

Commercial Vibes: promotional cultures on local community radio in England

Introduction

This paper considers the nature of community radio in neo-liberal, market-led UK society. Until recently, the sector was marginalized in the media industry and regarded with disdain; being “somewhat misunderstood and undervalued within academic circles and among the general populace” (Howley, 2010, p. 2). However, an industry body recently commissioned a study by radio expert David Lloyd highlighting the plight of the local independent sector in the face of what they now consider to be an overly competitive and increasingly commercialized community sector (Lloyd, 2018). Although community radio emerged in response to the lobbying of campaigners demanding more grassroots access to localized broadcasting services, some operators appear to be competing with the mainstream in their marketplaces. The UK framework for community media engenders a non-confrontational, consensus-based stance in relation to institutions, rather than conforming to ideological notions of radical, alternative or activist community media which tend to dominate academic discourse.¹ Despite being licensed as not-for-profit entities, many of the stations are engaging in the sale of airtime and other enactments of promotional culture so they look and sound very much like their commercial, mainstream counterparts. Listeners are often unaware of the distinction and assume the community stations they are listening to are staffed by professionals.

The issue to be addressed here is whether the commodification of airtime and by extension of the listeners, risks compromising the legitimated community radio mission of delivering social gain. Are community stations still providing access to the airwaves for citizens to voice their opinions, share their stories and air their concerns? How does the need to keep local stakeholders and niche target market businesses and organizations onside for PR and promotional purposes affect programming? First, I will discuss some of the ways in which radio as a medium has been understood in academia and where a promotional culture framing is relevant. Then I will briefly outline the multi-tiered radio broadcasting landscape we have in the UK today and how the community sector came about, before sharing my findings.

Radio as a democratizing medium

The utopian rhetoric surrounding radio as it first became institutionalized was that it should be used for two-way communication, as a tool for democracy in public affairs, rather than one-way distribution of content (Brecht, 1979). Martin Spinelli (2000) has pointed out the naivety of commentators such as Rudolph Arnheim (1936) who suggested that owning a wireless radio set should be a democratic right which would magically civilize society by promoting equality and uniting populations across boundaries and classes (Spinelli, 2000, p.

¹ Pirates, internet-only radio operators and podcasters can do this but are beyond the remit of this paper.

270). In reality, whoever funded radio industry infrastructures expected to control them and these vested interests were inextricably linked to state institutions. In the UK and USA, the first manufacturers and retailers of radio sets needed to establish reasons for their purchase. The production of audio content was facilitated if not funded by them to create demand; so that there would be something that audiences wanted to listen to. This set in motion the rather more consumerist undergirding of the radio broadcasting industry, setting into play the commodification of the listener. This explains why Spinelli considers Arnheim's belief that owning a radio conferred citizenship was "but a small step away from saying that in order to participate in democracy, one must be a consumer" (Spinelli, 2000, p. 271). Radio fast became mass broadcasting because that made more economic sense. Marshall McLuhan's description of radio as an extension of the ear seems appropriate (McLuhan, 1964), but its potential for also being an extension of the mouth, enabling any (or selected) voices to air views, beliefs and opinions was yet to be realized. The UK took the public service route and the USA went down the commercial route realising that income could be earned through enabling purveyors to disseminate their messages on-air. It could be said that radio broadcasters were early electronically-enabled 'influencers', with advertising campaigns and sponsored features and shows like the original 'soap operas' (Hilmes, 1997). Radio was recognized as a profitable platform for "traditional, nontargeted advertising" along with television, the press and direct mail (Scott, 2008, p. 18).

The medium caught on and audiences became used to the reliable, repetitive, cyclical patterns of programme schedules, finding the regularity reassuring (Scannell, 1996). As word of mouth content - intimate, involving and immediate, if not actually live - radio audiences came to trust and rely on the information imparted and found the entertainment companionable. Research was prompted by concerns over the propaganda uses of radio (for instance, Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1975). These had come to light especially during and after the second World War with governments broadcasting morale-boosting, strategically-scripted entertainments, fireside chats, ministerial addresses and faked news reports. Radio is a powerful medium, playing a part in "the formation of social, civic and moral space" (Silverstone, 2007, p. 5). We hear what is going on in the world through mediated interpretations of those happenings. The messages communicated establish credibility, confer legitimacy and can be persuasive. Media generally saturate our everyday lives but radio is especially pervasive. It is often playing in the background as a 'secondary medium' whilst we carry out other activities, but it is, nonetheless, affecting (Crisell, 1986; Tacchi, 2009).

