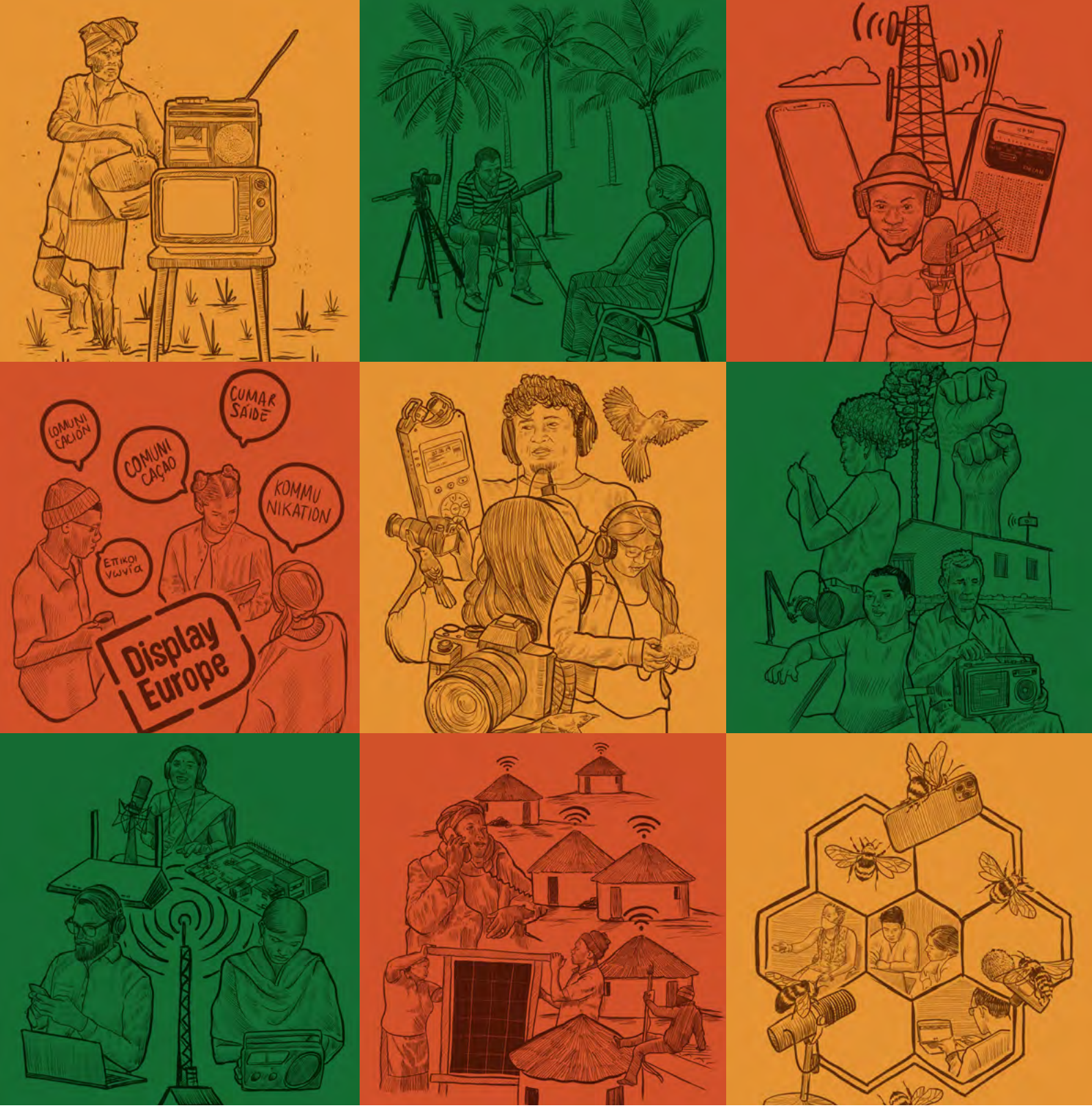

Community interest media

Emerging concepts and practices from the Global Majority (and friends)

IAWRT-KE The International Association of Women in Radio & Television Kenya

RHIZOMATICA

APC ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

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Introduction

This paper explores routes towards guiding principles for community-centred content creation and sheds light on relevant practices. It puts so-called "community interest media" (CIM) in critical dialogue with the established term "public interest media" and introduces first-hand experiences with participatory media making.

The empirical starting point for this research is the observed impact of digital networks (especially, but not only, the internet) on community-centred media initiatives that already existed in analogical times as free and community radios, fanzines, cinema clubs, etc. New configurations are constantly emerging, also in interaction with native digital formats, such as streaming, podcasting and online news platforms.

Of special interest to us is the collaboration between community networks (CNs)[1] and community content creation and dissemination across territories of the Global Majority. Those practices share a notion of autonomy and local agency to self-organise and self-determine the infrastructure and collective processes that shape meaningful connectivity and also provide a basis to co-create digital content and services within and beyond a local setting. We see those emerging practices as valuable contributions to provide understanding of new models of digital inclusion, participatory communication and community-led media development. The main objectives of this paper are to share these insights and trigger collaborations and replications.

With the aim of meeting the announced goals of framing community interest media and introducing relevant practices from the ground, our study is divided into two parts. The first part reconstructs a discussion of the research group[2] on participatory media making, community connectivity and sustainability, while also referencing previous relevant work by academics and practitioners. It suggests an approach that puts less emphasis on a conceptual definition and instead focuses on a relational and principle-based understanding of CIM. It further coins specific stages of a cyclical communication process that contributes to an analytic dimensioning of community interest media in the making. The second part frames eight small case studies conducted by our research collective in Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria and the Philippines, as well as two cross-regional practices. The contributions delve into the diverse sociopolitical contexts of Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, discussing challenges and visions to guide communities and their community-centred connectivity initiatives (CCCIs) in designing and dimensioning their own media.

[1] A more recent definition for community networks – which gives a more accurate idea of the dimensions of such efforts – is community-centred connectivity initiatives. For further reading on this, see: de Vasconcelos Aguiar, J. P. (2025, 17 July). What Is Community-Centered Connectivity and Why Should We Care? https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2025/07/what-is-community-centered-connectivity-and-why-should-we-care/

[2] The collective research was conducted by Foz and Violeta Assumpção from the Transfeminist Network of Digital Care in Brazil, Shalini A. and TB Dinesh from Servelots in India, Subekti Priyadharma from the University of Padjadjaran in Indonesia, Racheal Nakitare, Nelly Kiundi and Raylenne Kambua from IAWRT in Kenya, Daniela Bello López from Redes A.C. in Mexico, Okoro Onyekachi Emmanuel from the Media Awareness and Justice Initiative in Nigeria and Yumna Panday from Zenzeleni in South Africa. Nils Brock of Rhizomatica coordinated the virtual discussions. There were also some contributions from Europe, as a response to the need to reframe how we understand and support media that truly serve communities. For more information on the contributors, see the annex section of this paper.

Framing community interest media or how to sketch an immersive sea creature

Community interest media can be abbreviated as CIM, yet, by definition, they do not exist. However, if we ask what kind of media are of interest to a community, we will quickly receive many answers based on the aim they pursue, such as: informing local populations of relevant issues; cherishing a specific culture or language that lacks representation in established media outlets; providing spaces of dialogue and civic engagement; experimenting with, enjoying and subverting different media formats; and engaging a participatory audience as creative makers.[3]

The problem is that this very diversity makes it difficult to define CIM in one sentence. Yet, the fact that the notion elicits answers so easily shows that there is an underexplored "community interest" that escapes the common pattern of how media users and usages are framed in the definitions of some illustrious relatives, namely "community media", "tactical media" and "public interest media". Communities are different from the general public. Their desires and needs go beyond local content and their use of media tools is not targeted and strategic by design. There is also a need for – if not a right to – playfulness. So let us explore this idea of CIM a bit further and try to capture some emerging practices as proof of its existence.

Sound experimental? Well, that is because it is. However:

> The beautiful thing is that when you catch one fish that you love, even if it's a little fish – a fragment of an idea – that fish will draw in other fish, and they'll hook into it. Then you are on your way. Soon there are more and more and more fragments, and the whole thing emerges. But it starts with desire.[4]

When sharing this spark of an idea with a group of media practitioners, journalists and researchers from the Global Majority in early 2025, they immediately responded to the call. Living and working from different realities and territories, we all felt the presence of this huge immersed something that we all knew so well in parts but not as a whole. Would we be able to sketch it together, like a collective photofit of a mythical sea creature?

Short of time and resources for something big, we decided to first try out a "micro research" that would consist of three basic aspirations:

- Understanding what makes CIM different from other media definitions.
- Summarising a set of foundational ideas of CIM.

[3] We are paraphrasing here the collective thoughts of an amazing research group (see annex) and extensive bibliography referenced throughout the text.
[4] Lynch, D. (2006). *Catching the big fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity.* Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin.

- Sharing challenges and emerging best practices for media of interest to communities.

For those of you already getting anxious at this point in the paper and craving an executive summary, here we go:

- It is necessary to break up the existing notion of "community media" with its specific focus on radio broadcasting and to reflect on how participatory content creation and sharing should and could happen online, offline and in hybrid spaces.
- Being specific regarding the materialistic side of media – especially the organisation of its underlying infrastructure – is crucial for operationalising best practices. Re-imagining community interest media as a cyclical productive process can contribute to such an understanding.
- Documenting and sharing best practices is an evidence-based way to further explore and shape an actionable vision of community interest media, contesting the fragmentation of digital spaces and the disruptions and disarticulations of community life.

So much for surfacing. For all those who want to go deeper, stay with us. The first two sections provide a short reconstruction of available literature and three online discussions held with the participating researchers. The third section consists of individual pieces by the participants, exploring CIM features they have contributed to or experienced. Contributions range from topics such as the mediation of traditional knowledge for local communities by a local TV station in Western Java (Indonesia), approaches to communicating social and environmental justice in the Niger Delta (Nigeria), collaborations between community networks and community media to foster digital inclusion (Kenya), decentralised and networked community content creation in Mexico, strategies for media making by marginalised populations in Brazil, hyper-local media creation in South Africa, mesh radio on local networks (India), collaborative design of open-source tools for CIM and, finally, insights from a community-media-centred content platform, attempting to counter centralised big-tech approaches. But before diving into this diversity, let us try to work out a basic shared understanding of community interest media.

From an endless debate towards a practical entry point

What is media communication and what are communications media? This is an intriguing but also thorny and excessive debate.[5] For our purpose let us just say that communication is about putting things in common and that media are means and practices that facilitate this "putting in common" through different formats, languages and material/non-material ways of recording and sharing cultural, political, journalistic and many other kinds of expression. Such an initial claim is important to make sure media are not confused too hastily with regulatory regimes such as licensed "one-to-many-broadcasting" and "spectrum management",[6] which define a specific technological constellation and social practice of means of communication. We instead adopt a human-rights-based approach that proclaims "freedom of opinion and expression" including everyone's right to "receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."[7]

Such an understanding is also the starting point of many definitions concerning free and community media linking media freedom and freedom of expression to a collective rights holder, namely communities.[8] Here is where the trouble continues, because a community can be defined in many ways: by a specific territory, by a common interest or by distinctive shared features.[9] There is also the question of who defines and confirms the existence of a community. Let us suggest for the moment that self-recognition as a community is decisive if we want to grant communities a notion of sovereignty that includes different kinds of media practices.

Chewing collectively on the notions of "media" and "community" was a good warm-up for our group of researchers to get a sense of what we really wanted to taste, starting with the question: what do we understand as a community? In some regions, like South Africa, Indonesia and India, it emerged that legal, technological, linguistic and cultural realities deeply shape its definition. In others, like Kenya, government-imposed definitions of community media are narrow, ignoring the vast geographical and social diversity. We concluded that rigid definitions fail to take into account ways in which people engage with media – particularly in informal settlements, rural areas and indigenous territories. As a result, the recognition

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[5] Briggs, A., & Burke, P. (2002). *De Gutenberg a Internet. Una historia social de los medios de comunicación.* Taurus; Martín-Barbero, J. (1987). *Communication, Culture and Hegemony. From the Media to Mediations.* Sage Publications; Zielinski, S. (2002). *Deep Time of the Media. Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means.* MIT Press.

[6] Hatfield, D. N. (2003). Spectrum Management Reform and the Notion of the Spectrum Commons. *Southern African Journal of Information and Communication, 2003*(4). https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.10520/AJA20777213_40

[7] This definition is coined in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations and can be found here: https://nations-united.org/Universal_Declaration_Of_Human_Rights/Articles_Human_Rights/Articles_19_Human_Rights_Universal_Declaration_Nations_United_Nineteen.htm. For an introductory debate, see: ARTICLE 19. (n. d). What is freedom of expression? https://www.article19.org/what-is-freedom-of-expression/

[8] Bailey, O. G., Cammaerts, B., & Carpentier, N. (2008). *Understanding Alternative Media.* McGraw-Hill Open Education Press; Berardi, F. (Bifo). (2011). *After the Future.* AK Press. https://files.libcom.org/files/AfterFuture.pdf.htm; Downing, J. (2001). *Radical Media. Rebellious Communication and Social Movements.* Sage; Langlois, A., & Dubois, F. D. (2005). *Autonomous Media Activating Resistance & Dissent.* Cumulus Press; Machado, A., Magri, C., & Masagão, M. (1986). *Rádios livres. A reforma agrária no ar.* Brasilense; Rennie, E. (2006). *Community Media: A Global Introduction.* Rowman & Littlefield; Riley, R. (2009). *Tactical Media.* University of Minnesota Press.

[9] Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* Verso; Esposito, R. (2003). *Communitas. Origen y destino de la comunidad.* Amorrortu.

of "community media" in various national contexts is not linked to an active agency of different groups of people who see themselves as communities. What surfaced in the discussions among participants from the countries covered in the study was a rich fusion of interpretations, shaped by lived realities, policy frameworks, scholarly articles and the imagination of the communities themselves. The opening moments of the discussions on the subject revealed that there is no single, universal definition of community interest media. A common denominator was, however, that community media constantly go beyond the different kinds of definitions and "prescriptions" in at least five dimensions:

(1) More than a licence. In many countries the struggles of social movements to diversify the space of electronic media have secured legal recognitions of community media, often as part of a very small margin of the public system. In practice this often makes them a poor, younger cousin of established public media outlets, limited in size, reach and funding. The specificities are often defined by a general law, blind to demographics, topographics, cultural aspects and many other defining qualities of living communities but heavy on technical requirements and restrictions. Yet legally, as a community, you have to follow these laws as the only way to formalise your own media project.

This leads to different scenarios. There is much civil disobedience, for instance, with the historical free radio movement demanding access to the radio spectrum as a human right without any mediation by national laws. It has also led to commercial and proselytising ventures, trying to cash in through the airwaves, collecting money and/or souls without any licence. Where enforcement is effective or media makers grow tired of playing cat and mouse, they eventually legalise their work by applying for community media licenses, as we learned from Kenya. As noted by Racheal Nakitare of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT), during online group discussions held between January and March 2025: "From 360 public radios, about 80 are community radios. However, those licenses are sometimes chosen just because they are cheaper."[10] In countries like Brazil or Chile, the limited number of available community radios licenses are often used to serve political and religious interests that do not correspond to and are not controlled by the people who are exposed daily to their content. If a community promotes a diverse and inclusive notion of media making, it has to either compete with non-community interests or establish itself as an "outlaw". As a result, many licenses fail to foster community agency or legally prevent communities from unfolding their potential – so simply more than a licence.

(2) More than radio. The previous section intentionally equated "community media" with "community radio". Did you notice it? While it is true that the rules for sharing printed content have been relaxed over the last two centuries and many community expressions, such as fanzines, local papers and leaflets, can be distributed freely, the regulation of media content shared over frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum or cable networks is a different story. Here "community media" are *de facto* cemented as low-power FM radio

[10] All of the statements quoted below were likewise documented during these research dialogues and are identified with the name of the individual who voiced them and their organisation.

broadcasting in most national regulations, with some community or citizen TV channels over cable networks granted in some countries. Yet,

> [c]ommunity interest media can take on forms outside the radio spectrum. Radio can also be a service on a local WiFi network. There it might turn into a podcast – a different format, yes, but still a service shared amongst the people.[11]

Local networks themselves might underlie some kind of licensing, as well, but if they are set up and available as an inclusive space for a community – for instance, as a community network – they can extend the configurations of community media way beyond audio podcasts or web radios:

> Community interest media can be understood as a kind of service. Community networks, for instance, can serve as local content clubs. They can offer zero rated websites for the community with relevant content. They could also offer "community notice boards" with jobs and directories.[12]

While the internet might have lost much of its charm as a universal emancipatory and participatory space, community-governed digital networks represent an important intersection in terms of "how community media can fit into a broader media ecosystem."[13] The premise seems simple, but is actually complex. Communities can build infrastructure for meaningful connectivity while at the same time producing and sharing content that reflects their needs, values and realities. This can be done via radio, online posts, podcasts and even live events, which cannot just be classified as local media *per se* and can be an important space to put things in common.

(3) More than just news. In their role as content mediators media outlets are often primarily linked to news dissemination and the task of informing people. Not only could this framing be criticised as being too functionalist, but also, when reflecting on community interest and its mediation, the researchers agreed that this becomes even more problematic, since they see different "values" and "interests" at play: "Perceptions of a community can be different from [those of] government officials, concerning different opinions on seeds and grazing, for example," they noted when discussing agricultural politics in rural India. Far from simply conveying news, community media in Brazil are attributed the task of "creat[ing] resilience towards political interests not shared by the community." Speaking from Kenya, this opinion is echoed when framing community media as "particular" in the sense that they are "defined thematically, responding to a specific situatedness of a community."[14]

[11] Shalini A (Servelots).
[12] Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni).
[13] Quotes in this paragraph, in the order in which they appear: Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni) and Subekti Priyadharma (Universitas Padjadjaran).
[14] Quotes in this paragraph, in the order in which they appear: Shalini A (Servelots) and Foz (Transfeminist Network of Digital Care).

