

Contribution from the CMFE, the Community Media Forum Europe, to the Public Consultation “Transforming the digital dividend opportunity into social benefits and economic growth in Europe 10 July 2009”

Introduction

The Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE), is a gathering of policy experts, non-governmental organizations and national community media federations which, since 2004, supports the participation of the Community Media sector in policy debate and decision making at the European and national level. At present, the CMFE has 42 members from 18 different European countries. CMFE works closely together with AMARC-Europe, the European branch of the World Association of Community Radiobroadcasters.

The CMFE has been working in collaboration with European institutions to raise the profile of community media across Europe and, in recent documents, the social value of the sector has been reaffirmed by the ‘*Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the role of community media in the promotion of the social cohesion and the intercultural dialogue*’¹, adopted by the Council of Europe on 11 February 2009, and the ‘*Resolution of 25 September 2008 of the European Parliament on Community Media in Europe (2008/2011 (INI))*’².

Council of Europe

The Declaration of the Council of Europe, among other things, stresses its Members States about the desirability of:

“iv.a recognising the social value of community media and examining the possibility of committing funds at national, regional and local level to support the sector, directly and indirectly, while duly taking into account competition aspects”

and

“ii Draws attention to the desirability of allocating to community media, to the extent possible, a sufficient number of frequencies, both in analogue and digital environments, and ensuring that community broadcasting media are not disadvantaged after the transition to the digital environment;”

More specific on ‘Digital Dividend’ the Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe adopted on 20 February 2008 the ‘*Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the allocation and management of the digital dividend and the public interest*’³:

“Aware of the fact that technical and legislative choices involved in the switchover to the digital environment should not be determined by economic factors alone but ought also to take account of social, cultural and political factors, and agreeing that a balance must be struck between economic interests and objectives of common interest;”

and

“Conscious that a balance might need to be struck between the development of a purely market-based approach to spectrum allocation and management, on the one hand, and the promotion of pluralism, cultural and linguistic diversity and access of the public to audiovisual services in Europe, in particular free-to-air broadcasting, on the other hand;”

¹ <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1409919>

² <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P6-TA-2008-0459&language=EN>

³ <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1252459&Site=CM&BackColorInternet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FDC864&BackColorLogged=FDC864>

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European Parliament

On 25 September 2008, the European Parliament adopted the ‘*Resolution on Community Media in Europe (INI/2008/2011)*’⁴, in which it stresses that Community Media are an effective means of strengthening cultural and linguistic diversity, social inclusion and local identity, as well as media pluralism:

“G. Whereas community media fulfil a broad yet largely unacknowledged role in the media landscape, particularly as a source of local content, and encourage innovation, creativity and diversity of content,”

and

“19. Calls on Member States to make television and radio frequency spectrum available, both analogue and digital, bearing in mind that the service provided by community media is not to be assessed in terms of opportunity cost or justification of the cost of spectrum allocation but rather in the social value it represents,”

On 24 September 2008 the European Parliament also adopted the ‘*Resolution on concentration and pluralism in the media in the European Union (INI/2007/2253)*’⁵. The Resolution:

“24. Welcomes the dynamics and diversity brought into the media landscape by the new media and encourages responsible use of all the new technology such as mobile TV as a platform for commercial, public and community media;”

CMFE’s opinion

The CMFE stresses, in line with the above-mentioned declarations and resolutions, the importance social and cultural needs for the benefit of European citizens in regard to the opportunities the digital developments offer. Community Media contribute to the diversity of the European media landscape. CMFE sees in the proposed strategy too much focus on economic needs. Not enough attention is being paid to the problems of Community Media in the process of digitalization of broadcasting frequencies. The chosen technologies, e.g. DVB-T and HDTV, still threaten the possibilities for CM to survive in this new technological area.

For example, in the Netherlands the frequencies reserved for digital terrestrial broadcasting are lacking possibilities for local public television stations to participate. Four pilot projects with local DVB-t were very promising, but had to be stopped because of the reassignment of these frequencies to bigger DVB-T allotments. These four stations lose their investments and for the other more than 150 local TV-stations the participation in DVB-T developments is blocked.

In Spain, the new law on the promotion of the Information Society (*Ley de Medidas de Impulso de la Sociedad de la Información, LISI of 20 December 2007*) recognizes for the very first time in the state the “non-for-profit TV of proximity”.

