UK COMMUNITY RADIO PRODUCTION RESPONSES TO COVID-19

REPORT, July 2020

This document presents data from a research project conducted on the UK community radio sector, investigating how well-equipped and prepared stations were to react and adapt to COVID-19 social distancing and lockdown measures.

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Executive Summary

This document summarizes the initial key findings of a research project investigating how licensed community radio stations in the UK responded to the changing circumstances caused by the UK-wide lockdown in Spring 2020. The project was entitled "Digital Technologies in Community Radio Production Practices: responding to COVID-19 social distancing measures", and was devised to ascertain how, and the extent to which, stations were able to successfully adapt and continue broadcasting as the crisis ensued.

A total of 44 unique responses were received from community stations across the UK: five from Northern Ireland and Scotland, several from the Northern regions of England, several more from the Midlands, one from London, and over two dozen from Eastern and Southern England, including the Isle of Wight, and the South West.

The information gathered and insights shared by the respondents demonstrate the wealth of technical expertise across the sector, and the passion and sense of commitment felt towards the stations and their local communities. It has also revealed certain aspects of community broadcasting which will need addressing if the station teams are to make it through the fall-out of COVID-19.

Background and Literature Review

This research project has deliberately focussed on local community radio, as the licensed alternative to mainstream broadcasters, to assess from a micro-level perspective how digital technologies and innovations enable or hinder practitioners in their production activities. The need to examine the community sector's capabilities has never been more crucial as the commercial independent local radio (ILR) sector is becoming increasingly more networked and less localised, and even the future of BBC local stations seems uncertain.[1]

Across the country, there is a range of uniquely styled community stations, each licensed for potentially renewable 5-year terms to broadcast to a population within a short geographical range of their transmitter. Ofcom regulates the licence holders to locally produce original material which is focussed on catering for the informational needs, entertainment tastes and cultural values of the target audiences, and in doing so to help provide social gain for their communities. Stations are staffed primarily by unpaid, volunteer practitioners striving to achieve these key commitments. In November 2015, the Community Media Association (CMA), the primary organisation supporting the interests of the sector, issued a press release stating that there were "230 stations, each reflecting the local needs and interests of its audience … largely run by an army of 20,000 dedicated volunteers, who collectively work for around 2.5 million hours every year".[2]

In September 2019, Ofcom published an update estimating that: "On average, stations operate with 87 volunteers who together give around 209 hours of their time a week".[3] As the number of operating stations is now closer to 300, this suggests that there are over 25,000 volunteers involved in community radio broadcasting in the UK. This figure is much greater than the numbers employed in mainstream radio. According to data published by a company providing market and consumer

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[1] https://radiotoday.co.uk/2020/07/bbc-local-radio-to-cut-139-jobs-in-england/ accessed 3/7/2020
[2] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/community-radio-at-10 accessed 4/7/2020
[3] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/manage-your-licence/radio-broadcast-licensing/community-radio accessed 05/7/2020

data, Statista, in June 2019, employment in radio broadcasting has fallen from 21,000 in 2012 to just 14,000 in 2017;[4] a number that we know continues to fall.

There are community stations distributed across the length and breadth of the country; the CMA website has a useful map.[5] Although every station is different and operates under a unique set of circumstances, desk and field research already conducted by the author suggests that there are commonalities among them (Coleman, 2020). A primary aspect in common is the shared understanding related to the regulatory framework which requires the volunteer practitioners to conform with the Broadcasting Code and encourages professional standards of presentation and production. Secondly, the practitioners use similar arrays of technologies, mostly digital devices and software and web 2.0 platforms, to produce and distribute their weekly schedules of programmes.

Thirdly of course, at this moment of global pandemic crisis, every local station team has had to radically adjust their practices in the face of disruptions to daily life caused by social distancing. They are in good company, as mainstream radio broadcasters are likewise creatively reassigning labour and resources to continue their round-the-clock transmissions. The CMA, with just one member of paid staff and a voluntary board, has been circulating a weekly newsletter to its members throughout the crisis, full of industry updates, examples of best practice and sharing links to funding opportunities and other resources: conveying, for the most part, good news about how the sector is "thriving in the lockdown".[6] Having said that, this optimistic outlook is no guarantee of long term resilience. A press article quoting longstanding proponent of community radio, Steve Buckley, suggests that the sector is still having to convince the government of its worth.[7] The CMA and other interest groups are continually lobbying the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Ofcom. One instance of imparity being challenged is that commercial broadcasters and the press have been paid to carry government health messages, whereas it was assumed the community sector would carry them for free.

There has been high-profile media coverage of how the radio industry responded to the COVID-19 crisis.[8] Mainstream broadcasters, the commercial networks and the BBC alike, reported how their engineers, producers and presenters were adapting their operating routines to accommodate social distancing when it was introduced in March 2020.[9] These stories, often shared initially by the presenters themselves, captured the public's imagination and were circulated widely on social media. There have been audience surveys conducted too which indicate how radio has come into its own, demonstrating the audio medium's value in informing listeners of important news relating to the pandemic, as much as distracting them with feelgood entertainment. Ipsos MRBI's Omnipoll found that radio is the most trusted source of information, even amongst younger adults and as such "has made a connection with listeners across the country".[10]

The community sector has certainly not gone unnoticed amidst all this media coverage. When the hashtag "#RadioFromHome" started trending on Twitter in the middle of March, community station

[4] https://www.statista.com/statistics/383593/radio-broadcasting-employment-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/ accessed 4/7/2020
[5] https://www.commedia.org.uk/map/ accessed 05/7/2020
[6] https://us3.campaign-archive.com/?u=bed04ea0491d68a4181ec7b70&id=090ee96f52 accessed 2/7/2020
[7] https://www.prolificnorth.co.uk/news/coronavirus/2020/04/third-community-radio-stations-facing-closure-trade-body-warns accessed 3/7/2020
[8] See for instance: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/mar/22/bbc-hosts-improvise-home-studios-covid-19 accessed 2/7/2020
[9] https://radiotoday.co.uk/2020/03/these-radio-presenters-are-now-working-from-home/ accessed 05/7/2020
[10] https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-05/20-028458-jnlr_omnipoll_2020_final_21-04-20.pdf accessed 2/7/2020

volunteers were quick to pick up on it. On 30th March, the CMA promoted a call to collective action by encouraging station teams to post photographs of themselves on social media presenting from their homes. This generated ongoing activity around the hashtag and a second campaign took place on 1st May when stations across the country were encouraged to play The Beatles' track *Love is all you need* at 09:15. This initiative was used to highlight the valuable contribution of the sector and audiences were urged to write to the government to express their support.

