

Challenges of COVID-19 on Community Radio Stations in Ireland, JOC November 17th, 2021

CRAOL, also called the Community Radio Forum of Ireland, is the network for the Irish Community Radio Sector. Over 2,000 community radio volunteers broadcast weekly to almost 300,000 people in 21 fully licensed stations and almost 15 aspirant stations.

CRAOL's mission is to develop the Community Radio Movement and to realise its potential to make a difference to the communities its members are part of delivering a social benefit to these communities.

In April 2020, Craol carried out a survey to determine the direct impact COVID-19 had on Stations.

The purpose of the survey was to capture a snapshot of the situation across 21 member stations.

17 Stations responded. 16 stations were still broadcasting at the time of survey, and one had reportedly ceased operations temporarily due to Covid.

Two stations reported increasing their hours, one of which to facilitate leaving certificate subjects to be aired, and the remaining stations stated that they had to reduce their hours of broadcasting

Broadcasting hours varied across individual stations ranging from 40 hours per week to 168 per week with all stations reporting changes to programming and schedules.

The reasons for these changes were a direct result of government restrictions regarding social distancing, cocooning, working from home and non-essential travel.

Changes included a reduction in the production of programs, shifting to remote programming, ceasing live shows, broadcasting archived programs and content changes such as more health related topics, programs for elderly and broadcasting religious services.

Three stations were working completely remotely. To facilitate remote working, a variety of software and hardware was being used.

Stations reported that Boards/Management Committees had implemented measures in response to COVID-19. This included:

- Facilitating remote working.
- Exercising social distancing in workplaces.
- Promoting infection control
- Limiting number of staff at the station at the one time
- Maintaining communication with staff and volunteers through apps like Zoom and google hangouts

In a follow up Survey in November 2021 the below points remain an issue for stations

Loss of volunteers.

- Many of the volunteers were older or in high-risk categories and many stopped coming to the stations resulting in the loss of good people.
- Pre Covid-Community Stations were lively social hubs that gathered many volunteers and contributors daily in their offices and the studios this is now gone as the ongoing Covid is heavily limiting the presence of community members on these premises.

- Only some volunteers wanted to record their programmes from home or had the skills and means to do so and stations had to adapt to a whole new system very quickly.
- It brought to light the inadequacy of facilities as some stations operate from very small spaces and this led to Volunteer displacement.
- Volunteers who are dependent on public transport are wary of coming to the station
- High turnover of volunteers and staff during COVID 19 - this brings with it a loss of experience

Loss of Income and extra costs

- Stations are reliant on delivering Training and local communities and businesses to support the running costs. During covid many small local businesses were closed, and it was much more difficult to raise finance. Covid measures and health and safety are limiting the offerings for training, summer camps, and work placements for students.
- In addition, the possibility of running any kind of fund-raisers were severely restricted and the usual community fundraisers (live OB, bag packing, concerts etc.) are ongoing challenges for stations.
- Certain projects had to be cancelled and lots of recordings had to be postponed. programming such as audio drama, outside broadcasts, community events, could not take place. Some of these programmes were commissioned projects and cancellations and delays caused financial problems.
- It now takes more time to produce and record as it takes more preparation, more logistics, more Organisation. More Personnel hours are required.
- The cost of cleaning materials, new screens, and other Health & Safety Protocols added to stations costs as did the costs and number of subscriptions increased such as Cleanfeed/Zoom etc.

Programming quality decline

- The pandemic meant that very few 'live' interviews or programming could be carried out and the overall quality of the station suffered as a result.
- Restrictions also negatively impacted on stations ability to produce new material for broadcast.
- Internet reliability issues for all staff/Volunteers working at home
- Due to the closure of arts & culture and sports venues, some programmes had minimal content to cover.
- Stations supported those who were able to record at home, but some did not have the confidence or technical know-how to create a programme without technical assistance and this then fed into the reduction of original programming.
- Some Stations had to reduce live broadcasting hours, reduce total hours of non-live broadcasting hours with an increase in repeat programmes output.

Meeting Challenges

Stations are a vital lifeline to listeners, delivering social benefits especially to people who are marginalized and isolated. This became more obvious during Covid, and the services became more essential.

- Stations adapted Schedules to meet the needs of the communities they serve providing very detailed community programming, updates, and information.
- Staff were very innovative in sourcing means and methods for remote recording.
- Volunteers had to be trained on new technologies for remote recording and broadcasting.
- The cost of cleaning materials, new screens, and other Health & Safety Protocols added to stations costs.
- Community Radios were pre Covid lively social hubs that gathered

volunteers and contributors daily in their premises and the studios.

- Some stations managed to offer safe spaces for volunteers to stay involved, but Covid heavily limited the presence of community members on the premises.
- Staff worked 1.5 times their paid hours to ensure service continued
- The issues associated with rural and indeed urban isolation and mental health was compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and Stations worked to provide a service that reached out to people, provided factual and reliable information, provided community news and contacts for community services and supports
- Stations supported government campaigns around Covid 19 Health & Safety measures and guidelines and vaccination campaigns.
- Stations adjusted understanding of "access to the airwaves" beyond physical access