On the edge. AMARC Europe between ‘movement entrepreneurs’ and the grassroots. Notes from the Bucharest meeting

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Abstract
The (re)founding conference of the European chapter of the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC) took place in Bucharest, Romania, in December 2008 (http://www.amarc.org/conference_europe/index.html). About 60 community media practitioners from 18 countries in Eastern, Central and Western Europe, took part in the four-day meeting. Items on the agenda included the debate on current ‘hot issues’ such as the digital switch-over, the foundation of the European chapter of the AMARC Women’s International Network, skill-exchange workshops, a plan of action for the coming three years, and the election of a new board. The conference was crucial in fostering networking among radios, and enhanced the relationships with other players, such as the UNESCO and the news agency Inter Press Service. But should it have been more than that? This article takes a critical look at the Bucharest conference, and analyses what AMARC Europe has done so far, its potential role for community media in a pan-European continent, and the perspectives for the future.

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1. Introduction

December 2008. In a hotel at the outskirts of Bucharest, the capital of Romania, about 60 community radio practitioners and sympathizers from 18 countries in Eastern, Central and Western Europe are meeting for a four-day conference on community radio in Europe. The poster of the meeting shows a stylised map of Europe with a few antennas rising from the land. A thin man is walking over the map, on a rope stretched between the antennas, precariously holding a huge microphone. It is a perfect metaphor for the conference theme, “Broadcasting on the edge. Supporting positive change in Europe through the expansion of community”. In fact, there are many edges to be found in the field of European community media, one of which is the difference between the well-established community radios in most of Southern and Western Europe, and the absence of community media and an unclear legislative framework in many Eastern European countries.

The meeting is the first conference of the newly (re)founded European chapter of the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC from its French acronym). Items on the agenda included the debate on current ‘hot issues’ such as the digital switch-over, the foundation of the European chapter of the AMARC Women’s International Network (WIN), many skill-exchange workshops, a plan of action for the coming three years, and the election of a new AMARC Europe board of directors. Many steps forward were taken. However, many of us felt that not enough had been achieved.

This article provides an overview of the AMARC Bucharest meeting from the point of view of a ‘engaged researcher’ of community radio. Facts and personal impressions presented here are the result of participant observation at the Bucharest meeting, integrated by my earlier participation in other AMARC activities such as AMARC 9 (http://amarc9.amarc.org/), the ninth world conference held in Amman (Jordan) in November 2006, and a couple of meetings of the AMARC Europe board of
directors. Occasionally I will also quote interviews I have gathered in the framework of a three-year research project on emancipatory communication practices (Milan, 2009).

The article is divided into three sections. Section 1 briefly reconstructs the (pre)history of the present European section of AMARC, recalling the birth of the ‘international’ AMARC in 1985, and the experience of an earlier European chapter, founded in the 1990s, which had intense but short life. It also recalls the establishment in 2004 of another European network, the Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE), which emerged out of the vacuum left by the collapse of the first AMARC Europe, and the renewed enthusiasm at the AMARC 9 conference around the idea of re-building a European division. Other contributions in this issue will deal more in depth with the histories and policies of these community movement organizations. Section 2 summarizes the many achievements of the Bucharest meeting, focusing in particular on the development of joint projects and campaigns such as the partnership with the international news agency Inter Press Service (IPS), the growing awareness of policy issues, and the excitement surrounding the foundation of the European chapter of the Women’s International Network. The last section raises a series of questions, in order to shed light on the challenge of building a community radio grassroots movement in Europe: the pitfalls and the difficulties of (re-)building a pan-European community radio association, and the possible scenarios for interaction between AMARC Europe and the CMFE, and between the sector and policy-makers. It also sketches out the perspectives for the future, seeking to provide constructive suggestions on how to move forward.

2. The (pre)history of the new AMARC Europe

It all started when, in 1983, a group of community radio activists met in Montreal, Canada to discuss Canadian issues related to low-power radio stations. In 1985, at their second meeting, in Vancouver, it was decided to set up an organisation in view of building a movement in support of community radios worldwide. This initially spontaneous movement became a non-governmental organisation under the name of Assemblée Mondiale des Artisans de la Radio Communautaire, whose purpose is “to defend and promote the development of community radio worldwide” (AMARC, 2006). Currently, AMARC focuses on policy advocacy and funding.

