

Translocalism, Community Media and the City

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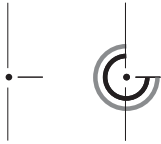


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Introduction

Media have an ambiguous relationship with notions of community, locality, and place. Especially in the one-to-many communicative models, the many were often de facto articulated as detached from their communities, localities and places, despite the relentless efforts of a variety of scholars to contextualise media organisations, media workers and media audiences.

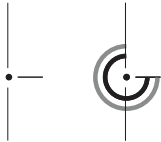
One of the areas where community and place did play an important role from the early days onwards was in community media theory and practices. For instance Janowitz' (1952/1967) seminal *The community press in an urban setting* - explicitly positioned in a Chicago school approach - starts its preface (to the second edition) with a reflection on the urban community, which

like any social system, encompasses a process of communications and a system of values. It implies sentiments and attachments to a geographical area, no matter how transitory or complex. The boundaries of human communities in our industrialised society are not only diffuse but are multiple. They stubbornly defy simple cartographic representations, but they create the life space in which men and their families [sic] pursue the search for status and self-respect. (Janowitz, 1952/1967: vii-viii)

Janowitz raises the still relevant question about the complex relationship between urban communities, their geographical situatedness, and its boundaries. For instance when globalisation became a dominant framework for analysis, the local was sometimes seen as threatened by the colonising and erasing impact of the global (media) flows. Fairly soon new attempts to reduce the decontextualisation of community and place assembled around the concept of glocalisation (Robertson, 1995) (and a number of conceptual variants), in order to theorize the complex relationship between the global and the local.

One of the disadvantages of this choice was that the concept of glocalisation could not shake off its genesis, still taking the global as its starting point for analysis and situating the local in a reactive position. In order to strengthen the local in (community) media analysis - without essentialising it - and in order to complement the concept of glocalisation, this paper organises a dialogue with Appadurai's concept of the translocal (as he uses it in his 1995 book chapter *The production of locality*). Using the concept of the translocal will allow reconciling the situatedness of urban communities and community media with their capacity to transgress their local boundaries.

In order to illustrate the rhizomatic workings of the translocal, two case studies will be analysed, both of which are situated in Belgian cities. The first case is RadioSwap, a community radio exchange project that allows these radio stations to redistribute their locally produced and embedded content and to establish a translocal community of interest. The second case is community Wi-Fi, where a number of community-based organisations are providing free internet access, linking their local nodes to form a translocal network of access. Before the case study analyses, two parts - one on community, and one on community media - generate the theoretical backbone of this paper. First, we need to look at the relationship between locality and community.



Locality and Community

The theoretical interconnection between locality and community is far from recent. As Leunissen (1986) argues, conceptualisations of community refer predominantly to geography (and ethnicity) as structuring notions of the collective identity or group relations. The dominant role of place and space in the definitions of community can be traced back to the early days of sociology - for instance in the work of Tönnies (1887/1963) - where community was contrasted to society.

'Community' was defined by the presence of close and concrete human ties and by a collective identity, while the prevalent feature of 'society' was the absence of identifying group relations (Martin-Barbero, 1993: 29). Morris and Morten (1998: 12-13) exemplify Tönnies' distinction by using the concepts communion and association; community thus refers to the 'notion of a big family', while society 'represents a colder, unattached and more fragmented way of living devoid of cooperation and social cohesion. Instead of a sense of neighbourliness, people are isolated.' Locality played a key role in the construction of this difference, as the spaces of the city provided the inspiration for the articulation of society, as a threat to both the community and the individual. Tönnies' (1887/1963) community / society-model was clearly based on a romantic view of rural and city spaces, but also Simmel (1903/1950: 409) warned about the problems that individuals had to face in order to maintain their individuality '*in the face of overwhelming social forces*,' and to resist '*being levelled down and worn out*'. A similar position towards these city spaces is found in Engels (1845/1999: 93), when he writes:

There is something distasteful about the very bustle of the streets, something that is abhorrent to human nature itself. Hundreds of thousands of people of all classes and ranks of society jostle past one another; are they not all human beings with the same characteristics and potentialities, equally interested in the pursuit of happiness? ... And yet they rush past one another as if they had nothing in common or where in no way associated with one another.

Later, the city became one of the main and more respected localities of community, for instance through the work of the Chicago school. Despite the persistent fears of anomaly and alienation, the '*urban experience*' (Harvey, 1989) became accepted as one of the dominant modes of spatial and social organisation, where a diversity of localised and situated communities could thrive.

One of the key concepts to connect the locality of the city with the notion of community is the neighbourhood. This notion, defined by Appadurai (1995: 204) as '*situated communities, characterised by their actuality [...] and their potential for social reproduction*' allowed to reconcile the notion of community, still associated with small-scaledness of the village, with the size of the city by symbolically reducing it to a collage of village-neighbourhoods. Here, another seminal example - apart from Janowitz' (1952/1967) work on the community press - is Young and Willmott's (1957) *Family and Kinship in East London*, where they analyse the community life in the London neighbourhood of Bethnal Green.

In some other cases, entire (modern) cities are articulated as communities (see for instance Prezza & Schrujjer, 2001). This is most evident in the assumed role of community planning in urban regions, as for instance Mazanti and Pløger (2003: 309) point out: '*[c]oncepts such as place identity and place of belonging [...] play a central role in current urban planning and urban regeneration programs.*' City marketing (or city branding) is yet another example.

All four approaches (the village-as-community, the city-as-a-locus-of-community, the neighbourhood-as-community and the city-as-community) tend to emphasise locality and geography as a structural feature of community. Especially the older approaches also tend to use more essentialist perspectives, reducing community (and its localities) to a stable social setting.

/ 1. Beyond the Structural Approaches of Community

One way to bypass these rigid articulations of community (which also affect the local, given its sometimes even symbiotic symbolic relationship to community) is to look at a number of re-conceptualisations that transcend the structural-geographic conceptualisation of community.

A first set of re-conceptualisations introduces the non-geographical as a complement to the structural-geographic approach to community. Especially the concept of the community of interest allows emphasising the importance of other factors in structuring a community. Although one cannot explicitly assume that a group of people has common interests¹ (see Clark, 1973: 411), the communality of interest can form the condition of possibility for the emergence or existence of a community. A similar argument can be made for Wenger's (1999) so-called communities of practices, which are composed out of the informal arenas of family, work and friendship networks (see also Hewson, 2005: 17).

The analysis of the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) on everyday life has shown that communities are not only formed in geographically defined spaces, but also in cyberspace. Jones (1995) has pointed out that such virtual or on-line communities have similar characteristics as the geography-based communities². Verschueren (2006) therefore argues that the differences between offline and online behaviour appear to be of degree rather than of kind. The 'new' communities have further altered the rather fixed idea about space, clearly showing that geographical proximity is not in all cases a necessary condition for, or quality of, community. As Lewis (1993: 13) remarks, a community of interest can extend '*across conurbations, nations and continents*'. What is a defining feature for community is the direct and frequent contact between the members and the feeling of belonging and sharing.

