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Because it all begins with talk: community radio as a vital element in community development

Niamh Gaynor* and Anne O'Brien

Abstract With a similar set of principles underpinning the ethos and practice of both community development and community radio, we might expect to find close linkages between community development projects and their local community stations. This article explores this supposition in the context of community radio stations and community development projects in four regions in Ireland and finds, contrary to expectations, linkages between both sectors to be relatively weak. Exploring the reasons for this, we argue that the increased and extensive incursion of the state into the community sphere has resulted in both a sectoralization of community institutions and the hegemonization of a service ethos where, in a move away from the core principles of community development, the emphasis has moved to working 'for' and not 'with' communities. Paradoxically, we find that the state plays a positive role in its regulatory function within community stations, opening the space for real and effective community management and control of local public spheres. In the context of the profound marginalization of local communities from mainstream public discourse, we urge community activists to seize the opportunities presented by local stations to open the space for community debate, deliberation and resistance, re-animating and revitalizing local public spheres.

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Introduction: it all begins with talk...

The first thing to realise is that 'community radio' is more about 'community' and less about 'radio.' Community radio stations that have proven successful have often seen themselves primarily as community development resources which happen to use radio as their tool. If your group has people with various community development experiences, this is more important than having radio DJ experience... to be a successful community radio service, you need to be based on the idea of community building and cultural and social development. Craol¹

Much has been written about the politically ambiguous role of community development, swaying as it does between reformist and transformist agendas. As Shaw (2008, p. 27) notes, it exemplifies the classic communitarian dilemma of either 'reconciling people to their world' or 'remaking the world'. This ambiguity in outcome notwithstanding, a much more broad-based consensus is apparent on the values and principles which underpin the policy and practice of community development. Concepts of empowerment, participation and community building through joint endeavour are frequently invoked (Banks *et al.*, 2003, p. 12; Gilchrist, 2004, p. 22; Powell and Geoghegan, 2004, p. 19) and, as Freire (1972, p. 25) has taught us, at the heart of all community development endeavours is the imperative to work 'with' and not 'for' the people, opening up spaces for marginalized community members in particular to articulate their concerns and aspirations for themselves and their communities while challenging traditional power brokers to take on board these issues. Thus, while community development is about many things, above all it is about affording a voice to local communities. Therefore, as with all political projects, it begins with talk – talk about the everyday issues that confront us, talk about the decisions and actions that give rise to these issues, talk about how these should be addressed, and talk about whose responsibility it is to do so.

A significant challenge to this endeavour is the monopolisation of the public space for talk – the public sphere – by a relatively small number of voices within the mainstream media employing a language and debating issues which are often far removed from the lives of ordinary citizens and their communities. Ironically, at a time when the media exert a considerable influence over what we think and talk about, the increasing commercialization and privatization of its institutions has significantly reduced the space for public debate, resulting in what Jürgen Habermas has termed the 'refeudalization' of the public sphere (1962/1989, p. 195) where people have been

¹ <http://www.craol.ie/cms/publish/CRfaqs.shtml>, accessed 5 April 2011.

transformed from active citizens into passive consumers – of goods, services, politics and spectacle – through media which are oriented more towards the manufacture of consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) than the promotion of broad-based debate. Increasingly reliant on and answerable to the exigencies of advertisers, even public service broadcasting is not immune from this trend and the mainstream media's role in the 'corporate enclosure of knowledge, elitist process of communication policy making and the erosion of communication rights' (Hackett and Carroll, 2006, p. 10) continues apace.

Within this context, community radio – a radical communication project first introduced in many jurisdictions in the 1970s and aimed at re-appropriating local, community-based public spheres – stands apart. Free from the coercive power of advertisers and commercial interests and owned, managed and run by local communities, community stations open up the space for local talk by local people on issues of local interest and concern. In doing so, community radio represents a key element in the empowerment, development and consolidation of local communities – a key element in other words – of community development. While there has been a welcome resurgence of interest in this aspect of community radio within the broad media literature (see Jankowski, 2003 for an overview), surprisingly little attention appears to be paid to its role in this regard within the community development literature. While some reference is made to community stations' role in community empowerment in a select number of articles (see for example Goodfellow-Baikie and English, 2006; Mitchell, Kaplan and Crowe, 2007; Esteva, 2010), their overall role and function within community development remains generally under-theorized and under-explored. Notwithstanding these gaps, community radio is a rapidly growing phenomenon across the world. Given the significant overlaps in principles, values and objectives between community development and community radio – most notably the opportunity community radio affords to local communities to take back and re-colonize local public spheres – a necessary pre-requisite to both reformist and transformist change – the linkages between the two arenas merit further examination.

