

BROADCASTING COMMITTEE

BCC(3)-05-08 (p2) : 19 May 2008

Evidence from Andrew Jones and Julie Barton on Community Radio in Wales

Background to the Evidence

Community Radio began in the UK, after many years of lobbying from groups like the Community Media Association (CMA), in 2001, with the launch of 16 pilot stations. Known then as 'Access Radio'; it became in 2004, 'Community Radio', a third tier in radio broadcasting, with a very specific brief.

Unlike traditional local stations, Community Radio stations broadcast to much smaller areas; focus on a specific community (either community of interest or geographical location), and, according to Ofcom 'Their job is to benefit communities rather than make a profit'. They are only allowed to make up a maximum of 50% of their funding from advertising (and some aren't permitted any at all), and are often, in part funded with some kind of public money.

There is very strong regulation of Community Radio, and the stations are required to deliver 'social gain', though no one has ever quite defined what that means in this context.

Andrew Jones set up GTFM initially as a one off community project on the Glyntaff Estate near Pontypridd in 1999. However, GTFM went on to take part in the Access Radio pilot, effectively becoming Wales first full time community station in 2002. Since then Ofcom has awarded a further nine licences in Wales, though one, Toradio, based at Blaenafon has ceased to be licensed.

Community Stations are now on air in Pontypridd, Neath/Port Talbot, Cardiff, Brynmawr, Cardiff and Wrexham with further stations already licensed in Barry, Llandudno and Rhyl

In total these stations can potentially reach around 675,000 people - almost a quarter of the Welsh population and therefore their impact becomes significant in a Wales context. Unlike all the commercial stations on air in Wales ALL community stations are required to be owned and be accountable locally. When you consider the developing media map in Wales - threats to the future existence of ITV Wales and the shrinking circulation of Wales's daily print media (Western Mail circulation down to under 40,000) community radio (by its very nature) is well placed to provide a valuable source of news and information. Community radio is as much a tool of community development/regeneration as it is part of the media. It is in a unique position for example to support the Welsh Assembly and local authorities in communicating key themes and strategies to the 'grass roots level' and being part of the voluntary sector has a more developed understanding and appreciation of what it means, and its impact, than many in mainstream media.

Community radio relies on a small core staff and a large number of volunteers. Both funding and the need for a constant stream of volunteers present the biggest challenges. Community radio must be a lean operation. Core staffing quickly accounts for more than half the operating costs, yet this on going revenue support is the most difficult to find within the voluntary sector.

Having worked with the Assembly for many years Andrew, whilst he was running GTFM, lobbied hard for the creation of Assembly's Community Radio Fund which was announced in November 2006. It was formally launched this month and provides revenue support of £500k over 5 years. The Community Radio Sector has welcomed the existence of this funding, which though not a large sum of money, could provide vital revenue which could make a real difference. It is important though that the existence of the fund doesn't mean that stations in Wales aren't successful in applying to the Ofcom Fund which covers the UK. It would also be worth considering, in the future, if the fund is to be continued and even hopefully expanded, allowing certain RSLs to also apply for this fund.

There is another way of licensing community stations, with Restricted Service Licences (RSLs). Most existing community stations started in this manner. Ofcom can award a short term licence for broadcasting, normally four weeks. Outside London, a community can hold 2 such licenses each year.

The RCT Community Radio Project operates under the RSL rule. The project was envisaged by Andrew Jones when he was running GTFM as a way of expanding Community Radio in the County Borough, with the hope of making the proposition more economically viable. The project is funded by the Welsh Assembly's Communities @One programme, as a regeneration tool, specifically to pass IT skills on to members of the community who volunteer with the project. In all respects it has been very successful. Six broadcasts have been held in total over the course of twelve months in Treherbert, Penrhys and Penywaun. All broadcasts have been staffed with volunteers, and we've also had volunteer production support. Each of the three projects works with the relevant local Communities First Partnership; and the radio project has actually brought members of the public from the three areas together from time to time. A full evaluation of the project is being finalised now, but among the successes of the project is that one volunteer, Sharon Morris, from Treherbert, has won an adult learner of the year award from NIACE Cymru.

