
What makes you happy? Insights into feelings and muses of community radio practitioners

Stefania Milan

Department of Political and Social Sciences
European University Institute
San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy

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Abstract

What makes you happy in your daily activity at the radio? This question was asked to more than forty community radio practitioners from all over the world in the framework of a research on community radios as a social movement. People were encouraged to reveal their feelings and elaborate on their inner motivations for joining the radio station. Three main points could be singled out from the interviews: the idea of the radio as a ‘free space’ for the articulation of views and opinions, the role of community radio as amplifier of voices of other social groups, and the collective dimension of projects.

This article draws on interview texts using the method of discourse analysis to illustrate motivational frames of community radios activists, providing an original view of the radios, often considered ‘only’ as producers of alternative audio material or mere ‘infrastructures’, while the dimension of motivations and feelings is often neglected.

Introduction

By community radio I refer to small-scale media projects providing public (‘made available to everyone’) communication within a specific context: the community, understood not only as a geographic but as a social setting (Hollander et al. 2002). In this sense, community media are devoted to the ‘reproduction and representation of common (shared) interests’ and ‘the community serves as a frame of reference for a shared interpretation’ (Ibid., 23). It is not a matter of size or geography, as much as of a ‘special relationship between senders, receivers and messages’. Emphasis is on the symbolic experience: in other words, on the transformation of ‘private individual experience into public collective experience’ (Ibid., 23-26). The sector is highly diversified, and stations embody different organising principles and operating values. Nevertheless, they tend to share some core features, such as not-for-profit status, locally oriented and produced content, editorial independence, social mission, presence of volunteer and non-professional staff.

As Girard puts it, community radio ‘aims not only to participate in the life of the community, but also to allow the community to participate in the life of the station... at the level of ownership, programming, management, direction and financing’ (Girard, 1992:13, see also Dunaway, 2002). In relation to the aforementioned social mission, community media are about access to information and voice for marginalised groups (Buckley 2003), as well as community participation (Berrigan 1977), and often work as a vehicle for social change and citizens’ empowerment (Buckley 2006, Milan 2007).

In November 2006 over 300 members of the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC) met in Amman, Jordan, for the 9th world conference of the association. The conference theme was “Voices of the World – Free the Airwaves.” AMARC is a non-governmental organisation bringing together community radio practitioners from about 110 countries. Interviews were conducted with over forty community radio activists¹ in the framework of a research on the community radio sector as a transnational social movement. The aim was to gather information about the motivations of community radio practitioners, and the emotional side of their activism. The same questions were later asked to community radio practitioners – mainly board members of the Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE), an advocacy organisation, and of the European section of AMARC – gathered in Budapest, Hungary, in occasion of a workshop on community broadcasting in Europe in May 2007.

Drawing upon the data collected in Amman and Budapest, this paper will provide an overview on motivations and emotions linked to being active in a community radio station, and shed light on the ‘special relationship between senders, received and messages’ which Hollander *et al.* talk about. The aim is threefold. First, I seek to understand how community radio practitioners make sense of their action and of the relations that bind them together. Second, I attempt to answer the question which forms does this ‘special relationship’ between producers and the community take. Finally, I look at the meanings which are attributed to this relationship by practitioners in order to uncover the emotions and feelings that are involved in these processes.

Community radio seen through the lenses of social mobilisation theory

This research is inspired and informed by social movement literature and in particular by the works on identity formation and meaning attribution, and the function of emotions in social actors’ making sense of their activism. Participating in a community station is here considered a collective action, since it entails ‘a set of practices (i) involving simultaneously a number of individuals and groups, (ii) exhibiting similar morphological characteristics in contiguity of time and space, (iii) implying a social field of relationships and (iv) the capacity of the people involved

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of making sense of what they are doing' (Melucci, 1996, 20). Accordingly, each of the radio stations, and, by extension, the community radio sector, can be seen as a 'field of shared action' (Ibid, 16). Drawing on social mobilisation theory, the following paragraphs will provide a brief overview of concepts that can help to unpack the meaning production processes by community radio practitioners.

In social movement research, feeling and emotions are acknowledged to play a role in the formation of a collective identity. However, research tends to emphasise external structural factors and the role of leadership in shaping collective identity and not much empirical investigation has been conducted on emotions and feelings. Italian scholar Alberto Melucci constitutes an exception: within his constructivist view of collective action, he highlights the importance of the psychology of collective emotional experiences in the process of construction of a collective identity. Melucci argues that there is 'a certain degree of emotional investment... which enables individuals to feel themselves part of a common unity... Passions and feelings, love and hate, faith and fear are all part of a body acting collectively... There is no cognition without feeling and no meaning without emotion' (Melucci, 1996, 71). Emotions are first and foremost individual but they are also a relational experience. Accordingly, the relational aspect is central to the emergence and maintenance of a collective identity, conceptualised as 'an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals (or groups at a more complex level) concerning the *orientations* of their action and the *field* of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place. By "interactive and shared" I mean that these elements are constructed and negotiated through a recurrent process of activation of the relations that bind actors together' (Ibid, 70, italics in the original text). Furthermore, collective identity refers to a 'network of active relationships between actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate and make decisions' (Ibid, 70-71).

