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Bicycle Highway

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Celebrating Community Radio in Ireland

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Community Radio and Community Development

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Media do not create community but they can help to build it. Community radio activists see radio as a useful tool in achieving their aim of improving the society and community in which they live. The emphasis on participation, on non-hierarchical ways of working, on self-management and on process rather than on goal achievement bears a strong resemblance to the established professional discipline of community development. Community radios, in their aims and organisation, are similar to the community development projects pioneered by Saul Alinsky in the US in the 1950s. They owe a great deal to development practices in the third world, for example the liberation theology of Paulo Freire in Latin America from the 1970s and the participative communication practices of the 1980s and 1990s in much of the developing world. They have also learned from the community development projects sponsored by governments in Western Europe and elsewhere since the 1980s. Voluntary organisations in Ireland are moving away from the status of charities run by religious orders, as they were in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to community-development style projects in the twenty-first century.

However, while the community radio project seeks to develop the community, this is not exactly what "community development" as a term means. "Community development" describes particular work practices which, in Ireland, are usually undertaken by paid professionals. As a general term, it describes ways of working with groups to develop the community and to empower those who are marginalised, particularly by poverty, racism and sexism, to help themselves. "Community development" and "developing the community" are complimentary goals but they are not synonymous. The development of community is broader and describes an ideal rather than a particular practice. Community development is a practice and is far more narrowly focused than the ideal of the development of a community. Community development has evolved as a clearly defined way of carrying out social and community work and as a recognised discipline within academia.

Professional community workers in Ireland see community development as a powerful tool for engineering social change from the personal, through the communal and on to the political level. The Community Action Network (CAN) in Ireland describes this process as follows:

> Community Development aims to encourage people to take control of their lives, to develop fully their human potential and to promote community empowerment. It involves people coming together in groups to identify their collective needs and to develop programmes to meet these needs. The process or the way the work is carried out is as important as the programme of development being undertaken. The process of Community Development stresses the need to develop community awareness, engender group cohesiveness, and promote self reliance and collective action. This logically leads communities to seek change at policy and institutional levels, often highlighting the need for the redistribution of society's resources (Kelleher and Whelan, 1992).

The social goals of improving the quality of life and of reducing the levels of social inequities may be, but are not necessarily, part of the remit of Irish community radio stations. However, the lofty goals of developing greater understanding in support of peace, tolerance, democracy and development are dear to community radio activists and are specifically mentioned in point 10 of the AMARC Europe Charter, which states that:

> Community radio seeks to foster exchange between community radio broadcasters using communications to develop greater understanding in support of peace, tolerance, democracy and development. (See appendix).

Community radio activists share many of the same aims as practitioners of community development but they define a wider role for themselves in society. In many instances community radio can assist community development work as a channel of communication. Point 1 of the AMARC Europe Charter states that community radio specifically aims to:

> promote the right to communicate, assist the free flow of information, to encourage creative expression and to contribute to the democratic process and to enable the development of a pluralist society. (See appendix).

Community development supports and attempts to enable the democratisation of society at all levels but does not make communication a priority as community radio, almost by definition, must do.

Community development is frequently the mode of practice used by community radio stations to organise their work. Community radio aims to work in a participative and democratic manner. The projects are owned and managed by the community on a not-for-profit basis. Stress is laid on the process more than on the achievement of goals. The empowerment of individuals and of communities is of primary importance. In summary, it is fair to say

that community radio can use community development as a work practice, as a useful tool, while encompassing many, but not all, of its aims.

Community radio stations can and do define the communities with which they work. In many cases these mirror the communities targeted by community development work, such as marginalised and disadvantaged minorities. In others, the community served may encompass a wider range of socio-economic groupings and come closer to the remit of a public service broadcasting station. The definition of the community, or of groups within a community, which a station chooses to target will influence its work practices and organisation and will have implications in relation to sources of funding, for programming choices and for station ethos. Community development workers in Ireland are inclined to stress the importance of working with the dis-empowered, the voiceless and the disenfranchised and seek to effect these changes through the grassroots or "bottom up" approach. Community development in Ireland has come to be very narrowly focused on working with those who are marginalised by society especially through poverty, racism and sexism, as the Area Development Management project (ADM) in Ireland describes it as follows:

> Community Development is about enabling people to enhance their capacity to play a role in shaping the society of which they are a part. It works towards helping groups and communities to articulate needs and viewpoints and to influence the processes that structure their everyday lives. It is recognised that the ability to participate fully in society is open more to some groups and individuals than others, therefore the priority for those engaged in integrated local social and economic development is to work with the most disadvantaged (ADM, 1999).

