

UK COMMUNITY RADIO PRODUCTION RESPONSES TO COVID-19

REPORT, July 2020

This document presents data from a research project conducted on the UK community radio sector, investigating how well-equipped and prepared stations were to react and adapt to COVID-19 social distancing and lockdown measures.

Josephine F. Coleman Brunel University London

Figure 18 Responses to question: What do you think are the major factors behind who's still on the)
schedule for your radio station whilst social distancing is in place?	14
Figure 19 Responses to question: How important has it been to maintain your usual station	
standards of broadcast sound quality and professionalism during the social distancing?	15

data, Statista, in June 2019, employment in radio broadcasting has fallen from 21,000 in 2012 to just 14,000 in 2017;⁴ a number that we know continues to fall.

There are community stations distributed across the length and breadth of the country; the CMA website has a useful map.⁵ Although every station is different and operates under a unique set of circumstances, desk and field research already conducted by the author suggests that there are commonalities among them (Coleman, 2020). A primary aspect in common is the shared understanding related to the regulatory framework which requires the volunteer practitioners to conform with the Broadcasting Code and encourages professional standards of presentation and production. Secondly, the practitioners use similar arrays of technologies, mostly digital devices and software and web 2.0 platforms, to produce and distribute their weekly schedules of programmes.

Thirdly of course, at this moment of global pandemic crisis, every local station team has had to radically adjust their practices in the face of disruptions to daily life caused by social distancing. They are in good company, as mainstream radio broadcasters are likewise creatively reassigning labour and resources to continue their round-the-dock transmissions. The CMA, with just one member of paid staff and a voluntary board, has been circulating a weekly newsletter to its members throughout the crisis, full of industry updates, examples of best practice and sharing links to funding opportunities and other resources: conveying, for the most part, good news about how the sector is thriving in the lockdown .⁶ Having said that, this optimistic outlook is no guarantee of long term resilience. A press article quoting longstanding proponent of community radio, Steve Buckley, suggests that the sector is still having to convince the government of its worth.⁷ The CMA and other interest groups are continually lobbying the

volunteers were quick to pick up on it. On 30th March, the QMA promoted a call to collective action by encouraging station teams to post photographs of themselves on social media presenting from their homes. This generated ongoing activity around the hashtag and a second campaign took place on 1st May when s

at 09:15. This initiative was used to highlight the valuable contribution of the sector and audiences were urged to write to the government to express their support.

The main point the community sector has been keen to convey is how community stations have stepped up to provide essential updates to local residents and kept their listeners abreast of important COVID-19 developments and other news with local repercussions. Though there are

Findings STATION MANAGEMENT

unique number) declared that they are normally also involved on the presentation and production side. Comments ranged from: At least 1 [weekly programme] but sometimes I am providing dips,

FUNDING

An additional question revealed that two thirds (65.9%) of responding stations do not charge membership fees or take subscriptions from their volunteers. Less than a third (27.3%) receive up to £50 a year from voluntary volunteer contributions. Reasons for not making contributions compulsory varied amongst stations, with some management teams preferring to look to alternative ways of generating income streams rather than rely upon their volunteers. A different reason shared was to reduce the likelihood that paying volunteers would assume they had editorial control over their own shows.

In the follow-up interviews, managers listed some of the alternative ways they raised money to run their stations. Though listener donations

Since the introduction of social distancing measures, it seems that over half of the community radio stations surveyed are achieving a consistent ratio of speech to music

When asked how much this had changed during the lockdown, 43.2% reported that it had reduced a lot, and a further 27.3% said that it had reduced a little. 20.5% of respondents said that there had been no change (Figure 12).

Next, an indication was sought

Where stations were less well prepared, one respondent admitted: e had nothing in place Few of our Presenters are technically minded, several don't use

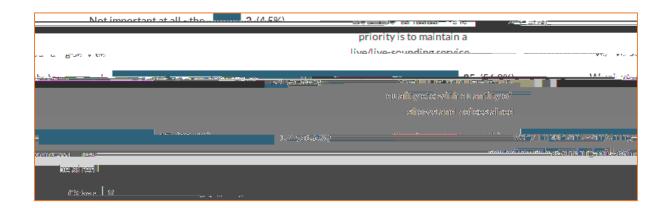
computers/tablets/smart phones at all Such situations did not necessarily mean solutions a very small studio which was not

suitable for social distancing. We closed it immediately and moved to VT A lot of older generation of presenters were taught new skills and bought their own equipment

and the availability of decent quality devices: one director reported that purchased a new playout system that allowed every presenter to be live or voice track from home It is clear also that some radio stations did not close their studio doors completely. For instance, one respondent explained: We currently lease large premises (with a large unused room at the rear) so it was quite easy to spread our operation out. Presenters are also encouraged to spend the minimum amount of time necessary in the building (as some of our volunteers possibly do fall into the vulnerable category) and wipe down surfaces in the studio with antibacterial wipes after use (r23).

So, what were the skills, resources and other circumstances which enabled some presenters to remain active where their fellow volunteers were hindered or prevented from participating? Having the relevant technical know-how appears to have been

Quality of sound is not as important as quality of content for local community The primary aim was to maintain a service and improve on the quality as we progressed. This has been achieved with most presenters finding that relatively inexpensive microphones are good enough, given the generally lower standards of acoustics in their homes



Despite the circumstances, 38.6% were adamant that quality should not be compromised. As one We have a reputation to uphold but we have a loyal, appreciative and understanding listenership, aware of who we are and our place in the community, seen as 'friends' doing a worthy but professional job We have been able to maintain production values even with some presenters VTing from home with nothing more than a USB mic and a laptop

LOCAL NEWS

The survey asked if the stations already had their own local news service before the lockdown, and 59.1% of respondents said that they did, although only 27.3% said they actually engaged reporters and journalists on their station. These were often students on the University stations and always volunteers.

In descending order, local news was provided most commonly through on-air bulletins, and shared online via social media, discussed on-air during magazine shows and posted on their station websites. The majority said they had been able to at least maintain this service, if not increase it during the lockdown (84.6%).

Of the remaining stations, 38.9% of respondents said that they had begun to deliver a local news service since the social distancing measures had been introduced. The methods of delivery were primarily on-air as bulletins, as well as online using their website and social media, and coverage was also provided on magazine shows.

One respondent elaborated that their station had instigated new programmes and features focused on circulating community news on COVID-19- ew versions of old shows with the new Covid life in mind A number of features including 'Age UK' anti-falls 10 minute exercise packages run daily for several weeks, regular phone interviews with school staff, doctors and members of the community on advice, activities and initiatives Other stations cited instances of enhanced coverage of local NHS partnership news as well as local council, police and emergency services, trading and charitable organisations.

Some stations have started broadcasting local church services, and two stations reported that they e have put local Talking

Newspaper interviews and news stories on air plus expanded their programmes to two hours from initial one hour plus repeating during week dded a health hour

show on Sundays, plus additional well-being items in magazine shows. Additionally, carrying interviews with community organisations asking for help. Broadcasting the local Talking Newspaper as the local sight charity cannot distribute it as normal

Bibliography

to researching local

.

Oultural Studies Companions), pp. 343 353.

Franklin, B. (1997)

. London: Arnold.

(30Media), (8).

Starkey, G. and Orisell, A. (2009)

. London: SAGE Publications.

. 1st edn. Routledge (Routledge Media and