The main point the community sector has been keen to convey is how community stations have stepped up to provide essential updates to local residents and kept their listeners abreast of important COVID-19 developments and other news with local repercussions. Though there are different understandings of what counts as 'news' and what sort of information is considered 'newsworthy', the majority of community radio station teams do what they can to provide important information for their local listeners. Most do not have their own newsroom, comprising a journalist or team of reporters who seek out and process hard-hitting, serious and politically sensitive news and rolling updates on current affairs for broadcast. Instead, practitioners consider interviewing community leaders, event organisers, charity and business representatives on magazine-style shows and discussing ongoing issues affecting the area as local news provision. Some would even include featuring live or pre-recorded "What's On" announcements and summarising newspaper stories as local coverage.

This can be termed a 'soft' news approach and has been regarded with disdain by some traditionalists in the industry as well as in academic circles. Radio theorists Guy Starkey and Andy Crisell recount how news content and delivery styles became more trivial and informal (and less BBC-like) with the advent of the independent, commercial broadcasters in the UK (Starkey and Crisell, 2009, p. 19). Journalist and academic Bob Franklin wrote a whole book about what he called 'newszak' and the dumbing down of news in the era of increasingly deregulated, market-led media (Franklin, 1997). He describes how human-interest stories (items that are of interest to the audience-cum-consumers) have become a higher priority than stories that may be less gripping but are in fact in the public interest (ibid, p. 4).

Arguably, the current crisis has proved that this softer style of information provision has been a really useful and workable solution to the need to keep local residents appraised of the latest happenings as the COVID-19 situation unfolds around them. The community sector seems to be gaining ground in becoming the nation's trusted local radio provider. It may be staffed primarily by unpaid practitioners - 'amateurs' - but it cannot be categorised wholesale as amateurish. Care is taken to check for accuracy when sourcing and sharing important, timely and relevant information that is both of interest to their listeners and in their interest. The Broadcasting Code and libel laws can usually be relied upon to guide even volunteer radio presenters and reporters in their work on community radio stations.

Realistically, if these not-for-profit, local community broadcasters are expected to be part of the answer to the diminishing ability of the mainstream to report on local affairs, they need more government help. It is well documented that the sector faces sustainability challenges. Stations have incorporated various strategies to generate income (Gordon, 2016), for instance many sell a limited amount of airtime. Indeed, there are stations doing this so proactively that the small-scale ILRs (those not yet swallowed up by the major networks) have expressed their concern.[11] Other funding options are the numerous charitable and lottery scheme awards which stations can bid for, but there is no underlying buffer which theoretically the government's Community Radio Fund could provide. Established in 2005, this fund is a pot of money, initially valued at £500,000, distributed

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[11] https://www.radiocentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/SMALL-SCALE-RADIO-IN-THE-UK-ONLINE.pdf accessed 5/7/2020

annually in two rounds by a panel for Ofcom on behalf of DCMS. It is designed to be awarded in varying amounts to a small proportion of applicants who have put together the most deserving bid for assistance to stimulate growth such as recruiting a business development manager, fundraiser or salesperson. The fund value has not increased in line with the proliferation of stations nor with inflation and the government has been challenged for this failure to provide adequate financial support for the sector.[12] In fact, more recently, the amount made available has reduced to around £400,000.[13]

The evidence that will be provided through this research project will support the community sector's case that it should be taken seriously as a trustworthy network of local broadcasters and media providers. There will inevitably be lessons learned for developing sustainable practitioner productivity and equitable volunteer opportunities. It will also highlight that the government and local authorities are likely to have to provide additional support if stations are to survive the repercussions of the economic fall-out after lockdown.

Research Methods

Throughout June 2020, an online questionnaire was circulated to UK licensed community radio station managers (n = 295) via the author's network of contacts, publicly available lists and using online contact forms and social media. It was requested that the questionnaire be completed by a director or senior manager at each station: someone who could be described as "a trusted colleague who is knowledgeable about the station and its current programming operations".

The station leaders, technical and operations directors, programme controllers, studio and volunteer managers who participated were consulted on what steps they took to sustain their broadcast output. Each was asked to indicate how well-equipped their station was, whether they had received any additional funding, to what extent their programme schedule and presenter line-up changed, and how their normal balance of speech to music and provision of news content was impacted by the enforced changes on production routines. They were invited to explain which skills, resources and other circumstances enabled practitioners to remain active: making radio content at home.

This online phase was followed up by semi-structured interviews over the phone or on video conferencing platforms with twelve selected respondents who had indicated they were happy to be approached. They were asked to elaborate on their questionnaire responses and these conversations provided more detailed insights into their station's studio programming, producing, presenting and funding arrangements.

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[12] https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/aug/24/community-radio-funding-crisis accessed 3/7/2020
[13] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/information-for-industry/radio-broadcasters/community-radio-fund accessed 6/7/2020

Findings

STATION MANAGEMENT

The majority of responding senior station representatives (henceforth referred to as 'r' and their unique number) declared that they are normally also involved on the presentation and production side. Comments ranged from: "At least 1 [weekly programme] but sometimes I am providing clips, content and interviews for multiple shows across the schedule" (r43), to "Pretty much all output" (r22) and "Directly - 2. Indirectly - all of them (c. 50 shows/week)" (r39).

When asked how much their active involvement with presenting and/or producing shows had changed under social distancing measures, over half of them said that it had increased (Figure 1).
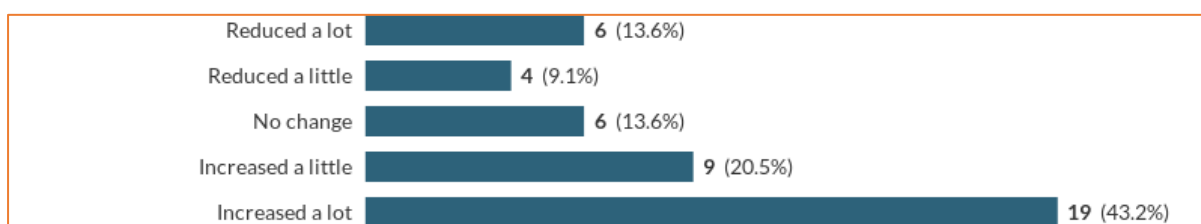

Figure 1 Responses to question: How much has your active involvement changed under social distancing measures?

