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# Envisioning the Future of Communication

Vol 2, No 1 (2025)

Envisioning the Future of Communication - Conference Proceedings vol. 2

## The public's active participation in news

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doi: 10.12681/efoc.7915

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# The public's active participation in news: The role of the voluntary radio of Thessaloniki

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***For Nafsika***

**Abstract**

Nowadays, one of the main axes of study of modern journalism is the participation of the public in the news production process, which is complex and multidimensional. The concept of public participation in the production of news is defined as the action taken by the public to influence the content of the news through their intentional actions. The aim of this research is to investigate the role of the active participation of citizens in the production of radio content and in the formation of listening options through the case study of the voluntary radio of the municipality of Thessaloniki. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among four individuals and head of institutions that used to host radio shows in the voluntary radio of the municipality of Thessaloniki. Through the content analysis it was concluded that this form of news production process promotes pluralism and citizens' access to a wide range of information while it strengthens the identity of specific communities and enables them to encounter the wider social spectrum. Furthermore, it promotes the fight against negative stereotypes and familiarization with social groups, which are at risk of social exclusion by contributing to awareness, engagement and participation of local communities.

**Keywords:** community media, participatory journalism, voluntary radio, experts' interviews.

## Introduction

Lately, mainly through the proliferation of social media, the participation of citizens in informing and shaping the news is a reality. Furthermore, listening to radio content is a daily habit for a large percentage of the public. Radio is considered a traditional medium, however through processes that derive from the local communities and affect them, it can be used as a medium of implementing participatory journalism. It can significantly contribute to the awareness, engagement and participation of the local communities and even more generally of the civil society, in issues such as culture, creativity, charity, solidarity, environmental awakening, mutual understanding, dealing with all kinds of crises (social, energy, economic, food, etc.), etc.

In a global media environment, citizen and institution initiatives that express their opinions and also self-express through their participation via a voluntary radio program can offer an

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alternative public sphere (Van Vuuren, 2001). The operation of the voluntary radio, globally, is based on citizen participation, and in its programs the cultural diversity is encouraged, all ideas are discussed, and all opinions are respected as a matter of principle and not as a concession (Foxwell, 2017). They fit into a context of communication and information beyond specific media institutions as a tool to increase public debate and communication, closer to an ideal public dialogue (Tucker, 2013) and aim to resonate through cultural dialogues about community and place (Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2009). The term community radio, and more generally community media, identifies community media organizations primarily based on community involvement and less based on geographic area, ownership, or sources of financial support (Hayes, 2018). In some cases, community radios are part of organizations that also have other educational, cultural and/or communication activities and are an alternative way of information, strengthening civil society and awareness of various issues.

The aim of this study is the investigation of the role of the active participation of citizens in the production of radio content through the case study of the voluntary radio of the municipality of Thessaloniki, which is the only one of its kind in Greece. The way that promotes the active participation of citizens in its program will be sought, as it is composed exclusively of broadcasts by volunteers, belonging to all kinds of groups and collectives, with content based on their interests and their subjects of knowledge. In this context, this study will attempt to identify and analyze the audience's will at the level of participation during information transmission and via shaping radio content.

Experts' interviews were used as a methodological tool since the research is still in an exploratory phase and this is considered an efficient and concentrated method of qualitative data collection.

The questions that this research seeks to answer are:

RQ1: What are the reasons that could lead an individual or an institution to present a program on voluntary radio?
RQ2: What is the assessment of the participation on voluntary radio?
RQ3: What is the overall opinion about voluntary radio as a medium based, not on the presentation of current affairs, but on issues of interest to society?

To answer those questions, four semi-structured interviews were conducted via email with participants that either represented themselves or an institution as radio producers during the time that the voluntary radio of Thessaloniki broadcasted.

In the rest of the paper, initially the literature review, focused on participatory journalism and community media is introduced along with the characteristics of the voluntary radio of Thessaloniki. Next, the methodology employed is presented and the derived results are analysed. Finally, the conclusions of the study are discussed.