The same claim is made for community media in South Africa: "They should focus on a particular area of focus or interest." Yet by doing so, they are also attributed the task of representing the "diversity of values" in a specific community, something that leads to another shared criterion brought up several times in the discussion: participation. In other words, while community media "put things in common," they do or should do so in a different way from that of "mainstream media that are shaping national agendas."[15]

(4) More than local content. This brings us to a common misconception about community media: their supposed exclusive dedication to local content. While the researchers could easily agree that "too much top-down information by experts should be avoided," not all shared the view that "community media are defined by content that is created locally." A first, empirical objection argues that "updating content is difficult to sustain after the first two to three months of excitement. Then it becomes hard to constantly create content on the local level."[16] Further responses indicate that the interest in information, dialogue and participation constantly transcends the local space. To become a kind of service for a community, media must mediate participation and content beyond the local scope. To "strengthen local knowledge, languages and traditions does not mean to completely exclude content from 'the outside' but rather curate it, as part of the media making."[17]

(5) More than just a replicator of established formats. Our understanding of media is often based on and limited by known formats, including specific programmes (e.g. a radio feature), roles (e.g. a presenter, a guest commentator) or thematic categories (e.g. financial news, sports, etc.). While those formats are an obvious and enabling starting point for many community media, there is also a shared expectation that they should find their own language – literally, in the sense of using and strengthening indigenous languages, but also in the sense of innovating the mediascape. "Community media in South Africa are often still close to mainstream media that are shaping national agendas." In India, constant thought is given to finding strategies and formats to reach out to persons who have difficulty reading news or engaging through written messages: "We see inclusive dissemination of content as a crucial stage." Turning this observation into a claim, we could say that "community media should represent divergent [views] and create communications."[18]

Laying out such liberating dimensions for community media provides just a rough sketch and yet it proves how fruitful it is to "highjack" the idea of a shared "interest" from the public space or reinject it into community media definitions to address their shortcomings. Our framing is by no means conclusive but rather an invitation for media practitioners and those who want to analyse current definitions to continue their unpacking and resignification. In the discussions, the understanding that CIM are not a static model became evident. What emerged

[15] First quote in this paragraph is by Racheal Nakitare (IAWRT) and the second and third are by Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni).
[16] Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni).
[17] Quotes in this paragraph, in the order in which they appear: Nelly Kiundi (IAWRT), Foz (Transfeminist Network of Digital Care), Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni), Subekti Priyadharma (Universitas Padjadjaran).
[18] Quotes in the paragraph, in the order in which they appear: Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni), Shalini A (Servelots), Foz (Transfeminist Network of Digital Care).

is that CIM are a set of media practices rooted in community voices, technologies and aspirations. In our group, this first deconstruction and questioning of established ideas sparked a series of immediate responses regarding how CIM could operate differently: They "should be based on collectively owned infrastructure," consider specific "demographic situations," "leave no one behind and design different channels for inclusive dissemination," "ensure connectivity and capacity building," "creatively involve traditional communications"[19] and constantly "adapt their platforms and channels" to community with special attention to young people, so as to become a "catalyst to make others join and participate."[20]

Each of these considerations requires further systematisations and strategies to translate values and visions into practices. Since CIM is a rather emergent term and this paper cannot provide a deeper research to theoretically ground it, we tried to systematise the ideas and reasoning underpinning our discussion and contrast them with the established terms "public interest media" (PIM) and "public interest journalism" and their foundational categories. However, we quickly found that they are constituted by many conflicting and vague definitions. Yet, in general terms there is agreement that this type of media is defined by the coverage they offer, that is, "reporting matters of societal relevance."[21] There is also a shared functionalist dimension attributed to such news media serving a public interest by "parking debate and making enlightened decisions on major social, political, and economic issues. It is thus one of the pillars of a healthy democracy."[22] There is, therefore, a rational and strong normative claim, but at the same time, there is a perceived "decline in public interest journalism" and even a fear that "digital platforms" have "basically destroyed the old model upon which public interest journalism was based."[23]

What sounds like an interesting contact point with the above-shared ideas for operationalising CIM unfortunately is not. This is not due to a lack of analysis, but rather to the scope of literature concerned with rescuing public interest media. First of all, the focus is very much on how to fix the traditional media business model that seemingly includes "any journalism on any form of media outlet whether newspapers, television or radio that concerns public matters."[24] However, in practice, community media and their specific situatedness often remain under the radar.

Secondly, approaches that include such a community perspective again tend to miss the point when recommending "engag[ing] citizens and multiple stakeholders in journalism

[19] Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni).
[20] Quotes in this paragraph, in the order in which they appear: Nelly Kiundi (IAWRT), Raylenne Kambua (IAWRT), Racheal Nakitare (IAWRT), Daniela Bello (REDES), Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni), Racheal Nakitare (IAWRT) and Yumna Panday (Zenzeleni).
[21] Eggington, B. (2018, 15 April). Journalism and the public interest. *Media Helping Media.* https://mediahelpingmedia.org/basics/applying-the-public-interest-test-to-journalism/
[22] MCCCF. (2011). *Pour une information au service de l'intérêt public. Orientations du Ministère de la culture, des communications et de la condition féminine.* https://bibliotheque.cecile-rouleau.gouv.qc.ca/documents/archives/pgq/C84M43_P68_2011.pdf
[23] Fels, A. (2025) Public Interest Journalism. Vanishing Pillar for a Sustainable Democracy? Interview with Allan Fels. In M. Lester and M. dela Rama (Eds.), *Innovation Pathways to Sustainability Conversations Towards Complex Systems of Governance.* Routledge. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382746845_Public_Interest_Journalism
[24] Ibid.

participatory process aimed at bringing around social change [...] within the community."[25] Because instead of exploring and interacting with existing ecosystems they are rather seen as resources – e.g. "rare sounds for digital audio products"–[26] or market extensions serving the sustainability of existing media houses.

Thirdly, where ambitions go further, for instance, in a "decolonial public interest journalism," journalism is again seen as a rather external tool, an enabler of value sets (e.g. Ubuntu) and a means to "empower individuals and communities with truths that enable them to meet their needs in ever-changing circumstances" and not as a manifest community expression.[27] Even if these objections run the risk of appearing somewhat simplistic here, the objection that definitions of public interest are not sufficiently media-specific and that communities are not given enough analytical space, while the goals of journalism are described at a higher level (i.e. not at the community level) cannot be dismissed so easily.

From what has been discussed so far, further intriguing questions emerge. First, public interest definitions often make the somewhat tautological claim that media have to be relevant to the public. This also implies a strong focus on "news" as the most relevant journalistic expression "by nature", which leaves its relation to other stories or formats unexplained. We can further ask who this receptive public is in all its generality and who defines what is relevant and what the scope of such relevance is. Another question is how to avoid a short-circuit between national media with a huge outreach and a public interest self-framed as national. Besides all those rabbit holes, we can also step back and ask why all those definitions of media and journalism that have to serve societies are so scarcely self-reflective. Should not everything that media and journalism are supposed to do for the public or common good also inform media practices in a practical sense, beyond general democracy and efficiency models?[28]

In order to avoid leaving all these questions unanswered, we have attempted to summarise and compare the research group's debates on PIM and CIM. We emphasise that PIM can have benefits for communities, but in their self-understanding it is foremost about professional journalism serving the public interest. In contrast, CIM are rather about communities serving themselves through participatory media. The distinction is not definitive, but rather an invitation to link and discuss the two terms more closely to media practices that go beyond normative and functionalist claims and create fruitful learning dialogues of how to put things in common for a public or for communities.

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[25] Moore, L., Köhler, E., & Cook, C. (2024). *The Media Viability Manifesto. A common framework for joint action.* DW Akademie. https://mediaviabilitymanifesto.org/wp-content/uploads/MV_Manifesto-EN-WEB-20240904-1.pdf

[26] Ibid.

[27] Chasi, C., & Rodny-Gumede, Y. (2022). Decolonial Journalism: New Notes on Ubuntu and the Public Interest. *Journalism Studies*, *23*(13), 1625-1637. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2022.2083006

[28] This question is discussed by Everette Dennis, who argues that the public interest standard has been interpreted and enforced by two separate political camps: proponents of the democracy model and proponents of the efficiency model. Dennis, E. E. (1974). The Press and the Public Interest: A Definitional Dilemma. *DePaul Law Review, 23*(3). https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol23/iss3/4

Dimension	PIM	CIM
Operational structure	State-funded, companies, donors, philanthropy	Locally managed, community-owned, self-sustaining
Production	Professional journalists working in or with established media houses	Community members create and/or share content through participatory processes
Distribution	Broadcast and digital platforms / mass media	Localised media networks; community radio, offline networks, grassroots digital platforms
Sustainability	Advertising, state-funded, philanthropic funding	Community-owned, local donations, grants
Technology	High-cost infrastructure	Low-cost community-owned connectivity and infrastructure
Audience	The general public	Members of the community and those engaging with it
Legal status	Licensed, legitimised by national communications laws as based on constitutional rights of different nation-states	Licensed and unlicensed, legitimised by the freedom of expression of a collective rights holder (community)
Ownership	Top-down controlled by directory boards and/or its financiers	Bottom-up decentralised model that gives control to communities

Based on this comparison, we suggest, for now, a minimalistic conceptual framing that leaves space for an active creation of situated interpretations. So, in general, community interest media should be understood in the context of community ownership, needs and participation, focused on social impact over profit but still aiming for sustainability. CIM are all about giving a voice and a platform to communities.[29] They are non-profits created by the community for the community, designed to reflect its priorities and cultures and for storytelling. CIM are

[29] A conceptual framework was instrumental in guiding the research process and defining key concepts, ideas and theories. Of significance were participatory communication theories, especially Paulo Freire's work, which emphasised that communities should define and shape their own media systems.

often seen as vital for informing, educating and empowering marginalised voices. However, this meaning of CIM is always shifting, depending on local contexts and governance structures. Such a situated understanding of CIM ties media practices to a specific self-understanding of a community. What is of interest to a community will be defined by that community and, again, it is that community that chooses the means to communicate with its audiences. The responses revealed a consensus asserting that CIM must be locally defined – by context, culture and communication needs.

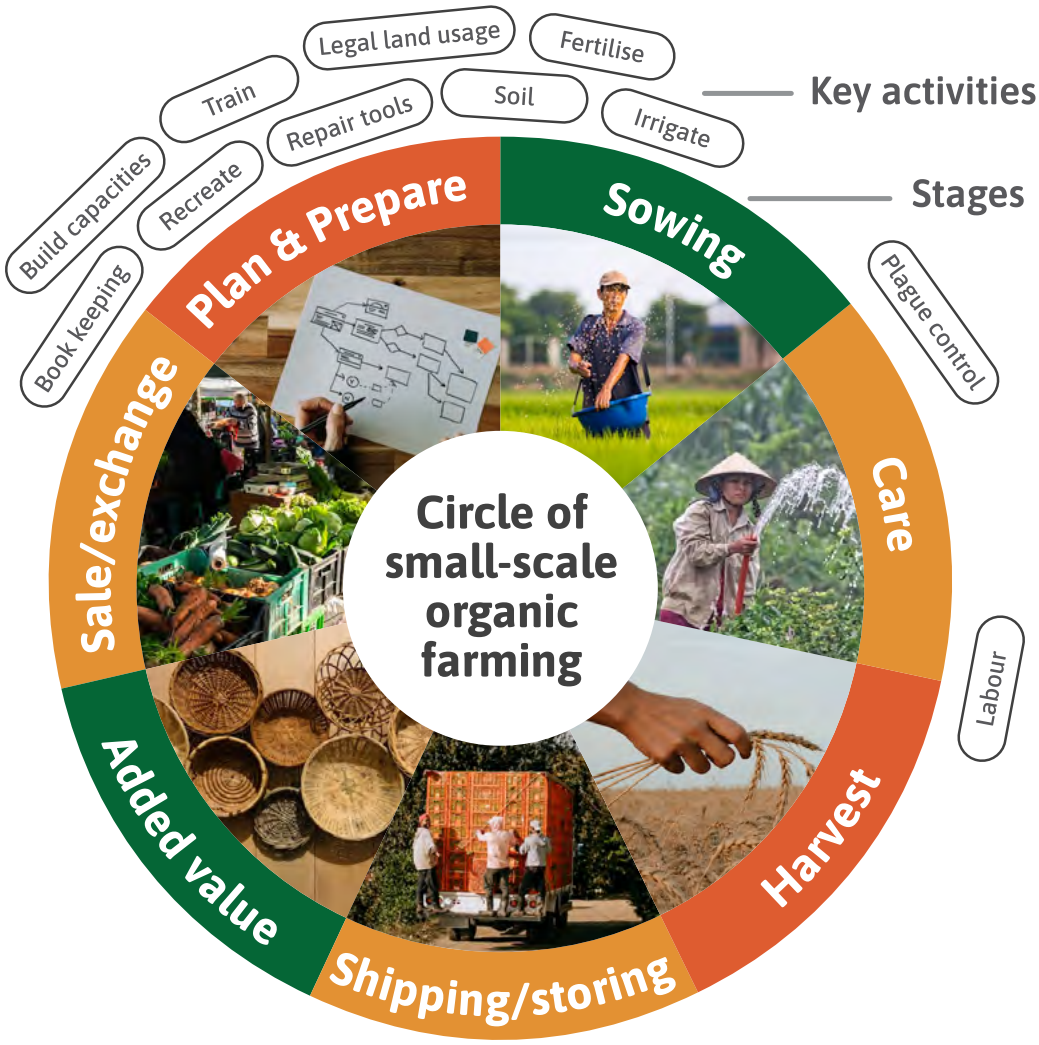
Therefore, instead of a one-definition-fits-all approach we suggest a two-step process: First, allowing for an open empirical question, in dialogue with real world communities, that asks what kind of media is of interest to a specific community. Second, drawing on the successful work of the Local Network Initiative (LocNet) in collectively drafting shared principles for community-centred connectivity initiatives (CCCI), such a shared understanding could also become a working definition informed by and for practitioners of community interest media.[30]

[30] For more information see: APC & Rhizomatica. (2024, 6 December). Principles for community-centred connectivity initiatives. https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/principles-community-centred-connectivity-initiatives

Community interest media: Defining features for a cyclical communications process

The practitioner's look also informed a second round of reflections among the research group's participants. Yet, we also wanted to take seriously the criticism previously raised that many approaches to public interest media are not sufficiently media-specific in their design. Implicitly public interest media are based on a one-to-many diffusionist model, with a few who inform and a many who are informed. The participatory claim of community interest media and its commitment to communications and dialogue beyond the information and news categories also make it necessary to review specific moments of media making, in order to unpack in more detail how things are put in common.

The practice of media at any level is a cyclical process that involves collective planning, creating and sharing. In other words, a news story is just a still image of a complex and continued movement, within which patterns and repetitions can be observed and conceptualised as a cycle. To reflect on media making as such a practice, we picked a comparable social practice: small-scale organic farming.



Going through its stages, the power of analogies kicked in, prompting a vivid discussion of how such a cycle would look like for community interest media making. Similar to farming, seven stages were identified, as labelled and described below. Since these stages are necessarily different from other media practices, for each of them we will also carve out one best practice, insofar as it is relevant to CIM, and share it to back these reflections.

1. Reflecting, organising and planning. This stage can be understood as a period of reflection on initiating media practices. This can happen at the institutional level (e.g. launch of a media station) and related to specific formats (e.g. podcast design) or planning content (e.g. thematic series). In CIM, this process should include community engagement and needs assessments, as well as collectively considering questions of ownership and representation. This way a "grounded community" is established, with its own media vision and ready to collectively create relevance and be accountable to community members and other audiences.

Best practices for this stage include globally established methodologies (e.g. SWOT and social mapping exercises) and reflective tools such as audience surveys (e.g. exploring preferred channels and languages). In Brazil, participants mentioned a digital tool for documenting and steering such processes called Plantaformas,[31] something that is done in a similar way with messaging apps in Nigeria. Yet this is not a tools question, but rather a mission that seeks to translate reflective needs into feasible practices. Offline dialogue formats with stakeholders, including community networks and local government, were reported to be already used in India and Kenya. And there are still unmet but shared needs that demand innovative ideas, for instance, conducting community media audits to identify information gaps and communications visions with final beneficiaries and audiences.

2. Building capacities. Hardly any cyclical model can do without this stage, since no practice can be sustainable without creating and recreating capacities. Its goal is to equip community members and allies with required skills for content creation and sharing, including localisation, adaptation and practical usage of technologies. This can be done in various formats, through workshops, mentorship programs, embedded training, etc. For CIM, the importance of this stage is even more crucial, because it contributes to the empowerment of underrepresented voices and thereby makes media content more diverse and sustainable in the sense that it builds confidence and creates ownership in storytelling.

The research group's sharing of existing practices for capacity building was rich and indicates that there is much to learn from each other here. Examples span from efficient concrete formats, such as the "reading aloud sessions to improve speech clarity" in Indonesia, to the multi-module podcast training of the Periodismo de lo Posible project in Mexico, which is conducted in a ten-month boot camp.[32] In attempting to briefly structure the shared insights, we can distinguish three approaches: (1) short, replicable and traveling capacity-building formats, such as the digital literacy, media literacy and fact-checking workshops taking place

[31] For more information, see: https://plantaformas.org/
[32] The audio output from this effort can be found (in Spanish) at: https://periodismodeloposible.com/

in India and Kenya,[33] or the specific community correspondent trainings that exist in Ghana, the Philippines and Kenya; (2) continued learning formats, such as mentorship programs and training of colleges by professional associations (Kenya-IAWRT), or university-community radio partnerships, mentioned in both Indonesia and Kenya; (3) openly available repositories where specific skill sets are documented, for instance, the digital hubs for tech skills offered by the Kenya Media Council or LocNet's cross-regional community network learning repository.

3. Creating/sampling raw material. This could also be called the fieldwork stage, in which CIM participants are engaging on the ground. There are many practices and approaches, such as community dialogues to build an understanding of a certain topic or participatory research that can be a one-off initiative or ongoing over a long period of time. The underlying idea is to explore and document specific realities that go beyond desk work or reporting in first-person narratives, offering a great narrative that explains the world (of others) without giving voice to its inhabitants. Such a problematic relationship does not only exist in a colonial North-South divide, it is reproduced in many other relations, such as, for example, urban perspectives on rural environments.

In the long history of journalism, there are many formats that can be used to organise and document such encounters. There are many techniques for conversations and interviews, different tools for field recordings and strategies to cover live events. But methods and tools for virtual engagements have also multiplied, ranging from voice note collection to guest call-in participations in web radio shows. Already in analogical community media times, recording and editing devices had lowered the bar for becoming a creator. Today, digital tools are widely available, also as mobile-first applications, and the challenge has become to encourage its active appropriation so community-led narratives and stories reflecting lived realities can be heard.

However, we underline that it is always important to think of accessible secure low-cost tools. One exemplary tool that had two participating researchers involved in its co-creation is the open-source audio production suite Colmena, which allows for collaborative mobile-first content creating, editing and sharing. There are many other useful software solutions that could be mentioned, but our group agreed to not understand this phase as a tool question and rather see it as a stage for sampling and content creation strategies that can be realised in different ways. Before any recording comes the question of how to design focus group discussions, surveys, interviews or conversations with communities. There are interesting approaches like participatory story harvesting, involving lived experiences as data, to be further explored, especially to also involve marginalised groups (e.g. youth, women, informal workers). Such processes should inform the use of tools and decision making, balancing skills, reach and existing habits (e.g. on big-tech platforms) with open-source ethics.

[33] Some of them are more directed to community media initiatives and others to community networks, for instance, Tanda.net (Kenya) and Janastu (India).

4. Producing and post-producing. This is the stage that comes after sampling material on the ground or in virtual spaces. This phase is important because it translates diverse and not always easily understandable sources, contextualises facts and develops a narrative that is tailored to specific target groups. In other words, all the material collected is edited into finalised media pieces that can take on a great variety of forms and formats, such as podcasts, feature stories, videos, etc. Up to this point, this stage of the work is similar in many ways to other media outlets. We found that for CIM such a dimension for exploring and creating workflows is linked to placing a special emphasis on shared responsibilities and ethics of collaborative and inclusive editing, including editorial decision making. This will be a way to strengthen editorial transparency and ensure a high quality of output from grassroots media actors defined on their own terms, without getting trapped in a logic of "professionalisation" based on external criteria. For instance, improving accessibility at a community level cannot be guided by external advice. Subtitles or translations or other adaptations of work must instead depend on intimate knowledge of the community and other audiences.

In reviewing best practices, we again first went through the "free tools shop" before moving to more process-oriented examples. Besides the already mentioned Colmena app (that comes with a multitrack audio editor), Audacity as a cross-OS-solution is still the gold standard for open-source audio productions on PCs. An increasing role was attributed to artificial intelligence tools for transcription, noise reduction or language translation – for instance, the widely used and implemented Whisper software from OpenAI. Yet, beyond that scope, discussions also included the usefulness of standard operating procedures for co-editing, as used by CIM in the Philippines and Mexico,[34] and questions around virtual newsroom practices. The Rappler Matrix communities provide safe spaces to create collaborative story workflows and again Colmena's chat-based content production workgroups point in the same direction, that is, inclusive content collaboration needs to ensure both onsite and virtual spaces.