This is the purpose of this article. Drawing on a broader study of four community stations and their role in driving social change within their communities in Ireland (see Gaynor and O'Brien, 2010 for the full report), our overall argument is that community radio represents an under-utilized yet vital element for community development in the four areas studied. We develop this argument as follows. In the following section we further elaborate on the role of community radio as a distinct media space and

examine the role set out for community groups in this regard. We then go on to present the findings from our research on the linkages between community stations and community development groups in the four areas studied. Reflecting on the possible reasons for our findings, in our final section, we highlight a fundamental paradox in the Irish state's incursion into the public sphere through both the regulation of community stations and the funding of community development. We conclude with an exhortation to community groups and activists to seize the opportunities presented by community stations to open the space for community debate, deliberation and resistance, re-animating and revitalizing local public spheres. Although situated within a specific context, with both community development and community radio in Ireland operating within a comparable regulatory environment to both that in the Australia and the United Kingdom, the article draws lessons of specific interest and import to researchers in these domains, as well as further afield.

Community radio as a distinct media space

Set against the backdrop of an increasing commercialization, celebritization, 'Hollywoodization' and trivialization of both commercial and public service broadcasters (Silverstone, 2007), where a homogenization rather than diversity of voices dominates the airwaves (Hackett and Carroll, 2006), community radio occupies a distinct space within the public sphere. A range of studies focusing on the organization and operation of stations across the world both highlights this distinctiveness and points to many of the commonalities in principles and outcomes between community stations and community development as a broader, inter-related project. Evidence of the role of community stations in building communities by enabling dialogue between different sections of the community (Siemerling, 2000; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2002; Martin and Wilmore, 2010), in reflecting and constructing local culture (Meadows *et al.*, 2005), in fostering and consolidating a sense of place (Keogh, 2010), in reducing the isolation of certain communities (Reed and Hanson, 2006) and in re-engaging marginalized groups and promoting progressive social change (Barlow, 1988; Sussman and Estes, 2005; Baker, 2007) implicitly point to the commonalities in ethos and aspiration between community stations and community development. As Jankowski and Prehn (2003, p. 8) outline, the defining characteristics of community media set them apart from their counterparts at both commercial and public service levels in both their aims – providing news and information relevant to the needs of community members, engaging members in public discussion and contributing to their social and political empowerment – and in their structures of ownership, control and financing

which are often shared by local residents. In short, community radio breaks with traditional, mainstream models of media production (both national and local) in that community members are not an audience in the traditional sense. Rather, they are potential and actual broadcasters and producers, active participants in their local community spheres, opening the spaces for a diversity of voices, issues and perspectives in an effort to consolidate communities and both reflect upon and drive change.

Community radio in Ireland, regulated by the state, corresponds closely to this model. The state regulator defines community radio as follows:

A community radio station is characterised by its ownership and programming and the community it is authorised to serve. It is owned and controlled by a not-for-profit organisation whose structure provides for membership, management, operation and programming primarily by members of the community at large. Its programming should be based on community access and should reflect the special interests and needs of the listenership it is licensed to serve. (BCI n.d., p. 3).

Thus, following state regulation, community stations in Ireland are run on a non-commercial basis; their programming content reflects local issues; although sometimes employing a small staff, they are largely reliant on community volunteers for both programming and associated administrative tasks; and stations are owned and managed by representatives from within local communities. At the heart of the community radio project therefore, as at the heart of community development, is the ideal of community participation. However, as within community development, such participation is not readily assured. Early studies on community radio revealed that proponents had taken for granted people's wish to participate in their local stations (Jankowski, 2003) and what some commentators have termed 'civic apathy' is often highlighted as a significant barrier to full community participation (see Stiegler, 2009, pp. 53–54).

Given the inherent inequalities within communities, this highlights the dangers of incomplete participation or indeed, as with the mainstream public sphere, participation of dominant rather than more marginalized voices. Again, this is a challenge familiar to community development activists and is one which has been discussed in the broader context of civic participation by political and social theorists alike. For these theorists, local community groups have a key role to play in promoting participation within local public spheres. Jürgen Habermas argues that local civic associations have a key role to play in both promoting participation within the public sphere and in forcing political leaders to be attentive and responsive to issues raised by civic actors within this sphere (1987, 1996, p. 370). In one of the most comprehensive and influential contributions within post-Cold

War debates on the links between civil society and democracy, Cohen and Arato draw on Habermas' theory of communicative action and argue that (1992, pp. ix–x) *'The political role of civil society in turn is not directly related to the control or conquest of power but to the generation of influence through the life of democratic associations and unconstrained discussion in the cultural public sphere.'* Civil society, in other words, plays a key role in promoting the civic culture which opens up the public sphere for more inclusive, broader deliberation and debate on issues of public interest and concern. In the context of community radio therefore, not only the stations themselves but also community development associations more broadly have a key role to play in promoting participation within community spheres. In the following section, we examine the extent to which this takes place in the four communities examined in the Irish case.

