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OPENING UP THE DEBATE: IRISH RADIO, FACEBOOK, AND THE CREATION OF TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL PUBLIC SPHERES

Daithí McMahon

INTRODUCTION

As the world's mass media become more digitised and globally integrated, radio's spontaneity, flexibility, and adaptability render it uniquely capable of embracing this change. Over the past decade radio has adopted new technologies and taken advantage of the opportunities presented by social media platforms. Professionals in the field have recognised the changes in audience preferences and consumption habits, and have expanded radio's remit into a multimedia product with bespoke entertainment and culturally relevant content to suit their audience.

This case study of the independently owned and operated Irish commercial radio station Radio Kerry will illustrate how a station broadcasting to a rural audience with a unique cultural identity, and a large diaspora, has used its Facebook page as a meeting point and forum for cultural discussion and debate. The case study highlights the importance of radio to an overseas audience as a source of information and a connection to home. The study aims to demonstrate that Radio Kerry has an active audience listening and engaging online from abroad and that the station is keen to maintain connections with this audience. The research methodology for the study involves data drawn from multiple methods including: interviews with Radio Kerry management and production staff (N=5)¹; an in-depth interview with an expatriate originally from Kerry but now living in the United States (N=1); an audience survey of

1 | Interviews were conducted with the station's General Manager, the News & Current Affairs Editor, The Sales & Marketing Manager, the *Terrace Talk* Producer and the *Terrace Talk* Presenter.

respondents (N=54)²; and textual analysis of the station's Facebook page over a two-week period, from July 1-15, 2016. Using this methodology, the author presents a case study of how Irish radio stations are using Facebook to connect with people locally, nationally, and transnationally.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The radio audience is much different today than it was a decade ago. What were once loosely connected groups of listeners, are now much tighter networked publics (boyd 2010) actively embracing convergence culture and spreadable media (Jenkins 2006, Jenkins et al. 2013). The emergence and prevalence of social media and the resulting impact on radio production and audience engagement is therefore a growing area of interest to researchers.

With the audience's time and attention increasingly difficult to gain and maintain, this has placed growing pressure on radio stations to compete. Since 2008, the Irish radio industry has been adopting numerous social network sites (SNSs) and looking at ways in which this once-perceived threat could be turned into an opportunity. To date, it has been Facebook and Twitter which have integrated best with radio programming in Europe (Bonini 2014), although youth stations employ a wider number of social media platforms. Radio Kerry claims to have looked at strategic ways in which staff can use Facebook and Twitter to expand the station's product without taking anything away from the quality and primacy of the on-air output. The proclaimed key for Radio Kerry is engagement with the audience, aiming to offer the listener/online user content that piques their interest and encourages them to consume Radio Kerry's content either on-air or online. This commercial aim of Facebook use by radio stations in Ireland has been driven by the outlets' strategic aims to grow and develop their commercial potential. This strategy has, for instance, been realised by another Irish radio station, Beat 102-103, which has successfully managed to commodify its largely Millennial Facebook audience and offer them to sponsors as part of wider sponsorship and/or advertising packages (McMahon 2016).

One of the important prospects that Facebook offers users is the visual and multimedia elements which remove, to a degree, the medium's longstanding characteristic of 'blindness' (Crisell 1994). Secondly, Facebook also has the advantage of having established networks of connected individuals who can share information around the world quickly and without much cost or effort.

2 | The survey was conducted by the author online using Survey Monkey. It was advertised and distributed via Facebook posts on the Radio Kerry Facebook page. There were 14 questions on the themes public spheres and community. Respondents were asked to rate their responses on a five-point scale and provide written elaboration if desired.

However, Radio Kerry representatives agree that redistributing on-air content via this tool alone is not sufficient to engage and grow a loyal audience. A radio station must understand who its listeners are – their expectations, likes and dislikes, where they spend their time and to what they lend their attention. The latter refers increasingly to SNSs, which, due to connectivity through mobile apps, means users are potentially always reachable. Radio Kerry producers have stressed that they have learned that in order to engage digital audiences, a station needs to use Facebook strategically to hook the audience's interest and maintain their attention. As this case study argues, an effective way to capture and hold the audience is for a station to generate communication from and between users, thus further connecting users with each other, with the station, and with Kerry and its culture.

RADIO KERRY AND ITS AUDIENCE

Radio Kerry is a full service commercial radio station broadcasting to a largely rural audience in the south west of Ireland. The station has weekly listenership reach of 83,000, a figure which represents 70% of the available listeners aged 15+. The station also holds a 53% market share in the county with the rest of listeners tuning in to the regional and national stations (Ipsos/MRBI 2017). The official Radio Kerry Facebook page had just over 74,300 Facebook 'Likes' as of March 1st, 2018. According to management, one of the main reasons for Radio Kerry's success as a local radio station is an understanding of the audience which enables the production team to deliver what listeners want. Specifically, this relates to content in the form of local Kerry news, current affairs, sport, entertainment and culture. Such local programming cannot be offered by the national public service stations at the same level of quality and therefore Radio Kerry is able to offer a highly bespoke product to a niche audience. Staff at Radio Kerry believe that Kerry people are very proud of their cultural background and heritage, and producers use this to tailor specific on-air programming and online content to match the audience's tastes. In the words of McLuhan, Radio Kerry beats the tribal drum, and this drum beat resonates with the Kerry tribespeople (McLuhan 1994).