Radio station teams became adept at not only providing a platform for news, information and entertainment but also using airtime to promote themselves with branded jingles and trailers marketing their shows, presenters, competitions and forthcoming events or campaigns. The heightened personability of radio, the power of the quasi-relationships between broadcasters and their listeners increases the likelihood of material, messages and meanings circulating and spreading through communities. Along with television, radio is uniquely equipped for self-promotion (see Ch 10, Newton and Potter in Eastman, 2000). The commercial stations are often competing against each other and with other media forms. This promotional culture aligns with Andrew Wernick's description of how people and organisations buy into and respond to consumerist

society (Wernick, 1988). The neoliberal turn that accentuates how such marketing and promotion has become increasingly important for business, has been accompanied if not accelerated by the convergences brought about by digital media technologies. Much of our communicative technology has been incorporated into digital coded media with online, digital platforms. As consumers are becoming producers of content too, this has paved the way for their exploitation as publicists, representing not only themselves as they wish to be portrayed, but promoting causes they believe in and products or brands they prefer. They can be, often unknowingly, recruited by businesses and institutions to disseminate materials by liking and sharing content, joining the tribe that will defend a brand's honour on social media.

UK Broadcasting Landscape

Perhaps the powers-that-be overseeing the UK's first radio institution were prescient in their determination to oppose vested interests and commercialization in broadcasting. Accounts of UK's unique history of radio describe how the strategy agreed upon was that the original British Broadcasting Company, set up to handle the engineering and programming of the nation's radio, would be incorporated and chartered to provide a public service (Crisell, 2002; Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). Its first director, John Reith, set the bar puritanically high for 'education, information and entertainment'. Activities of the multiplying independent offshore stations and competition from the continent eventually persuaded the BBC and the government into accepting that there was a growing market for lower brow entertainment and popular music. A new wave of sociologists joined the debate and advised that there was a need for local radio stations providing a "strong basis of local news and features of community interest" (Powell, 1965, p. 3). By 1967 the BBC was rolling out a scheme spearheaded by producer Frank Gillard, setting up stations in selected large towns across the country. VHF/FM transmitters had been installed creating extra frequency space within existing wavelengths. Not as many were opened as had been hoped due to the prohibitive costs involved (Linfoot, 2011). Today there are only 39 BBC local stations across England.

From 1972, the government introduced a licensing system overseen by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) for independent local radio stations (ILR). These stations were broadcasting in cities and county regions, carrying advertising though they were also subsidised by the radio authority to deliver public service output of 'meaningful speech' and cultural programming. This obligation was progressively relaxed over the years and the implementation of The Broadcasting Act 1990 marked significant lifting of restrictions (Stoller, 2010). Profit-led cost-cutting and other structural changes due to mergers and acquisitions created branded networks administered from remote, centralized hubs (Crisell and Starkey in Franklin, 2006, pp. 20–21). The localness of those services began to diminish as the numbers of on-air presenters and newsroom staff dropped.

The Community Radio Association was founded in 1983 (later known as Community Media Association) and by the end of the 1980s, welcomed the roll-out of short term, low power Restricted Service Licences (RSLs) for special projects, events, hospitals and student radio (see for instance Gordon, 2000; Lewis and Booth, 1990).

