

REPORT ON IREN PROJECT

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Why was IREN's work necessary ?

Private passion, public neglect

Let me begin by pointing to a curious paradox : radio is everybody's private possession, private passion even, yet in public, at the level of policy, and even within the rest of the media, it is undervalued and taken for granted.

This was the case, until quite recently, in the academic field of media and cultural studies also. In courses on the history of broadcasting, all radio got was a lecture before the arrival of mass television in the early 1950s. Radio practice as taught in universities and colleges was often little more than an uncritical reproduction of broadcast jour-

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nalistic technique. Radio was seen as ‘transparent’ or unproblematic with the result that a student interested in radio theory had constantly to attempt a mental substitution of radio for the visual media, of sound for vision, of analysis of acoustic images for their visual counterparts.

The reason for this was that most of us Europeans live in a visual culture, our very languages permeated with expressions that relate to sight, a culture that has built up over centuries since the invention of printing prioritised visual over aural skills. The study of media – and this meant originally the study of the press, film and television – had itself a hard struggle for recognition in the face of a strong literary tradition. Radio and sound connect with an older oral tradition whose contemporary traces have been virtually unexplored academically. In fact, anthropologists, musicians, speech therapists, acoustic artists and a few radio producers have visited this territory. It is only in media and cultural studies that radio has, till recently, been absent in the theoretical part of the field. It’s a discursive absence : though words are what radio uses above all else, it is as if there are no words to describe what radio is about.

Building a ‘subject infrastructure’

What needed to be done in this situation ? Radio was, we said, an ‘undeveloped’ field. It was, in effect, a new subject and it needed an infrastructure to support it.

To explain what I mean by ‘infrastructure’ let’s look at another subject. Take history. This well established field has over the years diversified so that the many different specialist branches and periods of the subject are catered for by different associations and networks. A typical subject association has an office in some university and a staff who administer membership and service a number of committees. Through the work of these committees, senior academics from across the country liaise with government policy and research funding agencies, develop strategic lines of research, oversee the publication of a Journal, set standards of public examinations and find ways to foster the subject at all levels of education, paying particular attention to the advancement of junior scholars so that interest in the subject is constantly renewed and reviewed.

All this at the national level, and of course there are regional and international levels as well with research partnerships routinely extending beyond national boundaries.

An essential part of this process is the organisation of conferences. Conferences are the front line of university research, often built in as a component and an outcome of a research programme. In answer to a Call for Papers for a particular themed conference, academics send in proposals which go through a process of 'blind peer review' – other scholars in the field assess the proposals without knowing the name or provenance of the author. Acceptance and delivery of the paper will usually lead to publication, and in turn to the advancement of an individual's career, not to mention the development of the field itself. Not only that, but in the UK, at least, the amount of published work produced by a university department determines the amount of government funding for research in that department. That funding is in part what supports attendance at conferences.

Until recently no such international infra-structural support for radio study could be assumed and the scientific field itself was not coherently established but remained a patchwork of unconnected studies, often marginalised within media programmes, or relying on individual scholars who were/still are isolated and receive little institutional support. IREN's Co-ordination Action built on several initiatives that have taken place within countries and regions – as we've heard from Jean-Jacques Cheval : the UK's *Radio Studies* Network, the French GRER, the *Irish Radio Research* Ireland and so on.

Whatever form of international organisation continues after the funded period of IREN's existence comes to an end, it must set itself the task of encouraging the individual researchers in countries and regions to get together to form their own networks, and so strengthen the infra structure for all.

What are the significant academic research outcomes of the project?

I am going to assume that IREN has helped to co-ordinate an agenda, content and methods of radio study, and that the very fact of

bringing together people and ideas in this field to create the beginnings of a subject infrastructure has been an important success. Though the EU funding is about to end, and with it the first stage of the project, this is only the beginning. We have witnessed, if you like, a sort of ‘big bang’ in the radio research universe, and it is characteristic of such a moment, to continue the astronomical metaphor, that there is a lack of differentiation in the field of study. Almost anything to do with radio is a potential research topic because almost nothing existed before. Stratification, subsets, hierarchies and taxonomies will come later. For now, a thousand flowers can and should bloom.

If I concentrate on the themes under which IREN was funded : Thematic Priority 7 : “*Citizens and governance in a knowledge based society*” and, within that Priority, in the research domain “*New forms of citizenship and cultural identities*” I don’t mean to dismiss the other topics among the 220 papers we have hosted.