Melucci highlights the relational significance of emotions and individual motivations. Even though this paper does not concentrate on the collective level or discuss the process by which individual perceptions come together to produce a unity (of collective action), it is important to keep in mind that individual emotions, feelings and meanings do combine and influence each other. Thus, the subjective accounts about radio-making reported in this paper should be seen in the context of the 'network of active relationships' between individuals. Collective experiences such as actively taking part in a community radio station involve people's feelings and emotions and 'the possibility of referring to a love-object ('Us' against 'Them') is a strong and preliminary condition for collective action, as it continuously reduces ambivalence and fuels action with positive energies' (Ibid, 83).

A second concept informing this research is that of ‘frame’, which will be used in this article as an analytical category. In social movement research the process of meaning attribution by social actors is called ‘framing’ and allows individuals and groups to make sense of their experiences. A frame is defined as an ‘interpretative schema that simplifies and condenses the “world out there” by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action’ (Snow and Benford, 1988, 137). According to William Gamson, who looked at the motivations of potential participants to collective action, frames can be interpreted as the psychological components of collective action (Gamson, 1982).² Looking at frames allows the researcher to bring into the analysis of collective action the element of perception and consciousness, that is to say the social-psychological process of interpretation which intervenes between opportunities for action and the actual action (Noakes and Johnson, 2005). In this paper, frames will be used to indicate the meaning attributed to action by social actors – that is to say, the meaning given by individuals to their participation in a community radio. In other words, it is the label given by the researcher to the socio-psychological element of social action.

Methodological notes

Data were collected using the technique of qualitative interviewing, either individually or collectively. Respondents covered a wide range of age clusters and countries and were selected according to the potential interest of their stories or through snow-ball sampling. Thus the research does not have any statistical value and does not aim at being representative of the sector. Individual interviews were designed to let the respondent, encouraged by ad-hoc questions, speak freely on selected topics. In collective interviews, in the form of peer group conversations, participants were selected at random amongst the participants at the Amman conference, following the principle of most different geographical origin and gender balance. The researcher introduced a question from time to time, and people were invited to engage in a conversation among each other. The researcher acted as a moderator, with the aim of grasping negotiation processes between people with different stories and backgrounds but sharing a similar experience. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish.

“What makes you happy...?” was the first of 6-8 questions, and was designed to put the interviewee at ease with the interviewer – and with the group in the case of peer-group conversations – and make his/her feelings and emotions emerge. It also served the purpose of turning over the expectations of community radio practitioners by asking them what they feel instead of what they do, avoiding the dry relating of facts or the repetition of catch-phrases.

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Interview transcripts were analysed using manual discourse analysis. Interviewees are indicated by a system of two- or three-letter codes not necessarily correspondent to their initials. While their name is not made explicit, the projects they are part of are sometimes described and taken as an example of a particular function or activity of community stations. A list of interviewees and the full interview transcripts are available upon request.

A methodological drawback of interview data is the assumption that verbal representations by the actors (for instance of the meaning attributed to an action) coincide with the actual object (in this case, the actual meaning). We can overcome this limitation by considering representations – that is to say how social actors verbally explain and justify their behaviour – as subjective accounts with no explanatory value. The focus is on individuals and their perceptions: thus, data should be intended as personal narratives. Despite this paper bringing into play collective action concepts, it does not aim at explaining the process by which unity in collective action is produced and how this unity, and the associated collective identity, looks like. It focuses instead on the micro level, and thus takes into consideration individuals who are indeed part of collective experiences but are seen here as expressing their personal views and recalling the emotional side of their own activism. Furthermore, concerning the individual level, the paper does not aim at explaining the process of meaning attribution, but pictures the final result, and analyses it.

A further clarification concerns the impact of different cultural and national contexts on the views of the interviewed practitioners, since in this research interviewees of different backgrounds were treated as homogeneous actors. Despite acknowledging that national political life and media systems indeed play an important role in the way practitioners frame their participation in a community radio station, especially with regard to the notion of radio as a tool for self-expression and for social change, the variable was considered to be of secondary significance to the project, which looks at community radios as an emerging transnational social movement. In addition, the snow-ball selection does not allow for a statistically relevant comparison across countries. In the following paragraphs, however, national specifications will be introduced to complement and contextualise some of the practitioners' quotes.

