

New Technologies and the Facilitation of Participation in Community Radio Stations.

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Keywords: Community radio; community development; empowerment; Ireland; multi-flows of communication; participation; social gain; social networking; student; technology.

Word count: text - 4,908, abstract – 289.

Abstract:

This paper investigates the extent to which Irish community radio stations use new technologies to facilitate the participation of members of their communities in programme production, station management and in the exercise of their rights of ownership of the station.

It finds that the rate of adoption of new technologies in Irish community radio stations is low. Although some community stations have begun to use social networking sites, they do so in the same way that commercial and public service radio stations do: to advertise and promote their own shows and presenters, to attract and grow their audiences, and to engage in limited dialogue with them. These uses are examples of one and two way flows of communication and do not provide for meaningful and useful engagement, which in this article, is termed “genuine participation”.

“Genuine participation” enables members of the community to participate in programme production, in management and in ownership of the station. This could be facilitated, in part, through the innovative use of new technologies. However, only younger people, in particular students, appear to be making even tentative attempts to provide for this.

Managers need to understand the potential of new technologies to provide personal and useful multi-flows of communication. Similarly, technicians must appreciate the social benefits that accrue from the facilitation of public participation in the media. In a study of twenty community radio projects in Ireland in 2009, only three student and two rural community stations provide the few examples of the early adoption and adaptation of social networking sites to facilitate genuine participation that were observed. Facebook and Twitter prove to be the sites of student preference. Cork Campus Radio and Flirt in Galway provide some examples of experiments to facilitate “genuine participation”.

Introduction:

Early adopters of any new communications technology tend to adapt the technology to meet their own needs and so contribute to its development, discovering unforeseen potentials that benefit those who come to use the technology later. It seems that this will be the case with the current crop of new communications technologies within community radio. In 2009, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are

being used by a small number of participants in some Irish community radio stations.

They are used to garner and grow audiences for individual shows in much the same way that commercial stations, celebrities and product promoters attract an audience, fans or customer base. So they provide examples of one way and very simple two way flows of communication. Some early signs of more innovative exploitation of the potential that social networking sites can offer community media projects are observed but these are neither well developed nor widespread. Tentative experimentation in providing for multi-flows of communication and for the facilitation of participation in meaningful and useful ways is primarily being undertaken by students in campus community radio stations; with new immigrants and younger managers showing the way in a few urban and rural geographically based stations.

This research project is a logical extension of an earlier investigation into how Irish community radio stations foster and facilitate participation in their stations and community projects (Day, 2008). The potential of social networking sites, particularly when linked to mobile phone technology, seems to have the capacity to promote two way dialogue and multi-flows of communication that are more dynamic than traditional, one way flows of information. If realised, such multi-flows of communication could and should assist community radio stations in the recruitment of volunteers, in maintaining a real and immediate two way dialogue with them, in creating new communication flows within the community served and in facilitating participation in the station at the most meaningful and powerful of levels, these being participation in ownership, management and programme making.

Traditionally community radio stations have employed a number of strategies to recruit, train and care for volunteers, ensuring their participation is meaningful and beneficial. In Ireland, these include training courses, mentoring systems and the appointment of co-ordinators to care for volunteers among others (Day, 2008). The social benefits that the facilitation of participation bring to individuals and communities are many and Irish community radio stations bear witness to this fact. Irish community radio stations seek to empower women (McGann, 2007), to combat the marginalisation of disadvantaged sectors of the community (Byrne, Galiana and Murray, 2007), to provide adult education (Stanton, 2007) and to facilitate the work of community development projects (Unique Perspectives, 2003; Day 2007). Community radio stations do not exist solely to broadcast. They have social and sometimes political agendas and use broadcasting as a means of achieving their aims of community building, empowerment and social justice. Working in a community development manner necessitates the facilitation of participation by members of the community served at all levels and this project sets out to investigate the extent to which Irish community radio stations employ new technologies to assist them in the facilitation of such participation.