This is both admirable and radical but a cynic will note that funds are available to work with those most marginalised in society, for example Travellers, the long-term unemployed and, more

recently, new immigrants. Of course community radio stations should prioritise such groups but they need to assess the risk of pursuing funding which enables them to work with certain target groups in the community and may cause them to forget their re-mit to all members of the community which they serve. Govern-ment interventions via community development projects to allevi-ate the effects of poverty in rural and urban Ireland do not aim to build all sectors of the community equally. Self-organised commu-nity groups which seek to build a strong sense of community, to create a public sphere in which all members can participate and to improve the quality of life for all, have a wider and potentially more radical role to play than such government-funded initiatives.

Community development by paid professionals is a vital and im-portant way of developing community, but it is not the only way. The current focus by state-sponsored community development workers in Ireland may not be helpful to community development long term, to communities in general or to community radio in par-ticular. By concentrating on those who are marginalised in isolation from the community as a whole, they risk institutionalising their marginalisation. All community development projects need to bring all sectors of the community along together if real change is to oc-cur in attitudes and values, as well as in material conditions. Fund-ing agencies and community development workers are aware of the need for the integration of marginalised people into main-stream society but they need to work with the greater community also for this to happen. Those who are not considered to be mar-ginalised also need to be educated and to be persuaded of the benefits of working collaboratively, equitably and inclusively and community radio projects are ideally suited to this work.

Many community radio activists do not view their role as be-ing exclusively that of working with the powerless or the disen-franchised. Many Irish community stations operate in middle class or mixed socio-economic areas and they see their role as serving all of the members of those communities. This may include a spe-

cial remit for the less advantaged members of the community as is the case in West Dublin Area Radio (WDAR, originally West Dublin Community Radio, WDCR), or it may not. Some community radios broadcast in the most affluent communities of Ireland, for example DSCR, in South County Dublin. In these cases, and in rural stations with a mixed socio-economic demography, it would be dangerous and unhelpful to concentrate solely on the disempowered, ignoring the talents and needs of the better educated, wealthier and more privileged members of those communities. Community radio seeks to connect the entire community to itself and to enrich the entire community as a whole, not just parts of it, although it may employ community development tactics to do this. The divisions of class, gender, religion, ethnicity and language are all important considerations, but truly inclusive community building will seek to accommodate all and to build bridges across these divides within communities.

The type of social capital which community radio stations try to build will reveal the priorities for each individual station. Does it attempt to bond members of that community closer together or to build bridges between diverse elements of the community or, ideally, does it attempt to do both? The philosophical orientation of the community radio movement in relation to building community can be identified, in part, by an examination of the benefits which Irish community radio stations hope will accrue to their communities by virtue of the participation of members of their communities in their ownership, management and programming.

Community media have been recognised as useful tools for community development. Several of the community radio stations currently licensed in Ireland were set up initially by "parent" community development organisations. These include Raidió Pobail Inis Eoghain, set up by Inishowen Rural Development Ltd in Donegal; Raidió Corca Baiscinn, set up by Éirí Corca Baiscinn in Clare; and Connemara Community Radio (CCR), set up partly by ConWest Plc in Galway. In these areas, where community development is

strongly established, the stations are seen as an ideal way of providing information and education to widely dispersed populations. They are seen as providing a communications link for the community and of presenting the community to itself in a positive light. They are also seen as sites for training in basic skills, as a way of enabling people to return to the job market through community employment (CE) schemes, and as a vehicle for increasing the self-confidence of individuals and therefore their ability to become actors in the life of their own communities. It seems a logical step for all community development activists to investigate the potential community radio offers to their own projects. The community radio station provides a communications link and another way of networking and of empowering people through participation.

The remainder of this chapter is based on research which I conducted for a Ph.D thesis (Day, 2003). I continued to research the work of Irish community radio stations and those findings are available in my recently published book (Day, 2007). However, the insights offered by the people who are quoted here have not been published before. I am grateful to the respondents who are named here and to many others active in Irish community radio for sharing their time and reflections with me.

The aim of building the community which they serve is the primary aim for all community radio stations. The ways they set about doing this and the priorities they place on different objectives vary across stations, but many Irish community radio stations today employ community development practices to powerful effect. WDAR revised the whole thrust of their operation in response to the needs of their community. Unlike most community radio stations in Ireland which grew from grassroots demands for licences, WDAR grew originally from a college's need to provide practical work for its media students. They only got to know the community which they served when they started to work with them. Their aims changed fundamentally when the station staff recognised the realities and the needs of the community they

were serving and began to respond to them. This is expressed in their early mission statement:

> By providing access for the community to a service of information, education and entertainment, West Dublin Community Radio seeks to act as an impetus for the stimulation of community activity, identity and well-being (WDCR, 1994).

