

# **Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI)**



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## **"Community media and social media: active citizenship in a changing media environment"**

*Input paper from CMFE (Community Media Forum Europe) for the next Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society*

As a contribution to the next Ministerial Conference on the Media and Information Society of the Council of Europe (Belgrade 2013), CMFE would like to reflect on the role of community media in the new media environment.

As alternative channels of media production and distribution, community media have facilitated active citizenship and political participation long before social media/Internet existed. What role do they perform in the age of social networks and blogs? How are they combining the use of "new" and "traditional" media platforms and technologies? Which kind of support and further action to ensure sustainable development is needed for community media in Europe, four years after the Council of Europe and European Parliament declarations?

Although mainstream media have attempted to facilitate forms of audience participation, alternative/community media in particular have proven to be more successful in organising deeper forms of participation in the media, whether online or offline.<sup>1</sup> According to Berrigan, access by the community and the participation of the community should be considered key defining factors for alternative media, they "*are media to which members of the community have access, for information, education, entertainment, when they want access. They are media in which the community participates, as planners, producers, performers. They are the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community.*"<sup>2</sup>

Community media have pioneered the use of new technologies for creative media production and can use social media to enhance the promotion and distribution of alternative media content. There are many synergies growing out of community media and social media, and at times, there can be a symbiotic relationship. But it is important

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey, O., Cammaerts, B. and Carpentier, N. (2008) *Understanding Alternative Media*, Maidenhead:Open University Press

<sup>2</sup> Berrigan, F.J. (1979) *Community Communications: The Role of Community Media in Development*, Reports and Papers on Mass Communication no. 90. Paris: UNESCO

to also stress the differences and reaffirm the need for community media now that social media are ubiquitous.

### **1. Media literacy**

Community media train people, particularly communities and individuals often not represented by the mainstream media<sup>3</sup> and enable them to become active media-producers and multipliers within their communities and beyond. Media literacy is a core competence on how to become an active citizen and participate fully in society and democracy.<sup>4</sup> One of its goals is to build critical awareness and a knowledge of the issues of personal and social life linked to media communication. Social media is primarily a re-distribution platform and doesn't fulfil a specific training function.

### **2. Ownership**

Community media are owned by the communities they serve. They are usually owned and controlled by people who would otherwise never get to own or direct media. Social media are for the most part a specific set of commercial hosted software offerings (Facebook, Twitter, Myspace etc.). This ownership means that control is with these entities which do set the rules for what can and cannot be published. This also includes community ownership of archives. There are many examples of this: in July 2012, we have seen Twitter suspending the London Independent's journalist, Guy Adams, presumably because he was very critical of the NBC's Olympic coverage.

### **3. Empowerment**

Who can use community media? Disadvantaged people: groups without access to high-speed internet, older, poorer, less educated, non-mother tongue speakers. These are important users of community media and they are also groups who cannot easily access social media. More significantly the transmission and reception of social media mostly happen according to a set of rules devised by private corporations. While it offers the potential for new audiences to be formed around media creations, this entails copyright and filtering rules which most people are not aware of.

This digital divide creates a two-tier society, which community media can redress by making information, which can be found on social media, available on more traditional platforms.

3a. Community media has a communal and participatory dimension that social media and blogs – which are more individual – don't have. Social media can create and sustain a collection of individuals but community media creates communities and collectivities of proximity or common interest.

3b. We also shouldn't under-value organisations as an important part of the building of democratic societies. Community media are civil society organisations, usually legal entities, and they offer and encourage participation at different levels of their structure. They are usually very local, and instil and nurture a sense of active engagement in a locality. They create physical (as well as virtual) spaces for participation and collective action.<sup>5</sup> Social media are not organisations and cannot fulfil these functions in a society.

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<sup>3</sup> In most countries persons active in community media belong to ethnic, cultural or social minorities, e.g. immigrants, people with specific needs, specific age groups.

<sup>4</sup> Under the Belgian Presidency of the EU in 2012 "Media Literacy for all" was a core policy issue.

<sup>5</sup> Carpentier, N., (2011) *Media and Participation*, Bristol: Intellect

#### **4. Recognition**

Community media have a recognized name and established network of active citizens, experience in promoting social justice, integration and social change.

Community media are often accessible centres of communications and technology in their communities. They are the places where all citizens, regardless of their skills, can learn about 'social media'. As recognized and trusted community entities, community media usage of social media has a strong factor of being a respected and trusted source of information, particularly on grassroots and local news items. Community media are part of the building of a community and voluntary sector, where they benefit from many networks and alliances.

#### **5. Transmission, dissemination**

The debate about online/social media as another way to disseminate information or as a replacement for traditional media will go on for some time, and it is difficult to tell where it will end. However, it is clear that linear traditional broadcasting is still immensely popular and has many years to run yet. And just as TV didn't replace radio, perhaps online media are just another part of the information dissemination jigsaw.

What is important is the growing availability of different media, with different strengths and weaknesses, with different infrastructural and regulatory needs. Also important is that these media need each other to build strong communications: the issue is not to choose between but how to combine different media types to be the most effective.

Moving forward, community media will continue to combine the use of online and traditional broadcasting platforms, providing media and Internet literacy for a variety of age, language and minority groups, people with special needs, etc. In the large field of organizations active in the adult education sector, community media are among the rare ones delivering media skills to a diverse audience. To fulfil this irreplaceable role, proper legislative regulation, greater structural support and funding need to be secured for community media.

Despite the adoption in 2008 and 2009 of Council of Europe and European Parliament declarations pointing to the important contributions of community media for lifelong learning, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue<sup>6</sup>, community media are still in a fragile position across Europe. Many countries still lack enabling legislation (for example Spain, Poland, and many central and eastern European countries) and in other countries recent developments have led to a possible deterioration of their financial situation (for example in Hungary, Germany, Denmark).

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<sup>6</sup> European Parliament resolution of 25 September 2008 on Community Media in Europe; Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the role of community media in promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 11 February 2009); Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on media pluralism and diversity of media content.

Within the context of the next Ministerial Conference, CMFE would be interested in sharing the outcomes of its mapping and rating project<sup>7</sup> conducted in collaboration with the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA), providing an up-to-date quantitative snapshot of the state of Community Media in Europe and inputs for further initiatives. This could take the form of a workshop on the side of the Conference or be integrated into a broader subject. The outcome of this effort should lead to new actions to be undertaken by the Council of Europe, e.g. monitoring progress in community media legislation, and support in member countries and so disclosing positive and negative trends.

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<sup>7</sup> Community Media Forum Europe launched the Mapping and Ratings Project in order to map all community radio and community