Participation:

The term “participation” itself can cause confusion. Some people believe that any engagement by, or involvement of, citizens within the mass media constitutes participation, no matter how fleeting, mediated or insignificant. However this is clearly not the case for community media activists who value participation for the social and personal benefits that accrue as part of its facilitation for the individuals involved and for the community as a whole. White’s distinction between “genuine participation” and “pseudo participation” is useful in identifying what community

media activists really mean by participation (White, 1994: 17). She maintains that “pseudo participation” is tightly controlled, heavily mediated and is facilitated for reasons such as the provision of cheap and popular programming or the projection of an image of inclusivity and localness. “Genuine participation” on the other hand, is enabling, relatively unmediated and provided for its own sake (White, 1994: 17). Commercial media and public service broadcasters in general tend to work at the level of “pseudo participation” while community media aim for “genuine participation”. “Genuine participation” leads to social benefit in the community in terms of the empowerment and conscientisation of individuals, the strengthening of community ties and the progression of community development goals.

In my earlier work (Day 2008), I investigated the notion of “genuine participation” and asked to what extent were Irish community radio stations facilitating this? To answer that question I needed a framework that would help to identify, if not quantify, the type and quality of participation that was being facilitated. It was necessary to distinguish between the types of participation that other media provide as opposed to those facilitated by community media for whom participation is a core aim and end in itself beyond the levels of broadcasting. It became clear just how important it is to do this during the course of this research, when many of those actively involved in community radio stations were found to believe that the facility for dialogue provided by social networking sites was sufficient in itself to fulfil the aim of enabling participation. Technicians in particular did not imagine or seek to enable any deeper or more meaningful type of participation. McCain and Lowe (1990: 95) provide a starting point to help differentiate between different types of participation. They propose a hierarchy that ranks citizens’ involvement in the media as occurring on three levels in ascending order: access, participation and self-management. This can

be expanded into a framework of seven cumulative levels to tease out the quality or form of participation enabled in descending order as follows:

A Framework for Participation in Media

<u>Level</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Provided by</u>
7	Full and Active Participation	Ownership by community	Community media
6	Self-management	Management and decision making, open to community, unmediated by outside groups	Community media
5	Participation	Schedule, programme planning, autonomous production after training by station, open to community	Community and access media
4	Mediated Participation	Producing and presenting programmes	Public service, commercial and community media
3	Controlled Participation	Presenting programmes with professional producers	Public service, commercial and community media
2	Controlled Access	Speaking on air	Public service, commercial and community media
1	Reactive Access	Responding to content broadcast	Public service, commercial and community media

(Day, 2008: 126).

Most broadcast media offer access and participation up to level 3, “controlled participation”. The facilitation of “controlled access” and “controlled participation” makes sense for all broadcasters, be they public, private or community. All radio stations, regardless of category, need to build links with their target audiences. Such participation often provides cheap programming and it sometimes makes for a riveting broadcast when someone breaks down on air or attacks another caller (Higgins and Moss, 1982: 139; Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 118) but it is rarely beneficial or empowering for the participants. Some public service and commercial radio stations offer “mediated participation” (level 4) where members of the public are selected and trained to produce and present programmes. This can provide a useful service for both the community and the station, however, it is provided

primarily for the station's benefit rather than for the development of the community. Only access and community media allow for the "genuine participation" we see at level 5 and usually it is only community media who can, or want, to provide for "genuine participation" at levels 6 and 7, enabling the exercise of self-management and ownership. It is only at the top three levels that participation is offered for the benefit it can provide the community, rather than merely as a means to a business driven end; for example to extend audience reach in order to increase profits.