A number of 'incremental' licences were also offered, intended for specific religious, ethnic and cultural audiences. Operators were expected to sustain themselves in the free market economy. However, struggling owners soon found themselves "forced to compromise their principles in mergers or take-overs" (Lewis, 1998, p. 5). The New Labour government saw in the 2002 experimental Access Radio scheme, in which 15 stations were given short-term licences. This was developed into the regulatory framework still operating today for licensing community organizations to transmit on AM or FM frequencies (Scifo, 2011). With a handful of special interest exceptions such as Christian stations and Gaydio, the enduring business model has been very local, not-for-profit community radio stations. Tens of thousands of volunteers have been involved year on year donating ten times that number of (hu)man hours (Ofcom, 2015). At the time of writing, there are over 280 licenced community radio stations in the UK run as non-profit organisations broadcasting to populations around the country which are deemed underserved by mainstream operators. Each station is set up in different sets of circumstances by unique combinations of people motivated by differing localized objectives. Yet, they acknowledge and appreciate the overall aims and conditions under which they labour in what is effectively third sector broadcasting for social gain

Research Design

My interest is on the 'practice-arrangements' involving the volunteer practitioners in community radio; the physical environments and infrastructures as well as the intangible webs of understandings that are shaped by and shape the way their activities are carried out. The practice-centric lens frames their media-related and interpersonal activities as taking place in 'social sites'. These evolve on a micro-scale but can be understood as extendible slices of the same phenomena unfolding on the larger, macro level (Schatzki, 2002). This suggests that the localized particularities of selected situations can provide significant information for a fuller understanding of the wider processes at play. Hence this paper draws on case study materials to illustrate a national trend. Examples are provided from doctoral research into production practices in English suburban community radio stations: Nickey Radio, Radio Lab, Radio Verulam, Somer Valley FM, The Eye, Vibe. Fieldwork involved a reflexively documented practice-as-research project, participant observations and interviews in those stations. Desk research included reading social media and listening-in to multiple stations, becoming a member of the CMA, meeting and conversing with practitioners and other interested parties from around the country.

Findings from the field

Looking local - branding

In most cases, small-scale community broadcasters do not have a natural media monopoly in their target market, so they need to invest in promoting and marketing their own brand to position themselves competitively. This is required as early as the preparation of bids applying for a licence to Ofcom. Sometimes an organisation is developed over years of RSLs or internet-only 'broadcasting' to build up a listener base and a profile in the local community. Branding choices are often determined by the station naming itself to convey

their home locality (or special interest) as well as the frequency. 'Nickey Radio' for instance is the online local radio station for the town of Harpenden through which a popular cycle route runs; along the disused Nickey Line railway. A symbol or iconic motif in the logo connotes the same affiliation. Nickey Radio does not have a frequency, whereas neighbouring Radio Verulam, named to honour the city's Roman roots as Verulamium, includes its frequency, 92.6FM, in its logo. Taglines and mission statements are often used alongside the station names and logos, highlighting their embeddedness and commitment to that community. In Radio Verulam's case, their primary tagline is "We are the radio station for St Albans".

Community stations benefit from endorsements by high-profile influential businesspeople, gatekeepers or personalities. These are earned through developing and nurturing positive relationships with local authorities, businesses, charities and other 'movers and shakers'. As well as supporters, they need listeners to establish a loyal audience base and secure a steady supply of volunteers. Sustaining a workforce is vital as is securing reliable revenue streams. These can be constant challenges for the sector and the running costs of community stations can be substantial. Income is required to cover building rental and upkeep, investment in studio and transmitter equipment, insurance premiums, music licences and so forth.² Some stations ask volunteers to pay up to £100 for annual membership. Some teams run regular workshops and courses for which they can charge for attendance or incorporate into schemes in order to apply for charitable grants and government funding.

