultural) dialogue both regionally or nationally and in diaspora communities. In reality, online publishing practices unfortunately remain patchy, as do efforts to operate communal, networked archives. Consequently, programming that could make valuable contributions to broader cultural and socio-political conversations has remained underutilized.

In this chapter, I will draw on the findings of the EU-funded project *CAPTCHA - Creative Approaches to Living Cultural Archives* (2013-2015, <http://livingarchives.eu/>), in which we explored community media archiving practices across Europe, and the study conducted during the project (van Beek 2016), in order to identify best practices for preserving and sharing content online and the challenges standing in the way.

THE PROMISE OF NETWORKED ARCHIVES

While community media audiences can develop an especially personal or loyal bond with the station through its opportunities for active participation or its focus on grassroots concerns, their expectations have changed in line with the ever-expanding scope of streaming and on-demand content. As *Radio Orange's* Jan Hestmann warned, people want to be able to listen to “what they’re interested in, [...] wherever and whenever they want.” (ibid: 9)

In our study we found that community media often struggle to keep up with this sea change in media use. Many are slow to embrace a transformation of what ‘making radio’ means – from solely producing on-air broadcasts to publishing media content in a variety of formats and interacting with listeners across different platforms. They are constrained mostly by lacking financial and organizational resources, but a cultural disconnect between the realms of radio and online plays a role as well. Those constraints also affect their capacity to not just maintain in-house archives, but ensure their public or online accessibility. All too often, legacies that represent not only a particular station’s history but that of whole communities are, as the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland’s Anne O’Brien warned, “at risk of being lost forever.” (ibid: 9)

In this light, online initiatives to exchange and archive programming on joint public platforms like the Spanish/Latin-American Red Nosotras en el Mundo (<http://www.rednosotrasenelmundo.org/>) play an especially valuable role, but they also face oversized challenges. The examples of EPRA (Échanges et Productions Radiophoniques), which once presented 11,000 hours of French community media content; Cross Radio, which involved radio stations from across former Yugoslavia; the program exchange platform of Ireland’s Community Radio Forum; and the Belgian community media database RadioSwap illustrate how they are often confronted with fatal hurdles, falling victim to funding short-falls, technical failures, or lacking organizational capacity.

Nevertheless, Austria’s Cultural Broadcasting Archive (CBA <https://cba.fro.at/>) and Germany’s Freie-Radios.net, hosting over 80,000 audio files each, have grown well beyond program-sharing tools of the community media federations that support them, into collaborative archives which present a rich documentation of contemporary history. Crucially, they have helped broadcasters publish content online, and highlight or integrate it on their own sites, even when they lack the resources to create their own archiving structures. Most stations only upload a selection of their broadcasts to them, however. Moreover, they seem designed primarily to serve the needs of participating broadcasters, rather than to provide listeners at large with user-friendly interfaces to browse and search the wealth of community media content they offer (van Beek 2016: 88-92).

REASONS TO EXCEL

In principle, community media should be particularly motivated to ensure the preservation of their content and excellently positioned to optimize online interaction with it. After all, each of the defining strengths of community media finds its parallel potential online.

Community media spring from the same groundswell of DIY culture, in which people claim “the right to be heard rather than be spoken to,” as the “acts of [...] independent, collaborative or participatory media-making” which have flourished especially online (Deuze 2006: 267, 273). Their participatory ethos, which identifies citizen-producers rather than passive consumers, overlaps with that of citizen journalism (Bosch 2013: 29), e.g. at similarly volunteer- and mission-driven hyperlocal news sites. (Williams 2016) Social media can help them fulfill their key mandate “of engaging with audiences in participatory ways, and allowing audience members to determine content through collaborative journalism.” (Bosch 2013: 37)

Community media provide “artists and creative entrepreneurs [with] a platform for testing new ideas and [...] content that cannot be conveyed in the mass media” (European Parliament 2007: 9). Austrian Dorf TV, which cofounder Otto Tremetzberger called “a hybrid of TV and Internet,” showcases how embracing the online recruitment, development and archiving of “user-generated television” can provide them with a complementary medium. Instead of trying to pull a spatially dispersed community of producers into in-house production structures and set broadcasting times, its portal allows them to store, work and interact on their videos remotely as well.

