

Community radio broadcasters in Germany and online archiving: Are we there yet?

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Captcha – Creative Approaches to Living Cultural Archives | October 2014

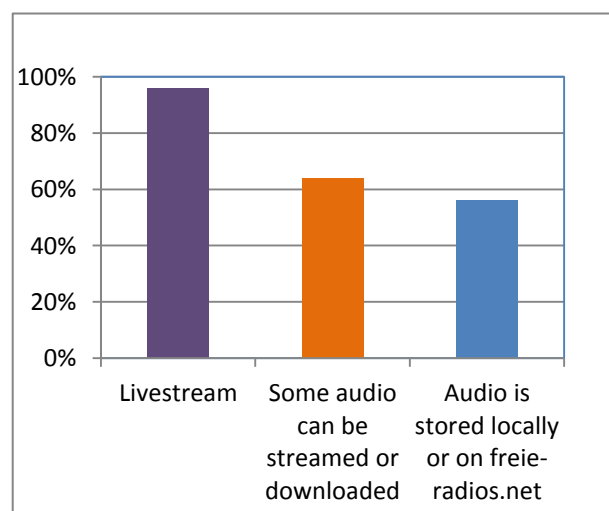
Many community radio makers would like to see more people listen to, and share, their programs. Many people who are interested in community media content would like to listen to their favourite programs when and where they want. The growth of online broadcasting and sharing has created ever more possibilities to make both of that possible – and support the online preservation of historical content in the process. But creating the website structures and channels for that costs time and effort. How far are community radio stations going?

The research being conducted as part of the Captcha project focuses especially on identifying examples of good practice in community media archiving, and we are interviewing coordinators and program makers to discover what hurdles they are facing and what solutions they have come up with. But to get some quantitative sense of where most stations stand at the moment, it's also worth looking at all stations in one country and see what they are publishing and sharing online.

In this post, I'm looking at Germany – a convenient example because the country's community radio organizations are organized in a national umbrella organisation, the Bundesverband Freier Radios (BFR). It's also an interesting example because the BFR facilitates an online program exchange platform, Freie-Radios.net, which might present an added incentive – and tool – for stations to upload their broadcasts. With a relatively well-established community media network, the German stations might be expected to have advanced further than most, but at the same time Germany doesn't have the sheer range and numbers of community media as [the United Kingdom](#).

Live streaming

A live stream of current broadcasts has become a near-universal feature for German community media. The BFR has a total of [31 member organizations](#), but a number of those are initiatives rather than broadcasters, and others broadcast only a specific program on another (usually public) radio station. Excluding those, as well as broadcasters that seem no longer to be active and/or don't have a website, leaves a selection of 25 members. One of those, Onda, doesn't broadcast live, instead producing customized programming for broadcasting on other community stations. The other 24 all have a live stream.



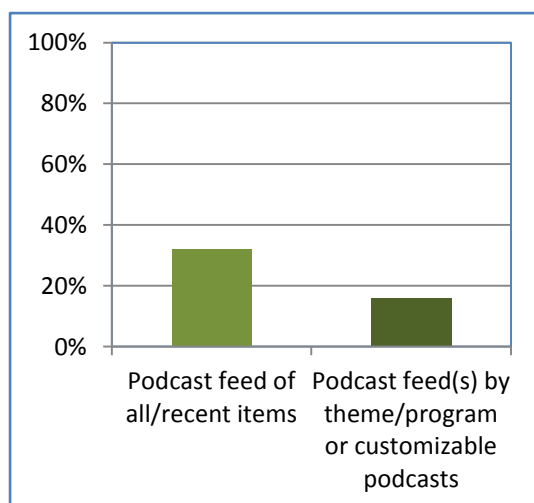
Uploading audio content

A clear majority of stations also have at least some audio from past broadcasts available on their website for streaming and/or downloading. While there is no consensus among community radio program makers and activists that seeking broader audiences online should necessarily be a goal for its own sake, this number suggests that some desire for sharing audio content online is widespread.

Much of this uploading, however, is limited in scope. Radio Pi in Berlin, for example, presents a selection of music that was [recorded live](#) in its studio. Radio Unerhört in Marburg provides an [embedded playlist](#) with a dozen or so recent items. The website of Freies Radio Wiesental features [a "Download" page](#) with one long list of MP3 files with descriptions and size and date info, which can be played inline. Radio StHörfunk constitutes a typical example: news items on [its homepage](#) often have embedded audio files, but items are not categorized or tagged and cannot be accessed by date, program or subject. For that, the station refers to its archive on Freie-Radios.net.

