

Bart Cammaerts

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Community Radio in the West: A legacy of struggle for survival in a state and capitalist controlled media environment

Bart Cammaerts (b.cammaerts@lse.ac.uk)

London School of Economics & Political Science
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

Abstract:

In this article the legacy of struggle by community radio in the West is analysed from a comparative perspective. More specifically, the focus of this article is on Western media policies towards community radio. It is argued that while many community radio discourses, theories and policies are oriented towards developing countries and emerging democracies, community radio stations in the West are often forced to operate in the margins. Case studies on the US, the UK and Belgium will be presented. Some influence of distinct regulatory paradigms can be observed, but overall in each of these countries community radio stations have a legacy of struggle for their existence and survival. This exposes the need to account for the distinct nature of community radio in (Western) regulatory regimes. A common thread in the cases being presented is the difficulty involved in (local) community radio legitimating its existence on the FM-band alongside commercial and public broadcasters. Unlike these, community radio movements have little lobbying power and are usually positioned as rogue and unprofessional actors within the broadcasting community. From a democratic perspective emphasising the importance of participation and civic culture, Western media policies urgently need to create an enabling environment for participatory community radio initiatives.

Keywords: community radio, regulation, policy, comparative, participatory media

Short Bio:

Bart Cammaerts is lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). His research examines multi-stakeholder policy processes, media strategies of activists, alternative media and issues regarding power, resistance and public-ness. He has published widely on this in journals and books. His most recent publications include; *Internet-Mediated Participation beyond the Nation State* (Manchester University Press/Transaction books, 2008), *Understanding Alternative Media* (with Olga Bailey and Nico Carpentier, Open University Press, 2008) and *Reclaiming the Media: Communication Rights and Democratic Media Roles* (edited with Nico Carpentier, Intellect, 2007). Bart Cammaerts chairs the Communication and Democracy Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and is vice-chair of the Communication technology Policy section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).

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Community Radio in the West:

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'It's about community, the radio will take care of itself'

(Phil Korbel, quoted in: Community Learning and Development Partnership 2004)

1. Introduction

In this article the focus is on the ways in which regulation and media policies impact on a 'third type' of broadcast media, namely participatory radio, complementary to both commercial and public media. One particular form of participatory radio, community radio is a salient case to illustrate the participatory potentials of media. As Lewis and Booth (1989: 8) quite rightly state, community radio *'aspires to treat its listeners as subjects and participants'*, not as objects to be educated or persuaded to consume. Radio is also a democratic and relatively cheap medium. Fraser and Estrada (2001: 1) also point out that *'[t]o start a small radio station is not as complicated and expensive as many people think'*. This is precisely one of the main reasons why much of the attention in the academic literature on community radio (and funding for research) has been devoted to its potential for empowering communities in developing countries (see Berrigan 1979; Postgate, et al., 1979; MacBride, 2004 [1980]; Girard 1992; Siemering 2000; Fraser and Estrada 2001; Gumucio 2001; Olorunnisola 2002; Rennie 2006)². Within this tradition of developmental and participatory communication, community media – and radio in particular – are seen to be potent tools enabling local communities to represent themselves, challenge and critique authority and advocate for 'strong' citizenship.

Furthermore, community radio is also increasingly seen as a way to foster peace building in post-conflict areas. A recent example of a radio being supported from this perspective is *Radio Okapi* in Bukavu, East-Congo. This local FM radio station was founded with the support of the UN and of the Swiss foundation Hironnelle (see <http://www.radiookapi.net/>) to promote peace in this conflict-ridden region.

It is thus fair to say that there is ample evidence that community media and radio in particular – among others because of low literacy levels - is an appropriate medium to improve community relations, distribute relevant information and increase the possibilities for the empowerment of local communities in developing and democratising countries. At the same time, it has to be noted that community radio can also be quite destructive in terms of the democratic potentials often attributed to it. It suffices to refer to the case of the Rwandan private radio Mille Collines (RTML) and its deplorable role in the incitement of racial hatred before and during the genocide on the Tutsi and moderate Hutu population in 1994 (Kellow and Steeves 1998).

However, the aim here is not to examine these potentials or restraints, nor to address the use of community media in a developmental context. In this article the focus is on the struggle for existence and survival of community radio stations in the West. Why the specific focus on the West? As has been shown above, much of the research and theory in terms of community radio/media can be situated within developmental communication and the inter-linked field of participatory communication, focussing mainly on Asia, Africa and Latin America, leading to a lack of critical reflection of the role of community media in Western democracies and on the importance of regulatory regimes in terms of stifling or promoting these media.

It is in this regard ironic – to say the least – that while many international organizations, such as UNESCO, but increasingly also the World Bank, as well as Western development agencies have been or have become strong advocates for the introduction of local community radio stations in Africa, Asia or Latin America, community radio in the West has a long legacy of struggle for their right to exist, for adequate frequencies and for (political) recognition. It is precisely this paradox that will be addressed here. First, a number of regulatory paradigms and models as put forward by Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2000) and Hallin and Mancini (2004) will be briefly outlined to conclude that community media and –radio in particular is totally missing from these paradigms and models. This will be followed by contextualising the notion of ‘community’ in relation to radio. Then three case studies of rather distinct regulatory environments will be presented, namely: the US, the UK and Belgium.

