

A Guide to Community Radio and Public Engagement with Research

The FUTURES on Air project ran between August and November 2020 and explored the features of community radio and the role it could play in public engagement with research.

What is community radio?

A broad definition, community radio is that it is a space for people to make radio in their own way, talk about meaningful issues in their lives, and connect with others through respectful discussion, listening and collaboration. Community radio is characterised by having community ownership, control and participation and almost exclusively volunteering run. It is oriented towards being non-profit with activities that are community development centred. There are two other radio forms: commercial broadcasting that is privately owned and public service broadcasters (in the UK, this is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)).

Most higher education institutions view media engagement as a subset of corporate communications, marketing, press and public relations. As a result, community radio's community development approach is poorly understood and often overlooked by researchers when thinking about ways to engage public groups with their research.

“Speaking with the media, we are briefed on it. Usually, what we are told to do is stick to one message and explain it three times. No jargon, make it as concise as possible and deliver it with some sort of enthusiasm.”

Researcher

“Community radio is media in the hands of communities. That what's special and important, and for people to understand the difference. The infrastructure, the company and everything is owned by groups of local people.”

Programme maker

[According to Ofcom](#), the regulatory body that licences radio stations for broadcast in the UK, community radio stations typically:

“covers a small geographical area with a coverage radius of up to 5km.”

Community Radio	Commercial Radio
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission-driven to deliver social gains to the target community • Not-for-profit • No singular model of organisation. Some are informal and volunteer-led, whereas others are ‘professionally’ organised with centralised decision making • Accountable to their host community • Local/ member-owned • Focused on quality and community-driven content • Sponsor messages • Civic-minded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profit-driven • For-profit • Commercial structure with paid staff • Accountable to shareholders • Market owned • Focused on ratings and mass appeal • Commercials 15-20mins per hour • Consumer Minded

Table 1. Comparison of the different features of community and commercial radio

How is content created for community radio?

Content for broadcast is developed with an expectation that it supports civic deliberation, creative engagement and social participation within a community setting on a chosen topic. This is a bottom-up process rather than a top-down one. It supports co-production and engagement, rather than expert-led dissemination, and it lends itself to a creative process of action for, by and of the community. This contrasts with the model used in commercial or public broadcast media, in which teams of expert producers and journalists are given a high level of institutional and professional status, from which they then explore a topic of social or cultural concern (see Fig.1).

“Broadcasting a radio show that a local community listens to, although that is part of it, the actual engagement is making the show together, including coming into the studio.”

Programme maker



Fig. 1. Difference between the traditional broadcast media and the community media model

FUTURES On Air Case Study: exploring how community radio can be used in public engagement with research

FUTURES on Air was a project developed and delivered as part of [FUTURES2020, a European Researchers' Night event](#), which aimed to understand the features of community radio and explore its role in public engagement with research.

The project consisted of a series of co-produced radio conversations between community programme-makers and researchers and broadcast across community radio in South West England at the end of November 2020. Seven one-hour long programmes were co-produced, using various creative approaches based on the principles of deliberation, listening, responding empathetically, and creating shared stories together.

Who was involved

The Public Engagement Unit at the University of Bath, along with creative cultural producers [Agile Rabbit](#) and South-West-based community radio practitioners [Stellaria Media](#), developed the FUTURES on Air concept and secured funding from the *FUTURES2020: European Researchers' Night* project. The project involved five community radio stations; [Bath Radio](#) (Bath), [Phonic FM](#) (Exeter), [Soundart Radio](#) (Devon) and [Radio St Austell Bay](#) (Cornwall). [Stellaria Media](#) facilitated collaborative engagement between the groups and researchers from the [University of Exeter](#), [University of Bath](#) and [University of Plymouth](#). [Agile Rabbit](#). Public engagement professionals connected researchers with Stellaria Media, who matched them to the relevant community programme-makers and facilitated relationship building. [Decentred Media](#) evaluated FUTURES on Air and highlighted the role that community media plays in public engagement with research.

What we did

The model developed for FUTURES on Air involved community programme-makers identifying topics they were interested in and were then matched, by public engagement professionals, with researchers carrying out work in those areas. Together they then made programmes that were broadcast on the participating radio stations (Fig. 2).

