Strength in Numbers. The Challenges of Running Community Radio in the United Kingdom

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Introduction

On 13 February each year, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) marks World Radio Day. On the occasion's tenth anniversary in 2021, the value of radio was highlighted as resilient, sustainable, adaptable, accessible and connective in a rapidly changing world, especially in the face of crises and disasters (UNESCO, 2021a). A subsequent campaign, World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2021, focused on the threats facing journalists and affirmed the importance of 'information as a public good' (UNESCO 2021b). Although UNESCO sees radio broadcasting in three distinct forms – public (publicly funded), commercial and community – it also took the opportunity to highlight the importance of locally relevant provision and citizen involvement. This call for recognition was echoed by the European branch of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), noting the 'lack of meaningful support to community media initiatives in most countries' (AMARC 2021). Surprisingly, this lack of support is experienced profoundly by many community station operators and practitioners in the relatively affluent and highly-regulated United Kingdom.

The British government currently provides a licensing framework for over 300 community stations across Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. Operators are left to their own devices, within the regulatory conditions, to negotiate arrangements regarding studio premises, funding and so forth. Just like any small business, they must fend for themselves using a range of income generation models. The only potential money available directly from the government's coffers via the department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is distributed through the Community Radio Fund by the communications regulator, Ofcom. This fund, originally worth £500,000, was established to support the first licensed community stations launching from 2005. The scheme continues to grant monetary awards but only 'core running costs' are eligible, defined as covering areas such as financial and volunteer management which stimulate entrepreneurial activity and growth, rather than any capital costs or operational bills (Ofcom 2021: 4-5). In addition, the total amount available annually has since reduced to around £400,000, for which the ever-increasing

number of station teams must compete by impressing the independent panel with written applications. With each round of selective funding awards, there are stations which miss out. This lack of motivation to financially undergird the entire sector has been called out by community radio practitioners and scholars (Buckley 2009; Scifo 2016).

Furthermore, there remain many aspiring broadcasting groups having to settle for temporary restricted service licences (RSLs), others operating online or even illicitly on analogue frequencies as pirate radio. Whilst steps are being taken to accommodate this demand to run radio stations, such as issuing webcasting licences and rolling out the new small-scale digital system (SSDAB), opportunities remain limited.

This state of affairs warrants further academic research but is rarely invested in. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the responsibilities involved in managing licensed stations and the mounting pressures experienced. Findings are shared from recent fieldwork and since half the interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of lockdown is also noted.

Community radio as a public asset

Community radio is often looked upon as a wellspring of diversity; the expectation being that media organisations which operate outside of the mainstream yield a 'colossal variety of formats' (Downing 2000: x). Localism is one of the defining characteristics of community radio for 'free expression', democracy, and enhancing and promoting community relations and solidarity (Howley 2005: 2). Self-management is another aspect, and as this article will demonstrate, creates a 'messy' reality, in that the overlap between community radio, commercial and public broadcasting becomes blurred, since:

> Many local community-based radio stations fulfil an entertaining and informative function for specific communities […] by reproducing mainstream formats, adopting semi-professional governing structures, and/or financing the costs that come with running the community station with advertising and sponsorships (Cammaerts 2009: 5–6).

Evidence would seem to support the argument that the regulation of media communications is all about power and who has control of it to determine its priorities (Cammaerts 2009: 3), inevitably politicising the public's purposeful access to the means of production. Licensed community radio operators in the UK must be not-for-profit organisations which need to be

run along business principles whilst delivering on their contractual service commitments. These 'key commitments' are agreed through the application process during which certain 'social gain' aims are established such as improving social cohesion and engendering diversity of involvement and representation. However, when it comes to central government policy and joined-up thinking around investing in communities, community radio can be undervalued due to a lack of awareness if not respect for its potential to perform public service and contribute positively to society through the social gain remit. Where there is acknowledgement of community radio's ability to serve hard-to-reach populations, it can make a real difference. For instance, on World Radio Day in 2021, three station managers shared their COVID-19 experiences on a live-streamed discussion organised by Doc Media Centre, which was later podcast (Decentered Media 2021). Speaking on behalf of *Ujima Radio* in multicultural Bristol, broadcast co-manager Miranda Rae recounted how the city's Mayor had telephoned her before lockdown to advise that the NHS and the government would need the station to help keep the area's Black and Asian minority and ethnic communities informed with important news updates and health advice. She and her colleague worked tirelessly to keep the station on-air, tailoring a new schedule for those volunteers able to create content remotely, and sourcing new grant funding when their advertising income plateaued.