2. Dominant Regulatory Paradigms and Community Radio

Media and (tele-)communication have from the outset been the objects of government regulation and policy, from the perspective of exerting control over the media or channels of distribution, allocating the spectrum, or providing a legal framework for public broadcasting and fostering public interests. In this regard, Ó’Siochrú et al. (2002: 4) state that

regulation ... is about the use and abuse of power. The real question is how regulation, by that name or any other, is shaped and implemented in a society, who controls it, how informed people are about it, and how they can participate in determining its priorities.

According to Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2000: 111) three periods in which a certain paradigm of media regulation was hegemonic can be identified. The first period ran until the Second World War and was first characterized by ‘no policy’ and later on by ‘ad hoc’ or, as Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2000: 111-12) put it. The second period lasted until the 1980s and can be described as the ‘public service era’ and the third and current period is described by Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2000: 112) as the ‘era of communication policy’ rather than media policy, signalling not only the convergence of media and telecommunication policies (Baldwin, et al. 1996), but also the (relative) disengagement of the state from the economy (Swann, 1988), and the

treatment of media content and communication more as a commodity than a democratic and public resource (Schiller, 1996).

This short overview of regulatory paradigms illustrates that state intervention in media and communication systems has to be analysed in an historical context. However, besides overall paradigms, an historic perspective also brings to light the divergences of regulatory systems from one country to another. In this regard, Hallin and Mancini's comparative model is very useful. They distinguish between the Mediterranean or polarized model, the North/Central European or democratic corporatist model and the North Atlantic or liberal model (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In the last model the market dominates the media-system, in the corporatist model commercial and public service media are combined, while in the polarized pluralist model the state and political elites exert a high degree of control over the media, both public and commercial.

The different paradigms identified by Van Cuilenburg and McQuail confirm a general paradigmatic trend, but cannot be considered absolute. Peculiarities in historical trajectories structure and shape the way in which national media-systems have developed and how certain regulatory regimes were adapted and implemented. Similarly, Hallin and Mancini's attempt to define different models based on geography and in part also ideology is necessarily a difficult exercise where inconsistencies emerge as well. Furthermore, an exclusive focus on the political economy and regulation of the media and communication 'industry' and/or on public service broadcasting systems, tends to exclude alternative- or community media, often very local, embedded in civil society and thus situated in between or relatively independent from state and market.

At the end of the 1980s, Lewis and Booth (1989) already pointed out the omission of community radio from dominant paradigms and theory building. In their book *'The Invisible Medium'* they not only critique the lack of critical and academic research into and attention for radio as a medium, but also called into question the dominant focus on public and commercial broadcasting, implying that community radio is somehow less important or even irrelevant in view of the importance and reach of commercial and public service media. Instead, Lewis and Booth (1989: xiii) give *'equal status to alternative interpretations – of history, of current policies and of an alternative practice of radio which [they] refer to as 'community radio'*.

As mentioned earlier, the focus here is on how different Western countries have integrated alternative radio (or not) in their own media policies at a national level. The media policies of three Western countries — the UK, the US and Belgium — regarding alternative radio will be explored from a historical perspective. Whilst the US is a prime example of a liberal 'free for all' media policy environment, the UK combines a strong, but highly regulated, commercial sector with an equally strong public service tradition. Belgium is a particular case. It has a strong and dominant public service tradition, but since media regulation is a matter for the different regions, divergences in media policy between the North and South of the country can be observed.

Whilst these three cases have very different (media-)histories and are embedded in distinct regulatory paradigms, it will become apparent that in each case community radio has experienced considerable difficulties in establishing and sustaining itself. In what follows the context of community radio will be explored further from a theoretical perspective in order to determine what we understand by this specific 'third' type of media, with a special focus on its relationship towards communities and participation.

3. Radio for and of the community

As Lewis and Booth (1989: 4) indicate there exists a plethora of notions that attempt to capture participatory forms of radio, among others *'listener-supported, community, public, free or alternative radio'*. Carpentier et al., (2003) identify four ways of conceiving participatory media: 1) as 'alternative' to the mainstream, 2) as part of 'a community', 3) as being embedded in 'civil society' and 4) as 'rhizomatic'. This last way of theoretically framing participatory media relates to Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome, which *'establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles'* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 7). Recognising these different interconnections is useful to overcome the analytical and essentialist identities of civil society activism, the state and the market, as well as the dichotomous boundaries between mainstream and alternative forms of media. In essence it accounts for the hybridity of participatory media, sometimes adopting mainstream formats, receiving state support, or needing some form of commercial advertising or sponsoring to survive.