Making sense of participation in a community radio station: insights from the field

Emotions seem to play a crucial role in sustaining an activity, like that of 'making radio' on a voluntary and not-for-profit basis, that is not rewarding in classical economic terms. Practitioners are indeed 'happy' of their involvement in a community station and of being part of a collective experience, and enjoy

explaining to outsiders what they find appealing about their activity, often recalling how they got into radio, what they feel when they hold the microphone or go on air, or explaining the social implications of ‘their’ radio.

In my effort to make sense of the interview data, I have singled out eight frames, which can be condensed into three ‘umbrella’ frames: 1) community radio as a free space, 2) community radio as political tool for social change, and 3) community radio as a collective experience. For each of the eight frames I will provide a detailed description using quotes from the interviews combined with concrete examples from the projects.

Community radio as a free space

Happiness evokes relaxation, feeling at ease, positive feelings. To get involved, beyond any political value or ideal, people must ‘like it.’ One of the main reasons for this affection seems to be the sense of freedom that derives from an environment that is self-organised like that of a community radio station. Community radio is a free space that allows people to express themselves in the way they want, and to have fun, as outlined in the following sections.

A free space for expression and self-determination

‘The radio is my friend, and my life as well. I make programs, I make news report, so many issues I can talk about,’ says DY from Radio Samargatha, in Kathmandu, Nepal. Strikingly, in 2005, during a period of social turmoil in the country, the station, was temporarily closed down for broadcasting voices critical of the government. But also in less turbulent contexts, community radio is seen as a free space for expression and self-expression: a radio producer can play music and discuss topics with a freedom that cannot be found in any mainstream media, constrained by commercial requirements and/or by the owner’s beliefs. The value of freedom and the intertwined value (and social practice) of self-determination seem to be central in the decision to join a community station, and one of the main sources of gratification. Freedom originates from the sense of ownership of the project: practitioners perceive themselves as an integral part of a project in which they can have a say and that can be developed according to their own will, provide they respect the collective decision-making and in a context where (allegedly) there is no (formal) leadership.

Many activists frame this freedom in terms of ‘alternative’ content, either issues that are underreported or niche music. ‘We are doing things that you can’t hear elsewhere. And that makes me feel very good, when I know that we’ve either covered something or given voice to someone on a issue that nobody else is giving space to,’ reports ER from Radio KCSB in Santa Barbara, California. ‘Freedom’ allows for diversity of content: KCSB’s mission statement reads that ‘it strives to

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provide programming substantially different from that carried by commercial broadcast media.’ Not surprisingly, emphasis on the free space notion differs according to the structural features of the station and in particular to the degree of horizontality implemented in the different projects, but overall it seems to be a core value:

‘Very often I hear from people who have done radio at KCSB who say things like I have never been able to have a freer space to operate as I did while I was there. This is even for people who are in community media, who say I don’t get to do the kind of programming I want, somebody else determines a lot of it’ [ER].

Nevertheless, as these two examples highlight, freedom and self-expression are framed in different ways according to national contexts: in a environment where freedom of speech is (temporarily) at risk, being able to discuss political issues becomes crucial, while in a context of over-exposition to media messages, it becomes important to provide content that is different from the mainstream and relevant to the community.

Community radio as fun

A frequent motivation for joining a community radio station seems to be that ‘community radio is fun’: listening to people and recording and broadcasting their stories, editing audio and providing entertainment are all rewarding activities. FW, engaged in a campus radio in Canada and producing the bulletin Women’s International News Gathering Service (WINGS), says that she enjoys making radio because she can listen to other people’s stories and work with them: ‘I like to listen, listen to women especially... I am also very interested in the view points of people that are not reflected usually in the mainstream media because I think that you get to know more. I like to edit audio too, it is really really fun’: curiously, in her account, the producer becomes ‘listener’. This notion of the ‘producer as a listener’ seems to be linked to the idea of the community station as a voice amplifier serving other disempowered social groups, that will be discussed later in this paper. Nevertheless, there seems to be also a component of enjoyment involved in listening to other people’s stories.

