Types of Community Multimedia Centres
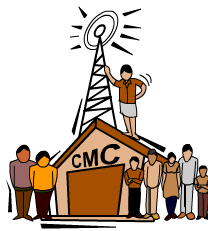
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In this chapter

- **How do we define a community multimedia centre?**

- **Types of CMCs**

- **Ownership of CMCs**

- **Start with what's already there**

Types of Community Multimedia Centres

How do we define a community multimedia centre?

Let's begin with the most general definition: a community multimedia centre (CMC) combines some form of local radio with telecentre facilities, under some form of community ownership with the aim to serve as a communication and information platform for the community's development needs.

The basic idea behind this model is to make maximum use of the synergies between the radio and telecentre components. The community harnesses radio's great reach and its potential for enabling local people to relay local content in locally-used languages; it then links these characteristics to the provision of computer training, access to internet and other digital resources. Radio becomes a very effective bridge between people especially those with low literacy levels and in rural, remote or deprived urban areas and the services offered by the telecentre.

Within this basic framework, CMCs can be of several different types, often determined by factors in the local, national or regional context. If, for example, national broadcasting legislation does not yet allow community radio to have access to the airwaves but allows unrestricted access to Internet or cable networks, then the radio component can be Internet or cable based. In another important area, that of community ownership, this principle which is common to all CMCs can be translated into a variety of practical arrangements.

It is useful to know about the different types of CMCs; this may help you to select an appropriate model for your community and also, each model has its own strengths and can offer examples of best practice, which may be taken up and tried within a different model.

Independent community radio and telecentre

The most widely practiced type of CMC has a community radio station sharing premises and all management and other structural arrangements with a telecentre. The radio usually broadcasts in FM between 8-18 hours a day within a radius of 10-50 kilometres. It is staffed mostly by volunteers and one or two permanent staff. It earns some income from announcements, messages and programmes paid for by individuals and organizations. The telecentre may have between 3-12 computers for public use with morning and late afternoon opening hours. It charges for Internet access, for scanning and photocopying, as well as for training courses. It also offers some services free or at discretionary rates to particular groups within the community, according to community needs and development priorities.

This type of CMC functions in many ways as a cooperative, earning revenue and seeking to achieve financial sustainability by balancing for-profit and not-for-profit activities. It usually has a high level of community involvement in its decision-making processes, through a steering committee, board of governors, core users' groups, local citizens' associations and so forth.

Another characteristic of this type of CMC is a high degree of self-reliance. The context is usually one of very little public support except at the municipal level. At one level, this can be a great advantage. It may mean that the community is truly in charge and empowered by having full ownership of its CMC.

A community multimedia centre (CMC) combines some form of local radio with telecentre facilities, under some form of community ownership with the aim to serve as a communication and information platform for the community's development needs.

On the down side, the resources of the CMC are often so stretched that it cannot deliver all the services it would like and, in particular, its radio contents are thin – with a lot of recorded music being played and few real radio productions. This means the radio is a less effective bridge to ICT for the community.

Daily *radio browsing* programmes offer a wonderful opportunity for mass, indirect access to the Internet. But it takes time and training, as well as good quality and affordable connectivity, for the radio presenters to be able to browse the Internet and produce a carefully researched and well-constructed radio-browsing programme on behalf of listeners.

Public service broadcaster

CMCs can play the part of a public service broadcaster as part of the national broadcast system, usually at the local or perhaps regional level. This is the case of Kothmale in Sri Lanka, UNESCO's pilot CMC from which other CMC models have developed.

Kothmale in Sri Lanka is the first CMC to introduce radio browsing.

At the outset these CMCs do not charge users for access to the computers, Internet or radio services. As with any media or ICT applications for development, the participation of local communities is essential in their capacity as listeners, users, facilitators, volunteers and peer trainers. In the case of Sri Lanka, listeners and ICT users are organized into local groups called knowledge societies with CMCs at their centre.

As a public service, this type of CMC does not offer commercial services such as fax, document binding, scanning and photocopying which is one of the mainstays of independent CMCs. The sustainability of the public service depends upon government support and a stable, long-term framework within which the CMC can develop. However, the introduction of public subsidies for Internet access is not common from one government to the next.

In terms of community ownership, the Kothmale example shows a form of ownership that is governmental in structure but community-based in practice, with a high level of community involvement alongside professionals who are public employees.