The question of meeting regulatory standards in terms of output whilst sustainably providing locally authentic non-mainstream variety creates an interesting conundrum. There appears to be an increasingly marked ideological distinction between those community radio practitioners identifying as belonging to a movement aligned still with grassroots do-it-yourself motivations, and those who think of themselves as comprising a professionalised sector, having been institutionalised by the passing of the Communications Act and Community Radio Order in 2004. Grassroots campaigning for the right to broadcast radio produced for *and by* the people had been happening on an international scale since the 1940s, but legitimation in the United Kingdom was hindered partly by party politics and partly by competing media interests (Coleman 2021: 27–29). These differences in understandings regarding the purpose, and to some extent, the practice of community radio manifest in, but are accommodated by, the arrays of practitioner approaches and management models. At times, this plurality in interpreting how to broadcast a service catering to and benefiting a local audience, or a specific sub-group in a particular location, causes tension in the wider station operators' community, although sharing their frustrations at meetings or in online

conversations over the precarious nature of their undertakings can also create opportunities for bonding.

Elsewhere, the author has discussed the need for stations to engage people who are well-established and influential in their local communities, embodying significant social status and possessing useful networking connections (Coleman 2021: 49). This is vital when applying and competing for a licence in the first place and securing the investment required to set up a station and then generate income to sustain ongoing operations. Having a strong core of 'movers and shakers' on a station also helps in terms of supplying sufficient content and the presenters to deliver it, supported by other volunteer practitioners such as producers, studio assistants and reporters. The crucial ingredient is 'raw passion' for keeping stations on air (Coleman 2021: 113), but this counts for little if the business model crumbles.

This article recounts how licence holders organise their operations to deliver their self-determined key commitments which identify the target audience and the amount and type of content produced locally each week. Operating in conditions where resources are limited and regulations are strict, failure to adhere can lead to fines, suspension or withdrawal of licences (Ofcom 2017: 23). The following section presents descriptions of how stations are run, illustrating some of the challenges faced: the time commitment; managing the volunteer workforce; negotiating the balance between income generation and outgoings such as equipment, infrastructure costs, and professional services. A discussion of the findings will follow before recommendations are proposed.

Surveying the field

The evidence discussed in this article was gathered in two phases between 2018 and 2021 through participant observations, interviews, social media monitoring and an online questionnaire. The first wave of research on five community stations in market towns in England involved visiting studios and interviewing practitioners, twelve of whom held management positions. The second wave from 2020 yielded responses from 44 stations across the United Kingdom. The self-selected cohort of managers completed a survey about how they and their station colleagues were coping during the pandemic (Coleman 2020). Twelve of these respondents were also followed up for further interviews, selected to represent the spectrum of reported pandemic-induced changes to programming output from significant increase to significant reduction. In total 24 interview transcripts with managers at

fifteen stations have been revisited here and key examples are focused on to highlight the main issues.

Characteristics of the data set

The management positions represented in the sample cover a range of operations, business and director roles. Ten are paid to work at eight of the surveyed stations. Each respondent is also involved in presenting and producing content, up to eight or nine shows a week in some cases. Of the twelve encountered during the earlier field research, two are under the age of 40, only three are women, and everyone can be categorised as 'white'. Although the net was spread further in the subsequent online questionnaire, the pool is still overwhelmingly male (eight of the 44 identify as female, one chooses not to say), four prefer not to state their ethnicity, one is Asian, one Black and the remaining 38 are 'white'. The data collected also indicates that the average size of a management team or board of members running a station is six; two stations have just two, and three stations have ten to twelve. In the interests of promoting gender balance, for the follow-up interviews used in this article five female respondents were selected and seven males.

