

What is the special significance of community media to civil society? CRIS Campaign Issue Paper 3

Community media provide a vital alternative to the profit-oriented agenda of corporate media. They are driven by social objectives rather than the private, profit motive. They empower people rather than treat them as passive consumers, and they nurture local knowledge rather than replace it with standard solutions. Ownership and control of community media is rooted in, and responsible to, the communities they serve. And they are committed to human rights, social justice, the environment and sustainable approaches to development.

A voice for civil society

Much is promised by the information society - access to vital knowledge for health and education, better information from governments and corporations, electronic democracy, global trade and exchange, up to the minute news. But because they lack the resources to make their voices heard in this shifting social landscape, the world's poorest communities face the twin dangers of being left out of this new economy and becoming a cultural dumping ground for mass market products made by and for the richest economies.

Community media help balance these inequities. They provide the means for cultural expression, community discussion, and debate. They supply news and information and facilitate political engagement. Radio is the most widespread electronic communications device in the world and community radio is a practical and cost-effective means of reaching and connecting the world's poorest communities. Independent and community publications provide news and views that are often framed out of the corporate media. And in the field of Community Informatics (see below), web-based media are increasingly seen as means for helping communities achieve social, economic, cultural and political goals.

Community media in practice

Community media are integrated with practices of community life. They offer concrete means for public participation and for defending cultural diversity. Their content includes political and economic news that facilitates community dialogue and involvement, community and personal messages (marriages, union-meetings, lost donkeys), musical greetings, educational programs for development (health, environment, gender), information programs, and culturally relevant entertainment. Through access to the production and consumption of relevant communications, these media form a collective platform for community empowerment.

A growing trend is the formation of regional, national, and transnational networks that support local communications initiatives and facilitate political and social participation at all levels of community. For instance:

- The National Community Radio Forum of South Africa is pioneering the use of Internet and satellite distribution for exchange of social action programming and news among its 100 community radio station members in South Africa.
- In North America, Deep Dish Television is a network that provides programming to 200 to 300 public, educational and municipal television channels. The programmes are produced by different communities using satellite television as a means of distribution.
- The Latin American Indigenous Broadcast Network ?Red Quechua Satelital? combines e-mail, audio by internet and satellite transmission, to daily connect 28 Quechua and Quichua radios and their audiences with news-bulletins and radio magazines. These community media contribute to the cultural and political awareness of the twelve million discriminated and mostly poor Quechuas

and Quichuas in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.

- 101.7 MAMA FM: is a community radio station set up by the Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA). The first women's radio station in Africa, it targets women between the age of 15-45 with gender sensitive educational programmes, and offers training and practical experience for female journalists.

- In San Francisco and New York, the Independent Press Association provides a range of services to bolster both the financial and editorial aspects of independent and community publications that serve groups and communities often marginalized by the corporate media.

- Around the world a growing number of Independent Media Centres are struggling to create an interactive, web-based platform for reporting and sharing information on social issues and social movements.

Building community media

Because communication is a basic right and a necessary condition for social and economic development, community media can make a strategic contribution to that development. But a sustainable approach requires firm foundations.

Building community media requires an approach based on the empowerment of peoples and communities ? not private investors. Nation states and international institutions have to guarantee access for production, distribution and consumption to all groups in society, and legislative reforms that assure effective access and support policies for community media must be implemented. In part, this requires strengthening rights to freedom of information and freedom of expression. Similarly, copyright and intellectual property right regulations must allow for the free circulation of that may impact upon health and well being.

Greater awareness of the development potential of community broadcasting, and particularly community radio, is needed among governments, intergovernmental agencies and the private sector. Community media projects require assistance to adapt to new digital production technologies and to increase their access to the internet. Strategic links need to be made between community radio and telecentre development, and opportunities to cluster broadcast, print, and web-based community media resources must be developed and promoted.

In particular, the development of community radio and the future of community television will depend on access to significant technical resources. Affordable access to frequencies, channels and bandwidth and the adoption of appropriate technical standards is imperative. Governments and intergovernmental bodies, including the International Telecommunications Union, need to ensure spectrum allocation and technical standards provide for community media development. Private media and telecommunications providers must be required to offer free or low cost channel space and bandwidth for community media content.

A burgeoning perspective is that of community informatics, which is concerned with the enabling uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in communities ? how ICTs can help achieve a community's social, economic, cultural, or political goals. Community informatics brings together the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders ? community activists and groups, policymakers, users/citizens, artists, and a range of academics working across disciplines. A Community informatics approach considers access facilities, service design, telecentre or community access centre design, design of the community system, online service delivery, and online support. Applications of community informatics include community Internet access, community information, online civic participation, online community service delivery, community economic development, education/training/learning networks, community and regional training, and telework.

A rich literature has developed in community informatics, which covers a broad range of issues,

focusing on case studies in North America, Europe, Latin America, and developing countries. These issues include: Access: how are access needs met in particular communities? Are community networks able to bridge the digital divide?; Community economic development: how are community networks contributing to this?; Social cohesion: are community networks contributing to social inclusion? What has been the effect of community participation?; Development: are telecentres and other public access facilities meeting the needs of those in developing countries? Learning: how are community networks being used or contributing to digital literacy?

Conclusion

Community media are key to creating a strong, socially responsible civil society. They must have access to sufficient financial resources whilst respecting and preserving their independence from government and commercial media corporations. Revenues raised from the sale of spectrum and cable and telecommunications licenses should be reinvested in social communications objectives, including support for community media development. And policy initiatives that support and promote community media at regional, national, and transnational levels ? such as tax incentives, production funds, and legislation supporting the creation of co-operatives and other not-for-profit organizational forms - should be devised and implemented. Communication policy development and international investment in information and communication technologies must consistently include support for community-based media.

Further reading and resources

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