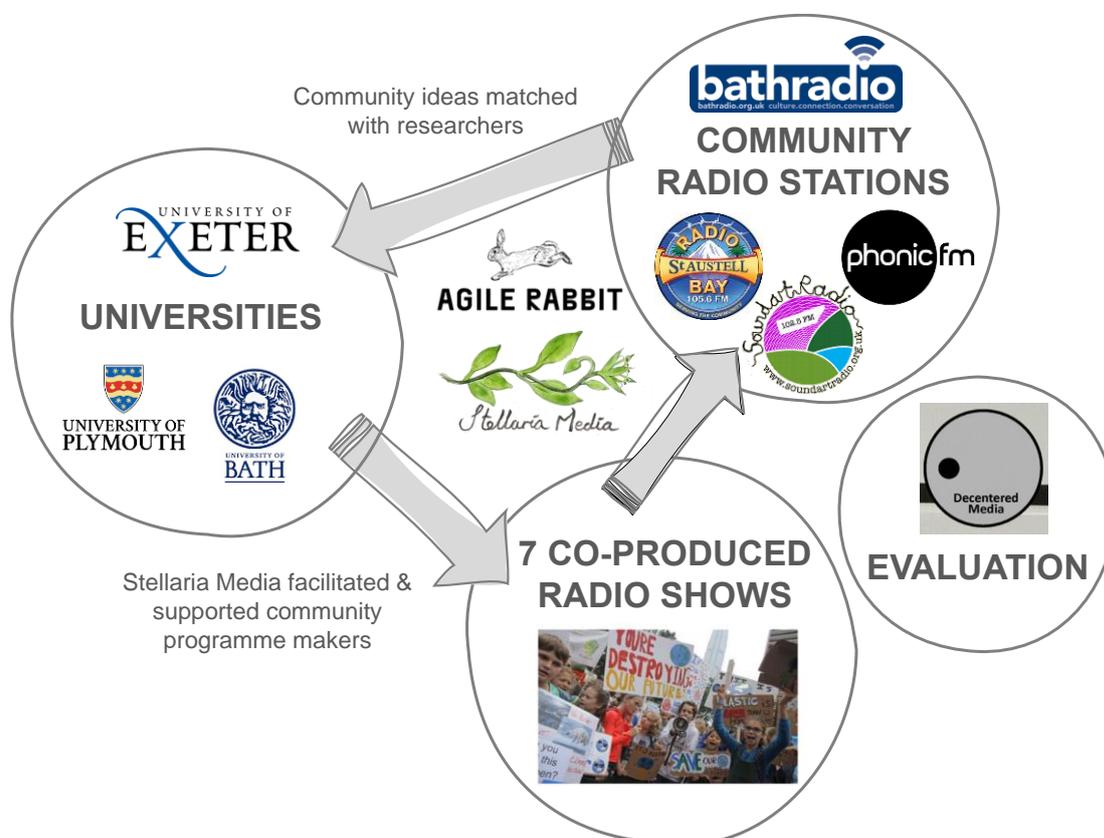


Fig. 2. Image of the organisations involved in FUTURES on Air and the method of co-production

The programmes produced used an in-conversation format and varied in content from climate change, feminism, housing inequalities, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and South Asian music.

All FUTURES on Air programmes are available to listen again on the [FUTURES on Air Mixcloud station](#).

An estimated 3,000 people listened to the seven one-hour programmes that were broadcast on the five participating community radio stations on Friday 27 and Saturday 28 November 2020.

The total cost of the development and delivery of FUTURES on Air was £8,420.

How we did it

There were three phases to the development and delivery of FUTURES on Air.

1. Developing networks (August to September)

- Stellaria Media reached out to interested community programme-makers and station managers who were part of the South West community radio network. To participate, stations had to accommodate the requirement to broadcast content on the two days of European Researchers' Night.
- Once committed, each participating radio station received a schedule fee to broadcast content developed by other radio stations and a production fee to cover the costs associated with the use of facilities and support their volunteer community programme-makers involvement.
- Stellaria Media worked with programme-makers to identify topics they were interested in exploring.
- The team commissioned Leicester-based researcher-practitioner Decentred Media to help evaluate the project.

2. Creating content (September to November)

- The Public Engagement Unit and Agile Rabbit matched researchers from the participating *FUTURES2020* universities with the programme makers' topics by reaching out across their established researcher networks and contacts.
- Once 'recruited', the team set about establishing relationships between researchers and programme-makers. This involved informal discussions and facilitating conversations by the team between researchers and community programme-makers to build mutual trust and understanding of community radio and the academic process.
- Stellaria Media supported the programme, making teams through trouble-shooting conversations and idea generation as they developed the concept for their audio content and went about recording material.

3. Editing, broadcasting and evaluating (November to December)

- Stellaria Media were on call for those confident programme-makers with any editing issues they encountered and took a more active role with those programme-makers with less experience, working with them to realise their concept for the content.
- The shows were broadcast during European Researchers' Night on Friday 27 and Saturday 28 November 2020.
- Decentred Media carried out a series of qualitative interviews with participants at the end of the project. This work and their observations throughout the project formed the basis of the evaluation report they produced.

Evaluation findings and learnings

Decentred Media took a developmental evaluation approach to assess FUTURES on Air which framed concepts around community radio as a participative activity. Evaluation of the project provided valuable insight into community radio, how it is organised in practice, and in what way it is possible to extend the creative and participatory use of the medium of radio to public engagement

with research. Here we touch on a few of the key findings, and the full report can be found on the [FUTURES on Air project case study webpage](#).

The value of the community radio content programming style

There wasn't a pre-determined model of programming or audience development on the project participants in contrast to commercial radio. Instead, the collaborative approach to programme making emphasised valuing the process and the product. It was recognised that the engagement was most effective when the content could emerge through conversations based on the participants' interests and concerns. This challenged the more traditional and mainstream media production model and demonstrated how socially affirming and personally empowering this process was for both researchers and community members.