To further explore the changes in their workload during the COVID-19 lockdown, the respondents were asked to compare their normal working hours with the amount of time they were having to commit during the crisis. As can be seen from the chart below, half of the respondents normally work for between 11 and 30 hours on radio business, whilst nearly a quarter spend over 41 hours a week dealing with station matters (Figure 2).
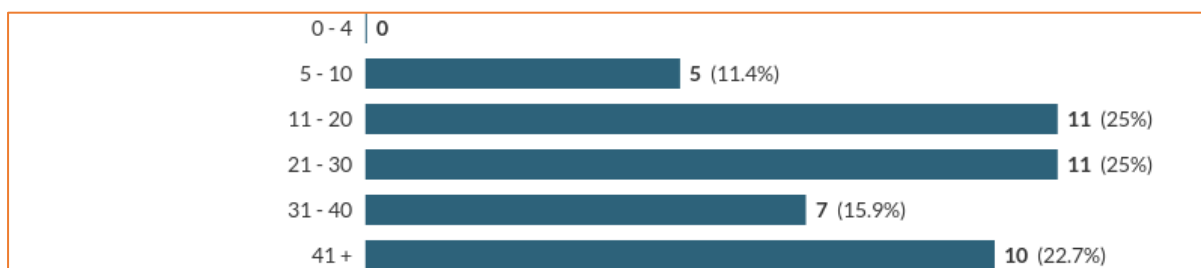

Figure 2 Responses to question: How many hours did you normally commit each week, prior to social distancing?

It is worth bearing in mind here that of the 44 respondents in this survey, I noted that two thirds (65.9%) of them said this work is unpaid. When asked how much change there had been in the number of hours they spent each week actively working on matters relating to their respective stations under social distancing, over a third reported that it had increased a lot (Figure 3).
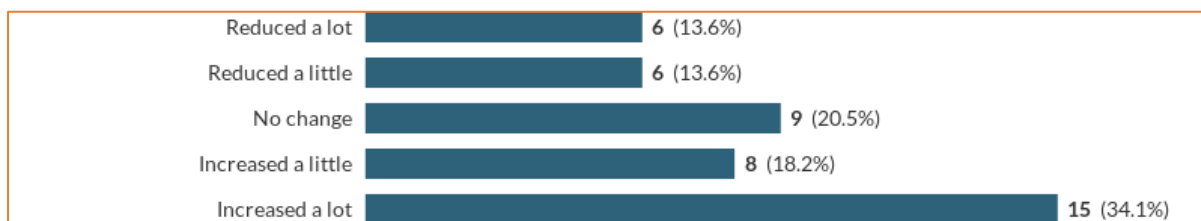

Figure 3 Responses to question: How much has this changed under social distancing?

The follow-up interviews revealed a commonly-occurring explanation for the increased workload; many volunteers were feeding their home-produced, pre-recorded audio content to their manager who then had to check it, in some cases enhance, edit and package it all together before uploading it for transmission.

Interestingly, the experience of 27.2% of respondents was that their hours had reduced. Reasons given for this in the follow-up interviews include the respondents having taken on a different role during lockdown, such as moving away from the day-to-day management of a station to a more strategic focus, and not going in to the studio to monitor live shows as usual, spending time instead applying for funding.

In terms of the management structure of the community radio organisations, only one respondent (of the total 44) reported that they did not have a management board or team at the station. The mean average size of the management teams, including boards of directors, was six. The number of members on these teams for the majority of the stations had remained constant under social distancing, only two had 'lost' members who needed to attend to other business or charity interests.

VOLUNTEERS

When asked how the management or organisational approach had altered since the introduction of social distancing, many respondents mentioned an increased use of phone calls, emails and social media for communicating with their volunteer body to replace physical contact, and there is now widespread use of video conferencing for conducting team meetings. Clearly though, some stations were already accustomed to using these technologies, since 12 respondents reported minimal change. The numbers of volunteers in each station were reported as shown in the chart below (Figure 4). Most stations (31.8%) have between 21 and 40, with a further 25% having between 41 and 60.
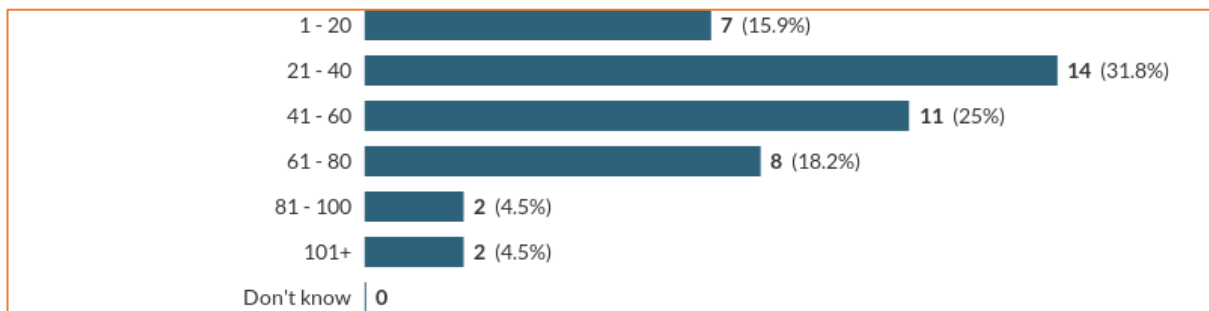

Figure 4 Responses to question: Approximately how many people normally work/volunteer at the station?