According to Partridge (1982: 10) the term 'community radio' was first coined by Powell (1965) in a leaflet entitled *Possibilities for Local Radio*. However, the idea of locally embedded small-scale radio, produced and controlled by citizens had been around for a while (for instance US amateur broadcasters before World War I). Localism is considered to be one of the defining characteristics of community radio and media. Today, community media is defined as:

grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity. (Howley 2005: 2)

Howley's definition points, among others, to localism as one of the defining characteristics of community media and radio. He also associates community media with a wider set of notions and practices, such as participation *by* communities *in* their own media, and producing content *for* the communities they serve (Kidd 1999). Community media is thus seen to be intrinsically linked to forms of internal basic-democratic procedures, to practices of self-management, and to the production of alternative 'non-mainstream' formats and content. In this regard, Prehn's (1991: 259) emphasis on participation as *'involving people directly in station programming, administration and policy activities'* is highly relevant. From this perspective, community radio

contributes both to external pluralism – by being a different voice among public and commercial broadcasters, and to internal pluralism – by being basic-democratic and providing a platform for a diversity of voices and styles, often lacking in mainstream media.

Reality is, however, much messier and does not let itself be framed so easily (see Hochheimer 1993; Medrado 2007). Many local community-based radio stations fulfill an entertaining and informative function for specific communities, but do this by re-producing mainstream formats, adopting semi-professional governing structures, and/or financing the costs that come with running the community station with advertising and sponsorships. Furthermore, the very notion of community, as *gemeinschaft*, as close and concrete human ties, as ‘communion’, as a collective identity, is increasingly contested in itself. Downing et al. (2001: 39), for instance, argue that the emphasis on community ‘*rais[es] more questions and dilemmas than it answers*’. Western sociological legacy tends to associate community with being locally embedded, inward looking, contained, homogeneous, having common interests and sharing similar values and norms (Tönnies 2001).

At least three main challenges can be identified against this view of community. First, reducing a community to a local context or setting is deemed to be too limiting. As Lewis (1993: 13) remarks, a community of interest can extend ‘*across conurbations, nations and continents*’ and thus bypass or transcend the geographically and spatially confined definition. Second, community is also increasingly viewed as not only being determined by structures or given characteristics, such as is the case with ethnicity, but also as being constructed, imagined and interpreted (Anderson 1983). A community is actively constructed by its members and those members derive an identity from this construction. As a result, community also means something different in a Western than in a non-Western cultural and social context. Finally, approaching a community as a homogenous group denies demographic stratifications and ideological struggles inherent to all social relations and formations.

Despite these challenges to the notion of community, Howley’s definition is nevertheless useful in a Western context, as it neatly describes the kind of participatory (local) radio stations addressed here: community-focussed, which can also be transnational; non-commercial³; experimental; independent; critical; internally democratic; and (mainly) driven by volunteers. Such a narrow definition of community radio in a Western context is most pertinent from a policy perspective as this type of independent radio often gets forgotten — or rather ignored — in favour of the interests of commercial and/or public service-type radio stations. However, as will be shown in the analysis below, in recent years a more favourable regulatory environment is emerging in several Western countries. In addition to this, the critical and democratic role of community radio and their contribution to social cohesion and to (external and internal) media pluralism and access is increasingly being recognized. While the ITU/UN sponsored World Summit on the Information Society rather vaguely called for ‘*support to media based in local communities*’ (WSIS 2003: Article 23j), the European Parliament (2008: 7) advised Member States ‘*to give legal recognition to community media as a*

distinct group alongside commercial and public media where such recognition is still lacking without detriment to traditional media'. It will, however, remain to be seen how these - as well as other (Council of Europe, 2008) - recent endorsements for community radio will translate in concrete changes in media regulation that enables both the emergence of new initiatives, as well as the sustainment of older ones.

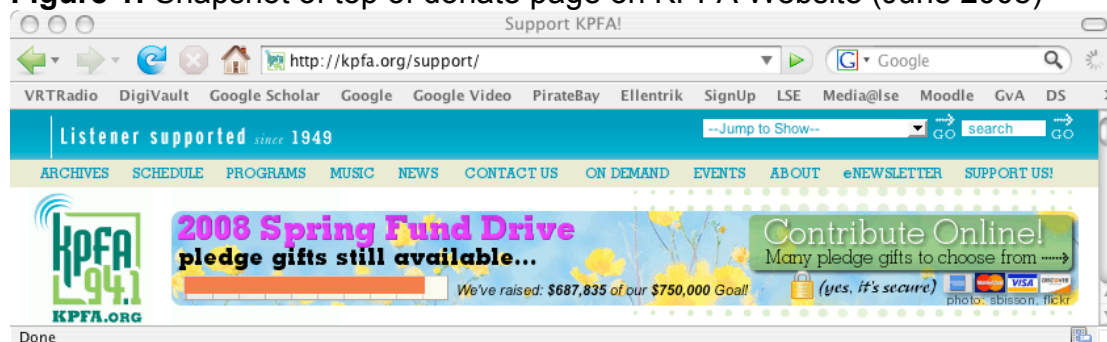
4. Community Radio Policies in the West.

In this part the regulatory opportunities, but above all constraints, in three different countries *vis-à-vis* participatory radio, as defined above, will be addressed. Rennie (2006: 4) quite rightly points out that *'[r]adio and television must exist within regulated media environments – it is where the battles over community access have been fought out'*, and are arguably still being fought over on a daily basis.