Text from these 24 manager interviews, representing fifteen stations in total, has undergone a basic thematic analysis. Collectively, their practice broadly aligns with the current charter of the CMA which is close to the principles of its previous incarnation, the Community Radio Association (Lewis and Booth 1989: 214). These reflect understandings of community media which include objectives such as providing training opportunities and access to production facilities and platforms for under-represented groups and enabling community engagement. Local ownership, not-for-profit status and editorial independence are also recognised, as is the importance of operating in ways to ensure diversity, equality, inclusion and accountability. There is clearly resonance with UNESCO's three principles of community media: Independence; Governance; and Service (UNESCO 2017). The utopian aims of the movement for grassroots empowerment through broadcasting are occasionally referred to, but the respondents' focus here is primarily on the everyday realities of running community radio in pursuit of social gain.

Organisational structures

Figure 1 uses data collected to chart different station set-ups. This table and how the managers consulted in this research describe their organisational, staffing and volunteering

approaches serve to illustrate the variety of contexts and practitioner experiences in the sector.

[Insert 'JC_Fig 1_Table_ respondent …' here. Caption to read: A table to illustrate which of the surveyed radio stations pay their managers, whether in full-time (FT) or part-time (PT) roles, and which do not, as well as if they charge their volunteers membership fees.]

Arrangements regarding studios and station premises range from large sums of money paid on building leases to mutually beneficial deals and charitable acts on the part of local businesses and community organisations. For the purposes of this article specific stations have been selected as examples because they fall into two broad categories, exhibiting similar characteristics. The primary defining aspect around which the findings are organised is whether practitioners are paid or not. For instance, the two university stations who are hosted by higher education institutions seem reasonably secure in terms of funding. In the case of *Radio LaB*, one of the academic departments, 'Culture and Communication', directly fund all operations including a full-time manager's salary.

Stations with paid employees

Academy 105.9 FM Folkestone

The focus of *Academy*'s operations is training 'with the radio station bolted on to the side' (Sharp 2020). With a background in broadcast engineering, studio management and training, the station manager, David Sharp, was appointed by a board of trustees to run the educational charity working with 1,000–1,200 children a year through radio and audio production on themed projects such as mental health. A large part of the overall budget is allocated to cover staff costs relating to project delivery such as technical support and salaries. David works full-time, according to the questionnaire, earning 'over £30,000'. There are five other part-time staff although two have not been working during lockdown: his wife, a project leader employed on a zero-hours contract, and the salesperson, normally responsible for about 20 per cent of overall turnover, who also books interviews and speech content for shows and presents her own as a volunteer. David described the usual team of around 24 adult volunteers and eighteen children as 'just people from Folkstone, really, who we'd trained up to be on the radio' (Sharp 2020). Their number reduced to sixteen and one respectively under lockdown.

According to David, many community stations are turning over less than £40,000 a year, much of which is grant money. His own station faces 'broadcasting outgoings' that are 'a mish mash of things': two annual Ofcom licences (around £1,000 a year), music licences (between £500 and £1,000), insurance (£1,000), technical support (£3,000). They have free leases and no rent costs with several years to run on two studio spaces. One is in a school building: 'Basically, we work with the kids […] and they give us the space for free.' The other is in a rateable property standing largely empty in the town centre, where it is in the landlord's interest to remain on good terms: 'because […] they get a load of their funding from the same place that we do' (Sharp 2020).

Academy do pay some staff to provide speech content. This is because the station's priority is delivering school training projects so its public engagement with the wider community is limited so they never have had people coming forward to volunteer as presenters. David pointed out the diversity of output quality in the sector:

> You get some amazing stations, either that sound very commercial or sound really at the heart of their community. And you get some of them which I think many people would just think were unlistenable and […] undoubtedly get very, very low audience figures (Sharp 2020).