Being seen out and about in the locality and participating in public events is essential for a station's profile. Where stations can afford a vehicle or a roadshow unit, branded publicity materials are affixed or painted on the side. They have banners made carrying the station name, frequency and sometimes a tagline reinforcing their mission. Merchandise can be produced, again bearing the logo, station name and tag line, in the company colours. Sometimes the stations can afford to use these items as promotional giveaways – such as car stickers, pens, carrier bags or balloons – especially if they are sponsored so the production costs are covered. Alternatively, they sell the items, or budget for some to be used as competition prizes – mugs, t-shirts, sweatshirts, hats, canvas bags, balloons. Again, if the station can afford it, or the volunteers can be persuaded to buy the items themselves, official logoed clothing is worn at public events where they are representing the station – they become walking billboards. Buying poster site advertising can be prohibitively expensive but there are examples where station staff have been able to negotiate contra deals or discounts on printing of posters and places to display them. There are examples of livery branding deals made with local bus companies and taxi firms. Advertising in local press can happen, even though there is often a competitive edge to the relationship because they are in competition with each other to sell advertising space to local firms. But mutual arrangements are possible, such as when radio stations promote annual awards run by newspapers through offering on-air/online radio advertising and provide talent to MC, or even to organise special occasions and concerts.

² One interviewee told me the average turnover of a community radio station in the UK, in 2016 was c. £50,000 (SV_Dom)

Editors can be happy to routinely publish station programme schedules in return for their paper being cited on-air as a source for local news. The editor of the main newspaper in Radio Verulam's catchment area, St Albans, used to visit the station regularly and one of his reporters had a weekly slot on the Drive time show to run through the week's headlines. Virtual branding is also prevalent, with logos and taglines appearing across the range of social media that a station uses such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. All stations communicate and provide information and entertainment for listeners and other stakeholders using their own website. This is an important resource for presenters, especially if there is a Community Noticeboard or What's On listings. This will be a calendar of local events and booking information tagged with searchable terms and printable that listeners can refer to, but the presenters can read from there too. Announcing a forthcoming school fair, sports fixture or library talk can be a handy filler in case of a timing miscalculation or other contingency during the presentation of a live programme.

Sounding local

During my listening-in to the stations, I regularly heard presenters do 'shout-outs' and dedicate music tracks. This is a strategy used to sound convincingly local and it comes naturally to most radio personalities. They often talk about the people, places, events or businesses they encounter locally. This casual name-dropping occurs 'in conversation' with the listener but also happens with studio guests and producers; whoever is accompanying them in the studio at the time. Programmed into the automated scheduling system, in between the obligatory music, are pre-recorded station jingles and 'idents'. These appear to be modelled on the ILR sector, which itself drew on the USA for creative inspiration; some stations and networks even commissioned American creative talent to produce them. Other pre-recorded material like lists of villages or districts served are used regularly to geographically position a station in its market. Very localized live or 'as-live' weather reports and traffic and travel updates are scheduled at regular intervals and likewise establish where a station is based and focused on. There is also widespread use of 30-second trailers spotlighting a station's shows and presenters, reinforcing a station's remit and publicising various events, competitions and other highlights on the schedule; understood as "*image... and program promotion*" (Eastman, 2000, p. 8).

I noticed a pronounced emphasis upon soft news presentation, whereby locally relevant stories are discussed with residents and local commentators, having been sourced through known contacts or social media, from the local press or press releases. Magazine-style programmes during which interviews are conducted seem to be a favoured option over trying to operate local news desks for the radio stations per se. The presenters, despite being volunteers, are usually competently skilled and certainly the popularity of a radio station is often enhanced by their personalities. It is in the interests of the stations to train their volunteers to pursue a more professional programming aesthetic in order to adhere to the Broadcasting Code. Complaints for libel for instance, could lead to large fines and even licences being withdrawn. In most cases though, presenters strive to build rapport, coming across as friendly and approachable. Some could surely achieve trusted positions as influencers and endorsers if it were not for the strict regulations imposed on them by Ofcom and Advertising Standards. Yet calculated targeting and empathizing with audiences is necessary to build a following for a

programme and for a station. A tactic commonly applied in radio presenter training to aid the development of an appropriate radio manner, appealing to the target audience, is to place a photograph of your imagined listener by the microphone. This resonates with the strategic marketing advice often given recommending that one should "Ask yourself 'what's the buyer persona profile?'" (Scott, 2008, p. 163).