A second set of re-conceptualisations is based on the cultural, as a complement to the structural-geographic community approach. These approaches emphasise the subjective construction of community, where Lindlof's (1988) concept of interpretative community and Cohen's (1989) community of meaning become relevant. Although Lindlof's re-conceptualisation is specifically aimed at redefining the audience as a community, both re-conceptualisations approach the concept of community from within. Cohen pleads for, in line with the above, '*a shift away from the structure of community towards a symbolic construction of community and in order to do so, takes culture, rather than structure as point of departure*' (Cohen, 1989: 70). In these perspectives, community is no

¹ In sociology, a group of people that is formed based on common interests is usually referred to as a collectivity (Merton, 1968: 353). A collectivity does not always have direct interaction, but is often only based on a common goal or interest. The people who belong to a collectivity do not need to know each other, and one cannot always identify direct interaction between them.

² Hollander (2000: 372) correctly argues that geographically based communities can also use digital technologies, which implies that a clear dichotomy between 'virtual' and 'real life' communities is not tenable. Moreover, the use of ICTs is unavoidably situated in the materiality of technology and place. Cyberspace is thus always complemented by cyberspace.

longer structurally imposed, but is actively constructed by its members, and those members derive an identity from this construction.

These different conceptualisations are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Defining Community

<i>Community as close and concrete human ties, as ‘communion’, As a collective identity, with identifying group relations.</i>		
<u>Traditional:</u>	<u>Re-conceptualisation 1:</u>	<u>Re-conceptualisation 2:</u>
	Supplementing the geographical with the non-geographical	Supplementing the structural/material with the cultural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Geography - Ethnicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community of interest - Community of practice - Virtual or on-line community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interpretative community - Community of meaning

12. **Revisiting the City: Fluid Spaces and Communities**

The above-mentioned re-conceptualisations have also affected the theoretical frameworks that are used to analyse the locality of cities and urban communities. Through these re-conceptualisations, more emphasis is placed on the fluid, contingent and heterogeneous character of these urban spaces.

First of all, a number of authors have emphasised the porousness of the (symbolic) city walls, partially through the notion of globalisation. Sassen’s (2001) ‘*global city*’ unavoidably deals with processes of globalisation and localisation, as the city is seen as one of the key sites where the global is incorporated in the locality of the city and its inhabitants. Similarly, the existence of electronic urban networks has led to another re-conceptualisation of community. While ‘[t]raditionally, cities have been regarded as relatively fixed places whose great strength lay in their overcoming of the “frictional distance of space” [...], electronic technology is able to overcome distance in an instant [which] creates new networks and new senses of time and space’ (Barker, 2002: 313). Through ICTs, communities can (more easily than before) overcome this ‘frictional distance of space’ and group and recruit members beyond the confinements of locality. More generally, the increase in mobility has been facilitatory in opening-up urban localities and has led to more mobile, fluid, and sometimes even nomadic approaches towards the urban. To echo Jordan’s (2002: 255) argument: ‘space plays an important role in the creation of communities and their everyday, but we cannot assume that space is defined by physical location.’

The second re-conceptualisation, which complements the structural aspects of the community with cultural aspects, has also affected urban theory. Here, urban communities become articulated as part of what Soja (1989) has called the post-modern city. He focuses on the changes in the materiality of the city (the disruption of the old concentric circles model, and the development of new patterns of social fragmentation, segregation and regulation) but also on the increase of the heterogeneity and diversity of the urban communities. Others, like Shields (1996) and Tagg (1996) have taken this argument further, by pointing to the importance of representational regimes and discursive processes in producing the city, its inhabitants and its communities. ‘Place identity’ (Hague & Jenkins, 2005) and space remain important notions in defining the everyday life of urban communities. But the urban representations that construct the city are now seen as contingent and open to contestation. Moreover, these place identities are no longer defined as isolated, but are seen to interact with a wide

variety of other identities (including those of communities) in constructing the subjectivities of its inhabitants/members. To paraphrase the title of Tagg's (1996) book chapter: both the city and the community are no longer one.

/ 3. Erasing place?

This statement of course raises the question whether community and locality have now become disconnected. If the non-geographical and cultural approaches to community have become dominant, is there any place left for the structural-geographical approach? And is there any place left for place?

It is rather obvious that the world has changed since Tönnies and Simmel wrote about communities and cities, and that this has affected our thinking of both community and locality. We now have to reflect about '*the production of locality in a world that has become deterritorialised* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), '*diasporic and transnational*' (Appadurai, 1995: 213). These societal changes have unavoidably impacted on the role attributed to place. A number of authors (Casey, 1998; Dirlik, 1999; Escobar, 2000) have pointed to the marginalisation, obscuration and erasure of place in contemporary societies. Casey (1998: x) argues that there is a '*rich tradition of place-talk*' but that this tradition '*has been bypassed or forgotten for the most part, mainly because place has been subordinated to other terms taken as putative absolutes: most notably: Space and Time.*' At the same time, it has become impossible to ignore these societal changes that have transformed locality and place, and we need to look at the issue of '*place beyond place*' (Escobar, 2000: 168).

One frequently used way to deal with this critique of the threatening '*erasure of place*' (Dirlik, 1999) is to revisit the globalisation debate. Appadurai (1993) has pointed out that the processes of globalisations have not intervened in all realms of the social, but have been concentrated in different societal spheres or *scapes*. He distinguishes five such scapes: ethnoscapas, mediascapas, ideoscapas, technoscapas and finanscapas, which incorporate flows of people, cultural meanings, ideologies, technologies and capitals. His argument is that globalisation is characterised by the disjunctures that occur in and between the scapes. In mediascapas, media like for instance films travel around the world, hopping from market to market. Appadurai considers this apparent disconnection - or deterritorialisation - to be one of the main characteristics of globalisation. At the same time he too argues that this disconnection is not total, but hides a complex interplay between the local and the global. Although the homogenizing effects of global culture exist, they are absorbed by local political and cultural economies and reappear as heterogeneous dialogues with the original versions. The homogenous and heterogeneous, and the global and the local find themselves in permanent fields of tensions, a dynamic process that is well captured by the concept of glocalisation (Robertson, 1995).

But this concept of glocalisation is not totally satisfactory, as it tends to articulate the global as the starting point of the reassessment of the local and the re-establishment of locality and place. Here, I would like to re-introduce the notion of the translocal, inspired by the way Appadurai uses this concept in his 1995 book chapter *The production of locality*. In this chapter Appadurai deals with the complex interplay between locality - more specifically neighbourhoods - and context. He argues that context provides the constitutive outside of locality, but that locality simultaneously provides us with a context. To use his words: '*The central dilemma is that neighbourhoods both are contexts and at the same time require and produce contexts*' (Appadurai, 1995: 209 - emphasis in original). Or: '*Neighbourhood as context produces the context of neighbourhood*' (Appadurai, 1995: 210). At the same time, the capacity of localities to produce their 'own' context and subjectivities is affected by

the ‘locality-producing capabilities of larger-scale formations (nation-states, kingdoms, missionary empires and trading cartels)’⁵ (Appadurai, 1995: 211).

