

ALL THE VOICES: GRASSROOTS, PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY MEDIA

Community Media is not a new idea. It has been around in some form for quite a while but it has been on the decline in most communities for a long time. Community Media includes television, radio and other sources of information sharing. Some communities in Newfoundland have seen a move away from community media towards the assimilating allure of popular culture and increasingly homogenous global media. This story is about counteracting that trend and re-establishing participatory local media. The story mostly involves efforts around community radio but it is much more than that. The projects are locally-driven and are supported through Ryakuga Grassroots Communications.



Newfoundland's community radio efforts are a different approach to an old idea. It is community radio with multiple components. This includes getting the community together to share stories, celebrating their culture in a public place and creating an interactive dialogue as opposed to a one-way flow of information. The last component is using the internet and new media, such as Skype and Facebook, which can be used in radio.

Participatory communications such as community radio can energize rural communities. It offers a unique space for community members to work together on a project, encourages dialogue and fosters cultural celebration – all shared via radio and the Internet. There is a strong interest in these types of projects amongst people in Newfoundland and very strong support and feedback from the communities that have begun this type of work. Newfoundland is frequently suffering from outmigration due to people seeking opportunities in other parts of Canada and these events can help re-create the community as people can view and participate in the event from wherever they are.

Ryakuga's interest in community radio is principally in a participatory, volunteer-controlled, informal process which focuses on interactive-dialogue and cultural celebration. Their efforts include local radio broadcasting and webcasting but with a different approach than conventional radio that is produced entirely within a studio. These projects are instead more collaborative and involve members of the community as content producers and derive their content from interactive community events. The story of Bell Island is a good example of the type of project that happens when this approach is used.

In March 2011, the town of Wabana on Bell Island hosted their first radio event. This community was in trouble after the mine shut down. They needed a communication process so they could start talking to each other and newsletters were not working. Community Radio was the answer. The whole community rallied behind this cause and took it upon themselves to learn the skills required and obtain the equipment needed. A week-long community event took place which was the result of a lot of hard work on the part of the community. It also served as a graduation event for the participants and celebrated their efforts in training themselves. It ran for one week and was hosted by St. Michael's School Library, where the environment was modified to create a comfortable laid back community atmosphere. Stacks of equipment were brought in and set up throughout the space. The programming was created by volunteers and coverage included news, interviews, a talk show, call-in song requests, sports, history, and lots of other topics selected to attract audiences of all interests and ages. Many people got involved in the project and in creating the programming. The broadcasts were also sent out via webcast and were picked up by many people who had moved away from the community. The project was a real success and there is talk of bringing a permanent live station to the community.

Prior to the week-long event, there were numerous workshops. People would come out and talk about what skills they wanted to learn. A teacher was not thrown at them to tell them what they needed to know. People requested certain skills training and then hired local people to become facilitators as people learned more. The Bell Island experience is an example of how a special community event of limited duration can be used to impart lasting skills and value to a community. Local people are taught to set up their own community radio and are able to connect and share over the internet. Skills are left in the community so that they can replicate these things on their own after the event is over. Regulatory approval is not difficult and can be done through the CRTC. It is relatively inexpensive to setup, with costs running at approximately \$10,000 to \$20,000 for the project, depending on in-kind support.

The Bell Island event was the first project supported by the Rural Communication for Survival Initiative (RSCI) - an inclusive multi-sector 'collaborative process' designed to bring together government departments and agencies, academic institutions, NGOs, community communications groups and private-sector enterprises who have a common interest in advancing the sustainability of rural NL regions and communities through improved communications. Initial collaborators in RSCI include the NL Rural Secretariat, Memorial University (Grenfell Campus), Quanglo and Ryakuga.

Initially (beginning in 1979), the Memorial University extension service sent technology crews to rural communities to implement television transmitter projects. By the end of the 80s there were no more financial resources for technology crews and instead extension workers adopted a popular education methodology meaning "we have no media experts but rather co-participants sharing in a communication/education experience. We don't teach but rather create learning situations and popular education resource materials."

Ryakuga (in collaboration) continued to work in community television after the university eliminated its extension service but local supportive owners sold out to corporations from outside the province. In 2001 they switched to community radio - a medium people find easier to adopt. They were already using the internet - initially for websites and e-mail but then progressed to using CGI discussion boards and software and video-conferencing. Ryakuga actually webcast before they broadcast. It has taken ten years for enough rural communities to get broadband to further utilize internet technologies. Meanwhile they still webcast audio which is compatible with dialup.

One effect of changing from long term, multi stakeholder project to discrete projects is that there is no longer funding for local facilitators to work with their communities to ensure full participation. The answer to this issue was found in the special events which are also designed to seed long term grassroots participatory community radio groups. There are several community television groups that have lasted for two decades.

The elements necessary to make these projects work are adopting "All the Voices" principles of: Participatory Communications - ordinary people have the right to be heard - but also the responsibility to speak out; Collaboration - for each communication project, look for as many partners as possible emphasizing commonalities rather than differences; Inclusion - in the communities, work with people of all ages and all walks of life (in community media projects, "animateurs" or "encouragers" have included women at home, retired teachers and recent

university graduates); Cultural Celebration - the local musicians, who are so important in community events, are not merely entertainers but also create an environment in which people feel good about their culture and who they are (Local people can speak out and plan their own future when they feel pride in themselves. Mainstream media tends to make people who live away from big centres feel inferior and insecure.); Positive Mirroring: Try to stress the positive aspects of the local environment and culture (This is also known as "pride of place." Again, its important for people to feel good about themselves and speak out.); Youth Power - Ben and Friends is one of the most popular programs on VOBB - the Voice of Bonne Bay (A Caribbean Federation of Youth slogan says "Youth, the present answer to the future." Youth are essential in media projects. They are not afraid of the technology. Their energy catalyzes the process. An intergenerational mix is good - older people gain respect for the technical prowess of the youth, while younger people become interested in community issues).

A constant issue with these projects is funding. A decade ago the federal government was interested in participating in long term community development projects and now they are not. So it has been necessary to strategize how to achieve similar long term goals with short term discrete projects. Another issue is the slow adoption of broadband in rural areas of Newfoundland and Labrador. We still have to use dial up for webcasts and relay broadcasts. It's difficult for many people to connect to new internet communication tools such as Skype, Twitter and FaceBook.

The projects have been fortunate to work with organizations and communities that want to work together. This is possibly related to outmigration and financial pressures which make the benefits of collaboration obvious. Also a grassroots community media process has obvious benefits for all members of the community.

Grassroots, collaborative, participatory, community media processes work best when a number of organizations, even in different communities, can work together without "turf" issues. Successful outcomes are seen when the collaborating organizations have the capacity for long term planning. Another requirement for success is an inclusive process to attract volunteers. There also has to be financial backing, both for permanent community media installations and for special events, but money isn't the secret to the process. People working together to get their messages out is the real secret.