The US

Whereas in Europe the boom in community radio stations can be situated in the 1970s-80s, as will be shown later, in the US the 1960s was the period of growth for participatory radio initiatives. This was, however, preceded by a long tradition in the US of amateur radios prior to World War I, after which licensing regulation was introduced.⁴ This intervention to regulate 'the chaos and anarchy' on the airwaves provoked a fierce battle amongst commercial stations bidding to get hold of a licence. Nevertheless, a legacy of educational radio, based in universities, assured a distinct voice over the airwaves (Sterling and Kittross 2002: 78). In 1941, the educational broadcasters won a substantial victory when the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) decided to reserve part of the radio spectrum for community and other non-commercial broadcasters. Pacifica Radio (KPFA) in Berkeley, California, generally considered to be one of the first community radio station in the US, took this opportunity and started transmitting in 1948 with support of its listeners (and still does, see Figure 1). KPFA has been described as *'an independent non-profit station supported by listeners subscribers many of whom were pacifists and anarchists'* (Partridge 1982: 17).

Figure 1: Snapshot of top of donate page on KPFA Website (June 2008)



Source: <http://kpfa.org/support/>

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 provided a framework for a US-wide public network and created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which

was given the task of funding and supporting local, as well as national, radio. Most of the federal money was channelled to National Public Radio (NPR), serving as a platform for syndicated programmes made by others and broadcasting to a national audience. Despite this, the 1970s saw a dramatic rise in the number of community radio initiatives, mainly run and operated by volunteers on a small-scale basis. It is fair to say that community radio in the US profited at first from the liberal ideology at the heart of US media policies, which led to a permissive and open regulatory environment for community initiatives.⁵ The emergence and growth of (local) community radio in the US did not go uncontested though. Both commercial and public broadcasting organizations persistently fought the presence of community radio on the airwaves. The FCC was not insensitive to the combined lobbying power of the commercial and public broadcasters, and in 1978 it decided to revoke the low power licences (of 10 watt). This resulted in the silencing of many the smaller and poorer stations (Hilliard and Keith 2005: 186). The only way for community radio to survive was to obtain a 100-watt licence, which for most was too expensive. Designing regulation in such a way that it becomes impossible for small-scale media initiatives to flourish, was not unusual in many Western regulatory regimes.

To resist the attacks of the commercial and public broadcasters the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) was set up in 1975 to represent and defend the interests of US community radio. Not surprisingly, many unlicensed or pirate community radios emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Pioneering examples include Black Liberation Radio in Springfield, Illinois, which went on the air in 1986, and Free Radio Berkeley, California, which started broadcasting in 1993 (Sakolsky and Dunifer 1998). These so-called micro-radio stations provoked immense resistance from both the commercial and public broadcasters who partially feared competition from these stations, but especially frequency interference (Hilliard and Keith 2005: 191). Due to a lack of funds or because of fines and seizure of equipment by the FCC, most of these micro-radio stations had a hard time sustaining their activities. Evidence of this was the emergence in 1996 of the Grassroots Radio Coalition (GRC), a very loose association of stations that reacted *'against the increasing commercialisation of public radio and lack of support for volunteer-based stations'*.⁶

At the end of the 1990s public pressure and street protests in favour of Low Power FM (LPFM) stations were growing. These resulted, in 2000, in the FCC granting legal recognition to community LPFM radio services and allowing them to file an application (in selected states at first, but this was extended in 2001)⁷. Despite this, Congress amended the FCC ruling, not only banning *'anyone who had operated an unlicensed micro-station from applying for a legal low-power station'* (Hilliard and Keith 2005: 197), but also calling upon the FCC *'to study the economic impact of these new stations on corporate radio outlets as well as the ... possibility of interference problems'* (Sakolsky 2001). This provoked outrage and division within the micro-power radio movement. As a result of Congress's obstructive tactics lobbied for by commercial broadcasters, only a very limited number of licences were granted. Many community micro-stations continued to transmit illegally but suffered heavy repression. For example, San Francisco Liberation Radio was

raided in October 2003 after criticising the Bush administration's war in Iraq and Free Radio Santa Cruz was closed down in October 2004.⁸

If we take the membership base of the NFCB and the GRC as more or less indicative of the number of legally operating community radio stations in the US, we can say that there are about 2400 community radio stations active across the different US-states⁹. This amounts to an average of 1 community station per 128.000 inhabitants, which is the best ratio compared to the other country cases outlined below.

So although a liberal environment could be seen as having been relatively beneficial for the US community media sector, it is also clear from the overview above that both the rather weak public broadcasters, but above all the lobby power of commercial interests linked to the media industries, have been successful at curtailing and restricting the modest openings that were made towards community radio in the US. By revoking the licenses for low-power FM radio stations and by disallowing formerly illegal radio initiatives to apply for a licence, it is obvious that the reality on the ground is still very difficult for most small-scale independent radio initiatives in the US, certainly as there is no form of official support for these initiatives available.