## Participatory journalism

Nowadays, one of the main axes of study of modern journalism is the participation of the public in the news production process, which is a complex and multidimensional process. Citizen journalism, which as a term began to be widely used from the beginning of the 2000s, in addition to the spread of digital technologies that facilitate the procedures, also appeared because of the crisis in the credibility of professional news (Turner, 2010). According to Carpentier (2012), access, related to technology, content, people and organizations, and interaction, which refers to the establishment of social and communicative relationships with other people, are necessary conditions to make media participation possible. Accordingly, Kammer (2013), who refers to the field of media and communication, argues that public participation in the production of news is defined as the action taken with the intention of influencing the content of the news media.

Rodriguez and Fields (2002) argue that one should avoid defining alternative media based on their opposition to the mainstream media but instead focus the study on the transformational processes they bring about to participants and their communities. This focus on 'transformational processes' describes the impact of community media in the context of people's everyday lives at the local level, and it is clear that 'transformational processes' are more consequential than comparisons with mainstream media.

Nowadays, due to technological advancements new forms of communication, involving public participation, are evolving aiming to raise awareness and create participatory cultures and societies (Margaritidou, & Matsiola, 2023). Therefore, it is no surprise that at the same time, at an international level, in line with new technologies and commons-based practices, unified technology communication platforms are designed together with the members of a community through a participatory design approach, recognizing the importance of strengthening of the community media. As communication between members improves, through interaction with a community-based media platform, participants may become more active members of their community (Cibin et al., 2020).

## Community Media

The social value and contribution of voluntary radio becomes evident in cases where, through its program, collective consciousness can be developed and collective interest for issues concerning the local community, such as the environment (Serafini, 2019) is strengthened, creating bonds between citizens that manifest an intention to adopt sustainable behavior (Shahzalal, & Hassan, 2019). Also, its participatory nature can provide incentives and challenges to support the active engagement of citizens belonging to under-represented groups such as the elderly or members of the LGBTQI+ communities, preventing them from falling behind in terms of information and civic participation while empowering them (Nirmala, 2015; Copeland, 2018; Reuter et al., 2019). The news presented by the institutions or bodies does not

belong to the current affairs and the so-called "hard" news, but includes topics based on social, scientific, educational and cultural content. As Meadows et al. (2009, p. 167) argue, the public perceives that the definition of 'what is news' can and should go beyond the traditional journalistic boundaries that we usually define as 'news'. Through this framework of diversity, a commitment to social and cultural development is encouraged.

The use of a single theoretical framework that would potentially encompass the functions, aims and outcomes of voluntary radio may prove elusive. Through a combination of representative (for the audience) and participatory (by the audience) communication practice, the usual theories associated with larger mass media are confounded (Foxwell, 2017). Especially, voluntary radio, with the multi-participation it offers, can contribute to the development of a multicultural culture and the exchange of experiences, since its producers are, among others, municipalities, vulnerable social groups, museums, associations, NGOs, collectives, foreign language institutes, as well as ordinary people citizens. Thus, a mass media can act as a stage of open dialogue, giving the opportunity to promote culture and get to know different cultures, opinions and mindsets by enhancing public participation in the public sphere by embracing difference and diversity (Foxwell, 2017). Through its broadcasts it provides citizens with services that are largely ignored by the commercial media. It has been observed that the lack of commercial atmosphere, even with the existence of errors, reduces the distance between stations, presenters and listeners (Foxwell, 2017).

Furthermore, in a partnership framework with university journalism departments, community radio stations enter into agreements to employ students in a realistic environment (Van Vuuren, 2001). In this way, students practice in a totally realistic environment while at the same time they help citizens and institutions to find the appropriate way to express their opinions according to the particularities of the medium.

Citizen-producers, as content transmitters, also become active receivers and therefore more demanding, critical and conscious listeners. In this way they are led to media literacy education as students are involved in the process of producing a program, thus understanding the procedures, contextual and technical, that are demanded (Nicolaou et al. 2021). In particular, when children are involved, radio combines media with education admirably. Through their participation they learn what it means to research a topic, develop better language skills, expand their vocabulary and through critical listening to other broadcasts they acquire an overall critical attitude towards media content, an issue of great concern to society and has been researched for a number of years (Aslanidou, 2000).