Fun is often linked to music. ‘What makes me happy at the radio is to broadcast music. The radio is my favourite place, thanks to the songs,’ says enthusiastically MPM from Radio Tierra, in Chile. This vision is shared by many other respondents, but not in isolation: in most cases music and entertainment are mentioned alongside with the social or political objectives of the station. About music and entertainment there seem to be mixed feelings; most respondents do see community radio as a tool for political action, and tend to emphasize that aspect at the expenses of the fun side of it. This might be linked to the context in which the

interviews were conducted: particularly in the case of interviews performed in Amman, the role of the organisation (AMARC) in framing what is community radio-making about, and the prolonged exposure to certain themes and refrains (for example, community radio as ‘voice of the voiceless’, which was one of the core themes of the meeting) might have reinforced the practitioners’ elaborations.

On the other hand, some respondents acknowledge that music and entertainment are often considered less relevant than political or social content. According to ER, ‘sometimes that [the music] gets neglected when we talk about community radio because we talk above all about the news and public affairs, those kinds of things... but I think music is extremely important because it conveys culture, it’s truly universal’. Music, ER says, makes the language of the radio accessible to a larger group, including those who do not speak the language. This point was stressed in particular by practitioners engaged in stations in urban areas, with high presence of migrant communities for which the music provides a universal language. ER framed it also in terms of ‘freedom of the listeners’, since music and sounds leave space to personal interpretation much more than spoken words: with music ‘even if you don’t understand a word that you are hearing you can imagine things. Radio is about imagination as well, since you don’t have all the visual cues’. Music was also singled out as central in his involvement by JE, a young man broadcasting from a station within an indigenous reserve in Canada. He affirmed that the radio is significant for his hip-hop group: ‘We can broadcast our music, talk to each other. It is a matter of speaking out to the masses, be able to let out my point of view, my people’s point of view, be able to affect people’s life’.

Community radio as a tool for social change

FW from WINGS, whose slogan reads ‘Raising Women’s Voices Through Radio Worldwide’ says: ‘I like ideas, and so.. at the radio I am always working for the ideas that would be the keys to social change for the better’. The social mission of community radio and its function as a promoter of social change are unquestionably the most recurrent references for the radio practitioners interviewed in the framework of this research. We can single out four main dimensions of social change. In the first place, community radio is explicitly linked to a dynamic of political engagement and the possibility to express ideas and pass them on to the listeners is considered very efficient in terms of generating positive social outcomes. Secondly, community radio allows amplifying voices that would otherwise be silent or shut down, be it for the speakers’ social conditions or for the impossibility of accessing mainstream media. It is seen as a ‘power’ in the hands of radio practitioners to ‘give voice’ to underrepresented, poor or disempowered social groups, and voice is perceived to have a transformative impact on those benefited. Thirdly, community radio can serve the needs of other social groups or social movements: the radio is seen as an infrastructure that can also be utilised by

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groups other than the collective running it. The radio becomes a 'service' provided to other groups and thus a way of supporting other struggles. Fourthly, community radio is a tool for empowerment: the radio station can work as a vehicle for alternative narratives, hence working for social change at the cultural and symbolic level. Besides, producing radio can positively impact on the personal sphere: speaking on the microphone, operating the mixing board, going on air can strengthen self-confidence, especially in young people. In this context, teaching to newcomers is often indicated as a source of gratification. The following sections will illustrate further these four sub-frames related to community radio as a tool for social change.

Community radio as a political tool to involve and affect listeners

Freedom in broadcasting as a working rule allows the radio station to be much more than a place where one can have fun: community radio is often considered a political tool through which practitioners articulate, express and share their political views and values, where politics is intended in the broadest sense of 'working for a better world' and never as party politics or ideology. Talking about a community radio set up in the '80s by his group, a commune, and broadcasting to a rural area nearby their farm, HR explains:

'for me [community] radio is a very organic kind of communication that can reach a bigger group. It creates social dynamics, because people are making programs, searching topics, but they are also obliged to go out to meet other people and keep in contact, otherwise it would not make sense to have such a radio. So for me it has a lot to do with political engagement, with relations with other people and all that.. it's a kind of social living.'

Radio is seen not only as a technical device to broadcast widely, like a loud-speaker, one's own ideas, but also as a proper space of articulation of views and values, and it is organic to an individual's or a group's political engagement, fostering connections and exchanges with other communities and groups around.

Interviewees often recall the notion that community radio, as a media working under rules other than the mainstream's, can actually change the way people think about the world. A community radio station is seen as a simple but potentially very influential tool to promote social change. It is the case of Radio La Tribu, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, whose slogans read '*Acostumbrarse es morir*' ('to be accustomed is to die'). La Tribu was started as a pirate radio during the dictatorship by a group of communication students, and is now run by a horizontal collective and open to everybody's participation. It intends to be, reads the website, 'A collective storytelling that circulates to discuss amongst us. A radio with consequences. With witnesses, declarations and dialogues. A radio that reports the reality to be able to transform it.' HL from La Tribu says:

‘It makes me happy of making radio when someone says something in this small place that usually community radios have and something passes on to the other side. When someone says, or does, or provoke, or the music you play or the questions that are asked generate consequences on the other side; and when they generate consequences of participation, I am even happier. This possibility keeps seeming magic to me.’