Slightly surprisingly, Appadurai uses the concept of the translocal only in the second part of this text, where he discusses the global production of locality, mainly through the nation-state. For that reason, he refers to the translocal as situated between the local and the nation-state, when he mentions the ‘*conflicting relation between neighbourhoods, translocal allegiances and the logic of the nation-state*’ (Appadurai, 1995: 220). The second reference to the translocal links it to the tourism industry, when he writes that:

The ethnography of these tourist locations is just beginning to be written in detail, but what little we do know suggests that many of such locations create complex conditions for the production and reproduction of locality, in which ties of marriage, work, business and leisure weave together various circulating populations with kinds of ‘locals’ to create neighbourhoods which belong in one sense to particular nation-states, but are, from another point of view, what we might call translocalities. (Appadurai, 1995: 216 – emphasis in original)

Arguably, the concept of the translocal is at its strongest when it is combined with the first part of Appadurai’s analysis, where he deals with the interaction between the local and its contexts (at whatever scale these contexts are situated). The translocal then becomes the moment when the local is stretched beyond its borders, whilst still remaining situated in the local. As Broeckmann (1998) puts it, it is the moment where ‘*different worlds and their local agents -- individuals, organisations, machines -- co-operate with global and nomadic agents within networked environments.*’ It is the moment where the local merges with a part of its outside context, without transforming itself into this context. It is the moment where the local simultaneously incorporates its context and transgresses into it. It is the moment where the local reaches out to a familiar unknown, and fuses it with the known. It is – to use Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) words – the place-based version of the rhizome.

The translocal is not that different from the glocal, as both concepts use fluid definitions of the local and the global, of place and space. They both combine structural-geographic, non-geographic and cultural perspectives to describe and analyse our social realities. But in comparison to the glocal, the translocal implies an inversed approach that allows taking the local as the point of departure, and adding the global as a second component. In this way, translocalisation acts as glocalisation’s mirror image. It allows us to retain the focus on the dynamics of the local and the global, but uses the local as a starting point.

⁵ Appadurai illustrates this point through the relationship of Yanomami groups in the rainforests of Brazil and Venezuela, with the nation-states in which they (have to) live. As this example might take me too far from the point I want to raise, I will not go into this specific analysis.

Erasing Structure? Defining Community Media

The local (and translocal) is of course not only built on practices, but also has an organisational component. Part of these organisations belong to the nation-state which – as Appadurai (1995: 214) argues – ‘creates a vast network of formal and informal techniques for the nationalisation of all space considered to be under its authority’, through ‘apparatuses as diverse as museums and village dispensaries, post-offices and police-stations, toll-booths and telephone booths.’ Although these apparatuses clearly have (had) nation-building objectives (see for instance Bennett, 1995), they simultaneously construct the local, as they always function within local contexts and become rearticulated through these contexts. Moreover, a variety of other organisations, including many civil society organisations, only exists (or mostly exists) within the realm of the local.

A specific type of this kind of organisation are community media, which are despite their diversity and complexity, often strongly embedded within their localities and communities. One of the objectives of this paper is to analyse these local community organisations, to see have they are indeed anchored and rooted in the local, but simultaneously manage to transcend the local and enter into the translocal. Again, the city remains a relevant setting, as many of the worlds’ cities have witnessed the development of community or alternative media serving their urban communities. Without desiring to exclude rural community media - which play a crucial role in many parts of the world – cities have generated fruitful biotopes for many of these media organisations.

In order to analyse community media’s capacity for the translocal, I first need to provide an additional theoretical backbone for my analysis by looking at community media theory, and the way community media are being defined. Although there are of course clear similarities with the theoretical debates on community and locality, community media theory remains a distinctive field, worthy of the detour.

One of the main similarities between the concepts of community media and community is that they both have a long theoretical and empirical tradition, and still manage to remain highly elusive concepts (for a discussion on community media theory, see Carpentier et al., 2003). In the case of community media, the multiplicity of community media organisations has caused most mono-theoretical approaches to focus on certain characteristics, while ignoring other aspects of the identity of community media. In order to at least limit the impact of this theoretical problem (see Figure 2), it is necessary to use a complementary set of different approaches towards the definition of community media.

Traditional community media theory is built on media-centred models as it tries to describe the functioning of community media (approach 1) and alternative media (approach 2). The first approach uses a more essentialist theoretical framework, stressing the importance of the community the medium is serving, while the alternative media models focus on the relationship between alternative

and mainstream media, putting more emphasis on the discursive relation of interdependency between two antagonistic sets of identities. These traditional models for theorizing the identity of community media are complemented here with two more society-centred approaches⁴. The third approach defines community media as part of civil society. In order to incorporate the more relationist aspects of civil society theory - articulated by for instance Walzer (1998) – they are combined with Downing’s (2001) and Rodriguez’ (2001) critiques on alternative media, and radicalised and unified in the fourth approach, which builds on the Deleuzian metaphor of community media as rhizome. This approach allows (even more) incorporating aspects of contingency, fluidity and elusiveness in the analysis of community media.

These four approaches can be summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Positioning the four theoretical approaches

	Media-centred	Society-centred
Autonomous identity of CM (Essentialist)	<u>Approach I:</u> Serving the community	<u>Approach III:</u> Part of civil society
Identity of CM in relation to other identities (Relationalist)	<u>Approach II:</u> An alternative to mainstream	<u>Approach IV:</u> Rhizome

In the first approach the community media’s role towards the community is emphasised. Community media serve a specific – often geographically defined⁵ – community, and thus validate and strengthen that community. Secondly, access by the community and participation of the community (and its constituent subgroups) are to be considered key-defining factors. ‘Ordinary people’⁶ are given the opportunity to have their voices heard. Topics that are considered relevant for the community can be discussed by members of that community, thus empowering those people by signifying that their statements are considered important enough to be broadcast.

The second approach to defining community media is based on the concept of alternative media, where it is emphasised that being ‘*third voice*’ (Seraes, 1999: 260) or the ‘*third type*’ (Girard, 1992: 2) is still a viable option for media organisations. This concept is built on a distinction between mainstream (public and commercial) media on the one hand and alternative media on the other, where alternative media are defined in a negative relationship towards mainstream media. This approach allows stressing that community media have alternative ways of organizing (often using a more horizontal structure), carry alternative discourse and representations, and make use of alternative formats and genres. Participation also plays a crucial role, as through the mechanism of self-representation this multiplicity of alternative voices is accomplished.

⁴ The object of this article – community media - of course complicates an unequivocal society-centred approach. Instead this type of approach should be interpreted as the societal contextualisation of (community) media.