Again it is worth pointing out here that 35 of the 44 respondents (79.5%) reported that less than two people involved in their stations are normally paid. Eight others said between three and five people are paid and one respondent declined to answer. In 81.8% of cases, this situation has not changed during the COVID-19 crisis, whilst 18.2% of respondents said staff employment has decreased. As for the impact of social distancing on the numbers of people actively working or volunteering with the stations, the chart below indicates that there has been a significant reduction (Figure 5).
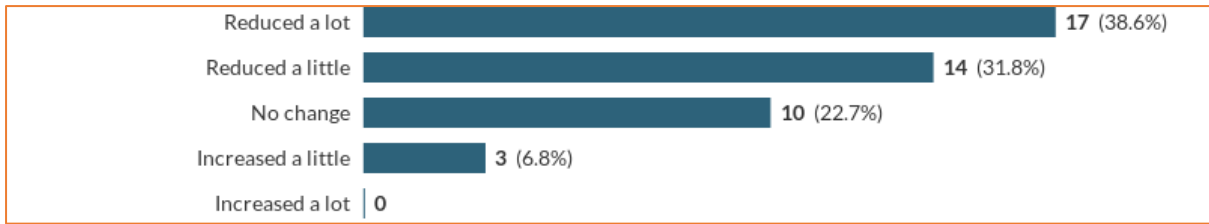
Reduced a lot	17 (38.6%)
Reduced a little	14 (31.8%)
No change	10 (22.7%)
Increased a little	3 (6.8%)
Increased a lot	0

Figure 5 Reponses to question: How much has this changed under social distancing?

FUNDING

An additional question revealed that two thirds (65.9%) of responding stations do not charge membership fees or take subscriptions from their volunteers. Less than a third (27.3%) receive up to £50 a year from voluntary volunteer contributions. Reasons for not making contributions compulsory varied amongst stations, with some management teams preferring to look to alternative ways of generating income streams rather than rely upon their volunteers. A different reason shared was to reduce the likelihood that paying volunteers would assume they had editorial control over their 'own' shows.

In the follow-up interviews, managers listed some of the alternative ways they raised money to run their stations. Though listener donations were likely to continue, since lockdown other avenues were now closed to them, such as: providing DJs, outside broadcasts and entertainment at public events; educational training and youth projects; running charity shops and cafés; and hosting local quiz nights.

They also reported that much of their usual on-air sales and programme sponsorship income had diminished because their regular clients were not currently trading. At the time of completing the questionnaire, 45.5% of respondents reported that they had been successful in winning grants or funding from schemes including local authority grants, the Government's Small Business Grant and Rate Relief schemes where applicable, national and local lotteries, and Ofcom's Community Radio Fund.

PROGRAMMING

To better understand the stations' outputs, the respondents were asked: "Prior to social distancing, approximately how many different shows were there normally in your station's weekly schedule (not including repeats or syndicated shows)?". As you can see from the chart, 38.6% of respondents said that prior to lockdown, they had between 21 and 35 different shows on their schedule (Figure 6).
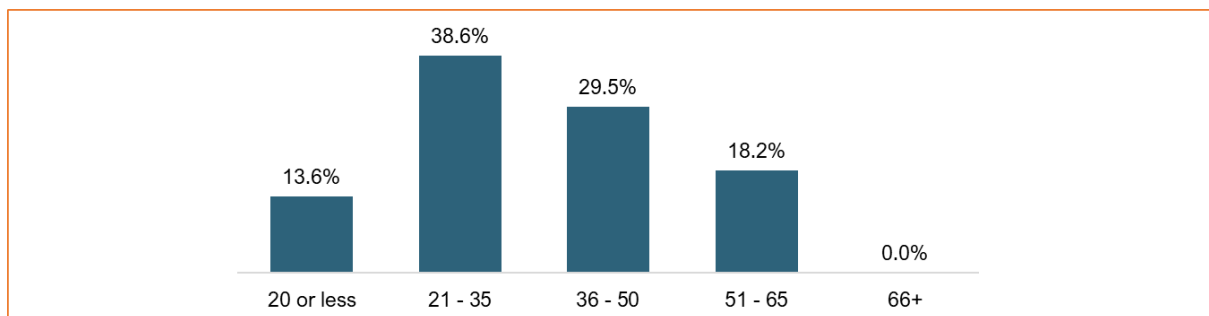

Figure 6 Responses to question: Prior to social distancing, approximately how many different shows were there normally in your station's weekly schedule (not including repeats or syndicated shows)?

The extent to which stations were able to keep to their usual schedules of programming is illustrated in the charts below. First, it was asked how much change there had been generally (Figure 7).
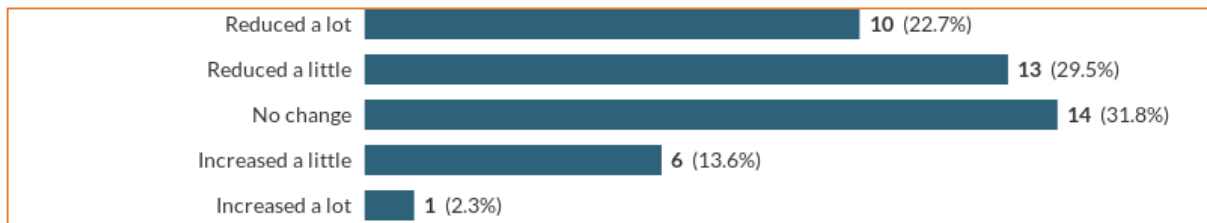

Figure 7 Responses to question: How much has this changed since social distancing was introduced?

Then more specifically, it was asked how many of the shows still on-air were themed, formatted and sounded the same as usual. Over a third of respondents (36.4%) said that over 75% of the shows they were broadcasting were the same as usual, whilst one quarter of respondents reported that the shows still being aired were sounding exactly the same as usual (Figure 8).
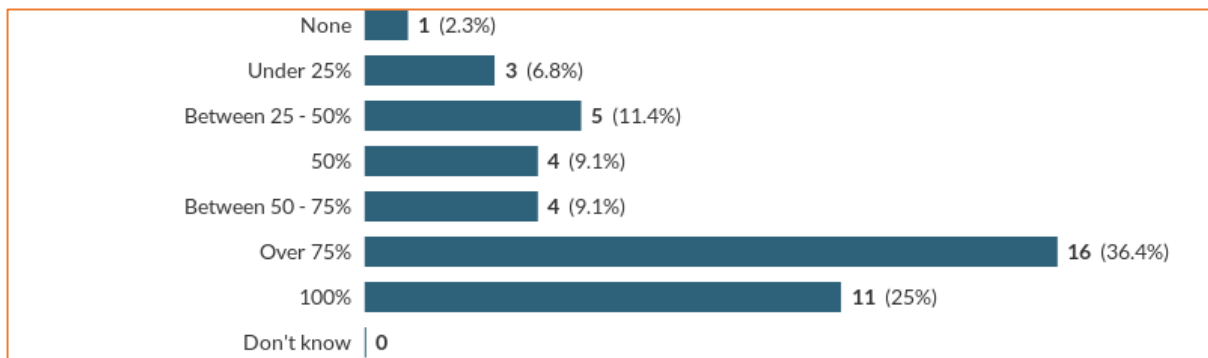

Figure 8 Responses to question: Of the shows still on-air during social distancing, approximately how many are themed, formatted and sound the same as usual?

