



Continuous Assessment 1.2:

Community Radio Advocacy and Activism Post Digitisation Essay

Digital Mediascapes

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Community Radio is an alternative option to commercial and public broadcasting, typically a private entity, with civic objectives that is owned, managed, and maintained by community-based members. Collaborative radio-based advocacy initiatives emerged between 1970 and 1980, an era when most community radio stations were illegal and referred to as pirate or unlicensed (King 2017, p. 24). As a result of perceived societal inequality radio advocacy, and its more violent cousin 'activism' raised its head once more in the early 1990s, which led to an increase in the number of grassroots activist agendas and organisations worldwide (Bullard & Johnson 2000, pp. 555-557). A discussion follows on how old media 'radio' transitioned itself into the contemporary mediascape through digitisation, and how in line with its community roots, it has adapted throughout its life to maintain its original advocacy intentions. Additionally, how radio's digitised content, that is, the media itself, supplants the delivery technologies that it sits within, and upon, will also be examined; and how the content amount and the number of constantly growing communities that generate cultural material, influence societal structure to a greater extent than any media conglomerate (Finlayson 2019, pp. 84-88; Jenkins 2006, pp. 13-16).

Historically, advocacy has always come with a price tag and a patron attached. However, minimal start-up costs, and a lack of online broadcasting regulation in the digital age, has meant that a media platform that streams alternative cultural content in a virtual public square can be established, and more importantly, controlled by anyone. Tal Laor (2018, p. 843) a lecturer at the Ariel University in Israel clarifies this further when he discusses how new audio technology, for example, an internet radio station or a hosted podcast, due to their low profit margin reinforce the primary motivations behind starting up an endeavour of this type. The motivations being a combination of founder self-fulfilment and the ability to provide an opportunity for a new societal voice to speak in the virtual public square. Laor (2018, p. 841) found in his study of Israeli internet radio station activity and social contribution that 53% of the established Israeli community radio

stations provide access for voices that were underrepresented in commercial or public broadcasting, a finding that was confirmed by the fact that 60% of these stations classified their content as ‘alternative’. To understand the importance of grassroots audio advocacy in 2021, we need to discuss through example the societal change within communities, for whom digitised audio has provided a voice. Between April and October in 2019, Extinction Rebellion (XR) utilised their anarchist pro-environment media podcasts to draw an international crowd to action; the October two-week series of events now known as the ‘International Rebellion’ took place in approximately sixty cities worldwide (Van de Geer 2019). Apart from mass arrests, a few members of parliament publicly committing to accelerate reforestation in the United Kingdom, and rail commuters physically assaulting an XR member, the phrase ‘International Rebellion’ was mentioned approximately 70,000 times in online media reports. The pro-environment XR message was delivered repeatedly, over a prolonged period to their desired target audience – in short, they dominated the digital airwaves (Townsend 2019). Dennis Leung (2015, pp. 205-206), a Ph.D. candidate at the Chinese University of Hong Kong found that following the 1997 sovereignty exchange of the Hong Kong province back to mainland China, that approximately fifty new internet radio stations were created within the region. Alternative in nature, these new audio sources, or voices, disseminated political information and opinion, in addition to highlighting media bias and misinformation distributed by the mainstream media. These emergent and critical new audio sources influenced public opinion; and were vital to their listeners in regard to the mobilisation of revolutionary politics and collective activism. In fact, Leung (2015, p. 201) confirms that since 2007, Hong Kong’s alternate audio sources have been a pivotal force in the formation of new political and social viewpoints, parties, personalities, and movements. Thus, digitisation has been a crucial developmental stage in respect to the democratisation of speech on the radio and has enabled through its underlying technology the creation of a virtual public square that provides an advocacy space for all voices within society to speak, to be heard, to share cultural knowledge, to motivate, and

sadly, to also manipulate and influence both physical and virtual communities.

Convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence have resulted in the media content itself supplanting the delivery technologies that it sits within, and upon, and the growth of virtual communities that generate this cultural material influence societal structure through activism to a greater extent than any media organisation or conglomerate. To appreciate how community-based groups and the cultural offerings of the masses influence public discussion and change agendas in the mainstream we need to take a closer look at community hierarchy, growth, and influence within a select group of cultural societies, namely the Maori community in New Zealand, the County Kerry community in Ireland, the KEXP Seattle community in the United States, the Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE) community of the global South, and the Aboriginal and Islander people through the Aboriginal Nation radio community. Rufus McEwan (2019, p. 153) a lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology states that the twenty-one iwi radio stations distributed throughout New Zealand are a collective that is committed to a renaissance of the Māori language and asserts that they serve their community beyond both existing radio technology and the mediums traditional practices. Taituha-Ngawaka, iwi online radio station manager at Maniapoto FM supports this concept further when they state that ‘we know that we are not going to actually achieve the bigger purpose of connecting with our people if we just focus on radio’ (McEwan 2019, p. 151). Taituha-Ngawaka’s statement would seem to support the adaptation of traditional community radio and foreshadow the repositioning of these media collectives as ‘iwi media centres’, servicing multiple needs of their audience and utilising various analog and digital platforms within the wider physical and virtual community. As decision-making within an iwi community radio station or media centre is performed on a local basis, the individual’s influence is felt and acknowledged to a greater extent than that of a more centralised board associated with a traditional radio station. Moreover, the

