

REACHING OUT THROUGH RADIO

"I make no distinction between Greeks and Barbarians. The origin of citizens, or the race into which they were born, is of no concern to me. I have only one criterion by which to distinguish them - virtue. For me, any good foreigner is a Greek and any bad Greek is worse than a Barbarian. I, on my part, see you all as equal, whether you are white or dark-skinned and I should like you not simply to be subjects of my commonwealth, but members of it, partners of it." These are extracts from the Oath of Alexander the Great sworn before tribal leaders in 324 BC at the town of Opis, an ancient Babylonian city, not far from modern Baghdad. Now, over 2300 years later, a Greek EQUAL project is making similar efforts to forge effective partnerships with people from other ethnic backgrounds.

According to the latest research, about one million people have tried to find a new life in Greece during the last 15 years and most have come from southern and eastern Europe. These immigrants appear to have congregated in the major cities, as they look for some form of employment and many have experienced various forms of social exclusion. This exclusion and their life situations are also depicted in the media, directly or indirectly, and sometimes the wording or the commentary that is used is essentially racist. Such ill-informed broadcasting tends to influence public opinion and, as a result, stereotypes and biases can surface creating a vicious circle that perpetuates discrimination.

[Commedia.Net](#) is an EQUAL Development Partnership that is working both in Athens and Thessaloniki to fight media discrimination against socially excluded groups. Its activities correspond to those Council's Recommendations on the implementation of Member States' employment policies that apply to Greece.^[1]



"The Olympics coming home to Greece in 2004 brought many benefits to our country," says George Petrou, the Managing Director of the [DIMITRA Institute of Training and Development](#) and the powerhouse behind CommediaNet, *"and one that we were able to build on was the multilingual radio broadcasting provided by the City of Athens during the course of the games."* In fact, this exciting and innovative DP is also based on other firm foundations. These embrace a well-established youth organisation in Thessaloniki with extensive experience in issues relating to migrants and refugees and the concerns of both of the Municipalities of [Athens](#) and [Thessaloniki](#) to ensure the active involvement of ethnic minority groups in the day to day life of these cities. They also include the openness of three media companies [Athina 9.84 FM Municipal Radio](#), [Greek Radio Television 3 S.A. \(ERT 3\)](#) and [FM 100](#), Thessaloniki's Municipal Radio, to cooperate in exploring new approaches to broadcasting. The direct assistance of the [Journalists' Union of Macedonia and Thrace Daily Newspapers](#) has also helped to ensure that the project is grounded in the realities of the media world.

GIVING COMMUNITIES A VOICE

The DP works with the media on three fronts:

- as a working place, creating on the one hand those preconditions that will lead to the development, organisation and operation of the multicultural media and the active participation of people coming from the excluded groups, developing their professional expertise and preparing them for the mainstream media industry;
- as a vehicle to promote and develop new ideas and cultures through the production and transmission of multicultural programmes;
- as a way of forming and influencing public opinion and fighting negative stereotypes and different forms of discrimination.

Help and assistance in set-up



Athens Community Voice on air

Community Voice uses all of these three methods and it is the name of the two community radio stations that the DP has established in the largest Greek cities of Athens and Thessaloniki. These initiatives have directly involved the municipal authorities of the two cities, as well as their radio stations. *"This is the first time a community radio station has operated anywhere in Greece and it is logical to need the mentoring of the municipal radios with their know-how and technical abilities, as the municipal radios were the first to challenge the sovereignty of the state radio, the only radio station in existence just 10 years ago"* says Nikolaos Politis, the Director General of Athens 9.84 FM Radio, one of the two municipal stations

that are members of the DP.

The assistance of the Municipalities was vital in finding bases for the studios. For example, in Athens, Community Voice is housed in a building from which the municipality provides a range of educational and administrative services to immigrants. The municipal radio stations have also been invaluable, as they have been involved in training the people who now run Community Voice, they have advised on all the technical aspects such as the equipment and materials that would necessary to operate such a community radio and they continue to provide professional and technical mentoring to both stations that are now up and running.

Training and preparation

Each of the Community Voice stations is operated by a team drawn from the main immigrant communities, members of which have undertaken a vocational training course to prepare them to carry out the everyday tasks in community radio. At the beginning, 12 people had 250 hours of theoretical and practical training in journalism, technical issues, management and lobbying and they also learnt about the relevant public services that operated in the municipality and about the structure of local NGOs that represented or assisted immigrants. The trainers for the course were professionals who were either journalists or NGO members involved in media and diversity issues and contexts.