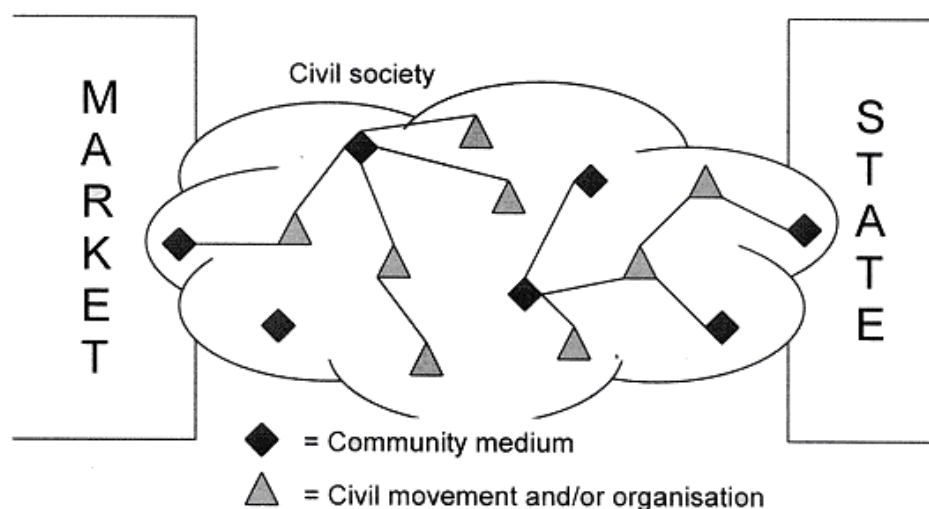
⁵ In for instance Amarc-Europe’s (1994) definition of community media, the geographical aspect is explicitly highlighted: ‘a ‘non-profit’ station, currently broadcasting, which offers a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community in the radio’. Nevertheless, also other types of relationships between medium and community are implied when Amarc-Europe uses the phrase ‘to which it broadcasts’.

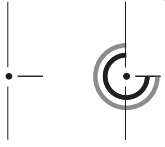
⁶ In other words: people who are not part of a societal elite (including politicians, academics, captains of industry, and media professionals) and those not considered being celebrities.

In the third (society-centred) approach community media organisations are seen as part of civil society, a societal segment considered crucial for the viability of democracy. Community media can firstly be seen as an ‘ordinary’ part of civil society, as one of the many types of organisations active in the field of civil society. The democratisation *of* media, as Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) call this, allows citizens to be active in one of many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life and to exert their rights to communicate. Community media also contribute to what Wasko and Mosco (1992: 13) call the democratisation *through* media, as they can offer different societal groups and communities the opportunity for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in public spaces, thus entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro-participation.

The rhizomatic approach to community media uses Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) metaphor to radicalise approach 2 and 3, by focusing on three aspects: their role as a crossroads of civil society, their elusiveness, and their interconnections and linkages with market and state. Community media are often part of large civil society networks, and act as meeting points and catalysts for a variety of organisations and movements. Both their embeddedness in a fluid civil society (as part of a larger network) and their antagonistic relationship towards the state and the market (as alternatives to mainstream public and commercial media) make the identity of alternative media highly elusive and fluid. In this approach it is argued that this elusiveness and contingency, which are ‘typical’ for a rhizome, are their main defining elements. And like rhizomes, alternative media tend to cut across borders and build linkages between pre-existing gaps. In the case of alternative media, these connections apply not only to the pivotal role alternative media (can) play in civil society. They also apply to the linkages alternative media (and other civil organisations) can establish with (segments of) the state and the market, without losing their proper identity and becoming incorporated and/or assimilated.

Figure 3: Civil society and community media as rhizome





Community Media and the Translocal

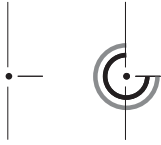
One of the major restrictions of community media is their confinement to the local, which traps them on one side of the local–global dichotomy. Community media are most often seen as small-scale and highly localised media organisations. The possibility of a sustained existence of large-scale and global community media is equally often put into question or even considered virtually unthinkable. This dominant mode of locality can be explained by the emphasis it receives in the interconnecting traditional media-centred approaches. The alternative media approach uses large-scale mainstream media as a reference point, almost automatically positioning community media on the other (small-scale) side of the binary. The community media approach draws on the dominant conceptualisations of community, which – as was mentioned above - refer to geography and ethnicity as structuring notions of collective identities or group relations. Through this focus on territorialised communities, the community media approach also tends to privilege the local.

The specificity of community media complicates their direct access to the global mediascapes. This does not imply that they are completely severed from the global. Similar to the above-described logics, the argument can be made that localised community media do not remain unaffected by the global. Here, Howley's (2005: 267) point that '*community media rather forcefully undermined the binary opposition of the categories "local" and "global" in two discrete, but interrelated ways*' is relevant. He refers to the '*historicizing and particularizing [of] the penetration of global forces into local contexts*' and to the '*endless stream of variation and diversity of cultural forms and practices around the world*' generated by community media. Nevertheless the dominant mode of locality seems to keep community media firmly locked within its 'essence' of being small-scale and a part of the local community.

This reduction structurally weakens community media in comparison to large-scale - and sometimes global - mainstream media. When they are so small, it is difficult for them to play a societal role, which reduces their relevance. Moreover, they become vulnerable in relation to the large mainstream media organisations and the political-regulative system. Quite often, they are simply invisible, not unlike one of Bey's (1985) Temporary Autonomous Zones. Paradoxically, their strength is also to be found in their being small-scaled. The close connection of community media with their respective local communities provides them with a diversity of content and collaborators. Their small scale makes them sensitive to the access and participation of their publics, and enables them to actually include more than token participatory practices, both at the level of content generation and management. In other words, it renders them alternatives to the mainstream.

This paradox, where the need for community media to (at least partially) overcome the local is combined with the equally important need to safeguard their local embeddedness also requires a theoretical reconfiguration. For this purpose, Appadurai's (1995) concept of the translocal can be put to work. The translocal allows theorising the moments where the local is effectively expanded by moving into the realm of the outer context, which is traditionally not considered to be part of the

local. In the case of community media, support is also found in the metaphor of the rhizome. Rhizomatic thought focuses on the heterogeneous and ever-changing interconnections, which are explicitly articulated against the arborescent structures of state and market. From this perspective, there is no necessary reason why the rhizome should stop at the edge of the local community.



Two Case Studies of Translocal Community Media Practices

In order to argue that community media indeed sometimes transcend the local (and that the translocal is not just a mere theoretical fiction) I now turn to two case studies, which will allow highlighting the existence of the translocal in everyday community media practice. The first case study is based on a Belgian online database exchange project called RadioSwap (see also Carpentier, 2007); the second case study deals with community Wi-Fi.

