

Who's Afraid of Local Radio?

Montse Bonet

- *Catalan local radio is going through a period of uncertainty and, at the same time, certain euphoria. The Pilot Plan and the last political changeover have introduced a number of modifications to what had seemed to be an inexorable trend towards business and/or programming concentration and network broadcasts as a productive form of survival. In any case, we can see that a certain terminological change has been taking place for some time, including a preference for using the word 'proximity' instead of 'localism'.*

The first part of this article reviews different historical parameters in the classification of local radio, while the second part takes the pulse of the current situation.

In Catalonia, I shouldn't think anybody would be afraid of local radio. Just when we had got used to the loss of single-frequency stations and the formation of networks, along comes the privileged observatory that is Catalan radio to offer us a new panorama that I find slightly worrying. A panorama of a certain and supposed revival of 'localism' that emphasises two elements: firstly, "thanks" to the Pilot Plan and music stations (Anglo-Saxon in design but offered in Catalan) new music stations have arisen, even though they are small at the moment; and secondly, a study published by the Catalonia Broadcasting Council found that local stations are the second-most-listened-to stations

behind Catalunya Ràdio. If anybody thought that the supposedly modern inventions of the 21st century would sound the death knell for 'localism', they were wrong. Although I should say that 'proximity' appears to be the word de jour that is gaining ground over 'localism'. This is not the first time local radio has been discussed and nor will it be the last, but it might be useful to review the state of the situation, as we have no idea how long it will last. I shall thus begin by reviewing some of study parameters and diverse terminology and then take the pulse of the situation as it stands at the moment.

Local, by force

Radio in Catalonia (and the whole of Spain) was never as local as when it could not be studied, i.e., under Francoism. Nearly all the stations were full-service broadcasters rather than music stations. In fact, a brief review of the history of broadcasting in Catalonia shows that radio was originally local, i.e., with weak transmissions that did not permit large-scale territorial coverage. With the exception of the early private MW provincial stations¹ that existed in Spain and the public broadcasters (once RNE had appeared), broadcasters used low-power transmissions. We should remember that the impossibility of forming a national broadcasting service (and thus ensuring radio reached everybody) came about because of the 1932 Decree that determined the establishment of local radio par excellence in Spain, i.e., the maximum authorisation of 200 watts and no more than one broadcaster per town. It could therefore be said that radio expanded in Spain at the hand of local stations.

After the Civil War, when Radio Nacional de España began, localism became the perfect solution for the new regime, as it made it possible to satisfy different political

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groups and factions (the establishment and excessive proliferation of new broadcasters) while at the same time guaranteeing control through the use of transmission power. As we know, Francoism forced broadcasters (except RNE) to be local even with regard content. The Order of 6 October 1939 completely prohibited broadcasting news beyond the local, provincial or regional sphere. Localism, at least in terms of geographic area, could thus not exceed the province (and this depended obviously on the orographic features of each zone).

The comparative problem with regard to transmission power remained the same throughout the Francoist period and beyond, not only on MW but also on FM, the band wave that is local by nature, as it has a more limited wave scope than any other. Localism was thus an imposition, obligation and form of control: a solution that was to be provisional but which was maintained over the years. The other parameters that historically had been used to determine whether a radio was local or not were language (once languages other than Castilian were able to be used) and share structure (very open to discussion and relative).

Other Radio Stations and Technological Possibilities

With the arrival of democracy, new voices appeared on the scene: regional radio, municipal radio, associative radio of all types, free radio, pirate radio, etc. In this period, the following events occurred which, whether new or inherited from Francoism, introduced the first fissures into a style of local radio that had been heavily defended and maintained throughout the previous era. They included:

a) During the early days of the Transition and democracy, the correspondence between radio type and State configuration was continued. "(At that time) it met a principle of building a backbone of democracy that was essential and in each area of democratic political participation there was a public broadcasting resource that established a basic harmony between the configuration of the State and the radio system, a principle also met in the private sphere, at least theoretically" (Prado, 1994:236). The most noteworthy feature was the appearance in the early 1980s of the first regional radio stations, along with a

new territory and political reality in the shape of the autonomous communities.

