

Appendix No 19 - Position Paper to DCDB

Position Paper on Communications and Community Media

(Community TV/Internet/radio)

To: Strategic Policy Development Group on Culture, Communications and Participation – *Citizens shaping the city*

From: Community Media Network
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Summary

We are concerned here with the state of community media in Dublin. The special nature of community media - participatory, accountable and diverse – is emphasised with particular attention to how it contributes to a developing multicultural society.

The community sector has had little access so far to this powerful tool, constrained by perceptions of community media; the type of information and training available in the use of new technologies; who delivers training programmes and their methodologies; access to broadcasting and distribution - the legislative and regulatory context; who should pay.

Community radio, with 16 stations established since the early 1990's provides a useful model for how community broadcasters can be structured, now their experience covers a wide range of lessons learned. Video is used in community contexts as a means for evaluation, promoting and explaining the work of community organisations and services, historical record; and expressing community identity. The pool of experience within the city in a variety of community media, including the use of the Internet, is a unique resource available to the CDB strategic planning process.

Community TV's greatest potential is as a tool for participatory democracy, as media created and controlled by the people. The proposed legislation and converging technologies mean that community TV will soon be viable in the City of Dublin. Equipment, training, and facilities are clearly identified as needs by the community sector. Facilities for production should be embedded within community centres, where equipment can be housed and training programmes designed to combat exclusion co-ordinated.

Our recommendations address: - mechanisms for participation, needs identification, and feasibility studies. Recognition of the social, economic and cultural value of community and the inclusion of the essential, defining, features of community media in the strategic plan. Access to the new digital infrastructure and the contribution of service providers such as cable companies to both carrying content and developing infrastructure.

Introduction

The City Development Board and inclusion of community media

CMN welcomes the consultative process afforded by the City Development Board and the breadth of its vision. We are therefore very hopeful that the strategic plan for the City of Dublin will enable participation in the democratic process for all its citizens. An important part of this, in our view, is the recognition of community media as a tool for empowerment which in and of itself provides an effective means of participation that supports social inclusion.

We see in the CDB process a special opportunity to initiate a citywide approach that will harness the potential of a capital city with all its interest groups to develop a unique and internationally recognised model of community media. There is already a strong pool of experience and resources to be drawn upon within the city amongst organisations working in different media – radio, video, community TV and Internet. We hope the consultation process will recognise the special nature of the community media sector, and provide protection for these initiatives within the plan.

Currently, CMN is focusing its efforts on the provisions for community TV under the new broadcasting legislation. It seems clear to us that the City of Dublin should, by virtue of its population and status, have a community TV broadcast service.

The opportunity now exists to ensure that the CDB strategic plan will support the provision of a community TV service that focus's on exclusion, and promotes inclusive and creative access to media. In our view, such a service can *only* be provided by a sector that is community owned, accountable, and not-for-profit. We support the establishment of a forum that would bring the actors and organisations involved in community media together to contribute to the plan.

The importance of community media

Community media is an important player in the media environment, it constitutes in effect, a 'third pillar' that acts as a democratic counter-balance to the growth of commercial media and the power and influence of media empires. Community media differs fundamentally from commercial and public service media in that it regards people as active agents in their communities who produce and broadcast their own material. Community media has participatory and accountable structures - a community station is owned and controlled by the community it serves and is an integral part of the development and growth of the community itself, a successful station will mobilise the commitment, creative talents and energies within the community. In most parts of the world community media is already recognised as a legitimate third pillar; Ireland is an exception in this regard amongst the developed countries.

Many Voices

Community media is believed by many countries to be essential for freedom of speech, and to the development of participatory democracy. It therefore has an important part to play in a changing society. Cherishing diversity and openness to the richness of other cultures is an oft-repeated aim of policy makers, and yet this remains vacuous without some follow through providing the means by which the diverse elements of our society are included and reflected.

Community media in all its forms, video, TV, radio, print and Internet, is a means for expression of different voices and cultures, it is also a means for communication between cultures, and these functions are particularly important in a changing society. A key feature of community media is the fact that it is totally determined by the communities themselves. It can be big, small, a village or have no physical boundaries. It is therefore able to provide a medium for communities identifying around their common interest rather than a geographical locale. Islanders, small farmers, women, Travellers, lesbians and gays, all may have more in common with each other than with geographic neighbours.