The words ‘citizens’ and ‘citizenship’ in a media context points in our field of radio towards public service and community radio, *radios associatives*, or ‘third sector’ radio. These are forms of radio whose mission is to address listeners as citizens, members of a community, whether national, regional or local, and to include in that address, and often make special provision for, social groups that may or may not be minorities within the overall community. In the eight conferences IREN has organised, a considerable number of papers discussed both these forms of radio, and two meetings, those in Seville and Limerick, were specially devoted to community radio in Europe and the developing world. In the latter, the distinction between public service, commercial and community radio is less clear when it comes to assessing the contribution radio may make to community-building – whether in coverage of local events, showcasing local music talent or discussing local politics. An impoverished public service or state radio may be less able to reflect these local interests than a commercial station – we heard of examples of this in Madagascar, and the same is true of Mali according to a recent article in *The Radio Journal*.

In Europe, we have to say that commercial radio’s over-riding concern with community is as a local market in which consumers can spend. This form of radio is important economically, socially and culturally and too few of the IREN papers dealt with the political economy of

commercial radio. Concentration of ownership and its implications for local cultural identity needs to be tracked, but keeping track of the fast-moving developments in this sector of broadcasting needs a lot more money than academia can find on its own. There is need for a properly funded radio observatory within an EU Media programme.

The EU has of course, over the last decade or more, been concerned about concentration in the media generally, about the need to maintain pluralism and diversity. Over the same period the presence of public service broadcasting has been judged important as a guarantee of quality and diversity – both a geographical diversity so that local and regional interests are served, and diversity within national programmes in order to reflect the linguistic, cultural and religious interests of ethnic minority communities whose members are often spread across a nation as a diaspora.

So the health of public service radio in the face of increasing commercial competition and fragmentation of audiences has been the subject of many of the IREN papers. But even in the short lifetime of the IREN project a new development is causing all sectors of radio broadcasting to re-think their role and their programming offer. This is the rapid increase and popularity especially among younger people of ‘social networking’ (eg. MySpace) and ‘user generated content’ (eg. blogging and podcasting). This is being openly acknowledged as a threat to all the traditional forms of media – newspapers, magazines, television and *mainstream* radio.

I emphasise *mainstream* because, while there is a strong strand of interest among the IREN papers in the new technologies and their implications for the way radio is produced and received by mainstream media, the relevance to *community radio* of this development has not been explicitly considered. ‘User generated content’ is what community radio is all about and has been for 50 years or more. The difference is that while the mainstream tries to retain its hold on listeners, readers and viewers by the concession of access, community radio starts from the other end of the argument. The *raison d’être* of community radio/ community media is giving a voice to the community that owns the outlet, and particularly a voice to the marginalised and disadvantaged groups in a community. Every community radio station that carries out this programming policy is giving lessons to citizens about how to

operate in a 'knowledge-based society'. Perhaps the mainstream might like to consider taking these same lessons! To put it another way, this development looks set to weaken if not dissolve the boundaries between public service radio and the community radio sector. What is the latter if not a local public service? So ways must be found to protect and support it at the European and national level – I mean both financial support and through the reservation of frequency space especially in countries where the planned migration to DAB or its equivalent threatens to leave FM Band III to the mercy of private sector mobile telephony.

What relevance does radio have to EU policy?

Up till now my discussion has been mediacentric, but I have singled out community radio as a local form of public service broadcasting and the motivation for this form of broadcasting is social, cultural and political experience – experience that has been unable to find expression in mainstream media. Community radio is the expression of the social movements in civil society and no form of radio is better placed to explore and serve *'new forms of citizenship and cultural identities'*.

If we consider what are particular issues of concern in Europe at the present time, the experience of migration and what it does to the communities left behind and those the migrants enter must rank high. It raises all the issues of inclusion and exclusion, the reduction of poverty, cultural diversity, the rights of ethnic minority communities, encouragement of citizen participation in governance.

In a recently book, published posthumously after his death, Roger Silverstone argues that migration and immigration

“represent ... a perceptible if not yet a conclusive change in the nature of national cultures and their capacity to sustain traditional boundaries and identities...“the struggles for community, identity and a place in the culture of region, nation and continent are becoming the central ones in the present century.” (Silverstone 2006 : 83)

The task of guarding the symbolic boundaries of nations has been till now an important role for public service broadcasting, but if Silverstone is right in his assessment, then we must look to community

media to share with public service broadcasting the task of reflecting news forms of citizenship and cultural identities in societies which have become fully mediatised.

References

Silverstone, Rode. (2006) *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

