

The state of Community Media in the European Union

Executive Summary

I. Introduction

Community Media (CM) constitute a dynamic and highly diverse part of the European Union's media landscape. Yet, little information is available regarding the sector's scope, its potential and on the status of CM organisations in different Member States. The purpose of this report is to investigate the state of CM in the EU and to examine the factors that influence their development. Particular attention has been focussed on examining how CM activity meets EU policy objectives. Furthermore, an assessment of the sector's involvement at EU level is expected to inform future policy choices regarding CM.

II. The State of Community Media in the European Union

According to the client brief, the term CM is defined as “media that are non-profit and owned by or accountable to the community that they seek to serve. CM are open to participation in programme making and management by members of the community”.

This study begins by examining a number of CM's contributions that are of public interest. These contributions are illustrated with several case studies of CM initiatives. The sector's activities are often of social, cultural, political and economic relevance. Its contributions towards the public interest form the basis of political support CM receive in several Member States. These contributions are perceived and prioritised differently by CM organisations and governments across the EU. Subsequently, the sector's public profile varies from country to country.

On the basis of a sector mapping, consultants estimated CM activity across the EU, indicating higher levels of activity in Member States in the North-West of Europe and modest levels of activity in many of the new Member States. Results of a country by country survey, and a total of 36 conducted consultations, show that levels of activity are closely related to public awareness and legal recognition of the sector as well as to the existence of underlying regulatory procedures. The mapping also confirms the high diversity of the sector and the different roles CM play in different Member States. Moreover, desk research exhibited that audience shares and the number of participants of CM vary significantly. Whereas some initiatives are well known across different communities, others operate on a much smaller scale and may cater for one specific community. However, research also shows that CM often reach out to large proportions of very specific audience groups.

The diversity described above is also reflected in how the sector is organised at national level, where CM are represented by a variety of different sector associations. As further outlined in Section 1, results of the mapping should be perceived as indicative due to the scarcity of available data regarding the sector.

Legal status of CM is important to the development of CM organisations. Research shows that a recognised legal status enables CM organisations to engage with regulatory authorities, funding partners as well as advertisers, thus contributing to their sustainable development. Organisations are registered as various legal entities while some broadcasters still operate as pirate stations.

The underlying regulatory situation in most Member States reflects low levels of awareness amongst policy makers regarding this sector and its potential societal contributions. While EU regulation contains provisions that could enable recognition of CM at national level, the sector finds it difficult to make policy makers aware of its requirements. There are some countries that have implemented policies which support CM development; this study has used Hungary, the United Kingdom, France and Ireland as examples to demonstrate this.

Digital technology is an opportunity as well as a challenge for CM. Internet-based CM allows the sector to reach out to new audiences as well as to engage new participants in innovative ways. It also allows the sector to adopt new operational models as well as the ability to disseminate and exchange content. Furthermore, the future switch-over to digital broadcasting could free radio spectrum that could potentially be utilised for new CM services. However, there is a growing concern among the sector that switch-over policies of most Member States do not take CM into account. Moreover, transition to Digital – whether to internet or digital broadcasting – involves some high initial costs that many CM organisations (as well as many other small scale media organisations) cannot afford. Finally, digital broadcasting standards often do not cater for the needs of small media organisations such as CM and may exclude the sector from future platforms. The study shows that only few countries include must carry rules to prevent this from happening.

CM organisations rely on a variety of different resources. These include commercial revenues as well as state support. The sector also heavily depends on volunteers. Differing economic and social circumstances make it difficult to estimate an average budget for a Community Media organisation. Moreover, public policy sets the parameters under which the sector operates in each country. Though in some countries regulation promotes high flexibility and entrepreneurship from CM organisations, others adopt policies that lead the sector to operate in a more stable and institutionalised fashion.

In the context of all these differences and distinctions, the sector shares some common traits. Research has shown that there is currently momentum in the development of CM across the EU. The sector has embraced digital technology and CM organisations are trying to act collectively to articulate their positions before policy makers. Moreover, in the current climate of things, CM could certainly benefit from the increasingly stronger concept of emerging knowledge-based societies. For if society's future relies on the active involvement of informed, media literate citizens, CM can play a definitive role in facilitating such a future. A key challenge for the sector is to raise awareness among policy makers and the general public regarding this potential contribution.

III. EU Policies and Community Media

As part of the study, CM's relation to several EU policies as well as the impact of EU policy making on the sector was examined. The sector's societal contributions are in line with a range of EU policies which are listed in the main body of the report. However, the report also shows that many of regulations that would benefit the sector need to be implemented at Member State level:

- Regulations in the EU telecommunications regulatory package include measures regarding non-discriminatory spectrum allocation and general interest objectives for the establishment of "Must Carry" rules. Yet, the inclusion of CM in such measures depends

on Member States.