Community development and community radio in Ireland: different sectors, same ethos

In response to a burgeoning 'pirate' radio sector reflecting a demand for greater diversity in both radio programming and organization, community radio in Ireland commenced with a pilot-project established in 1994 by the national broadcasting regulator. Under this scheme, eleven stations were initially licensed to broadcast. Following the pilot project, the regulator supported an expansion of the sector and there are currently (2011) twenty-two licensed community stations operating across the country. Four stations – two urban based and two rural based, all with a reported listenership of between 60 and 90 per cent of the population within their catchment areas² – were selected for this study. The research, conducted by the authors over the seven-month period October 2009 to April 2010, combined both an ethnographic approach, where time was spent in each of the four stations observing how the stations operated and informally chatting with volunteers and staff, with thirty-three individual interviews with staff, volunteers and representatives from community development groups in each of the four communities. The community groups interviewed were identified by station managers, staff and volunteers as groups that they worked most closely with. Eight community groups in total were interviewed.

Exploring the nature of the links between community stations and community development groups together with interviewees' perceptions of the

2 These figures are calculated through public surveys conducted by the four stations themselves as the state-sponsored Joint National Listenership Research surveys (JNLRs) do not cover community radio.

respective role of each category, two key issues – common to both categories – emerged strongly. First, and somewhat surprisingly, linkages between community stations and community groups appeared quite weak and interviewees commonly spoke in ‘sectoral’ terms with community development constituting one sector and community radio another. Notably, community development representatives in all four areas studied saw no distinction between their local community station and local, commercial broadcasters. To their mind, community radio – although predominantly reliant on local volunteer producers and broadcasters – sits within the broader media sector. And so the key benefit of local stations to their work was identified as providing publicity for their centres and activities. As a representative from one community development group notes, *‘We would ring the station to promote events, we’d have our staff speaking on radio around topics and that’s very useful in getting messages out’*. Again, a representative from a different group in a different region notes *‘We always include it [Station X] in press releases and do interviews in relation to different projects.’* And again, in relation to a different group and a different station, *‘approximately sixty percent of people hear about our events through the station’*. For their own part, station staff, despite their expressed difficulties in attracting volunteers, most particularly to produce and present talk shows, also view their principal role as providing publicity for community groups and their activities. The importance of having a mobile broadcasting unit to cover community events is underscored repeatedly when speaking of work with community development groups and both human and financial resources prove a limitation in this regard, *‘we’d like to do more of going out to particular areas ... I’d like to see more community centres getting involved ... but the problem is resources’*. Thus, neither community radio nor community development activists appear to see a role for community development groups in fostering active community participation in stations in the manner envisaged by community radio adherents, opening up, animating and diversifying local public spheres with local voices and local talk. Community radio, rather than being *of* the community, appears to operate more *for* the community – functioning more as a local information and entertainment service than as a political resource.

This brings us to our second point – the service ethos which, despite their perceived sectoral distinctions, appears to dominate policy and practice within both community development and community radio alike. As we have seen, for community development groups, their local community stations primarily represent a vehicle through which information on their own activities, events and services may be disseminated together with local news and information more broadly. Community stations were repeatedly described as *‘providing a valuable service to the local community’*,

reporting on local issues not covered by commercial and national media. Community station staff and volunteers themselves also spoke of the service they provide to their communities, interestingly distinguishing between the service provided to staff and volunteers themselves and that provided to the wider community. In the former category, stations were often described in social enterprise terms with their principal contribution being the skills and confidence provided to volunteers to then 'move on', as a number of interviewees put it, and gain paid employment elsewhere. In the latter category, the stated contribution of community stations mirrored that identified by community development practitioners – the provision of local information and entertainment. Thus, with a focus on the skills and competencies acquired by volunteers together with the information and entertainment function for the broader community, stations appear to function more as a service to the local population – serving as another sector to complement state-funded social services in the area, rather than as a medium for opening debate and dialogue among community members themselves as advocated by community radio activists.

This represents a significant departure from the ideals of community radio as set out by its proponents where community radio is about the right for community members to participate in public talk themselves rather than to be talked at – i.e. where community radio represents an active communication project of and with the community rather than a mere passive service for them. For community development practitioners viewing the stations as predominantly publicity channels for their own work, it also represents a significant departure from theorists' ideals of community leaders as animators within their local public sphere. Community development and community radios' common ideals of empowerment and participation appear to have become somewhat subordinated by community development and community radio practitioners alike to a service ethos aimed at 'reconciling people to', rather than 'remaking' their world. Why is this the case, and what are the implications of this shift for community radio and community development activists moving forward?

