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FUTURES on Air: Community radio and public engagement

ABSTRACT

FUTURES on Air was a public engagement project delivered as part of FUTURES2020, a European Researchers' Night event, which consisted of a series of co-produced radio conversations between community programme makers and researchers, which was broadcast across stations in the southwest of England, November 2020. FUTURES on Air explored the role of community media, specifically community radio, in relation to alternative forms of public engagement with researchers, and as impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

In a world beset by the breakdown of in-person social engagement, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions have revised their public engagement practices. In 2020, there was an explosion of online conferencing, not just for remote working, but for direct engagement with citizens by public sector organizations. While there has been a rush to adopt platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangout and Microsoft Teams, this digital push should not be allowed to eclipse the tried and tested benefits of legacy media platforms, such as broadcast community radio, without more detailed examination. This article presents a summary of how the FUTURES on Air project acted as a bridge for public engagement between universities and listeners of community radio in the southwest of England (Veall et al. 2021; Bath 2021). This experience

was one of facilitating and building trust between the institutions and their researchers, the people who created the radio programmes and the people who listen to them.

FUTURES on Air was a project developed and delivered as part of FUTURES2020, a European Researchers' Night event, which consisted of a series of co-produced radio conversations between community programme makers and researchers, which was broadcast across community radio in the southwest of England at the end of November 2020. FUTURES on Air explored the role of community media, specifically community radio, in relation to public engagement of research. Community groups from five community radio stations, including Bath Radio (Bath), Phonic FM (Exeter), Soundart Radio (Totnes) and Radio St Austell Bay (Cornwall), were asked to identify topics they regarded as important and relevant to them and their wider communities. Using a participatory community media methodology, southwestern based community radio practitioners Stellaria Media (Lucinda Guy and Alice Armstrong), facilitated collaborative engagement between the groups and researchers from the University of Exeter, University of Bath and University of Plymouth, who conducted research in areas related to the topics identified by the participants.

Seven one-hour programmes were co-produced between the community groups and researchers, using a variety of creative approaches based on the principles of deliberation, listening, responding empathetically and creating shared stories together. The programmes varied in content, ranging from climate change, feminism, housing inequalities, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and South Asian music. They were diverse in format. The collaborative programme making approach aimed to enhance the mutual exchange of ideas and experiences between researchers and community media participants.

FUTURES2020 BACKGROUND

FUTURES2020, like other examples of engagement activities that migrated online during the COVID-19 pandemic, had to be quickly repurposed. The FUTURES2020 team identified the potential risk posed by online-only engagement, which was likely to exclude many people who do not have the economic or cultural capacity, or resources, to engage through online platforms (Good Things 2020). The concern was that some groups were easy to overlook and did not have a sufficiently robust orientation for effective digital engagement. Many people at the time were also suffering from digital fatigue and therefore had a different sense of risk perception to those who were more familiar with digital working. For example, Ofcom noted periodic declines in news consumption during the pandemic (Ofcom 2021). However, it appears that some people just did not have the capacity to engage digitally, as their access to devices, bandwidth and skills was limited and so their reliance on legacy broadcasting platforms was vital.

FUTURES on Air sought, therefore, to explore a range of learning approaches for remote engagement, while seeking to mitigate the risk of exclusion by experimenting with a diverse model of platform access, including legacy media platforms such as broadcast analogue radio. FUTURES2020 would have included traditional participative engagement activities, such as place-based media and street art exhibitions, however, because of the lockdown, the participative model was extended to encompass community radio.

COMMUNITY RADIO CHALLENGES

Community media in the United Kingdom represents an underdeveloped platform and practice for public engagement (Watson et al. 2019). Two significant reports in recent years typify the repeated shortfall in public policy engagement in relation to community media. The 2018 Civil Society Strategy, a centrepiece of Theresa May's premiership, which sought to address the loneliness crisis (HM Government 2018), and the Kruger report of 2020, which informed Boris Johnson's policy for 'levelling up' (Kruger 2020). However, both failed to include any direct or indirect reference to the role of community media as a recognized form of place-based, participatory or inclusive civil society practice. Similarly, Ofcom's reporting of diversity in the UK media industries, excludes data collection related to community media (Ofcom 2019), thereby missing minority populations as defined by their protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act and the differential impact of their media experience. Popular discussion of public policy related to the idea of 'renewing normal' or 'building back better' seldom, if ever, discusses community media as a component of social and public policy in the United Kingdom. Recent policy discussions, by the likes of Hillary Cotham, Ed Miliband and Nick Timothy, often signify corresponding community engagement priorities for social change and economic development from across the political spectrum, but they seldom include community media as part of this practice (Cottam 2019; Miliband 2021; Timothy 2020).