- EU audiovisual regulation acknowledges that media pluralism and diversity are preconditions for democracy in the EU. The European Commission has recently highlighted the importance of media literacy to foster active citizenship. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that media policy remains a responsibility of national authorities and that the EU is quite limited in its involvement with this field.
- There are a number of EU policies relating to freedom of speech, racial equality and the non-discrimination of minorities that are of relevance to CM. Consultations revealed that the EU might be able to actively support the sector in these areas without impeding on the rights of Member States.
- The recently published Communication on Culture notes the importance of local creativity as well as the role of local culture in fostering social cohesion and innovation. The Communication could eventually lead to policy changes that may positively influence the CM sector.
- The EU institutions increasingly wish to enter into a dialogue with local and regional communities regarding important EU issues. The local nature of many CM organisations provides the Union with an opportunity to promote public dialogue on European issues via CM services.

Although there is no EU support programme specifically directed towards CM, the study shows that the sector benefits from a range of EU funding. Research showed that CM organisations participate in decentralised as well as centralised funding programmes such as European Social Fund initiatives or the Gruntvig Programme. While decentralised funding offers the most opportunities for the sector, consultations showed that only a minority of the sector has the knowledge and experience to benefit from EU support and that funding officers are not aware of the breadth of CM's potential societal contributions. The scope exists to further integrate a concept of CM into future EU support actions.

There also appears to be momentum regarding the sector's endeavours to engage at EU-level. However, it so far has not been successful in developing a distinct profile among EU-institutions and policy makers. Increased awareness on both sides and more communication between the sector and EU institutions is therefore required.

IV. Opportunities for Future Engagement with the Sector

The study provides evidence that the sector has the potential to contribute to a wide range of EU policy objectives. In return, EU policy can play a major role in helping the sector tackle some key issues that can either foster or impede CM's development at national as well as at EU level. The sector needs to raise its profile at EU level in a more consistent and distinct way to gain recognition and acknowledgement. CM require further recognition in national media law as well as an increased awareness amongst regulatory authorities regarding its nature and its needs – specifically with regards to spectrum allocation and digital switch-over and must carry rules. Due to the high diversity of the sector, CM organisations and associations can learn from each other. The sector thus benefits from being very collaborative. Finally, dedicated funding support can help the sector to develop the capacities needed to operate in a more continuous and sustainable fashion.

It is the responsibility of the CM sector to achieve many of the above mentioned objectives. As already indicated, many of the challenges CM face need to be resolved at Member State level. However, the European Parliament's CULT Committee can support the development of CM in the EU. The following lists a set of recommendations to the Client which are further outlined in the main body of the report:

- The Committee should highlight the sector's role in achieving various EU policy objectives: A reference should be made to CM in Parliament Resolutions regarding several planned policy initiatives of relevance to the sector (Review of the telecommunications regulatory package, Communications on media pluralism and media literacy, etc.).
- Support networking and presence of CM at EU level: Alongside the continuity of the Committee's engagement with the sector, it should issue an Own Initiative Report regarding the potential of CM to implement EU policy objectives. Such an initiative could be supported by a parliamentary hearing on CM where representatives of the sector and experts would present their case before the Parliament. Furthermore, CM should be put on the agenda of the audiovisual inter-group as a future topic for discussion.
- The Committee should encourage the sector to create a pan-European Community Media association that represents the sector before EU institutions and policy makers. It should be enquired whether EC support for European Cultural Bodies could be utilised to assist such a body. In addition, research regarding the sector should be promoted as part of the 7th Framework Programme to increase understanding of the sector.
- The Committee should support the sector in its endeavour to establish a European Union wide internet-based CM portal. This would help the sector to exchange best practices as well as to coalesce and raise CM's public profile. Such a profile could also foster further understanding regarding the potential benefit of using internet-based services, such as online repositories of free-to-download programmes among the sector.
- The sector's potential to connect the EU with local and regional communities should be highlighted. The Committee should raise awareness among European policy makers regarding the opportunity to promote public dialogue on EU issues via CM. This could be done by inquiring whether DG Communication is aware of the sector.
- Increased knowledge exchange among local, regional and national public authorities that govern the CM sector should be encouraged. The Committee should inform the sector of the possibility to apply for support that would enable CM organisations to engage in a dialogue with public bodies, regarding how to best develop policies that meet the needs of the sector (e.g. Regions for Economic Change, etc.).