Larger audiences and higher profits are welcome bi-products for any broadcaster, including community radio stations. However, community media aim to facilitate citizen participation in their projects— both on and off the air – to empower individuals and to connect them to others in their communities. They seek to do this in ways that enable members of their communities to work together so as to improve the quality of life of those communities, communally. Community development practice stresses the need for this to come from within the community and to be controlled by the members of the community (Rubin and Rubin, 1992: 68). It can be fostered by community development workers and other agents of social change but it must be led and most importantly owned and controlled by the community itself. This requires the facilitation of "genuine participation" at levels 5, 6 and 7 in the areas of programme planning and production, in management and decision making and in ownership. It is extremely difficult to maintain the facilitation of this type of participation and most community radio stations fail to do so adequately. The more successful stations recognize this and constantly review and revise the strategies they employ to facilitate participation. However, many Irish community radio stations, and those who work in them, do not recognize the difference between different types of participation and the important

implications of this, and they struggle to achieve their goals as a result (Day, 2008).

The research project:

The aim of this small research project was to ascertain the extent to which Irish community radio stations had discovered the potential that new communications technologies can offer them to provide for participation in their projects at the higher levels of “genuine participation”. The research was conducted over six months in 2009 and consisted of a simple questionnaire, a focus group, individual interviews with managers and basic observation or monitoring of popular social networking sites and of stations’ websites. Five stations were found to use new communications technologies to some degree to facilitate participation. At first it seemed that stations were not using the newest technologies at all. However, this changed from month to month with more technologically aware, – usually younger – participants in stations setting up their own pages on Facebook and beginning to establish a presence there for their shows. The five stations are Cork Campus Radio, Flirt in Galway and Wired Fm in Limerick, all student community radio stations and two small, rural stations on the Atlantic seaboard, Connemara Community Radio in Galway and Raidió Corca Baiscinn in Clare.

Two major reasons for the slow adoption of social networking tools emerged clearly from the focus group and interviews. Technicians from many stations, both paid and voluntary, found the concept of participation itself was alien to them.

They were excited by what new technologies could do but did not demonstrate any understanding of the value of facilitating participation as a goal in itself. There is a clear need for a process of conscientisation within this group in stations. It was equally clear that older managers and members of boards of management, who do not use social networking sites themselves, could not conceive of the potential that

these sites have to offer their stations in the future. Their resistance came from an insistence that communication should be personal and immediate and remain rooted in the community. This stems from a lack of understanding of just how personal and immediate social networking is for those who are engaged in it and how technologically assisted networking enhances relationships that are rooted in real communities such as young professionals and students. Again, there is a clear need for education in this area and some dialogue between technicians and managers in each station would reap benefits for community radio projects across the country. The result of such a dialogue would lead to the conscious adaptation of new communications technologies to make the facilitation of participation more targeted, immediate and regular and consequently make it more meaningful and effective. It would ultimately promote community radio stations' core aim of building the community served.

The lack of awareness of the importance of participation and a lack of understanding of how and why it should be facilitated, mean that as late as the Autumn of 2009, most community radio stations in Ireland are using new communications technologies in the same manner as commercial and public service counterparts. They use the internet sites and facilities such as Facebook and Twitter to attract and to grow audiences. Essentially, they use them to communicate with members of their communities in one direction. Oftentimes, this limited forum is merely used to advertise and to give information, although occasionally social networking sites are used to engage in a limited form of dialogue to keep people listening and to encourage feedback and some general comments. However, they do not actively engage members of their communities at the levels of broadcasting, managing and exercising their rights and responsibilities as owners of the stations.