“Broadcasting a radio show that a local community listens to, although that is part of it, the actual engagement is making the show together.”

Programme maker

“It's not about persuading people that what you're saying is correct or that your point of view is correct. It's more about sitting down and just having a chat as if you're in the local pub or around your kitchen table.”

Researcher

The value of community radio practitioners

The project was led by community radio practitioners, Stellaria Media, who were responsive to the needs, interests, capabilities, and capacities of each participating community radio station and their programme-makers.

There was no singular template for content production that was used. Instead, the approach was unique to each of the participating stations. The following features characterise Stellaria Media's way of work and highlight the importance of working with practitioners who are experts in the area and embedded in the community radio field. These include:

- **Relationships and networks:** Stellaria Media are part of an established network of programme-makers and radio station managers across the South West. They have developed significant relationships and trust within this network, which enabled effective collaboration at the outset of the project, considering the needs of the different individuals and groups, who operated in very different environments, and with very different motivations. As most community radio stations are operated and supported exclusively by volunteers, an external project can be disruptive to a station's operation configuration. Stellaria Media were positioned to understand how the stations operated and were able to support them and radio makers to participate in the project, which may not have been possible without them.
- **Listening and connecting:** As facilitators, Stellaria Media understood the importance of listening to the programme makers' social requirements and were quick to identify the topics they were interested in. As a result of working with public engagement professionals at the consortium universities and Agile Rabbit, Stellaria Media connected the programme-makers with the researchers that best reflected their interests.
- **Collaborative conversations:** Stellaria Media created a space for collaboration between programme-makers and researchers. This space looked different depending on the programme. For example, for the Our Shared Planet programme, they actively facilitated

and supported young people in a creative session to develop their questioning skills to enable engagement with climate scientists. For the Heritage, Heart and Home programme, the space they created was a lighter touch and just involved connecting the programme maker and researchers.

- **Developing skills and capacity:** Stellaria Media are themselves community radio programme-makers who bring experience and expertise from professional careers in 'traditional media. This expertise proved valuable throughout the project as programme-makers had to adapt to creating content in a COVID secure manner and use new and unfamiliar software and programmes for online recording. Programme makers were able to benefit from the support of Stellaria Media to develop their skills and capacity.

"It helped me understand the technical side of the programming, how to use interviews in an incorporated way in my shows. This has given me the confidence actually to interview people."

Programme maker

Stellaria Media helped researchers and community programme-makers navigate the potential misinterpretation of the academic process and practice of community radio. Leading the facilitation, Stellaria Media were also able to quickly establish a shared sense of purpose in the various collaborations between programme-makers and researchers, which helped develop an awareness of each other's working practices, enabling collaboration.

The role of community media in public engagement with research

FUTURES on Air created an opportunity for greater deliberative engagement with research. The collaborative programme making approach at the heart of FUTURES on Air enhanced the mutual exchange of ideas and experiences between researchers and community participants. It was an activity that enabled community programme-makers to have their own knowledge and experiences valued and heard.

"Our anecdotes, our stories, our life experiences, are a really important kind of knowledge."

Programme maker

The evaluation's findings highlighted the genuine civic value of engagement through community media for community participants - supporting the development of their social capital, deliberation of issues of importance to them and their communities, and democratising access to 'knowledge' generated through research.

"He was almost in tears when he was talking about his programme, how much it meant to him to be able to make something like that, something that he'd wanted to create for a long time."

Community radio station manager

For researchers, participation also offered a meaningful opportunity to gain insights into the experiences of people who are or could be affected by their research.

"What I like about the project was that the community found the subject, and it was about them making the connexions with my research."

Researcher

"There's value in the content. But actually, the key, the core value, is in the process of people meeting, talking, listening to each other and making something together."

Researcher

"I've become more aware of the importance of what community radio is and what it stands for. It's such a needed medium, allowing for proper conversations between people."

Researcher

FUTURES on Air has demonstrated an example of an equitable approach to practice in public engagement with research. The traditional power imbalances often associated with public engagement with research were subverted. Community programme makers accessed knowledge generated through research that helped them make sense of issues that they and their wider community are affected by in a space they owned and where they had agency.

"Co-creating stuff means you get people more involved. Having conversations with researchers and making stuff together, and being a bit less 'this is the expert'."

Programme maker

"He asked. 'So everyone's going to participate, and it will probably be a call-in?' Like when people ring in, and I'll be one of the experts talking?" And, I was like, "well, we don't really do that. Plus, it's really hard to engage people in that way"."

Programme maker

Dean Veall - Deputy Head of Public Engagement, University of Bath

Dr Kate Baker –Director, Agile Rabbit and post-doctoral research fellow, University of Exeter

Dr Rob Watson - Decentred Media

Alice Armstrong – Stellaria Media

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If you would like to find out more about FUTURES on Air, please visit the [FUTURES on Air project page](#) or drop us a line public-engagement@bath.ac.uk