/ 1. Case 1: RadioSwap

A number of projects in Europe and the USA have focused on facilitating the exchange of audio content by community media organisations. For instance the Stream on the Fly project⁸ is an Austrian based collaboration of radio stations and companies, such as Public Netbase. Following several years of trialling, they now have an operational *'open-source, station-management interface, a programme exchange platform and a portal engine for radio programme reuse'* (Alton-Scheidl et al. 2005: 1). Similarly, the One World Radio project and its more than 1000 members has become *'a global radio community sharing programmes and ideas on development'*.⁹

Yet another of these radio exchange projects, and the object of this case study, is called RadioSwap. The project was initiated (on 1 January 2001) by six Belgian community radio stations - Radio Campus (Brussels), Urgent (Ghent), Radio Panik (Brussels), Radio Centraal (Antwerp), FMBruessel (Brussels) and Radio Universitaire Namuroise (Namur) – who received a Belgian federal government grant. As already indicated, all six of these media organisations are based in Belgian cities.

The mindsets of these radio stations are often transnational: their programmes feature music from every continent and their connections with new social movements allow them to cover events and processes from all over the world. In this fashion they try to contribute to the alternative ideoscapes that circulate through global civil society and transnational social movements. Their sensitivity towards the problems of marginalized societal subgroups¹⁰ allows members of those subgroups, from a diversity of nationalities and origins to have their 'own' broadcasts and gain the ability to have their voices heard. Moreover, many of these community media organizations have links with national and transnational media organizations.

But their broadcasts are simultaneously locally embedded, through the wide number of individuals that live their lives in the urban communities of these Belgium cities. This of course includes those

⁷ Of course, other types of media organisations, like Independent Media Centres could also be used a case study material.

⁸ <http://sof.berlios.de/>

⁹ <http://radio.oneworld.net>

¹⁰ Item five of the 1994 *Community Radio Charter for Europe* of the *World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters* (AMARC-Europe, 1994) states that: *'[Community radio stations] provide a right of access to minority and marginalized groups and promote and protect cultural and linguistic diversity.'*

radio producers that have reached Belgium in the slipstream of the global ethnoscares. Their news and current affairs programmes combine local with national and international news items, and many producers have close relationships with local (branches of) civil society organisations, and with small local businesses like records shops and café's. Finally, these media organisations and their participatory approaches require a (relatively) high involvement from their staff, which mostly lives nearby.

The RadioSwap project makes use of a website to organise the exchange of the radio content these people produce. On their first website the following description of its main objective, written by the project coordinators, could be found: *'The Radioswap.net project aims to develop a technical as well as organisational system that will allow staff working for non-commercial and community radio stations – inside and outside Belgium – to exchange radio programs via the internet'* (RadioSwap, 2001).

On RadioSwap's second website, which was mounted in 2002 to replace the first, the project objectives are regrouped under five headings: Seeking multilingualism; Directed at volunteers; Giving a greater place to forms of self-management; Dreaming of co-productions, partnership and news exchanges; and Willing to experiment (RadioSwap, 2002). The first item refers to the participatory nature of the radio stations involved; their staff work voluntarily without remuneration to produce the radio programmes. ■

The RadioSwap database itself is also based on this participatory model. The RadioSwap technology and procedures are built on the idea of self-(data)management. The password-protected interface is meant to facilitate radio producers to record, digitise, compress (using MP3 or OGG Vorbis) and upload the material they have themselves produced (see Figure 4). On the RadioSwap-website, this preference is described in the self-management item:

The point of all of this is not to build a 'normalised network' such as some of the networks we can find in the commercial radio world. It is rather to develop a common tool whose management would be shared and that the radio stations and their collaborators could use according to their needs in order to reinforce their singularity and specificities. (RadioSwap, 2002)

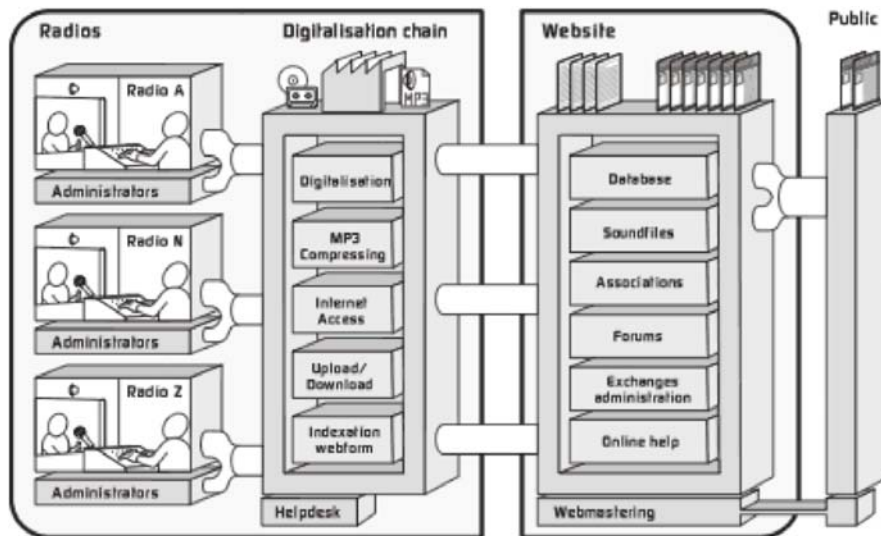
The project not only aims to *'give the radio collaborators an opportunity to spread their programs beyond their original radio'* (RadioSwap, 2002), but also wants to construct and enhance networks among different individuals and organisations.

Another objective of the project is to make it possible to use the system to set up co-productions between radio stations, or with outside partners. The system should allow collaborators to work together from afar on the same contents and the same programs, each one using her/his own way of working, with his/her own culture. (RadioSwap, 2002)

RadioSwap is no longer restricted to the six original founding radio stations. In April 2007 RadioSwap included 81 radio stations or affiliated organisations and 209 registered users based in Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Hungary, Macedonia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, the UK and the Czech Republic. They have uploaded 982 radio programs, which accounts for 47GB of audio.

■ During the project, the position of FMBussel, one of the radio stations, changed when the north Belgian government decided to subsidise it. As a result, the number of voluntary staff was drastically reduced.

Figure 4: RadioSwap production model



RadioSwap (2001)

By using the capacities of the internet, RadioSwap aims to create a new community, besides the urban communities that these radio stations want to serve with their broadcasts. This community of radio producers is a new network that transcends the local, but still remains firmly rooted in it. More than simply being global, RadioSwap is - through its architecture - a translocal community of interest, based on the exchange of self-produced audio that crosses the frontiers of the local, without losing its connection to it. Access to this community is negotiated through membership of the partner radio stations, which are open-access (albeit to different degrees) organisations. Once access is granted, the radio producers can upload and download content (on a voluntary basis), thus facilitating the circulation of alternative content and adding nodes to the rhizome. Although this form of gate-keeping creates access restrictions, it also shapes and structures the sub-rhizome RadioSwap (as part of the larger rhizome of community media) and thus allows for the generation of new nodes.¹²

Figure 5: RadioSwap logo



This does not imply that RadioSwap does not have any problems and restrictions. The first restriction is the size of the network. Although the numbers (of members, both individual and collective, and of hours of uploaded content) are impressive at first sight, the core group of regular users is limited. Moreover, as the Radia network¹³ is also linked to RadioSwap, a sub-community of radio artists has been formed, which remains relatively disconnected from the other radio producers. Secondly, the project suffers from the fallacy of a technology-centered approach to human interaction. The interface is seen as sufficient stimulation for community building, which can only be considered to be illusionary. This constraint is further strengthened by the (unavoidable) top-down approach used for (applying for) the project, reducing the possibility for the radio producers to appropriate the database, and adapt it to their specific needs. This approach also makes the project a target for the deterritorialising strategies from (the more radical of) the radio stations, which usually target the state and the market. The radio producers – 25 of them were interviewed (see Carpentier, 2007) -

¹² This argument shows the dialectics of generative/productive and restrictive power practices, as theorised by Foucault (1978).