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For most of the first decade of the 21st century the adoption of new technologies by Irish community radio stations was poor. This was due to lack of finance, the rate of development of the technologies themselves, the age and education levels of many of the participants in community radio stations and the lack of time to experiment or to learn new skills for volunteers who were already busy broadcasting and engaging in community work in their spare time. As late as 2009, high speed broadband is still not available in every area where community radio stations are broadcasting. In others, poor literacy and low incomes mean that the internet is not being used by the majority of the population. Websites were created for community radio stations from the late 1990s onwards but these generally remained static and quickly became boring and irrelevant. They remained no more dynamic than electronic noticeboards and even at this were rarely updated. Stations made no effort on their websites to communicate with the members of their own communities differently to the ways they presented themselves to the casual web browser. By 2008 text lines had been introduced into nearly every station but these are mainly used in the same way that commercial and public service broadcasters avail of them, for members of the public to send in requests and for simplistic feedback on content. They are not being used to connect listeners to each other or to invite them to participate in the day to day management and long term policy planning of stations. There is little evidence of new communications technologies being embraced and utilized to promote multi-flows of communication that could be exciting. There is less evidence of any experimentation with communication at meaningful levels that could lead to “genuine participation” that could be powerful. There is no evidence of any attempt to develop multi, micro-public spheres that could be truly dynamic both socially and politically.

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After this slow and disappointing start, the situation is undergoing rapid change and development and some station managers are reporting the benefits. Two stations in 2006 used the internet to interface with emigrants from their communities. One of them, Connemara Community Radio, has had offers of financial assistance from emigrants in New York who depend on the website for local news, in particular for the death notices. Although this demonstrates greater involvement between the station and some members of the community, the result, in terms of production, is still at the level of information provision and is largely an example of uni-directional communication. The interesting change is the adoption of social networking sites by student stations and the two most useful and popular at the time of writing are Facebook and Twitter.

Most of the activity is still at the level of individual pages and postings and operates as simple one and two way flows of communication. Students create pages and tweets to advertise individual shows and presenters and to provide an opportunity for some dialogue with fans. While this is interesting and enjoyable, it is no different to the use made of them by any other medium or celebrity.

However, there are some signs that student stations are beginning to adapt the technology to serve more important community radio goals. The three student stations, Cork Camps Radio, Flirt in Galway and Wired in Limerick are each using social networking sites to bind their volunteers together and Flirt is showing signs of beginning to engage students through Facebook and open blogging to participate, to some extent, in planning and decision making in the station.

Student stations are ideally placed to lead the way as they are the only communities in Ireland served by community radio stations that use new technologies daily and for long periods of time. Students spend a lot of time on Facebook itself and it is because they already use social networking sites to connect with each other that

they have no difficulty visiting and contributing to station pages on a regular basis.

In other communities, where people rarely connect to the internet and where Facebook is not a routine and daily function in ordinary life, it is difficult to see how stations could get them to log on or to imagine why the members of those communities would want to. However, this situation is bound to change and when the rest of the population depends on the internet, on social networking sites and on their mobile phones for more than just accessing information, texting and talking, their community radio stations will need to engage with these new technologies and to use them as organizational tools to involve members of their communities in decision making, planning and policy making. Social networking sites have the potential to be open to all and to provide opportunities for participation on an equal playing field, much as Habermas hoped for in providing “ideal speech situations” (Habermas, 1962). However, as with all ideal constructs, this is still only imagined by some. Student stations in Ireland have not yet discovered how to do this through the use of new technologies and other stations lag even further behind but at least they are beginning to experiment with social networking in this direction.

One example of how social networking can be used as a formal organizational tool that improves communication and builds relationships between volunteers is provided by Cork Campus Radio. All volunteers are required to set up a page on Facebook during their induction and as part of their formal training. They are encouraged to make this a distinct page, separate from their own personal pages. They use these pages as commercial broadcasters do, to post their play lists and to engage with their audiences as individuals. However, they move up the participation hierarchy outlined in the framework for participation in the media by trying to consciously create what their station manager terms “a cloud”. All of

these pages are interlinked and the conversations and discussions that are carried out on them are station related. This, they have found, helps them to get to know each other and was introduced after an internal evaluation found that there was a gulf between the student volunteers and the board of management and poor connectivity and communication between the students themselves. The station manager reports that whereas student presenters frequently only knew the presenters who came on air immediately before and after them and did not engage in the station outside of their own show, the interactions and exchanges on Facebook have led to students having prior knowledge of and communication with each other when they meet at station social functions. They now report that they feel more a part of a team and that they feel there is less of a clique running the station. This is a long way from being an example of active participation in station management but it is a step forward. The difficulty for managers in breaking down the operation, or the perception of the operation, of cliques within stations was observed and noted in my earlier research (Day, 2008: 175). This layered, yet transparent, set of interactions, of multi-flows of communication in fact, seems to provide one way of countering this problem.