There was one respondent who reported that not a single programme going out on-air sounded the same. This appears to be related to a significant reduction in live broadcasting on that station during lockdown. Whereas normally, the same respondent reported, up to ten presenters routinely produced their work remotely each week, that number had "increased a lot". She elaborated that they had: "two new shows being produced to allow more interviews and local information" despite the fact that they only "just about had adequate access to some basic resources" (r10).

In an additional question, 63.6% of all respondents reported that new strands of programming had been introduced since lockdown. Some of these changes can be put down to changes in the availability or involvement of particular presenters and producers. For instance, one respondent remarked: "Two new DJs approached us to air their remotely produced dance music shows, which now help to fill our Friday evening schedule" (r9).

Delving deeper, more information was requested on how much speech radio output was normally produced in relation to music content across all the respondents' programme schedules. The chart below indicates that, pre-COVID-19, over half of the stations provided between 10-25% speech and 27.3% were producing between 25 and 50% (Figure 9).
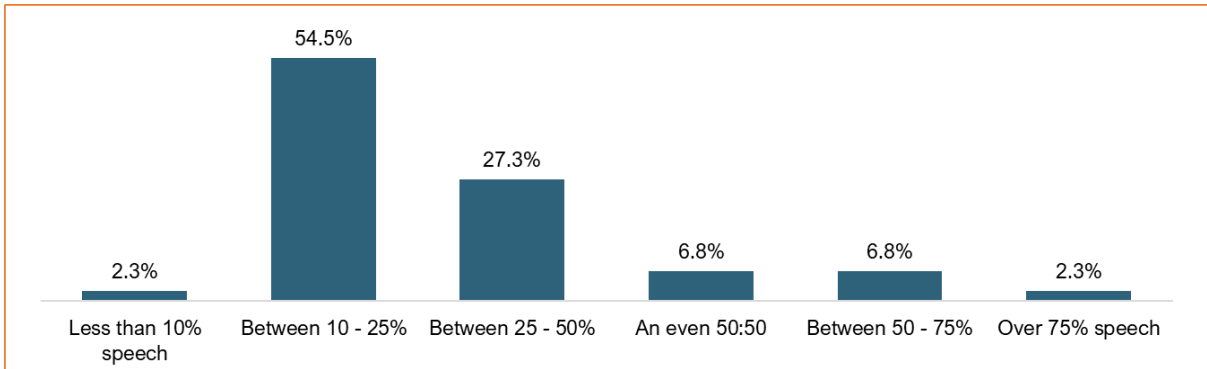
Figure 9 Responses to question: What is normally the proportion of speech to music content across your programme schedule?

Since the introduction of social distancing measures, it seems that over half of the community radio stations surveyed are achieving a consistent ratio of speech to music. A quarter of stations have increased their speech content a little, whilst a fifth have reduced the amount of on-air speech (Figure 10).
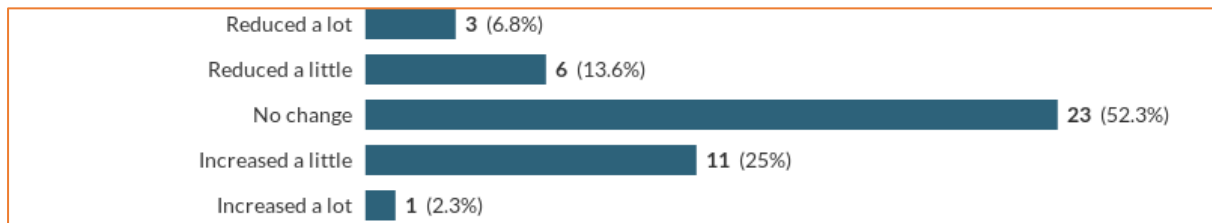

Figure 10 Responses to question: How much has this changed under COVID-19 social distancing?

PRESENTER ROUTINES

So how have the individual community radio practitioners been able to continue broadcasting their shows when the studios have, in most cases, been rendered out of bounds? The respondents were asked a series of questions about their station broadcasters' routines prior to COVID-19 and how things had changed for them during lockdown. The chart below illustrates that just under three quarters of respondents said that under normal conditions, their stations tended to broadcast more live output than pre-recorded content (Figure 11).
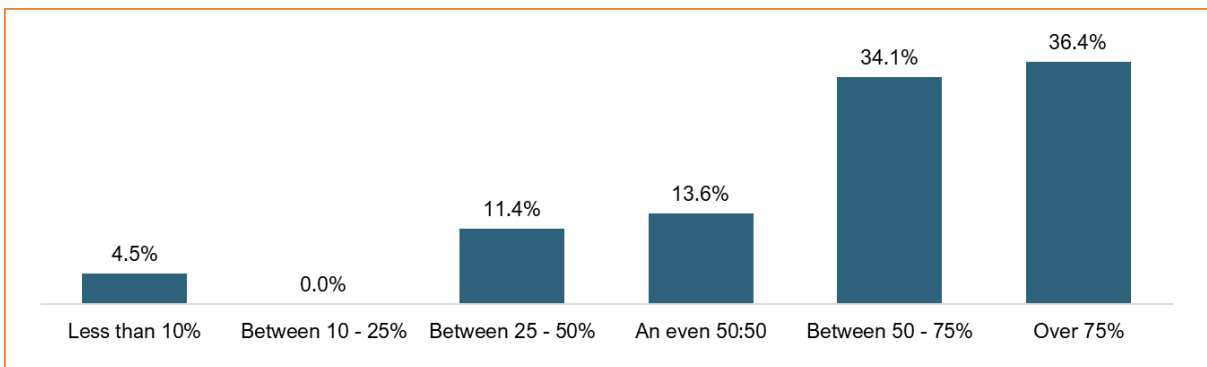

Figure 11 Responses to question: What proportion of shows and features are normally presented and transmitted live?