Ireland's 'Third Way' governance – of paradoxes and opportunities

In tandem with developments in a range of other countries, Ireland's shift towards 'Third Way' governance through local partnership structures and contractual arrangements with local community development groups has been comprehensively analysed (Broderick, 2002; Collins, 2002; Powell and Geoghegan, 2004). Reinforcing a consensus culture in Irish social life while eschewing conflict and dissent (Broderick, 2002), these developments

have also led to a professionalization of the community development sector where, it is argued, the focus has shifted significantly from transformative change to service provision (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004). The implications for community development as a professional practice are clear. These shifts are not limited to this professionalized sphere however and, as one of us has argued previously, through both its 'White Paper' on community and voluntary activity and its so-called 'Active Citizenship' campaign, the incursion of the state into the community sphere extends far wider and deeper than into professional groups alone, promoting a distinctly apolitical model of community development based on service provision and the promotion of self-help initiatives across communities more broadly (Gaynor, 2011). This helps explain the service ethos which is reflected not just among the community development practitioners interviewed but also among the staff and volunteers of the four stations examined in this study. In a neat inversion of Freire's teachings, the imperative now appears to be to work *for*, and not *with* local communities.

It is now almost half a century since Habermas first warned of the dangers of the colonization of the public sphere by powerful private and state interests. In his sharp critique of modernity, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1989), Habermas warned that the incursion of state and commercial interests into community and public life had turned active citizens into passive consumers. In the Irish case, Habermas would certainly appear to be right. Through Ireland's contemporary 'Third Way' governance, state influence within local public spheres is both widespread and profound. A community service culture is being actively promoted by strategic actors within community development and community radio alike and the space and the appetite for vibrant, active debate and contestation appears somewhat muted, if not closed.

This suggests that the challenges to re-opening and re-animating local public spheres are enormous – most particularly given the role of the state in both the regulation and the funding³ of community broadcasting. However, it is here that a fundamental paradox is apparent. While the encroachment of the state into the broader public sphere raises fundamental questions around the capacity of community groups and leaders to actively animate and re-colonize the public sphere, the state's role in regulating community stations arguably presents real opportunities in this regard.

Under the 2009 Broadcasting Act, state regulation aims '*to ensure that democratic values, especially those relating to rightful liberty of expression, are*

3 While all community stations are locally owned through either cooperative or company structures, they are still somewhat reliant on state funding (between 40 and 83 per cent in the case of the four stations studied) for ongoing running costs.

upheld and that broadcasting services in Ireland are open and pluralistic'.⁴ The scope of state regulation of community radio in Ireland is extensive and covers licensing, ownership and management structures, programming policy, and the funding and financing of community stations. Closely following the progressive model set out by the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC),⁵ state regulation ensures high levels of community ownership and participation within community stations, promoting the distinctive role of community stations vis-à-vis the mainstream media. Thus, while community development activists appear to see little distinction between local community and commercial stations, state regulation ensures that the space for active community communication – the space to talk, to say what needs to be said and to question what needs to be questioned – remains open and distinct from the mainstream public and commercial sphere. The challenge to communities is to use it.

Situated within communities dominated by both mainstream media where elite interests dictate the parameters of debate and where, through Ireland's extensive experiment in Third Way governance, citizens have been largely reduced to consumers, we propose that, paradoxically, it is state regulation (together with a small number of active community radio promoters) which maintains the distinctiveness of community radio within Ireland's broader mediasphere. This is indicative of the inherent contradictions across state agencies with respect to the ethos and function of community development and community activism. At this time of profound crisis within Irish social and political life, a crisis which has finally broken through the relentless '*spend, spend, spend – we've never had it so good*' monologue of the heady Celtic Tiger period, community radio – a severely under-utilized resource in Irish community development – provides a real opportunity to open up honest, frank and candid discussion within local community spheres on how and why we arrived at where we are today and where and how we should move forward. Yet, the stunning irony is that for a nation of talkers, when it comes to what really matters, we seem to have lost our capacity for enlightened, meaningful debate within the public sphere. Clearly, Habermas was right. Yet, paradoxically, Habermas was perhaps also wrong. Real opportunities exist in the progressive state policy and regulation of community radio in Ireland to reclaim communities sphere(s) and to broaden the debate from the interests, concerns and analyses of elites to those of our own communities. In a regulatory environment comparable with that in a number of other jurisdictions, the challenge to

4 See http://www.bai.ie/about_objectives.html, accessed 5 April 2011.

5 See http://www.amarc.org/index.php?p=Community_Radio_Charter_for_Europe, accessed 5 April 2011.

community radio and community development activists alike, both in Ireland and further afield, is to seize this opportunity, to collectively reinvigorate and recharge our public spheres, re-animating and re-vitalizing public talk at a critical time in our collective history.

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