

**The Expanding Boundaries of Non-Commercial U.S. Community Radio:  
New Spaces for Online Journalism**

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## **The Expanding Boundaries of Non-Commercial U.S. Community Radio:**

### **New Spaces for Online Journalism**

Scholarly and professional discussions in the United States about the phenomenon described as “citizen journalism” emphasize the Internet’s abilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to engage members of the public who are not professional journalists to gather and report local news in their communities, and to extend such reporting to national and international audiences. However, such discussions often understate or ignore the existence of previous generations of citizen-produced media, such as the “underground press” (Peck, 1985; Rossinow, 1998; Gitlin, 2003); non-commercial “community radio” (Barlow, 1988; Girard, 1992; Keith, 1995; Beatty, 2000; Howley, 2001; Downing, 2001; Daley, 2004); and “community television” (Downing, 2001; Halleck, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001). Radio, in particular, is often missing or underrepresented in 21<sup>st</sup> century discussions about U.S. citizen journalism, despite the medium’s persistent popularity, and the particular strength of the non-commercial, volunteer-operated sector, known as “community radio,” which has offered a space for news, commentary, and public affairs programming for at least 60 years, since the creation in 1949 of Pacifica Radio’s KPFA-FM, in Berkeley, California (Eliasoph, 1997; Downing, 2001). The role of these stations as online providers of news and information has received even less attention.

The self-described, non-commercial “community radio stations” represent one of the three main types of U.S. radio, in addition to (1.) commercial stations, such as those 800 broadcasters owned by Clear Channel Communications, and (2.) “public service” or

“public” radio stations, such as the 800-member National Public Radio network. In contrast, community radio stations follow non-commercial models for local radio, emphasizing the role of citizen broadcasters over professionals, and a listener-supported model of financial contributions and volunteerism (Howley, 2001).

In 2009, when many traditional media organizations are reducing or abandoning their operations in cities and towns across the country, the community radio sector is expanding its presence, on the airwaves and online; forming new stations and networks; and undertaking new endeavors to deliver local news, making the phenomenon extremely timely to study. This study examines how radio journalism conducted outside of traditional newsrooms, by members of the public instead of professional journalists, is expanding its boundaries within the community radio sector, on the air and on the Internet. The actors include “Full-power” stations that reach entire cities and regions, and a newer class of “Low-power” FM (LPFM) stations, which reach smaller local audiences in neighborhoods and small towns and are less expensive and more accessible to operate than the larger stations.

As more communities become licensed to build and operate non-commercial, citizen-produced radio stations, and as more stations engage in producing local news and public affairs programs, new spaces for non-commercial news will emerge, on the air and online. While it has been common for such stations to be presented as examples of “alternative media” in local communities, this study suggests that the current emphasis on “citizen journalism” makes it appropriate to discuss community radio as a vehicle through which members of local communities might not only gain a voice in the local

public sphere (a commonly repeated though vague and clichéd explanation), but more specifically how participation in community radio news and public affairs programming can be explored as an assertion of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizenship.

## **Research Questions**

Using a case study methodology that employees qualitative interviews of station personnel and quantitative data obtained in a survey of several dozen community radio stations conducted by the author, I will specifically examine the following questions:

RQ1: How are U.S. community radio stations making use of the online environment to provide news and information to listeners and visitors?

RQ2: What are the circumstances that prompt community radio stations to build an online news presence?

RQ3: What specifically do the producers of community radio stations seek to achieve with their online presence, and did they attain their objectives?

RQ4: What are the measurable impacts of online community journalism spaces on audiences, producers, and stations?