b) One of the most important and decisive features of the current situation of Catalan radio (and Spanish radio in general) has been the relationship between the radio industry and advertising. Radio has accepted advertising as a source of funding since the beginning (and I will not here go into the controversy about the doubling funding of public radio). If we take into account that the new Spanish regulation that began in the 1980s only went some way², we can see that the change in regulations affected the radio sector (Bonet, 1995: 426) and fostered an opportunity that did not correspond to market reality and opened the door to concentration. Exiting a numerically large sector built on ideological parameters and now subject to the laws of the free market led to the battle that has translated in the past 20 years into mergers and takeovers and, consequently, concentration. Network broadcasts (or station broadcasts, if you prefer) are not new - in fact, they have always been around and were a permanent reality during Francoism, although they didn't happen very often. Network broadcasts as we understand them today date back to the mid-1980s and were particularly favoured by the appearance of new technologies such as satellite, which guaranteed State coverage, even though the connected broadcasts were local in essence and power. Localism suffered its first significant fissure because of network broadcasts, implemented to cover as much territory as possible to guarantee maximum audiences, because big advertising investors wanted big markets.

c) The appearance of new voices and the reality of other countries led to a confusion about terms. Just as nearly everyone had got used to calling the same kind of radio 'local', new municipal stations, free radio stations, associative (cultural or otherwise) stations, neighbourhood or district stations and others appeared and terms more commonly used in other political and social realities were imported, including 'community radio', 'popular', 'alternative', 'participative', 'educational', 'rural', 'communal' radio, etc.³ Stations could now be classified according to whether they met the regulations (they could not be considered clandestine, as the political situation was one of freedom), their form of management, whether they were non-profit, etc. Of course they all had a common denomi-

nator, i.e., small and short coverage, but for the purposes of social motivation they worked *with, in or for* small communities (neighbourhoods, rural communities, classrooms, etc.). Democratic localism had a key role during the Transition as a motivating force or element of cohesion and as a way of reinforcing democracy and recovering local languages and cultures.

Later on in the democratic period, as new “small” voices emerged and the local stations that had already existed were concentrated, the natural barriers of territorial scope were overcome thanks to new technologies. Private radio stations entered a spiral of competitiveness and a battle for the advertising dollar that diminished ‘local’ transmission times. There was a slow move from *network broadcasts* to *breakouts*, which shows how priorities had begun to change.

To further add to the confusion, in recent years the private sector has preferred not to use the term ‘local’, thinking, perhaps as in the case of television, that it is too heavily associated with ‘unprofessional’, ‘uncompetitive’ or ‘amateur’, or even to prevent the mental image of the minimum or reduced coverage that the thought ‘local radio’ provokes. On the other hand, the questions and doubts raised about local radio in various parliamentary interventions have always referred to municipal radio. “Until recently, the basic question was whether or not Catalan radio (or the radio of any other point in Spain) was local. Now, in the last quarter of 2002, the question should be whether or not Catalan radio should continue to be local. (...). In other words, to survive, commercial Catalan radio is forced to abandon localism and reduce it, where appropriate, to the sphere of content. Given the ambiguity of this issue, radio prefers (like other media sectors in general) to use the word ‘proximity’” (Rabadan; Bonet; Guimerà, 2003: 218). Private Catalan radio stations (like their Spanish and some European counterparts) have had to sacrifice localism to get the broadest coverage they can in order to survive.

‘Local’ is the only adjective that does not refer to a particular political and/or administrative division (unlike ‘municipal’, ‘regional’ or ‘national’). The only thing everybody appears to agree on is that it refers to a radio reality of a smaller scale, almost at the bottom (or the top, depending on how you look at it) in the territorial-scope scale. Saying that a radio station is ‘local’ is as common and at the same

time as ambiguous as saying it is European. Thus a large factor in the success of the word ‘proximity’ is the fact it is new, does not recall earlier times and allows a more sharply defined mental picture about the new media reality, i.e., ‘localism’ in terms of content. If satellites and the Internet mean that the world is in our hands, regardless of where the message comes from, what is it that makes a listener feel they are in proximity to a station or not?

Globalism, Networks and Proximity

There is a great deal of complexity surrounding the radio sector, which not only has to combine localism with economic profit but must come to grips with new terms and realities, including globalism, proximity and the Internet.