It is particularly relevant to be discussing community radio now, in light both of Ofcom's PSB Review, and also Ofcom's Consultation last year on the Future of Radio.

The Future of Radio Consultation made a number of proposals to relax the regulatory burden on Community Radio Stations. The proposals will need further legislation, and are being kept under review. More significantly, the consultation also proposed a number of

measures to relax the rules on 'localness' for Commercial Local Radio, largely in response to complaints by the sector that with falling revenue from advertising, they needed less regulation and less local programming to be viable. These proposals have already been implemented.

Some have argued that as commercial radio becomes less local, community radio can step in to take its place. However, Community Radio, given the financial challenges should not be a substitute for a full service commercial station, although it can certainly deliver a public service, especially to deprived communities and audiences which may not be reached by more traditional stations. It can certainly too, play a very strong role in regeneration if used in the right way.

One issue which concerns us very much is the provision of news for both community "and" commercial radio stations here in Wales. Most community stations don't have sufficient funding to employ journalists, and so, if they carry news at all, like many of their commercial counterparts they will take IRN (Independent Radio News) for their bulletins. IRN (being a subsidiary of ITN) in common with other news services (such as Sky Radio News which an increasing number of commercial stations here in Wales now use as the mainstay of their news, purports to cover the UK, but doesn't. Indeed much of what it does cover isn't relevant to Wales, post devolution. Yet this might be the only news which someone who is a loyal listener to a local service will receive. We feel very strongly that there is a requirement, which won't be met by the market, for an IRN type service for Wales. It might be possible if a fund and/ or a funding body for PSB is set up in Wales, that such a service should be provided.

In addition many commercial radio newsrooms in Wales are themselves staffed by just a handful of staff often working under extreme pressure to provide news bulletins over a number of stations. Their news services are also themselves threatened with cuts. For example GMG Radio which owns Wales's largest commercial radio station - Real Radio- has just announced that it is axing its extended lunchtime and early evening news (thus potentially cutting back on Wales stories in favour of bigger UK/entertainment/sport stories). In addition it now increasingly relies on its Manchester news hub out of 'normal' working hours. All this is significant in terms of PSB here in Wales

Community radio should consider news as an essential part of its service to the community. At GTFM Andrew developed an Editorial Policy based on the local authority's Community Plan (covering important aspects such as continued learning, safer communities, employment training opportunities and healthy living!) These are important in a community regeneration context and obviously important themes for the Welsh Assembly to communicate to the grass roots. The news operation at GTFM has proven the success of this approach in a party neutral way (listeners would often thank us for letting them know of local initiatives they could benefit from which they would not have generally been aware of via other broadcasters)

Although nine stations in Wales continue to hold community radio licences, not all have gone on the air full time yet. Those licences were awarded by Ofcom as part of a rolling programme across the UK. As yet there is no proposal from Ofcom about how future stations will be licensed, although large parts of Wales are completely untouched by the sector. Community radio is ideal for expanding radio here in Wales - taking it to rural/Welsh speaking areas which will never be able to sustain local commercial radio.

There is also the issue of who does the licensing? At present all radio licensing decisions are made by the Ofcom Radio Licensing Committee which is a sub committee of the main Content Board. There is no direct Welsh representation. In our opinion this is not a situation which serves Wales well.

The community radio sector in Wales is fragmented. The Community Media Association does a fine job, but it doesn't have a particular strength in Wales. The Community Radio Forum of Ireland (CRAOL), www.craol.ie, is an extremely good example of how much more effective stations can be when they have formal links between them. The community stations in Ireland also receive public money provided for their operation. It seems unlikely that such an association will be formed and for for Wales without some priming. This might be a good initial use of some of the money from the Assembly's Community Radio Fund.

Conclusion

This is a very good time to be considering Community Radio in Wales, with the launch of the Assembly's new fund, and Ofcom's consultation on PSB, and its continuing work on the Future of Radio. There are some really promising signs, but there is certainly a deficit when it comes to news, and financial viability remains an on going problem. There is also a strong argument to be made that radio licensing decisions affecting Wales must, at the very least, have a strong input from here.