Somer Valley 97.5 FM

Another station offering facilities and a platform for media skills and employability training is *Somer Valley* in Somerset. Paid-for commissions help ensure the station is commercially viable, since the income generated supplements the sale of airtime advertising, whilst also serving their programming needs. The manager of the station interviewed in 2018 was former professional broadcaster, Dom Chambers. He had many responsibilities such as coordinating volunteers, safeguarding and risk assessments, administrating business aspects such as selling radio advertising and making funding applications. As station leader, he felt he was like 'many people right round the country in their own style but achieving the same thing: driving forward community broadcasting for the benefit not only for the radio listener but for the community as well' (Chambers 2018). Yet, he explained, to avoid over-reliance on one individual:

> We've also got a democracy here […] I've introduced all sorts of things long before […] they'll ever be needed. I've instigated a complaints procedure including a

complaint against the management […] so that people can feel they're part of something' (Chambers 2018).

He explained that the biggest liability for any station is either salaries or premises, bearing in mind that one might pay at least £20,000 for a part-time employee. In 2009, 'the average turnover of a community radio station in the UK […] was around £74,000 [… by] calendar year 2016 that dropped to just above £50,000' (Chambers 2018). As a director on the station's board, the principal objective of which is to ensure the business follows due diligence, he would attend their quarterly meetings to deliver the finance report along with a fellow director acting as accountant. The other part-time staff member and representatives of the independent volunteers' board routinely join these board meetings halfway through to discuss licence obligations and matters arising from their own quarterly meetings concerning 'social aspects' of the station such as how the volunteers, numbering around 80, are kept occupied on their collective mission which Dom described as contributing 'to the music culture, sports culture, heritage' of the local area (Chambers 2018). Their activities include reviewing local bands and music, interviewing local creatives and organisers of arts, theatre and museum events and very occasionally attending local fetes to do an outside broadcast (OB).

Kane 103.7 FM

The community participation manager and fundraiser at *Kane*, Jenniann Davies, said her station is run by a committee of eight comprising four directors, including herself, 'the IT guy, the schedule and studio managers', along with people from the local community 'that were either in at the beginning as a pirate or have come on board because they like the radio and they want to support it and they've got some skills to share' (Davies 2020). Their purpose is to work with young people who are not in education, training or support. 'The music you play is the engagement platform', she explained, adding: 'Nobody who is just there to do their show gets paid. They're all volunteers' (Davies 2020). None of the over 100 volunteer music presenters/disc jockeys (DJs) need to pay to join the station. Aged between nineteen and 70, they specialise in a range of music from old funk and dance hall, disco, drum and bass, jungle, reggae – anything but mainstream pop.

When *Kane* won its licence, having been pirate since the early 2000s operating from people's houses and gardens, they were given space for a broadcasting studio attached to an adult learning centre in Guildford but needed to move due to the discovery of asbestos. Then

the University of Surrey Student Union gave them a room which proved logistically complicated, so they managed to negotiate rent for two rooms – a studio and an office – at the local YMCA. The challenges of securing income are significant:

> We always have had problems with […] marketing and finance […] getting adverts is a very difficult thing on a community radio […] because we can't do RAJAR […] the only way you can stack up your listenership is via social media and online listenership (Davies 2020).

This has been her primary reason for shifting towards seeking funding for youth projects. Due to professional contacts from her former career in education and the local council, she has won National Health Service (NHS) funding for children she works with who have an education healthcare plan (EHCP) and has earned affiliation to the Arts Award scheme as assessor so that participants on her courses can gain skills certificates (Trinity College London, 2021). She explained: 'I'm only getting paid because I'm working with twenty [or so] kids and running a project […] My daughter, actually, is the bookkeeper and does it for peanuts. And she has taken ages to get her head round it' (Davies 2020).

After some initial seed funding from the National Lottery, they have struggled to get more because, she said, 'the rest of the country think that Surrey's rich. Yeah? And in actual fact, Surrey has got a huge poverty gap, probably one of the biggest' (Davies 2020). The new local Guildford lottery does yield £2,000 a year for *Kane*, through an arrangement whereby they receive 50 per cent of every ticket sold at £1 for the potential 'big prize' of £25,000. Post-Covid, rather than sell advertising spots, they are planning to promote show sponsorship opportunities, which could bring in £20 a month per show.

