

Feeding the beast. What it means to be a community radio presenter in the UK

Introduction

The experience of being a radio presenter is under-explored in academic literature, the tendency being to focus on audiences and content (Wolfenden, 2014: 7). For popular consumption there are ‘numerous biographies [and] autobiographies’ but little or no critical analysis (Killmeier, 2001: 353). This chapter will go some way to redress the situation, taking as its subjects not the glamorous, high profile, celebrity household names that publishers invest in, but the unpaid radio broadcasters in more mundane contexts. There is a rich seam of research on these practitioners in a small number of doctoral theses on community and ethnic minority radio.ⁱ These participants whose stories and opinions are being sought include a growing number of presenters involved in non-mainstream broadcasting in the UK, at a time when the professional radio industry, impacted by market and audience expectations, is seeing continued staffing cuts and resource centralisation leading to a dramatic fall-off in employment: to 13,000 at the last count (Statista, 2021). The author’s research, conducted between 2014 and 2021 (Coleman, 2021: 90-91), indicates that there could be up to twice as many volunteers in the licensed local community radio sector alone, regulated by the government’s Office for Communications (Ofcom). At the time of writing there are 315 of these not-for-profit stations listed (Ofcom, 2022), and the roll-out of new small-scale digital audio broadcasting licences has begun. In addition, but beyond this study’s remit, any internet search will reveal a proliferation of unlicensed online stations, licensed webcasters and short-term broadcasters, not to mention the explosion of podcasts. How these are monetised is also beyond the scope of this chapter, but in the licensed local community sector, thousands of practitioners are routinely spending multiple hours each week at home or in studio hubs sourcing, shaping and sharing media content and serving their target communities. Since it is rare for these presenters to be paid, their commitment is worth studying for what it might reveal about the allure of radio presenting more generally.

It is important to acknowledge and respect the contributions that volunteer practitioners make to society because they are assets in localities often serving underrepresented populations, which, as the recent pandemic has proven, can make a significant difference to people's lives. As Salvatore Scifo found through research earlier this century with presenters on three community stations: 'Making radio makes them feel more confident, boosts their self-esteem and gives them the possibility to speak about their cultures, their social groups and their lives, and helps to provide a local view on global issues.' (Scifo, 2011: 314). There follows an exploration of the emotional and affective aspects of the practice of volunteering as a presenter on local community radio. Although findings from research on Australian community radio implicate narcissism as a primary motivator (Order, 2014), other priorities and purposes will be identified. What is it about presenting shows on local community radio that makes the practice meaningful, worthwhile and in some ways compulsive? The intention is not to provide a single definitive explanation; the sheer multitude of experiences would render that impossible. Rather, evidence will be provided illustrating some of the felt, expressed and demonstrated motivations and impacts which will help create a more nuanced appreciation of radio presenting. The aim is to develop an understanding of what factors drive unpaid 'amateur' practitioners and what this means for stations' sustainability and social gain objectives.

Understanding radio presentation and community radio

To explore what it means to be a volunteer presenter on community radio, the experiential focus is switched away from the more commonly studied perspective of audience studies and how listeners are affected by station outputs (Tacchi, 2009), onto how presenters are affected by their own performances of the practice. The term 'presenter' is used to define those volunteers heard on-air and whose names are listed on the radio schedules; for ease it also covers 'disc jockeys' (DJs) or music show hosts (Montgomery, 1986). The presenting role in the community sector often includes research and technical production too, since the number of additional volunteer helpers may be

limited to studio assistants and regular contributors. Two other key terms used interchangeably are 'show' and 'programme.' Practitioners tend to use 'show' colloquially, especially when it is music-based. A 'programme' tends to be understood as containing more speech content, imbued with intellectual gravitas, although a genre known as 'talk show' has become popular around the world as a format for encouraging listeners to phone in and have their say on topical, often controversial, subjects (Turow, 1974; O'Sullivan, 2005; Ames, 2016). This study focuses on the presentation of content that is light, entertaining, magazine-style and considered more 'human interest' than headline news, such as conversations about local happenings and interviews with those involved, introducing music and artistes, discussing special interests and creating themed features.

By flipping Jo Tacchi's anthropological perspective on how 'affective rhythm' impacts listeners' lives to explore the impact on presenters, we can begin to appreciate how they too are affected by the 'qualities of radio sound and its capacity for mood generation.' (Tacchi, 2009: 171). Presenters are exposed to the music they play and the storytelling they engage in over the airwaves; habitually performing these tasks provides them with a sense of 'emotional security' (ibid.: 180-181). Here then, we seek to understand the emotional attachment of practitioners to their practice. Using Theodore Schatzki's socio-cultural framing for analysing sets of tasks as situated arrays of practice-arrangements (Schatzki, 2002), the notion of a 'teleoaffective structure' is applied as a schema to help account for what drives and sustains practitioners in pursuit of their practice objectives underlying any consciously articulated personal motivation. This is effectively a normative framework that becomes embodied and enacted upon by practitioners as they learn how to behave in a prescribed role: how to think, speak and act. This embodiedness is akin to and developed from the Bourdieusian notion of 'habitus' which has been applied to the work of professional journalists said to have a 'gut feeling' for their practice, as they respond pre-consciously to the 'doxa' of the field (Schultz, 2007: 192). When practitioners carry out their tasks unthinkingly, applying tacit or pre-reflexive knowledge, they are influenced by a host of factors: general understandings relating to the field; the practical intelligibility, skills and know-how required; rules and guidelines associated with