Cork Campus Radio also use the activity on individual pages and the collective interaction between them in the “cloud” to update the station website collectively. Their website has now become a more vital and energized, interactive space for communication within and for the station as a result. Although the manager only updates his own news about once a fortnight, student volunteers have begun to use Twitter for headlines on this site as well as in the usual manner and find the immediacy and brevity it offers ideal for maintaining a fresh and lively approach. The Twitter headlines on the website are changed by volunteers who have access

to the station's mobile phone on a daily basis and this is reported as increasing activity, interest and engagement by students in the site significantly.

Staff in Cork Campus Radio still use email for contacting volunteers and they use their text line for emergencies but they use Facebook for the business of managing schedules, for programme planning and for ensuring that everyone knows what everyone else is doing on air. This does not provide for participation at level 5 of the framework "schedule, programme planning and autonomous production" of itself but it does assist and supplement the other work practices and strategies that do.

Cork Campus Radio's station manager reports that he finds it easier to interact with and engage with his volunteers now than he did two years ago when he depended mainly on texts and on email. He believes that Facebook and Twitter allow him to be in immediate and constant contact with students. He can see who is on-line at any given time, he knows more about what students are interested in and what they are doing and they can talk to each other and to him more immediately and effectively than heretofore. This means he can manage them more effectively, although it does not yet provide opportunities for them to participate more effectively in management.

Flirt in Galway have advanced further in their use of social networking sites as a way of connecting their volunteers with each other and with the station. They provide an early example of a community radio station in Ireland exploring new technologies to attract and engage the participation of members of their community in station management itself. They do all that Cork Campus Radio do - their presenters have and use their own Facebook pages, blogs and Twitter but they have created a single page on Facebook for the station and given the station a quirky personality for students to interact with. "She" is called "Raidió Gaillimh" and you

can become friends with “her”. This is more integrated than Cork Campus Radio’s “cloud” and is a smart, self-aware effort to tie volunteers in more closely with their station and with each other. “Raidió” has a blog, written mainly by the young station manager who updates it daily. She uses it sometimes to spark off debate about management issues but she usually uses it as an organizational tool for management so that all volunteers know what is being planned and can have some input in or influence on it before it becomes practice.

The two smallest and most isolated, rural, community radio stations in Ireland, Connemara Community Radio in North West Galway and Raidió Corca Baiscinn in South West Clare are also beginning to use new technologies but to different degrees. Individual presenters in both stations have Facebook pages and blogs relating to their programmes but the lack of broadband and the lower income and education levels of many in their target communities mean that this has not become widespread practice. While the manager of Connemara Community Radio was keen to try any means of improving the rates and quality of participation, he was suspicious of new technologies, seeing them as a replacement for, or even a block to, “real” or face-to-face communication. In the case of his community, primarily older people, without broadband, living in an isolated, disadvantaged, rural area, this resistance is valid; people there do not use Facebook and Twitter to communicate with their neighbours. The opposite is true for members of student communities as they live on and through social networking sites.