The UK

Although the UK is generally considered to be in the North-Atlantic liberal sphere of influence, the situation for community radio in the UK is very distinct from the US. In 1951 the UK Beveridge Report on the Future of Broadcasting stated: *'Use of VHF could make it possible not merely to give the existing BBC programmes to people who now fail to get them, but to establish local stations with independent programmes of their own.'* (Beveridge Report 1951: 78). Those envisaged as possibly operating such community stations included *'a Local Authority, a University or a specially formed voluntary agency'* (ibid: 79). However, given the hegemonic public service logic of the time in Europe these ambitious plans did not materialize, on the contrary. The BBC was given the means to expand its activities and operate local or regional radio stations. The hegemony of the public broadcaster was first challenged by pirate radio stations, operating from fixed structures or broadcasting from ships in international waters beyond the reach of domestic legislation. In the (short) period between 1964 and 1967 numerous such stations emerged, including, for example, Radio Caroline, Radio London and Radio Scotland. Despite the undoubted and unprecedented success of such stations, most were forced off the air by the 1967 provisions of the Marine and Broadcasting Offences Act (Baron 1975).¹⁰

In addition to the BBC experimenting with local stations, the Sound Broadcasting Act of 1972 had transformed the Independent Television Authority into the Independent Broadcasting Authority, giving it additional powers to regulate radio. However, while this theoretically allowed community stations to exist, it also provided a very strict regulatory framework that was only beneficial for commercially-driven local radio. UK community initiatives that had emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s were left with only one

option and that was operating illegally in addition to campaigning for official recognition. Many of these pirate stations were, or soon became, advertisement funded radio, even though in some cases fulfilling a community role. In 1983 the Community Radio Association¹¹ was founded to represent community radio stations with government, industry and regulatory bodies.

Despite the lobby efforts of the CRA/CMA for political recognition, the – by definition – illegal pirate stations were targeted repeatedly by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), whose actions were aimed at shutting down the broadcasting operations of illegal broadcasters. A fairly recent example is Dimension FM, a pirate community radio in Telford in Shropshire. Dimension FM started operating in 1999 and played mainly underground electronic music that was largely ignored by mainstream radio at that time, but also had some comedy, prank and phone-in programmes. The station broadcast every weekend and as it managed to increase the power of its transmitter Dimension FM reached a growing community of loyal fans (cf. Figure 2). In December 2003 the DTI organized a raid on the station, closed it down and prosecuted two of its collaborators. Their programmes are archived online.¹²

Figure 2: Protest against the raid on Dimension FM (UK)



Source: Dimension FM
(<http://www.dfmpromotions.com/radio/courtcase.htm>)

The idea of a third way radio, complementing the commercial and public broadcasting services, was finally accepted in 2002 when the Radio Authority issued licences for 15 of what were then called ‘access radio stations’. These licences were renewed in 2004. The 2003 Communication Act (HMSO 2003) and the 2004 Community Radio Order (DCMS 2004) could be considered turning points in the history of community radio in the UK. After a round of consultations, the newly formed media regulator, Ofcom, began to grant full licences for community radio in March 2005. Furthermore, a Community Radio Fund was introduced, managed by Ofcom and financed by the DCMS (Ofcom 2005). It primarily funds core competencies, such as financial management, fundraising and administrative support. By 2008, 187 licenses had been granted and about 120 community radio stations were on air in the UK¹³. This amounts to approximately 1 community radio station per 510.000 UK inhabitants.

An interesting example of a thriving licensed community radio is, the East London-based, Sound Radio, which claims to *'reflect, as far as is possible, the make up of the East London community to whom we broadcast.'*¹⁴. Sound Radio is partly funded by advertising, but uses this to provide access to the airwaves for 10 different (diasporic) communities in the London area. It has English, Afro-Caribbean, Latin American, Kurdish, Bangladeshi, Jewish, Turkish and African programmes. Unlike most community radios, Sound Radio broadcasts on AM rather than FM primarily because there was no suitable FM frequency available in the area at the time they got their licence. This allows it to reach a much wider audience, as current FM regulations restrict community radios to a radius of 5 km from their antennae. However, given the low quality of AM very few people listen to AM radio nowadays. This might explain why Sound Radio, similar to many other community stations, also streams its programmes on the Internet, which is proving to be an efficient way to bypass regulatory restrictions, and to attract an international audience beyond the UK.

As in the US-case this prudent opening of the airwaves for community radio does not mean that there are no pirate community stations anymore. In 2008 some 80 pirate stations were active in the London area alone, mostly playing underground music. Several websites¹⁵ are dedicated to mapping the ongoing and fluid landscape of pirate radio in the UK's capital. It has to be noted, however, that most of these pirate radios can hardly be characterized as community radio. Most of these radio stations are in effect commercial stations playing music and promoting parties as well as other commercial events.

The UK case illustrates that while being situated in a liberal North-Atlantic model economically, its regulatory regime towards media and communication was for a long time very much in line with the North-European way of doing things with a strong state monopoly on broadcasting. Although the UK did open-up the spectrum for commercial media initiatives much earlier than other European countries did, it also designed its broadcasting regulation as such that community radio was in effect forced into illegality, resulting in subsequent repression and criminalization. This policy recently changed to the better with licenses being issued to community radio stations and financial support being provided.