5. Storing. Once the cycle moves as far as sampling great raw material or even ready-to-publish stories, it is important to not lose this content and to store it in a safe and responsible way. Or to put it differently: content should be archived and at the same time be accessible for publication. Here we run into yet another infrastructure dimension of media making that is mostly invisible (as all intact infrastructure) but that is often overlooked as a material dimension of any content: without any power- and water-consuming data centres, even apparently intangible online publications would not exist. However, here we are still not talking about published content but are one step earlier that likewise has a storage dimension (which sometimes is the same as that of publications and only a public link makes all the difference). In both cases, content creators have to make choices about where and how to store. This often takes the form of a certain repository, digital or analogical, with specific ways to organise this content (e.g. metadata) and access rules. Digital repositories can be designed as local instances, hosted on a physical computer in the newsroom or on other networked

[34] To learn more about best practices in Mexico see the chapter on Community content creation in Mexico: The role of political advocacy in the development of the Canto de Cenzontles and Periodismo de lo Posible projects.

computers, collectively maintained, or offered by third-party providers (e.g. commercial services, universities, non-profit co-ops, etc.). For CIM, such storage design decisions are sensitive and involve political choices, since they influence the way stored content is collectively stewarded and made available as "cultural memory" of a community. Often without being previously aware, CIM can become responsible for such a task and have to review or reshape initial "storage solutions".

In the research group, two strategies for storage were mentioned, often combined to create backups and avoid data – that is, "memory" – losses. Local storage occurs first of all at the level of individual content creators who might keep archives on SD cards or external hard drives. This is described to be very common in low infrastructure areas and yet is always linked to the question of how to backup this data securely together with others. Two important elements that come into play here – showing once more the organic relationship between community networks and community media – are local servers that are accessible or part of community-centred connectivity initiatives.[35] Beyond just giving access to a "shared folder", such repositories on local servers and networks have become more sophisticated thanks to open-source software such as Nextcloud or CasaOS,[36] laying the ground for digital libraries and content indexing. On a second level, such storage strategies also occur on cloud servers not owned by the community, which can range from commercial providers to conscious archiving in non-profit repositories and established digital libraries, such as archive.org, as done, for instance, by Canto de Cenzontles (Mexico).

6. Publishing. The archive.org website mentioned above is already a hybrid space, since it is also a digital platform where content is published. The move to "making a story public" can be identified as yet another stage of CIM. Once again, decisions have to be made: will the media initiative self-publish the content analogically (e.g. in a printed fanzine) or digitally (e.g. on a website)? Or will the content creators upload their content on digital platforms or circulate it in messenger apps of commercial providers, claiming those accounts or channels as "their media"? Or both? Whatever the choices, they will influence the visibility, outreach, audience engagement and credibility of the published content.

Interestingly, none of the researchers was part of or cited a CIM best practice that exists only on a platform of (commercial) third-party providers. Instead, emphasis was put on efforts to maintain proper publishing spaces, as, for instance, in Janastu's online platform,[37] the self-hosted podcast archive of Canto de Cenzontles or the creation of web radio streams as part of community network initiatives in Kenya.[38] The second scenario also describes a convergence, an inter-media moment from an analogue to a digital "broadcasting"

[35] In some way or another, all the work on or with CIM conducted by the researchers is also related to one or more CCCIs in their respective countries: Janastu's mesh networks in India, community networks set up by MAJI (Nigeria), Common Room (Indonesia), Collab (Brazil), Zenzeleni (South Africa) and Tanda.net (Kenya).

[36] Nextcloud can be best understood as a community-managed cloud, installable on different kinds of servers, from the most local one to virtual machines in huge commercial data centres (more at: https://nextcloud.com/). Compared to this, CasaOS is a server-side software that helps to self-host content (https://casaos.zimaspace.com/).

[37] https://blog.janastu.org/

[38] CN/CIM partnerships in Kenya (internet support for livestreams, mainly free for marketing purposes or subsidised).

experience. Yet, media dialogues are more diverse than this often-cited dichotomy. As we learned, CIGA TV in Indonesia is a space where indigenous people share stories, cultural expressions and rituals and cover local events. Here the content publishing moment can also be seen as a blend of traditional formats with digital media languages, looking actively for wider reach while remaining inclusive for different audiences. The publishing process, in other words, is what makes the content available for an audience linked to a specific "mission" of a CIM and is the obligatory passage point to make its content relevant. End of story? No, because there is one more stage we can distinguish.

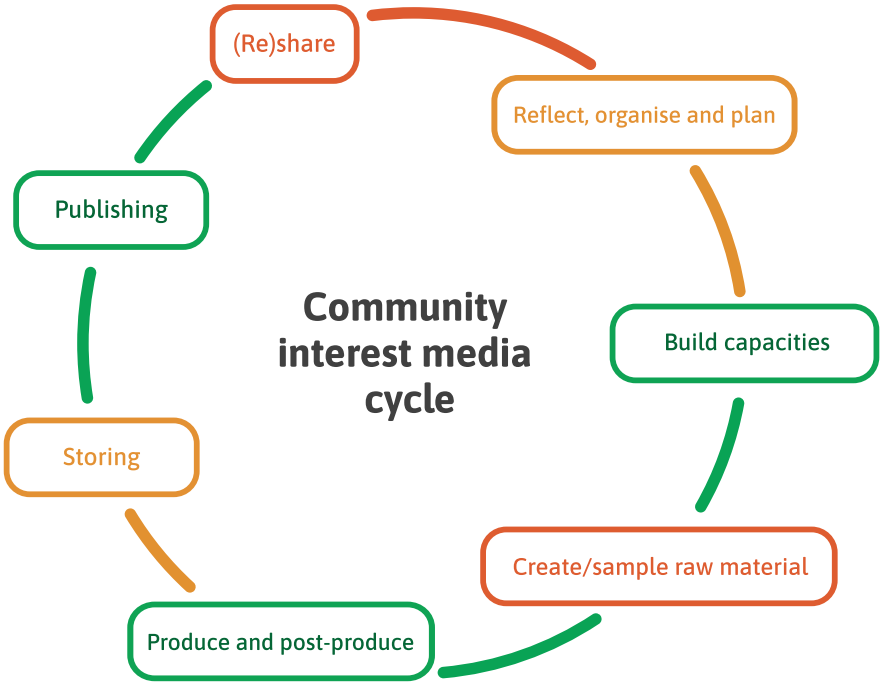
7. (Re)sharing. "Wait," you could object, "isn't re-sharing or re-publishing the same as posting on a third-party platform as an existing CIM?" The qualitative difference we are suggesting is that (re-)sharing is rather a complementary strategy that adds to a media space or self-publications as amplifiers or multipliers but cannot be confused with the media itself. Such re-sharing can take different forms and what comes to mind quickly are of course all the "content slot machines" of the platform economy. Here is where the suggested distinction becomes immediately plausible, since you cannot "own" a WhatsApp channel or an Instagram profile, but you can creatively and purposefully use them for your diffusion strategy as a CIM: for promotion and redistribution of content, to expand your impact, encourage dialogue and foster collaboration. Yet re-sharing does not end with big-tech. In fact, there are many other viable options involving networking dynamics and partnerships with other stakeholders that are worth exploring and which according to our group of researchers foster collective advocacy of shared topics of interest, trigger co-creation, counter algorithm-driven content marginalisation and make it possible to reach new audiences.

So, looking back on our conversations, first, beyond the "usual platform and messaging suspects", we identified a number of creative and efficient re-sharing approaches in partnership. Co-publishing (on air and online) with public and university radios is an approved practice in Indonesia, Kenya and Mexico. Such collaborations can also take the form of localising content from "homeless media", as described in India or – just the other way round – evolve in regional community media networks, sometimes with the declared goal of cross-border content sharing. One of the most impressive examples of such multifaceted sharing occurs with the already mentioned Canto de Cenzontles podcast. While each episode is published on its own website, it is also retransmitted by more than 60 radios in Mexico, the United States, Bolivia and Argentina.

This does not prevent the makers of Canto de Cenzontles or other CIM from also launching their content through mailing lists, newsletters and most of the different digital platforms. Trying to engage with new audiences and create visibility for stories should never be disdained. Social media and messenger channels (sometimes also coordinated with partners) have become quite popular for this purpose, as exemplified by the WhatsApp-based engagements with audiences by Mtaani and Pamoja Radios in Kenya. This kind of potentially massive visibility when going viral is, of course, thrilling, but it is also good to ask what the quality of those engagements is. Are we communicating with humans or just receiving some thumbs up from bots? Beyond the opaque algorithms, digital platforms employ new AI-driven

tools to supposedly amplify reach. But what for? To spend more time on the platform? How can CIM content avoid becoming merely clickbait to increase screen time in an atomised and angry online community? Those are questions that remain open. However, we can share at least one best practice of enhanced content sharing that was co-created with CIM participation from the very beginning. The Display Europe project is offering a non-commercial platform that creates visibility and increased reach through translation tools without directing traffic away from the website and channels of the content creators but rather bringing more audiences to them.

We have come full circle, just to start again.[39] Each stage feeds into the next, sustained by a collective breath. Yet each of the stages represents a specific moment of media making that is crucial for a sustainable and impactful practice. By looking at the graphic below and calling to mind its methodologies and tools, you will also note how organically interwoven media making in the interest of the community and community-centred connectivity are in practice. Way different from an abstract "public interest" framing, content creation and sharing are reflected as situated, conscious choices. CCCIs and related local services are enablers for CIM, while, if we look at it the other way round, they are themselves an important local service that adds to bottom-up meaningful connectivity.



The following nine research reports, case studies and interviews will point back to this cycle in many ways and illustrate both challenges and best practices. Again, these stories also demonstrate the power of CCCIs for bridging digital divides, nurturing cultural heritage and strengthening locally governed media ecosystems. So let us have a look...

[39] The model however does not insinuate that the process has to begin at the "reflection stage". In practice, the cycle can and often is put into motion at other points.

Community media as custodians of the ancestral order: A case study of Radio Swara and CIGA TV in Kasepuhan Gelaralam (Indonesia)

Subekti Priyadharma

Community media as custodians of the ancestral order: A case study of Radio Swara and CIGA TV in Kasepuhan Gelaralam (Indonesia)

Subekti Priyadharma
Indonesia, Asia

Introduction

Amid the tides of digitalisation and global media penetration, the indigenous community of Kasepuhan Gelaralam in West Java presents an alternative narrative of information sovereignty and cultural preservation. They have established and managed two forms of community media: Radio Swara 107.7 FM and CIGA TV. These platforms serve not only as channels of communication but also as spaces for learning, cultural preservation and building bridges between the internal life of the community and the outside world.

This paper is based on an interview with Yoyo Yogaswara,[1] a resident of Kasepuhan Gelaralam (formerly known as Ciptagelar), who has been appointed by the traditional leader, Abah Ugi, to serve as the *Jambatan* (literally, bridge), i.e. as a communications officer who bridges the Kasepuhan with the outside world, akin to a public relations role in modern society. Through this role, he also helps manage and sustain the community media platforms.

Historical background

Radio Swara Ciptagelar was founded in 2004 as a creation of Abah Ugi, who had been experimenting with building transmitters since junior high school.[2] He later established CIGA TV in 2008, having refined television transmitter technology while in high school. These two media outlets emerged in response to the isolation of the Kasepuhan community from communication infrastructure in the early 2000s. At the time, there was no network coverage and even landlines had not yet reached the area. Community media thus became a local and self-reliant solution, driven by the principle of being by and for the community. "The community needed a means of communication because we were far from urban areas [...] It was still the era of telephone cables," Yoyo explained.

The establishment of these media was grounded in three main principles: the needs of the community, the mission of the Kasepuhan to disseminate ancestral teachings and the momentum provided by the introduction of communication technology brought from outside by Abah Ugi.

[1] The interview was conducted online on 5 June 2025.
[2] Tifani, O. (2023, 1 March). Miliki Stasiun TV Sendiri, Ini 6 Fakta Menarik Kampung Adat Ciptagelar. *Liputan 6*. https://www.liputan6.com/regional/read/5220204/miliki-stasiun-tv-sendiri-ini-6-fakta-menarik-kampung-adat-ciptagelar?page=2

Vision and mission of Radio Swara and CIGA TV

The community media's vision is to protect and disseminate ancestral values. Their mission is to revitalise customary knowledge systems through community-based media. "Kasepuhan itself has a mission *to spread the ancestral order* [...] so the existence of a communication tool is necessary to realise this," Yoyo stated. Radio Swara and CIGA TV were not merely designed to deliver information but also to visualise the life of the *adat* (customary) community, especially as local people became more accustomed to audiovisual media.

These two platforms serve as tools for internal communication within remote areas and as documentation and preservation instruments. Furthermore, they selectively and educationally disseminate information about *adat* to broader society.

Ownership and management

These media platforms are conceptually and symbolically owned by Abah Ugi but operated collectively on behalf of the Kasepuhan, "since Abah himself is a *sepuh* (elder)," Yoyo clarified. While the original ideas and funding came from Abah, he entrusted the media's operation to customary officials who carry out their duties based on ancestral responsibilities. "When we speak of Kasepuhan, it means there are those who keep the organisational wheel turning [...] namely, the officials who are responsible for their respective domains in the Kasepuhan."

Media management is thus executed directly by appointed community members under the coordination of the elders. In contrast to modern organisations, there are no fixed wages; instead, a system of service and communal livelihood sustains them. "The reward is living with the sepuh, who assumes responsibility for our lives," Yoyo explained.

Decisions regarding media broadcasting are made collectively but filtered by Yoyo in his role as communications officer. "We make decisions together [...] but the final channel is through me."

Digitalisation and technological challenges

As media systems shift from analogue to digital, Kasepuhan Gelaralam has also endeavoured to digitise its media infrastructure. CIGA TV is now fully digital, in both production and distribution. Platforms such as YouTube,[3] Instagram[4] and even TikTok are used to reach external audiences. Meanwhile, Radio Swara is temporarily inactive due to the logistical challenges of relocating the Kasepuhan from Ciptagelar to its current site in Gelaralam. Still, there are plans to revitalise Radio Swara as a digital, internet-based streaming platform, supported by the now-stable community-centred connectivity in Gelaralam.

[3] https://www.youtube.com/@cigatvciptagelar6230
[4] https://www.instagram.com/yoyoyogasmana_ciptagelar/?igsh=OXd4Mmlxd291azkw#

However, digitalisation has not been without its obstacles. One significant challenge is the limited technical infrastructure, including electricity and internet access. "We once had a mini server [...] but due to electricity issues, the computer malfunctioned and is now offline," Yoyo recounted.

Additionally, a lack of formally trained human resources in digital technology has posed a barrier. Learning remains primarily self-taught and access to technical training is minimal.

Pre-production: Recruitment and capacity building

Recruitment is informal and based on trust and lineage. "These community members are those carrying out the duties of their ancestors," said Yoyo. There is no open selection process; rather, individuals are identified based on their potential and willingness to learn. Yoyo typically scouts young people who are eager to acquire skills, ranging from understanding equipment to using it and eventually applying it to document events in the Kasepuhan. "They may serve as camera operators, editors and broadcast technicians, all rolled into one."

Capacity development is primarily experiential and organic, occurring during the coverage and publication of customary events. Peer-to-peer learning is common. "As they say, the best teacher is experience," Yoyo reiterated. Nonetheless, external training has occasionally been provided by NGOs such as Common Room, offering workshops on content production using mobile phones and social media.

Production and post-production

Unlike modern media, CIGA TV does not operate on a fixed programming schedule. "We don't need to plan programmes [...] we just wait for the moment." Content is guided by the cultural and ceremonial calendar, around events such as *tandur* (rice planting) or *ngaseuk* (sowing seeds). Community media personnel are tasked with documenting these events.

To do this effectively, they are trained in basic journalistic principles such as the 5W+1H method[5] and in constructing natural visual narratives. Yoyo observed that editing and story-telling styles evolve organically, reflecting the unique personalities and perspectives of each young media worker.

Notably, the same personnel conduct post-production tasks. "A CIGA TV cameraman must also be able to operate the equipment and broadcast the content. Everyone must be able to handle the entire process." Thus, tasks are not divided by specialised roles as in professional media organisations; instead, the work is carried out through multitasking.

[5] In journalism, the 5W+1H framework refers to what, who, when, where, why and how. *What* describes the event or incident that took place; *who* identifies the individuals or groups involved in the event; *when* specifies the time at which the event occurred; *where* indicates the location where the event took place; *why* explains the reasons or causes behind the event; and *how* details the process or manner in which the event unfolded.

Distribution, media platform selection and archiving

Content distribution strategies depend on the target audience. If aimed at the local community, content is broadcast through the local television station; for broader audiences, it is uploaded to YouTube. Careful filtering determines which content is suitable for public consumption. "Primarily for local TV [...] we choose and sort what can be shared publicly."

YouTube serves not only as a distribution tool but also as a digital archive. This is an essential workaround given local infrastructure limitations. Hard drives remain the primary storage medium and YouTube provides a backup solution.

Production equipment such as camera operators and computers are primarily acquired through donations, particularly from former cameramen. Maintenance is managed internally. "Cameras were donated by those who no longer needed them," said Yoyo. Computers used for editing are similarly sourced, while hard drives are regularly purchased for local data storage.

Regulation and relations with state institutions

According to Indonesian Broadcasting Law No. 32/2002 and Government Regulation No. 51/2005 on Community Broadcasting Institutions, community media must obtain a broadcasting licence from the government via the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI). Kasepuhan media representatives and Abah himself once approached the West Java KPI to apply for legal recognition. However, both KPI and the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs responded informally, offering verbal support rather than completing administrative procedures. As a result, the media have yet to obtain legal recognition, though they have received tacit institutional support.

"If we're talking about Kasepuhan's communication tools, they told us, 'Let us take care of it' [...] it's under their responsibility," Yoyo said, quoting KPID West Java. This reflects the trust that state authorities place in the Gelaralam community and particularly in Abah Ugi's leadership, recognising that these media are not misused and remain focused on internal community purposes.

The role and impact of community media in cultural and social empowerment

Radio Swara and CIGA TV have a function far beyond basic information dissemination. They have become tools of cultural preservation, intergenerational education and social empowerment rooted in customary values.

1. Empowerment of individuals and youth capacity building

These media have fostered communication and technical skills among young people who previously lacked confidence. “From not being able to speak, they learned to speak. From not knowing how to use tools, they learned,” said Yoyo. Through this informal learning, they gain storytelling skills, archival knowledge and public communication abilities grounded in lived experience.

2. Cultural education within families and communities

CIGA TV has become an intergenerational bridge for transmitting local knowledge and *adat* practices. Yoyo shared how a *baris kolot* (village elder) wanted CIGA TV in his home to explain traditional practices to his family. “It helps them understand [...] this is how we plant rice, how we sow seeds.” These visual media serve as intergenerational conversation tools that preserve cultural knowledge.

3. Documentation and living archives

Community media serve as living archives of cultural events, traditional farming methods and important community moments. These recordings are not just media content but valuable cultural records that preserve oral traditions in both visual and auditory forms.