AMARC is a membership organisation and has a light and decentralised structure, with only four staff members, based in Montreal. The main governance body is the International Board (IB), elected every four years, whose 13 members are not salaried. Since the very beginning, AMARC has promoted the development of regional chapters. Each region is independent (also financially), can set up its own office and governance structure, and organise regional assemblies. There are six regions, namely: North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Pacific, and the recently added Europe and the Middle East region.

In 1992, in Mexico, Steve Buckley of the UK Community Radio Association (CRA) was elected to the AMARC IB as the new Western European representative, with the mandate to establishing the European section. AMARC Europe was funded in 1994, with headquarters in Sheffield, hosted by the CRA. It was largely depending on project funding, with little paid staff (which shrank even more when funding expired), and suspended operations in 1998 for bankruptcy. For a while, after the collapse of the European chapter, there was no pan-European association for the community radio sector. In November 2004, a group of community radio practitioners met in Halle, Germany, at the Bundesverband Freier Radios Assembly hosted by Radio Corax. They recognized the lack of participation of community media in the European policy debate. The Council of Europe had just issued a call for public consultation on media policy issues in view of its periodical inter-ministerial conference on mass media policy issues, to be held in Kiev, Ukraine, in 2005.1 The CMFE was created in response to the Kiev policy arena, as an umbrella organisation to represent and strengthen the participation of the ‘Third Media Sector’ in European policy-making.

Contrary to AMARC, the CMFE is not a membership-based organisation but an “action-oriented network focused on advocacy” (interview no. 14, Budapest, May 14 2007) and “an organisation that identifies its allies and establishes coalitions spontaneously in the light of specific activities, targeting specific issues. In that sense it is really an expert group, mediating on different levels and in various spheres” (personal communication, December 14, 2006). The CMFE can be seen as an ‘epistemic community’, that is to say “a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area” (Haas, 1992, p. 3). Since Kiev, the CMFE has been very active lobbying the Council of Europe, where it obtained observer status in 2008, and the European Parliament, enabling its members to bring up their concerns on the European level.

In the meantime, something was moving also on the AMARC front. In November 2006, at the AMARC 9 conference in Amman, about 15 people from Ireland, Moldova, Germany, Italy, Hungary, France, United Kingdom and Azerbaijan, met to discuss whether there was a common interest in re-founding AMARC Europe, taking advantage of some funding opportunities. Also CMFE members participated in the meeting. Participants were in favour of the creation of a membership-based organisation, devoted to exchange of content, best practices and training. The objective was to strengthen relationships between radios, to create a network supporting community media at the grassroots, rather than a lobbying structure. Headquarters were based in Rome, and an interim board of directors was elected to ensure the transition to the first founding conference. Mariano Sanchez, from the Madrid-based Radio Vallekas, was elected president, while Francesco Diasio, from the Italian radio agency AMISnet, was appointed as secretary. A trilingual website (http://europe.amarc.org/) was created within the AMARC international website.

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1 For a detailed account of the CMFE participation in the Kiev process (see Milan, 2009).
To ensure constant interchange between the two organisations, and avoid duplication of efforts, it was agreed that one representative from AMARC Europe would sit in the CMFE board, and vice versa. The two associations were seen as complementary: AMARC Europe would function as a movement organisation, “to keep in touch with the base”, while CMFE would focus on expert contributions to policy arenas. However, already in Amman and despite the efforts of the meeting organisers, some difficulties emerged around the AMARC/CMFE respective roles, pointing to potential future ‘competition’ problems. This mostly reflected the wishes of different national community radio federations, and the previous existence of interpersonal conflicts among activists.

3. Steps forward

The Bucharest conference was intended to broaden the constituency, and contribute to building a ‘critical mass’ around the association, expanding towards Eastern Europe and towards those countries in the area without a community media legislation. It was articulated in a number of plenary sessions, and a series of parallel skill-sharing workshops.

Alongside with ‘European’ community radio practitioners, special guests were invited: among others, Maria Pia Matta, president of the very vital Latin American and the Caribbean region, Aleida Calleja, current vice-president of AMARC, and Karol Jakubowicz, an academic and the chairman of the Intergovernmental Council of the Information for All Programme (UNESCO). Step forwards were taken in three main directions: exchange programs and joint news production on the occasion of special events, policy awareness and the exchange of best practices, and the creation of the European chapter of the Women’s International Network. In this section, I will describe the main achievements of the conference in these areas.