From among the very many interpretations of the word, we could consider ‘globalism’ as the name of the new phase of the internationalisation process that began many years ago. All of these realities have their opposite. Oddly enough, the opposite of internationalisation, transnationalisation, globalisation, etc. is always ‘local’. The now-famous expression for defining the intersection between these opposites, i.e., *glocalism*, continues to be “think globally, act locally”. However, this expression is clearly determinist as it transfers the interpretation of the world to a particular centre, i.e., global, while localisms can only act or apply what has already been decided. The real debate should be about whether the global world could be interpreted from the point of view of localism. As Castells said, although the media are interconnected at the global scale and programmes and messages circulate on the global network, we are not living in a global village, but rather in individual homes produced at the global scale and distributed locally (Castells, 1997: 374).

In this society-network that Castells and other theorists say we are building, the concept and interpretation of the world, as well as the communication process, are undergoing a generational change that even the classic media do not always know how to interpret correctly (sometimes they can’t even detect it). Internet and mobile phones, as the terrorist attacks of 11 March showed, are new sources of information and intoxication, but above all they are an alternative. If, for example, pirate stations broadcast in Hw,

Table 1. Number of Radio Frequencies in Catalonia (1999-2004)

<i>Broadcasters</i>	<i>MW</i>	<i>FM 2004</i>	<i>Total</i>
Public institutional (CCRTV and RTVE)	9 (all from RNE)	240 (171 from CCRTV and 69 from RNE)	249
Municipal stations	1 (COM)*	220	221
Others**		80	80
Private sector	12	94 (+ Pla Pilot)***	106

Source: Author's own work, based on the chapters "Radio" and "Local Communication" in the Report on Communication in Catalonia 2001-2002, broadcasters found in the Radio Guide [online edition] <<http://www.guiadelaradio.com>>; COMEmissores [online] <<http://www.comemissores.com>>; the Federation of Local Radio Organisations of Catalonia [online] <<http://www.fedcatradio.org>>; the Directorate General of Audiovisual Communication [online] <<http://www.gencat.es/dgrtv>> [consultations: April 2004], and personal conversations with people working in the sector.

* I know that it is not very orthodox to put MW stations in the section of municipal stations, but a) with regard to coverage, Ràdio Sabadell was originally local, b) in terms of programming, COM Ràdio uses a municipalist model.

** 'Others' includes various radio initiatives (associative stations, free/pirate stations and some educational stations).

*** There is no official list that refers to the Pilot Plan, but some 'non-official' lists indicate it could include a hundred frequencies.

they are local. On the Internet they are no longer pirate or illegal... but are they no longer local?

Proximity (localism through content) even in a period when the Internet (network broadcast) has become an indispensable tool in radio production for survival can correspond to what Castells (1997:29) says about the schizophrenia of our time: "Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar position between the network and the 'I'". A type of schizophrenia which is also being experienced in radio, with the need for network broadcasts to attract large audiences and the constant fragmentation and specialisation of these audiences. 'Traditional' localism is a successful way to fragment audiences via coverage, which is why the new word, 'proximity', is more in line with today's concerns, i.e., the fragmentation of values, ideology, tastes and takes on the world. With a broad supply and the help of technologies, the world is within reach in a few seconds and hence the criteria audiences use to choose stations vary.

Catalonia: Where All Models Are Possible

If I had to explain the state of local radio in Catalonia (no easy task), I would have three basic options:

a) To refer to frequencies and talk about connec-

tion/breakout times;

b) To suggest models, types and a timid approximation;

c) To look into why Catalan listeners do or do not feel that stations are 'proximate'.

I do not have much space left to review the first two, although I would like to mention the need for new research into the local/proximate sphere⁴. I will instead try to draw a diagram of Catalan radio today. I apologise if this analysis is not terribly precise, but there are some lists that are still not official. From the quantitative point of view, as the situation becomes more standard, it is increasingly difficult to 'officially' know how many frequencies are present on our airspace. Between the Pilot Plan (which not only includes private stations but also COM Ràdio) and pirate stations, associative stations of all types, etc., lists are missing. Lists are missing and a plan that awards many broadcasters a definitive legal framework is also missing. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Catalonia is a good observatory for studying radio and its variations, as it certainly is not lacking any type of broadcaster.

From the quantitative point of view, i.e., frequencies, the figures have remained the same for years. In the private sector, since the last licence was granted after the Royal Decree of 1997 and with only a slight variation, we can talk about Catalonia in the quantities shown in Table 1.