4. External communication and cultural representation

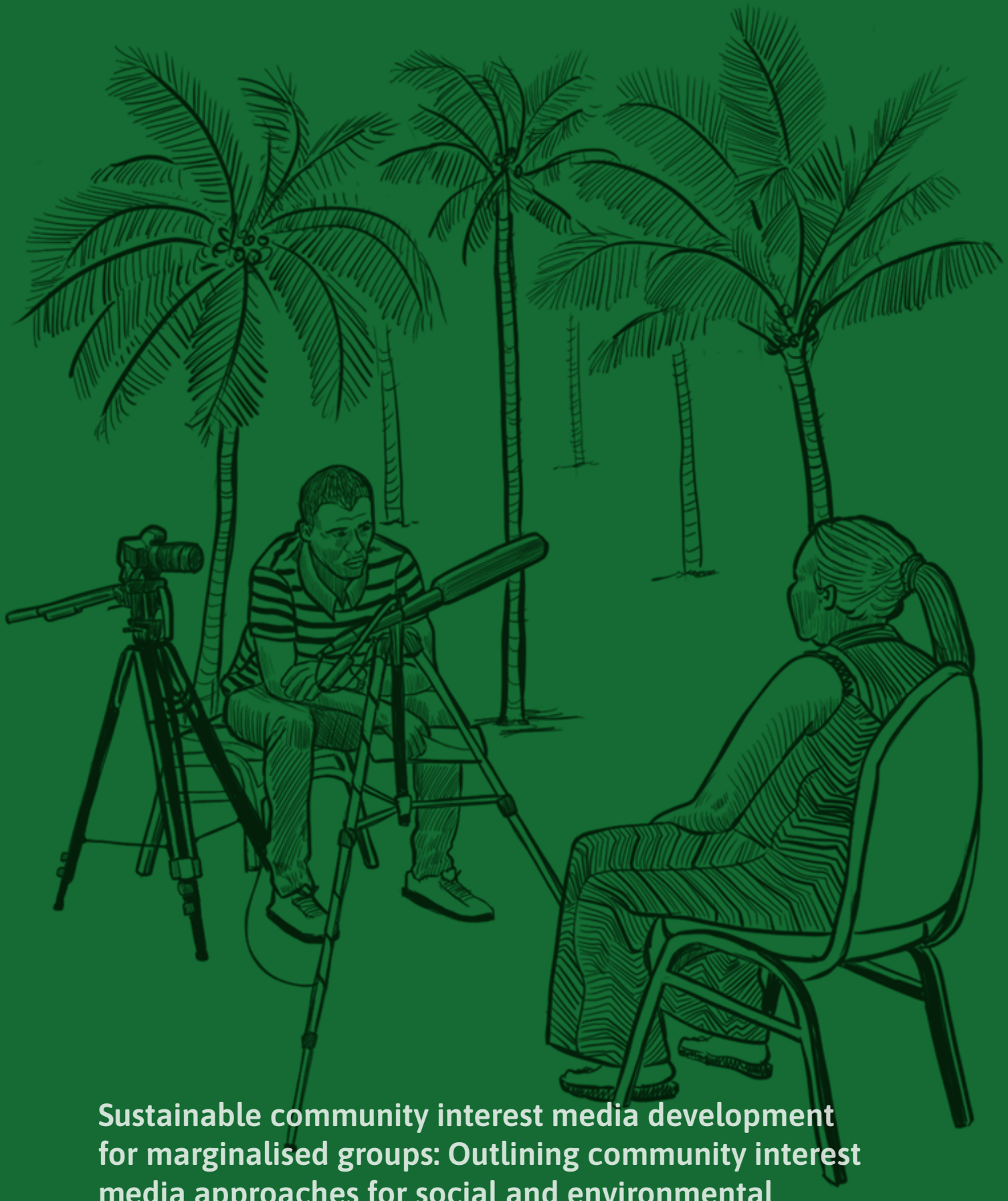
Externally, these platforms function as tools for cultural diplomacy. Carefully curated content shared on YouTube and social media presents indigenous narratives from the community’s own perspective, thus offering a counter-narrative to common stereotypes.

Conclusion: Community media as cultural and transformative agents

As this analysis has shown, Radio Swara and CIGA TV serve dual roles, i.e. as protectors of cultural heritage and as catalysts for social transformation. They support the continuity of local knowledge, enhance youth capacity, strengthen family ties and broaden cultural representation.

These community media are not merely technological tools; they are sociocultural institutions deeply rooted in local values and sustained by communal agency. They stand as a testament to the power of community media not just as alternatives to mainstream media but as living spaces that link the past, present and future of indigenous communities.

All photographs included are the property of, and were provided by, the author of the corresponding chapter.



Sustainable community interest media development for marginalised groups: Outlining community interest media approaches for social and environmental inclusion of rural and urban communities in the Niger Delta region

Okoro Onyekachi Emmanuel

Sustainable community interest media development for marginalised groups: Outlining community interest media approaches for social and environmental inclusion of rural and urban communities in the Niger Delta region

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Nigeria, Africa

This paper documents how local community-based groups and other relevant stakeholders use community media, data and approaches to increase social and environmental inclusion of communities across the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It also outlines the challenges faced by stakeholders living in rural and urban communities and how they have been working in collaboration with CSOs, media and community-based groups to circumvent these identified challenges. To gather the findings recorded in this paper, the Media Awareness and Justice Initiative (MAJI) has, in the course of its work, carried out interactive sessions with identified stakeholders, analysed outputs from facilitated digital training for young people approached in previously developed audiovisual media content and documented key strategies used during awareness engagements across social, radio and print media platforms.

Country overview

Looking at an analysis of the media landscape in Nigeria based on implemented interactive sessions with media practitioners and community town criers, it is clear that huge information-sharing and communication barriers exist in terms of properly representing marginalised groups living in rural and urban communal areas across the Niger Delta.[1] Media content is developed using contexts that do not accurately depict the lived realities of rural and urban poor communities. When such media are developed by civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent filmmakers, the local communities that are the primary subjects of such films do not get to see them. This lack of access to community interest media content has led in particular to a huge information gap, where communities are excluded from accessing key information needed for social, environmental and economic inclusion. This lack of access to relevant information opens up channels to disinformation and misinformation, which further disenfranchises the target communities. Further analysis of Nigeria's media shows that the plight of marginalised groups such as women, young people and people with disabilities (PwD) in rural and urban communities in the Niger Delta is either ignored or reported in low quantities across digital platforms and spaces across the Niger Delta. This is due to lack of either electricity to power devices, digital access channels, digital tools or the financial capacity to view such long-length media content via the internet. In addition, these independent media are not televised or streamed due to editorial bureaucracy and

[1] https://www.majinigeria.org/researchandreport/6878c335abe92da60d9c0bdf

government censorship. For regional and local outlets in the Niger Delta, issues focusing on social, economic and environmental challenges are mainly presented as support stories and content, with community people not able to access this media content, which is key in raising awareness and sensitising these rural and urban communities. In addition, direct voices and experiences of marginalised groups and communities are largely missing in the overall narrative, with few articles, TV programmes and social media projects engaging these marginalised groups as experts or professionals who possess local knowledge of the problem identified.

Objectives of the study

The Media Awareness and Justice Initiative aims to achieve the following key research objectives:

- **Knowledge creation:** In collaboration with identified project stakeholders and target groups, it seeks to increase the understanding on the key drivers of information disorder across rural and urban communities and how community interest media can advance advocacy, campaigns and awareness. The paper outlines the impacts of lack of sustainable community interest media on communities, social groups and the development of community-oriented national policies, while outlining strategic recommendations to provide tailor-made counter-strategies for the existential problems identified by the key stakeholders at the local levels.
- **Capacity building:** To strengthen the development of community interest media, there needs to be a focus on capacity building for identified target groups living in rural and urban communities. These target groups have to be trained to work collaboratively to achieve shared objectives. Hence, this research paper seeks to identify and document key areas of capacity building that will support the sustainable development and use of community interest media.
- **Policy campaign and development:** The deliberate use of community interest media for advocacy, campaigns, awareness and policy development is a key objective. The paper outlines potential strategies that can help maximise the uses of community interest media. Documented gains and advances using community interest media further strengthen community trust in its use, providing a platform for overall inclusion of stakeholders at all levels.

Methodology of the study

To document key findings outlined in this paper, MAJI used focus group interactions, analysis of the media landscape across Nigeria and review of produced audiovisual community interest media content focusing on social, economic and environmental challenges. Under the focus group interactions, MAJI engaged with key stakeholders by gathering findings from lived experiences. To gather insights on the challenges to digital access and inclusion faced

by marginalised groups and communities, MAJI pulled findings from the community network (CN) research work that was developed during the deployment and installation of CNs that adopted the use of participatory approaches to provide digital access to residents living in rural and urban poor communities.[2] MAJI also drew on findings from its work on audiovisual media development, the challenges of developing community media, dissemination of development media and how to use the media developed for advocacy and campaigns.[3] MAJI moreover explored the challenges of real-time data collection and how this has supported community-based use of qualitative and quantitative data for environmental advocacy, campaigns and awareness.[4]

Stakeholders engaged under this study

The Media Awareness and Justice Initiative engaged with the following key stakeholders in the development of this paper:

- Civil society organisations
- Community-based groups
- Community-based women's groups
- People with disabilities
- Newsroom media and investigative journalists.

Key findings

The importance of the inclusion of community target groups and stakeholders in the development of community interest media cannot be overemphasised, as they provide deep knowledge into the problem, while also contributing key solutions that are community-oriented and sustainable in nature. The main findings from our interaction with key stakeholders are listed below:

Community inclusion in media development is a key component

For sustainable development of community interest media, it is imperative for identified community groups to be front and centre in media development. The inclusion of key groups in the development of community interest media provides the platform for participating target groups to take ownership of the content developed and ensure that the content is shared via communal platforms and channels. This type of approach also encourages other community target groups to use the produced media content for their campaigns, advocacy, awareness and sensitisation. Community inclusion in media development also provides the platform for the development of innovative media content using relevant community contexts to share the lived realities of target rural and urban communities in similar locations across multiple geographical areas.

[2] https://www.majinigeria.org/researchandreport/66750386cac9dc0ce0963ebe
[3] https://vimeo.com/mediaforjustice
[4] https://www.datacab.io/

Capacity building is a useful tool for supporting continued development of community-owned media, by community people. Hands-on training, focusing on audiovisual content development, information authentication, fact-checking and interactive engagements using artificial intelligence (AI) incorporated technology and collaborative strategies are essential for strengthening this component.

The imperative need for the inclusion of community languages in media content development

The inclusion and use of community languages and dialects in the development of community interest media are strategic and important tools. This ensures that the media content developed has a communal identity and is understandable by all literate and illiterate groups within the community. Usually, local languages are the best form of communication during this phase, as they are readily acceptable and understandable by literate and illiterate people within the target communities. This key factor also provides a useful tool for communal sensitisation and awareness creation using community-based platforms such as town hall meetings and film screenings. The inclusion of community languages in media development also provides some level of authenticity to the content produced, outlining the direct impacts of the subject portrayed by the content developed.

Provision of low-cost digital network access to affordable internet

Across the African continent, a huge number of people remain unconnected. For contrast, Africa is the continent with the lowest internet penetration rate, which currently stands at 39% of the population, compared to the global average of nearly 60%. As at January 2022, Nigeria's internet penetration rate stood at 51% of the total population. Official statistics indicate that in Nigeria alone there are at least 27.1 million people with no access to connectivity in the country. Despite the seeming expansion of low-cost mobile tools and broadband internet access in urban areas, rural underserved communities are still struggling with supposed market forces that hinder their access to the internet, thereby further expanding the digital gap within Nigeria. Telecommunication companies point to a lack of required market forces needed to push telecom infrastructure to these underserved communities.

Creation of community-oriented platforms for media dissemination and advocacy

Community-oriented media dissemination platforms are important and strategic in community awareness, sensitisation and advocacy. These platforms provide a level structure for knowledge sharing, clarification of community information and interaction amongst community groups and stakeholders. Policy advocacy using community-oriented platforms supports inclusion and overall acceptance of the proposed advocacy objectives. Examples of community-oriented platforms include community radios, town hall meetings, film screenings, town criers and other communal gatherings that support interactive interfaces amongst community dwellers and residents.

Recommendations

The development of community interest media is a collaborative effort and to achieve the projected objectives of sensitisation, awareness, inclusion and informing policy, specific stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, independent filmmakers and community-based groups, need to adopt community-oriented approaches that support capacity building, campaigning for the inclusion of decentralised media-sharing channels and development of community-centred connectivity initiatives that provide low-cost connectivity options to enable community people to access produced media content via online and offline platforms.

In addition, key stakeholders have to adopt participatory strategies that will support community ownership, non-biased dissemination of the content produced and the use of local languages as key components for community inclusion. Strategic stakeholders such as community-based groups, civil society organisations and media are key in the dissemination component for developed community interest media content.

It is also important to identify the key roles played by the implementation of hands-on capacity-building trainings in media development and dissemination. These trainings should cover key stakeholders such as community actors, CSOs, social media influencers and other relevant partners working to increase community voices, awareness and sensitisation.

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Enhancing digital inclusion through collaboration between community networks and community interest media in Kenya

Racheal Nakitare, Nelly Moraa and Raylenne Kambua

Enhancing digital inclusion through collaboration between community networks and community interest media in Kenya

Racheal Nakitare, Nelly Moraa and Raylenne Kambua
Kenya, Africa

This report explores the collaborative potential between community networks (CNs) and community interest media (CIM) in advancing digital inclusion and participatory development in Kenya. CNs are grassroots digital infrastructures enhancing access in underserved areas, while CIM such as community radios and online platforms serve hyperlocal information needs. The report highlights participatory journalism, sustainability challenges, digital transformation and regulatory gaps. It underscores the need for policy recognition, capacity building and integrated infrastructure to harness the synergies between CNs and CIM for inclusive, community-driven media ecosystems.

Country overview

Kenya's media landscape is diverse and dynamic, with a thriving radio sector of over 300 radio stations broadcasting in a range of local and vernacular languages, according to the January-March 2025 Audience Measurements and Industry Trends Report published by the Communications Authority (CA) of Kenya.[1]

Mobile phones make up about one third of the radio listenership, though traditional radio sets are still the primary means of listening, especially in rural areas. At the same time, the widespread use of mobile phones has helped Kenya achieve one of the highest internet penetration rates in Africa, allowing citizens extensive access to digital platforms.[2]

Community radios are locally owned, non-profit and managed by community boards. Coverage varies regionally and licensing is regulated by the Communications Authority (CA). While the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) helps with journalist accreditation, connectivity often depends on private partnerships or informal arrangements with community networks.[3]

Objective of the study

The study seeks to examine how CNs and CIM in Kenya collaborate to advance digital inclusion, strengthen participatory journalism and support community-centred development,

[1] Communications Authority of Kenya. (2025). *Audience Measurements and Industry Trends Report: Quarter 3 2024/2025*. https://www.ca.go.ke/sites/default/files/2025-05/Audience%20Measurement%20and%20Industry%20Trends%20Report%20Quarter%203%202024-2025.pdf
[2] Ibid.
[3] Media Council of Kenya. (2024). *State of the Media Report 2023*. https://mediacouncil.or.ke/sites/default/files/downloads/MCK_%20State%20of%20the%20Media%202023%20Survey%20Report.pdf

while examining the structural, financial and policy challenges they face. It further aims to propose actionable strategies for sustainable partnerships. It aligns with APC's Local Networks (LocNet) initiative exploring similar dynamics across the Global South.[4]

Methodology

This qualitative study is based on interviews conducted with five stakeholders: Pamoja Radio, Mtaani Radio, Equator FM, the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) and the Association of Kenya Community Media Operators (ACKMO). Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. Visual documentation and secondary literature from regional reports and national policy frameworks were also reviewed to contextualise findings.

Key findings and notable practices

Participatory and community-driven programming

Mtaani Radio, Pamoja Radio and Equator FM develop content based on direct community input. Audiences suggest topics, contribute stories and participate in production.[5] There is community anchoring and co-creation. Pamoja and Mtaani Radios prioritise community-generated content. Mtaani's 360 model (on air, on the ground, online) allows it to co-create with youth and engage over five million digital users, some from the Kenyan diaspora.[6]

> We are community owned [and] community informed, in that it is a board drawn from the community that actually runs the station. – Henix Obuchunju, news editor at Pamoja Radio

> We have a call-in for radio listeners to suggest programming, but mainly we operate a WhatsApp platform for the community where we engage on scheduled topics and start conversations from the platform even before we hit the airwaves. – Kelvin Nyangweso, station manager at Mtaani Radio

Digital infrastructure and innovation

Mtaani Radio leverages collaborations with Poa Internet, individual entrepreneurs and Plug In to maintain connectivity and stream audiovisual content. These partnerships help the station monetise digital platforms such as Facebook. Previous partnerships between community networks like TunapandaNet and Pamoja Radio in Kibera promoted digital literacy and civic awareness. These amplify digital themes in programming and increase visibility on online platforms. Additionally, stations like Equator FM utilise digital streaming services, mobile platforms, and social media to maintain dialogue with their audiences.

> Community radios – typically rural, non-profit, and linguistically localised – exist to empower marginalised communities, promote peace, and deliver context-relevant

[4] https://www.apc.org/en/our-work/themes/digital-inclusion
[5] Interview with the news editor of Pamoja Radio, Henix Obuchunju, June 2025.
[6] Interview with the station manager of Mtaani Radio, Kelvin Nyangweso, July 2025.

programming. Many now integrate with internet infrastructure to enhance coverage, often relying on mobile operators like Safaricom. – Daniel Waruturu, ACKMO chairman

Support and mentorship

Equator FM leverages mentorship support from IAWRT Kenya in their mentorship programme supported by the US Embassy.[7] Selected female journalism students receive hands-on training in digital media skills and media production. The programme is keen on bridging the digital gender divide and also critically emphasises the principles of objective and inclusive reporting. Furthermore, the Media Council of Kenya is enhancing digital literacy and civic engagement by supporting a network of digital hubs across regions such as Kisumu, Kisii, Eldoret, Mombasa, Malindi and Busia.[8] The hubs provide internet access, production equipment and collaborative workspaces that are open to accredited freelance journalists, citizen journalists and the community at large. While the hubs are currently not working in collaboration with any CNs, this untapped potential remains viable for a transformative experience.

Linking community interest media with community networks offers the transformative potential to enhance digital access, amplify local content and foster civic participation. – Jerry Abuga, MCK corporate affairs manager

Policy and regulatory support

Despite efforts by MCK to provide training, accreditation and professional development, the absence of infrastructural funding weakens CIM operations.

ACKMO provides a national platform for CIM to demand recognition, regulatory clarity and equitable access to resources such as Kenya's Universal Service Fund.[9]

We are fighting for visibility, voice and viability. – Daniel Waruturu, ACKMO chairman

Challenges for CNs and CIM in Kenya

Sustainability remains a core challenge

Community media and networks face persistent funding gaps, lack of institutional support and unreliable infrastructure, hence limiting operational continuity and digital expansion. Equator FM, while benefiting from institutional support from Maseno University, still requires additional access to funding and equipment. It also faces operational challenges during academic recess when student staffing is unavailable, leading to potential programme disruptions. Mtaani Radio sustains itself via community water projects and advocacy advertising from the government and NGOs. Pamoja relies on advocacy and philanthropy.

[7] Interview with Equator FM presenter R. Naisoi, June 2025.
[8] Interview with Media Council of Kenya representative Jerry Abuga, June 2025.
[9] Interview with the chairperson of the Association of Community Media in Kenya (ACKMO), Daniel Waruturu, June 2025.

Regulatory and licensing barriers

Community interest media (CIM) face operational and financial strain due to strict and costly licensing requirements from the Communications Authority (CA) and advertising restrictions that limit their revenue generation. Additionally, the lack of formal recognition in national policy undermines their institutional legitimacy and access to critical support mechanisms.

Infrastructure and connectivity deficits

Many CIM operate with outdated equipment and have limited access to regular technical skills training, while unreliable and costly internet often sourced from commercial internet service providers (ISPs) further restricts their capacity. Short-lived community network initiatives, such as TunapandaNet and Plug In, show strong potential but highlight the challenges of poor rural connectivity and the lack of sustained funding needed for long-term digital inclusion.

Human resource and skills gaps

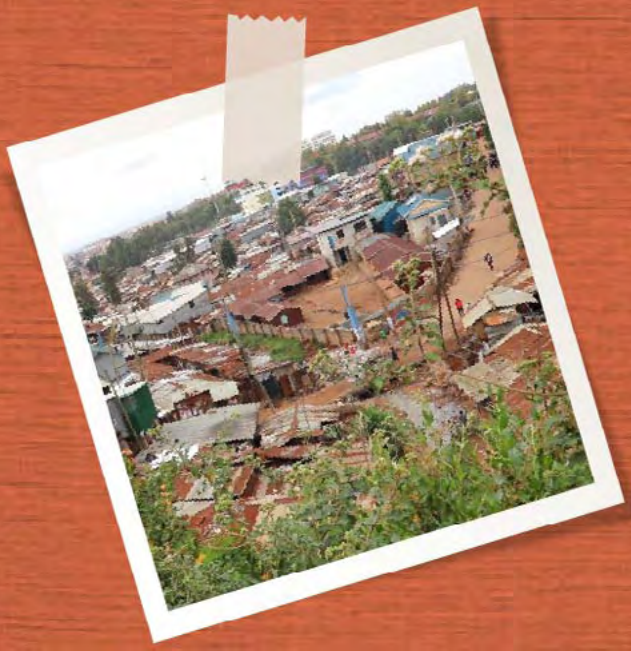
CIM face significant human resource and skills gaps, including inconsistent staffing especially in university-based stations like Equator FM, which experience disruptions during academic breaks. There is also a widespread need for continuous mentorship, localised capacity building and training in digital tools, ethical journalism and civic technology to empower both youth and grassroots reporters, considering that the training provided by MCK does not cut across all CIM.

