

Community Radio in Ireland

Introduction

There are 21 licensed community radio stations in Ireland. This may seem like a small number but Ireland itself is a small country of just over 4 million people. The experience these stations have to share with community media activists internationally is valuable as they have developed a philosophy of community radio forged from collective reflection on their experience. This philosophy is encapsulated in a definition of community radio employed by the regulatory authority in making licensing decisions but developed by the community radio stations themselves. Sharing a vision and a set of core aims, these 21 stations, in a wealthy and developed nation, work primarily with those who are marginalised and they usually operate in a community development manner. The regulatory authority has an open, friendly relationship with the stations they license, one that can be viewed as a partnership devoted to the work of community building and to the empowerment of individuals through their participation in broadcasting.

Types of stations and communities served

There are two types of community radio stations currently issued with licenses in Ireland. These are defined in terms of the communities they serve – geographic communities and communities of interest. There are 16 community radio stations that serve geographic communities. These range in size from the 10,000 people scattered over a rugged terrain of 300 square miles, including two off-shore islands, served by *Connemara Community Radio* to one quarter of the population of the capital city, Dublin, nearly 250,000 people, served by NEAR FM. Communities of interest licences have been granted to students in three of the major cities outside Dublin (Cork, Galway and Limerick), a Christian faith community in Cork and the scattered community of Irish speakers living in the greater Dublin area.

History and aims

The Broadcasting Act of 1988 broke the 62 year legal monopoly of the public service broadcaster, RTÉ, in Ireland and allowed for the licensing of independent, commercial and community radio for the first time. A regulatory authority that has undergone several name changes (*The Independent Radio and Television*

Commission, IRTC, the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, BCI and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI) was established to license and monitor the sector. Licensed, commercial, local and national radio stations began broadcasting in 1989 but community groups had to wait longer. In 1993 two community radio stations were granted licenses as a result of successful political lobbying. Both were in Dublin and the demand for other community radio stations to be licensed continued. The regulatory authority decided to establish an 18 month pilot project to examine the viability of community radio stations before issuing long term. Invitations to participate were advertised in the press in 1994 and, in 1995, eleven community radio stations began broadcasting.

One of the key achievements arising out of this pilot project, apart from the survival of nine of these stations today, was the development of a definition of community radio. This definition declares that any group seeking a community radio licence must be representative of their community in ownership, management and programming and must operate on a not-for-profit basis. The station must be open to participation at the levels of membership, management, operation and programming and it must be able to define the community it serves. It states that

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, 2001:2).

This definition enables stations with diverse perspectives, coming from very different types of communities, to work together as a sector and as a movement. It was adopted by the regulatory authority as part of their policy on community radio and so facilitates the licensing and support of community radio stations in a clear and transparent manner. It prevents other groups laying claim to community credentials and licenses when, perhaps, they are music oriented and profit driven. The community radio sector in Ireland has sought the inclusion of this definition in every broadcasting act since 1988 but, to date, has been unsuccessful in doing so. The reluctance of politicians to ring fence a space for community media in legislation is difficult to understand. However, it makes the adoption of a definition of community radio by the

regulatory authority all the more valuable to community activists, particularly as it came from consultation with, and the experience of, the practitioners themselves.

Another significant outcome of the pilot project was the establishment of the *Community Radio Forum of Ireland*, now called *Craol*, the Irish word for “to broadcast”. All of the licensed community radio stations currently on-air are members of this network and community groups aspiring to broadcast are welcomed and supported in making their applications. The work of *Craol* is assisted by the regulatory authority in terms of advice, easy access to its officers and through a number of funding schemes for development, evaluation and training. The network has one paid executive supported by a committee of volunteers elected by stations and organised as a co-operative. This recent appointment and the maintenance of a website (www.craol.ie) together greatly facilitate communication between community radio activists. The executive and website assist in the provision of support and back up for stations in matters as diverse as grant applications, scheduling, and the care of volunteers.

Craol organises many training events throughout the year in diverse locations and for specific needs. Its single, biggest event is a national training festival or *Féile*. Hosted by a different station once a year, up to 150 participants meet for a weekend of training, learning and networking. Stations choose different participants to go to the *Community Radio Training Féile* every year so that learning is maximised and shared on return with others.

Ownership and management

Each of the community radio stations licensed in Ireland is owned by the community that it is licensed to serve. Sometimes this is in partnership with an existing community development body. This is the case with *Radio Pobal Inis Eoghan* (ICR), Co. Donegal in the north of the country and *Radio Corca Baiscinn* (RCB), Co. Clare on the western seaboard. More stations are owned by co-operative societies (Co-ops) that any person in the target community can join by paying a nominal fee. The number of shares is unlimited but they do not pay dividends. Shares are used to fundraise and to sharpen the awareness of collective ownership. Each person or organization has only one vote, regardless of the number of shares purchased. Examples of this type of station include NEAR FM and *Dublin South FM*, both urban

stations in the capital city. Some community radio stations have opted to form limited companies but again, shares, which do not pay dividends, are offered to all members of the community at a nominal price. Campus community radio stations are owned by the students in partnership with the institution or the student union or both. Ireland currently has three of these: FLIRT FM in Galway, *Wired FM* in Limerick and *Cork Campus Radio*.