By looking at a greater picture through the prism of a desired future society, community media could hold a crucial role in operationalizing change. As the type of media that encourages democratic participation by giving voice to all, including marginalized and underrepresented groups they provide a platform for public debate and discussion and the community has a direct say. In the digital era community media may also be found in mobile-based platforms, aiming

to enhance connectivity especially among younger people (Moitra et al., 2016), that still focus on issues that mainstream media may overlook bringing out the importance of diverse voices needed in acquiring an equitable society. The ability to challenge the local community to be involved in discussions and even debates through practicing ethical journalism may end up in collective actions towards social change thus amplifying social movements. Meadows (2013) argues community journalism plays a crucial role in addressing the 'democratic deficit' and recreating a 'public conversation' that heightens the sense of citizenship. Therefore, the prefigurative approach of community media expresses the desirability of change providing the means to be achieved.

## Voluntary radio of the Municipality of Thessaloniki

The voluntary radio of the Municipality of Thessaloniki has been a unique and original form of communication and information which operates on a completely voluntary and non-profit basis. It broadcasts on 100.6 fm, a frequency belonging to the Municipality of Thessaloniki, and it started broadcasting its programs in September 2011. Prior to its operation, a call was made to individuals, institutions, and organizations in order to have an expression of interest. There was a huge response, and the program was 100% covered.

There are no commercials between the programs and the equipment is mostly handled by the producers/citizens themselves. During its years of operation, 100.6 hosted broadcasts from schools of all levels as well as University departments, NGOs, municipalities, sensitive social groups, cultural organizations/museums, associations/and ordinary citizens, etc. Therefore, there are no audienceship metrics as the radio station was not included in such metrics. The main reason was its non-commercial nature that would not attract any kind of advertisers.

## Research methodology

To answer the research questions of the study and achieve qualitative data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted via email with radio content creators in the voluntary radio of the Municipality of Thessaloniki to reveal their philosophy, goals, and intentions. A set of predetermined open-ended questions that allowed for detailed and expanded responses were sent via email to them to allow for flexibility in replying as they all had a very tight schedule. As the interviewees were former radio content producers, they had the experience to provide detailed and nuanced answers delivering the insider perspective through reflective insights. Furthermore, as they were familiar with the interviewing processes they had the ability to reply clearly and to the point while providing vivid examples of their involvement. The questionnaire had a clear structure starting with essential questions and moving further to more in-depth exploration. Therefore, the methodological approach was implemented in the framework of bringing to light the aspects of four radio producers that belonged to different categories of content who are considered as experts since they may provide inside information. Experts' interviews is a widely used method in social sciences utilizing questions that may range from

open-ended conversations to semi-structured or structured interviews (Dorussen et al., 2005; Littig and Pöchhacker, 2014; Manzano, 2016).

Since the operation of the voluntary radio is a unique practice in the Greek reality, the aim of the study focused at acquiring an overview and broader insights from people who were active in the process. Therefore, four interviewees who represented themselves as radio producers or the institution they are members of, were selected to discuss with. Specifically, the four interviews were (a) an author, (b) a member of a volunteer group of the Faculties of Science and Education of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki named Psysics Partizani that present "various interactive experiments, which promise, among other things, to surprise, trouble and enchant" (Physicsgg, nd), (c) a member of the Thessaloniki Pride organization that is "a civil society organization that aims to strengthen the social visibility of the LGBTQI community as well as support of equality and their rights in Thessaloniki and the wider region" (Thessalonikipride, nd) and finally (d) a member of the Teloglio Arts Foundation of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki whose "main goals are the systematic acquaintance of the public with art, the collection, recording and study of our cultural heritage, the creation of conditions of cooperation between artists and art scholars, as well as the essential contact of children with works of art through educational programs" (Teloglio, nd).

The interviews were conducted during September to October 2023 and to overcome time constraints due to professional and personal obligations, a questionnaire of 12 questions was created and sent to them. At first, the interviewees were asked to state how they were informed regarding the voluntary radio and how was the approach performed while pointing out the reasons that drove them to participate and their initial thoughts on the prospect of engaging in such an initiative. Consequently, they were asked specific questions on the topics of their programs as well as the frequency by which they produced their broadcasts and the impact to the audience. Among the following questions were the assessment of their participation and their general opinion on voluntary radio as a medium based, not on the presentation of current affairs, but on issues of interest to society. To conclude with, they were asked regarding their intention to participate again and their opinion if there is anything that needs to be changed. Since one of the researchers was actively involved in the voluntary radio project, thus having a common field with the participants, it increased their level of motivation to take part in the investigation (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009).