Recommendations

- Establish a community media development fund, provide access to Universal Service Funds and offer support services to licensed community radios.
- Promote co-regulation among stakeholders to improve standards while respecting community ownership. Consider licensing waivers, flexible compliance frameworks and sustainability assessments for CIM.
- Support digital integration of CIM by offering training and subsidised digital tools for content creation and online broadcasting.
- Promote sustainable monetisation models such as Mtaani's approach of integrating local community water projects with their local services, which also involves leveraging digital advertising revenue from community interest advocacy programmes.
- Develop national and county-level frameworks that formally recognise and support collaborations between CNs and CIM.
- Integrate CIM into Kenya's national digital and media development frameworks, ensuring legal recognition.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that community networks and community interest media should be natural partners in Kenya's pursuit of digital inclusion. The cases of Mtaani Radio, Pamoja Radio, Equator FM, ACKMO and the Media Council of Kenya offer practical evidence of what works and what still needs structural support. With the right policies, funding and partnerships, CN-CIM synergies can bridge the digital divide while enhancing civic voices through participatory engagement and local development



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Community content creation in Mexico: The role of political advocacy in the development of the Canto de Cenzontles and Periodismo de lo Posible projects

Daniela Bello López

Community content creation in Mexico: The role of political advocacy in the development of the Canto de Cenzontles and Periodismo de lo Posible projects

Daniela Bello López
Mexico, Latin America

Community media in Mexico play a vital political role in advancing the rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples who are often excluded from mainstream media. This research explores two initiatives — Canto de Cenzontles and Periodismo de lo Posible — as examples of how community content creation serves as both cultural expression and political resistance. These projects reflect the outcome of years of political advocacy by grassroots organisations in Mexico and, despite economic and institutional barriers, they assert the right of Indigenous communities to tell their own stories, defend their territories and strengthen autonomy through media created on their own terms.

Introduction

Community media in Latin America have long played a critical role in advancing the rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. In contexts of systemic exclusion from public and commercial media, these media serve not only as tools for cultural expression, but also as mechanisms for the defence of territory, language, identity and self-determination. In Mexico, where Indigenous communities continue to face threats from extractive industries, structural racism and a lack of media representation, community content creation has become a vital strategy for both communication and resistance.

This research explores the experience of community content creation in Mexico through the projects Canto de Cenzontles – a radio magazine featuring stories of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities – and Periodismo de lo Posible – a narrative podcast produced collaboratively by social activists and community media documenting stories of territorial defence, focusing on the hope and dignity of the protagonists of the stories.

Both initiatives are grounded in principles aligned with Indigenous rights frameworks – including those enshrined in article 2 of the Mexican Constitution and article 16 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – which affirm the right of Indigenous peoples to create and access their own media, in their own languages, without discrimination. These projects not only reclaim media spaces, they also foster participatory processes that strengthen autonomy and collective memory.

We would like to explore how community content creation responds to a broader struggle for Indigenous rights through a strong and organised movement of Indigenous media in Mexico. Despite the economic limitations and lack of public and commercial spaces to share their

content, both projects focused on the right of Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories on their own terms, as a result of a long-standing collective dream of community, Indigenous and Afro-descendant media and civil organisations that have been working in Mexico for many years to change the law and the conditions in which these media operate.

Objectives of the study

This paper aims to:

- Share the key practices and experiences of two community media initiatives in Mexico.
- Identify their contributions to legal and political advocacy for Indigenous communication rights.
- Contribute to the ongoing debate on legal reforms aimed at media inclusion, democratisation and cultural justice.
- List the main challenges to the economic sustainability of these initiatives and the creation of community-based content.
- Promote international collaboration to strengthen political advocacy for community media and content production.

Methodology

The research draws on internal documents, observation by the author as part of the projects, interviews with other team members, listenership metrics and legal frameworks. It combines field observation and content analysis to capture the political and cultural impact of both projects. The findings highlight both narrative innovation and organisational strategy.

Key findings and notable practices

Canto de Cenzontles

Canto de Cenzontles[1] is a weekly radio magazine rooted in Indigenous and Afro-descendant narratives. It is produced collectively by a diverse network of communicators from around 10 radios and organisations dedicated to community communication. The name "Canto de Cenzontles" translates as "Song of the Mockingbirds", symbolising the diversity and richness of languages, voices, cultures and stories they amplify across all media and territories.

The aim of the project is to build bridges among people, disseminate realities that reconnect people with life and territories, transform collective imaginaries, narrate from hope and bring to the forefront struggles and alternatives for autonomy, self-determination and the right to communication, among others.

[1] https://www.cantodecenzontles.org/

Canto de Cenzontles was founded in 2020 as the result of a long-standing collective dream of community, Indigenous and Afro-descendant media and civil organisations that have been working in Mexico for many years to change the law and the conditions for these media to operate. The project is the fruit of all those years of political advocacy in Mexico.

Within the framework of the project Designing Public Policies to Support Indigenous and Community Media in Mexico and Incorporate Indigenous Content into Public and Commercial Media,[2] carried out in collaboration with UNESCO, the initiative emerged to place original radio content in public and commercial media to promote the country's cultural and linguistic diversity.

- **Structure:** Network of communicators from around 10 radios and organisations with an editorial board and production, dissemination and coordination committees.
- **Reach:** Over 60 public and community stations in Mexico, the U.S. and Latin America.
- **Audience:** Mainly Mexican women (35-44 years old).
- **Values:** Gender equity, inclusion and intercultural dialogue.
- **Support mechanism:** Launched a fund to train and support other community radios.

> The diversity and richness of voices, languages, and territories is what gives life to each episode. – Canto de Cenzontles production team

Periodismo de lo Posible

Periodismo de lo Posible[3] is a narrative podcast series created through community-led editorial and production processes that shares stories of territorial defence. It is produced by collectives, organisations and community communicators and supported by seasoned journalists, who convey accounts of territorial protection and the challenges that have been overcome.

Stories that highlight achievements and possible paths for protecting life and nature through actions and strategies woven daily from within communities, assemblies, organisations and collectives in Mexico are shared in a narrative format.

The stories presented resonate with struggles in countries where similar resistance movements are taking place in response to extractivist projects, climate change and violence. These stories echo across diverse spaces and places, as they strengthen and inspire other individuals, communities and collectives facing similar difficulties – placing collective effort at the centre of the fight for a more just and sustainable future.

While there are cultural and social differences between territories, Global South countries are currently facing common recurring issues, such as the imposition of megaprojects, extractivism, gentrification and land devastation.

[2] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/strengthening-indigenous-and-community-media
[3] https://periodismodeloposible.com/

The stories featured in Periodismo de lo Posible can inspire more people to organise, build collectively and find creative solutions to the challenges faced.

- **Training-based model:** Combines journalism and technical workshops with mentorship.
- **Partners:** Supported by four organisations that manage a fund to operate the project – REDES A.C., Ojo de Agua Comunicación, Quinto Elemento Lab and La Sandía Digital.
- **Distribution:** Fifty-three radio stations, digital platforms, listening community circles and classrooms in schools, universities and human rights centres.
- **Main themes:** Resistance, sustainability and grassroots organising.

> Because storytelling is a way of transforming reality, of creating memory, and of sharing what is possible as a collective. – Periodismo de lo Posible production team

Challenges

Both initiatives face challenges that impact their reach and sustainability:

- **Funding instability:** Funding is volunteer-driven, with little or no regular financial support.
- **Limited technical resources:** Basic tools must be sourced independently.
- **Sustainability risks:** Teams face the risk of burnout without structural support.

Recommendations

As part of our advocacy efforts in REDES A.C., we are also asking legislators to contribute to the development of specific help for Indigenous and Afro-Mexican content creation.

In April 2025, a group of organisations, including REDES A.C. conducted a technical analysis of the Draft Law on Telecommunications and Broadcasting from the perspective of Indigenous, Afro-Mexican and community media[4] and presented it to both chambers of the legislative branch. The analysis concluded that the production, dissemination and financial support of content created by Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities and peoples is backed by a legal framework that includes the Constitution, international treaties with constitutional status, Mexican regulations and standards from international organisations.

It thus required the following:

> a) Inclusion of the obligation for all media outlets to reflect the linguistic and cultural plurality of the Mexican nation.

[4] https://redesac.org.mx/multimedia/prensa/

It is necessary to explicitly include the constitutional obligation that public broadcasting services have to reflect the cultural and linguistic plurality of the Mexican nation, which is both a right of Indigenous peoples and a right of audiences. According to article 6, section B, subsection III of the Mexican Constitution, broadcasting as a public service of general interest must preserve plurality and contribute to the aims of article 3 of the Constitution, which include fostering better human coexistence in order to strengthen appreciation and respect for cultural diversity.

In addition, article 6 of the General Law on Linguistic Rights stipulates that the "State shall adopt and implement the necessary measures to ensure that mass media outlets disseminate the reality and linguistic and cultural diversity of the Mexican Nation." Finally, the draft law itself, in article 228, recognises this as a right of audiences.

b) Support for the creation and dissemination of Indigenous, Afro-Mexican and community content.

The problem inherited from previous legislation lies in the fact that, although there is a framework that recognises the importance of Indigenous peoples' participation in telecommunications regulations, it does not establish clear mechanisms to ensure the sustainable development of Indigenous media, particularly in relation to content production. Despite normative advances, the absence of a comprehensive public telecommunications policy that includes specific funds for content production remains an unresolved issue.

Article 2, section B, subsection XI of the Mexican Constitution establishes the State's obligation to adopt measures to promote the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the media. We believe this obligation can be made effective through the following practical actions:

- Establishing requirements for public media to acquire Indigenous and Afro-Mexican programming.
- Including commitments to acquire and broadcast Indigenous or Afro-Mexican content as a criterion for granting or renewing commercial broadcasting concessions.
- Creating a fund for the production of Indigenous content that includes support for training, production, archiving, cataloguing and dissemination of Indigenous media content.

Additional measures:

- **Create public funding channels:** Institutionalise budgets for training, production and archiving of Indigenous content.
- **Legal and policy implementation:** Ensure Indigenous content is prioritised in national public and commercial media.
- **Inter-organisational collaboration:** Build alliances among media groups, civil society and academia.

- **Infrastructure access:** Provide low-cost tools and connectivity for rural media production.
- **Replicability models:** Share tools, formats and methodologies across the Global South to foster locally adapted versions.

Conclusion

The experiences of the Canto de Cenzontles and Periodismo de lo Posible projects demonstrate that community content creation in Mexico is both a form of resistance and a strategy for cultural renewal. These projects, grounded in collaboration and respect for Indigenous worldviews, show the transformative power of media when placed in the hands of the communities themselves. For these efforts to grow and endure, robust support systems – legal, financial and technical – must be established.

All photographs included are the property of, and were provided by, the author of the corresponding chapter.

Communication, community and connectivity: Resistance on the margins of Brazil

Violeta Assumpção

Communication, community and connectivity: Resistance on the margins of Brazil

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This article summarises the Brazilian stage of the Exploring Community Interest Media research, for which 11 interviews were conducted. It analyses how community interest media combine communication networks and content production to strengthen autonomy and give visibility to territories rendered invisible. These media act as spaces for memory and political education while also promoting commerce and publicising causes, balancing communication geared towards the community with the need and desire to reach an external audience.

Country overview

Brazil reports relatively high national rates of internet access, but those figures hide enormous gaps.[1] Urban peripheries, rural areas, Indigenous and Quilombola communities are underserved by inadequate public policies and the disinterest of major operators in investing in territories considered unprofitable, which result in communication deserts or very expensive services. In this context, community networks built and managed locally emerge as alternatives, combining technical and cultural knowledge to guarantee communication as a basic right and to strengthen social and political ties. These initiatives show that infrastructure is not only cables and towers, but also processes of care, memory and self-management.

Study objectives

The aim of this article is to show how two experiences, located in different Brazilian territories, build community-centred media and connectivity practices, emphasising autonomy, care, resistance, outward visibility and income generation; to systematise their narratives and strategies and their integration of communication, technology and collective action in contexts of social and territorial invisibility; to contribute conceptual and methodological reflections on the role of community interest media from a situated perspective attentive to intersections of gender, race and class; and to provide input for researchers, enthusiasts and for public debates on policies supporting autonomous communication and connectivity networks in Brazil.

[1] Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil (CGI.br). (2024). *Conectividade Significativa: propostas para medição e o retrato da população no Brasil*. https://cetic.br/media/docs/publicacoes/7/20240415183307/estudos_setoriais-conectividade_significativa.pdf

Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative approach. Between May and June 2025, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with technicians, activists, educators and popular communicators involved in community networks and community-centred media. Two experiences were selected as case studies: (1) AMA Web Radio/Praia do Açu (Rio de Janeiro), presented by Maria Eduarda Barreto; and (2) the Digital Forest Project in the Puyanawa Indigenous Territory (Acre), discussed with Carol Puyanawa. Interviews with Zeilane (Nupef), Tânia Mara and Luandro (Coolab), Fernando de Barros Wanderley/Saci (Rádio Aconchego), Luisa Cilente (DW Akademie), Adriane Gama (Projeto Saúde e Alegria), Foz (Transfeminist Network of Digital Care), Thiago Paixão (IBE-Brasil) and Daiane Araújo (Casa dos Meninos) provided complementary perspectives and made it possible to identify common thematic axes around media, territory, technology and care. The analysis was guided by the identification of emerging themes across sociotechnical, affective and cultural dimensions.

AMA Web Radio: Community media and connectivity in Praia do Açu

In April 2025 AMA Web Radio emerged as a development of the community network built by the Associação de Moradores e Amigos do Açu (AMA). In a context marked by land conflicts and the installation of an industrial port, the radio became a space for local content production and dialogue with the "outside world". Maria Eduarda, a young woman who is a network technician and communicator and is responsible for community liaison and marketing at the radio, explains that the initiative, together with social networks, enabled residents, shopkeepers, producers and artists to amplify their voices and reach millions of views within a short time. In addition to supporting the dissemination of local businesses, the web radio acts to combat misinformation and functions as a forum for dialogue between the community and the port complex, discussing environmental impacts and social offsets.

The radio operates in a physical studio where residents produce programmes on culture, women's empowerment, spirituality, news and entrepreneurship. The live schedule, still expanding, covers four days a week and accepts contributions from anyone living in the territory of Açu. Partnerships with other community radio stations help fill a 24-hour schedule. For Maria Eduarda, the radio is a space for listening and learning: "The radio isn't just us talking. It's the community listening to itself." The entrepreneurship programme presented by her offers notions of digital marketing, finance and bureaucracy for small businesses, demonstrating the direct impact of community media on income generation.

The relationship between the web radio and the internet network in this case is symbiotic, and this connection already allows the radio to be streamed via the web to listeners in neighbouring communities and towns, and even in other regions of Brazil. The sustainability of the radio and the network depends on self-management and community solidarity, since

there are no public funding policies and the projects survive on contributions from members, network users and advertisers who choose to contribute, given that advertising on AMA Web Radio is currently not mandatory.

Digital Forest and the Puyanawa Territory: Visibility, memory and defence

The Digital Forest community network project has operated since 2022 in four northern Brazilian states – Amapá, Acre, Amazonas and Pará – linking nine territories of Indigenous, Quilombola and riverside communities. In the Puyanawa Indigenous Territory, which is the focus of this study, the network associates meaningful connectivity with the production of their own media that value cultural diversity, territorial struggles and socio-productive initiatives. During the cultural-religious festival, the community sells handicrafts and food. At the same time, it uses the internet to publicise its cultural rescue work and to strengthen knowledge and memory. Like AMA Web Radio, the Puyanawa people also want to "speak outward" and show their culture to non-Indigenous audiences: they have formed a network of young communicators and use social media and YouTube as dissemination channels and archives. In Carol's words:

> We're recording our elders, creating a digital collection to store chants, knowledge and stories that previously were lost on cassette tapes loaned out and never returned or damaged over time. We're publishing part of the material on our online channels as a way to reinforce Indigenous identity and visibility, and another part we want to keep only on our internal networks, leaving material for future Puyanawa generations.

Network governance is based on autonomy and care. Access is open to all, but the community sets priorities and protocols to avoid overloading the infrastructure, especially during events. In 2025, using drones, they produced a documentary to record and show how the monitoring of the land borders that separate the Indigenous territory from non-Indigenous areas is carried out through the annual clearing of the territory, performed by the Indigenous people themselves for more than 50 years, illustrating how technology is incorporated into old practices of defence and visibility.

Gender, participation and exchange

Ensuring the presence of women in technology and communication projects, including facilitation and teaching spaces, is fundamental. Events, initiatives and meetings that promote exchanges among women strengthen support networks, enable the sharing of experiences and inspire new participation.

Voices that resist

Community communication is seen as a space of sociopolitical organisation and a basis for other rights. Communicating to an external audience is necessary to attract resources and gain visibility, but it entails the tension of adapting content to formats imposed by platforms. Luandro observes that "communicating only within makes no sense to many. But communicating outward can also dissolve local identity. Because on Instagram you can become just another grain of sand." The challenge is to preserve identity and autonomy in the use of technologies while building visibility.

Learning, caring and building collectively

The initiatives operate as an informal source of information and education where residents learn communication techniques and debate politics. Saci points out that the community media initiative is a space where "we consider ourselves a collective," underscoring the affective dimension of training:

> Radio for me is far more than just infrastructure [...] radio is a way of organising ourselves; we come to see ourselves also as a collective and as a medium whose reason for existing is the community, not our individual freedom of speech, thus communication becomes a pillar for other rights.

On the topic of political education, Zeilane adds:

> I no longer see the community network – as well as community media – as a project solely to address the problem of connectivity. I see it almost as a pedagogical tool that allows us to have other conversations within the territory.

Weaving solidarity

The sustainability of the networks arises from self-management and inter-territorial cooperation. Communities exchange equipment, training and technical support, creating a support network in the face of a lack of public policies and resources. New projects emerge from the exchange of experiences, strengthening the sense of belonging and preventing initiatives from becoming isolated. Continuous training feeds technological autonomy and sustains the networks over the long term.

Economy and generations

The experiences show that community media can generate work and income. This movement entails training both adults and young people in digital and communication skills.

Shadows along the way

The interviews reveal recurring obstacles. The lack of public policies prevents the legal recognition and financing of the networks, limiting their expansion and making them vulnerable. Sustainability is fragile: equipment and maintenance require constant resources and without permanent support networks such as AMA it is necessary to resort to donations and partnerships. Platformisation imposes standardised formats that can dilute local identities, requiring a delicate balance between communicating "outward" and not submitting to algorithms. Finally, the development of digital archives involves sovereignty and governance considerations to prevent cultural appropriation and protect sensitive data.

Adriane Gama also points out that implementing a community network in Amazonia, as well as in remote areas, is an enormous challenge, particularly in remote territories with limited infrastructure. She thus argues in favour of redefining the concept of a community network. Even without local servers or full technical autonomy, appropriations such as web radios or media archives should be recognised as legitimate components of community networks. This adaptation is essential to ensure that communication remains alive and relevant in Amazonian realities.