Community radio as voice amplifier with a transformative impact

Within the frame of radio for social change, the idea of community radio as an amplifier of voices that ‘are excluded from the mainstream media’ – as DX from Nepal puts it – is definitely the most popular among the respondents, both from the Northern and Southern hemisphere. As mentioned above, this might have been influenced by framing within AMARC, as many of the interviewees are members of the organisation, but it seems to be more than that. GG says, talking about his experience at Radio El Puente, in Uruguay, recalling his initiation to radio as a child:

‘I started doing radio when I was 13, and I was very scared. I started taking pleasure in making radio when I started to speak, but not for how I was speaking, because in fact I was very afraid of how I was speaking.. but the happiness of making radio was the possibility to approach microphones to people and let the others speak. (...) having the radio gave me power, the power of letting the others speak, speaking myself just a little. Giving space to all these little experiences that a local radio like ours could give, people of very different social conditions who in turn had never thought they could speak over the radio, till we told them they could do it... this made me happy.’

The same concept of ‘power’ has been reversed, and gratification comes from giving up the power of the microphone holder. This is a recurrent scheme amongst the practitioners interviewed in this research: the radio activist considers himself/herself a vehicle through which ‘others’, and especially deprived people, can speak.

Often ‘the others’ are disadvantaged groups and the community radio station is a vehicle for their social inclusion. It is the case for Radio Villardevoz, in Montevideo, Uruguay, working with psychiatric patients. It makes possible ‘the inclusion of a voice, that of psychiatric patients, that has been silent for many years, spoken by others. This makes me very happy, not only what concerns the communicative aspect but also the other objectives of the radio, which have to do with its therapeutic ends and the rehabilitation of the word of crazy people’, said MS. Sometimes ‘the others’ are indigenous communities, as reports JE, an indigenous young man: ‘What I like of making radio is to give a voice to our native speaker population, and contribute to the preservation of our cultures, that are

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really being lost due to the influx of Western civilisation. It is a matter of giving our people a voice and let our voice be heard.’

Community radio gives space to underrepresented voices, and does it in an unobtrusive way. JA, an American radio producer based in Lebanon, who has been working with young people expressed it in the following way:

‘I like the opportunity to bring out voices that are underrepresented, and the idea that those voices can be transmitted to a number of people in their own community but hopefully in communities that aren’t yet familiar with them. What I like about radio is that, unlike television, it is less obtrusive, it seems to be less of an invasion in someone’s life and because people are not worried of what they look like, they feel more free to discuss about the things that impact them’

Community radio is not only a venue for those social groups that have been made invisible by the silencing practices of mainstream media, but can also have a transformative impact on them, as evokes RB, from Bangalore, India, where he works with a non-governmental organisation to sustain local community radio projects: ‘It makes me happy when I see people whom I wouldn’t normally otherwise notice, like small shop owners, or farmers, when I see that they take a small radio station and speak about all things which they think are important, and the transformation you see in those people, how they feel happy when they talk about something or exchange ideas. Just seeing that is my main motivation for being involved with radio.’

Community radio serving other social groups

Community radio stations are often seen as infrastructures that other groups can use to express themselves and advance their demands. ‘What attracted me to radio was my activism in social movements. I just came to believe that none of the things that I worked for would succeed until there was a change in the way that the media was owned, controlled and operated. When working at the radio, I can serve all issues I care about by giving all these activists a way to talk and make an impact on the debate about their issues,’ says PT from the Prometheus Radio Project. Prometheus is a fluid collective based in Philadelphia, United States, that has been working in the radio field since the ‘90s but – interestingly enough – does not have its own radio. Its activists train other groups to build their own low-cost transmitter from a kit bought over the Internet, and lobby the U.S. regulator, the Federal Communication Commission, to adjust legislation so that more groups can operate their station. The very name of the project recalls the notion of empowering other groups: ‘Prometheus was a semi-god, who saw that the gods had fire and regular people did not... and he saw this injustice, and so he stole the flames and taught any other to make fire,’ says PT. ‘Stealing the fire’ is a metaphor for giving people the control over their communication means to enable them to

control also their messages. The same concept is highlighted by EL, who operates in a campus radio in Canada: ‘I think we work more for the others than for ourselves and this is for me making radio. I have been a programmer in radio for two-three years, but for me it is more important to provide a good infrastructure for the society in general than to speak about my issues.’