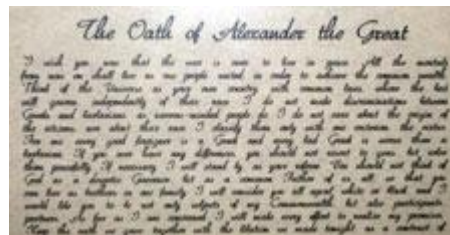
"The vocational training had a multi-fold aim" explains George Petrou, "of course, it was primarily to prepare the people who would form the radio production team for the challenges of producing daily radio programmes and running a community radio station, but at the same time, it offered them a vocational training that might help them enter the mainstream media. Another very important aspect was the fact that these individuals who have been trained can now act as trainers for another group of volunteers and/or community workers and this can help to ensure the sustainability of the community radio."

At the end of each course, five people were selected on the basis of the skills and aptitudes that they had displayed during their training, to become the "stagiaires" who now run Community Voice. For some of the people on the course and for these final stagiaires this experience meant that they became legally registered as they had to apply for a "green card" or work permit from the employment office if they were to participate in, and get a grant for, their training. Now the stagiaires receive a relatively small, but still a living wage, thanks to EQUAL and their social security contributions are also paid by the DP.

In Thessaloniki, the stagiaires are all young people coming from Albanian, Romanian, Armenian, Russian and Bulgarian backgrounds. It was very important to have someone from Albania because Albanians represent 7 to 8% of the population and are the largest minority group in Greece and, in Thessaloniki, this figure is even greater as 11% of the inhabitants are Albanian. In Athens, there is a greater spread of ages in the new staff members but not of ethnic groups. The staff members include two Albanians, one Russian, one Bulgarian and a Mexican whose influence is crucial because there are almost 800,000 Spanish-speaking people in Athens. Community Voice in Athens also has regular, almost full-time in some cases, volunteers from many different countries. Some of these volunteers had taken part in the original training, while

other had heard of Community Voice "on the grapevine" or even "on air" and had come to offer their services.

Part of the role of the staff and volunteers is to liaise with their ethnic communities with a view to ensuring that the views and issues of that particular community are reflected in the output of Community Voice. *"At the beginning there was a bit of a danger of things becoming segmented, as each person wanted to represent 'my own community!'"* reports Dimitrius Triantafillidis, the mentor from Athens 9.84 FM, *"but now they are working as a team, serving a bigger ideal and incorporating ideas for programming as group ideas and **not just my ideas.**"* For those who are interested, it is possible to listen to the outputs produced by the staff and volunteers of both stations over the web, by just clicking on [this link](#).



The Oath of Alexander the Great that is displayed in the Radio Studio in Thessaloniki, reinforces the need for partnership

Outreach activities

The intention of each of these radio production teams is not only to offer information and a voice to the people of these communities but also to reach out to society in general. The most important challenge is to try and change the stereotypes and biases and to create an acceptance of multiculturalism. *"We want to present the cultures and their people to the Athenian society,"* says Elena Contratova a member of the production team in Community Voice, *"We want to make them see individuals with names and a story to tell and not just numbers but people with a certain music, history and contemporary presence and to reach out and connect people and cultures. Our communication has to be two ways, towards the ethnic communities, bringing them to the station and towards the host Community, the one we all live in, and also bring it to the station".* The operation of Community Media also relies, to a large extent, on contributions not only from ethnic communities but also from Greek volunteers, as volunteering is something that has increased greatly after its very successful use in the hosting of the Olympic Games. These Greek volunteers are provided with relatively short training seminars geared to the tasks that they will fulfil and to their specialities.

Meetings have also been organised, along with education officers from the Municipalities of Athens and Thessaloniki, to promote the projects' activities and to brief and raise the awareness of teachers, parents and students. This work with schools is proving to be very popular. For example, in Thessaloniki alone, there have being two three-day seminars for 40 teachers on different ways of teaching about human rights. There have also been visits from a number of primary schools to Community Voice that have given these young pupils their first ever chance to make their own radio programmes and to learn about respecting other people's backgrounds and cultures. Similar events and meetings are also happening in Athens and based on all of these experiences, CommediaNet intends to produce a "Training the Trainers" pack.

The DP is also working closely with one of its partners, the Journalists' Union of Macedonia and Thrace Daily Newspapers. Members of this Union are identifying, collecting and selecting articles from the press libraries in Macedonia-Thrace. They are looking for articles that have been written on topics related to discrimination, examples of articles that either reinforce or challenge stereotypes or stereotypical behaviour and those that contain some historical retrospective on, or analysis of, issues of racism and xenophobia. The idea is that these articles can be used to produce another Training Pack but this one will be aimed at journalists, students of journalism, researchers, media employees and producers, owners of media companies and news agencies and the pack will be supplemented by information collected at national and European level. The final aim is to create a network of volunteer journalists who are all aware of issues related to minorities and immigration, supported by an electronic platform through which materials and information can be distributed and exchanged and collaboration can be developed and extended.