Cable and Internet based CMC

The next type of CMC we are going to look at is the CMC in countries where national legislation does not permit community radio to have access to the airwaves. These CMCs have to find alternatives to broadcasting; often with the ultimate aim of being able to switch to broadcast radio once there is a change in legislation, as radio has by far the greatest reach.

Internet radio is one possibility in these circumstances. Its major disadvantage is that access is limited to computer users. Its advantage is that users may often be able to access programmes at the time of their choosing, not only at the time of transmission. Internet radio encourages interactivity by giving the listener opportunities to respond to programmes, ask questions, vote in polls and so on, creating an added volume to the online component.

Cable based radio stations have been successful with the Namma Dhwani community radio in Budhikote, India. This cable-based CMC functions through a local operator to **cablecast**

community radio programmes to 400 subscribing households. Namma Dhwani is equipped with a simple radio studio, 2 computers, a small telecentre and an Internet connection with multimedia tools and is managed by a women's self-help group. The CMC is also connected to the local development resource centre, where daily community radio programmes address local information and communication needs, by drawing on a variety of multimedia resources.

The combined approach

Some CMCs have started to combine video, local cable network and print media with ICTs and radio while others combine several radio stations with one telecentre. This type of CMC is found in Mali, where up to three community and private FM radio stations are serving 50,000 - 250,000 people.

Building on existing resources and infrastructure, the CMC model in Mali introduces a telecentre within the premises of one radio station and arranges memoranda of understanding (MOUs) for organisational arrangements to ensure that all the radio stations are partners and beneficiaries of the telecentre facilities. It is important to make sure that this is really the case in practice.
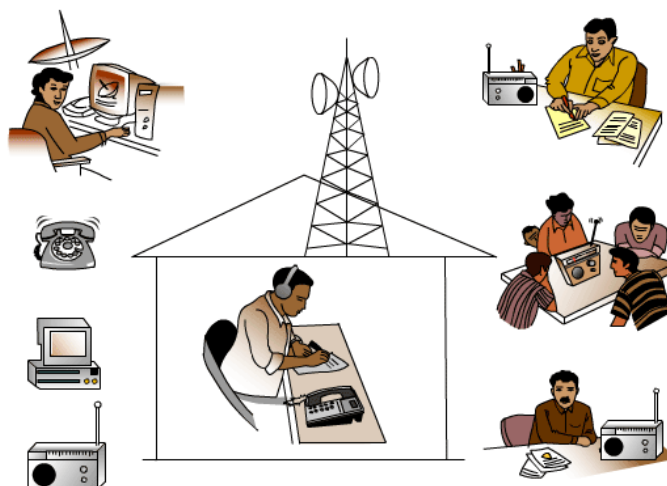
The advantage of this model is that it is highly cost-effective in the way it maximises the use of resources and the potential impact of ICT within the community where the population could certainly not sustain four or five CMCs. This approach also helps to federate the existing radio stations and encourages them to unite their forces around important development goals.

Community cultural centre

Yet another type of CMC is beginning to emerge within community cultural centres. These grassroots facilities are established through the UNESCO programme *Culture in the Neighbourhood* and offer an excellent base for the addition of a CMC. The community mobilisation and ownership process that went into setting up the cultural centre offers a good framework for the CMC.

A CMC within a cultural centre also benefits from the cultural approach to development, which organizes development activities around events – shows, gatherings, exhibitions and competitions. These draw on the traditional arts, crafts and creative skills of the community and are participation-centred. Such practices transfer very easily to radio and with sufficient resources and training, can also transfer to digital media.

Many other types of CMCs can be developed on the framework of community development structures such as community health information centres, farming and agricultural networks, youth clubs, environmental conservation initiatives or networks working for people with disabilities. Educational institutions especially offer good prospects for long-term sustainability.

Ownership of CMCs

When can a privately owned facility be considered a CMC? In theory, "community ownership" may be taken to exclude private ownership. In practice, there are cases where a private FM station, telecentre or CMC is fulfilling a community role, meeting community development needs and involving community members.

There are interesting examples of good practice in the private model that can be transferred to the community-owned CMC. In South Eastern Europe, for example, community radio is virtually non-existent, but private FM stations have flourished in the post-conflict period and often filled important community functions, such as helping to link or network refugees and displaced communities. FM stations are now opening telecentres with broader goals than those of the cyber café model formed by most telecentres. These new telecentres organize computer training with a strong focus on improving people's employment opportunities and they make a serious effort to obtain official recognition by delivering certified qualifications.