Recommendations

To strengthen community interest media, the interviewees recommend complementary paths. It is necessary to create public funds and permanent support mechanisms that guarantee financial autonomy and to offer technical training integrated with political, gender-sensitive and intergenerational training, preparing residents of all ages to produce and manage their media. Encouraging the creation of digital repositories with backup and governance policies reinforces sovereignty over narratives, while stimulating horizontal networks favours the exchange of experiences and solidary business models between territories.

Final considerations

The experiences presented here show that when communication is designed by the territory itself it stops being just a vehicle and becomes a collective process of meaning-making. By activating radios, digital archives and narratives that spring from grassroots efforts, AMA and the Puyanawa people demonstrate how community interest media weave together memory, economy and political assertion in a single gesture. In this context, connectivity is a means rather than an end. What matters is the ability to produce and circulate words and images that reflect the lives and futures these communities envision. Out of this bloom creativity, care and cooperation, indicating that community interest media are much more than channels: they are practices of sovereignty and well-being that re-enchant the present and point towards more just and affective digital futures.

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Building community media together: Mankosi interviews and reflections

Yumna Panday

Building community media together: Mankosi interviews and reflections

Yumna Panday
South Africa, Africa

Zenzeleni Community Networks developed these questions to support the journey of strengthening locally driven connectivity and media practices in rural South Africa. Our purpose goes beyond simply providing infrastructure; it is about enabling locals to speak for themselves, showcase everyday life and ensure that information channels reflect the realities and diversity of Mankosi and rural villages in general.

Everyday communication in our community already takes many forms, from the familiarity of radio broadcasts and group phone calls to gatherings convened by local leaders. We value both traditions and growing experience with digital tools that bring distant families closer, help youths learn and make sure even the quietest voice can be heard.

By exploring the ways people already share news, stories and advice, we aim to learn what works, celebrate our strengths and invite new and old generations to build together. This document captures those perspectives, so that others near and far may learn what genuine community media looks like when it grows from the ground up.

Questions and answers

1. Meaning of media in daily life

Effective communication is central to rural life in Mankosi. The ways people share news about projects, cultural traditions or challenges shape how trust and understanding develop among villagers. The following question explores what methods are seen as most meaningful and why certain forms are preferred over others.

Question:
When people in Mankosi want to share important information or stories, such as about community projects, cultural events or local challenges, how do they usually communicate? What makes that form of communication trusted or meaningful?

Answer:

In Mankosi and other villages, when there's something important to discuss, like a new development or a community event, people know to come together for an *imbizo*, our traditional meeting. Elders especially believe that talking in person is best. Everyone can share ideas and questions, and no one is left behind in understanding. If the issue is about a new project, the headmen help divide the tasks, so every village is involved and no one feels left out. At gatherings, different villages take turns participating so all

voices carry through the community. The meeting gives everyone a chance to talk freely, openly and honestly, which is why people trust the messages. You know the whole story, not just pieces from others.

Direct interaction is valued for more than just information. It builds respect and leads to decisions that feel fair because everyone can contribute and challenge ideas until real agreement is found. That's how we know we've made the right choices. Once the meeting is done, everyone goes back and shares what was discussed with those who couldn't be there, so nobody is left in the dark.

Nokhwezi Sigcau (F, 57)

Reflection:

This practice helps keep everyone in the loop and allows real issues to be discussed face-to-face. It also means traditional forms of respect are maintained, as people know their input will shape what happens next.

2. Role of Zenzeleni in connecting

Access to affordable communication is a major challenge for many rural communities in South Africa and Mankosi was no exception before Zenzeleni arrived. The question explores how technology has changed local life, especially in connecting the younger generation – who often use mobile phones and the internet – with elders, who traditionally rely on meeting in person or through radio broadcasts.

Question:

How has Zenzeleni's presence changed the way people hear about local/community news or connect with others, especially between youths who use phones and elders who may rely more on face-to-face or radio-based communication?

Answer:

Since Zenzeleni came, things have changed a lot for us. Before, people struggled to get online because it was too expensive or just not possible where we live. Now, even children can do their schoolwork faster, adults can find jobs or look up important information and talking to family, especially those far away, is much easier because we have video calls and voice notes. Zenzeleni offers different vouchers, like three days for R7 and a full month for R35, making it possible for everyone, from local workers to weekend visitors, to get connected when they need it.

And the elders are slowly learning to use digital tools, too, sometimes with the help of youths. Some older people still like to talk face-to-face, but Zenzeleni has helped them stay in touch with grandchildren and relatives who move to the city. Young people use WhatsApp, Facebook and even YouTube and sometimes they show elders how these things work. This is good for everyone because now more people can share news, and it makes us feel like a big family, even if we are far apart.inethemba Lukhozi (M, 36)

Reflection:

Zenzeleni's approach to inclusive, affordable connectivity has made it possible for Mankosi to bridge generational divides and strengthen social bonds. With young people helping elders adapt to new technology, and elders sharing their wisdom in new ways, Zenzeleni is fostering a community where everyone can participate, learn and stay informed, whether online or offline.

3. Voice and representation

Rural communities like Mankosi are often described and depicted by outsiders, which can result in stories that miss local nuances or even misrepresent lived experiences. By nurturing local media and storytelling groups, Zenzeleni aims to empower residents to capture and share their own history, achievements and daily realities in isiXhosa and other familiar formats. This question explores what stories the community most values and how locally controlled media could make a difference.

Question:

Many stories about rural life are told by outsiders. What stories do you wish were told by Mankosi people themselves and how do you think local media like a community radio or a digital storytelling group could help share them?

Answer:

> We want the stories about Mankosi to come from us and not outsiders. Like on radio, our elders can tell the community stories in isiXhosa, the way we were taught. Young people, with Zenzeleni's help, can use their phones or cameras to record short videos and write about important local events or honour those people who help our villages. It's better if the stories go straight from us to others, not through someone who doesn't understand our life here.
>
> I believe media should let listeners call in or text about things that affect everyone. We need real conversations, not just someone talking and others listening. When we talk about decisions from a meeting or something that happened in the village, sending messages or calling in lets people share their views, so everyone's voice is there. Keeping history, music and knowledge is also important to me. If we put our songs, traditions, language lessons and stories online, then even young people who move far away or children in school can learn about our ways. We don't want anything to get lost. It's about making sure our stories stay alive and reach more people who care.
>
> Yoleka Sikanisi (F, 39)

Reflection:

Bringing new technology to the village does not just mean more people online; it means elders, parents and youth become teachers for one another. Zenzeleni's presence has broadened how people learn, share and keep connections alive, making everyone feel closer no matter where its members are.

4. Community decision spaces

Rural village traditions of decision making are built on communal discussion, not just among traditional leaders, but with broad participation from all villagers. With the rise of digital technologies and community media, new ways are emerging to strengthen these longstanding practices, help spread information between villages and increase transparency. The following question asks how local-run media channels could be used to deepen collective dialogue and keep every village connected.

Question:

Mankosi has strong traditions of imbizo and collective discussions. If there were community media channels run by locals, how could these spaces help strengthen decision making or discussions across villages?

Answer:

Our villages are used to meeting in person, with everyone coming together to talk and agree on what must be done. But sometimes, not everybody can make it, maybe because they are ill, working or living in another part of Mankosi. If we have our own radio station or media group, we can tell people about big meetings before they happen, so they know what will be discussed and have time to think and prepare questions.

We can also broadcast these meetings live or record them and replay later, so those who were not there can still know exactly what was said and what decisions were made. After the meeting, important decisions could be announced on the radio or WhatsApp groups for everyone. This way, no one gets confused about what's happening, and we stop the spread of wrong stories and rumours.

Media is not just about information sharing. It can also support accountability. If our leaders or committees promise something, like fixing a tap or starting a project, we can follow up on how things are going. People can hear updates, ask questions and check on the progress so nothing just disappears after the meeting. This helps everyone trust the system and feel a real part of it.

Apumle Makhawula (M, 27)

Reflection:

By using community media to prepare, document and follow up on decision making, villages like Mankosi can make local governance even more inclusive and transparent. These tools can keep every resident, near or far, informed and empowered to contribute, helping to prevent isolation or misinformation as rural life evolves.

5. Youth and elders exchanges

In Mankosi, as in many rural communities, digital literacy and traditional knowledge sit on opposite ends of a generational divide. Young people navigate WhatsApp, social media and mobile internet with confidence, while elders are stewards of local history, values and culture. Zenzeleni and similar initiatives see bridging this gap as crucial for collective empowerment, richer storytelling and resilience in a changing world. The question focuses on how local media can help generations teach and learn from each other.

Question:

Young people are using digital tools more frequently, while elders hold deep knowledge of the community's history. What could help bridge generations so that media becomes a space for both teaching and learning from each other?

Answer:

> We see young people around us always busy on their phones, using WhatsApp, Facebook and all those things. The elders have the stories of our community and show us what life was like before, but sometimes they don't know how to use the new technology. It would be good to have workshops where elders share our traditions and knowledge, with youth helping them record and edit stories, so we keep everything safe for the future. Putting young people with elders, like teachers and students, means us as the youth can teach the older generation how to use phones and laptops and they can teach us about our real history and values.
>
> Maybe we can work together on radio shows and short videos. These can be shared with everyone here and even those who moved away. If there were WhatsApp groups or an online forum, both elders and youths could exchange what they know, maybe the youths could share quick updates and the elders could answer with wisdom and advice. Digital literacy training would help more elders feel confident using these tools and storytelling events are a great way for elders to share and then for youths to post their words to social media.

Zingisa Sigcau (F, 30)

Reflection:

Community media that brings generations together not only preserves heritage, it also empowers elders and youths alike. By blending the strengths of tradition with digital opportunity, rural villages can create a shared space for dialogue, learning and connection, ensuring that experiences from the past serve as guidance for the future.

6. Imagining community media for the future

Community-owned, locally managed media and connectivity are part of Zenzeleni's mission in our villages. With growing digital literacy and self-run radios or storytelling hubs, residents can amplify their voices, maintain cultural identity and tackle local problems with solutions designed by and for themselves.

Question:

If Mankosi had its own local radio or online storytelling hub connected through Zenzeleni, what kind of content or voices would you most want to hear, and what makes that content uniquely "ours" rather than something from outside?

Answer:

> Our hope is for media that truly belongs to the people of Mankosi. We want to hear the voices of elders and traditional leaders regularly, because they give guidance and they remember the roots of our village. Their stories link us to past generations and help young people understand where we come from. It's important our youth are involved too, bringing in new ways of thinking and energy to move us forward. Teachers, healers and farmers also have special knowledge; they face real challenges every day and share advice that makes life easier for everyone.
>
> Other people, such as mothers and small business owners, should also have their stories aired, because what happens in one part of Mankosi might help or affect another. We want to use isiXhosa, with our own dialect and local words, so people feel at home when they tune in; it's not just about English or faraway topics that don't relate to us. Our media must talk about issues like water supply, health and education, the things only our own people really know about.
>
> If we own and run the radio station or website, we decide what matters. Outsiders don't decide for us. This supports the way we have always talked and debated in meetings. Technology must add to that, making sure collective decisions, help and learning reach all corners of the village.
>
> Group response

Reflection:

Locally produced media built on community control, inclusive participation and cultural relevance offers both authenticity and resilience. By preserving language, elevating diverse local voices and directly addressing local concerns, this approach ensures that digital channels strengthen, instead of diluting, the foundations of rural village life.

Conclusion

The voices gathered in these pages show how much can be achieved when locals lead the way in sharing information. As elders, youths and everyday families connect traditions with new technology, Mankosi's experience becomes proof of how media shaped here makes sure everyone can be part of the conversation and the changes that follow.

Letting people tell their own stories and solve problems together does not just inform or entertain, it strengthens the ties that keep Mankosi strong. The journey shared here is just a beginning, with every new story and shared lesson helping the next.

Community mesh radio is radio for all

Shalini A.

Community mesh radio is radio for all

Shalini A.[1]
India, Asia

Community mesh radio (CMR) can be a powerful medium for fostering grassroots communication, amplifying marginalised voices and addressing local issues in ways that mainstream media often cannot, while bypassing the technical challenges associated with traditional community radio. Its potential to inform, empower and mobilise communities makes it especially valuable among rural communities across diverse social, economic and cultural contexts. In the following sections, we explore three scenarios that illustrate the value of community radio. The first describes a real-life case where CMR was effectively implemented, demonstrating tangible benefits for the community. The next two are hypothetical, showing how CMR could have played a critical role in addressing specific challenges, had it been deployed. Together, these scenarios highlight both the proven impact and the untapped potential of CMR in community development and resilience.

Outline

Community interest media can take forms outside the radio spectrum. Radio can also be a service on a local WiFi network, such as a podcast, shared as a service amongst the people. It is mostly carried out by a smaller group and community radios focus on local languages. The community focus can differ based on the public interest. For example, in the case of forest fires, perceptions of a community can be different from government officials, with different opinions on seeds and grazing. Therefore, there are possible conflicts, also concerning general aspects and needs at the technological level. However, there is also a threat of being overwhelmed by infrastructure questions at the local level. We consider radio over an internet protocol (IP), or web radio, as a relevant format outside spectrum regulation.

Background and concept

The history of community radio tells us the origin was experiential, traced to a *Shashtri* (musical scholar) who wanted to spread music to a few houses in an approximate distance of 2 to 3 km with a transmitter. All India radio was then born officially – a government initiative with some structural programs based on the people's interest, which as a mediator could reach the mass community. In the year 2000, community radio became popular because representation was very important. Community inclusion, their thoughts, ideas and opinions became important. This turned it into a popular media platform. Even the government started promoting and encouraging communities to run community radios in every region. Even that has a structure. Any organisation or group or community can start. There was a fee of 200,000 rupees to apply for a licence, and an office, a studio, a space for antenna, etc., were

[1] Shalini A. works with Servelots Infotech. This paper was developed with guidance by T. B. Dinesh and technical knowledge support was granted by Manoj Kumar, Shashi Kumar.

needed. This also looks big. If we think in one aspect this is not a basic need where ordinary people can take up and run. If there is belief or fear, people can take up the expenses and build. How can the smallest of the group be reached? For example, through social media. It is in their hands. Mobile phone and internet is enough for them to start their own media. To build propaganda, every broadcasting medium should come together. In mass/commercial media any news from a community may run for 20 seconds, but any politicised news will run for hours for TRP, money, etc. But the important representation of subjects from a community/ village is lost. It is important to show everyone's expressions and opinions. Some, in order to build the propaganda media, decide what people have to use. Only a few voices will be dominant. In a democratic country, representing individual voices is important. That is why we have to talk about the small media. Community mesh radio is one such media, which can reach the smaller groups. Even one person can create a network with the smallest budget. What you need to talk about and listen to can be decided by you. Ownership is yours. The collective authoritative voice will come out and will reach the higher legislative.

Drawbacks of typical radio wave services

Typical radios cannot be maintained by community members. Community radios shut down due to lack of continued funding and difficulties to maintain them. There are many technical challenges, clashes with radio bands and community radios overridden by other bands as they increase their reach. This leads to shut downs and cancellation of licences. Community radios still exist in certain places, such as colleges. Many community radios that had been set up before in the places we went to do not exist anymore. As an alternative, we began to use a WiFi mesh to run a "radio".

Community mesh radio during the COVID-19 pandemic

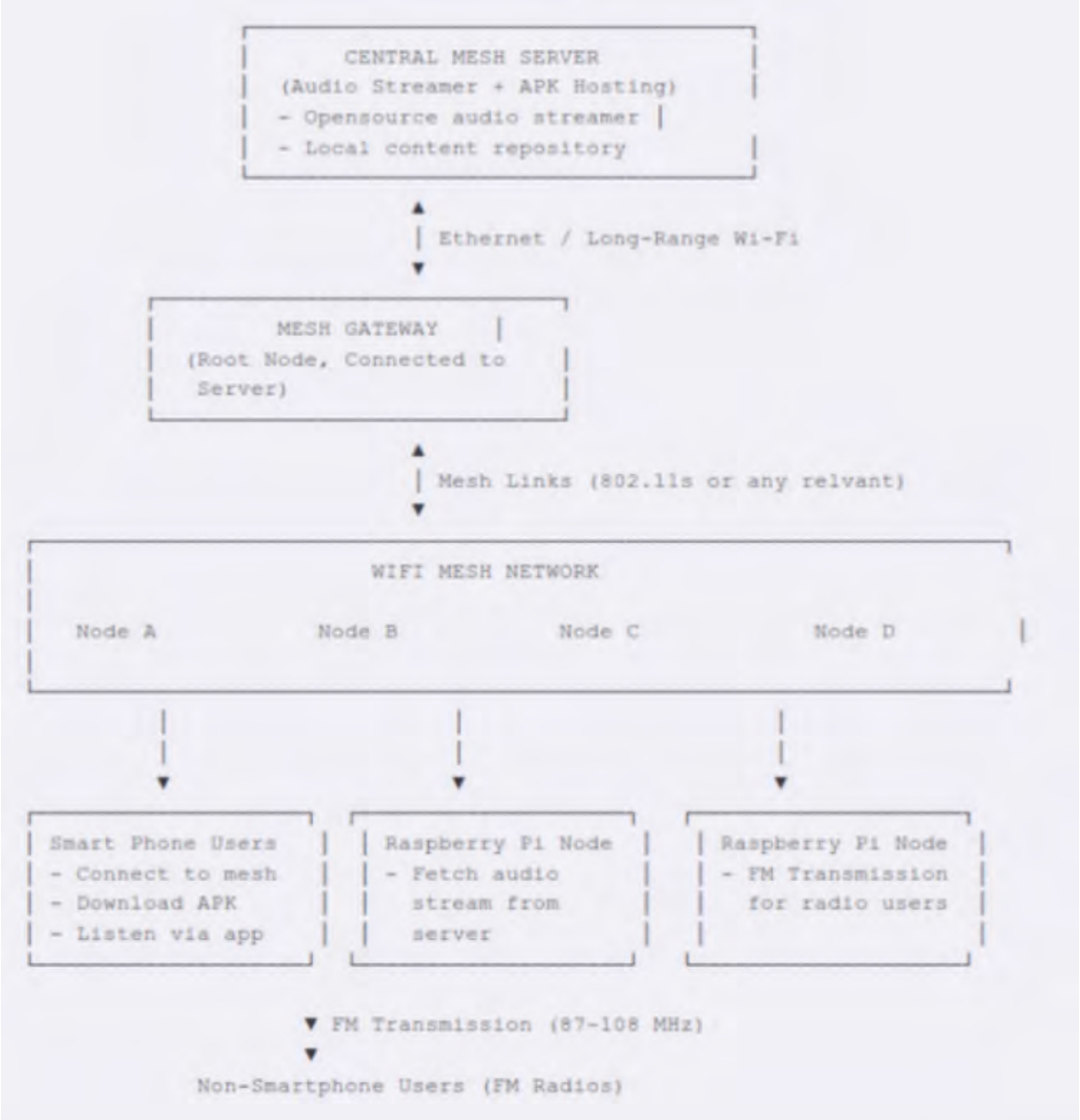
In a village in the Tumkur district (in the southern state of Karnataka), we have been running a community mesh radio that we established in the years prior to the COVID pandemic. During COVID, the community mesh radio (CMR) operated over the mesh network played a significant role in disseminating relevant information about COVID-19 to local communities. The CMR was used to not only broadcast content provided by public authorities and medical experts, but also to inform communities about the locations of COVID care centres, the availability of doctors, nurses and medical resources in their vicinity and the schedule of visiting ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers. In villages where COVID was not taken seriously, the CMR was useful in raising awareness and promoting preventive measures. It was also used to counter misinformation and clarify what was factually correct. It was also useful for communicating with many villages, dispelling misinformation and providing clarifications on what the right information was. It had become a champion in the sense that it provided many benefits for the community. To reach the remotest villages, there was a mobile radio operated in the form of a van, which went from village to village. To extend the CMR's reach, a mobile radio unit (a van equipped with a loudspeaker and open Wi-Fi) travelled between villages, disseminating important information and health programs to the most remote villages.