Vibe 107.6 FM

Vibe's managing director, Howard Groves, said the biggest challenge in operating their Watford-based station is running costs: 'the largest […] single one being the rent here, and then you've got all your licences' (Groves 2018). As well as the annual licence and transmitter fees to Ofcom and music performance licences payable by all stations, he added that *Vibe* pays a lot in software subscriptions, and that they have three part-time salaries to cover: his, the programme manager and a marketing/funding executive. The latter role developed from a year-long marketing post initially funded by an Ofcom award. It does not involve cold calling potential clients, instead the focus is on making grant applications and

developing their online presence. Effective marketing means that airtime and the website are used as revenue sources; advertising packages include options such as banner displays, special offer links and informational articles.

The station's success, and the resulting professional-sounding output, has a downside too though. 'Although [*Vibe*] is not-for-profit', Howard explained, 'it's not a charity and therefore it's not always viewed through the same lens. People often just treat you as a commercial enterprise' (Groves 2018). Securing income is important because managing the cost base is a challenge for them, especially with inflation; their rent went up by 30 per cent in 2018. A recent refit of the two studios was part-funded by a National Lottery grant of £10,000 and some Borough Council money, but they were hoping to sell the old equipment to offset some costs.

Vibe is sufficiently well-known to have a constant stream of volunteers, around 40 are occupied on social media, programming, and/or appear on-air. None of them is paid expenses; some consider their involvement as an investment in career development, others enjoy a longer-term relationship with the station and their volunteering is a worthwhile hobby. In terms of community engagement, the *Vibe* team help organise Watford's annual Cassiobury Fireworks event with stage entertainments and live bands, put on promotional events in the local shopping centre and publicise fundraising projects as well as report on local happenings and interview the people involved.

Stations with no paid employees

The other broad category of stations identified in this research are those that do not routinely pay their managers or practitioners. A further categorisation within this group is those stations which ask members or volunteers to contribute financially to the running costs. *Vectis*, a Community Interest Company (CIC) on the Isle of Wight, expects everyone to contribute £1 per week to a general fund for buying materials like paint for their rented studio space in a community centre. *Lionheart* in Northumberland, also a CIC, raises income through voluntary donations. Adult presenters are invited to subscribe £1 a week: about half do, according to their station organiser, who joined in 2009 as part-time 'paperwork lady' but stayed on as a volunteer to provide technical support and training after the money ran out.

Radio Verulam 92.6 FM

At *Verulam,* no one is routinely paid, though the St Albans-based station recently won a financial award from Ofcom's Community Radio Fund to develop marketing strategy and fund a year-long part-time operations manager post. They do offer volunteers incentives to sell airtime. For instance, their studio manager Phil Richards, a founding member who presents six shows a week, earns a small commission. During interview, he recalled 'I did give back probably several thousand pounds over the years […] in our early days', but admitted to keeping it latterly, 'because I'm losing potential teaching time that I could otherwise [be] earning good money [for]' (Richards 2018). As well as advertising income, another revenue source is membership subscriptions to Verulam Community Radio Limited; individuals pay £30 a year. This does not automatically mean they become a volunteer or presenter; it is about having a say in the direction of the company and voting for the board members.

At the time of research, the directors were trying to implement a cultural shift in the station, to instil a greater sense of responsibility and reinforce the message that station volunteers are fortunate to be involved in programme outputs; they should appreciate the opportunity and not assume they are indispensable. The job of managing volunteers is challenging and time-consuming. The incumbent in 2018, Denise Parsons, was drawing on her corporate background to revamp the recruitment policies. She wanted 'hiring and firing rights', yet found her hands were tied in that respect because she lacked some concrete 'plan B' for easily replacing presenters with suitably trained talent (Parsons 2018). She spent a great deal of time on station business and although she relished the status, she was feeling highly stressed.

Another director, Clive Glover, the founding member when *Verulam* launched on cable in the mid‑1990s and current OB manager said: 'We've had some experience of people burning out […] a lot of people don't quite realise how much work is involved' (Glover 2018). The station's chair, for instance, who took early retirement from a career in business management, product marketing, and corporate finance for global media firms, routinely volunteers 40 hours a week, more at busy times, such as when preparing for the AGM.