their role and positionality not only within their specific radio stations but in their wider and overlapping social circles spanning particular yet ever evolving spatial and temporal contexts (Schatzki, 2002: xi). Enacting their practice makes them feel a certain way too; there are emotional rewards.

Before proceeding, a note on the voluntary aspect of the practice is required. John Wilson's definition of volunteering is: 'Any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause.' (Wilson, 2000: 215). Wilson's 'ecology' approach features a range of correlates such as age, gender and race; he finds that an 'exchange theory' model applies because those with more [of the resource] human capital are likely to volunteer more (ibid.: 222). He identifies a 'peculiar moral economy of volunteering' whereby 'the normal predictions about the impact of job satisfaction on commitment do not apply.' (ibid.: 230). He cites 'role overload theory' (ibid.: 220) and another aspect of volunteering which arises in this chapter, that of burn out.

Studies exploring how and why people participate in local life indicate that a phenomenon of 'voluntary affiliation' occurs when 'organizations build membership through the recruitment and retention of homophilous individuals, many of whom come from existing members' core social networks.' (McPherson 1981 in Stern and Fullerton, 2009: 557). This was observed amongst the stations studied for the research informing this chapter, supporting the argument that volunteerism becomes something that is achieved through acting and interacting around shared interests, creating a localised 'community field.' (ibid.). What any community radio presenter stands to gain will vary from person to person, place to place, and will change over time, but as this chapter will illustrate, there are commonly experienced, non-monetary benefits from engaging in the practice. Practitioners derive a deep sense of satisfaction and pleasure, achieve personal fulfilment and accumulate social capital through giving up their time and energy for the benefit of others. As will be evident, at least as far as the respondents can articulate upon reflection and through conversation, presenting can become integral, if not pivotal, to their way of life: a passion if not an obsession.

Radio presenting as two-way communication and relationship building

The predominant framings of radio broadcasting centre on audience usage of the medium and content. Research on presentation techniques and the resulting formation of communicative, interpersonal relationships has focused on the listening experiences elicited rather than on those of presenting. As Helen Wolfenden states: 'In a world that was still emerging into mediated media relationships, Horton and Wohl [writing about para-social interaction in 1956] had not recognized that this connection was as potentially meaningful for presenters as it was for their listeners.' (Wolfenden, 2014: 15). Talk being the 'primary code' in this 'blind' medium, radio presentation is understood as discursive even when delivered in monologue form (Goffman, 1981; Montgomery, 1986; Scannell, 1991; Killmeier, 2001; Chignell, 2009; Theodosiadou, 2019). As Andrew Crisell outlines, when presenters speak phatically on-air, they are relying on 'an element of pretence or make believe'; they are 'at pains to give themselves and their listeners a sense of the latter's presence on the medium.' (Crisell, 1986: 182). They perform as if in a conversation with someone else, pausing for effect, simulating 'the timing characteristics of dialogue.' (Goffman 1981 in *ibid.*: 182).

Though presenters may use scripts, delivery is more effective if it sounds natural: extemporised and spontaneous (Crisell, 1986: 58–59). They must sound convincing when conveying specialist knowledge on a topic, such as music (Theodosiadou, 2019). Presenters interact 'authentically' with their audiences through acts of 'self-disclosure.' (Kim and Yang, 2019: 337). Indeed 'sharing testimonials' is a proven tactic for not only attracting attention but building audience loyalty because the presenter's performances of personal involvement convey a heightened 'feeling of social presence.' (Kim and Yang, 2019: 340). Presenters recount their own experiences as 'entertaining stories.' (O'Sullivan, 2005: 722). We can again switch perspective to consider that, in the same way listeners participate in a show by calling in and being put on-air to expose themselves for 'emotive' or 'exhibitionist' purposes (*ibid.*: 733), so too may presenters

experience social consequences when friends or family are listening who later give their opinion as to how it sounded. Thus, their performance is a display which they hope confers status on them by virtue of its perceived success, serving to satisfy their own needs in terms of self-esteem through a therapeutic, empowering process of self-disclosure to a community of listeners or fans (ibid.: 734-735).