Community media capture unique content that is “intrinsically interwoven with the lives of local community members” (Raveendran 2016) and gives voice to grassroots communities that are underrepresented in mainstream media and institutions. Theirs are the memories that are most vulnerable to being lost. Archiving this content “will ensure the voice of the ‘ordinary’ people will be recorded and available for future generations” when “the majority of mainstream archives [...] tend to be the voices of those in power and authority” (Loughran 2015). Otherwise, Jörg Depta of Berlin’s Pi-Radio warned, “while the public service broadcasters enjoy the luxury of having their own archive at the German Broadcasting Archive, nothing will be left for historians [...] from the ‘free radio stations’ and their predecessors, the pirate stations” (van Beek 2016: 9-10).

Community media help “strengthen the identities of specific communities of interest” (European Parliament 2007: 6), presenting locations of cultural encounters as well as platforms for “the participation and emancipation process” of minority groups (Online/More Colour in the Media 2004). Archiving presents a key tool for protecting cultural heritage, and interactively publishing

content online presents an opportunity to rouse engagement with minority cultures across geographic, community and generational boundaries. Online community broadcaster Radio Kultura, for example, addresses a diasporic Basque audience as well as a bicultural local audience of French and Basque listeners.

Greater use of on-demand and social media, already home to virtual communities that play an especially important role as “spaces for identity, expression and participation” for diasporic populations (Georgiou 2013: 84), could expand the parameters of community media to become “a cosmopolitan space of cultural netizens,” geographically fragmented but symbolically connected (Nassanga/Manyozo/Lopes 2013: 259). On the site of one rural Irish community station, a remote listener commented to say: “Can’t wait to go back home to Connemara. Listen to you guys every night. Helps me get to sleep. You’re keeping me going until I can move back” (van Beek 2016:116).

SOBERING REALITY

In short, community media should be “well equipped to take on” the challenges of digital platforms: “they are grounded in an experimental ethos” in using technology and “cater for specific [...] interests but also connect communities across boundaries and distances” (Hallett/Hintz 2010: 159). And yet, the publication, distribution and archiving of content online is a scattershot affair, often lacking an overarching digital strategy (Leindecker 2015: 14). Many smaller broadcasters are yet to advance beyond “simulcasting [...] web and FM transmissions” which was already “increasingly common” a decade ago (Lewis 2008: 25). Others only embed some selection of audio content in playlists, blog posts or news items, with at most few and inconsistently applied metadata. Sometimes, more structured archives exist only for specific programs or initiatives; a fragmented practice which is exacerbated by having to rely on short-term, project-specific funding opportunities.

A review of community radio stations in Germany’s umbrella association BFR revealed that only one in five offered ways “to access (posts with) past audio content by theme or topic” and “just under one in four allowed listeners to navigate to past audio content by day, week or month” (van Beek 2014). The rates were even lower among Spanish community media. Endeavors to highlight, structure and contextualize archival content in interactive or narrative ways that would ensure its discoverability in the long term (Leindecker 2015: 15) remained a remote prospect.

Online archiving efforts have often depended on the work of lone, passionate individuals, who might be increasingly challenged by ever more complex technologies. Switzerland’s Radio LoRa has been uploading its full program since 2002 thanks to the pioneering work of Christoph Lindenmaier, whom

his colleagues described as “a genius, [who] made everything himself” (van Beek 2016: 53). But its system has remained essentially unchanged since then, meaning you now need auxiliary software to listen to archived broadcasts, since they are still being uploaded as Real Media files.

Our study found relatively few examples of collaborations with comparably grassroots, activist communities of online developers, and hardly any recruitment efforts that targeted potential volunteers with a primary interest in web or tech rather than on-air radio. Spain’s CUAC FM, where software engineers volunteered to develop a mobile app and an open-source system to automatically record and archive broadcast content, demonstrates the benefits of doing so.⁷

The extent to which content is archived in-house varies too. While Slovenia’s Radio Študent maintains an internal archive with 40 thousand objects, an interviewee at one radio station confessed that “we have a few cartons of stuff, but that’s basically our archive”. Current broadcasts now seem to be universally recorded and stored, but if this content is not labelled and organized its accessible preservation is still under threat.

Much historical material may have “scattered” and only survive “in a drawer, in the attic” of former volunteers or listeners (Brunow 2015: 9). On the bright side, the capacity of community media to cultivate active volunteer and sympathizer communities means this is an opportunity as much as it is a danger. At Radio Dreyeckland, former volunteers return to digitize the programs they themselves made. Radio Študent “crowdsourced” the station’s historical record in an experiment it dubbed ‘on-air ethnography’, and even reconstructed its first ever broadcast.