No matter which model of ownership is employed, each of Ireland's community radio stations has a board of management, democratically elected, that develops long term policy and is in control of the station. These boards must be comprised of members of the community and, in every case, the majority of board members are volunteers. A gender balance is ensured. This is a requirement of licensing, but in almost all cases, it is reflected in practice on the air and on the ground.

In most stations, a paid manager assisted by a subcommittee or executive of volunteers nominated by this board, manages the day to day running of the station. Irish community radio stations collectively devised a circular flow model of management which now forms part of BCI community radio policy.

Almost every Irish community radio station depends on other paid members of staff to assist the manager. The schemes and mechanisms through which these are funded often prove problematic. They have varied considerably over time as Ireland has moved from widespread unemployment, through the boom of the Celtic Tiger and back into recession. Stations differ in their reliance on government funded back-to-work and disability employment schemes and on positions provided for through grant-aided projects.

Finance

It is a basic tenet of the community radio movement and a contractual condition for Irish community radio stations that they be funded from a variety of sources.

Advertising is allowed and is capped by the regulator at 50% of all income but this percentage is not reached by any community radio station broadcasting in Ireland today. This is partly because commercial advertisers do not seem to be attracted to the sector and also because community radio activists are keen to maintain their editorial independence.

The greatest single source of funding for Irish community radio stations is through grants from government departments, NGOs and from the European Union. Stations apply for funding for activities that are in tune with their core goals and of benefit to their communities. They rarely manage to secure funding for the making of broadcast programmes. Instead they depend on funding for training or for interventions with sectors of the community who are marginalised or disadvantaged. Examples of this type of funded project include adult literacy work by *Community Radio Castlebar*, a training project by *West Dublin Access Radio* with reformed drug addicts, a production course with young people with disabilities in *Wired FM* and a multitude of projects involving the participation of new immigrants and disaffected youth in nearly every station in the country.

Other sources of income include local sponsorship, fundraising in the community, off-air commercial activity such as studio hire and training and, to a very minor degree, membership fees and shares. To date there is no funding agency that recognises the importance of the core work of community radio stations in building and developing their communities. This means that the costs of managing and running the stations as broadcasting entities must be found elsewhere. However, stations survive financially and they choose the projects for which they apply for funding carefully so that they match their aims and ethos.

The regulatory authority supplies significant funding to Irish community radio stations but again this cannot be spent on day to day running expenses. A number of specific schemes assist stations in developing key areas and these include the *Community Radio Training Féile*, discussed above, the *Community Radio Support Scheme* (CRSS) and the *Sound and Vision Scheme*. The CRSS funds evaluations, both internal and external, to enable the station to assess its performance in different areas, for example its relationship with its community or its long term strategic planning. *Sound and Vision* is a scheme paid for from the television licence fee under the terms of the Broadcasting Act of 2003. This funds new programmes dealing with Irish culture, heritage and experience, adult literacy and the Irish language. Launched in 2005, it has brought significant funding, and therefore security, to Irish community radio stations, enabling them to focus on programme making while helping to pay their bills. It undoubtedly improves the quality of programming in the sector, funding

documentary, drama and experimental sound projects, thus developing the expertise and creative output of community radio stations.

Programming, target groups

The voices heard on air are probably the most obvious signifiers of public participation in any community radio station. It is through its programmes, and through the voices that are heard on them, that members of a community may first assess the relevance of the station to them. This means that talk programming predominates on most stations. While all stations play music and many programmes are music oriented, the priority for stations is speech-based, issue-driven programming across a range of genres. The magazine type show predominates on all schedules.

Volunteers from the community served make up the majority of the presenters and producers in Irish community radio stations. This is a matter of policy, as the community radio station is set up to be used by its owners. An average of 80 people participate on a weekly basis in each Irish community radio station.

Community of interest licences establish stations that cater for specific groups within the wider community. However, all geographically based community stations target segments of their community in order to support and empower those who are excluded from or ignored by main stream media and society. These include women in the home, the elderly, disaffected youth, new immigrants and the disabled. Such groups are seen as subsets of the larger community and by working with other agencies who care for those on the margins of society, Irish community radio stations form part of the community development efforts to build a more inclusive and democratic society.

Sometimes a station provides on-air training leading to programmes that are broadcast and that may be the extent of the intervention. More frequently, Irish community radio stations develop training programmes in the areas of personal development, communication and broadcasting skills and community activism. They seek to foster long term relationships with disengaged and disempowered individuals and groups. The aim of Irish community radio stations is to enable different sectors of the

community to interact with each other through the station and to co-operate in the community building project for all.

For further information please consult:

BCI. (2001), *Community radio policy document*. Dublin: BCI.

Day, R. (2008). *Community radio in Ireland: Participation and multi-flows of communication*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.

Day, R. (2007) (Ed.). *Bicycle highway: Celebrating community radio in Ireland*. Dublin: The Liffey Press.

<http://www.bci.ie>

<http://www.craol.ie>