Airing 'the small change of the everyday' is useful currency in imagined conversations with the audience (Montgomery, 1986: 423). It is after all, much-needed content. Thus, radio talk can 'create small moments of culture in the struggle to make meanings' through dialogue between audience members and a station's presenters with their 'manufactured personae' as sociable, affable and friendly hosts (Moss and Higgins, 1984: 355–356). The more confident practitioners with sufficient cultural and social capital can influence audiences and even shape the identity, image and symbolic capital of their stations. It is interesting to note that Crisell ventures: 'What is certainly true is that many popular broadcasters are shy introverts whose personalities seem to be transformed by the presence of a live microphone.' (Crisell, 1986: 186). This presumption of shyness will be revisited later in the chapter, but suffice to say, presenters work hard to attract a listener's focussed attention to counteract the tendency for radio to be on in the background as 'acoustic wallpaper.' (ibid.: 17).

Sociologist Erving Goffman is one of the few anglophone researchers to have studied the practitioner experience. His discussion of performativity in radio talk explains that certain occasions give rise to particular character roles being played or routines being performed which are convincing to audiences (Goffman, 1981). Martin Montgomery, too, describes how presenters (DJs) dynamically shift their fields of reference when talking to their listeners, from directly identifying 'specific' individuals, to segmenting sub-groups, or to more general addressing (Montgomery, 1986: 424). He argues that when presenters mention listeners as well as, and in the context of, the immediate environment of the studio, they are effectively treating them '*as if* co-present' both socially and spatially (Montgomery, 1986: 427-429). This aligns with Paddy Scannell's concept of the 'doubling of

place' when audience members imagine themselves to be where the presenter is speaking from, which Shaun Moores extends to 'pluralizing' of place through the usage of media (Moores, 2012). This notion prioritises listeners, yet the presenters are integral to the generation of these mediated communicative spaces and therefore the notion of a show becoming a familiar place where the listeners are spending time (Moores, 2012), becomes somewhere to which the presenter also develops a sense of belonging. Practitioners become emotionally attached to their shows, their listeners and to their practice and feel a sense of ownership.

The act of radio presenting has physical as well as psychological repercussions for the practitioner since the imagined closeness, the potential for quasi-intimacy between a presenter and listeners, has a physiological dimension. Early radio theorist, Rudolph Arnheim, describes the art of radio as addressing the audience not as a mass but as individuals, proceeding as if 'à deux' (Arnheim, 1936: 72). He notes: 'The physical fact that the normal distance between sound-source and microphone is inconsiderable, implies as a normal condition of the art of broadcasting a spiritual and atmospheric nearness of broadcaster and listener.' (ibid.: 77). When speaking into a microphone positioned at one's nose, close to the lips, there is a resonance. Using headphones enhances the sensory experience and there is a simultaneity – even when imagined – facilitating 'spatial propinquity of people.' (ibid.: 227). And, today, presenters do not have to rely on imagination to visualize their listeners, because they can engage with them on social media and can meet them through local in-person encounters. Kate Ames, researching Australian radio, describes how presenters 'work to foster and maintain a sense of listening community by taking on different roles—being a friend, host, counsellor, entertainer.' (Ames, 2015: n.p.). They are facilitators aiming to represent community interests by participating in conversations with guests or colleagues 'for an overhearing audience' which is like a club with its own 'rules, its rituals, its codes of conduct and its abiding principles, beliefs and values.' (ibid.). This understanding makes complete sense in community radio since it forms the foundation of the sector's very existence.

Community radio in the United Kingdom

The principle of community broadcasting is predicated on the Utopian vision for radio which Bertolt Brecht described a century ago. Rather than be a 'one-sided' distributor which 'merely hands things out', he saw the medium's potential as a two sided 'communication system' for public life (Brecht, [1932] 1979: 25-27). Community radio promises audience participation in producing a station's outputs. In the UK, legislation for licensing community broadcasters on renewable five-year terms was eventually introduced in the early 2000s (Scifo, 2011). Licences are for analogue FM and some medium wave (AM) frequencies covering limited geographical areas, 5 – 10 kilometres, with local digital multiplexes now emerging too. The primary aim of each licensed, not-for-profit community station, reflected in the 'key commitments' to which their volunteers sign up, is to transmit an agreed minimum number of hours of locally produced content each week and, in the process, contribute towards social gain or benefit. In other words, these practitioners collectively help create a sense of community; they have the common good of their target audience at heart. Through their performances, they become part of a global movement, practising community radio broadcasting to represent specific ethnic or cultural ways of life or reflect geographical areas that are otherwise not well catered for by other mainstream radio stations (Bailur, 2012; Browne, 2012; Moylan, 2018).