Afterwards, to proceed with the interpretation, the textual data from the interviews were thematically transcribed, not detailed to each word but keeping the context (Meuser, & Nagel, 2009; Psomadaki et al. 2022). The interviews were studied a number of times by both researchers to reach to a deep comprehension level of their content. Afterwards, thematic units were created using the terminology employed by the interviewees while focusing on the main issues that were revealed and that were of interest for the scopes of the study and the primary codes and codebook were created. As this is research on a field that has not been investigated, the authors considered that the four interviews were adequate in providing an insight, however

the encountered restrictions were taken into account. Both authors read the transcribed interviews and came up with almost the same thematic units that were consequently discussed to reach the final ones used in the study. However, after a short period of time the transcripts were reviewed to ensure accuracy and clarity in a process of eliminating any repetitive data and at that point, labels were given to the themes that were introduced and the final codebook was established after having grouped similar categories. It must be mentioned that no kind of software was used at any stage of the interpretation since the dataset was a small one that could be handled.

## Results

Following the thematical transcription of the interviews and the creation of units, content analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Considering the research questions that were set and the labels that were given at a prior level, patterns were sought among the answers to identify the concepts. In this subsection, the results are presented based on the research questions under specific titles while allowing for further commentary on the issues that arose.

*Presented Topics and Content*

The participants were interested in presenting topics related to the fields in which they operate. For example, the interviewee of the Thessaloniki Pride organization mentioned the topics of interest that include LGBTQ+ issues at local, national, European, and international levels with an emphasis on organizational action. The participant of Psysics Partizani group involved in the radio programs the Nobel Prizes awarded each year, scientific achievements of the year, and scientific achievements of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The author mentioned that he wanted to present what appealed to his own sense of aesthetics and bring the audience closer to the world of books. Finally, the major exhibitions and the parallel events accompanying the exhibitions, such as theatrical performances and concerts, were the topics that that occupied the radio broadcasts of the Teloglion Arts Foundation, along with the presentation of the educational programs and their derivative results for adults and children.

*Reasons for Participating and Original Thoughts*

Regarding the reasons that drove the interviewees to participate, their main point was to engage with the community and express themselves, address their issues and raise awareness about them, while promoting their actions as well. The participants' original thoughts for this initiative were that it was an excellent and innovative idea that would allow for facilitation of a civil society and a channel of offering and communication although the exposure was something that intimidated them at the beginning. As the member of the Thessaloniki Pride organization shared in his interview, the motivation to take part in this initiative was: *"[…] we are an active part of society. […] Also, for reasons of visibility and participation in the public discourse of the LGBTI+ community"*. Furthermore, the member of the Teloglio Arts Foundation of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki mentioned: *"Teloglio was given a platform to communicate with the*

*people of the city."* The ability to express their opinions that could otherwise be hidden from mainstream media was very important to all the participants since the topics they are dealing with belong to broader alternative categories and not to the current news. Characteristically, the author said: *"I wasn't calling people that were in the foreground, nor was I looking in the background. I think that the ones I called - mostly sui generis types - would not be easily called in by the media"*. Moreover, it is indicative what the member of Psysics Partizani stated: *"[…] for communicating science to the public via live broadcast.",* while adding: *"The voluntary radio initiative would give students a chance to try out radio and the production process, be a forum for presenting scientific positions on issues of general interest and test the radio presentation of experiments that listeners could perform with materials that were at home.",* revealing the educational approach of the voluntary radio through practical advice. In the same aspect, space was also given to schools (teachers and students) during the radio broadcasts of the Teloglio Arts Foundation to present their impressions, the impact of the exhibition/program, and the program they created.