Chairperson Celia Flanagan explains their change of direction in community development terms:

> That type of deep community development, that people use it as a tool and that the idea for the use can come from anywhere. It sometimes comes from us because sometimes I think you have to prod the community, you see things that can be done and sometimes I think you have to have a leadership role. Then again, if someone comes to you and they're very confident about what they're doing or what ever, you can give them the leadership role, depending on the circumstance.

Station staff at WDAR are keenly aware of the potential their station has to develop the whole person. This is carried through in the personal relationship which they nurture with each volunteer, Community Employment (CE) Scheme worker, board member or casual visitor to the studios. They believe in working co-operatively, non-hierarchically and in assisting people in finding their own voices. Former station manager Eugene Bollard explains one of the important effects which the foundation of the radio has had as follows:

> In this area very few go on to third level, the radio has made the college accessible to them – they can walk in. Their own confidence, their own speech, it gives more options to them and I think that's a huge thing.

Bollard himself is a good example of this. He started with the station as a participant in the CE scheme and became the station manager while studying for a degree at night. Without using the

rhetoric of community development, staff at WDAR are con-
cerned about facilitating the participation of those most marginal-
ised by society and of working in a non-hierarchical and empow-
ering way. Celia Flanagan explains that this is what makes their
working day worthwhile:

> I get a great buzz out of watching someone come on, people
> who mightn't say a word for the first three months and then
> they do every thing on the one day – talk, write, go on air.

The goal and the ethos of community development were the
founding principles of Connemara Community Radio (CCR).
These principles and aims were clarified over the first four years
of the station's existence and their second application for a li-
cence in 1998 rephrases them as follows:

> The aim of Connemara Community Radio is to operate a
> community radio station that adheres to the principles of
> good community practice, i.e widespread participation, em-
> powerment, ready access by all especially the most marginal-
> ised. We are firmly located in the community development
> tradition and see radio as a highly significant and appropriate
> vehicle in this process (CCR, 1998).

They elaborate on this and state their aims clearly and con-
cretely as being:

- To establish a community radio service in the context of
  being aware of the potential of radio to enhance the
  process of community development in novel and innova-
  tive ways

- A commitment to the establishment of a radio service
  which is truly community owned, managed and operated

- A commitment to the development of a service which ac-
  knowledges the complexity and diversity of communities
  and of different interests within them (CCR, 1998).

These aims were formulated through a process of self-evaluation and discussion at volunteer meetings and workshops, an essential part of any community development project. Each volunteer and worker believes in the community development goals and principles of the station and is proud that this is what they are about. Their first station manager, Mary Ruddy, clarifies their position:

> I think really what I would say about community radio is that it's a tool for community development but obviously it's a specific one. It's a broadcasting one, so a lot of your concerns will be as they are with the commercial and the public ones, you know programming, problems with programming, transmission problems, technologies. So we will share these things with broadcasters, but the other end of it, you know, "the why we're there", the kind of more philosophical end of it, is more comfortably located in the community and voluntary field.

This is held to be true by everyone participating in the station. People in CCR tend to describe their community in a block and then as specific subgroups. Some of these subgroups are to the forefront in programming provision, such as the community of local artists and local community activists. Others, more marginalised, are targeted by the station and become empowered through training and participation, such as women in the home and young people who have left school early.

NEAR Fm sees itself as bringing the various groups in the community together and enhancing their own development work through their involvement with the station and each other. The former chairperson, Jack Byrne, reflects:

> So a lot of these things link in together. I think what, for me, the richness of community radio is that it can actually allow people with compatible but slightly different approaches to this issue of development to use the radio station to pursue

> their own particular developmental aims and I think they're all complimentary. I don't see a conflict in that.

The understanding of community development itself and of the role which radio could play in enabling this practice was not fully understood at first, but it grew and evolved as the founding group experimented and interacted with other community radio activists from around the world. As Jack Byrne explains:

> I think there was an instinctive grasp that media and radio could be good for community development, now it was as nebulous as that. It was like one of these things, you ran it up the flag pole and everybody saluted it and no one quite knew what it meant. What did we mean by access and participation and that sort of thing?

NEAR Fm also takes its role as an educator very seriously. It works to educate the community in a number of ways, as an information source certainly, but also by equipping people with the skills, both radio-specific and personal development, to hear their own voices, to articulate their problems and to find the solutions to them.