Finding resonance with listeners is key, so presenters and producers are always seeking relevant content to fill the schedules day after day, all year round. By signing up regular contributors, getting in new guests and voices from the local area, the volunteers are not only helping those people and organisations promote themselves and their interests, but satisfying the never-ending demand for programme material. An additional benefit of hosting interviews and discussions on-air is that it can build the profile and reputation of the station. It is a sort of ongoing public relations exercise because it requires and in turn builds relationships in the local community.

International Women's Day at Radio Verulam

If one of the aims of community radio is to be a mouthpiece for the community, coming up with things to talk about is a priority. A routine approach to creating talking points is to plan a pseudo-event by featuring a global news story and applying related issues to the local area, consulting local people for their input. One such instance I observed was International Women's Day (IWD) at Radio Verulam. On this occasion, over a dozen local businesswomen had been invited to the studios by presenter Kerry to take part in her show, *Good Morning St Albans*. She was celebrating two years at Radio Verulam as presenter, having joined the station after being a guest herself on an IWD feature. Kerry realized the importance of the occasion which could be capitalized upon to create:

- a) content for the show (and potential spin-offs for further interviews). The guests had each chosen a track by their favourite female artist to be played on-air and they were asked to introduce it along with a short description of their business
- b) networking opportunities for the businesswomen and herself. There was a reception in the café downstairs afterwards
- c) a promotional opportunity for Kerry's breakfast show, the radio station, the guests' businesses and the café
- d) potential sources of competition prizes, co-promotions and future sales airtime packages or station sponsorship
- e) interest among some of the guests in becoming station volunteers
- f) a programme worth entering into radio competitions

Community Radio as a local alternative advertising medium

In order to run a radio station, reliable sources of income are required. Many stations position themselves as a cost-effective option for advertising, co-promotional and sponsorship opportunities, compared to local press, and mainstream radio stations. Ofcom allows community stations to earn from the sale of airtime up to 50% of their annual income or a 'fixed revenue allowance' totalling £15,000 each financial year, where they overlap

with any local, small commercial radio station.³ Ofcom has contracted out regulation on advertising standards to the Advertising Standards Authority, and volunteers usually receive training and guidance on best practice to avoid contravention. Adverts on community stations tend to be local such as solicitors, pubs, restaurants and residential homes. They sometimes carry national campaigns such as mental health and public information announcements from the government. There have been attempts to roll out national campaigns for clients across the community sector, but these do not always result in success. When Radio Verulam started carrying ads for a new taxi app, I was informed: “All it actually did was annoy the local cab drivers who always used to have us on in the cab. When we started advertising Uber, they switched off!” (RV_Denise)

Audience approval is important for community radio, and the need for balance in the programming is imperative. One manager told me they do a little “pandering ... to the community radio ethos ... lots of interviews, all local ones” but there must be enough music. He implied that if the audience were not getting their music, they would tune in elsewhere and advertising sales might fall. Then, he said “You've got a problem cos you can't [afford to] run the station!” (RV_Phil). Developing good relations with the business community is important, and as Kerry's example illustrates, worthwhile and revenue-generating arrangements often come about through free publicity first. The other stations I studied - Vibe, The Eye, Somer Valley, Radio Lab, Nickey Radio - all advertise on-air and online the fact that on-air and online advertising and sponsorship opportunities are available. They list advertising rates and salute their advertising ‘community partners’ and sponsors by adding logos and business descriptions onto the websites.⁴ Vibe, for instance declare that you can advertise for £10 a day or £1.99 per spot and expect to reach 30,000 listeners. Recommendations are valuable for instilling confidence in potential clients. On the Vibe website are quotes from recent advertisers expressing their appreciation and the benefits reaped from their campaigns, saying that they are regularly told their radio ads were enquiry sources. Common phrases are “competitive rates”, “value for money”. One client wrote: “Their promotional activity and involvement in the family fun event at our new Watford branch resulted in our most successful store opening ever!” (Brian Collier, Store Manager, Wilko, Watford). Incidentally, Vibe pays three part-time members of staff; their marketing executive told me her salary was covered by the airtime sales income. She also told me that they limit the number of adverts to just a handful an hour and will turn away potential new clients if the books are full rather than risk turning off the listeners.