Table 2. Municipal Broadcasters in 2004

<i>Municipal broadcasters (220)</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Total</i>
Only associated with COM	82	+17 + 7 others + OM	COM = 107
Only associated with the Local Radio Federation of Catalonia	53	+ 17 + 8 others	Federation = 78
Members of both COM and the Federation	17		
Members of neither	68		

Source: Author's own work based on COMEmissores [online] <<http://www.comemissores.com>>; the Local Radio Federation of Catalonia [online] <<http://www.fedcatradio.org>>; the Directorate General of Audiovisual Media [online] <<http://www.gencat.es/dgrtv>> [consultations made in April 2004 from a list most recently updated on 19 February, according to a direct consultation with the Directorate General].

Note: To COM and the Federation I added the 17 stations that belong to them both. I further added OM, formerly Ràdio Sabadell, to COM, along with seven other non-municipal broadcasters. I added eight non-municipal broadcasters to the Federation (in both cases they are associative stations).

Among different municipal and associative stations (not including pirate stations), there are around 100 frequencies associated to COM Ràdio, as well as the 80 or so that are members of the Local Radio Federation of Catalonia. They are, in any case, the most genuine demonstration of what local public radio could be understood as, although with distinctions, as neither are strictly radio stations. COM Ràdio is not a station but rather a programming brand created and managed by a public organisation, the Local Communication Agency⁵, which arose, not without controversy, in the mid-1990s and which has always taken the view that it does not make network broadcasts (banned by law⁶), but rather offers municipal and associative stations the chance to connect to its satellite to broadcast their programmes. For its part, the Federation, in the same vein of programme management, offers its federated broadcasters the possibility of choosing programmes (known as the Support Programming Catalogue) to round out their local programming, offered through agreements with Catalunya Ràdio, Catalunya Cultura, the federated broadcasters, the Estrader Nadal Group (World Wide Radio) and the private firm Fritz Hermann (which also manages sending programmes to broadcasters and offers advisory services, call-sign registrations, etc.).

As far as the private sector goes, the Pilot Plan has substantially changed the price of single frequencies, which until recently were pursued and tempted by nearly all the big

channels. If they could get a frequency to work temporarily as a repeater, there would be no need for an associate. This meant that some small owners pulled out of the agreements and joined the 'traditional' associated frequency and some joined the Pilot Plan in a mini channel. Three small music stations arose from this new phenomenon, two of them Catalan (Styl FM and Gum FM) and one that originated in Andorra but was also present in Catalonia (Pròxima FM). Styl FM stems from the same frequency that was until recently associated in Manresa with Flaix FM. Gum FM stems from the broadcasters associated to Ona Catalana in Vall d'Aran and Ribagorça, which belong to the Catalana i Aranese de Telecomunicacions Group. Finally, Pròxima FM belongs to the R7P Group in Andorra; R7P Ràdio was established in 2001 and by late 2003 the station that had been known as R7P Fórmula became Pròxima FM, broadcasting in Andorra and which bought the Seu d'Urgell frequency in Ràdio Valira. All three are music stations.

Table 3 shows briefly but clearly the supply of private Catalan radio stations in early 2004.

I know I have not included Kiss FM, but indications are that it will shortly exit the Catalan airspace (unless, of course, it reaches an agreement with someone).

To be honest, without knowing whether the Pilot Plan will be consolidated or in what fashion, it is impossible to make commentaries or forecasts without having more information,

Table 3. Supply of Private Catalan Radio Stations (2004)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Stations</i>
SER	SER Convencional, 40 Principals, M80 Ràdio, Màxima FM, Dial
COPE	COPE Convencional, Cadena 100
Onda Cero Rambla	Onda Cero Rambla, Hit Ràdio
R. Salut-Europa FM	Europa FM
RKOR-R. Intereconomia	Ràdio Intereconomia
RAC	RAC1, RAC105
Ona Catalana	Ona Catalana, Ona Música
Flaix	Flaix FM, Ràdio Flaixbac
RM Radio	RM Radio, Radio Tele-Taxi
Ràdio Estel	Ràdio Estel
Gum FM	Gum FM
Styl FM	Styl FM
Pròxima FM	Pròxima FM
Segre Ràdio	Segre Ràdio
Ràdio Marina	Ràdio Marina
Ràdio Club 25	Ràdio Club 25
Xtra-FM*	Xtra-FM

Source: author's own work.

* Xtra-FM is the frequency in Jonquera that COPE exchanged with Onda Rambla in 2002. Together with some Dutch partners, they used the new brand with the initial aim of getting a clientele made up exclusively of tourists, primarily from the north of Europe.