When asked how much this had changed during the lockdown, 43.2% reported that it had reduced a lot, and a further 27.3% said that it had reduced a little. 20.5% of respondents said that there had been no change (Figure 12).
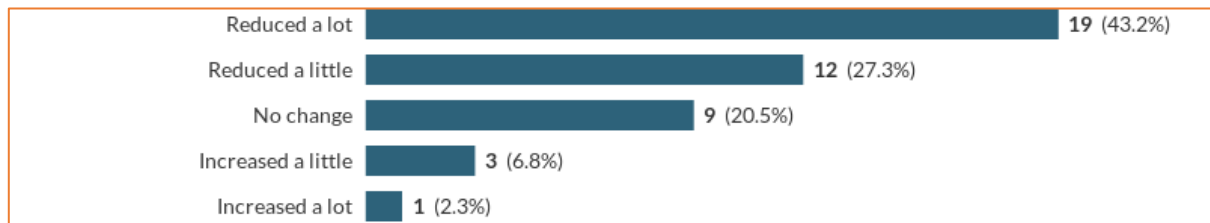

Figure 12 Responses to question: How much has this changed under COVID-19 social distancing?

Next, an indication was sought as to how many presenters and producers routinely used to work on their shows remotely. The chart shows that in 77.3% of the cases, no more than 10 different shows a week were normally presented or recorded by members from home or studios outside the radio station (Figure 13).
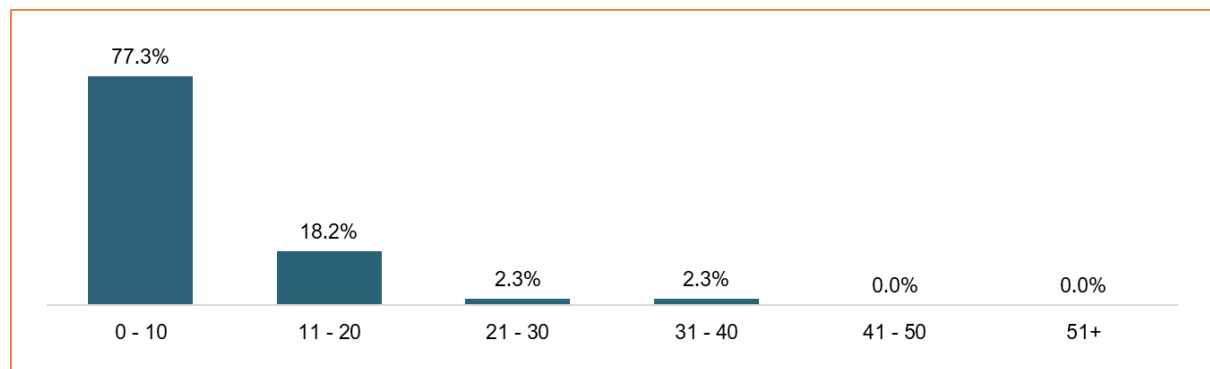

Figure 13 Responses to question: Prior to social distancing, approximately how many different shows were normally presented or recorded by members from home or remote studios each week?

The extent to which this changed under social distancing measures is illustrated in the chart below (Figure 14). For 59.1% of the stations, there had been a marked increase in remote broadcasting and for a further 20.5% it had increased a little.
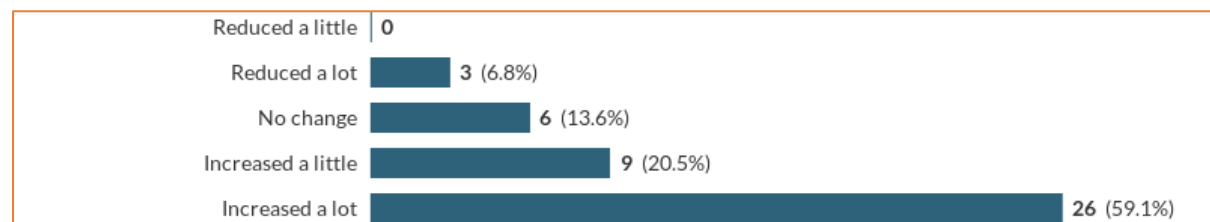
Figure 14 Responses to question: How much has this changed under COVID-19 social distancing?

The technique of voice-tracking (VT) has become widespread in the commercial industry and has been introduced to the community sector too. This involves using software tied in with the station playout system which provides presenters with the intros and outros of music tracks and a set number of seconds which they need to fill with speech. These links can be scripted or ad-libbed, pre-recorded onto a computer and automatically uploaded into the right places in the schedule.

According to responses on this questionnaire, there had been limited take-up of VT technology prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: 68.2% of respondents said that no more than four of their practitioners normally used the approach (Figure 15).
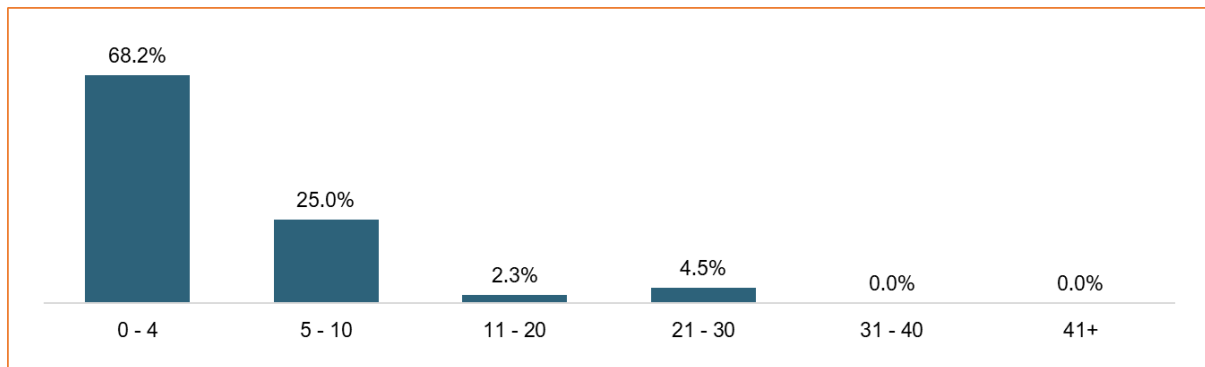
Figure 15 Responses to question: Prior to social distancing, how many station practitioners routinely voice-tracked content for their shows and the station?