A potential problem facing the community sector when selling airtime is the relative lack of ‘reliable’ listening figures. This is largely because the financial cost of being included in the industry audience survey RAJAR is prohibitive; several thousand pounds.⁵ Instead, station operators have made their own arrangements with research organisations or conducted their own surveys. Luton's Radio Lab survey in 2017 provided usable data on how likely its target age group of young people in the area would tune in and suggested that other age

³ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/101860/Community-radio-guidance.pdf accessed 29/12/2019

⁴ <https://www.radioverulam.com/advertising/> accessed 22/12/2019

⁵ https://www.rajar.co.uk/docs/how_to_subscribe/2020_Full_Station_Ratecard.pdf accessed 11/1/2020

groups were also listening. This was useful in securing advertising income from a trampoline park wanting to attract students and from a car rental firm wanting to promote a graduate scheme. Some stations have been imaginative in their market research like asking local garage engineers to check and note down which radio station cars are tuned into when they arrive for a service. Since all stations have online presence with platforms like their station websites, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, it is possible to measure audience engagement and extrapolate those figures to estimate audience size. RV has a short video on its webpage declaring: 14,800 listeners; 71,000 monthly impressions on Twitter; a 19,600 28-day reach on Facebook; 15,000 monthly page views on its website; 5,700 + followers on Twitter; 3,000 listens to podcasts over a 14-day period; 8-10,000 footfall; 25-30,000 footfall at the Herts Country Show (at which RV is the official radio station and conducts live reports over the three days); and 1,100 entrants to competitions. As well as advertising campaigns, community stations can offer sponsorships for features like travel news and weather. Other arrangements that can make economic sense for a station, if not in revenue terms then in resource terms, include establishing contributor spots as contra-deal arrangements. For instance, Radio Lab has an arrangement with the local police force whereby recruitment ads are aired in return for a police liaison officer speaking to students for their radio projects.

Finding niche commercial sponsors for specific shows is another approach. One such example is Radio Verulam's *The Parsons Knows*, a local music show that was sponsored initially by the online gig guide Lemonrock, run by a friend of the show's producer, Denise. The current show sponsor is 3Ms Music, a London-based record production company. As is evident from this screenshot of part of 3Ms 'About Us' webpage, Denise also runs their corporate social media and has taken this opportunity to cross-promote her show and the radio station. Her cartoon profile picture is her personal brand that she uses across all platforms, including on her website where she presents herself as a 'community champion' and the CEO of PK Promotions, with the strapline 'The Parsons Knows – The Queen of the local radio scene!'⁶ A 'go-to person' with 'a finger in every pie', Denise produces the local music show, sells sponsorship and airtime and is a very active social media publicist. She regularly hosts the Radio Verulam-badged stages for local street festivals, Christmas lights switch-ons and other charity events. All volunteers at stations are important representatives as they go about their daily lives in and around the target community, but Denise is an example of someone extremely adept at building and capitalizing upon her high-profile role. Such local celebrityhood achieved through radio presenting can be exploited to raise awareness of community issues and campaigns and to fundraise for charity. One of the longest-serving breakfast presenters at Vibe recently abseiled down an office block to raise money for a local hospice. That stunt generated a lot of media publicity for the charity and the radio station as well as generating donations. The hospice now also advertises on the station, at a discounted rate. Thus, securing advertisers or show sponsors to community radio stations can come about organically through the communicative relations with contributors and listeners that have built up around station activities and shows.

⁶ <https://3msmusic.com/about-us/> accessed 15/7/2019

WUKA Wear – from an interview on *The Parents' Show* to sponsoring *Environment Matters*