Belgium

As stated before, Belgium is an all-together different case, for a number of reasons. First, it is a Federal state where competencies are divided between the Federal level and the regional entities, media and communication regulation is one of these (Burgelman, et al., 1995). Second, it is also a country with different political cultures and styles. Belgium can be characterized as a surreal mixture of French statism and Northern-European pragmatism that sometimes converges, sometimes clashes but often leads to diverging policies in the North and in the South of the country. Dewachter (1998: 185 – own translation) even goes as far as to claim that *'[w]hen it concerns media, it is obvious that the Belgian society does not exist anymore'*.

Just as in the UK, the state monopoly on broadcasting was first challenged by purely commercial initiatives, broadcasting from ships in the North Sea from the late 1960s to the early 1970s.¹⁶ However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s a new challenge emerged from terrestrial local FM pirate stations. Some of these were community radio stations born out of the anarchist punk movement, the environmental movement and the student movement. Most non-public radio stations challenged the boring formats and paternalistic content of the public broadcaster, but were also commercial or eventually evolved into commercial stations (Drijvers 1992: 107-8).

However, as explained above, from a policy perspective, a clear distinction should be made between developments in the North and the South of Belgium, as media regulation and policy became de-federalized in 1971. However, one notable exception was frequency allocation, which continued to be regulated at federal level until 1990.

North-Belgium

In the North of the country, an opening for local non-public radio, including community radio, was created in May 1982, allowing some pirate stations to become legal. It is evident, however, that consecutive regional governments ignored the specificity of community media. For a long time media policy in the North of Belgium was aimed at protecting the interests of the Dutch-speaking public broadcaster and at preventing national networks of (commercial) radio to emerge. Non-public radio was by definition considered to be commercial, thereby disregarding the specific requirements of community radio stations (Carpentier and Cammaerts, 1993). The regulatory framework was primarily geared to limiting the impact of commercial radios on the media landscape, minimize their 'market share' and guaranteeing the dominance of the public broadcaster. In this epic struggle to defend the interests of the public broadcaster against the pressures of commercial interests, the demands of community radio stations for a distinct statute did not carry enough weight to be supported by the major political parties (Carpentier 1994; Drijvers 1992). In 1994 the Organization of Radios for a more Creative approach to Acoustics (ORCA) was founded, uniting all four community radio stations in the North of Belgium.

Despite this, the ignorance of policy makers for the specificity of community radio, was again confirmed in 2002, when the monopoly of the public broadcaster regional coverage of North-Belgium was finally lifted.¹⁷ The fiercely competitive commercial interests involved in obtaining a regional or provincial license, and the lack of transparency in the allocation process (as well as cases of corruption), relegated the very few community radio stations in the North to the margins of the FM-spectrum. Furthermore, their broadcasting range was severely restricted (to maximum 15 watts).

Radio Centraal,¹⁸ a community radio in Antwerp that has over 150 volunteers and runs without advertising income, has been most vocal in condemning the lack of media policies towards participatory media in consecutive North-Belgian governments and the persistent conflation of community radio and commercial radio at a local level (Carpentier 1994). Ironically, the North-

Belgian media regulator, which has the power to sanction radio stations, recently condemned Radio Centraal for boosting its signal beyond the strict limits set by the law, but reduced its penalty because of the specific nature of the station (Vlaams Commissariaat voor de Media 2005). This amounted to a first – albeit implicit – official regulatory recognition of the distinctiveness of community radio in the North of Belgium.

Figure 3: Poster/Flyer of Radio Centraal celebrating 100 years of international women's day



Source: <http://www.radiocentraal.be>

Besides Radio Centraal, there are currently only three other community radio initiatives remaining in the North of Belgium; Radio Katanga in Aalst, and two student radio's - Radio Scorpio in Leuven and the more recent Urgent FM in Ghent. No support whatsoever is being given and the regulatory regime also does not foresee in a specific stature for community radio stations, nor is there any support for community-type radio. In the North of Belgium there is currently one community radio station per 1.500.000 inhabitants. Surprisingly, this has not led to a surge in pirate stations.

South-Belgium

A very different picture emerges when examining the South of Belgium and Brussels. The South was for one much prompter to allow commercial stations to compete with the public broadcaster at national level (1991) than the North. Some years earlier, the French-speaking public broadcaster had also been given permission to broadcast advertising, and a specific statute for community radio¹⁹ was created within the regulatory framework (Ministère de la Communauté Française 1987). This was in part due to the efforts of existing community stations, some of which formed the Association pour la Liberation des Ondes (ALO) in 1978; struggling for the 'liberation of the airwaves' and representing French-speaking community radios in the south and in Brussels. These included Radio Panik, Radio Air Libre and Atelier

Radio Arlon. The Audiovisual Decree of 1987 even cautioned about being *'especially careful to facilitate the existence of associative creative radio stations'* (Art. 30, own translation). However, in this regard the strong political influence of France on policies in the South of Belgium should also not be underestimated. For example, France sold TF1 in 1986 and implemented a similar regulatory shift just a few years before similar policies were decided upon in South-Belgium (Cheval, 1997).