Running a company with a turnover of £60,000 means they must be professional. Clive is long retired from professional life and has never drawn a salary from *Verulam,* though he occasionally claims expenses for buying volunteers refreshments. He explained:

Paying all our bills on time […] is quite critical and there's really only two of us doing that on a day-to-day basis […] people don't […] recognise that there's a lot more finance now than there used to be (Glover 2018).

He remarked that managing relationships with landlords and other parties takes up time: 'We've been very involved with St Albans Council and the CVS, as I call it, which is now called Community Central […] they've helped us because they have a lady who's a real whizz at getting grant funding' (Glover 2018).

KCR 107.7 FM

Keith Community Radio (KCR) in Moray, northern Scotland, launched in the late 1990s. The station has twice received funding from the European Union's (EU) LEADER scheme which was especially useful when they won their FM licence in 2014. The chair/technical director, Eddie Stuart, also presents on the station. He explained that no one at *KCR* is paid. Two people receive an honorarium of £100 for their contributions: the treasurer and the engineer, who is ex-BBC. He added:

We do now use one person who gets a commission on advertising […] he just gets a cut off the top. We don't actually pay him as such and all the rest of us do it, yep, for the love of it (Stuart 2020).

KCR is one of the stations enjoying a minimal rent. Eddie described the premises in Keith as comprising an administrative area with a foyer, one toilet and a small studio booth:

A local builder put together a corner of his big shed and basically built a studio and we pay a notional £1 a year rent for it […] Doubly [fortuitous] because we are the rate payer for the building, so we've also got the [COVID-19] Government [small business] grant (Stuart 2020).

As well as covering local happenings, such as reporting on the whisky and gin trade from behind the scenes at the Spirit of Speyside event and providing national news updates in weekly political programmes following proceedings in Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, the station celebrates Scotland's traditional music heritage by featuring live and recorded performances. During lockdown, the station hosted a major music festival on-air and online for which they received a donation, which was most welcome income-wise. Eddie explained

that they usually sell airtime to local companies in hospitality and tourism, so they have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic.

Since *KCR* covers a much larger geographical area than most community stations, encouraging volunteers to attend meetings is challenging, so group communications with members and volunteers are usually achieved via email and social media. Eddie admitted: 'We had presenters' meetings, but there were some who never came to them unless they really, really had to […] that's not good, cos you literally never see people' (Stuart 2020). He said they are trying to find a solution and that the virtual platforms used during lockdown are a possibility. 'Basically, you know, [station meetings] are boring […] what are you going to talk about?' (Stuart 2020). He acknowledged the debate in the sector about whether volunteers should pay membership fees:

> We're one that has never asked for donations […] it's a bit difficult to suddenly spring it on people unless it got to the stage of, we need, you know, can everybody cough in a tenner to actually pay the bills or we're off air (Stuart 2020).

103 The Eye

The Eye in Melton Mowbray, a Leicestershire market town, was the first station to launch on-air with an FM licence in 2005. Today it is still based in the managing director's home: a room at the back of the kitchen accessed through a conservatory-cum-green room. Christine Slomkowska described her and her partner Patrick Mccracken's management style as 'like a happy family […] a little bit like mum and dad' (Slomkowska 2018). No station personnel receive a salary, but external contractors are paid for professional services like accountancy and engineering. Christine's role is multifarious:

> I'm responsible for all the financial aspects […] We do have an accountant who looks at the books at the end of the year, but I do the day-to-day book-keeping, invoicing, selling advertising […] We're not a commercial station, we're a not-for-profit but [that's] the income-generation side of it (Slomkowska 2018).

Whenever they are granted small business funding from sources such as the LEADER scheme for rural development, it is used to invest in new equipment. In 2019, they were able to buy a small dual-purpose trailer for use as a mobile training studio containing a mixing desk, computer, editing equipment and so forth for schools, and as a more manageable soundstage for the fetes, carnivals and other local events they like to attend and report on.