¹³ Radia is a network of radio art producers, see <http://www.radia.fm/>.

often appear to be a disinterested and detached ‘community’ of self-interest, but their remarks are only translations of the structural constraints that they have to face; and not necessarily signs of a total lack of interest.

The RadioSwap project is a very modest contribution to the ever-expanding network of community media organisations and other civil society organisations. The radio stations and radio producers remain embedded in their communities and produce the programmes that they want to produce for their communities. Through RadioSwap they are offered the opportunity to overcome localism and isolationism, to reach out to what is usually seen as context and to be no longer utterly confined to the local. Although the global component is potentially present – because of the semi-global access offered by the internet – it only provides the radio stations with limited added value. The main emphasis is on the local, as a site of embeddedness where locality is simultaneously transcended. In summary, RadioSwap is an example of glocalisation, but even more of translocalisation. Despite its problems, RadioSwap remains an important endeavour because it has explicitly incorporated this unattainable – at least on the short run – horizon. RadioSwap not only illustrates the difficulties that community media have to face when striving for a translocal identity, it is a materialisation of the need and the dream to move beyond the local rhizome, to follow the trajectory of global civil society, and to offer a viable alternative for the global (media) market of the future.

/ 2. Case 2: Community Wi-Fi

The second case study focuses on a slightly different form of (community) media use. In contrast to the RadioSwap project, which groups ‘old’ media organisations, community Wi-Fi (or Community Wireless Networks) is very much aimed at providing internet access. As is illustrated by one of its main proponents in the U.S. – Free Press – the concept of community Wi-Fi is very much embedded within the (sometimes problematic¹⁴) discourse of the digital divide:

High-speed Internet access is fast becoming a basic public necessity — just like water, gas or electricity. But far too many Americans are finding themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide, unable to get connected or afford expensive commercial service. Community Internet is the answer. (Free Press, 2005: 1)

The advent of Wi-Fi has of course generated a wide variety of initiatives to provide wireless access. Barranca (2004) divided the initiatives that make use of the unlicensed spectrum into three categories, which surprisingly well fit the Gramscian state/market/civil society model. He names these three categories as follows: the community broadband networks, municipal wireless broadband and commercial wireless broadband. The apparent neutrality of this enumeration hides the antagonistic relationship between commercial Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISP) and community Wi-Fi, through which community Wi-Fi is partially defined, as for instance Flickenger’s (2003: 6) statement illustrates:

People who are fed up with long lead times and high equipment and installation costs are pooling their resources to provide wireless access to friends, family, neighbours, schools, and remote areas that will likely never see broadband access otherwise. As difficult as the WISP nightmare example has made this idea sound, people everywhere are learning that they don’t necessarily need to pay their dues to the telco to make astonishing things happen.

¹⁴ See Carpentier (2003).

Wireless activists built their first free-access networks through the *'triumph of unreflective accidents'* (Sandvig, 2004: 591), where Wi-Fi hot spots came into being *'by default and not by design'* (ibidem) as initially users did not always realise that they were granting 'strangers' access. Through a combination of primitive signs (a practice called warchalking – romantically linked to old U.S. hobo signs) and more sophisticated mapping database techniques (see Figure 6), the open nodes can be traced and used. Despite a number of protective strategies (like the development of NoCatAuth¹⁵) the fear for abuse has limited the growth potential of community Wi-Fi, especially because WISPs have incessantly pointed to these risks. As Sandvig (2004: 591) argues: *'The problem has been that Wi-Fi, unlike air, is already understood as private property.'* Through the discourse of thievery (and more specifically 'Wi-Fi-theft'), the commodification of the spectrum is also protected by the state; witness the court cases against 'Wi-Fi-thieves'¹⁶. This of course strongly contrasts against the gift economy of what Sandvig (2004: 591) calls the *'open wireless community'*.

Figure 6: Wi-Fi Access between Antwerp and Brussels: Map on nodeDB.com

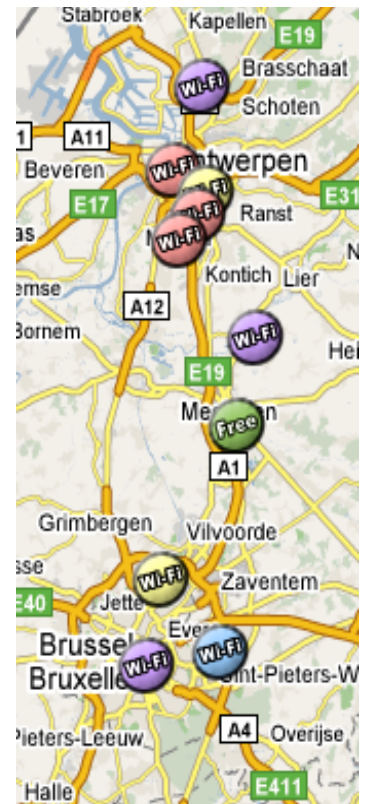


Figure 7: Wireless Antwerpen building a new node in Berchem (Belgium)



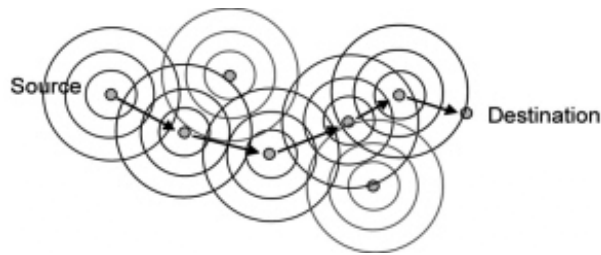
Wireless Antwerpen (2004)

The problems related to the absence of mutual consent has led Wi-Fi activists to develop their own networks, permanently scouting for (opportunities for) new nodes to add them to these networks. This has not structurally altered the core philosophy of community Wi-Fi, as is illustrated by the two main guiding principles (respecting equality and enabling free access to a citizen's agora) of one of the Belgian groups, RéseauCitoyen (2006a – emphasis in original):

Nous prétendons que **l'égalité entre citoyens** est un incontournable parmi les principes que nous nous engageons à respecter. [...] Le second principe défendu par RéseauCitoyen est l'établissement d'une **agora citoyenne** à l'accès libre et gratuit. C'est-à-dire dont les barrières d'entrées soient les plus basses possibles.