Although each station is uniquely tailored to its own locality and target community, there are sufficient commonalities of practice across the sector to allow shared experiences to be identified; notably the commitment these volunteers make to appear repeatedly in their allotted slots with refreshed shows: to create variety in the sameness, balancing continuity and reassurance with newness. When it comes to programming a station's broadcast output, some licensees rely more heavily on playing particular genres of music than others but there is a requirement to produce some speech content. Financial constraints mean that the most time- and cost-effective approach is to broadcast live or as-live. Audience expectations and the relentless demand for material to fill programme schedules on an hourly, daily and weekly basis are challenging for a volunteer workforce

held to same standards as mainstream stations under the Broadcasting Code. Some stations benefit from the involvement of current or former broadcasting professionals who have their own shows or are training volunteers. Presenters introduce tracks and share trivia with the unheard listener, and they converse with callers or studio guests to impart meaningful speech that includes information on local happenings, projects, events, fundraisers and so forth. They may share or invite updates and eye-witness accounts for topical discussions qualifying as 'civic news talk.' (Hutchby, 2001: 482). Presenters are constantly planning interviews, discussions, phone-ins and features that will be of interest to their listeners, to attract their attention, entertain them and provide useful information. This on-air output is complemented by websites and social media posts to engage and interact with listeners, to promote shows as well as to source content and potential guests.

Ethnographic research findings attest to the benefits of learning to produce and present community radio this way. When incorporated routinely into the everyday lives of volunteer practitioners these activities constitute a practice which, although creating pressure to deliver to deadlines, can also enhance their outlook, mood, self-confidence, and motivation. Women broadcasters, for instance, can experience a feeling of empowerment (Mitchell, 2000: 6). Nazan Haydari describes how female volunteers at Desi Radio for the Panjabi community of Southall in London, find themselves part of a supportive local broadcasting community that helps provide a sort of 'therapy' to cope with the stresses of daily life at home such as retirement and divorce (Haydari, 2018: 68–69). Haydari writes about the 'sense of comfort' experienced by her respondents and how one of them, involved in the provision of music, poetry, news, and discussion, said that: 'The radio production process facilitated a relationship between her identity as a program [sic] presenter, as a member of Panjabi community, and as a woman.' (ibid.: 71). This volunteer has the power to voice her own opinion, to integrate cultural resonance into the poetry she writes for her show, but also to: 're-write the news and pick what is relevant to our community and people, include some news from East and West Panjab, and from here, England.' (ibid.: 70). Most tellingly, the respondent admitted:

‘Now that I am doing the show my mind is always there.’ (ibid.: 71). This indicates that she carries her role as radio presenter everywhere she goes.

Community radio for social and personal gain

Evaluating the impact of being a community radio presenter requires an exploration of how it feels to perform under the pressure of producing refreshed content to fulfil the station’s programme schedule commitments. The evidence used in this study is derived from the findings of a broader research project which involved six community radio stations covering market towns in four English counties: Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire and Somerset. Whilst not achieving the depth of ethnographic immersion advocated in Robert Watson’s thesis, nevertheless this author did draw on her own volunteering experiences to ‘enter the lifeworld and find out what is going on, identifying how people recognise and share their interests, what it feels like to those involved.’ (Watson, 2017: 231). Participant observation fieldwork and studio visits were supplemented by online monitoring of the stations and their social media as well as radio industry, community media sector and academic discourse. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-two respondents to ascertain how they became involved in community radio and why they continue to volunteer. They were asked to reflect on their practice, what inspires them and what they feel they contribute to their local community. Their responses suggest that certain issues arising, experiences and feelings are common across stations. In addition, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the author conducted an online survey and follow-up interviews with twelve of the responding community radio managers about adapting to lockdown (Coleman, 2020). Having been a community radio presenter, she empathised with the respondents and could relate to their expressions of enthusiasm and emotional involvement with their shows and stations.

Basic thematic analysis has been undertaken on the transcripts and other fieldwork data to determine how the role and responsibilities become embodied in practitioners to the extent that their identity as community broadcasters seeps into other parts of their lives and social activities and

can become all-consuming. The examples shared below have been selected to illustrate specific, situated, and notable instances of practice which provide insights into what it means to volunteer in community radio. Quotes from practitioners at four stations have been highlighted because they help illustrate the author's points whilst representing the diversity that abounds within relatively close proximity just north of London: Radio Verulam for the general population living in and around the market town of St Albans in Hertfordshire; Vibe FM for young adults in the metropolitan Watford area, also in Hertfordshire; Inspire FM, aimed at the local Muslim community in the industrial Bedfordshire town of Luton; and Radio LaB, the student radio station for the University of Bedfordshire also based in Luton. The information collected on motivations and meaningfulness has been divided according to researcher impressions and respondent expressions of serving others in the community and of the self-serving benefits which, as will become clear, are intertwined.