WHAT’S HOLDING THEM BACK?

Essentially, it remains true that “the sector lacks the skills, resources and notably the regulatory support” to fully utilize the digital media environment (European Parliament 2007: 51). In addition to scarce funding opportunities, the main challenges community media face relate to copyright, volunteers, conflicting objectives, and data capacity and security.

When legal rights issues hinder the web archiving efforts of much larger institutions (Sierman/Teszelszky 2017), it is no surprise that community media wrestle with them. Specifically, copyright regulations that preclude or limit the online publication of musical content played a major role in discouraging most every station to some extent from uploading content – not just music programs, but mixed-content journalistic broadcasts as well. Only concerted, sustained

7 | See <https://cuacfm.org/novas/2017/02/nova-version-da-app-android/> and <http://radioco.org/en/about/>.

advocacy can offer long-term relief. When Austrian community radio stations succeeded, after years of negotiations, in concluding a ground-breaking three-year collective agreement with collecting societies (Neuwirth 2014), CBA contributors uploaded over 500 files in a single day.

Community broadcasters rely on volunteers who are eager to learn and motivated by a sense of idealism. But this also means they can't necessarily be obliged to take on the additional tasks of uploading and categorizing their content, and stations have to rely on persuasion. High turnover and divergent levels of digital literacy of volunteers, many of whom might be from disadvantaged communities, affect the consistency of archiving and the quality of meta-data. Centralizing the process is often unfeasible, not least with multilingual programming, so community media must continuously invest in training and guidance.

Contradictory use cases hamper the discoverability of archived content. Community radio websites, focused on helping regular listeners catch up with specific programs, tend to replicate on-air structures: hour-long units, fitted into archives by date and/or program that have frequently mushroomed into complex content trees which mix audio and non-audio content. But a new generation of (mobile) online-only listeners might not recognize program names or care about when something was broadcast. Consistent use of tags to identify subjects and genres as well as design shortcuts to highlight where audio content is available serve to mitigate this dilemma to some extent. But stations increasingly face a choice between maintaining intricate but cumbersome parallel navigation structures, as German community broadcaster Radio Dreyeckland did, and making a strategic decision to focus structures primarily on the online-only visitor, as Belfast's Northern Visions seemed to do when establishing a stand-alone archive site (van Beek 2014: 81-83).

The "digital archive needs active and constant care"; truly safeguarding long-term preservation involves not just multiple backups but regularly checking their integrity and migrating them whenever formats and carriers become obsolete (Pop 2015: 50). This is a daunting prospect for most community broadcasters. Stories about significant amounts of content being lost when servers failed or websites were overhauled or migrated were disturbingly frequent.

Lacking the resources to build online archiving structures, many broadcasters understandably rely on commercial third party services. Without their free accounts on Soundcloud, Mixcloud, iVoox and Vimeo, a vast span of community broadcast content would never find its way online. But delegating the online accessibility of their content makes broadcasters dependent on companies which can change or restrict access, features and pricing at will, or fail altogether and take entire archives down with them, while conceding those companies legal control and financial profit over their content.

If community broadcasters are to “maintain the relevance” of their media-political principles, they need to carve out autonomous, pluralist spaces in the digital media landscape the same way they did on the radio waves (Leindecker 2015: 13-14). That means doing it the hard way, building and utilizing non-commercial, open-access and open-source tools and infrastructures which they alone control, and can expand and customize at will. Doing so requires reaching out more to open source communities, recruiting primarily IT/web-focused staff or volunteers (as Radio Študent and CUAC FM did), partnering with local tech companies with similar values (as Germany’s Radio Wüste Welle did), developing open source software that could also meet the needs of other community broadcasters (as Pi Radio did with metadata management tool “calcms”), and creating avenues for stations to pass on lessons learnt (as the CAPTCHA project aimed to do). Stronger national community media organizations would make the effort considerably more feasible. While networked efforts by German stations to build a “Freie Radio App” appear to have faltered, the CBA remains an excellent example of a joint initiative that, more than just creating a shared archive, provides even modestly sized stations with tools to publish program content on their own sites. In all, a formidable challenge indeed; but community radio was itself born of a struggle that achieved improbable success against daunting odds.

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