¹⁵ NoCat Authentication allows for user identification, in order to increase (community Wi-Fi) network security, see <http://nocat.net/>
¹⁶ See for instance: <http://www.techdirt.com/articles/20070417/112235.shtml>. In April 2007 the BBC reported (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/hereford/worcs/6565079.stm>) that in Redditch (Worcestershire, UK) two people were arrested and cautioned for 'using people's wi-fi broadband internet connections without permission.' The news article ends with the following two sentences: 'West Mercia Police said people with wi-fi should follow security advice given by their internet provider. ISPs recommend that wi-fi users secure their wireless networks.'

Figure 8: Mesh networks



RéseauCitoyen (2006b)

Both the involuntary and voluntary networks are characterised by their rhizomatic nature. The technology that supports the rhizome is often referred to as a *mesh network*, which is based on multiple and overlapping Wi-Fi access points, linked to each other in a dynamic and non-hierarchical way. As the leaflet (Figure 9) illustrates, this technological model is integrated in the community Wi-Fi ideology.

Figure 9: Free Press and Champaign-Urbana Wireless Network (2004) Community Wireless Networks Leaflet

COMMUNITY WIRELESS NETWORKS

Affordable High-speed Public Broadband

Wireless offers many advantages over wired systems for building new broadband networks. Of all the wireless alternatives, a dynamic, wireless mesh using open sources and open standards offers greatest adaptability, highest capacity, lowest cost, and greatest benefits to the community. Each of the four facets of this "best practice network" — wireless, mesh, dynamic and open — is critical to building the next generation of community-wide communications networks with public service priorities.

WIRELESS

Over the next decade, cost-saving wireless technologies will inevitably replace wired systems. For 1/10th to 1/100th the cost of tearing up roads or setting up poles, rooftop antennas with "smart radio" technology can be easily installed to deliver services using the airwaves. As more users come online and the wireless cloud spreads over an entire community, the technology becomes cheaper, faster, and more robust.

WIRED

Wired technology has dominated the communications landscape since the age of the telegraph. In wired networks, cables strung along telephone poles or buried underground deliver services through physical connections to individual buildings. These wired networks are very costly and require enormous amounts of labor to deploy and maintain. Although antiquated, wired technology is deeply entrenched in current communications systems. It continues to be both expensive and disruptive to build.

HUB & SPOKE

Like the spokes on a bicycle wheel, "hub-and-spoke" wireless systems connect users with line-of-sight antennas to a centrally-located broadcast tower. Clients who cannot see the hub from their building cannot join the network. These networks are resource-intensive. They require a tower, specialized broadcasting equipment, and constant maintenance of the hub, an extremely vulnerable, single point of failure.

MESH


Robust and reliable, mesh wireless systems offer multiple points of connection to the network and no central tower. Mesh users can bypass obstacles like hills and trees by using different signal paths. Mesh networks are easily expandable at very low cost, and they have no single point of failure. Mesh networks also feature shorter distances between nodes, which means each antenna can broadcast at lower power, creating less interference and allowing more users to communicate simultaneously.


CLOSED
Proprietary or "closed" networks do not communicate with each other. Even in a dynamic mesh system, these networks create unconnected wireless islands within a single neighborhood. Clients are often forced to overpay for incompatible equipment because only one manufacturer makes it. Proprietary network software stifles innovation and collaboration among entrepreneurs and programmers. Local developers are prohibited from modifying closed software with new innovations, fixing flaws, or closing security holes.

OPEN
The success of open access Internet technologies demonstrates how open standards and open source provide a foundation for building new wealth, a platform for innovation, and a basis for low-cost computing solutions. Open standards lead to interoperability of products, a necessity for efficient use of the public airwaves, and result in lower costs to consumers. Open source code lends itself to innovation and development, a huge advantage for local developers with new ideas for community applications.

STATIC
Once a cutting-edge technology, static wireless networks are now seen as difficult to plan, build, manage and expand. Developers must map out in advance the pathways that network signals will follow to ensure reliable service. This means that if an obstacle — like a growing tree — blocks a user's connection, or if new users wish to come onto the network, the entire network may need to be reconfigured to enable signals to reach them. It is an inflexible system that is easily disrupted. The result is often an expensive, inefficient network with severe limitations on expansion.

DYNAMIC
A dynamic wireless network constantly adapts its wireless links to cope with new conditions. It automatically adjusts its pathways to integrate new homes and businesses and offers higher capacity to a wider coverage area. This kind of network is strengthened as the subscriber base grows. It changes patterns of use to bypass interference, blockage, or network congestion. Dynamic networks achieve higher resilience and flexibility than comparatively rigid and fragile static networks.

 www.cuwireless.net

 www.freepress.net

FOR MORE INFORMATION
To learn more about the technology involved in community wireless networks, or to see an example of such a network in action, visit www.cuwireless.net. To learn more about the importance of such networks for democratic communications, or to learn more about policies that can support such networks, visit www.freepress.net/wifi.

The rhizomatic nature of community Wi-Fi is not restricted to a technological model (which has - already some time ago - proven itself for the fixed internet) as the nodes of the network not only consist of antennas, computers, and software, but also of organised individuals. Again, in some cases, like RéseauCitoyen (2006a), the mode of organisation – reminiscent of anarchist models – shies away from hierarchal forms of decision-making, as is explained in their modus operandi:

Nous tentons l'exercice libertaire de ne pas avoir d'organe de décision institutionnalisé. Cela ne veut pas dire qu'aucune décision ne soit prise. Seulement que le mode de prise de décision et surtout de sa mise en oeuvre est l'affaire de chacun et plus de tous. Le leadership par l'exemple devient le mode de proposition et d'action privilégié. Aucune coercition n'est possible de la part du "pouvoir". Seul le consensus perdure. Pas de décisions collectives mais un résultat collectif résultant d'actions individuelles.

Other organisations – like Wireless Antwerpen – are structured more on the basis of an expert model, which brings along a more hierarchical form of decision-making. In these cases too, the hierarchies remain fairly horizontally structured, as these organisations are still staffed by volunteers, which reduces the abilities for top-down control. Despite the variations in organisational structures and cultures, these community Wi-Fi organisations provide the backbone of this alternative network. This (organised) core group is supported by an ‘*army of enthusiasts that never meet*’ (Sandvig, 2004: 588), which engages in cooperative action (for this reason they are also referred to as ‘co-ops’). These enthusiasts are often even unknown to these organisations.

As these organisations are often located in municipal areas, community Wi-Fi has a clear urban dimension. Linking community Wi-Fi to class – ‘*Wi-Fi co-ops often exist to provide free access to an inexpensive service for the rich*’ (Sandvig, 2004: 584) – Sandvig (ibidem) concludes that ‘*the bulk of Wi-Fi co-op activity is occurring in wealthier metropolitan areas.*’ The embeddedness of community Wi-Fi organisations in local civil society as a resource for volunteers and capital, often

Although there are attempts to bring these user communities together (see for instance <http://wifi.meetup.com/>).

positions community Wi-Fi in local urban communities, where they establish rhizomatic connections between technologies and human beings. Given its preference for low power transmitters, community Wi-Fi tends to stop at the edges of the city, as the volunteer density decreases and distances increase.