Community members accessed this content by connecting to the network and listening to pre-recorded programs. A radio station was established via the mesh and operated by a representative to broadcast updates and announcements. This was particularly useful for reaching people who were unable to leave their homes.

Technical Aspects

Architecture

Community mesh radio is a simple technology and that simplicity is its strength.



Record the content on the mobile phone → edit → upload → listen

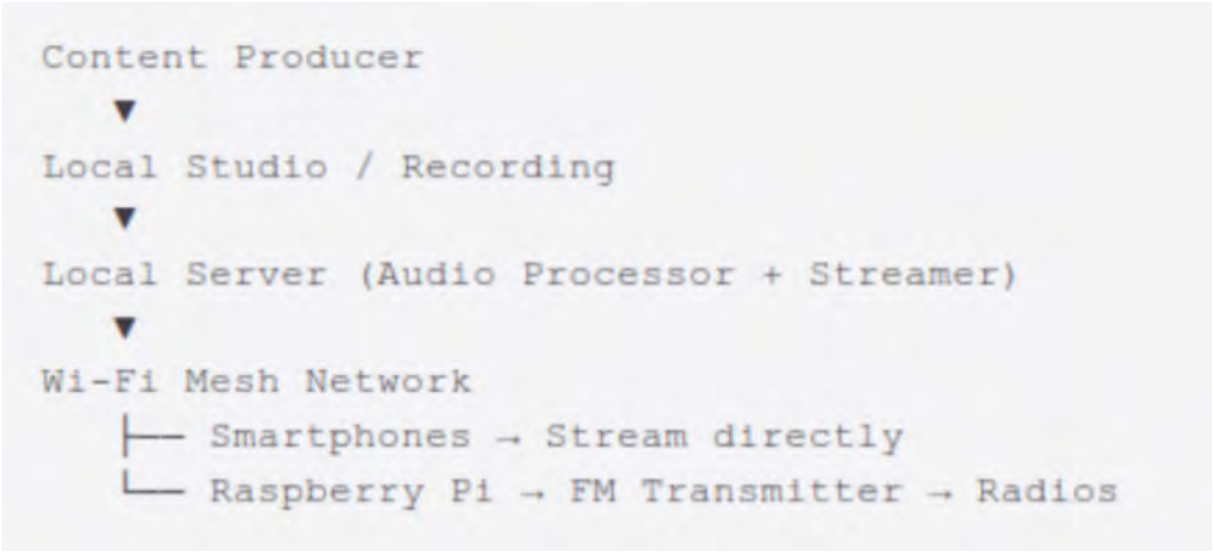
The audio is always in analogue mode, like waves. These signals will not pass through the routers. Saving it will convert it to digital format in binary mode. This data will travel via WiFi signals. In any accessing devices, such as mobile phones, connected to WiFi, the data will convert from digital to analogue so we can listen to the audio. Audio players are embedded with a decoder. Mobile phones will have audio recorders and players.

Infrastructure

Set up a WiFi mesh network for the range that needs to be covered.

Set up a server (Raspberry PI/laptop/desktop computer) that is connected to the WiFi network, which is accessible from any corner of the network. Set up services to stream the content. Put links to install/download the radio app APK or from the Play Store or a web service that should be accessible to everyone. The services can work as soon as you broadcast and a notification/alert should be sent to the accessing device.

Workflow diagram



Scale up

- Add more mesh nodes to extend coverage.
- Introduce offline surveys via the mobile app.
- Add SMS/IVR gateway (if partial internet is available).

Research

There are ways to expand mesh radios in existing radio technology, such as AM and FM. All radios will use radio frequency, which has several bandwidths. In WiFi we use 2.4 GHz and 5 GHz frequency and we use 88 MHz to 108 MHz for FM radio, which are licence-required

frequencies. We have frequencies below 88 MHz up to 68 MHz. Licensed community radios operate above 90 MHz, for example the 90.8 and 90.3 bands. We have several radio frequency ranges in India, which are licence-free, from 433 MHz to 867 MHz, which can transmit for shorter and low-power radio frequency. Using this idea we can create a community radio without a licence or official permission to transmit content. We need to explore the technology, including the hardware, which can allow regular radio devices to be used.

Other potentials to explore are:

- HF signals – https://www.hfsignals.com/
- WiFi radio – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp26xFBwrJs

Potentials and challenges of community mesh radio

Strengths

- Works completely offline
- Easily scalable mesh architecture
- Low power consumption
- Open-source components
- Inclusive (smartphone + FM users).

Potentials

- In disaster prone areas any crisis can also be addressed.
- Schemes can be explained.
- Schools can be connected.
- Most people become stationary while using phones or computers, but one can listen to the radio and do regular work.

Challenges

- Mesh may degrade over long distances. Need to expand the mesh. Creating a mesh-mash (village to village) network across the villages.
- Power outages.
- Limited technical capacity. Requires local training and remote management toolkit.
- Internet for services – set up local servers.
- Maintenance of the network. People still do not have complete knowledge. How to make people participate and become knowledgeable and promote community ownership.
- Not enough funding available to run the radio, to pay the resource person.
- FM licensing restrictions – Use low-power unlicensed FM or coordinate with local authorities.

Mitigation

- Create a group from the area who can run the radio and identify a person who can monitor the whole thing; people who are able to decide, who can assume the responsibility; a group of young people who can engage during their available time.
- Involvement of people and activities for people should be present.
- There should be a centre/address where people can reach you.
- There are limitations, such as no proper encouragement, reachability to the target audience.
- There should be local people associated with running the radio, that way there is less risk.
- The challenge is in monitoring. People making it a part of them is important.
- There will be an improvement in people's lives, through economic growth children's education will be enhanced and there will be development in the villages, schools and in other areas.
- There should be proper equipment and tools to operate, including a recording device, a camera, etc., as well as a person to monitor.
- Make a yearly radio budget. At the state level, contact the government offices and NGOs that are interested.
- A physical centre/address will help people visit for any communication.

Impact

- Increased access to timely information.
- Strengthened rural communication networks.
- Inclusion of marginalised populations (no smartphones needed).
- Local language content creation.
- Support for disaster communication.

Sustainability and funding

- Corporate social responsibility funds.
- Village corpus fund.
- Train local operators. To achieve community ownership we have to create relevant activities and educate regarding the purpose. When people feel they have invested in terms of technology, money, time, themselves and everything, they will own it more effectively. When higher authorities notice, the community will receive support.
- Community governance model.
- Schedule content across agriculture, health, education, local news.

Policy

How does the country/state allow transmission of content on community mesh radio? What restrictions apply and how will they be able to check on the "transmitted" content?

Community mesh radio falls under freedom of expression. We are already working in an area where internet reach is absent. The internet has already taken a place in fundamental rights. We have to have some criteria to show this technology is not against the government and prove the legality of the mesh network, which is operated under allowed frequencies. How can the government support this by bringing it under fundamental rights? And how should the government involve people to make decisions while creating policies?

Conclusion

Radio was an active part of everyone's life. Due to many challenges, it did not grow as fast as the web has grown. It met challenges such as resources, funds and maintenance problems in the presence of alternative media, such as TV and the web. We deploy radio on the local web – community mesh radio – using the mesh network setup. We find that this is significant for communities where literacy is low and also to provide women with support for gender inclusion. We have tried a number of mesh networks set up where the internet is not available and communities have a significant number of low literate women. This is a hard job where we need to work with several aspects of mesh radio, such as setting up the mesh technology, getting people to create content and upload it regularly for people to listen and to be on call to help maintain it until local young people take it up. But wherever a community mesh radio has been set up, people have enjoyed it and feel they benefit from it. There are still areas where basic technologies have not reached and where radio is still a popular medium of communication. Mesh radio is not just a radio; it has visuals also. Community media platforms are essential for most rural remote areas, especially where there is low literacy. Who knows what we will end up doing. We expect that community mesh radio/media will become popular over time and be beneficial to all communities.

Interviews[2]

Kavita Kammanakote, independent journalist
Manoj Kumar, software developer, Indian Institute for Human Settlements
Naada Maninalkur, founder of Arivu (Alternative education for youth and children)
Shashi Kumar N, mass media communication

[2] https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1pllyVSGO3rAEDl9G2KHL7YET6eOzcOpc

Colmena, a digital newsroom meant to fit in every pocket: A critical travelogue of an ongoing open-source software project for community media

Nils Brock, Vivienne Gager and Santiago García Gago

Colmena, a digital newsroom meant to fit in every pocket: A critical travelogue of an ongoing open-source software project for community media

Nils Brock, Vivienne Gager and Santiago García Gago
Global

This article describes an ambitious road trip: the stubborn yet enthusiastic attempt of participatory and community centred open-source software development. The authors' perspective is comparable to a shared front passenger seat. From this position, we tried to find the best routes on a constantly changing map of co-creation, struggling to keep the team bus on track, dialoguing with and cheering up changing drivers and passengers, making sure not to leave behind any partner at a service station, while keeping an anxious eye on the fuel gauge so as not to run out of funding. This trip is not over. Better buckle up before reading on...

A starting point named pandemic

Colmena[1] was initially conceived by the German media development organisation DW Akademie as a rapid response to the challenges of local and community media organisations of the Global Majority during the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2021. At that time, community media struggled to remain active creating news or reaching their audiences. Surveys and interviews with several radio stations and community media helped to further identify needs and expectations. With the help of consultants and advice from colleagues a final product – a most viable product (MVP), as software practitioners like to call it – was devised, budgeted and scheduled.

What did this product look like? The survey results had shown how media organisations struggled to collaborate as teams, unable to meet physically, not properly equipped outside the office and without 24/7 internet connectivity when producing from home. Responding to this situation, Colmena was conceived as a practical digital tool for content creation and sharing. Colmena was claimed to be especially relevant for people who work with audio content and need a way to record and edit interviews for radio programmes or podcasts. This audio production tool would be available in different languages and be open for further localisations based on user needs following two core premises: good usability on mobile devices (mobile first) and connectivity with limited internet (offline first).

Looking back on this foundational narrative, first of all we have to recognise that our initial goal to create a fully functional progressive web app (PWA) within one year, by integrating various software solutions, coding a native application programming interface (API) and building a backend, proved too ambitious. What is more, though community media

[1] For general information, see the project website: https://blog.colmena.media/ (11.06.2025)

practitioners were consulted to co-create the MVP, the following operationalisation was rather a top-down approach: find a team of developers to design and deliver a software solution as soon as possible. After two months, we found a talented and available group that translated our initial ideas into an amazing development roadmap. If you ever come to this point in project development, be aware of one thing: there is quite a tendency among developers to start everything from scratch.

> -So we need a content management system (CMS)? Well, all available solutions are quite shitty. Let's write our own code from scratch.
> -Really? Is this realistic?
> -Sure, easy-peasy...[2]

We should have heard the alarm bells and opted early on in the process for a more incremental approach, prioritising simplicity and a step-by-step process. In hindsight, we also spent too long defining core features and we missed opportunities to refocus after the first iteration. Features like text editors and multiple APIs for direct social media publication could have been deferred until later stages, instead of trying to deliver everything at once. Software development can quickly spiral into a Frankenstein-like endeavour, creating a complex, unwieldy "monster". While we were able to avoid this drastic result, the learning process of how to deliver a working product was time and resource consuming.

After three years of work, Colmena was launched under the GPL4 licence and since then it can be either installed or used as a hosted service, supported by extensive e-learning material. Its key features make it a useful toolbox for media outlets and organisations that integrate it meaningfully into their workflows and collaborations. Yet, its functionality cannot compete in its leanness and omnipresent availability (e.g. zero-rated messenger services) with big tech products. Also, the usability of established open-source champions such as the Audacity audio editor for desktop is superior to the Colmena experience. Nevertheless, Colmena offers a working solution for specific use cases – and it is open to continue its development, creating new features or interoperability with the fediverse.

Micro Machines and *colectivo* experiences

The initial simile of a team bus does not really fit the experience of the first months of collaboration. While the route was marked by DW Akademie, the atomising effect of the pandemic made it impossible to travel in one vehicle. We were rather engaged in a wild race of co-creation with teams dispersed in different territories and time zones, looking at their screens like in the video game Micro Machines: tiny cars moving through a challenging territory, every once in a while just disappearing from the common field of vision. Once a day a group of freelance open-source developers and consultants met to discuss advances for the software, falling increasingly behind schedule. They rarely engaged with the second space

[2] Memory log (transcription of a conversation) between the coordination and developers' teams in March 2021.

(the coordination circle), which involved a group of partner organisations, happily planning training based on the optimistic original schedule and unaware of structural problems and delays. The third space, a group of local media and community radios, gathered in regional meetings to hear about results and provide critical feedback for the first group: the developers.

It was not apparent during the first months how poorly these three spaces were communicating and though improvements were made, bringing in a new lead developer, the fundamental chiasm between the logics and dynamics of software development and user expectations could never be fully bridged. To ensure participatory software development, a common understanding of what is actually done and what the outcomes should look like has to be renewed periodically, to avoid dialogues such as this one:

> -The new prototype is less functional than the first beta version it was meant to replace.
> -But the code and its documentation have become so much better.
> -And how can we prove this to the funders?
> -Well, just take a screenshot and describe the quality of the code. [3]

While the daily collaboration took place in a dispersed way on disseminated screens, we still succeeded in publicly moving Colmena forward as a team bus. However, this vehicle gradually transformed into a kind of *colectivo,*[4] an informal public transportation system ubiquitous in many parts of Latin America. Colectivos are unique: they follow a predetermined route, but their stops are fluid, with passengers waving down the drivers from the roadside to meet their needs. This dynamic aptly captured the essence of the project. Donor institutions and project partners all brought diverse expectations and aspirations, overloading the bus with ideas and expectations.

As global crises unfolded, such as the war of aggression in Ukraine or armed conflicts in the Sahel region, new use cases for Colmena were imagined, addressing the urgent needs of journalists and content creators on the ground. Empathising with these struggles and trying to deliver quickly, the commitment also expanded the project's original scope, placing immense pressure on developers and the coordination team alike. We found ourselves navigating feverishly between three distinct perspectives: those of donors, end users and developers, each with their own vision and aspirations for the app's future.

Furthermore, working with an initially quite heterogeneous group of freelance developers was a big challenge but yet unavoidable since the project took off in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic where there was a high demand for skilled collaborators. This resulted in some

[3] Memory log (transcription of a conversation) between the coordination and developers' teams in November 2022.
[4] Colectivos are also referred to as *micros* or *combis* and have counterparts in other regions of the world. See: Fernández González, J. (2023). Concealed Public Transportation in Latin America. A Rediscovery by Bus. *Revista Harvard Review Latin America, 25*(1). https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/concealed-public-transportation-in-latin-america-a-rediscovery-by-bus/

colleagues having overcommitted schedules, putting unrealistic aspirations but sometimes also financial opportunities ahead of their (mental) health,[5] capacities and responsibilities.

Accompanying such a loose team remotely and trying to resolve conflicts of ideas, vision and interest proved to be tedious and sometimes problematic. Changes in the core team occurred more than once. A lack of proper documentation brought us to a strange point: we had a working prototype (with cool features that were ultimately not achieved in the final version), but it was a fragile construct of code, poorly documented and not easily packaged into an installable app. After bringing in a more cohesive software cooperative to take over the work of the first iteration and to finish the product, their code review and proposal to finish the development fell short of achieving the goals of the initial MVP and even more cuts had to be made when it came to the vision of the end users.

Key learnings from this process include the importance of engaging with consolidated development teams instead of loosely connected freelance consultants. Clear leadership and roles, including expertise and practical knowledge concerning software development and architecture, are also critical to ensure smooth and efficient progress. The experience underscored the need to balance inclusivity with effective decision making, acknowledging that not everyone needs to be involved in every detail, as this can be exhausting for both coordinators and participating experts. From an intersectional gender perspective, we also have to humbly recognise that one project cannot break up the "driver culture" of software development rooted to a great extent in networked cis-masculinities. Since Colmena aimed to be grounded in an intersectional gender perspective from the very beginning, driving against a wall – at least at the software development level – was tough and deserves a closer look.

Formula 1 pink washing

Artifacts and devices are not gender neutral, though this myth floats in the air like a pungent cloud of exhaust gas. Software development is a bit like Formula 1 racing: while there is no gender-based restriction on participation in the sport, historically there have been few female drivers. We wanted to consciously address the male-dominated and Global North-centric nature of the tech field. To do so, our strategy was to pay particular attention to the specific contexts and needs of female users.

Since the very beginning, when selecting organisations, colleagues, consultants, developers and test users, we made a conscious effort to include female or diverse participants. The goal was to have gender diversity in the core team as well as in regard to the needs of future users, particularly from rural and Indigenous communities in Latin America and Africa. We still see this as crucial to ensure that software processes and products reflect specific contexts and

[5] The COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for all, however, and mental health considerations, particularly for professionals in tech development projects, were drastically overlooked. These individuals faced heightened pressures, while grappling with isolation, burnout and blurred work-personal life boundaries in remote settings. Awareness of these issues only emerged after the fact, highlighting the need for earlier recognition and proactive support in future crisis responses.

realities of usage, areas often overlooked by mainstream technologies originating in the Global North.

What worked well was including female testers from Latin America and Africa. They were represented in all iterations, with the aim of ensuring a more equitable gender balance in user participation. It was and is a key part of our approach for authentically representing and responding to the diverse needs of women in these communities. Concrete initiatives included the creation of feedback spaces exclusively for female users to critically reflect on the use of technologies and the importance of creating safe spaces for women to be able to exchange and share experiences, solutions and learnings. Furthermore, these safe spaces were used to embed digital rights awareness into the broader project framework.

What did not work out was the effort to promote inclusivity within the development team. Recruiting female developers proved challenging, faithfully reflecting the gender imbalance in the tech sector. Ultimately, only one female developer joined the team and just for a while. It was also significant that women were otherwise "only" involved in designing the interface and testing the user experience. We often had the impression that these iterations, which are important for acceptance by the target groups, were seen by developers as an obstacle or unnecessary complication to their work. As in Formula 1 racing, whose stated goal is to promote "the most talented drivers [...], regardless of gender or ethnicity,"[6] having sensitised and gender-aware developers, particularly in leadership roles, is still just lip service when it comes to recruiting colleagues for development sprints. In other words, while establishing gender-aware and transformative spaces in the dialogue and co-creation with community media organisations, we definitely fell short in terms of spotting and engaging with more diverse ecosystems of techies.

Who is setting the track?

Another big challenge was consolidating the methodologies and mindsets of software developers with the visions and demands of local communities. Features and usability flagged as important by testers (and communicated by the women leading the work on user experience or UX) were often not prioritised in development cycles, either because they were difficult to achieve in time or because the coders felt they knew what was better.

While it is true that a development roadmap cannot be changed on a weekly basis, we have to acknowledge that there were challenges in fully integrating the visions and needs of end users. Even when agreeing on development cycles and sprints, the demands of the participating communities had to constantly pass filters to be taken into consideration. The question of how to go beyond "mere consultation" to create a more active "decision making" on behalf of the final beneficiaries is a complex one. Transferring full ownership of software design to the end users seems impracticable. Besides time and funding constraints, we can also ask if such a responsibility should really be placed on local or community media, which are often already operating under hard and precarious conditions. Designing active and constant participation

[6] https://corp.formula1.com/corporate-rsponsibility/diversity-and-inclusion/

in a development process that meets the criteria of being consensual, inclusive and user-centric is a difficult task.

Yet there is this particular Colmena flavour...

Despite all the difficulties and shortcomings mentioned above, Colmena is out there and the participatory approach has left its mark, both in the app itself and in the communities that helped co-create it. Future users engaged in multiple ways throughout the design and development of Colmena. They helped to create needs-based user stories for the MVP, provided feedback on initial wireframes, engaged in UX feedback loops, contributed to the naming of the emerging app and tested both prototypes and the final version. The results are present in current versions, with specific user-centric features of audio sharing and icons taking cultural diversity into account. The different language versions are also based on permanent dialogues with the emerging user communities, who actively participated in the translations or suggested changes for coherence and understandability.