It is the notion of community radio practitioners as ‘service providers’: the community radio is seen here as an infrastructure that can be used by different groups to express their views, while the individuals or group with the expertise – either in building transmitters or in radio production or sound editing– put themselves at the service of the groups that need infrastructures and skills to convey their messages. Most of the practitioners addressed in this research declare that their station organises training programs to help other groups or individuals less skilled in broadcasting to get engaged. Beside the training courses in radio production, support is offered also in lobbying for better conditions for community media in national media laws, as does e.g. the Prometheus Radio Group and the Legislation Program of AMARC Latin America. GG, who works in the project, says:

‘It is already a year I am not making radio, because I am working on the area of legislation... and actually I did find a vocation in serving even better the whole Latin American community movement because in many countries there are very difficult conditions [for community radios]. It makes me happy to have this program on legislation that can put at disposal of the radios an ear to listen and a hand to help, so that they don’t feel so alone, they don’t feel like they are fighting against enormous enemies and there is nobody close.’

Community radio as an empowering tool

Community radio contributes to empowering people, either by promoting alternative narratives for social change or by developing the personality of those involved. IDC from Colombia says:

‘Garcia Marquez said in his writings that reality is not made up of facts but of the ways we relate them. Amongst the things that make me passionate about radio is that it is an excellent place to tell in public stories coming from points of views that generally communication means doesn’t put into play. What we try to do in the type of radio we do, in the formation and trainings, is to strengthen this capacity of telling stories, fortify this capacity of narrating that all men and women have (...) in a way that through the radio we can enrich our own way of looking at things with the stories that all people have to tell.’

Radio is here seen as a vehicle to articulate and disseminate alternative narratives: exercising listening and story-telling, people go through a change of perspective

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about their life and their environment and can be encouraged to take action to improve their conditions.

An alternative perspective on empowerment consider instead the personality and skills of those involved in running the station. Respondents, particularly those working with young people or problematic groups, emphasise that radio as a means of expression, being so accessible and somehow simple to use, can have a decisive impact on people's character, improving self-confidence and the capacity of speaking in public. AS, a volunteer in a youth radio in the United States, says: 'One of the things that I enjoy the most is seeing new people engaged, discovering that they can actually create something which they were totally intimidated by before. Take for example young people: often their personality changes from being a very quiet kid to somebody who can express himself, not only behind the mic. It passes over into their personal life and they become a more outgoing person.' The experience of AS with young people seems to recall that similar to that of psychiatric patients in the aforementioned Radio Villadervoz.

Teaching and passing on one's own skills becomes an integral part of a community radio and seems to generate a lot of excitement, as well as being an important source of gratification. 'I like to teach people to produce radio, get them to catch the spirit of a community radio', says FW. ER likes 'the excitement of people who are new in hearing their own voices, or finding out when I am training somebody that you can bring sound out from two different sources at the same time... it is this kind of discovery thing that makes me very happy.'

Community radio as a collective experience

A community radio station is a complex universe of exchanges and relationships: it is not only about the relations between those engaged in the everyday of the radio, but also about the 'special relationship between senders, receivers and messages' mentioned at the beginning. Concerning the radio as a collective, that is to say the practitioners and the way the radio project sustain itself, interviewees have highlighted how being part of a collective experience is a strong motivation for getting engaged and how the peculiar working rules of a community project – such as access, horizontality, consensus and participation – make collaboration a very pleasant adventure and makes it possible for the radio to sustain itself over time. In relation to the community of reference and the external environment, radio activists have emphasised the role of the station as community revitaliser, that is to say a collective experience where the 'collective' goes beyond the studio walls: the radio fosters exchanges and linkages amongst community members, promotes dialogue between citizens and local government, and encourages transparency.

Community radio as a collaborative project

A community radio is a 'product of many hands' collaborating with a common objective in mind. Being part of a collaborative project seems to reinforce substantially activists' motivations and be a significant source of gratification. 'What makes me happy at the radio is to carry out a project jointly with all radio members,' says MS from Uruguay. 'Indeed, it is a big challenge to make it in a democratic and participatory way'. Community radio is perceived to be a free space that potentially welcomes a wide range of opinions, making collaboration between people of different backgrounds possible. OA from Chile puts it in this way: 'What makes me happy is the possibility to do stuff jointly with other people and that there isn't the precondition that we think all in the same way ...starting from different ways of seeing the world we can articulate ourselves in function of common objectives.'