Social distancing has had an impact on VT use: a quarter of respondents said usage had increased a little and slightly fewer (22.7%) reported that usage had increased a lot (Figure 16). However, there were five cases where the usage had reduced a lot. From respondent comments in follow-up interviews, the main cause of this appears to be that normally, before the pandemic, voice-tracking was carried out in studios at the radio stations which were now temporarily closed.
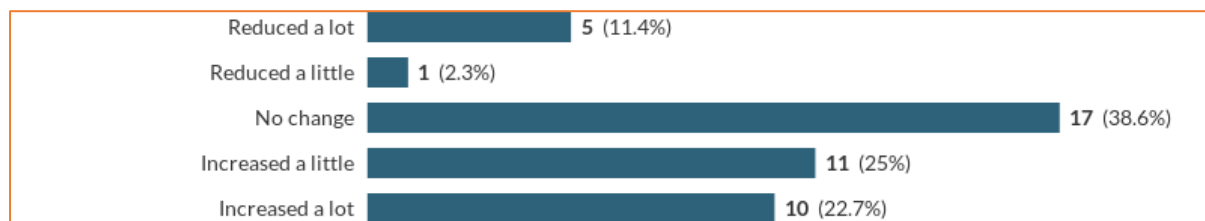

Figure 16 Responses to question: How much has this changed under social distancing?

The questionnaire then enquired as to how well-equipped the respondents felt their stations had been at the point of lockdown. Two groups, in equal proportions (29.5%), said they "just about had adequate access to some basic resources" or "were fairly well-equipped" (Figure 17).

Figure 17 Responses to question: How well equipped was your station to respond to the COVID-19 social distancing measures?

Where stations were less well prepared, one respondent admitted: "We had nothing in place" (r13) and another explained: "Few of our Presenters are technically minded, several don't use computers/tablets/smart phones at all" (r4). Such situations did not necessarily mean solutions could not be found. One station manager stated: "We have a very small studio which was not suitable for social distancing. We closed it immediately and moved to VT" (r15). Another commented: "A lot of older generation of presenters were taught new skills and bought their own equipment" (r37).

What those who felt they were "excellently resourced" had in common was software and the availability of decent quality devices: one director reported that they had already "purchased a new playout system that allowed every presenter to be live or voice track from home" (r44). It is clear also that some radio stations did not close their studio doors completely. For instance, one respondent explained: "We currently lease large premises (with a large unused room at the rear) so it was quite easy to spread our operation out. Presenters are also encouraged to spend the minimum amount of time necessary in the building (as some of our volunteers possibly do fall into the vulnerable category) and wipe down surfaces in the studio with antibacterial wipes after use" (r23).

So, what were the skills, resources and other circumstances which enabled some presenters to remain active where their fellow volunteers were hindered or prevented from participating? Having the relevant technical know-how appears to have been considered the most important, as was internet access (Figure 18). Factors in the "Other" category included being mindful of any vulnerable, high-risk volunteers.
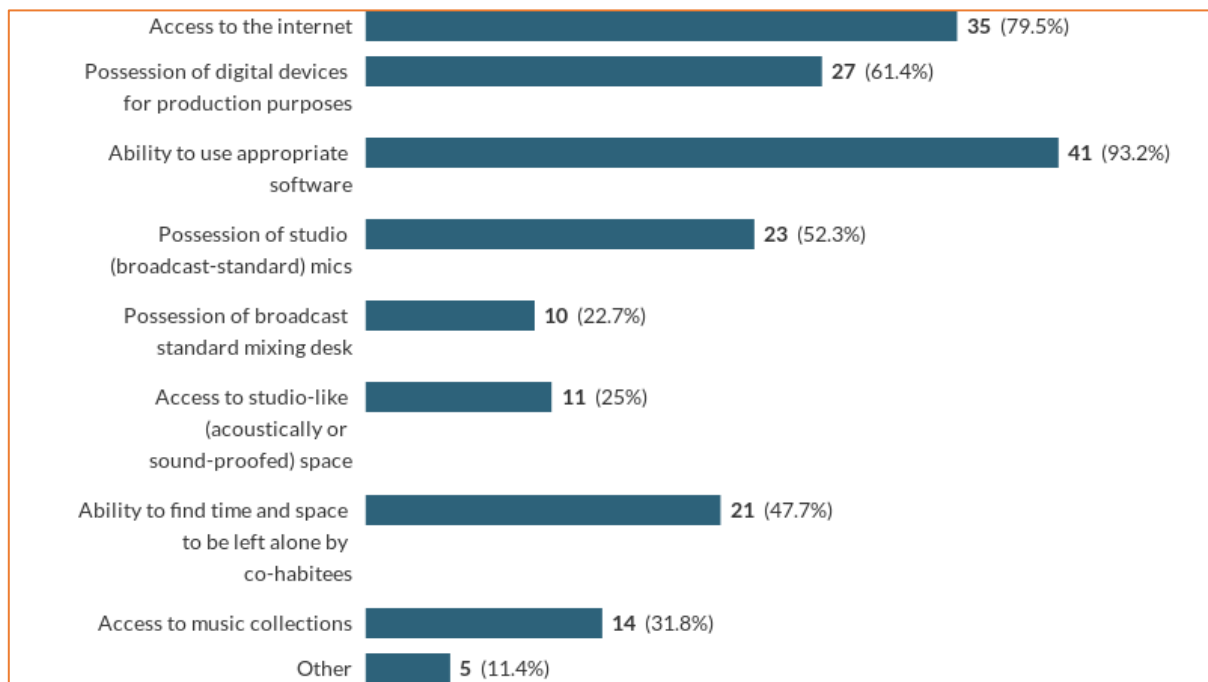
Figure 18 Responses to question: What do you think are the major factors behind who's still on the schedule for your radio station whilst social distancing is in place?