Along with having a strong connection to the land for tourism and agriculture, sport forms a significant part of the cultural heritage and identity of Kerry people. The Kerry men's senior football team are the undisputed champions of Gaelic football in Ireland. As with sport in general, Gaelic football is a highly emotive topic for Kerry people with almost all people taking an interest to some degree. Radio Kerry management and production staff understand and appreciate how much the listeners follow sport as a central aspect of the local culture. Sporting content is therefore extremely popular and the evening sports

programme, *Terrace Talk*, and the *Weekend Sport* show both rival the flagship news and current affairs programme *Kerry Today* in terms of ratings and audience engagement. The strong listenership figures coupled with consistent audience participation via text, phone and email, as well as the high levels of online engagement through Facebook, are further evidence that the Kerry audience is keen to follow the in-depth discussion, analysis, and debate on all sports.

Ireland as a nation has experienced high levels of emigration for centuries with ebbs and flows dependent on economic conditions both home and abroad. As a rural county inherently lacking a strong economic base, Kerry has been particularly exposed to such changes in employment and opportunity during the recent economic recession (2008-2016). Regardless of where the Irish diaspora go, the people always maintain a strong sense of pride and an affinity to family, friends, and the cultures and traditions that they left behind. In this study, survey respondents identified Facebook as an easy and useful tool to keep in touch with family, friends and associates at home, or indeed in other parts of the world. Furthermore, survey respondents stated that they turn to Radio Kerry and its Facebook page, whether living in Kerry or elsewhere, as a source of information, entertainment, and cultural conversation. One respondent stated their reason for following Radio Kerry on Facebook was, “to know what’s going on in Kerry” (respondent #4). Another respondent wrote about the Radio Kerry Facebook page, “Living abroad, it makes me feel more in touch with the goings-on at home” (respondent #1). The data suggests that current information and general knowledge are key factors in developing identity and association with place – that the more they know about Kerry, the closer they feel to home and the people.

The interviewee for this study (‘CK’) identified his reasons for tuning in to Radio Kerry from abroad was to connect with home and maintain his Kerry identity. CK emigrated to the Boston area in the 1950s when employment and opportunity were scarce in Ireland. For CK, living far from home is made easier by having a reliable and consistent source of Kerry-centric information and entertainment available to him. CK believes that if he did not have the information that Radio Kerry offers, Kerry would seem more distant from him. Speaking of Radio Kerry, he stated, “It keeps me up to date all the time, I wouldn’t know how to go without [...] it makes me feel a lot closer to home, I know what’s going on and I know everything that happens in Kerry is at my fingertips [...] Radio Kerry is on here 24 hours a day”. As a result, CK finds “it’s like living there actually [...] It makes you feel like you’re a part of Kerry”. Feeling part of Kerry and its immediate community is important to maintaining his identity and for him, this is achieved by being involved in conversations on Kerry football. CK’s testimony highlights trusted and culturally relevant information from ‘home’ as being central to what the Kerry diaspora yearn for and what Radio Kerry provide through their on-air output and online platforms such as Facebook.

Users recognise that they are sharing a communal space with others with similar interests and tastes. “Even though it’s all online”, one respondent said, “I feel part of the global community based around the station and the locality” (respondent #7). This respondent’s sentiments of being part of a community of Kerry people that are dispersed throughout the world but share common connections, are reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ (1991). The sense of being in touch with home through the quality of information is where Radio Kerry maintains connections with its transnational audience. Even though the members of the diaspora are not a directly saleable commodity to advertisers, station management and production staff nonetheless consider the overseas audience just as valuable and an important part of the ‘family’.

PRODUCTION STRATEGIES

The focal point of sport on Radio Kerry is the highly popular, multi-award-winning sports program, *Terrace Talk*, hosted by the equally popular Weeshie Fogarty. Fogarty identifies his connection with his audience as the key to his programme’s success. He claims to understand the power of sport, most importantly Gaelic football, and the way it draws Kerry people together to share their passion. Consequently, the audience have high expectations from media reporting on the subject. Fogarty regularly receives emails from listeners around the world including North America, the UK, Australia, the Middle East and beyond. By reading these comments and requests out on-air, he strives to make expatriates part of the listening Kerry community. Fogarty describes *Terrace Talk* as “the listeners’ show”, and he is careful to treat audience members living in far off lands with just as much, and often more, care and attention as those living locally. Fogarty regularly takes trips abroad to meet with members of the Kerry diaspora and collect their stories, and the resounding sentiment is that Radio Kerry is “their connection to home”. According to Fogarty, radio brings Kerry culture into their home, and many of them rely on *Terrace Talk* to know what is going on at home in sport. On his travels he has found that Gaelic football is a focal point of the expat community that draws people together in their adopted home.