A further example is how a local start-up business supplying environmentally safe, vegan-friendly underwear became a show sponsor on Radio Verulam. WUKA Wear was launched via a blog sharing market research on menstruation and featuring other women's health issues in summer 2017. This came to the attention of the two working mums on *The Parents' Show*, Lydia and Kathy. They are marketing-minded and find social media a valuable resource for sourcing stories as well as promoting upcoming shows. They have a high profile, having publicised the show well over the years and their Facebook page carries a wealth of videos, podcasts, links to other websites and photographs dating back to a high society-style launch party in 2011, featured in the glossy *Hertfordshire Life* magazine. The show is a trusted, valuable resource for the parenting community locally, covering a range of topics from "eating disorders in children, autism, imaginative play for young children, adoption, puberty, school selection, weaning and family finances".⁷ Having noticed WUKA Wear and tracked down the co-founder living locally, they invited her into the studio for an interview which they streamed simultaneously on Facebook Live. This decision meant that their listeners had the chance to see the entrepreneur handling and explaining the underwear. This created an influencer effect: "She's so engaging, and everybody wishes her well, you know. But that had over 500 views /7 shares" (RV_Lydia).

WUKA Wear went on to run a successful Kickstarter campaign that winter, which was also publicised on the Radio Verulam website in a blogpost.⁸ Public awareness of the business increased, as did sales and these positive outcomes stemming partly from the new business's encounter with the radio station encouraged further commitment as 'official supporter'. They went down the line of show sponsorship rather than advertising, to really target their niche audience. But as Kathy and Lydia already had a sponsor, Neves Solicitors, bringing in £2,000 a year to the station, an alternative opportunity was sought. The most appropriate feature was *Environment Matters* which is broadcast and streamed 'as live' every Wednesday evening as part of the *Local Life* show. This weekly spot shares locally-relevant news on sustainability and other environmental matters ranging from air pollution and plastics to vegan cuisine and wildlife. The producer/presenter, Amanda, is an active environmental campaigner and social media user. Her radio features are routinely repackaged as podcasts and listed on iTunes, Spotify, Android, TuneIn and Stitcher and so forth to further promote the issues covered. Each podcast carries an eye-catching thumbnail image from relevant stock images, logos from posters, fliers of the events or campaigns being featured, or photographs of the studio guests. WUKA Wear benefits from being associated with all this promotional, campaigning activity since it is credited as sponsor on-air and across online platforms. Amanda also follows, responds to and features their social media publicity, as is obvious on the show's webpage where the live Twitter feed is available.

⁷ <https://www.radioverulam.com/show/the-parents-show/> accessed 19/7/2019

⁸ <https://www.radioverulam.com/public-blog-post/help-ruby-kickstart-the-uks-first-period-underwear/> accessed 30/7/2019

Concluding comments

I have provided examples of how community radio staff and volunteers opportunistically create and exploit situations and interpersonal connections to benefit their stations. Indeed, they aim to build associations with "desirable events, people, programs" in order to reach "potential audiences, affiliates, and advertisers" (Eastman, 2000, p. 10). This promotional and PR mindset may not always bring in income but is nonetheless valuable in other ways. The approach facilitates the sourcing of relevant, informative programme content to achieve resonance and attunement with the people living and working in their catchment areas. It also contributes towards managing the reputation of a station; maintaining the trust, credibility and legitimacy it holds in the minds of stakeholders. What helps here is that volunteers tend to live locally and have their own, varying vested interests in the localities. So, there are 'real' networks of personal connections in play, not only the quasi-relationships that build up between presenters and their listeners on-air and online through social media. They are intimately involved and will usually behave responsibly and ethically in order to protect their personal reputations as well.

Many interpret their role in contributing towards a community's social gain as one which "oils the cogs of community" through providing opportunities for local organizations to use a station's media platforms to reach more consumers and users; to serve local interests and boost the local economy. A station must be seen and heard to serve the interests of, and thereby attract, larger and more loyal audiences from the target locality in order to increase the value of its airtime to potential advertisers. Stations need to be publicised locally and favourably in order to establish their position in the community *and* the marketplace. Nurturing mutually-beneficial relationships with local institutions, organizations, movers and shakers, can help to ensure a more sustainable future for all concerned. Since, if stakeholders trust in the station's social gain remit, they are more likely to invest in that good work through grants, gifts or advertising spend and by doing so, it will reflect well on them too. Thus, despite this widespread embracing of promotional culture in local community radio, practitioners share an enduring commitment to the ethos of doing radio for and with the communities they are licensed to serve.

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