Figure 11: One of the Antwerp Nodes of Wireless Antwerpen



Wireless Antwerpen (2007a)

To take the case of Wireless Antwerpen as an example, this not-for-profit organisation was initiated in 2003 by Stefan Lambrechts (as '*a hobby that got out of hand*') and is based in an Antwerp suburb called Schoten. Wireless Antwerpen is building:

a fast, free and cheap wireless network in Antwerp and its environment (sic). This network is constructed by volunteers and sponsors that provide locations (high rooftops and masts) and/or hardware. (Wireless Antwerpen, 2007b)

At the time of writing, the core group of Wireless Antwerpen consisted out of 3 people, with a support group of about 30, mostly amateur radio operators and Linux programmers. They now have about 30 nodes, 14 of which are situated in Antwerp (see Figure 10), and three internet uplink points (with 20kB/user). The estimated number of daily users is 150 (Interview Stefan Lambrechts, July 11, 2007).

But again, the rhizome does not have to stop at the edge of the local community. Interestingly, Wireless Antwerpen is run by a number of amateur radio operators, which

has led to the introduction of elements of long-distance reach (which is characteristic for amateur radio culture) in the community Wi-Fi concept. This is symbolised by the variety of maps to be found on their website, that do not make use of the ‘traditional’ representation of mesh networks (via overlapping concentric circles), but all have linear connections between different nodes, with the distances clearly indicated. Exactly the fusion of both components (amateur radio broadcasting and Wi-Fi) has led to a translocal community Wi-Fi network, with interconnected nodes in different North Belgian cities¹⁸, linking city to city. As Figure 13 shows, one of the nodes is located in Brussels, near the Atomium.

Figure 10: The Antwerp network of Wireless Antwerpen



Wireless Antwerpen (2007a)

Figure 12: Wireless Antwerpen maps

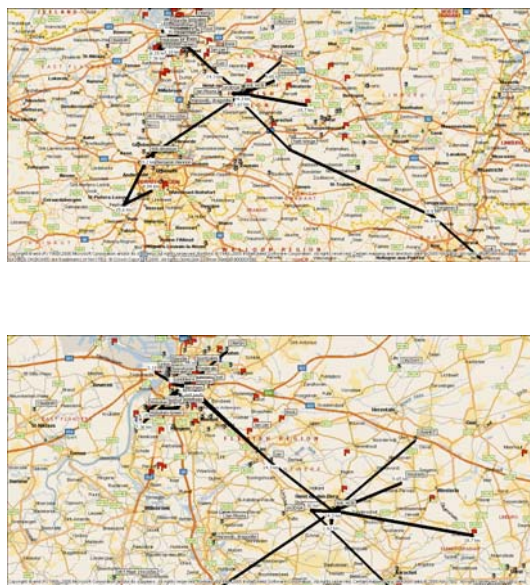


Figure 13: Node Atomium of Wireless Antwerpen



Wireless Antwerpen (2007a)

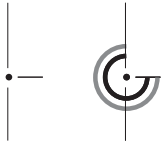
¹⁸ Beerzel, Brussel (Atomium), Diest, Herentals, Herk de Stad, Heist o/d Berg, Lier, Tielt-Winge and Tongeren are mentioned on the Wireless Antwerpen website.

Despite its translocal potential, community Wi-Fi is (not unlike community media) struggling for survival, as it has to face the ever-present commercial internet. Sandvig (2004: 596) refers to the redundancy problem, where community Wi-Fi is reduced to the role of a '*second Internet*.' He – slightly ironically – refers to the Faq of one of the British community Wi-Fi organisations, Consume, which states: '*Don't cancel your ISP account just yet.*' (Consume, quoted in Sandvig, 2004: 596). This reduces – again according to Sandvig (2004: 597) the map building to an '*aesthetic project*' and the entire community Wi-Fi endeavour to a '*community-building hobby*.'

These problems are further strengthened by the problems alternative media organisations often face. As most alternative media, community Wi-Fi remain vulnerable organisations, dependant on a limited number of volunteers. As Stefan Lambrechts of Wireless Antwerpen put it: '*If I disappear, the network will disappear.*' Another problem area are the sometimes-antagonistic relationship with the market and state, discrediting or incorporating¹⁹ the community Wi-Fi project. For instance Wireless Antwerpen lost most of its inner-city nodes in Antwerp when a commercial 'competitor' had its lawyers contact the proprietors of these Wi-Fi antenna sites.

Nevertheless, community Wi-Fi remains a good example of the translocal, where Wi-Fi activist organisations remain firmly embedded in their local communities, providing wireless internet access to their local users, whilst at the same time bypassing (and even transgressing) these localities by connecting different local networks by reverting to the technologies, practices and cultures of radio amateur broadcasting.

¹⁹ One example is <http://www.mywifizone.com/>, where Wi-Fi network 'owners' can '*make money from [their] WIFI network!*' by turning their network into a hotspot.



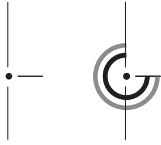
Conclusion

The RadioSwap and community Wi-Fi case studies show the complexities of the relationship between urban (community) media organisations, their geographical situatedness, and its boundaries. Cities are still part of our everyday life structures, providing the localities and places to live these everyday lives. Moreover, they are also the sites where urban communities and organisations thrive (or not).

But the notions of locality, place, community and organisation have changed in a world characterised by fluidity and contingency. As the boundaries that surround these notions (and practices) have opened up, we now need to look at '*place beyond place*' (Escobar, 2000: 168), locality beyond locality, community beyond community, and organisation beyond organisation. This does not imply that we need to give up on these notions, and focus exclusively on globality, space, society (to bring back Tönnies for a moment) and the individual. Small is still beautiful, and we need to continually establish ways to theorise and analyse how the local interacts with its boundaries and contexts.

Appadurai's translocal is one of these notions that incorporates the promise of conceptually structuring this interaction. The translocal allows us to think the ways the local moves beyond locality, without reducing the weight of the local in its definition. Both case studies are distinctively local in their situatedness in local structures and organisations, local participation and access, and local content production, but at the same time it would be reductive and impoverishing to reduce these case studies to their local nature. RadioSwap and community Wi-Fi have both found ways to move beyond the boundaries of their cities and to incorporate their larger contexts.

This does not imply that moving into the translocal is easy for community media organisations that act as alternatives to the mainstream. Both case studies also illustrate the difficulties these (always potentially vulnerable) organisations face when combining the safety of local-known with the familiar-unknown. Although the translocal component of RadioSwap and community Wi-Fi has materialised, these expanding rhizomes are still very much work in progress. This should not lead us to underestimate the material and symbolic nature of these translocal processes, as they will probably never cease to be work in progress.



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