Access to means of communication such as community media is vital in the development of new immigrant communities. A common means of recognition of ethnic groupings is to import cultural products from the home country. This is important in terms of contact with cultural roots, histories, and maintaining identity, and has been seen in Irish communities abroad who have transported Irish culture and traditions to many parts of the world. However, as has been widely demonstrated, the conditions, concerns, and aspirations of new immigrants, may not be reflected or given voice by this means. Community media allows such groups the space to express and discuss their needs in a developing situation and it has often been the case that this has given rise to new methodologies and approaches, making significant contributions to the wider cultural context.

Community media initiatives in Ireland

Community Radio

While we await the arrival of community TV, Ireland already has international renown for its community radio legislation; indeed this is openly envied by community media organisations all over the world including the USA, Europe and the UK. This initiative, regulated through the IRTC, has enabled the development of 16 community radio stations, 4 of which are in Dublin: NEAR FM, South Dublin Community Radio, Tallaght Community Radio, West Dublin Community Radio; as well as a special interest station in the heart of the city – Anna Livia. These are

vital creative initiatives that are run with volunteers from the local community, operate an evaluation procedure within their communities, and who now have a wealth of experience in this area. They are therefore a unique resource in the city, and provide an example of a working community media environment.

Community use of the Internet

Access to the Internet has been the subject of concern for many groups in the city who have highlighted the lack of access to new technologies leading to marginalisation and disenfranchisement. Recent surveys have also reported distinct inequality issues in early and secondary education due to poverty – it is clear that this affects whole communities. Organisations that represent these communities need to stay abreast of the other sectors and failure to do so means an inability to engage in partnership structures and exacerbates social exclusion.

Provision of Information on how to use the Internet and email is poor, being over generalised and driven by commercial interest. There is a need for programmes that address the needs of community organisations in accessing this information. Such programmes should take account of the time and financial pressures on the voluntary workers, paid staff and steering groups of these organisations. The negative impact of programmes that do not take account of these needs and are perceived as time-wasters by people whose energies are already overstretched cannot be overstated.

We have seen various initiatives aiming to develop community capacity in this area and the importance of EU funding in these efforts is significant. However, many initiatives in this area concentrate on the development of IT skills on an individual level due, in the main, to the design of project funding such as the EU Employment programme. When project funding is geared towards the training of individuals, and is linked to the unemployment register, it automatically means that those who receive the training are destined to move into jobs and often away from the project. Programmes need to address the development of the organisation, rather than individuals, and educate key actors who will pass on the skills in the course of their ongoing activity.

Resources must be made available to support community oriented, introductory programmes grounded in participatory methodologies. These programmes can

be developed by community media organisations who will have an understanding of the issues involved. Development funding should be made available to facilitate this process.

Also needed are further developmental programmes that support capacity building amongst organisations in the use of this technology as a strategic tool. Our project work has provided us with an understanding of the problems experienced by the community sector in utilising IT which we see as follows:

The majority of capacity building in this area happens on an ad hoc as opposed to organised basis.

There is no established structure with an understanding of the needs of community organisations where projects can turn to for support in this area.

CDPs and other community organisations do not have the resources, either in terms of staff or money, to invest to any great degree in this area.

To a significant level, staff of community organisations are somewhat intimidated about using new technologies.

Dependence on a single staff member or a single volunteer to take charge of the computers and software in the organisation is commonplace.

There is a clear need for the establishment of a not-for-profit organisation that is dedicated to supporting the strategic development of IT in the community sector.

Broadcasting legislation.

Currently, this country stands at the verge of developing its communications infrastructure to encompass the convergence of media and digitalisation. Our state services are being de-regulated as the global trend in the commercialisation and commodification of communication advances. The Broadcasting Bill, currently in the Committee Stage, mentions community media for the first time, and, in particular, creates the possibility for community TV broadcasting in this country. This is a welcome acknowledgement, however, the fact that community media is not defined within the Bill, and that there is no existing funding line to develop this initiative, are serious flaws. There is a risk that the legislation will fail

to allow the emergence of a vital and lively entity either by unwieldy restrictions or simply by failing to recognise the true spirit of community media and protecting this in the Bill. We will see, very shortly, an expansion of our broadcasting networks that include some version of what is called Community Media.

The following four points address the issues as understood by community media activists,

- The definition of community must recognise communities of interest;
- The Social, economic and cultural value of community media should be signaled;
- The legislation must include the essential, defining, features of community media;
- Community Media will need access to the new digital infrastructure, if it is to join the digital age.

None of these requires fundamental changes to the Bill, and can be accommodated with relatively minor changes and additions.