Almost all the 16 community media which shared at least some audio online are uploading it to either their own website or the Freie-Radios.net website. This is noteworthy because elsewhere in Europe, we have come across a widespread practice of uploading content to commercial third party services such as Soundcloud, Mixcloud or iVoox, and then embedding or linking to the files or playlists on their own sites. Individual volunteers at German stations are definitely also using such sites to upload their own shows, but stations as a whole rarely do. Considering the pitfalls inherent to depending on third-party sites (lack of control, customizability, or guarantee of continued and unchanged service), this is encouraging, as any station that once uploaded content to MySpace will affirm. It could also be interpreted as evidence that the Freie-radios.net site is successfully fulfilling one of its roles. Four stations, for example, do not upload their audio files to their own website at all (or only the most recent ones), and instead embed the audio they uploaded to Freie-Radios.net or link to the broadcasts there.

Podcast feeds



It's a long way, however, from uploading some selection of audio content to creating a tool or system that allows visitors to find and listen to past broadcasts more systematically. One simple, popular tool for small radio stations to let their audience listen on-demand as well as live is a podcast/RSS feed of recent broadcasts. Eight of this sample's German community stations do so.

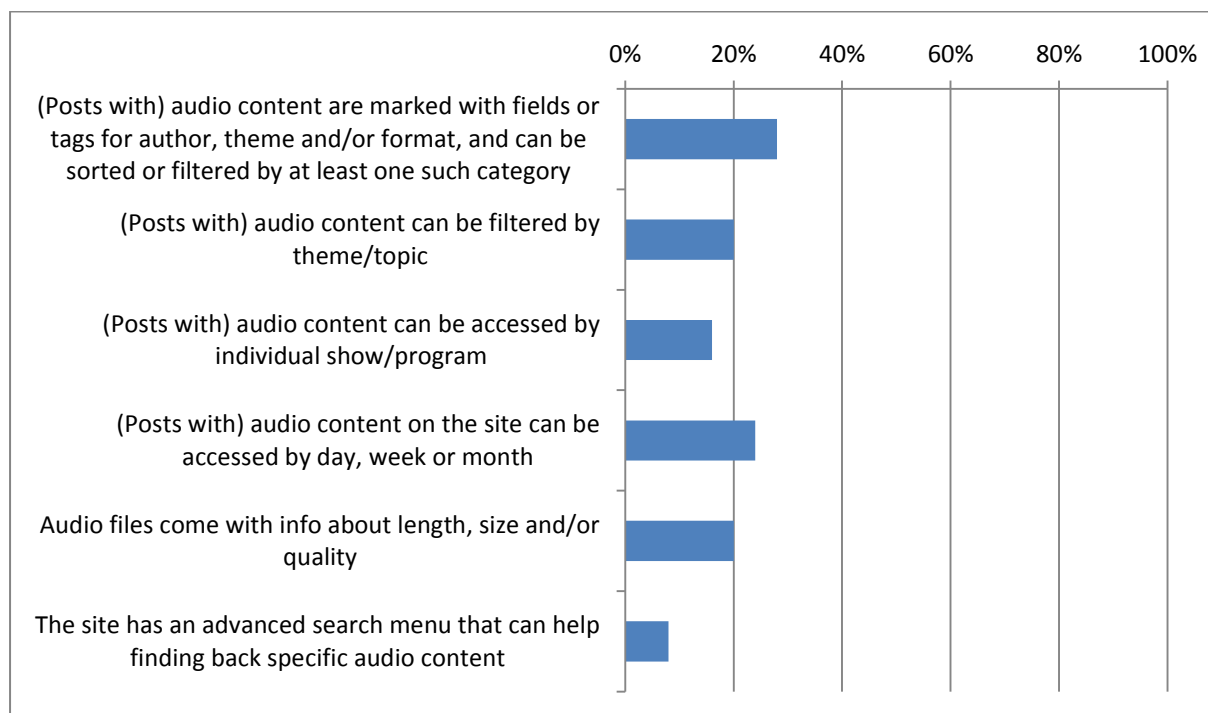
Only four, however, take a crucial and relatively easy further step to accommodate listeners and offer one or more podcast feeds for a specific programs or specific themes. At [Radio Dreyeckland](#), for example, you can subscribe to a

podcast feed of all content, only its “Newsflash”, or only complete broadcasts. Onda, the single online-only entity in this sample, is also the only one to [give users maximum control](#): you can subscribe to specific feeds for a handful of individual programs or series, but also compile your own personal podcast feed. Onda produces and disseminates current affairs programs about Latin-America, and as website visitor you can select a country, language, type of content (interviews, reportage, et cetera), particular series and/or free text search item to access a feed of only that content which exactly matches your interests.