Raidió Corca Baiscinn transmits in a very similar area and community but they are in the process of introducing significant uses of new communications technologies. They developed a new, more dynamic website in early 2009 and have a link specifically for volunteers on the front or home page. Broadband has recently been rolled out in their transmission area and they are about to begin streaming and

podcasting in the Autumn. Their young station manager believes that as people take advantage of broadband to fulfill other needs on a regular basis, Raidió Corca Baiscinn should take advantage of that activity and link local internet users into their website and project. The station began to have a presence on Facebook in the Summer of 2009 and staff are eager to explore the possibilities it may offer. Raidió Corca Baiscinn has a co-ordinator for volunteers is supported by a team of trainers to recruit, train and care for volunteers and they believe that Facebook and Twitter could be really useful but only once people in their target communities begin to use them. As they are run as part of a community development initiative and target the most disadvantaged members of their community first, this is likely to take some time.

In the meantime, and similar to the experience of Connemara Community Radio, they find that emigrants in New York and elsewhere are beginning to get in touch as they discover their more dynamic and audio supported web page. The potential usefulness of social networking for members of their diaspora are obvious.

Whether the community radio station decides to devote energy to facilitating the “genuine participation” of these emigrants or not is a decision for them to debate but it is a possibility provided, for the first time, by the development of communications technology.

Conclusions:

The rate of uptake of internet and mobile phone technology in Irish community radio stations beyond the use of static websites, email and texting is disappointing. The reasoning behind this is multifaceted and includes the poor telecommunications infrastructures and the low income and education levels of most of the communities served by Irish community radio stations. The facilitation of participation itself has been overlooked on two counts. Firstly, the belief of

many older community radio activists that new communications technologies will fail to enable personal and meaningful communication results in avoidance of any sustained engagement with new technologies. Secondly, the lack of understanding by station technicians, both paid and voluntary, of the crucial importance of participation for community projects has also contributed to the lack of experimentation with new technologies; technologies that are almost certain to facilitate “genuine participation” if used and adapted consciously and creatively. Some exceptions were observed, these include some individual presenters, some new immigrants and some younger managers in stations who are using social networking sites to promote their own shows and agendas but there is no evidence in any of these cases of any attempt to facilitate “genuine participation”. Rather they provide examples of one way and simple two way flows of communication that do not facilitate genuine participation in the programming, management and ownership of the community radio stations. It is only the student community radio stations that offer any evidence of the exploitation of the potential that social networking sites offer to community radio stations to attract, facilitate and foster the participation of members of the community in the station at the higher levels of the framework proposed.

New communications technologies that enable dialogue are available to Irish community radio stations but are not yet being energetically explored for their potential to facilitate “genuine participation”. The adoption and adaptation of these new technologies will depend on the rate of the use of the internet and newer mobile phone technologies within the target community. In order for any of these new technologies to be useful to a community radio station in recruiting new participants and in supporting them in that participation, members of those communities must be comfortable with the technologies and must already be using

them. Younger people tend to be early adopters and adapters of newer technologies. Students in particular are IT literate and embrace new challenges and opportunities. They communicate and interact through digital technology and it is no surprise, therefore that the initial, admittedly limited, experiments in using social networking sites to facilitate participation are to be found in student community radio stations and in stations led by younger people.

Most Irish community radio stations however, serve communities where the rate of internet usage is still limited, infrequent and uncommon. This is related to age, educational achievement, financial resources and poor telecommunications infrastructures. Given that the majority of Irish community radio stations work from a community development ethic (Unique Perspectives, 2003; Day 2007) we can hardly expect that the poorest, most marginalized members of society will be in a position to use these new technologies in the immediate future.

In the meantime, it is up to the young, well educated, technologically able, community radio activists of the student stations to explore further the potential to facilitate “genuine participation” through new technologies. If they lead the way in using social networking sites to facilitate “genuine participation” simply and effectively, other community radio stations will follow happily when their communities are ready.

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She was one of the founders of three community radio projects in Ireland and has been actively involved in community radio in Ireland since 1988 as a trainer, a programme maker and a strategic planner. She helped to build the Community Radio Forum that became CRAOL and continues to provide training and advice on a voluntary basis.