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

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 are 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 organizing deeper forms of participation in the media, whether online or offline.[1] 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."[2]

Community media has pioneered the use of new technologies for creative media production and can use social media to enhance promotion and distribution of alternative media content. There are many synergies growing out of community media and social media and at times it can be a symbiotic relationship. But it is important 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[3] and enables them to become active media-producers and multipliers within their communities and beyond. Media literacy is a core competence on the way to become an active citizen and participate fully in society and democracy.[4] One of its goals is to build critical awareness and a knowledge of the issues of personal and social life linked to media

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[1] Bailey, O., Cammaerts, B. and Carpentier, N. (2008) *Understanding Alternative Media*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

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

[3] 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.

[4] Under the Belgian Presidency of the EU in 2010 "Media Literacy for all" was a core policy issue.

communication. Social media is primarily a re-distribution platform and doesn't fulfill a specific training function.

2. Ownership

Community media is owned by the communities it serves. It is usually owned and controlled by people who would otherwise never get to own or direct media.

Social media is for the most part a specific set of commercial hosted software offerings (Facebook, Twitter, Myspace &c.). This ownership means that control is with these entities and they do set the rules for what can and cannot be published.

Eg: 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-mothertounge 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 happens 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 carries with it copyright and filtering rules which most people are not aware of.

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

3a. There is the communal and participatory aspect of community media vs. "individual" use of social media/blogs. Social Media can create and sustain a collection of individuals but community media creates communities and collectives, of proximity or common interest.

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

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 centers of communications and technology in their communities. Community media 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,

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[5] Carpentier, N., (2011) *Media and Participation,* Bristol: Intellect.

particularly on grassroots and local news items. Community media are part of the fabric of the community and voluntary sector, and have many networks and alliances there.

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: it's not a matter to choose between, but how to combine different media types to be 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 fulfill this unreplaceable role, proper legislative regulation, greater structural support and funding needs to be secured for community media.

Despite the adoption in 2008 and 2009 of the Council of Europe and European Parliament Declarations pointing to the important contributions of community media for lifelong learning, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue[6], community media is 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 others recent developments have led to a possible deterioration of the financial situation (for example in Hungary, Germany, Denmark).

Within the context of the next Ministerial Conference, CMFE would be interested in sharing the outcomes of its mapping and rating project[7] conducted in collaboration with EPRA, the European Platform of Regulatory Authorithies, 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 sidelines 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 Coucil 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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[6] 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.

[7] Community Media Forum Europe launched the Mapping and Ratings Project in order to map all community radio and community television stations in all 47 members states of the Council of Europe.