The working rules of a community station vary across a wide spectrum, but most practitioners declare to implement horizontality, consensus-building and equal power distribution among all members. Often they take the form of a collective, where each member takes a share of responsibility in managing the radio, creating a sense of ownership of the project by those involved. NB, from Radio Lora in Switzerland, says: 'Contributing to the success of the project and seeing the community radio day by day developing and growing (...) being part of the collective that manages the radio and ensures that the project stays alive is my main motivation.' Running a collective project is not immune from problems, but doing it 'all together' is rewarding, as says OT from Austria, evoking his experience in setting up a radio station from scratch: 'Creating a radio station has been on the one side enormously intensive work, but on the other side a very visible work, with a concrete effect, a concrete impact. In a few years we established beginning from nothing a community with lots of people involved, and this is our greatest success'.

Community radio as a community revitaliser

Community radio connects practitioners to the community 'out there'. The final product is a joint work, by the community for the community, which impacts on the environment where the radio operates. Most respondents emphasized their relation with the community and their social mission in terms of amplifying people's voices, as outlined in a previous section. Linked to this vision, but going slightly beyond it, is the idea of community radio as a community revitaliser: the radio, by creating and reproducing a tight relationship between producers and listeners, contributes to revitalise community ties which, in turn, are nurtured by the feeling of being part of a common project. The most poignant expression of this social function comes from an African radio practitioner working with Radio Peace, which operates in a deprived area in the central region of Ghana:

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'I am so excited with what I have being doing at Radio Peace! ... [we serve] people who are marginalised, who are voiceless, who are diseased, who live in objective poverty... it is so exciting when you get to the community and you see that these people can rely on you but especially when you look at the people who need help and assistance, and these people can call you a brother or a sister, they can look up to you as somebody who can help them... I have the feeling and the satisfaction that I am helping some people to come out of their poverty level, and we are doing it together' [IKU].

This sense of 'togetherness' seems to built upon pre-existing ties, and seems to be reinforced by means of a common project to work on but how this happens still needs further investigation. The table below shows the eight community radio frames and the three resulting 'umbrella' frames emerging from the analysis of the interviews.

Frames: community radio as..	'umbrella' frames
a free space for expression and self-determination fun	community radio as a free space
a political tool to involve and affect listeners	
a voice amplifier with a transformative impact	community radio as a tool for social change
-serving other social groups	
a empowering tool	
a collective project with alternative working rules	community radio as a collective experience
a community revitaliser	

Table 1. Frames of community radio

Social change, voice, 'reversed' power and a bit of entertainment

The questions posed at the beginning of this paper – how do people make sense of their activism in a community radio? How do practitioners frame the relations that radio activism produces? – have manifold answers. Three points should be kept in mind in analysing interview data. First, these are individual narratives: they identify inclinations and tendencies among community radio practitioners but should not be considered representative of the whole movement. Second, this paper provides a extensive collection of enthusiastic voices and positive feelings, the main reason being that practitioners where not asked what makes them sad, frustrated or angry in their activity at the radio. The guiding assumption in looking only at optimistic views is that people get involved if they like it and get some satisfaction out of this activity. Nevertheless, this is a partial picture. We should also consider the possible distortive effect deriving from the unconscious attempt by the interviewee to fulfil the alleged expectations of the researcher, or from the membership in some organisation. Thirdly, there is no extensive quantitative data available to triangulate it with the qualitative pictures presented in this paper: for that reason, relevant variables such as age, gender and country of origin are not taken into consideration. This being said, I believe that personal narratives provide fascinating windows on 'meaning work' and picture a 'world' that deserved to be looked at.

Most of the practitioners interviewed link community radio to a political or social mission, but a considerable amount does connect it with fun. It has to be noted that the social mission is not antithetic to entertainment, but there seem to be a general perception that entertainment is less relevant because it is perceived as less appropriate to convey political and/or social messages. The role of radio as tool for social change – either as a form of political engagement, a tool for empowerment, or an infrastructure serving the voiceless or other social groups – represents the core of all individual narratives. In particular, radio as voice amplifier seems to be the most widespread concept across the radio activists interviewed. However, since most of the respondents were part of the same associations (AMARC and CMFE), they could have been influenced by the issue framing adopted by the organisation itself. Nevertheless, in more general terms, we can consider this element as the nucleus of some sort of collective identity, which, as Melucci argues, relies extensively upon shared emotions. The emphasis on social change and voice is consistent with the literature on community radio, which tends to stress the role of community radio stations in development processes and in fostering a healthy public sphere. Among others, Roncagliolo wrote that “We must preserve a space for citizens to defend rights and seek equality. I think this is the challenge facing community media, the reason why they get involved” (Roncagliolo 1998, see also Buckley 2003).