Community video and community TV in the City of Dublin

Perceptions of community production

The perception of community productions in all media as being 'low quality', 'uninteresting', and essentially 'for free' is a strong one amongst the funding bodies, broadcasters, and producers in the industry.

This perception has been steadily challenged not only by the groups involved in production gaining access to high standard equipment and training, but also by people's demand for relevant content, feedback and accountability in the media. The situation is now slowly changing as funding is directed towards community interests – the introduction of the idea of the 'community brief' is a good example.

However, funding is still ad hoc, community organisations cannot invest resources to develop their capacity to use media as a strategic tool to benefit

their community, and voluntary support organisations need core-funding to continue and develop the work they are doing.

Bodies such as the Combat Poverty Agency, FAS, and EC programmes have proved the most receptive applications for community media. However, of 127 projects in the last round of the EC EMPLOYMENT Programme, only 13 were in any way arts related, and of these 5 were media projects aimed at specific target groups. Only 2 were specifically orientated around community media, the others focused on media training for access to industry related or employment skills. For this to be the number of community media projects within this fund pool is indicative of the pathetic provision for this area.

Uses of community video production

Video is being used within the community for a variety of purposes, at a recent conference entitled 'Changing Images', Ballymun Media Cooperative identified the use of video in their community as follows:

“to promote and explain the work of centres, - family centres, advice centres etc.; to showcase the work of the many, and different, organisations in the community; as an evaluation tool; to record events of significance for the community and it's achievements providing historical record and reflecting the values of the community.”

Video can also be an expression of the identity of a community as was the case with the work of Leitrim Video Group in the making of a 15-minute production about a boating tragedy on Lough Allen. These organisations have minimal access to equipment and resources, but the community sense of ownership of their productions is strong.

Community organisations in Dublin, Leitrim and Cork, who were participants in an INTEGRA project run by CMN (1998-2000) that aimed to help community organisations develop a media initiative in video, radio or photography, identified their needs as equipment, training, and facilities.

Facilities for community video production in Dublin

Community video production can and should happen within the community and not from outside, i.e. in a studio 'somewhere else'. It is important that the facilities for production be developed in community centres, taking account of the needs of the community. It should be possible for training and equipment, precisely those needs identified by the participants on our project, to be accessed within the community, training must be designed to meet the particular needs of participants. In this way an inclusive approach can be identified that will provide access for members of the community who face marginalisation if their circumstances are not catered for – e.g. lone parents, Travellers, refugees, carers, disabled.

The development of community media resources within established centres will provide the content necessary for a community broadcasting service. This is the basis for a representative community TV service and will ensure that whatever organisational structures are arrived at will be a proper function of the community. In this way, also, the development of a community broadcasting service is a subset of the community centre.

Potential for Community TV broadcasting in Dublin

At this juncture, the CDB process and the strategic plan could play a significant part in the direction that this very important development would take. Given its size and population it is conceivable that Dublin City *can* support a community TV facility and feasibility work should be undertaken. Indeed, Dublin *should have* a community TV broadcasting facility.

A survey of existing groups and facilities is necessary and should be commissioned. This should provide the basis for the establishment of a Media and Communications Forum.

A feasibility study is necessary and should be commissioned by such a Forum.

There are a number of not-for-profit community organisations that constitute interest groups, they have been active in the city around these issues for many years. Their experience is vital to the development of any

service; it is likely they would be ready to create a network of community production units that could feed a community broadcasting service.

These groups may also be interested in providing, or being part of a consortium that would provide, a local service.

There will be a need for specialised facilities, and, while these could be planned on a regional or even national scale, Dublin is both demographically and geographically a high priority area. The distribution of local production units will also affect the positioning and functioning of these facilities, and a networking approach to establishing these facilities would increase sustainability for the production units.

There is now the possibility of creating a vital and creative resource. However, there is a long way to go to achieve this. The circumstances of the very first community TV slot to be legally broadcast in this country is significant. The "Place" series, devised and produced by Open Channel, is broadcast by TG4. This consists of three series of 6 half-hour community programmes, the second series was broadcast this autumn, the last will be broadcast in 2001. TG4 provides airtime only. No funds, no equipment, no resources. This has been a labour of love indeed and such a contract is indicative of the attitude of all the agencies to the community and voluntary sector, as well as toward that part of it that attempts to give it a voice.

The CDB has now the opportunity to demonstrate the possibilities of innovatory planning to unleash such creative potential within the community.

Are people interested in community TV?

As this question will no doubt be rhetorically asked, we put the following points for consideration.