cultural content will be more diverse in nature, and it will be more personal and pertinent to other iwi community listeners, which in turn will lead to more interest and greater engagement online and in the creation of convergence on a particular community-based topic. The iwi media centres apart from operating traditional broadcast radio stations, utilise digitised historical content archives, event live-streaming and distribution of video content on various digital platforms (McEwan 2019, p. 146). This variation in their services, and their growth creates a community-based media hub that generates reach across technology and cultural media convergence through participation. This concept is further confirmed by two other community-based radio case studies, namely Radio Kerry in Ireland and Seattle's KEXP radio station in the United States. Both studies found that greater community engagement occurred through the convergence of technologies and the hosting of content on multiple digitised platforms, that is the YouTube video sharing platform, and various emerging podcast hosting sites (Cwynar 2020, p. 84; Badenoch & Föllmer 2018, p. 252). Amber Day (2018), a Professor of English and Cultural Studies presents in her article on anti-corporate activism a case study that demonstrates the manipulative art of activism, and its potential to engage a large audience. The activism by the Yes Men undermined a large corporate identity, that is, Chevron, and its narrative, that was designed to heal and correct public opinion in respect to oil companies. The Yes Men's 2010 parody campaign went viral utilising a form of anti-corporate social activism and revealed that a small group or community can affect society's psyche in a way to rival the mainstream media and the conglomerates that control broadcasting. Additionally, Gatua, Patton and Brown (2010, p. 176) point out that economical and commonly available digitised audio sources, for example, a computer, tablet, MP3 or iPod player, are the most obvious community initiation points for an individual to connect through as they provide instant access to worldwide information avenues. The fact that most community radio has now broadened its technological boundaries, highlights a new operational 'norm' that allows radio content to

be accessed by a wider audience, and an audience no longer bound to a geographic location, thus supplanting the mediums platform technologies.

All this convergence occurs within a virtual public square, a location that does not exist, but nevertheless dictates how society should think and behave. Gatua, Patten and Brown (2010, p. 176) found through their analysis of FIRE and the multimedia technologies and methodologies it employs to unify women's voices world-wide, that a community is no longer classified by its geographic location. Badenoch and Föllmer (2018, p. 252) state that the introduction of a Radio Kerry social media platform created a new way for the radio station to engage with the wider Kerry community beyond the usual one-way audio broadcasting. A way for cultural material to be exchanged and its audience to grow exponentially, and not be limited to, or confined by the County Kerry borders. Furthermore, Hartley (2000, p. 158) suggests that an awareness and appreciation of community for Aboriginal and Islander people is being established by the National Indigenous Media Association of Australia (NIMAA) through the linking of local radio stations across the Indigenous nation. He goes on to add that this virtual community is defined by an individual's character, culture, and way of life, and forms around 'taste cultures', that is the grouping of people who share similar backgrounds, class attributes, educational histories, and no longer the type of community that is dependent upon topographical proximity. He distinguishes an important difference between virtual and physical communities, and how community is culturally perceived. Community in 2021 is no longer a physical tangible element, it is virtual and mercurial in nature, an online public square with a choice of town crier. A grouping that cannot be quantified but can be influenced or manipulated to champion causes and take on the controllers of the various digitised platforms through messaging and other calls to activism online, and in person.

In conclusion, community radio has transitioned itself into the contemporary mediascape through digitisation by adopting a range of delivery technologies that meet the informational needs of radio listening communities, through

education, entertainment, activism, and advocacy. This essay's key concept relating to maintaining advocacy is supported by the actions of XR's 'International Rebellion' 2019 two-week protest podcasts, and the rise in the number of independent internet radio station alternative programmes in both Hong Kong and Israel since 1997. The idea that cultural material content can surpass the delivery technologies this same information resides within, or on, is evidenced by the growth of radio-based communities, for example, Radio Kerry, Seattle's KEXP, and the New Zealand iwi radio stations, on numerous digitised platforms other than traditional analog radio technology. From a societal influence perspective, the FIRE, Radio Kerry, the Yes Man anti-corporate campaign, and the NIMAA examples exemplify the reach of community radio and its ability to compete with commercial and public radio narratives. At this point in time, advocacy and activism within community radio is thriving, disseminating powerful messages and ideology worldwide that is changing the way society thinks on many issues. The only threats on the horizon being the annexing of permissible speech online through the rise of political partisan censorship on social media platforms, and the potential introduction of authoritarian-based government enforced regulation to the digitised broadcasting community.

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Coverpage image depicts a stack of vintage radios piled up at an art gallery in London (Stefan 2017)