The International Computer Driver's Licence

The International Computer Driver's Licence (ICDL) demonstrates a person's competence in computing knowledge and skills. It covers the key concepts of computing, practical applications and use in the workplace and society. It consists of seven modules, each of which must be passed before the certificate is awarded. The modules include:

- Basic concepts of information technology
- Using the computer and managing files
- Word processing
- Spreadsheets
- Database
- Presentation
- Information and Communication

This competency standard is designed to assist people at work, home or in study, establish a recognised standard for everyone who uses a computer in a professional or personal capacity. Anyone regardless of age, education, experience or background can take part in the programme. No prior knowledge of IT or computer skills is needed to obtain the ICDL, which is based on a single agreed syllabus world-wide.

The European Computer Driver's Licence/ICDL Foundation in Dublin licenses a national or regional Licensee to use the concept and establish its programme. For example, the UNESCO Cairo Office is the designated Licensee for the operation of the ICDL programme in Egypt and other Arab States. The programme is being operated in more than 31 countries worldwide.

For more information contact t.shawki@unesco.org

In all regions of the world, there is a strong demand for CMCs to deliver recognised qualifications that improve people's job prospects. As all CMCs offer basic computer training, one possibility would be for them to deliver recognised courses such as the "computer drivers' license". In an ideal situation, as soon as a CMC attains facilities, services, and staff competency, it should be able to deliver recognised educational and training courses.

CMC network

The last type of CMC we will look at in this chapter (but undoubtedly not the last type that is beginning to emerge) is the CMC network. Obviously, any type of CMC can network and networking is strongly encouraged as a valuable support system of mutual benefit to all members for many activities, ranging from sharing and exchange of contents, to pooling resources for maintenance, joint training activities and exchange of experience and best practice.

In this example, a pre-existing network actually enabled the CMC development to be planned and implemented from the outset in all the details of its network dimension. A number of community radio stations in the Caribbean began networking, a few years ago, with the aim of establishing a radio programme exchange system. This type of network can make invaluable contributions as each radio station evolves into CMC.

The initial stations to add a telecentre from this network are in Jamaica, Cuba, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago. Others in other countries will follow.

Building a network from the outset satisfies many of the required inputs and support systems that cannot be supported by one CMC alone. Training is one of the most costly requirements and in the Caribbean network; Radio Toco CMC in Trinidad is being groomed to become the training hub. Radio Cocodrilo, Cuba, together with Radio Toco, Roots FM in Jamaica and Radio GED in Barbados are now starting to use a Multimedia for Caribbean Communities, (MCC) an interactive electronic network. In addition to the normal telecentre services, the MCC network will provide interactive training, e-forum networking, local content exchanges, e-learning interaction, as well as a number of creative and for-profit activities. See www.unescocaribbean.org/mcc for further information.

Narrowcasting

A good first step in community radio broadcasting

Community radio is the process of broadcasting at the micro level to a well-defined community in a small geographical area. "Narrowcasting" (as against "broadcasting") takes this concept to a further more micro level.

What is narrowcasting?

Narrowcasting can be done in several ways: a. A group of villagers sitting together and listening to a programme. But this time, the programme is not broadcast through a transmitter from a radio station, but played back from a tape in a cassette player. An audio programme which is played through loudspeakers set up at places where the community people gather e.g. village markets and exhibitions, public offices, meetings.

This has several advantages.

– You don't need a transmitter since you are not broadcasting.

– If you have not got a licence to broadcast, you can avoid any legal problems with the authorities by using narrowcasting.

– The people don't need radio receivers to listen to the programmes.

– In the case of audio cassette listening groups, since the group has come together voluntarily to listen to the programme, they are more motivated and focussed.

Adapted from Community Radio : The Voice of the People
Author Abdul Rahman Pasha; published by Voices
Email: voices@vsnl.com

Start with what's already there

The opening question of this chapter was: How do we define a community multimedia centre? Answers to that question will really emerge from the chapters that follow.

All of the examples above attempt to show that the CMC concept is flexible and adaptable. The reason for that adaptability is not only because it is necessary to adapt to the local context, but also because it is *better* to use existing community structures as a starting point. There can be as many types of CMC as there are types of active and thriving community development organisations.

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