The station's target audience is the general population living within geographic range of its studio and transmitter, and it is highly regarded within the community. For instance, Christine recalled: 'The local firefighters raised money in a Christmas collection […] and presented us with a new computer recently in recognition of our work because we broadcast fire safety messages' (Slomkowska 2018). There are many magazine-style and specialist music shows on the schedule, far exceeding their key commitments with around 100 hours of locally-produced programmes each week. Visitors frequent the station to be interviewed about local current affairs, special events, and sport. With a healthy number of volunteers, 50 of whom are presenters, new recruits are attracted organically and Christine or Patrick are always on hand to substitute when required.

Discussion

The insights presented above suggest that community radio administrative staff are paid to supervise and help produce programming outputs only when there is a steady income stream from a parent organisation, secure sources of grant funding and/or guaranteed revenue from the provision of a specialist service, such as media skills training. Depending on the management model in place, directors and members need to agree terms of engagement. Such responsibilities weigh heavy and during the pandemic the burden became more complex than ever. One anonymous respondent to the author's online questionnaire, a station director in Northern Ireland, declared that under social distancing their own active involvement in presenting and producing shows decreased a lot. However, board meetings with five other managers (all volunteers) were conducted online and after taking account of their resources, including only small-sized studios, they decided to prioritise high quality programming over the quantity of shows and voices aired. They managed to increase their local news provision on-air and online and added a mental health strand. They achieved this with no external funding since they could not access business grants due to being rates exempt.

Running stations by allotting limited resources and relying on volunteers requires social capital as well as financial. Professional expertise is invaluable, as evidenced in the interviews. *Verulam*'s chair, Nick Hazell, commented:

> There are a lot of skills brought here […] everything from engineering skills to IT to business management […] It's just a question of finding out […] how you get them to use it for you, right? Cos some people come with a skill they don't want to use (Hazell 2018).

Applying for a licence requires knowing the right people and high levels of literacy. Winning one can be a dream come true for many operators. It is rewarding but is also hard work especially when broadcasting and advertising standards must be met, and finances are limited.

These aspects of the regulatory process raise questions over the diversity it promotes. The evidence shared shows that building solid local relationships clearly benefits stations in terms of providing income-generating opportunities. This makes sense since local ownership is a prerequisite for licences, yet there is a tension stemming from the dialectic between strategic business aims and the idealised visions of community access radio. After all, those in charge are running a business dealing with multiple stakeholders: staff, volunteers, suppliers, customers, sponsors, investors, supporters and listeners.

In all but one of the stations surveyed, (*Academy* being that exception), radio shows are always presented by volunteers. There are different approaches to administering this unpaid workforce across community radio in the United Kingdom. In some cases, they are seen as an additional source of revenue (see Figure 1). Whatever the case, maintaining their collective enthusiasm and input is essential for the long-term sustainability of community broadcasting. Stations need to consider how to balance the overwhelming demand for programme content with volunteers' rights and working conditions. The tendency to over-commit is evident; dedication to the cause, self-sacrifice and determination are no doubt desirable characteristics in a volunteer body, but to ensure the ongoing delivery of an organisation's mission, exploitation must be avoided. It should raise the same human resources concerns as when it happens to salaried employees. Although the respondents seemed good-humoured about the pressures involved, stemming primarily from their contractual obligations and needing to conform to regulations, burnout was a recognised risk.

The licensing system appears to have become a victim of its own success with over 300 community radio licence holders now on Ofcom's list (Ofcom 2021a) not to mention the additional 66 long-term RSLs (Ofcom 2021b). Practising within the institutionalised framework, they vie for audiences, grant funding and recognition. There are mismatches vis-à-vis aims, expectations, acceptable working conditions, broadcasting standards and successful outcomes on multiple levels, between community broadcasters and the regulator, within the community radio sector and in the stations themselves. The precarity exacerbated by the pandemic has brought to light different approaches to funding and income generation,

the delicate balance operators aim to strike, and the flexibility required to support their endeavours. Reporting on how the Welsh community stations performed under lockdown, academics Steve Johnson and Paul Atkins describe how the sector rallied to keep on broadcasting, addressing the information deficit by providing 'the public a direct line to ask ministers questions […] as a facilitator of democratic participation, enhancing plurality and providing an important platform for alternative voices' (Johnson and Atkins 2020). They remark on the sector's resilience but make the case for increased funding to be made available.