The final outreach activity of Community Voice is the publication of a newsletter, every two months. Some 10,000 copies are produced in Greek and English and this newsletter provides information about the programmes on both Community Voice stations, the other facilities that

CommediaNet offers, local services and agencies for immigrants and ethnic minorities and Greek and European legislation that relates to these groupings.

TRANSFERRING AND PROMOTING INNOVATION

Community Media is something completely new in Greece but it has existed in different European Member States for a number of years. In such countries, there is already hard-won experience, resources, materials and training methodologies that can be used to promote and increase the pace of development of the Community Media in Greece.



The Athens team discussing the next day's programming

This is the main idea behind CommediaNet choice of transnational partners in EQUAL. The DP works within the [Digitales](#) Transnational Partnership which is using media as an empowerment tool for minority ethnic and cultural groups, young people 'at risk', users and ex-users of mental health services and people with disabilities. The leading partner is [Online / More Colour in the Media](#) (OL/MCM), which is a European foundation that was created by Mira Media, an independent co-operative body founded by the major Dutch migrant organisations. OL/MCM has been working for the last ten years in areas such as employment, career orientation, research and media-education. Through this partnership Commedia.Net is acquiring the know-how and the resources that have been achieved during those years of operation and using them for further pilot Community Media stations. The DP also wants to use the Dutch and the other transnational partners' experience of how the media can provide a route to empowerment for migrant groups and NGOs and of how it can offer a new source of career and employment opportunities for people from migrant backgrounds.



Replying to a listener's question at Community Voice in Thessaloniki

Another area of interest is how the media can offer a more balanced portrayal of the minority groups or excluded groups and a more accurate view of the multicultural nature of society. One idea that was immediately implemented in the activities of the Commedia.Net was the Week of Media and Diversity. Martina Valdetara from Online / More Colour in the Media explains that *"we all used this occasion to present our network to journalists, broadcasters, editors and other relevant stakeholders including national and local authorities and NGOs, and organised roundtables and working groups"*. The principal subjects that were addressed during the week of Media and Diversity were

the empowerment of audiences by NGOs and minority organisations, diversity policies in broadcasting and the portrayal by the media of people from excluded groups.

CommediaNet wants to assure the continuation and sustainability of Community Media in Greece and, at the same time, influence the type of linkages that can actually result in a positive change across Europe. Thus while it has made a very strong contribution its transnational partnership, this involvement has enabled the DP to make a comparative study of the major features, and the legislation that applies to, Community Media in other countries. In Greece, it is backing this up with this international study with three other national investigations. The first will look at the knowledge of the general public, in Athens, Thessalonica and Larissa, about Community Media and their attitudes towards this new form of broadcasting. The second research is on the informational, educational and entertainment needs of ethnic minority groupings and the extent to which these needs are being met by the mainstream media. The final piece of work will result in the production of a guide and a draft business plan for establishing other Community Media radio stations.

The intention is that when more frequencies become available, as a result of the impact of digital broadcasting, CommediaNet will be able to use the studies to make an excellent case for the granting of licenses to other Community Media ventures. In addition, the Ministry of the Interior, Public Administration and Decentralisation is heavily involved in the decisions on broadcasting licenses and, as this Ministry is also one of CommediaNet's partners in the DP, the prospects begin to look very good. Indeed, the same could be said about the sustainability of the two existing Community Voice stations. Forecasts suggest that by 2010 as much as 25% of the Greek population will be of foreign extraction and thus, politicians will be interested in ensuring that these minorities will be able to live, and participate in Greek society, side by side with the host community and they will also want to win votes from such a sizable percentage of the population. Indeed, the new Mayor of Athens made a pre-election pledge in autumn 2006 that Community Voice will continue after its EQUAL funding has expired.



George Petrou (centre), the driving force behind the introduction of community radio into Greece, together with some of the team members at Community Voice in Thessaloniki

Three Important Conclusions from CommediaNet

George Petrou feels that experience of EQUAL DP has demonstrated that:

1. "To operate a multi-cultural project with multi-cultural staff teams like ours, people have to be prepared or even trained to listen. The skill of knowing when to stop talking and giving yourself time to take on board other people's views and reactions is so vital in promoting mutual understanding.
2. The only way to realise your ideas and to ensure that they are mainstreamed is to develop synergies and create networks at local, national and international levels.
3. Innovation and transnationality in EQUAL have been so important to us in realising our objectives and if the EU really wants to help its new Member States with their employment and inclusion policies and practices, these EQUAL principles have to be maintained within the operation of the mainstream ESF during the programming period of 2007 to 2013."

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[Link to EQUAL database description](#)