As the roads are being dug up to provide cable for the new technologies, the people who are sustaining the inconvenience and problems involved get no return. The City Manager has already publicly stated his opinion that the companies should pay for the privilege – however they have not been required to do so. It should be noted that public access TV was initiated in the US on the

basis that cable companies should give some return to the people for their co-operation in infrastructure development.

It is also pertinent that the take-up in the UK for domestic users of the networks post-convergence in recent years has been disappointingly (for the industry) low. Speculation on the reasons why this is so has highlighted public *disinterest* in the *content* of programming. Community TV has meaningful content for people, both in its structures and in content - we think it should be seen in this light - not simply as part of converging technology that delivers thousands more homes to e-commerce and vote-seekers.

Community TV's greatest potential is as a tool for participatory democracy, as media created and controlled by the people. The following statement comes from an evaluation of community radio, funded by the IRTC and conducted in 1996, these findings might equally be applied to community television or other community media:

“the most valued aspects of community radio in Ireland were seen as:

They establish and deepen intra-community linkages of all kinds, especially in rural areas and amongst scattered populations;

They are a source of skills, training and employment, including general education regarding the media and specific media skills;

They sustain and renew a sense of community identity that comes from the people themselves;

They act on behalf of the community on issues that concern it, with no vested interests other than those of the community itself;

They provide local information and entertainment.

Note that most of these are not simply about producing programmes that people enjoy, but about the deeper interactive functions between a broadcaster and the community, intimately linked not through a legislated or commercial relationship but by the fact that are in effect one and the same. The Broadcaster is a legitimate expression of the community.”

In the words of a participant in the survey:

“It was not just the services provided, but the manner in which they were provided – through direct creative community involvement – that was usually seen as the distinctive and valuable point.”

Recommendations

The CDB should explicitly recognise the social, economic and cultural benefits of community media and in particular, community broadcasting, and its positive role in media for the 21st Century.

The CDB should recognise the special, democratic and participative nature of a community media broadcaster and include a definition in its plan, similar to that adopted by the IRTC from the AMARC Charter. The definition of community should include communities of interest. The difference between a community broadcaster and local commercial television should be made entirely explicit to ensure the community focus and indeed viability of the former.

A Media and Communications Forum should be established through the Community Forum that can make representations to the proposed Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, the Arts Council, and other statutory and advisory structures.

This Forum should carry out an initial survey of the community media environment.

The Forum should also commission a feasibility study on the provision of community TV in the Dublin area

Community Media deserve their own designated funding line, or a means of finance. This is true for all the community media, video, community TV, radio, Internet, and print media – including photography. The CDB could initiate action within the local authority, to set up designated funding lines and to make recommendations to the ODTR. The broadcasting legislation before the Select infers a ‘must-carry’ obligation on cable companies; this should be made explicit and should ensure the requirements extent to include infrastructure and facilities as well as content as a condition of issuing a cable license, as already exists in many countries.

The CDB should ensure that a participative evaluation process run on behalf of the community, is part of any community media broadcaster’s brief. (The IRTC has already sponsored such community consultative processes for community radio, with great success.)

Signed:

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Community Media Network (CMN) is a 32 county, not-for-profit organisation that aims to promote the use of media as a tool for empowerment and community development. CMN is founded on the basis that working together within each medium, and indeed between the different media, makes a lot of sense. Its overall objective is therefore to initiate networking within and between media and to provide support where key resources are absent. CMN members, with organisations such as Open Channel, have been involved in campaign and lobby efforts for the past ten years or more to promote access to broadcasting for the community sector. As part of this work CMN has supported seminars and workshops often encouraging an international dimension – running workshops at the prestigious IAMCR meetings in Dublin in 1993, and in Seoul in 1994, Brussels in 1998, and Cincinnati USA in 1999. Submissions have been made to Green and

White papers at national and European levels (e.g. Green paper on Living and Working in the Information Society and the Green paper on Convergence; also contributions have been made to strategic plan consultative processes, e.g., the Arts Council and the Combat Poverty Agency.

As part of its own strategic Plan, CMN is working to establish a media centre designated to the use of the community and voluntary sector, to this end a sizeable and state-of-the-art equipment resource has been accumulated with the help of European Regional Development Funding.

Margaret Gillan is co-ordinator of Community Media Network since 1996. She has directed a number of EC funded projects providing training and developing infrastructure in media for the community and voluntary sector. She has worked with a range of media including, video, film, and print media and taught in Further Education, Adult Education, and in the community sector. She is currently serving as CDB Representative from the Culture Cluster of the City Community Forum.

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