⁴ See footnote 2

⁵ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P6-TA-2008-0459&language=EN>

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According to the LSI, these TV stations could apply for digital licenses. But this new legal framework specifies also that the spectrum reserve for proximity TV is not a priority in respect with the other broadcasting services. This results in unbalanced competition between ‘small scale TV-stations’ and ‘large-scale TV-stations’. Because of the stronger economical base (serving larger areas with bigger audiences) of larger TV’s, small scale TV’s will almost automatically be excluded from participation in the digital era. What is more, the Law Regulations are even increasing this inequality among broadcasters in terms of frequencies coverage and period of validity.

Also in Ukraine the regional and local TV channels expressed their concerns regarding digital developments and recommend, as a result from the international conference on ‘*Regional and Local TV Channels: Possible solutions for distribution in the digital environment*’, held in Kyiv on 28 April 2009:

“(...) to the government of countries, which had already started the process of launching digital TV, to take all needed actions for the elaboration of the conception of launching digital TV on local level, including learning supplementary possibilities of the radio frequency for the aims of local broadcasting and conducting experimental building of digital air mini-network using low-powered transmitters.”

and

“2. Acknowledge that the rejection of bodies of state power to give the license on building digital air mini-network using low-powered transmitters is the limitation of right to free broadcasting of information, which is not justified with technical problems and contradict the requirements of the Article 10 of the European convention of Human Rights.”

There are also examples of promising initiatives to let community like services participate in the digital broadcasting era. In Norway Frikanalen is distributed on the digital terrestrial network, which at the end of 2010 will cover most of the country.⁶ Frikanalen is an “open channel”, which means that everyone, organization or individuals, has access to air their programs on the channel. Frikanalen is so Europe’s first digital community TV channel. Also in Denmark licenses have been granted to community media organizations to broadcast on national and regional DVB-T networks. “*Denmark’s radio and TV authority has issued 220 broadcast permits in the new digital terrestrial network (DTT) for associations and other now-commercial organizations (out of 306 applicants). The starting date is 1 November this year when the analogue TV-network will be closing down.*”⁷

Wireless communication applications

There also great concern amongst broadcasters that the continuity and further development of wireless communication applications, as needed for wireless audio- and video connections used e.g. in ‘on location’ broadcast registrations (e.g. for wireless communication between reporters and studio and/or technicians and camera-operators) is hindered. Existing equipment will have to be replaced, because of the changed availability of frequencies. Complex coordination processes will have to be renewed. This leads to extra costs and especially public (local) broadcasters and community media need to be compensated for these costs. Otherwise they will be hindered to fulfil their public obligations to e.g. offer live coverage’s of important (local) events.

⁶ <http://frikanalen.no/english>

⁷ <http://blogs.rnw.nl/medianetwork/digital-terrestrial-television-opens-for-the-civil-society-in-denmark>

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Community Radio

The developments as described for community (local) television also apply to the digitalization developments for local, community radio. Until now the chosen digitalization technologies hinder instead of challenge the participation of small-scale radios. It is absolutely necessary to invest in digital radio technologies that offer smooth transition possibilities from analogue FM to digital radio technologies as e.g. DRM+. DRM+ is recently successfully tested in Germany (Hannover, August 2009)⁸ and France (Paris, July 2009)⁹.

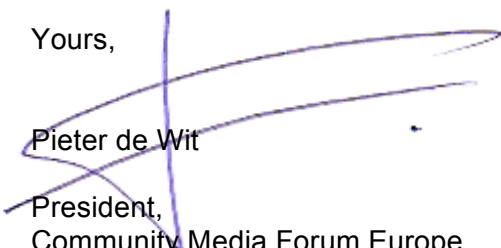
Conclusion

Community media need extra guarantees for participation in the digital broadcasting era to also profit from the ‘Digital Dividend’. New digital technologies need to offer challenges instead of treats to the community media sector. This needs extra attention because until now only large scale broadcasters and commercial media and communication services tend to profit from the chosen digital technologies.

CMFE urges to set aside sufficient spectrum for the further development of local and community television and other community media services in every country.

New technology and also digitalization is meant to make more possible, not less !!!

Yours,



Pieter de Wit

President,
Community Media Forum Europe

⁸ <http://www.drm.org/news/detail/news/drm-field-trial-in-germany/>

⁹ <http://www.drm.org/news/detail/news/first-drm-demo-in-band-i-in-paris/>

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