An agreement for future collaboration on news production was signed with the international news agency Inter Press Service, to pool resources in reporting on global events like the World Social Forum. Earlier experiences of collaboration among AMARC members were praised and strengthened: Radio Attac, an internet-based multi-language radio exchange which operated in the coverage of the 2008 G8 meeting in Japan, will be in the future conducted in partnership with AMARC. The aim, as activist Viviana Uriona put it, is to “learn together”, and to be able, when reporting on some issues, to provide a “global” perspective.

AMARC Europe members reiterated their commitment to promote networking and exchange of programs and training, creating new flows of exchange and strengthening existing ones. The problems of funding and language diversity were raised. Making use of European Union funding opportunities was seen as a potential solution to the eternal shortage of funding. It was also proposed to connect existing websites on campaign issues, and to develop a joint agenda to exchange material in occasion of international days such as Women’s Day. Development of joint campaigns was seen as a priority for the new AMARC Europe, however there was no agreement on which campaigns should be supported.

A (somewhat surprising) considerable amount of time was dedicated to discussing policy issues relevant to community media, which testifies of the growing awareness within the sector of the importance of an ‘enabling environment’ for community radio. Research is seen as an integral part of the struggle to legitimize community media in policy arenas. A study by the Austrian Federation of Free Radios on the state of community media in five European countries raised much interest among the advocates. Nadia Bellardi, elected within AMARC to sit in the CMFE board, updated the assembly on the state of CMFE lobbying activities at the Council of Europe. Karol Jakubowicz highlighted how governments and transnational institutions are increasingly more interested in community media (his speech is included in this issue). This is because, he said, community media speak to issues of civic engagement, minority rights, freedom of expression, and work as community facilitators. Such commitment on the policy level seemed to be much welcomed particularly by activists from countries where community media are not recognized by the national legislative frameworks.

Women proved to be the most organised segment of AMARC Europe, and put forward an ambitious work plan for the coming years. These plans included a survey of women’s role in European stations and ‘positive discrimination’ initiatives. WIN-Europe was set up, as a “mean to empower women but not to segregate them”. The newly-founded WIN group pointed to the fact that, despite horizontality and participation are shared principles in most community radios, there are still gender-based inequalities. WIN participants called for self-criticism and self-evaluation within European stations, in order to assess the situation, and improve it through the joint development of rules and procedures to be implemented locally.

Training program by women for women, women-only annual meetings, defence of community radio as a “tool for women visibility”, promotion of women artists and writers, support for creation of national women’s networks, creation of liaisons with women’s organisations were the main components of the work plan developed in Bucharest.

4. On the edge: problems and suggestions for the future

The Bucharest conference was crucial in fostering networking among radios, and in expanding the network towards East, by incorporating community radio activists from Romania, Poland, Armenia, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, among others. It marked an important point for the development of a pan-European agenda on common standards for community media in

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2 Field notes, Amman, November 13 2006.
3 Field notes, Bucharest, December 13 2008.
4 Field notes, Bucharest, December 14 2008.
the region, in particular with respect to policy aspects and the forthcoming digitalisation (see the contribution by Hallett and Hintz in this issue) – even if this agenda is still just a shared commitment rather than a reality. It also enhanced the relationships with other players, such as the UNESCO and the news agency IPS.

But should it have been more than this? This section provides a critical overview of the Bucharest meeting and of the state of the network, with respect to movement formation, collective identity, and relation with policy-makers. It adopts concepts from social movement research to assess the achievements and uncover the problems, making suggestions for future improvement.

If we consider AMARC Europe’s primary aim (building critical mass and broadening the network), the Bucharest conference might have missed a number of opportunities. Between Amman and Bucharest, the network did not do much in terms of outreach and networking. This of course reflects the consequences of the (involuntary) lack of resources (time, funding, human resources) that can be devoted to develop the network, and to make contacts with potential new members. Other likely participants could not attend: the Bucharest event was organised in a short time, due to the temporary availability of financial resources, and without prior consultation with other networks (including the CMFE). Time-wise, it ended up very close to another conference of European community radio in Europe, preventing many people from travelling to Romania.

In her introductory speech, Aleida Calleja described AMARC as a global citizens’ movement. A movement is usually made by networks of groups who recognize each other as part of the same struggle. This reciprocal acknowledgement forms part of the movement’s ‘collective identity’, which usually comprises a definition of the acting social actor (the ‘we’), the identification of a target of action (the ‘them’ or ‘it’, which can also be a piece of legislation), and a sense of injustice that motivates people to action (Gamson, 1992). According to Melucci, collective identity refers to a “network of active relationships between actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate and make decisions” (Melucci, 1996, p. 71).