Likewise the policies relating to community radio closely reflect French media policy. A Conseil Supérieure de l'Audiovisuel (CSA) was set-up as the regulator and a Fonds d'Aide à la Création Radiophonique (FACR) was created to finance specific projects. The fund has supported between 15 and 40 radiophonic projects annually since 1994 (depending on its financial availability). It was initially financed from a percentage of the revenues from public service channel advertising. The new media decree voted in February 2003 also included commercial radio networks in the funding mechanism of the FACR, although it has to be said that commercial broadcasters fiercely resisted this attack on their advertising revenues. The role of FACR is to promote:

radiophonic creation in the French-speaking community in Belgium. It intervenes in the production costs of original and creative radio, valorising the patrimony of the French-speaking community in the area's of information, documentaries, cultural content, fiction and music. (FACR 2005: 7 – own translation).

In addition to community radio, individuals and non-profit organizations can also submit proposals, opening-up the airwaves for the broader public and civil society. Furthermore, since 2002 the public broadcaster has been required to (re-)transmit a minimum of 20 hours a year of productions funded by FACR. By 1995, South-Belgium counted 23 community radio stations and the Brussels region 4 (Conseil de l'éducation aux médias de la Communauté française, 1995). This represents one community radio per 160.000 inhabitants, which is quite a difference compared to the North.

The Belgian case thus shows us how two completely distinct and to some extent even contradictory regulatory regimes co-exist within one country. While the South (and Brussels) followed French policies very closely, the North held on to its public service tradition for much longer than was necessary, thereby stifling and excluding community radio projects and initiatives across the North of the Belgium. It is fair to say that the South has implemented a highly enabling environment for community media with a special statute for community media and innovative – albeit minimal – intra-sectorial cross-subsidiarity measures. The result is obvious, while in the densely populated North only very few community radio initiatives were able to survive, the regulatory environment of the South allows almost 30 community radio stations to function and broadcast.

4. Conclusions

One of the aims of this article was to expose the discrepancy between policies of Western countries and of Western controlled international organisation that advocate for community radio initiatives in a developing or peace building context and the legacy of struggle of community radio in the West.

The analysis above exposed that especially in countries with a strong public service broadcasting tradition, community radio is only a fairly recently recognized distinct media space. In countries with a strong liberal tradition, such as the US, community radio has a longer history and legacy. However, this by no means implies that there was/is no struggle or conflict regarding the right to communicate for community radio stations in the US. A common thread in the cases presented above, was the difficulty involved for community radio to legitimate its existence on the FM-band alongside commercial and public broadcasters. Unlike these powerful actors, community radio movements had limited lobbying power and were usually positioned as rogue or unprofessional amateurs within the broadcasting community. All too often the argument of spectrum scarcity and FM frequency interference was used against them and/or regulatory frameworks were designed in such a way so as to exclude not-for-profit radio initiatives from the airwaves. This has resulted in a tumultuous (and continuing) history of struggle, both in Europe and in the US.

Table 1: Comparative overview of community radio history and regulation

| | US | UK | North-Belgium | South-Belgium |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Regulatory Paradigm | liberal model | liberal model | democratic corporatist model | democratic corporatist model |
| Emergence of community radio | Late 1940s | Late 1960s | Early 1980s | Mid 1970s |
| Official recognition | 1941 [full, curtailed from 1971-2000] | 2002 [full] | 1982 [partial] | 1987 [full] |
| Advocacy Organizations | NFCB (1975) and GRC (1996) | CRA/CMA (1983/1997) | ORCA (1994) | ALO (1978) |
| Estimated # of legal community radio stations | NFCB, over 2300 [in 2002] – GRC, 32 | 120 | 4 | 23 |
| Approximate # of inhabitants per legal community radio | 128.000 | 510.000 | 1.500.000 | 160.000 |
| State support | None | Structural funding | None | Project funding |
| Position of community radio | Dependent on subscribers and donations | New impetus, but often rather professionally run | Innovative, but weak, no distinct status | Rather strong, but commercial media should also contribute to the FACR |

Table 1 exposes the different histories and distinct nature of that struggle. In the US community radio was able to obtain licences at an early stage thanks to the efforts of educational radios. However, the combined lobby-power of the commercial and public broadcasters, consistently aimed to marginalize community radio, with considerable success. The vastness of the US and the liberal model does however result in the lowest ratio of number of inhabitants

per community radio. Subscriber-schemes and a tradition of listeners supporting radio stations, keeps many of them running and assures some degree of (financial) independence.

In the UK, the dominance of the public service model, which applies to some extent to the commercial sector as well, meant many years of repression for the UK community radio sector. Only recently, the UK has created a specific legal status for community radio and actively promotes the emergence of new community radio initiatives throughout the UK through structural funding. This, however, is not entirely unproblematic as it might lead to a partial professionalization and commercialization of the UK community radio sector. The UK still scores rather bad on the ratio number of inhabitants per community radio, but is handing out more licences, so this is expected to improve.