Volunteering on community radio to serve others

The practitioners who participated in this research profess to believing that they give something back to their communities through their shows, by entertaining listeners with conversation, topical features and playing feelgood music, as well as by providing information covering relevant happenings, supporting worthy causes, and promoting local businesses. Radio Verulam's Pat, a retired businesswoman and local councillor, has produced and presented two series for the station: *Outspoken*, a politics and current affairs show, and *Days of our Lives* for 'baby boomers' like herself. She described the time spent researching as 'considerable' which partly explains why she stopped working on the time-sensitive *Outspoken*, requiring two and a half days a week preparation for the hour-long live broadcast of interviews with local spokespersons. Her own subsequent creation, *Days of our Lives*, designed to be a six-week pre-recorded series, routinely requires over a day a week of preparation. Yet it feels worth it for her, because, in between dealing with her own serious health issues, and being a director of a UK charity raising money for cancer research, she identifies with her intended audience:

Now, we actually have some time to do things that we want to do. And that is the whole ethos of the programme ... I do holidays you can go on, or activities, University of the Third Age, things like that. I have all those type of guests on the programme but at the same time, you can't ignore that when you get older there are certain things that you may have to face. Certain health issues, for example ... I have a doctor who comes on and talks about some of the nasty things that we can get. But again, the message is always that, actually, there is life after cancer. There is life after heart disease. There are lots of things you can do even if you've had terrible illnesses. You know you must never give up. Enjoy life while you've got it.

(Pat, Verulam, 4 April 2018)

Also on Verulam, the weekly *Parents Show* addresses difficult issues like self-image and eating disorders. Consulting local parents like themselves, teachers and community leaders, the presenting team interviews experts and provides opportunities for children and young adults to take part and have their voices aired. One volunteer, Lydia, declared: 'I love doing this job, I really do.' (Lydia, Verulam, 21 March 2018). She especially enjoys people coming into the studio and capturing 'beautiful moments' such as when three teenaged schoolboys movingly praised their favourite teacher during an on-air discussion about self-harm and depression. Lydia used words like 'amazing,' 'great' and 'fantastic' to describe how presenting satisfies in her the desire to pursue a range of different interests:

Between [me], Kathy and Seema, we're pretty much tapped into the community, just because we love it. I think it probably stems from [me] being Irish and being used to living in a place where you know people. And I think we try to recreate that here, as much as we can because it makes us feel at home, you know.

(Lydia, Verulam, 21 March 2018)

Co-producer and presenter, Kathy, claimed to not 'particularly enjoy presenting.' (Kathy, Verulam, 3 March 2018). What really motivates her is getting people on-air who lack confidence. 'It can be completely transformative for them' she said and described an occasion when she interviewed a visually impaired child about playing ball sports. The following day 'the whole school was buzzing about it,' making the boy feel like a celebrity (ibid.).

Down the road at Watford-based Vibe FM, one of the founding volunteer presenters and mentor to new recruits, Lee, emphasised the social value of his breakfast show and how he uses this platform to 'help out with the community side of things.' (Lee, Vibe, 7 June 2018). Born and raised in the area, he often not only publicises but participates directly in fundraising events for local charities. The younger presenters interviewed displayed equally impressive levels of positive energy and appreciation of the station's community focus. Even though this is primarily a contemporary music station, they aim to serve local listener needs. Drivetime presenter, and recent university graduate, Chris, explained:

It's not about me, it's about, you know, the listener and they wanna get home and they wanna listen to the music as well, but if I can fill in with some interesting stuff I wanna talk about or just some conversational speeches to help them get home after a long day at work, you know, I try and do that as best I can.

(Chris, Vibe, 7 June 2018)

A fellow volunteer at Vibe, Nathan, 18 years old at the time of the research, is equally committed to putting the audience first. Despite voice tracking, which is a system for pre-recording vocal drop-ins in advance of transmission, it is important to him that his shows feel real, live and relevant:

Being on my feet and being engaged with the air around me is a big part of the energy on the radio and I have to put myself into that time zone. I have to think to myself: “Right these guys are on a Friday night, they've just had a very long, slog at work. What do they wanna hear?” They don't wanna hear some guy sat down on a couch with a cup of tea in his hand having a ramble. They wanna hear that energy and bounce off that ... when you're voice tracking and pretending to be as excited as you are, it is a performance for the listener ... I want it to sound organic and like I really care and am excited about it. Hopefully, that comes across.

(Nathan, Vibe, 11 June 2018)

Twenty miles north, the Bedfordshire town of Luton is home to Inspire FM and one of their higher profile presenters, Shemiza. As guest speaker on a webinar ‘Lessons from community media’ hosted by the Media Reform Coalition, she enthused about community radio, calling it a ‘beautiful space.’ (Shemiza, Inspire, on Media Reform Coalition, 2021). She said: ‘I feel more love and passion for ... community radio, especially in the pandemic ... To have a voice that you can actually understand and representative of you is so, so needed.’ (ibid.). For Shemiza, part of the attraction to community radio presenting is a conviction that Muslim stories deserve to be ‘fully represented, in a coherent way.’ (ibid.) Through her show, she provides ‘a safe space for the community to come together and actually have an opportunity for them to be heard where they may not be able to be heard elsewhere.’ (ibid.) She explained:

I’ve stayed with Inspire FM for a good ten years and the reason why I do that, I think it’s out of love, it really it is out of love. I don’t feel I’ll be able to put my heart and soul anywhere

else as much because I just feel that I'm in control of what I'm projecting. I'm in control of the stories I'm able to share, I'm in control of what I feel that my audience wants to listen to and what the audience wants to say. And having that control, having that opportunity to be able to have a space where you can create without an agenda is just a wonderful space to be ... I actually value the platform that I have because I do see it's making a massive, big difference, it's empowering those voices to have their narrative shared in a safe space.