The community radio stations that participated in FUTURES on Air were a small cross-section of the available operators and represented a variety of operating models. Each station is run separately and independently from each other, having different public profiles, volunteer bases and differing levels of dedicated resources and studio equipment. There is no single model of organization of community radio in the United Kingdom. Operational structures and experiences are often unique to each community radio station. Some are formally constituted, but others are informal and unconstituted. Some stations may appear on the outside to be 'professionally' organized, with a focus on defined roles for station managers and marketing managers, while other stations focus on emergent concerns of community development and creative engagement suited to their inclusive mode of operation (*Decentered Media Podcast* 2021).

Content for broadcast in community radio is typically developed with an expectation that it supports civic deliberation, creative engagement and social participation within a community setting and on a chosen topic that is relevant to the local community (Stevenson 2019). This is a model of production that is bottom-up, rather than top-down. 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 (Todd in *Community Development Podcast* 2019; Todd and Nicholl 2018). As one participating programme maker noted: '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' (Watson 2021; Anon. n.d.: n.pag.).

WHAT IS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH?

Public engagement with higher education research is defined by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement as: '[T]he myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared

with the public. Engagement is a two-way process involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit' (NCCPE 2021: n.pag.). Using this definition, FUTURES on Air adopted the characterization of public engagement adopted by the University of Bath. This model of engagement seeks to:

- involve people from outside of academia in settings where they have agency;
- generates mutual benefit;
- relates to specific research.

Public engagement with research activities tends to fall into three broad (but not mutually exclusive) categories. Projects therefore aim to:

- inform: where researchers share and inform people with their research;
- listen: involving researchers listening to people's views, insights and perspectives on their research;
- collaborate: researchers and people working together on projects and activities that involve drawing on the expertise of both groups that relate to the research.

The FUTURES on Air project aimed to understand how the features of community radio might be utilized in support of public engagement for research. The project therefore focused on two areas of engagement: recruitment of participating community radio stations and the delivery of content that was co-produced with participating programme makers who identified topics and themes.

Initial project engagement by the facilitators consisted of bringing together the different participants and helping them to explore their ideas for meaningful programme making. This was based on a reciprocal concern expressed by both the researchers and community media practitioners. The challenge at first was to align expectations of what might be undertaken, how it might be undertaken and what would be achieved by it. Initially, this was expressed as a suggestion that research participants might be taking part in radio phone-ins or that they might undertake a 'takeover' of the broadcast studios and the social media feeds of the stations. Discussions and support were offered in the early stages of the project, therefore, to identify what forms of practice might be best used as a basis for developing mutually produced audio content suitable for broadcast. Furthermore, attention was given to exploring how community radio operates in practice, and how and why that operation is different to established corporate forms of media production.

Crucially, the community radio approach was identified as one of collaboration and participative engagement, in which volunteers produce broadcast content that would be of social concern to them and their communities. As Alice Armstrong, one of the facilitators, describes:

It's really about saying that people do things and are motivated to do things, using different sets of tools, in different sets of circumstances, that all interact and have a knock-on effect on each other, but which you can't easily put into discrete categories, or to look at, you know, to characterise as being sequential, if you like.

(Watson 2021; Anon. n.d.: n.pag.)

PROGRAMMING STYLES AND STANDARDS

It was essential that the researchers and programme makers remained open about the end nature of the programme. This necessitated an emphasis on valuing the process as well as the product. So, rather than imposing a pre-determined model of programming or audience development on the project participants, it was recognized that engagement was most effective when the content was allowed to emerge through developmental conversations, based on the interests and concerns of the participants themselves (Ife 2013; Hustedde 2015). This challenges the traditional and mainstream model of media production and public engagement and was able to demonstrate how socially affirming and personally empowering this process can be for both researchers and community members. Premal, one of the programme makers noted that he thought:

> Maybe that it would involve talking to either students or staff about what they're involved in the research. But, as it turns out, it's been inter-esting. I mean, it has involved talking to staff now, but obviously, to me, it's kind of been a lot more […] eye opening […] Just really kind of interesting, just the way that it has actually happened.
>
> (Watson 2021; Anon. n.d.: n.pag.)

Nicky, a community organizer in Cornwall, noted that the project has been good as a way of connecting with:

> [O]ther women around the […] well sometimes around the globe actu-ally […] They come on and we have a conversation and a chat about the various projects we're all engaged in. Which is exciting, because it's great to hear what other women are doing and how they're engaging with their community. With ideas that they come up with.
>
> (Watson 2021; Anon. n.d.: n.pag.)

