

Abstract from a recent article published on Community Media Association's 'Airflash' on Community Media Research at London Metropolitan University

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It's very unusual to find community media given such official recognition in higher education in the UK and in the rest of Europe – though perhaps not surprising that London Met, with its long tradition of commitment to the local communities in North London going back to its Polytechnic days, has been the first (perhaps) to take such an initiative. Let us hope other universities soon follow its example.

First, we think it highly appropriate that we are based in the University's Department of Applied Social Sciences (DASS). DASS colleagues are concerned with health, housing, minority ethnic communities, young people, women's issues, migrants and asylum-seekers, the environment etc – as well as media. This means that our interest in community media, rather than starting from a media-centric perspective, starts with the realities of everyday life and asks how this kind of use of media can help address problems and provide opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged social groups, giving 'a voice to the voiceless'.

Like all academics nowadays our task is threefold: to develop teaching and learning that attracts students, to publish research that scores points in the government's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), and to generate income from a variety of sources.

So we will be talking to colleagues in DASS and across the university in other departments about how some reference to community media can be introduced into their courses, and we will be developing new courses which include both practice and theory. By the latter we mean that we would set the practice in a social and historical context and make connections with theoretical work in areas like identity, public sphere, political economy, globalisation and so on. A large proportion of London Met students have family origins in regions beyond Europe and we will want to include reference to those regions: use of community media to address poverty reduction, for example, is supported by UNESCO and is increasingly a component of development plans in many countries.

We also want to encourage students to take up work placements in local projects and to see whether their course assignments could include work that is useful for community media projects, for example, conducting impact studies for community radio stations that don't have the time or money to afford them.

When it comes to research, the field is wide open. Apart from a handful of doctoral theses, very little formal research is being undertaken. The rapid expansion of the community radio sector is not being monitored by independent research outside the main players – the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), Ofcom and the Community Media Association (CMA).

There is need for studies of best practice in a range of different kinds of stations to understand the benefits to different social groups of the community radio sector – and the problems: what about the groups that failed to get a licence or whose needs are not being served? Above all we need to look at the political economy of the sector with particular regard to sustainability: how can it make sense that a Community Radio Fund of £0.5m, originally set aside to support fifteen pilots, is expected to support 128 stations and more to come? Either the DCMS must persuade the Treasury to increase the fund, or an inter-Departmental group must be formed to create an integrated policy that channels funding for ‘social gain’ from a range of existing initiatives in other Departments such as the Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

Then there is the effect of plans for digital switch-over on community TV. Now that the regional element in British television has become so diminished, the opportunity must be seized to provide on the public service digital platform for the presence of local TV as option available across the UK.

At European level it has become ridiculous for the Commission’s ‘audio-visual policy’ to exclude radio as a matter that can be left to member states. Even if you could accept that public service broadcasters can hold their own against ever stronger competition, it certainly is not the case that governments can be trusted to nurture community media. At least the Council of Europe (it has influence but no funding) has seen that “community, local, minority or social media [can make] a contribution to pluralism and diversity, provide a space for dialogue and serve as a factor of social cohesion and integration” and has urged governments to encourage the development of these media.

In another hopeful initiative that may goad the European Commission into action, the European Parliament’s Culture and Education Committee has commissioned a study of community radio in Europe that will make recommendations about ways the Commission could support the sector.

We think the most urgent need, at national and European level, is for the monitoring of policy. This was the focus of a very successful seminar in Budapest last month whose 50-strong attendance included representatives of AMARC, the soon to be revived AMARC-Europe and the Community Media Forum for Europe (CMFE).

At London Met will pick up the theme when we launch our Community Media Research project with an international symposium, Finding and Funding Voices: the inner city experience to be held at the University’s Graduate Centre in the Holloway Road on Monday September 17th (visit www.communitymedia.eu for further details).

We hope then to hear the results of the European Parliament's study and we want to continue this attention to policy in collaboration with colleagues across the UK and in the rest of Europe.

Further information at www.communitymedia.eu

Initiatives for Young Radio Scholars

Even though a lot of space is/has been given to young radio scholars in IREN's events and similar initiatives are planned for 'IREN 2', I thought it would be great to have a smaller event focused on emerging research in Radio Studies undertaken by postgraduate students and early career researchers. There was a specific side-event at the Seville conference in Feb 2005, but translation problems and the chair didn't help to make it really enjoyable...there was no follow up to this.

In my experience with MeCCSA's Postgraduate Network, I found the conferences organised by the Network by postgrads for postgrads quite enjoyable. Who has organised has learned a lot in conference organisation and more generally project management/finance skills and delegates (60ish in the last one in Bristol last July) have benefitted from peer networking and a schedule tailored to their needs, useful to discuss their issues and concerns. The activities have been possible thanks to the support and funding from MeCCSA, ADM-HEA (Art, Design and Media Subject Centre – Higher Education Academy) and the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council)

If ECREA's Radio Section/IREN 2 will plan similar initiatives in the future I will be happy to give a contribution.

Further information on the network on www.meccsa.org.uk/pgn/