*Participation assessment*

The interviewees were asked to assess their participation on the voluntary radio of the Municipality of Thessaloniki and answers received were very encouraging. They think that such initiatives that open doors for civil society to present concepts and concerns must be facilitated by the Municipality, permitting institution and organizations to leave their natural space to approach the public of the city. The positive assessment was also based to the feedback they had either during the radio programs through messages and participation in quizzes or through comments they received at a later stage.

This very positive experience was expressed in their replies; the member of the Thessaloniki Pride organization stated: *"We were able to have our own voice in a public information medium."* The author vividly described: *"The years have gone by, and I still think about those Fridays. I hear the signal of the show and it moves me. I've met great people through these shows and I'm proud of my choices. I learned from them. […] I am grateful!"*. It is very important to realize that these radio programs offered a platform for locals that are concerned with culture, such as authors, poets, artists to reach a wider audience and present their work. However, it is crucial to declare that the positive assessment does not concern only the producers but the local society as well as perceived the participants. The member of the Teloglio Arts Foundation of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki clearly replied that: *"The freedom of expression provided to us by the voluntary radio, […] proved that the pioneering initiative had a positive effect both to institutions and citizens as well as the city itself."*

*Overall opinion*

The overall opinion of the interviewees about the role of voluntary radio as a medium based, not on the presentation of current affairs, but on issues of interest to society, however not typically presented by the media was also explored by this study. Their aspects converge that

through the polyphony it hosts, it gives the opportunity to individuals, groups, and institutions to introduce subjects underdeveloped. Characteristically, the member of Psysics Partizani, who presented scientific positions on topics of general interest, such as earthquakes, geological configuration of the country, biodiversity, climate change, environmental radiation, etc. during the radio programs, replied: *"[…] as topics that are important and of interest to society that do not receive adequate attention from radio or television news broadcasts can be presented".* Furthermore, the member of the Teloglio Arts Foundation of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki mentioned that the voluntary radio conveyed the daily life of its broadcasters and its audience *"[…] sharing what is happening in the city […] making visible people and institutions, who do not share journalistic current affairs, but their own reality and this is valuable and necessary".*

When asked if they would like to participate in voluntary radio again in view of its re-opening, all interviewees answered positively and declared themselves strong supporters of the "magic of radio". They consider that this specific initiative does not concern a program that is opposite the "other" radio, but next to it. It is broadcasted by people who are not professionals and is made out of their love to contribute somehow.

## Discussion

The public's active participation in news provision through the voluntary radio of Thessaloniki has proven to be a valuable approach to the local community contributing to presentation of very interesting collectives and topics that would otherwise be left unheard. It fostered participation of under-represented in the mainstream media groups that gladly, as pointed out, contributed to the endeavour.

The results of this study affirm that the voluntary radio promoted pluralism and citizens' access to a wide range of information, at the same that it strengthened the identity of specific communities and enabled them to meet the wider social spectrum (Serafini, 2019). It is very important to understand that it functioned both as a medium of expression of the radio producers and as a medium of information for the audience that had the chance to hear alternative perspectives and content thus democratizing media (King, 2017).

Through the programs, the voluntary radio contributed to the education and literacy of the public and of the producers as well, since it was open to all (school students, individuals, institutions, etc.). It provided the capability of developing skills in media production, such as interviewing and equipment handling, as argued by Todorova (2015), as well. Furthermore, the specialized information that was offered educated the citizens and contributed to the empowerment of the community members to make informed decisions. As mentioned by one of the interviewees, after the health crisis of the pandemic and the current climate crisis the

public has an increased interest in science and there is need for calm and confirmed information, point out the contribution of the voluntary radio to raising awareness.

The radio programs promoted the fight against negative stereotypes and familiarization with social groups, which are at risk of social exclusion building stronger and more cohesive communities (Nirmala, 2015). It is in the authors' firm belief that voluntary radio is a unique example of a media that had become a forum for open dialogue that brought people together around shared interests and concerns.

As all research this one comes with limitations, the main of which is the small number of participants. Although they are considered experts, the number of four is relatively small compared to the total number of individuals, bodies and organizations that broadcasted their programs on voluntary radio and this the reason this research is considered a pilot one. Future research should include more radio producers and furthermore should address as well to the public which is the audience of this unique initiative to obtain the views of the recipients of this unique project.

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