In Belgium two distinct systems can be observed. Legally, community radio in the North is treated in the same way as local commercial radio, while in the South community radio has a specific legal status. Support is given in the form of project funding which is financed by a tax on the advertisement revenues of the public broadcaster. In the North, not surprisingly, the worst ratio number of inhabitants per community radio can be observed; the South approaches the US ratio, despite a rather limited number of cities, often crucial to sustain a community radio in Europe.

The South-Belgian (and French) policies appear to be rather successful at promoting a thriving non-commercial community radio sector, stimulating innovative radio projects, and promoting the relationships between community radio stations, the public broadcaster and the broader civil society. Project-based funding and embedding state support in a public service logic, can be viewed as way to support community media initiatives without making them completely financially dependent on the state nor prone to co-optation by the market. It has to be noted though that a system of cross-subsidies from the public broadcasters' advertisement revenues towards a fund to stimulate community media is not applicable in every country. However, would it be totally inconceivable to reserve a limited proportion of the advertisement revenues of commercial broadcasters and/or of license fees, when applicable, to stimulate creative media diversity on the airwaves?

From a theoretical perspective two observations become apparent. Despite distinct regulatory histories, and the enactment of enabling and restricting policies for community radio in the West, such initiatives remain persistent, even in the most dire of circumstances. They express the desire of activists, communities, artists to express themselves and resist the – often restrictive – regulatory context. This is to a large extent made possible by the rhizomatic nature of many participatory media initiatives, by their inter-connections with broader civil society, at times with the state and even with the market in terms of generating funds to sustain their often fragile operations. At the same time this also confuses their identity, can potentially lead to co-option, which in turn makes it difficult for regulators to determine which kind of radio can be considered 'community' media and which not. Hence, the earlier plea for a fairly strict definition of community media in the West.

Finally, this historical and comparative study also exposes that the theoretical models and typologies to compare media systems and regulatory regimes are flawed to some extent. Although the differences between the liberal model and the public service model certainly had an impact on community radio (US vs. Europe), current regulatory models and typologies do not properly reflect on or accommodate for the historical struggle of participatory radio. Nor do these models and typologies fully recognize the valuable democratic role that community radio plays. By facilitating citizen participation in the media they promote civic cultures and through their role as critical watchdogs and as a platform for marginalised and dissident voices, they promote (external and internal) media pluralism. In this light and in line with the South-Belgian model, it might even be fruitful to start considering community radio as fulfilling a public service, as an alternative form of independent public radio.

Indeed, the public's radio can and should take care of itself, but it needs a creativity-enabling regulatory environment to be able to do this and sustain itself.

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Notes:

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² See also URLs: <http://radio.oneworld.net/> and <http://www.panos.org.uk> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

³ By non-commercial is meant 'not-for-profit'. This does not imply, however, that no commercial activities are undertaken. Whilst most community radios are partly supported by those participating, as well as the audience in some cases, and in some countries by grants from the government or sponsorship deals, these funds are rarely enough to sustain a 24 hour radio station. Thus, for most community stations it is paramount to organise additional activities that generate funds in order to break even, pay license fees, electricity and invest in new equipment.

⁴ In 1927 the Radio Act was voted by Congress aiming to end the perceived chaos on the airwaves. The act established the Federal Radio Commission, which was given the task of issuing licences. The FRC was replaced by the FCC in 1934. For more on this see: Hilliard and Keith 2005: 30-1; White, 2003

⁵ For a good overview of this early period of community radio in the US, see: Walker 2001.

⁶ See URL: <http://www.grradio.org/about.html> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

⁷ See URL: <http://www.fcc.gov/mb/audio/lpfm/index.html> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

⁸ For an overview of recent evolutions in the micropower movement see URL: <http://www.diymedia.net/> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

⁹ See: <http://www.nfcb.org/projects/kzyx2.jsp> and <http://www.grradio.org/members.html>

¹⁰ Despite the provisions of this legislation it was by no means the end of such so-called 'offshore' or 'pirate' broadcasting to the UK. Radio Caroline survived, moving its operations to the Netherlands but still aiming its broadcast output at UK listeners. It was joined by various others, including Radio North Sea International, and Lazer Radio in a broadcasting phenomenon which lasted until 1990 when Radio Caroline finally ceased broadcasting from international waters (although the station remains active via satellite and the Internet up to the present day).

¹¹ In 1997 the Community Radio Association changed its name to Community Media Association to accommodate community television initiatives: <http://www.commedia.org.uk/> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

¹² See URL: <http://www.dfmpromotions.com/radio/> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

¹³ Email Lawrie Hallett, 11 November 2008

¹⁴ See URL: <http://www.soundradio.org.uk/> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

¹⁵ See URL: <http://www.transmissionzero.co.uk/radio/london-pirate-radio/> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

¹⁶ Examples of this were the Mi Amigo, the Magdalena and the Jeanine, ships from which programmes produced in Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK and even Spain, were broadcasted; they played mostly hit parade music introduced by popular DJs.

¹⁷ Strangely enough the monopoly on TV broadcasting was lifted 15 years earlier, in 1987.

¹⁸ see URL: <http://www.radiocentraal.be/> (Last consulted 2 June 2008)

¹⁹ In French, the notion community radio is commonly used, instead such radio stations are called '*des radios associatives*' or '*des radios culturelles*'.