Is there a shared collective identity within AMARC Europe? I think the answer is ambiguous. There is a shared media-related identity (even when taking into account the sector’s diversity), and to a less extent a generic AMARC-related identity, but a collective identity specific to Europe is not yet there. The basic building blocks of a collective identity (who are we, and what is specific to European community radios) are still missing: in Bucharest there were some misunderstandings with some new participants of what a community medium is and what it is not, in particular with regard to not-for-profit status vs. commercial aim, and community ownership. Developing a collective identity should start from a joint (but still open) definition of community media, in order not to include those groups which are, for example, profit-oriented or non-participatory. Looking at the composition of the new AMARC Europe board, one can only wonder about the reasons for including some of its board members.

A collective identity specific to Europe, which would ‘justify’ the existence of a European chapter of AMARC, should highlight what is specific to European community media, and what they can do together. This would entail fostering cross-border exchanges, and focusing on ‘European’ issues and institutions, promoting a sense of belonging. But a sense of belonging is a long-term development, and cannot be artificially created by (and among) local community stations. In addition, community stations tend to focus on some specific issues only, such as funding – unfortunately the sector suffers from a continuous lack of financial resources and seems to ‘go European’ only when there is a chance to gain access to funding possibilities. However, this situation is rapidly changing, with the joint commitment in advocacy and the development of exchange flows among radios in different countries. Sadly, also linguistic and cultural diversity seems still to be a serious obstacle.

With respect to involvement in policy advocacy, Bucharest saw again the national preferences and the interpersonal difficulties which had already emerged in Amman. Some AMARC Europe members would like AMARC to take leadership in advocacy at international arenas such as the International Telecommunication Union. However, this sphere of action should be left to the CMFE, which over the past years has been working with success to develop exchanges with institutions, reaching considerable results. A joint commitment under the CMFE umbrella, instead of two separate organisations lobbying institutions, would further community radio chances to be heard in policy arenas, and decrease the ‘noise’ created by too many voices advocating for similar positions.

Overall, the AMARC Europe network seems to be still very much dependent on (1) the commitment of a few core activists, which could be seen as ‘movement entrepreneurs’, and on (2) the availability of resources, and especially financial resources. ‘Movement entrepreneurs’ are those activists who play a crucial role in mobilising and managing (human, financial, material, but also symbolical) resources (McCharty and Mayer, 1977). Both in the case of AMARC Europe and the CMFE, the long-term commitment of a few ‘entrepreneurs’ is crucial in ensuring a certain level of activity, international presence, and continuity. Community radio stations are often too busy with everyday broadcasting, and their struggling for financial endurance, to get engaged in international activity. Besides, many activists feel that international advocacy is too distant from, and hence irrelevant to their own experience of community broadcasters.

Resources are the other sine qua non condition for the survival of these organisations – under-funded and relying on a few highly-committed individuals without whom it would not exist, AMARC Europe is highly dependent on the availability of institutional support of some kind, especially funding. One could ask whether, if the funding comes to an end, the organisation would still have a reason (and resources) to exist.

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5 See the works by social movement scholars Melucci (1996) and della Porta and Diani (2006).
Lacking a European-specific collective identity, and heavily dependent on the availability of financial and human resources, I would like to argue that AMARC Europe is not yet a full-fledged network of active members (a ‘movement organisation’), but rather a collection of ‘hard-core’ movement entrepreneurs acting on the behalf of the whole network.

In conclusion, how can AMARC Europe promote movement-building? A bottom-up European specific identity can emerge only if people feel the need for it. An organisation like AMARC Europe can only provide a space (and occasions) for interaction where the different community stations can converge and cooperate. AMARC Europe ‘entrepreneurs’ should keep trying to build a ‘critical mass’ around the organisation, by promoting European meetings, exchanges flows, and joint projects. The linkages and collaborations with CMFE, now limited to the sphere of the ‘movement entrepreneurs’, should be expanded through encouraging new people – also the sceptical ones – to get involved. Emphasis should not be put the availability of funding as the main reason to come together: it can raise false expectations and make adhesion dependent on resources (which are never stable) rather than on a sense of belonging. It is only by anchoring the organisation into the grassroots that the ‘new’ AMARC Europe has some chances to survive.

References