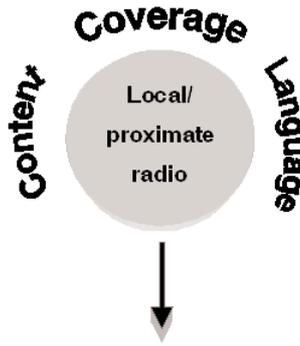
beyond the fact that it is time to recover local stations but via musical programming (with voices in Catalan, of course) and the information from the CAC study that showed local broadcasters were the second most-popular choice on the part of listeners⁷.

Finally, there is little more to be said about local digital radio beyond the fact that in November 2003 the names of the winners of the tender (called on 8 August) were announced for the 48 licences for the provincial and supra-provincial spheres in the Provinces of Barcelona (12 programmes), the Provinces of Tarragona (6 programmes), Montsià-Baix Ebre (6 programmes), Gironès (6 programmes), Segrià (6 programmes), Bages (6 programmes) and Osona (6 programmes).

As I said, without knowing whether the new radio landscape will get busier or not, rather than types of local radio stations, I would like offer a script model that could be used to better orientate a position within the media ecosystem which, as Castells said, moves between the network and the 'I'. Particularly in terms of radio, we should mention networks as a consolidated way of developing collaborations and relationships between stations, i.e., a network that could be interwoven on the basis of voluntary or compulsory connections or sharing programmes on an occasional or permanent basis. The following diagram could be used by way of conclusion to this brief report.

Script Models Better Than Types

Notes



Relationship with other radio stations (in the same company or not)

- Authentically local, in terms of coverage and/or content (many small stations are local but are music stations)
- Local in terms of breakouts (thus recovering original coverage or by awarding airtime):
 - from the regional network and/or
 - from the State network.
- Local in terms of advertising breakouts (always or at certain times during the day).
- In terms of connection (COM model, voluntary satellite connection).
- In terms of programme purchases or exchanges with other local radio stations.

We often find more than one of these models at the same time. For example, a State channel can have a regional or local breakout or a breakout for advertising only.

1. There are only nine MW provincial stations in Spain. They are EAJ-1 Ràdio Barcelona (SER), EAJ-2 Radio España in Madrid (currently the title of Cadena Ibérica), EAJ-3 Radio Valencia (SER), EAJ-5 Radio Sevilla (SER), EAJ-7 Radio Madrid (SER), EAJ-8 Radio San Sebastián (SER), EAJ-15 Radio España in Barcelona (whose original licence was awarded to the Ràdio Associació de Catalunya, would later pass to the Rato family and is now OCR in Barcelona), EAJ-29 Radio Intercontinental in Madrid and EAJ-101 Radio

Zaragoza (SER).

2. i.e., public sector of sizes above the European average, a private sector in the hands of the same businessmen, the appearance of more and new media in an advertising market that was not growing.
4. For further information on how research into local communication has evolved in Catalonia, I would recommend the valuable contribution of the UAB professor Josep Àngel Guimerà referenced in the bibliography.
5. COM is an initiative of the Local Communication Consortium, made up of the Provincial Government of Barcelona, the Association of Municipalities of the Metropolitan Area (31 municipalities) and a further 98 city councils, as well as EMUC (Municipal Broadcasters of Catalonia). In late 1994 the Consortium created ACL (the Local Communication Agency) to manage programming and other activities associated with local communication.
6. Point 3, article 3 of Act 1/1991 of 8 April on the Organisation and Control of Municipal Radio Broadcasters says: "The broadcasters referred to in this Act may simultaneously broadcast the same programme either made internally or produced for other public broadcasters, respecting the matters established in the section above and in no case may form part of a network broadcast".
7. The CAC already showed in the results of its survey on questions about different types of radio stations that a considerable percentage of people responded 'don't know/no response' - sometimes more than 60%. Another datum: we can talk about local radio stations, but the people surveyed did not identify them (or at least did not express it in this study). Furthermore, the percentages corresponding to 'another station' were also considerable (more than 20% and 30% in some cases) and they were not identified either. In fact, this only corroborates what we have known for some time: that radio surveys, particularly the General Media Surveys (EGMs), are always damaging to local radio, given the concept of State coverage with which many (although not all) are prepared. At the time of writing, the new "Catalan EGM" had just appeared, which perhaps may provide more precise figures (it was launched on 13 April).

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