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YOU CAN'T TELL MY STORY FOR ME!

Community Media as a Means of Expression in Multilingual Local and Globalized Contexts

Judith Purkarthofer

So I came here [to the UK] as a refugee, I had no experience in radio before. I didn't know what's behind the desk, I was just hearing it like everyone else. So that mystery behind, I've discovered it and I went to master it now. I can say that. [...] I acquired lots of skills, and now things are changing in my country of origin, I was able to go back there and a group of young people decided to set up a Community Radio station and now I'm supporting them in building their capacity, training them in radio production and helping them to set up their local Community Radio station.

This was Dan Cissoko, station manager of Peterborough Community Radio, describing his experience in the UK and back in Senegal in his presentation to the Pre-conference: Radio, Refugees and Migrants Workshop. His is a telling story about Community Media as a means of expression in multilingual, local and global contexts. Along with three other practitioners, he contributed to an afternoon of shared stories and in-depth discussions. As a sociolinguist and Community Media activist, currently in the role of president of the Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE), I was honored to be part of this panel as a discussant. Community Media (CM) are interested in involving citizens as producers and viewers or listeners of media production and aim to (self-) educate people about media content and in media literacy, policy and practice. By connecting individuals and groups across gender, age, cultures and languages, CM become a meeting ground where citizens engage in broader media landscapes and contribute to a more colorful and pluralistic media ecology. The CMFE is a European umbrella organization, with currently about 100 members in 23 European countries; it sees its goal as lobbying at a European level and facilitating exchange between researchers and practitioners in areas of policy, research and practice. As a result of a number of grassroots initiatives, the importance and potential societal gain of CM has also reached national and European legislators: the role of CM was recognized by a European Parliament

resolution of 25 September 2008 and by the Council of Europe in its Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the role of Community Media in promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue (2009). Both bodies stress the social value of CM as a source of local content, cultural and linguistic diversity, media pluralism, inclusion and intercultural dialogue, and recommend that member states give legal recognition, access to spectrum (analogue and digital) and funding to the sector. In this way, CM, as the so-called ‘third media sector,’ has a clearly distinct identity alongside the public service sector and private commercial media.

Community Media stand for a large number of media initiatives, ranging from radio and TV stations to internet-based projects. According to the most commonly shared definitions of CM, they fulfill certain requirements (Lewis 2008; see also Kupfer 2010: 189): they are independent of governments, commercial or religious institutions or political parties; they are non-profit-oriented and are driven by voluntary participation of members of societies and communities (while they do at times employ some paid staff). The ownership is shared and the production and broadcasting processes are meant to be inclusive and enhance exchange in and across languages, cultures and interests. Among the growing body of literature that has emerged in the last decades, the notion that CM are a “means of expression of the community, rather than for the community” is one of the core values (Berrigan 1979; cf. Gordon 2012). ‘Community’ can be understood with different foci and Browne (2012: 155) stresses three possible constructions, each present in different contexts: “Community as participants, community as audience, and staff and volunteers as community.” Depending on the local context, the history of stations and the goals of each initiative, producers will focus on their own expression, the expected interests of local (or linguistic and cultural) communities or else on the societal goals they deem important.

The means of expression that Berrigan (1979) mentioned are still highly relevant for media producers today – and this contribution will focus on multilingual, local and global means of expression with the help of the four presenters in the *Radio, Refugees and Migrants Workshop*. Being able to speak (or, better, to express oneself) is a fundamental experience that is said to contribute to humanness. Thus, we are already approaching the question of who is speaking, a question that is always linked to what are we speaking about. Fairclough (2015: 3) reminds us that speaking (and writing, for that matter) carries power, but that we should look at the “power behind discourse rather than just the power in discourse.” I want to focus on the way Community Media creates spaces for individuals to develop a powerful voice, to broadcast contents worth hearing, but by the same means contribute to CM as powerful actors in society, enabling discussions and the questioning of hegemonic discourses. It is, as we see in

Cissokho's introductory vignette, a place for personal encounters and meeting with society.

Finding one's voice is an important motivation for many to interact with the media (Purkarthofer/ Pfisterer/Busch 2010). For those who feel less represented by mainstream media, because of gender, age, cultural or linguistic background or language practices and competencies, this is often perceived as struggle (Peissl et.al. 2010). CM usually are the first place where participation and speaking publicly become possible: especially for minorities, people without a clear affiliation (as it might be the case for children of refugees or migrants) or all those wishing to speak about topics that are not generally considered radio-worthy. Through claiming one's voice, it is not only possible to tell one's own story, at the same time it contributes to the presence of different voices and speakers in the media. Listeners and viewers will feel less isolated when they are presented with shared histories or interests. Media producers who speak about their experiences and about their ideas of society can also engage in myth-busting, a term used by Dan Cissokho to describe speaking up against ignorance and stereotypes. Larry Macaulay, founder and editor in chief of Refugee Radio Network in Germany, added to the point in his insistence that in order for the public to understand and learn, "in the beginning, we had to talk a lot." The traditional, yet also myth-driven image of radio as a music-centered pastime, consisting of background noise and offering little content, is thus contradicted by the urge to speak and the message to be heard.