(Shemiza, Inspire, on MRC, 13 May 2021)

Self-serving: community radio for career progression

As well as being a platform for expressing under-represented voices, training and mentoring in media and social skills is commonly written into community stations' key commitments (Scifo, 2011: 318). Volunteers and trainees benefit by accruing production know-how and other transferable skills which can equip them for future careers in the communications industry and beyond. Terry, employed by the University of Bedfordshire to teach radio and audio, coordinates the student station Radio Lab. He described feeling privileged to work there, witnessing how often students use radio presenting to boost their self-confidence and to gain experience in socialising, meeting and dealing with people. Terry explained: 'A lot of the people who volunteer here are quite shy and ... they're doing this to drive themselves to get better at talking and listening.' (Terry, Radio LaB, 4 May 2018). Graduating student, Jack, is one such success story, having overcome shyness to become one of the station's four student managers, presenting several weekly shows. He was very dedicated and proud of his contribution:

I can safely say I've given this everything. There's not much more I could have given. I've literally given blood for this station ... When I wake up in the morning I'm straight away working and stuff to usually when I go to bed.

(Jack, Radio LaB, 4 May 2018)

This eagerness to invest energy in radio broadcasting echoed that demonstrated by the young recruits at Watford's Vibe FM. As well as striving to become professional broadcasters, they love the thrill of presenting and enjoy becoming well-known as key figures in their local social or special interest circles. Their on-air and online social media presence earns them recognition and social capital outside of the station. Some of them continue volunteering even as their professional careers are developing. During interviews, they expressed a sense of belonging to the station community having built relationships there that matter to them. The radio station is embedded in their social lives, their enthusiasm palpable. Chris recalled how he started:

So, I came in ... for two weeks ... [to] sit in with a couple of the presenters and see and get a feel for what it was like. Loved it and thought it was great and thought it was something I'd be very keen on trying to do.

(Chris, Vibe, 7 June 2018)

This feeling is evidently shared by older, more experienced volunteers, such as those who provide training and shadowing opportunities at Vibe. They value being part of the station as it forms their identity. By demonstrating professional competence, they can put previous achievements or missed career opportunities into perspective. Lee, who has been involved since the launch of the station in 2011, expressed this sentiment:

You know, I wouldn't work at a national station or a commercial station ... Cos I like to think I've got a bit of a personality about me, and I like that to come across and a lot of stations wouldn't allow that. So, they wouldn't have me, so that's why I've never really pursued it cos I believe I'd be wasting so much effort and exhausting myself trying desperately to make it, to fit into some [box].

(Lee, Vibe, 7 June 2018)

The longer serving volunteers at Verulam were articulate about supporting volunteers and trainees as part of their community service remit. Jonny, a teacher at the time of the interview, explained the duty of care he feels a station has:

Radio's all about communication ... We need to be pastoral ... that whole element about the community and looking after people and community projects. When you've got volunteers, it is so different from managing people who are being paid ... you can't just say: "Oh, your show's rubbish, you're gone!" Which is what will happen in the real world of radio. Once your contract's up, you'll be off the air like that. Instead, we've got to try and help.

(Jonny, Verulam, 4 April 2018)

Jonny referred to the studio as 'an old friend' and looked very much at home there. He described the station as slickly run, music-based but with local links. He explained how the management find a place on the schedule for people whose voices might not normally be considered 'right' for radio:

From 7 o'clock in the evening, you've got all these wonderful, more bespoke local shows ... Some are really high quality ... and then you get other people who perhaps would not get a sniff at anywhere near being on a radio station, presenting shows, and that's wonderful, playing the music they love. You know, it's great. And it's about encompassing that.

(Jonny, Verulam, 4 April 2018)

Self-serving: broadcasting as an enjoyable hobby

Everyone interviewed for this research enjoys broadcasting, even those with additional, sometimes challenging and frustrating station responsibilities who often feel over-worked. Verulam's founding director and presenter, Clive, explained the need for volunteers to do more than present shows; they need to help keep the station going, since it is a company with a turnover of £60,000. He cited several critical administrative tasks such as paying the bills that need doing on a day-to-day basis and admitted that roles like station manager must be split to avoid individuals taking on too much because they have had 'some experience of people burning out a bit on that.' (Clive, Verulam, 21 March 2018). The station's company chair at the time of research, Nick, routinely delivered the first hour of Breakfast Show traffic and travel and described presenting his own show on Thursday mornings. He quickly added: 'I shouldn't use [the term] "my show." I always tell people: "It's not *your* show, it's the radio station's show!"' (Nick, Verulam, 13 April 2018).