Community radio is also fun and entertainment: despite numerically a smaller number of the respondents mentioning it, it emerges from the very same enthusiasm and the words picked by the practitioners that there is indeed a fun side of it. Fun is linked to music, understood as a an universal language that can reach even those who do not speak the language – as in the case of community radios in urban areas serving several migrants groups – and a cohesive element to create a community across different cultural backgrounds. But fun permeates a wide range of activities, such as listening to other people’s stories, news production, editing, and process-related aspects such as being part of a collective and working together. Regrettably, the entertainment and fun aspect of community stations has been so far neglected by the literature, which tends to focus on the social ethos of community radio.

Unusual organisational rules such as free access, horizontality and consensus, implemented to a different degree by different radio stations, build up a ‘space of equals’. All this makes community radio clearly distinguishable from mainstream media. Sense of ownership of the project can be retrieved both in the idea of the station as a free space for self-organisation and as radio in collective experience terms: practitioners share responsibilities and make choices, to a different degree based on consensus, and have the feeling that they can collectively control (‘own’) the project. This seems to be functional to the very same survival over time of

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community stations, usually not-for-profit projects with wavy revenues and light structures which can jeopardise the continuity of their activities.

Content-wise, community radio is perceived as a free space where one can broadcast any kind of content consistent with the station's values and the tastes of different communities of interests, and not constrained by classical journalistic or commercial values. Radio can become crucial in situations where freedom of speech is suspended, and it is also a vehicle for 'alternative' content which can not be found in other media, precisely because they implement different (non-commercial) working rules.

The notion of power comes back frequently in the interviews but it is framed in a 'reversed' way: who 'has the power' does not directly benefit from it. The beneficiary of the 'mic power' is not the microphone-holder, but 'others', specified as under represented, disadvantaged communities or just people who want to get engaged. One could respond to that that the microphone-holder still decides who should speak, if there was not a second element in this reversed definition of power that intervenes to mitigate the potential distortion effect of microphone-holders: practitioners appear to make frequent efforts to share their expertise with newcomers, which is to say to literally 'pass on' the microphone, not only hold it to allow other people to speak. Sharing expertise is relevant to the continuity of the project, but, in particular, it is consistent with the social mission of the radio and the idea that radio promotes people's empowerment. A quantitative research conducted in Germany within the non-commercial radio sector, which by no means can be considered comparable to the data presented in this paper for the different questions asked and the different scale of the project, confirmed that amongst the arguments for participation in a self-produced radio program is the fact that 'people directly concerned can express themselves' (Günzel 2002, 344). However, more research is needed to explore this multi-faceted 'reversed' notion of power, and to understand how it is relevant to the practice of radio activists.

Curiously – though this study is not statistically representative of the whole population – there are no significant differences in issue framing between the industrialised Western countries and the South. Values and emotions seem to be pretty much the same, and only details and descriptions of the community targeted by the radio, as well as to some extent organisational values, vary across continents. Membership in some community radio organisation proved to work as an homogenizing factor in framing participation and values: for instance, narratives from Latin American countries are very similar to each other, and this can be correlated to the extensive presence in the sub-continent of a dynamic AMARC section.

Which forms do the ‘special relationship between senders, receivers and messages’ take? The shared assumption that community radio works for social change seem to give a special relevance to the communities served by the radio station: community members are not mere listeners or users but are expected to get engaged or more or less directly involved in the radio. The literature is quite rich in this area. Berrigan spoke of ‘the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community’ and ‘media to which members of the community have access (...) when they want access’ (Berrigan, 1977:18). AMARC says: ‘community radio is not about doing something for the community but about the community doing something for itself’ [AMARC Africa and Panos South Africa, 1998]. Practitioners justify their activity at the radio being members of the community serving the community at large. There seem to be an identification between practitioners, who are community members with expertise in radio-making, and listeners, who are community members that are expected to get engaged in the social change adventure from the other side of the antenna.

The emotional side seems to play a relevant role in motivating radio practitioners in their activities. Making radio in such an environment is a source of gratification, happiness, excitement, empowerment, fun, which are functional to the social change objectives but also crucial in sustaining projects which often have instable financial bases. However, more research is needed to identify the role of emotions in the process of formation of a shared collective identity.

Notes

¹ In this text I refer to community radio actors indifferently as practitioners and activists. The latter is derived from social mobilisation theory that I am using in the research. In this context, the two have to be considered as synonymous as they both refer to people engaged in radio production within a strong social change perspective.

² A second tradition in the analysis of collective action frames considers frames as strategic resources of movement organisations: frames would be used by social movement organisations to mobilise people to act (Benford and Snow, 2000). Although this perspective could say something for what concerns community media organisations such as AMARC or the CMFE, it will not be taken into consideration for this paper that focuses instead on the micro level.

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