Since the CMA began campaigning for community media, decades before legislation was in place, the proliferation of stations has accelerated. Yet funding for the association's operations has diminished and staff numbers have reduced dramatically. It still plays a pivotal role in representing the community media sector, but the current Operations Manager and the elected council of CMA members have only limited resources with which to represent members' interests to Ofcom and DCMS. Social media platforms have facilitated the growth of other new support networks which also help empower and inform community broadcasters: for instance, The Radio Hub promotes best practice; the UK Community Radio Network brings managers across the country together; the annual Community Radio Awards celebrate talent and programming; and the Welsh Community Radio Network is rallying members to amplify their cultural importance (Johnson and Atkins, 2020) Whatever their differing niche interests, these groups share a commitment to helping realise the potential of community radio as a social asset.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated the breadth of practice across community radio in the United Kingdom. However, further research is essential to document the patterns and processes at play, ideally, in as many different contexts as possible to accurately portray the potential of this sector and reflect the plight that many operators find themselves in. Notwithstanding the tantalising gap in knowledge regarding non-white practitioners and the ethnic stations, the evidence here shows that when considering solutions to operational problems, and even defining the parameters of those problems, one size does not fit all.

The fundamental factor in the success of a station is social capital; possessing this is vital for ensuring delivery on the key commitments. Where it is present in a management team, they are better equipped to seek out and secure vital resources to keep their station

viable. Whether key staff and practitioners are paid or not has little bearing on the quality of broadcast output or project impacts. Volunteers can be experienced, incredibly dedicated and productive. What counts is having the backing of a wider organisational structure with experienced directors or trustees who can provide professional oversight, proper accounting procedures and legal advice, particularly when providing a commissioned specialist service alongside the broadcasting operation, such as at *Academy* and *Kane*. Where social capital is lacking, the concern is that the regulator's arms-length attitude may leave lesser privileged stations to fall through the gaps of whatever limited contingency support is available. This is a particular risk for stations that sound more authentically 'community access' by allowing the airing of unpolished local voices which compete poorly for listeners and struggle to be financially viable or sustainable. Nevertheless, these community broadcasters are providing public service through offering participation. This approach is compatible with the original movement's grassroots sensibilities and universal access, whereas the more 'successful' professional-sounding stations carrying lots of commercials, albeit limited by licence regulations and the not-for-profit remit, may bring into question whether diversity and inclusivity are being achieved. Suffice to say, the pandemic stymied most income-generating activity anyway and re-focussed hearts and minds onto social cohesion and building community spirit (Coleman 2020: 17).

What the COVID-19 crisis has also accentuated is the paltry level of investment that the sector receives from the government, in return for what is often very good and cost-effective radio content and community service. For instance, given the access that these stations enjoy to local populations and often hard-to-reach ethnic groups and minorities, the government could respect the sector more and consider paying for the transmission of public service announcements as they do with the independent sector. Not only paying to reach those community station audiences but increasing centralised funding to support all licensees across the board in the various and varied contexts would enhance their capacity to contribute to the public good. This is important because, despite the pandemic, the new Community Digital Sound Programme (C-DSP) licensing process is underway which will lead to increased competition for the current Community Radio Fund once the SSDAB multiplexes take off.

Community broadcasting in the United Kingdom is at yet another turning point in its short but rapidly evolving history. Clearly the sector is now well-established as deliverer of

local and socially-engaged media. As such it warrants explicit promotion across government departments and agencies as post-pandemic recovery strategies are developed. This calls for formal endorsement of the sector by the authorities, acknowledging its contribution to the public good and providing 'meaningful support' as per UNESCO and AMARC pronouncements by accepting more responsibility for the patronage of its community service offer.

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Disclosure

The author has been a member of the Community Media Association (CMA) since 2015, and in June 2021, she joined Verulam Community Radio Ltd.