Radio is in this sense a deeply personal medium – close to the self and often with the voice as the most immediate (and intimate) form of expression. On the other hand, all media are about the connection to the reader, listener or viewer and Community Media are no exception. CM are a means to reach people, to make one's voice heard by other people. Being able to speak within the frame of a radio station, or being able to produce for a local TV station, as in Anne Ostendorp and Ahmad Naffak's collaboration in Nijmegen gives legitimacy and sets an example of ways for newcomers to engage socially. Ostendorp and Naffak present encounters from everyday life, offering a sympathetic view of Dutch lifestyle and the potential misunderstandings experienced by newcomers to Dutch society, thus opening a space for exchange and encounter.

Another important aspect mentioned by several of the panelists is the knowledge about institutions and possible pathways through society – as well as the need to contact relevant associations and organizations of civil society. Being a legitimate member of a society is a recognition no human being can accomplish for him/herself: we need connections and relationships to help each other grow. Community Media do offer recognition to those who engage and they are able to take on new roles or find their former (professional) roles in a new environment.

Participants and producers can find and build new ground when they develop their media personality, they can be(come) citizen journalists, entertainers, educators and more, and they can do so without having had formal training. A lot of learning happens on the job, motivated by personal interests and encounters. But CM also provide a place where education and training as journalists are recognized, where qualifications can be used to produce independent news, to acquire local knowledge and combine it with prior training. Developing and re-activating one's professional or artistic identity is a key moment when in doubt about one's role in society. Larry Macaulay describes his work, which consists of various media productions across Germany and Europe, spreading across radio and TV broadcasts as well as other formats. Being visible in the German media scene has also gained the Refugee Radio Network team recognition and airtime on international panels, among them Al Jazeera and UNESCO events. But Macaulay's work is also influenced by how people read him and his role. An example is his encounter with a US NGO who contacted them some time ago:

We've participated with Al Jazeera, Unesco, Radio Lora and so on... then corporations in Austria, Paris, Calais, Italy and then they [the US NGO] came all the way from Washington – What do you want? They said they've been following our trend for a while and they would like to cooperate with us. Ok, which area of cooperation? Well, they lacked ideas, they were like: We will train you. And I said: Does it look like we need training?

In this example, we see how locally relevant initiatives like Community Media stations are informed and influenced by global movements (as in the case of the refugee movement) but we also see the deeply embedded international relations linked to the networks of each participant. Individuals – and those engaged in media production tend to be especially well connected (see Purkarthofer/Pfisterer/Busch 2010) – carry their stories with them to different spaces of engagement. CM stations also develop their networks over time, not least through EU-funded projects. These moments of exchange, of sharing of knowledge, strategies and instruments add to the perception of coherent media landscapes and the effects of CM that go far beyond the sum of all the parts. Apart from physical exchange and the sharing of media productions, CM relate of course also to social media and many CM projects make use of more than one form of distribution. Radio stations use analogue broadcasting but are just as effectively announce their broadcasts via social networks or get in contact with their listeners on a local and international level through internet fora or telephone calls. As we learned from the participants of this panel, all of them used different means to broadcast, announce and interact – each following the possibilities and preferences of their communities.

Uniting speakers from different countries of origin (Austria, Nigeria, Senegal, Syria, The Netherlands and the UK) and different countries of residence and work (Germany, Norway, the Netherlands and the UK), the Radio, Refugees and Migrants Workshop was undoubtedly a moment of exchange, not just between the panelists but with practitioners and researchers in the audience as well. The two main topics that will be remembered, along with colorful stories and quotes, are the freedom of personal expression and the social recognition and cohesion that forms around those media encounters. Speakers are personally engaged, as they are able to speak their mind and to bring their own view of the world to the fore, especially when taking into account the complexities of the producers' multilingual life-worlds. But, and these two motivations, the need for personal expression and social recognition, reinforce each other: speakers are also deeply dependent on being recognized as members of (one) society. Speaking can turn from a highly pleasurable experience, if it is shared among many, to a frightening space of loneliness, when it is perceived as being in a void without reaction. The role of CMFE, as a lobbying and umbrella organization, is in my view to carry these experiences and issues on, to make them heard at the policy and political level where media content unfortunately rarely arrives.

European lobbying efforts, drawing on generalized evidence about impact and social gain often find it hard to transmit the immediate experience, so highly relevant for CM. Meetings like this workshop are thus much needed as they can be more outspoken and transmit first-hand experience: for example, when the participants agreed with Larry Macaulay that they "are the only ones with a foreign face. And people who would not meet normally, through the radio they get together." By getting together, we can find and invent means of expression as we see fit. We need people to speak for themselves in the media and we need all of us to listen, because, as Dan Cissokho said: "You can't tell my story for me."

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