This point of view was reiterated in an interview with programme controller, Andy, commenting during the pandemic on member subscriptions to the station:

It's not membership of a broadcasting club ... Some people ... feel that they have the right to be on air. And previously I think they've been given that impression. But over the last few years, I've been correcting that impression ... we're trying to change the mood ... they need

to realise that they're lucky to have the opportunity. And with that opportunity comes responsibilities. And if they don't meet those responsibilities, you know, if someone says: "Oh, I'm leaving, then!" Fine, all the best, you know. And I think that's a real cultural change.

(Andy, Verulam, 17 June 2020)

Despite this, the respondents at Verulam appreciated the opportunity to reflect on and talk about their radio volunteering; many expressed a sense of pride at their accomplishments and their passion for the topics they covered. Jonny repeatedly referred to 'my shows' in his interview and sounded exceedingly satisfied with his track record, having been with the station ten years already. And even though Pat admitted the commitment to producing *Days of our Lives* can be 'very difficult', she clearly cherishes her time at the station. She feels excited to be there, claiming to love the smell of the studio. Her involvement and the feeling of connection with her show's audience is life-affirming. Director, Clive, agreed:

It's very important in anything you do, you know, paid work or anything you do voluntarily or out of, in your own time – has to be fun. And this is fun. Sometimes it's frustrating, sometimes incredibly annoying, sometimes you have problems with people or whatever but at the end of the day – you look back and say "Gosh, we went to this great thing, we did this and we did that." We have fantastic opportunities offered to us.

(Clive, Verulam, 21 March 2018)

Retiree Ian, presenter of *Music Memories* on Verulam, looks forward to the time he spends each week at his computer, going through his music collection, putting together a playlist,

researching and writing a script. When asked if he has a specific listener in mind, he said he prioritises his own enjoyment and sounding authentic:

I want to feel like I'm alive and enjoying it. I don't actually picture anyone in particular ... occasionally you might slip in a mention, you know: "My friend Alan is travelling back to Florida and I'm playing this for him". But I don't do a lot of that because some of it sounds a bit phoney.

(Ian, Verulam, 31 January 2018)

For the most part, the respondents acknowledged that they find the satisfaction derived from volunteering in community radio outweighs the time commitment and any stress involved. For some, it is enmeshed in their lifelong aspirations. For instance, community radio veteran, Phil, one of *Verulam's* founding members, said:

I'd love to have done it incredibly successfully and been the next Tony Blackburn ... but you know, there's a certain bit of luck and probably extra talent that you need ... It's wanting to be heard ... I just want them to hear the music that I'm playing ... I like the presenting, you know, I like to be the man playing it and being the DJ ... I absolutely love music.

(Phil, Verulam, 29 March 2018)

Verulam's Jonny also confessed to dreaming about becoming the next household name in radio:

I'm a real radio geek ... I had this fascination with radio, being in the car going to school with Terry Wogan on the radio, in my dad's car. Not understanding there were all these bands in the studio, didn't realise it was records ... and really fell in love with it. And I wanted to be on the radio.

(Jonny, Verulam, 4 April 2018)

Contrary to Crisell's assumption that many radio presenters are shy introverts, plenty encountered during this research gave the impression of relishing opportunities to become well-known locally. Denise for instance, presenter of *The Parsons Knows*, a weekly local music show on Verulam, took great delight in recounting instances when she is recognised: 'I get stopped, you know, it's ridiculous, literally stopped in the street. People say they listen or whatever. I mean, I was in the dentist the other day, and this bloke walked in and said: "Oh, I know who you are, I listen to your shows."' (Denise, Verulam, 8 March 2018). Lee on Vibe laughed about being 'chatted up' and admitted that offering to do birthday dedications gives him the 'buzz' of being thanked for doing so and receiving positive listener correspondence. He seemed genuinely appreciative of anyone listening: 'They choose to listen day in, day out to me on the breakfast show. I'm quite humbled by that.' (Lee, Vibe, 7 June 2018). He said that his two sons in their early twenties never admit to listening. He suspected: 'They don't want to give me too much credit, I think [but] they know, I 'spose, it's kind of cool.' He explained how he answers people when they ask him why he does it for no money:

Do you get paid for doing your hobbies? No, cos you're doing something you enjoy doing.

And that's what I say, you know. It's a hobby to me, that I enjoy doing and helping out and it

makes a difference to people sometimes, you know. That's really in a nutshell why I do it. Sometimes I'm tired and [laughs] I think to myself. Yeah!