Towards an online archive

Creating a podcast feed by itself does not allow listeners to find back individual past content by date, show or theme. Only a small minority of these German broadcasters have conducted some form of online archiving that makes that possible. Only around one in five offer a way to access past audio content by topic, program, and/or date, and some of those offer one or the other of these possibilities but not all.

On the website of Tübingen’s Freies Radio Wüste Welle, for example, you can access an overview of items from a specific editorial team –[the local affairs program, the women’s program](#) – and filter items by date or subject within that list, but there is no way to access all the station’s items by date or subject. In total, 28% of the stations use some form of categorization or tagging to mark individual content by theme, format or author, and make it possible to filter or sort content by at least one of those things.



A dilemma of matching the needs of different audiences

A review of these sites also reveals a conflict between two practical needs.

On the one hand, stations want to share news or information about any number of shows they are broadcasting. This can take any form, ranging from news items about special programs or events to a systemized program archive where listeners can find information about the content and host of any past broadcast. Sometimes there will be audio to embed in those items or pages - and often there might not be. On the other hand, visitors who are specifically interested in finding broadcasts to listen to on their phone, tablet or computer will want to browse or search audio content only.

At the moment, it's not yet often that both of those needs are met. The minority of stations which conduct some form of archiving of past content on their website, categorizing and/or tagging the descriptions of past broadcasts, often provide no way to access only those items that have audio content.

This is not necessarily anyone's "fault". Online content tends to expand organically, and this is even more so for largely volunteer-based organizations than for business entities. The scope and structure of a station's online content might have grown from a desire to meet one of a disparate online audience's needs (e.g. finding back basic information about any broadcast), which turns out to be ill-fitted for meeting another (e.g. a new generation of mobile users seeking to mix and match audio content).

Adding a "contains audio"-type category is the simplest solution and doesn't require any advanced design, as [coloRadio's podcasts page](#) illustrates – though even then, our interviews confirmed, retroactively categorizing content is not realistic for community stations. Meanwhile, Radio Corax (one of the Captcha project's partners) has experimented with establishing separate, thematic subsites. While the main Corax site only has a live stream, you can listen to a wealth of interviews and broadcasts on sites like [Lokal.radiocorax.de](#) and [Wendefokus.de](#). There are no advanced search options, but the use of categorizations and/or tags and substantive summary descriptions mean these sites also fulfil more of a third objective of online archiving: preservation of historically interesting material. This is especially true for the [Wendefokus](#) site, which presents interviews about people's experiences in 1989 (and has [recently been relaunched](#)).

Design vs. detail?

Among German community media, the full online archive experience, in which programs or snippets from programs are uploaded, natively hosted, and categorized, and can be accessed by theme, program and date as well as explored through advanced search options, still remains elusive. Might the possibility to instead refer visitors to [Freie-radios.net](#) not solely be a blessing, but also a brake on initiatives that would otherwise unfold? On the one hand it's only thanks to the Freie-Radios platform that many of the smaller stations have the chance to engage in any kind of online archiving. Moreover, the relative thoroughness of its archiving practices constitutes an example of good practice. On the other hand, it doesn't, in

its current form, serve a broader, more casual online and mobile audience's interest in browsing and sampling audio content from different sources. Its target use, the site's design suggests, firmly remains the exchange of program files among station coordinators.



Although similarly focused on radio stations themselves rather than their audiences, one of BFR's member organizations also comes closer than most to offering the full archive experience. On [the site of Onda](#), the Berlin-based "Agencia Radiofónica Latinoamericana-Europa," you can access all of its programs by year and month and sort them by date, author, length and series. On an advanced search page, results can be filtered by country/region, format, series, language, dates, and authors. Clicking on any item, you can see all details and both stream or download the program, and as mentioned above podcast feeds are highly customizable. However, as with the Freie-Radios.net website, the site's structure, design and writing seem to be aimed squarely at fellow station managers, and less suited for pulling in the broader, ever growing online audience of casual listeners. The dilemma thus remains, especially for community media with limited funding: how to marry this level of detail and customization with public- and mobile-friendly design?