For Fogarty and his programme producer, social media supports on-air broadcasting. It provides wider content which expands upon what is on-air and provides another channel by which Radio Kerry can communicate with its audience. The strongest reaction from Radio Kerry’s online audience was to content posted to Facebook that affected the user emotionally. Such Facebook posts garner ‘likes’, ‘comments’ and, most importantly, ‘shares’ with other users in their social network. According to the *Terrace Talk* team, having emotional impact is effective especially when addressing expatriates as it helps to connect

the transnational audience with home, and over time this helps maintain an affinity with the radio station.

CULTURAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The Radio Kerry Facebook page has emerged as a portal which acts as a mutual meeting point for Kerry people. This has been verified by analysis of the Facebook page and the comments made by users in which they reveal their current location, often during live Gaelic football matches. Due to the ephemeral nature of social network sites, it is important from a production point of view to be always sharing something new. Therefore, producers need to refresh the content constantly.

One theory which can explain what is occurring on the Radio Kerry Facebook page is McGuigan's cultural public sphere theory (2005). McGuigan introduces the concept of the cultural public sphere, defining it as a place where users interact on emotional issues as opposed to political or economic matters of Habermasian public spheres (Habermas 1989). A key element of the cultural public sphere, which distinguishes it from the Habermasian public sphere, is the presence of 'affective communication' as well as 'cognitive communication'. According to McGuigan, "the cultural public sphere provides vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, which are not necessarily of inherent merit but may be of some consequence" (McGuigan 2005: 435). In this instance, we are considering discussions around sport which in the eyes of some is a trivial matter. However, for those involved the topic is of enormous consequence due to the place sport holds in their lives. When users come to the Radio Kerry Facebook page they engage in debates, discussions and sometimes arguments regarding issues that are of importance to them. Due to the emotional involvement users have with sport, their contributions involve affective communication. It is evident from the comments and discourse on the Radio Kerry Facebook page that users are using both affective and cognitive communication.



Figure 1: Example of cultural public sphere on Terrace Talk Facebook page.

The above (Fig. 1) is an example of content that engages audience members in cultural discussion and debate which was posted on the *Terrace Talk* Facebook page and subsequently linked through to the Radio Kerry Facebook page. The programme presenter posted a photograph from his own archives of a Kerry Minor Football team and instigated discussion by asking the audience to try to identify the year, and name as many individuals in the photograph as possible. As the comments section below the post show, a number of people were engaged by the challenge and offered their suggestions. The post was shared,

by means of ‘tagging’, with four other individuals who became involved in the discussion. This screen shot was taken the day the post was published on July 2, 2016 with people contributing and interacting through comments or reply until July 12th, meaning the post had a life of ten days. During that period of time there were eighteen comments made, including replies, involving eleven individuals (four of whom were tagged), all contributing to a worthy conversation testing the audience’s knowledge of Kerry football. In terms of emoji reactions, a further fifteen people ‘liked’ the post, one person ‘loved’ it and one person shared the post on their own timeline meaning a total of 28 individual Facebook users were involved in the discussion. Although the numbers of individuals involved in the discussion is relatively small considering the number of followers of the Radio Kerry Facebook page, it is but one of many examples of the ‘micro-cultural public spheres’ that are created and engaged with over the course of a year. Such content appeals to the audience’s love of football, tests their historical knowledge and generates feelings of nostalgia. Here nostalgia proves to be a powerful emotive tool that engages the audience. It can relate to a yearning for the past or, for those living abroad, can also create a yearning for home. In the above case, it achieves both.

CONCLUSION

Despite emigrating abroad, the interviewee and a number of survey respondents involved in this research project identified that they maintain contact with their culture and heritage, stay informed of current events, network with friends and relatives, and reaffirm their Irish identity through cultural reinforcements. Facebook is a good example of a platform that helps the Kerry diaspora maintain connections with home, and emotional engagement through nostalgia is a highly effective method of maintaining an audience despite geographical distances. The Radio Kerry Facebook page acts as a site of discussion and debate around topics of interest to the audience. The dynamism, liveness, and spontaneity of radio makes it well-suited to Facebook and other social media, and is one of the main reasons the two platforms, radio and Facebook, run so closely alongside one another. The integration of Facebook into Radio Kerry’s production remit has allowed it to further engage audiences beyond audio broadcasting and made the station’s product a multimedia experience. For expatriated Kerry men and women Radio Kerry’s Facebook page allows them to keep up with current affairs in Kerry while engaging with other members of their cultural community. The Radio Kerry Facebook page has thus become a form of transnational cultural public sphere where carefully curated content is used to attract and engage audiences.

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