Examples of this aim being translated into practice include the work they do with refugees, prisoner rehabilitation, early school leavers and travellers (see Chapter 10). Not all of these have been successful but the station manager explained that people in NEAR Fm understand the slow nature of community development work and do not view a high drop-out rate or the collapse of a project as outright failure. This is common in community development projects where the emphasis is placed on the process rather than on the product, on working at the level with which people can cope.

The goal of empowering the disadvantaged and of being an instrument in enabling people to change their own environment and circumstances is very strong in this station. Jack Byrne is passionate about the role he believes NEAR Fm can play in this way:

It's community development but for me, for me I think it is about personal empowerment. I really would love to think that the station was empowering people, that just to help them, just to help people to realise their own uniqueness and their own potential. I'm sort of getting in to something maybe even more spiritual than that, I would love to think that people understood their own ability to change things, that in the sort of world of chaos each person can have an impact, each person can have an impact on the situation, if they just realise their power to organise. Then of course, I feel you need to be informed, to organise, to do certain things, rather than always sort of acting to other people's agendas, that they start writing their own agendas and for me, that's when I think the station will have arrived and I don't see that happening in the next twelve months even. I'd love to be at the stage where the station, through its programming, was making people aware of this power that they have and to question, not to be complacent, I mean, for me, we should be asking what is an economy for? Is it just about the Celtic Tiger or is it about the weakest and the poorest and ensuring that they have a say in the whole thing?

Every Irish community radio station recognises the power of community radio to build their community. They are all concerned that community activists locally use their stations to accomplish their own goals. In reflecting on the development of Connemara Community Radio (CCR) in its first five years as a licensed broadcaster, their first station manager, Mary Ruddy, believes that people gradually came to realise the benefits of community radio in advertising or promoting their own group's activities. The situation has changed dramatically from the early days when it was difficult for other groups to visualise the benefits of participating in the station. Today, groups and associations are keen to go on air in order to have an impact on the community at large. They believe that the community radio station is a good way to promote themselves and their activities. As Mary Ruddy explains:

> I think people do use the station as a tool and increasingly so. I think there was a time, initially, when we started doing commentaries for example, we found the GAA impossible to depend on. Now they come to us and they will sort out where we will get access to a telephone line, they'll look for sponsors… And I think, certainly it raises awareness of what the groups are doing. Yacht clubs, for example, the RNLI would frequently have made contact with us about say a new development, a new boat, how many rescues they had, how many call outs they had and I think it just makes people aware of "God, I wouldn't have thought the Clifden RNLI would be that active" or so on. I think as well that one of the things that it generally does is to make people aware of the level of activity in the area.

NEAR Fm believe that they have succeeded in making their station available to community groups to broadcast their message to the community and that these groups recognise the value of the station to them in doing so. Station personnel quote several examples of groups who have experienced the positive benefits of going on air with NEAR Fm (see Chapter 6) and of groups who consequently became closely involved with the station. They are convinced that the access they can offer groups is more meaningful than that offered by other media because it is continuous, as Jack Byrne explains:

> I think community radio's real strength is that it allows individuals and organisations this continuous access to keep telling their story and as it evolves, to tell people where they're at now and to bring people along with them.

One of the original founders of DSCR, the late Tom Murchan, explained that he became involved in the project in the early 1980s because he believed that radio could provide a powerful communication channel for groups active in the community to promote themselves and to build the community:

> I always felt that there was a tremendous need for some
> source for the local voluntary organisations to advertise
> themselves and disseminate their wares and so forth. I'm not
> a real radio buff, as such, but I felt that there was the need for
> this and that if we could possibly get it, it would be a marvel-
> lous source for the development of the community and that's
> really our purpose: the development of the community.

Their current chair, John O'Brennan, agrees, emphasising that
south county Dublin did not have a strong tradition of community
activism:

> One of the advantages of the radio was to gather the com-
> munity together. Unfortunately the history of Dundrum,
> around this area, is not great for community work and maybe
> people are a bit more affluent and it was a little bit separated.
> Community groups never got together and we were trying to
> draw them together and to use the station to disseminate
> knowledge and to get the groups together, to get them in-
> volved in the radio and to get people to listen to them and to
> see who they were.

Irish community radio stations find, over time, that the com-
munity development approach is a good way of working, although
not all stations recognise that this, in effect, is what they are do-
ing. Stations and aspirant stations should look to community de-
velopment projects for ideas and if possible employ people with a
community development background or, at the very least, people
who are open to the principles and approach of community de-
velopment practice. The community development process assists
stations in evaluating and refining their practices. Likewise, com-
munity development workers should investigate the potential of
community radio to enhance their own work. Community devel-
opment and community radio, while not identical by any means,
have much to offer the community when they work hand in hand.