VALUE AND COMMUNITY MEDIA PRACTITIONERS

The benefits of using experienced guides and facilitators, who understand both the technical and the social requirements of the different stations, were a considerable asset to FUTURES on Air. Stellaria Media helped navigate the potential misinterpretation of the academic process and practice of commu-nity radio for both researchers and community members. Alice Armstrong and Lucinda Guy were able to quickly establish a common sense of purpose, based on mutually recognized terms and priorities. Using this informal process of facilitation and supportive engagement with the participants, it was possible to relatively easily align each groups interest. This further helped to develop an awareness of each other's working practices, and as a result, they were able to form mutually supporting relationships that established trust.

Lucinda Guy noted her approach as a facilitator and how it is important to focus on the:

> [T]hings they're interested in, and that they think are important about radio, I guess […] And I think a lot of our work, I suppose, it's more about love, you know. It's like, and this sounds corny, but if you're trying to make a programme for social good, then what you're really saying there is you're trying to make the world a better place. And so

the process must be a loving process. And that will shine through. The care will shine through and affect the listener, and the people involved in this.

(Watson 2021; Anon. n.d.: n.pag.)

The focus of progressive community media practice, therefore, is mutual development, which corresponds to principles and practices of community development, such as those associated with Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) (Russell 2020), or the Communication for Development (C4D) process (Lacey 2006). It would certainly be productive to explore these issues in greater depth, in relation to the combined interactions and mutual developments of community media, as they might be integrated with research impact practices. There was a clear indication, though, of the benefits of personal expression and identity affirmation. The gap that has been opened-up by FUTURES on Air, however, indicates some potential to further examination of how social change is articulated, not just in media representations but also in community media practices as they are integrated with research impact practices. Dean Veall, public engagement manager for University of Bath, notes:

It's about recognising […] other forms of knowledge, so that phrase knowledge equity comes in. Academic knowledge isn't all knowledge. Like there's lived experiences people have, which is on-par, and has parity with academic knowledge. Knowledge learnt through the academic processes. And I think what this, my feeling from what I've heard of the outputs and some of the processes with the community radio stations, is that it allows that knowledge to be expressed, for everyone to be equal.

(Watson 2021; Anon. n.d.: n.pag.)

Therefore, over time the relationship between three modes of engagement explored in this project might be more specifically identified and incorporated in the public engagement process. If there is a will to maintain engagement over a sustained period, the collaborative process of community media production would clearly benefit by being linked with the research impact process and vice versa. Community media as a development practice, moreover, may provide additional scope for different levels of engagement over extended periods of time. The community radio practitioners and the research practitioners who have worked together in this project have clearly gained from their involvement and have demonstrated that they are energized by the links that they have established with partner research institutions. The academics and researchers are themselves empowered by the opportunity to express their concerns in a way that is grounded in local experience, personal identity and the needs of their respective individual communities.

Where there is potential for further study, then, is in understanding how these parallel processes of emergence might be mutually and reciprocally aligned, especially if this is done with the expectation that they do not fit with pre-determined points of view or anticipated social characterizations. This is a reciprocal development process in which one set of concerns will mutually inform the another (Watson 2017). They must be allowed to form their own pathways and routes. This suggests a distinctive developmental process that is reflexive, multidimensional and based on a

two-way relationship (Kegan 1982), with insight gained and comprehension expanded for all parties through mutual support and empowerment.

FINDINGS

FUTURES on Air provided valuable insight into the potential role of community radio as a collaborative public engagement practice with universities. What was noted was the realization that it is possible to easily extend the creative and participatory use of community radio for public engagement. Community radio was identified and recognized, perhaps for the first time, as legitimate collaborative methodology for the enhancement of public participation in public policy research, which, in this first instance, was of primary benefit to the researchers and community radio programme makers themselves. Kate Baker, one of the research participants noted that:

> What I think, potentially, universities can learn about their research and social impact models, is to move away from audience, top-down audience development models, where you put something out there and people are supposed to learn from it in some way. It's got to be that co-production co-development, empowerment model. Rather than it being 'we're giving you knowledge and information, go use it' kind of thing.
>
> (Watson 2021; Anon. n.d.: n.pag.)

The collaborative programme making approach at the centre of FUTURES on Air enhances the opportunity for the mutual exchange of ideas and experiences that goes beyond the classroom (Moylan 2021). This is expressed as a collaborative model of engagement between researchers and community participants. FUTURES on Air therefore enabled greater deliberative engagement with research. It provided researchers with an opportunity to meaningfully engage with the insights and perspectives of community members on their research, while also enabling community programme makers to draw on their own knowledge and experiences to help make sense of issues that affect themselves and the wider community.

There is an opportunity to further develop combined research impact and community focused communication models that will include additional listeners and new participants. This will introduce new players and agents to the academic processes, based on transparency and democratic inclusion. By demonstrating how academic research works in practice, this will enable more people to recognize their potential role in the knowledge creation and exchange process, making it more inclusive and fit to meet what are certain to be changing and challenging circumstances ahead. This has the potential to be a virtuous circle that would have real impact.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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