(Lee, Vibe, 7 June 2018)

As for the younger generation, Vibe's Chris said he is inspired by the BBC presenter Dermot O'Leary's retelling of advice from the late Terry Wogan:

They either like you or they don't. The most important thing is to enjoy it. And if you don't enjoy it, don't do it. And I love doing it. Cos obviously being a community station and stuff, people say: "Ooh, why do you do it?" I just say cos I just get a great kick out it. I love doing it. I'm given some creative freedom. I get to talk to people I may never get the chance to talk to in anything else.

(Chris, Vibe, 7 June 2018)

Understanding community broadcasters as self-serving covers those practitioners who are honing their craft for future employment and strategically building up their social capital for other purposes in their community, as well as those who also or instead enjoy this type of volunteering purely as a hobby. Whatever the initial motivation, whether the energy channelled is enthusiasm for music, the arts, the environment or sport, doing this activity is a way to meet people, make friends and have somewhere special to spend time and belong to, both a physical studio hub and the virtual, communicative space of a radio show. Another by-product of volunteer presenting is the sense of pride it yields. Performing this practice, committing to sustaining a quality show and engaging with listeners in order to successfully represent their interests stimulates a sense of purpose. Connecting and conversing with listeners can be immensely enjoyable. There is the adrenaline rush of being in a

live studio, of being in control of the desk whilst at the microphone and yet not quite being certain of what might be said next. Combined with this is the affective pleasure that playing and hearing one's favourite music inspires.

Feeding the beast, feeling the buzz

The beast in the title of this chapter may first be perceived as representing the voracious demand for fresh material (Keefer, 2004), but as the evidence unfolds, it takes on a further meaning – representing the felt need within the respondents, passionate about their craft and their community. 'Feeding the beast' corresponds not only to the necessity of aligning with the conventions of radio broadcasting practice and the duty to deliver on audience expectations, but there are more personal urges involved. Local community radio presenters develop an emotional attachment to their imagined audience through mediated engagements, reinforced by in-person encounters and dealing with guest contributors and interviewees. They feel noticed and appreciated, their lives are anchored by the reliable scheduled regularity with which their shows occur. Presenters are at the heart of the sense of community they are facilitating through 'serving others' by amplifying news and narratives that listeners can relate to and feel represented in. Thus, there are 'self-serving' benefits too; by volunteering in this role, they fulfil their own need for self-esteem, a sense of achievement and recognition for those that would pursue it. Add to this the sense of purpose derived from the pressure of a deadline and the thrill induced by the performative nature of the role.

Attachment occurs on a physical level too, as a response to the sensuousness involved in the act of radio presenting. The practitioner feels it through bodily exposure and the senses: the sight of glowing lights, meters, screens and digital devices signifying power and hyper capability, the feel of the faders and clicking buttons conveying control. There is the smell of a familiar radio studio, sound proofed and air conditioned, and the sensation of hearing one's own voice, reassuring in its vitality, the voices of others and the vibrations of those exchanges as well the music which inspires

memories and moods. All these sensual gratifications combine to significant affective impact, especially when things are running smoothly with no technical errors, to produce a deeply pleasurable buzz. Hence the strong inclination, if not compulsion, to reproduce those conditions through routinely presenting on community radio.

These findings support the understanding, as corroborated by Simon Order's research, that part of the social gain delivered by community radio is felt by the practitioners themselves: '[It] is as much about the benefits for the volunteers as the benefits for the listening community.' (Order, 2014: 148). They benefit emotionally and in various practical ways through their loyalty and commitment to producing and presenting shows to suit the tastes of, and through dialogue with, their target audience, be that a specific ethnic community, demographic or interest group focusing on a specialist music genre or specific issue such as ageing, parenting or the environment. Though personal motivations vary, engaging in the practice involves a complex relationship between self-serving and serving others and yields a sense of personal satisfaction and pride. As well as providing a purpose to life, helping build a sense of identity and belonging for the presenter which can enhance mental well-being, the role can also generate an enthusiasm verging on becoming a compulsion: little wonder then it can lead to burn out. Recognising this and fairly managing presenters' contributions is important in order to ensure a station's sustainable future as a community asset by retaining a competent volunteer workforce whilst making space for new voices on-air.

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ⁱ Examples include: Coleman, Josephine (2020), *Talk of the town: exploring the social site of local content production for community radio*, Birkbeck, University of London; Rimmer, Annette (2019), *Breaking the Silence: Community Radio, Women and Empowerment*, The University of Manchester; Scifo, Salvatore (2011), *The origins and development of community radio in Britain under New Labour (1997-2007)*, University of Westminster; Shember-Critchley, Eleanor (2012), *Ethnic Minority Radio: interactions and identity*, Manchester Metropolitan University; Watson, Robert (2017) *Participation and Advocacy in Community Media*, De Montfort University. All these and more are available at <https://ethos.bl.uk/>