The respondents were asked to indicate what the programming priorities were at their stations when such crisis-management decisions were being made. As the chart below indicates, the most important consideration for over half the respondents was to achieve a balance between the amount of shows and voices they could get on air and the quality of that output (Figure 19). As one

station engineer put it: "Quality of sound is not as important as quality of content for local community" (r37). And a director/presenter from a different station said: "The primary aim was to maintain a service and improve on the quality as we progressed. This has been achieved with most presenters finding that relatively inexpensive microphones are good enough, given the generally lower standards of acoustics in their homes" (r19).
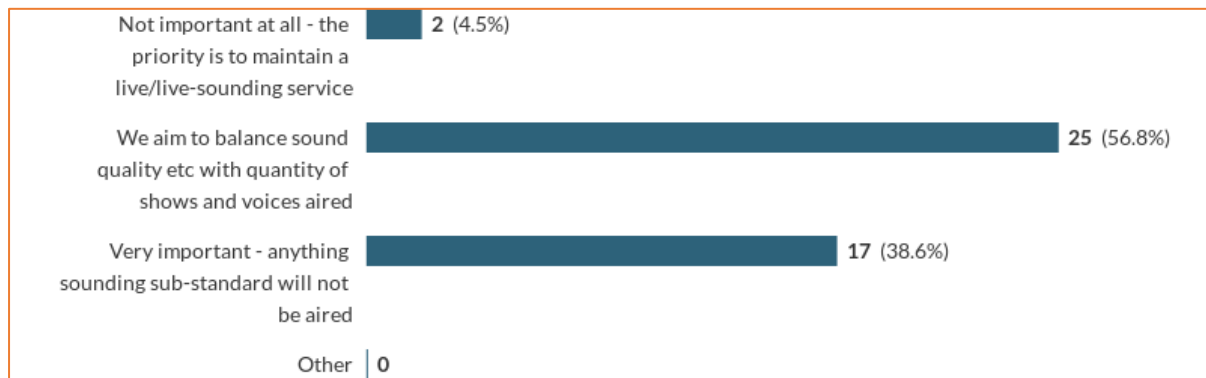

Figure 19 Responses to question: How important has it been to maintain your usual station standards of broadcast sound quality and professionalism during the social distancing?

Despite the circumstances, 38.6% were adamant that quality should not be compromised. As one respondent commented: "We have a reputation to uphold but we have a loyal, appreciative and understanding listenership, aware of who we are and our place in the community, seen as 'friends' doing a worthy but professional job" (r20). Another pointed out: "We have been able to maintain production values even with some presenters VTing from home with nothing more than a USB mic and a laptop" (r39).

LOCAL NEWS

The survey asked if the stations already had their own local news service before the lockdown, and 59.1% of respondents said that they did, although only 27.3% said they actually engaged reporters and journalists on their station. These were often students on the University stations and always volunteers.

In descending order, local news was provided most commonly through on-air bulletins, and shared online via social media, discussed on-air during magazine shows and posted on their station websites. The majority said they had been able to at least maintain this service, if not increase it during the lockdown (84.6%).

Of the remaining stations, 38.9% of respondents said that they had begun to deliver a local news service since the social distancing measures had been introduced. The methods of delivery were primarily on-air as bulletins, as well as online using their website and social media, and coverage was also provided on magazine shows.

One respondent elaborated that their station had instigated new programmes and features focused on circulating community news on COVID-19-related projects and initiatives: "new versions of old shows with the new Covid life in mind" (r28). Another described that they had produced a "number of features … including 'Age UK' anti-falls 10 minute exercise packages run daily for several weeks, regular phone interviews with school staff, doctors and members of the community on advice, activities and initiatives" (r20). Other stations cited instances of enhanced coverage of local NHS

partnership news as well as local council, police and emergency services, trading and charitable organisations.

Some stations have started broadcasting local church services, and two stations reported that they had extended airtime for their local Talking Newspaper: one stated: "We have put local Talking Newspaper interviews and news stories on air plus expanded their programmes to two hours from initial one hour plus repeating during week" (r36); and another said they had "added a health hour show on Sundays, plus additional well-being items in magazine shows. Additionally, carrying interviews with community organisations asking for help. Broadcasting the local Talking Newspaper as the local sight charity cannot distribute it as normal" (r19).

Discussion and Policy Implications

These findings suggest that UK community radio stations have been able to continue broadcasting: adjusting and innovating in ways which have enhanced their resourcefulness in presenting shows, providing entertainment and sourcing and sharing important information. Volunteer practitioners have been able to adapt their media production practices using digital technologies and techniques not dissimilar to those used by mainstream professionals. The crisis has revealed the sector's ability to respond to and reflect local audiences' specific interests and needs.

Clearly though, a proportion of volunteers either did not wish or feel confident enough to continue broadcasting under the newly imposed conditions, or were not deemed to have the capacity because they did not have access to a suitable combination of the requisite resources (Figure 18). This aspect of equality and fair access to the airwaves for the sector's practitioners is an area that warrants consideration in future studies, particularly if some of the innovations become the 'new normal'.

Although one respondent described the situation he and many of his fellow community broadcasters found themselves in as "a very dark place" (r25), at the time of writing only one station has been unable to continue live broadcasting: its 'on-demand' service is still available on Mixcloud.[14] All other stations are still managing to transmit material and across the board, after viewing their websites as well as listening in, the author finds that 'coronavirus' has become a pivotal topic of conversation. The various local initiatives and projects going on to help those worst affected have become rallying points around which presenters are very effectively calling their listeners to action.

The research highlights that this sector is perfectly placed to provide locally specific health and welfare updates and indeed has proved itself to be adept and efficient at responding to a crisis and incorporating new content alongside their usual entertainment and information outputs. However, their ability to do so should not be taken for granted.

As time wears on, community radio operators will need enhanced regulatory support informed by a sympathetic understanding of their distinctive needs. This faith in the value of the sector for the social good will pay off as long as government and local authority help and funding is provided to help sustain studio infrastructures, incorporate technological innovations and to boost volunteer workforce morale. For one thing, like every other organisation in the country, their finances will be diminished, especially as any local advertising or sponsorship income they used to earn is unlikely to be replenished any time soon.

With sufficient attention and commitment from the government, the media and the public, community radio can play a dynamic role in the rebuilding process as we pull ourselves out of the COVID-19 lockdown. Social distancing measures have had massive repercussions on every community: on healthcare, businesses, education, entertainment, the leisure industry and more. But so far, community radio has survived, if not thrived in its vital role during the pandemic. Radio broadcasting provided voluntarily by local people has come of age. By providing coverage of local happenings, amplifying positivity, airing and sharing initiatives and opportunities for mutual cooperation, radio stations have been at the heart of communities pulling together in a broken world and they can help spearhead local efforts to put back the pieces and work towards renewal.

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[14] https://csrfm.com/ accessed 2/7/2020

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