

Community Radio

Photo Credit: Robert Ashworth

Aaron
Snider

In a rural context where people live in small towns or on isolated farmsteads, aging can lead to isolation as transportation options dwindle. For some who are not comfortable with technology, or who do not have the necessary equipment to connect online, staying connected to their community and to public conversations can be difficult.

Community radio offers a low-tech method of communication between individuals and communities at a regional scale, and can provide a forum to not only connect those potentially isolated at home to the wider society, but to also target seniors or other groups with important outreach and information.

Broadcasting Community

As a communication tool that can broadcast both personal messages and general news and stories, radio is an effective tool for connecting people to their society and their culture. One radio program in Colombia aired messages from callers to their kidnapped loved ones, held by FARC rebels in the country's jungles. While the messages brought information and hope to those being held captive, the show also allowed other Colombians listening to hear the voices of those impacted by their nation's decades-long conflict ("Radio for Colombia's Missing," 2018). Similarly, call-in radio shows on community radio stations in South Africa helped to raise the profile of clinical trials for HIV/AIDS treatments, and contributed to public dialogue about public health (Medeossi et al., 2014). In cases like these, radio allows an audience to listen in and relate to personal stories that may have wider application or meaning. This is especially true of issues like aging, that may not be highly visible in other media.

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Narrow focus, wide reach

While radio communication can reach large geographic areas, an individual station can have a narrow focus. Radio station CFAM, based in Altona, MB, started out in the late 1950s with the aim of providing rural news and farming issues that Winnipeg-based stations did not cover, and to make time for religious programming that was increasingly being cut from other stations' broadcasts (see fig. 1). CFAM was so successful in this latter part of its mission that one researcher found that the station contributed to a consolidation of Mennonite culture across southern Manitoba over a twenty year period (Wiebe, 2008).



Photo Credit: Sumner (2017)

Figure 1: CFAM 1290 Radio Station

These impacts show how radio can reach people with similar interests or needs across a large geographic area, and allow them to feel connected to one another and to a community that can otherwise be difficult to comprehend.

This ability to connect communities can help bridge gaps left by losses of physical infrastructure. In rural Newfoundland, two communities that lost their ferry connection - Woody Point and Norris Point - were able to reestablish a partial sense of connection with a shared radio broadcast (McKee, 2011). A station targeted to provide a region's seniors with resources, news and culture could help to restore connections that may have been severed by losses of mobility or transportation options.

Old school meets new

Radio benefits from its simplicity, the ubiquity of listening equipment, and its familiarity, particularly among older generations. However, there are opportunities to leverage the broad reach of new communications technologies to boost the impact of radio in the internet era. Online streaming audio from a radio station can be listened to anywhere in the world, establishing a connection to the region for those who have moved away (McKee, 2011). This kind of radio-internet partnership not only connects people to home and heritage regardless of their current location, but may also help boost the longevity of small towns by broadcasting the benefits of rural life, attracting people to move back, or to move there for the first time. This longevity is essential for age-friendly places, which need economic and social vitality to continue providing services.

Versatile, affordable, barrier-free

Depending on the type and scale of the radio station being considered, there are ways to get it up and broadcasting without huge upfront investments. The UNHCR provides suggestions for the infrastructure and hardware required to quickly establish radio communication with a target community using minimal software and affordable equipment (Radio for Communicating with Communities, n.d.; see fig. 2). For a larger-scale and more permanent operations, CBC's Transmission subsidiary leases space on their nation-wide network of broadcast towers, providing the ability to target almost any audience in the country (Site Sharing, n.d.).

Perhaps more important than hardware and radio towers are the people who will not only operate the equipment, but research, write, produce and share the news, stories and other content that make the broadcast valuable as an age-friendly communication method. One radio station, VOWR in St. John's, NL, has been going for more than 90 years with exclusively volunteer staff (Mullaley, 2020; see fig. 3). This model not only makes the regional community radio station



Figure 2: Low-tech radio programming schedule



Figure 3: Station VOWR in St. John's NL began to broadcast church services to those who could not make it to church

“Community radio benefits seniors by providing access via the radio to dialogue occurring within a community straight into their homes” (McKee, 2011, p. 14).



Figure 4: Youth contributing to Cape Shore Radio in NL

an affordable solution, but provides opportunities for locals, including youths and school programs, to gain valuable experience creating broadcasts for their own communities (McKee, 2011). In this way community radio can help to establish a communication ecosystem where both younger and older residents feel involved and included in life of their region.

Final Thoughts

In rural and regional contexts where governments may have difficulty justifying investments in expensive transportation or telecommunications infrastructure, a volunteer-run and community-oriented radio station can help connect residents to a common source of information and cultural content. The local news, public health information, and audience participation that a radio station can provide can be an affordable way for one or more levels of government to boost the capacity of a region's residents to age in place. Online broadcasts can also serve as a connection to home for seniors who have to leave the region for long-term care.

A regionally-based radio station is important, since city-based radio stations may not cover the kinds of topics or the locally-focused news that rural listeners value. Being regionally specific can also help to establish (or re-establish) a regional identity. By allowing local residents, and especially youths, to help write, produce and broadcast the region's news and stories, radio can also create inter-generational connections (see fig. 4).

Reliance on volunteers also presents challenges, and may limit the amount of programming that is possible. Despite cost-saving options, start up costs for a new station may be a barrier to some communities. Some funding options are available, but a station will need to find ways to show the value of public investment for continued support (Funding Programs, n.d.). To address these and other challenges, radio's flexibility is an asset. Community radio can broadcast 24/7 or just a few hours per day or per week, depending on the local capacity (McKee, 2011). A community radio station is an investment in health, in culture, and in an age-friendly region.

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