Another legacy of the co-creation process is the capacity building that happened both at a personal level and in the communities. Some experienced users even joined the UX team, while others were trained to become regional trainers and support future users. Importantly, many of the people involved in the project came from community media backgrounds and had a deep understanding of the realities expressed by the radios, trying to bridge the gap between developers and users.

The participatory approach also had a lasting influence on the ownership of the app. As mentioned earlier, the project was kick-started by DW Akademie but the close cooperation with partners on an open-source software made creating a collective care and maintenance approach inevitable. After a long reflection process, the ownership of Colmena lies with a consortium comprising DW Akademie, Redes AC, Tanda.net and other, changing development partners. The consortium operates as an open model, so other organisations can always join as supporters and maintainers. To support the testing or immediate use of Colmena, the software is also offered to local and community media of the Global Majority as software as a service (SaaS) by DW Akademie.

Why should I jump on this crazy bus?

The Colmena experience has not always been a joy ride. Yet, if we just look at the outcome in terms of software production, we have achieved what is currently the only audio production tool that can be run in the browser as a PWA (independent of any app store), including a multi-track audio editor for mobile devices. Though not fully developed, the offline functionalities provide more independence to create content, even without an internet connection. In practical terms, Colmena has proven quite handy for distributed productions,

where local content creators share materials in a Colmena group chat that is then further edited by a podcast or radio team. This makes Colmena an interesting tool for collaborative productions of small and community media, as well as an option for bigger media houses to create participatory and audience-driven content. Colmena is out there to be used, approved and also further reflected on.[7] Just choose your seat and get in touch with us at info@colmena.media.

[7] As noted in the beginning, our perspective has been that of project coordinators. To tell the full story, complementary accounts from developers, consortium members and media partners would be needed. Hopefully others will share their accounts in the near future.

All photographs included are the property of, and were provided by, the author of the corresponding chapter.

Display Europe: An innovative platform connecting local newsrooms and audiences across language barriers

An Interview with Catalina Albeanu, conducted by Nils Brock

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Europe

Community radios and local non-profit news initiatives are also at home in many European countries. There was always an interest in transmitting and collaborating across borders, translating and sharing stories that diversify and complement the mainstream reporting of public and private media players. Yet contributing to a global perspective from a local experience requires time, effort and resources. To make things a bit easier, a non-profit consortium designed the platform Display Europe to share and translate stories from local newsrooms into more than 20 languages. The platform is currently in its very early stages of development, with a minimum viable product (MVP) online, but welcomes media partners who share in its mission. Catalina Albeanu works with the project on media outreach and is a co-director of the Display Europe Cooperative, which further develops the platform. In an interview with LocNet she shares how Display Europe was set up and how community media organisations can use it.

Catalina, you are a trained journalist and have been working as a journalist in different newsrooms for 11 years. So, how did you transition from your role as content creator to a project that is about making content created by other media outlets widely visible on the internet?

Throughout my career I have been interested in implementing new digital tools and also reporting on newsroom tech suites. So, I have slowly gravitated more towards media products, and I started taking on more editorial coordination roles. Becoming familiar with European media outlets that are working in collaborative ways, I tried to tackle some of the bigger questions about the sustainability of journalism and figure out how to better work together across borders. This is how I got to know the Display Europe project and joined it in the summer of 2024.

At first glance, Display Europe looks like yet another content platform, but there is more behind it. How exactly does the project contribute to the sharing of journalistic content, especially for community media?

Display Europe allows pieces of journalism to find their audiences. Many smaller newsrooms, non-profits, as well as community media, which have traditionally relied on the big tech platforms to help them establish an online community or to find an audience for their journalism can no longer rely on this mediation. Even if they have an audience on a particular platform, there is no guarantee this audience will see all their posts or find out about all of their stories, because they are no longer being prioritised by the algorithms.

One thing that Display Europe aims to address is the transparency around how content is distributed. We are really trying to create a space that is at the intersection of a newsreader with some social media features, combined with translation and grounded in open-source technology. Our goal here is to connect journalists and newsrooms with audiences across different corners of Europe, break down language barriers and really allow people to discover interesting journalism that they are passionate about, and do so in a way that makes it clear for everybody how the newsfeed works.

One thing important to note is that we translate journalistic content without the goal of keeping audiences on our own platform. We take readers to the online spaces of our media partners. To read or see a fully translated story, they must leave Display Europe and go to that partner's website. This is a very different approach to the compilations of news by other social platforms, where the intention is to keep revenue, in terms of the attention, on the platform and not to help in any way to create traffic for local media.

> ***Sounds like a promising answer for many online mags or community media who struggle to prove to donors that their stories are read online. Did such media outlets actively participate in the creation of Display Europe?***

The platform itself came out of a European consortium of independent newsrooms, community media representatives and technologists who work with open-source tech. It was very much a group of people who shared common interests and needs. It was incubated in this shared-interest group and now it is slowly starting to come out of it and to be validated by other media partners who have come on board.

> ***You already talked a bit about the uniqueness of Display Europe in terms of its respect for the stories and media spaces. And you are also in favour of open-source technologies. Is Display Europe a 100% open-source product?***

Our own code base is open source. We are keeping in mind how we use the technology and we have built a minimum viable product based on open code as much as possible. We use PeerTube for video distribution, technology from our partners the Cultural Broadcasting Archive for audio, Discourse for discussions and Matomo for analytics.

The platform is managed by a cooperative based in Austria that will continue to take care of it together with the media partners who want to contribute to its development.

For translations and the creation of teasers, we built our current MVP using Open AI via an application programming interface (DeepL API) and we run Whisper locally for speech recognition and transcripts. Both DeepL and Open AI claim they do not use the data coming from the API to train their models, but in our next steps in our product development, we plan to move to European-based platforms, and we are exploring the possibility of running our own large language model (LLM) in the future. We want to work as open source as much as possible so we can provide a real alternative to the practices of big tech platforms that no longer prioritise journalism.

I have seen that many media outlets present on Display Europe are community radios from different parts of Europe. Seems your work is relevant to them.

The consortium has always been diverse, and besides the technology partner Fairkom, there were also organisations, including Eurozine, Voxeurop, the Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE) and the Cultural Broadcasting Archive, a podcasting platform based in Austria that hosts a lot of community radio content. They were the ones giving feedback and shaping some of the features. It was a collaborative effort, though not all radios that are currently featured on the platform engaged at that point.

From a gender perspective, is there a specific focus to involve gender-based needs in the design?

The main goal is to be a representative platform, but also to spotlight organisations that deal with topics that are censored or sometimes considered very niche. In some countries, this includes dealing with gender issues or migration. We are very mindful to provide and showcase a wide range of topics on our main news feed. We also highlight voices that might not be the first voice on national TV broadcasts and front pages in the different corners of Europe. Those voices have shaped Display Europe.

One intended use case was community media. Would you say they are also the main users today or are there also more commercially driven projects that just identify with the idea of sharing or see it as an opportunity?

It's a mixture. The community media aspect really came from the fact that CMFE as well as CBA are very rooted in community media, and they have been part of the project since the beginning. So, we always kept in mind how to best serve the interests of community media partners. But the platform itself is open to different types of media organisations. We have onboarded and reached out to various media partners who are working across Europe, digital journalism start-ups, for example. In the current stage of the platform, we are having more conversations also with commercial newsrooms, which are attempting to do journalism differently. In the future, it would be very cool for Display Europe to also include some of the bigger titles and brands, especially if we can break down some of the language barriers across Europe for them. We are in the first stages of our journey, so we have not expanded outreach that far yet. But it is also the case that since we emerged from the community media landscape, as well as smaller non-profit or independent newsrooms across Europe, they will always be the core users. Their needs guide us.

How open is Display Europe? Anybody who wants to join can apply? Is there some kind of control to ensure that there is a shared focus and that people comply with basic rules?

The onboarding process includes direct conversations between the media partner and our team. We look at the outlet and the journalism standards its work is based on. We also look at how they talk about their work, whether they adhere to established editorial standards

and make sure that we spotlight trustworthy journalism. You cannot just open an account and make all your selected stories visible on Display Europe. There are a couple of steps to go through together.

So, once a media outlet is approved, how does the collaboration start?

There are two ways of connecting. For WordPress-based platforms, there is a plug-in that you can install and configure. That's it. If you are not a WordPress user, we have an option to connect via RSS and a short script that enables us to call an overlay where the translation from Display Europe is shown on your own platform. There are several steps for communication around connections, making sure that the technology works well and that you share only those articles that you want to share with us. Nobody is obligated to share a certain amount of articles. It's very much up to each publisher how visible they want to be on the platform.

So, in practical terms, thinking about a WordPress user, a tag for Display Europe is created and through that the content becomes eligible for Display Europe. Is that more or less how it works?

Yes. If you are WordPress-based and you installed the plug-in, you have some options to control which stories you want to share. If you're very open and you're happy to share a lot of stories, you can select existing tags that you have on your website. For example, let's say one of the core topics that you cover is education in your area. You can just add the existing "education" tag and then all of the stories covering education will be featured on Display Europe. If you want handpicked stories, you can create a new tag, like Display-Europe. A lot of our media partners are doing this.

Do you see any kind of difficulty for people, in terms of inclusiveness, for those who maybe are not so aware of the tech side?

With each partner, there are some practicalities about the connection between our plug-in and their currently existing set-up. For some of them, it is very much plug-and-play. You just install the plug-in, you put the tag in and it just works. For others, depending on how complex their WordPress environment is, it might be the case that we have to make some adjustments. But we do always provide tech support from our side to help mitigate this.

Do you think that the media partners also kind of reshaped or re-translated the original Display Europe?

The platform has been in testing for about a year now. It has grown through different phases and mostly has had a soft launch for close media partners. Since April, we've started doing more outreach publicly to onboard new partners. So, I haven't yet seen publishers who have started tinkering in creative ways to include Display Europe into their own practices beyond what we have encouraged them to do. I did have some conversations with partners who are interested in exploring our translation as a potential service that they can further edit and then use in some of their own outreach spaces, as part of their impact strategy.

What else is on your personal wish list for features that do not depend on big tech tools?

We are currently preparing for a co-creation process alongside media partners to identify exactly which pieces of digital infrastructure they are missing and that we as Display Europe could provide for them, whether these are specific pieces of technology, connectors between other tools they use or European-based ethical alternatives to tools they already use but are concerned about. We are preparing for a product design process that will result in our list of priorities for future development.

Specifically for the platform, there are several features we would like to change or introduce. Some of them are in relation to how readers can discover content, for example, more topic-based searches or more topic-based feeds. Currently, you can see a general newsfeed on the main platform and then each publisher's individual newsfeed. And you can search, of course, if you want to find specific content. In the future, it would also be great to pull specific themes from across our media network, for example, climate change or upcoming elections. We are working on how to really spotlight relevant newsworthy events and make them discoverable on the platform.

We also have a lot of development to do for user accounts on the platform, which we have only started to test. You can already comment, react and bookmark stories for later. But we want to include further options to follow publications that you particularly enjoyed. So, some options to interact a bit better and to be able to personalise your feed in a way that makes sense to you, following a different logic from those algorithms just putting you in a bubble. Any algorithm we introduce to create news feeds should be transparent and give users the choice to opt out.

So, if there were other regions in the world that are interested in a similar project or in replicating it, how difficult would this be? What can you say about human and financial resources to keep the platform running and to provide usability?

Replicating the platform in other regions would have to be discussed in more detail. There is something to build on, as we are open source, but there are also parts specific to the current environment that we have created here that you would then have to build by yourself depending on your own ecosystem. There is currently no plug-and-play version that you could turn into, say, Display Africa right now.

In terms of staff, the cooperative itself, which is currently tasked with maintaining the technology infrastructure and growing it in the future, has a core team of five, with additional members of the cooperative involved in advisory capacities. Keep in mind that you do need some strong development resources to maintain and grow the platform. We don't have an exact starter package to adapt yet but if anybody is interested in building something similar in their own region, we're very happy to talk and see how things could work.

I would imagine that the multi-language approach could stir lots of interest in other regions. Currently, how many languages in the European Union are you actively translating?

It's not all covered yet but we are currently translating over 20 languages. Hit the language button on the platform to check the full list. We want to grow further and cover all the EU languages. We still don't have editorial partners for each covered language and we are currently onboarding new partners with the goal of really discovering journalism from all corners of Europe.

You talked already about the licences and the ownership approach, also about the cost and the team structure. Looking back, what would you do differently if you could start the project all over again?

The platform went through a few different versions based on a constant dialogue of how we want things to work and how we want things to look. It wasn't the easiest path, but where we are now seems to be offering more flexibility for our future strategy and to our partners. We have been taking into account all of the different products and partnerships to further expand Display Europe. And looking back, learning from our experience, we are now working to identify other people or teams working in the same direction, sharing our values and mission. It's better to connect and build together towards similar goals rather than doing everything from scratch in isolation.

Is there a medium-term or long-term commitment? Can you guarantee that Display Europe will still exist in 2026?

We have a lot of plans going into 2026 and beyond. We plan to consolidate the digital infrastructure behind the Display Europe platform and develop the range of products we can provide for our media partners. Our goal is to work towards establishing ethical technology alternatives for newsrooms that are accessible for all, regardless of resources (financial as well as where access to development skills are concerned). We are planning co-creation processes with our partners in two main directions: further building on the journalism distribution work that we have already started with the Display Europe platform and exploring newsroom tools that our partners need in order to be better equipped and more resilient. The next priorities will be determined by feedback from our stakeholders and the funding we can raise. At the cooperative, there is a lot of commitment.

And how can others support the sustainability of the approach? Would you say more users would make you happy because then you can show how great the approach is? Or would you say that too many users will kill you and you would rather have more donors?

If you are a media organisation based in Europe, please do reach out if you want to connect to the platform or be part of our future development. We are open to various levels of engagement, from contributing to our co-creation process to joining the cooperative if our mission resonates with you. In general, any feedback helps to improve the platform. If you are somebody who is passionate about journalism and interested in exploring how to exist online differently, using ethical technologies and experimenting with new sustainable distribution models, do consider joining the cooperative. It's not a huge financial investment, but you would be included in our future conversations and decision making.

Annex: Information on authors and collaborators

Catalina Albeanu

Catalina Albeanu is co-managing director of Display Europe. She is a digital editor with product management experience, having worked primarily in independent and small newsrooms throughout her career. Her work focuses on gathering innovation and media development insights and supporting the growth of complex editorial projects and media products and developing media partnerships for Display Europe. Previously, she worked for *DoR*, a non-profit magazine, coordinating editorial processes as well as the implementation of special projects, including the introduction of digital subscriptions, building digital storytelling experiences and facilitating community meetings. During her time at the magazine, the team at *DoR* won the 2020 European Press Prize for Innovation with a pop-up newsroom project, challenging established reporting practices.

Daniela Bello López

Daniela holds a degree in Communication Sciences from the University of the Americas Puebla (UDLAP), having graduated with honours, Magna Cum Laude. She holds a Master's Degree in Political Action, Institutional Strengthening and Citizen Participation from Francisco de Vitoria University, in Spain. Since 2020, she has been part of REDES A.C., contributing to projects such as Supporting Community-led Approaches to Addressing the Digital Divide, furthered by Rhizomatica and APC, the Canto de Cenzontles radio magazine and the Periodismo de lo Posible podcast. She also works with the Centre for Research in Community Technologies and Knowledge (CITSAC). She currently coordinates the communications and outreach department at REDES A.C.

Nelly Moraa Nyangorora

Nelly holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Reporting Climate Change from Uninettuno University, Italy, a BSc in Communication and Public Relations from Moi University and a Diploma in Journalism from the Kenya Institute of Mass Communication. She has 28 years of cumulative experience in media and public affairs. Her recent work includes contributions to studies on women governors in Kenya (AMWIK), women journalists' use of technology (IAWRT Kenya) and the effect of the EU Green Deal on global climate efforts (Uninettuno). She continues to mentor emerging journalists while exploring how community media and networks access and advance inclusive communication.

Nils Brock

Nils has a PhD in Political Science and has worked for two decades as a broadcast journalist, workshopper and media developer, mainly in Latin America but also in other regions of the Global Majority. His core topics are community communication and open source solutions.

Since 2016, Nils has been working with Rhizomatica on the LocNet initiative and as of 2019 for DW Akademie in the development of the Colmena content creation app for community media and the implementation of the Floresta Digital project for digital inclusion and economic sustainability of indigenous communities in the Brazilian Amazon region.

Okoro Onyekachi Emmanuel

A 42-year-old documentary filmmaker, network professional, participatory project developer and environmental campaigner, Okoro Onyekachi Emmanuel works with local communities in rural and urban areas of Nigeria at the intersection of technology used for the protection of human, environmental, communal and social rights. Using this approach, he develops projects on human and environmental rights, digital inclusion, digital literacy and the use of open source technology and participatory approaches to increase awareness, support advocacy and amplify community voices.

Racheal Nakitare

Racheal is a media and communications specialist with vast experience in public broadcasting, media production and development communication. A former president of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT), she champions gender equality, human rights and mentorship in journalism. A Hubert Humphrey, Knight Journalism and Poynter Coaching and Leadership Fellow, Racheal brings global insight to her work on empowering communities through media. She made history as the first African journalist to interview President Barack Obama at the White House, marking a distinguished career of excellence and impact.

Raylenne Kambua

Raylenne is a journalist and communications liaison at IAWRT Kenya with over six years of experience in media and communication management. She is deeply committed to advancing gender equity, human rights and digital justice, working at the intersection of media, gender, technology and policy. An Internet Governance Fellow and current Master's candidate in Communications and Media Technology at Maseno University, she is one of the pioneer developers of a Kiswahili lexicon on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), a groundbreaking project by KICTANet. Her work spans multiple initiatives in the media and technology space, focusing on advocacy and in particular on amplifying the voices and experiences of women in media.

Santiago García Gago

Santiago is a social communicator, radio broadcaster and trainer. As an advocate of free technologies, he coordinates RadiosLibres.net and is a member of the Community Radio and Free Software Network. He has published several books, including *Manual para radialistas analfatécnicos*, *Radios postpandemia* and *Politizar la tecnología*. He is also a member of the DW Akademie consultancy team in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Shalini A

For more than a decade, Shalini has been part of Janastu, a software NGO, and Servelots, an IT company that engages with local contexts for their research and development needs as an engineer working with rural communities in setting up WiFi-mesh networks and internet. She closely works with women and youths who can adopt technologies for their entrepreneurial and aspirational needs.

Subekti Priyadharma

Subekti is a lecturer at the Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia. His doctoral dissertation, *Internet and Social Change in Rural Indonesia*, published in 2021, earned him a Ph.D. from the University of Erfurt, Germany. He is one of the winners of the 2025 FAO/IAMCR Rural Communication Services Award for his research work, conducted jointly with colleagues, entitled Developing a National Strategy for Enabling, Shaping and Seeding Meaningful Community-Centered Connectivity in Rural Indonesia.

Violeta Assumpção

Violeta is a Brazilian with a degree in journalism and holds a Master's Degree in Scientific and Cultural Dissemination from the State University of Campinas, where she researched digital care and activism. Her main area of interest and professional activity is digital care and rights defence from a feminist perspective in Brazil and Latin America. Since 2019 she has been part of the Transfeminist Network of Digital Care.

Vivienne Gager

Vivienne holds a Master's Degree in Media and Political Communication and is a social communicator, trainer and consultant on gender, intersectionality and diversity from a human rights perspective. As of 2020, she works for DW Akademie developing and strategically accompanying cooperation and development projects, such as the open-source software Colmena and #CambiaLaHistoria, a transformative programme that supports journalists in Latin America in incorporating a gender and intersectional perspective in their reporting on violence.