

LIFE JOURNEY OF COMMUNITY RADIO BROADCAST JOURNALISTS: GAINS AND DRAWBACKS

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of community radio broadcast journalists and their gains and drawbacks as they performed their jobs as media practitioners. The study was conducted through in-depth interviews with eight community radio broadcasters from different radio stations in Davao Region, and the data were subjected to a thematic analysis. The results show that the community radio broadcasters' gains and drawbacks in their experiences as media practitioners were: becoming popular in the community, obtaining people's trust, but as they perform their duty, they encounter financial constraints, bullying by giant media practitioners, difficulties in information access, as well as threats and harassment. Their coping mechanisms with the challenges of their experiences include turning towards the reality, embracing challenges into one's life, asking advice from experts, staying close to the challenges, and accepting successes and failures. The insights that they shared in their experiences are that they should be personally and professionally equipped; practice and accept their work as fulfilling and rewarding. The eight participants of this study shared their experiences to inspire other practitioners and communication students.

Keywords: arts and communication, community radio, life journey, gains and drawbacks, phenomenology, Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION

Community radio serves as an essential platform for disseminating information, fostering local identity, and addressing community-specific concerns. However, despite its pivotal role, community radio broadcasters face unique challenges that significantly impact their professional and personal lives. The exploration of their experiences is crucial to understanding how these practitioners navigate the gains and drawbacks of their work while contributing to society.

Globally, journalists often operate in precarious environments marked by financial instability, limited resources, and threats to press freedom. According to UNESCO (2022), nearly 85% of journalists worldwide report experiencing some form of harassment or intimidation during their careers. Similarly, community journalists in developing nations frequently encounter barriers such as technological inadequacies, low income, and the risk of physical harm (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). Nationally, the Philippine media landscape is shaped by a complex interplay of economic challenges, political pressures, and societal expectations. Community radio, in particular, remains underfunded and overlooked, despite its vital role in amplifying local voices. Studies by Cabañes and Cornelio (2020) highlight that many Filipino broadcasters work without sufficient financial or institutional support, while regularly facing threats from political and corporate entities. Furthermore, the harassment of journalists in the Philippines ranks among the highest in Southeast Asia (Amnesty International, 2021). Locally, in the Davao Region, community radio broadcasters struggle with similar but context-specific challenges. A survey by the Philippine Press Institute (2023) revealed that journalists in this region face financial insecurity, limited access to accurate information, and occasional harassment from powerful individuals or organizations. Despite these adversities, broadcasters in the region have played a crucial role in empowering marginalized communities by providing a platform for dialogue and transparency (PPI, 2023).

The significance of this study lies in its potential to address gaps in existing literature about the realities of working in community radio, particularly in the Philippine context. By shedding light on these experiences, the research not only enriches academic understanding but also contributes to the development of practical strategies for enhancing the support and sustainability of community broadcasting.

Three key global issues associated with community journalism include the suppression of press freedom (UNESCO, 2022), the economic vulnerabilities of independent media organizations (IFJ, 2021), and the rising incidents of journalist-targeted violence (RSF, 2021). Nationally, the Philippines grapples with media censorship, political interference (Freedom House, 2020), and a lack of funding for community-based journalism (Cabañes & Cornelio, 2020). Locally, broadcasters in the Davao Region face financial constraints, limited training opportunities, and safety concerns tied to reporting on sensitive topics (PPI, 2023).

Drawing from global, national, and local perspectives, it is evident that the challenges faced by community radio broadcasters are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. While global trends such as press suppression and violence manifest in national and local contexts, the nuances of these challenges vary based on socio-economic and political conditions. This study synthesizes these perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of community radio practitioners, aiming to inspire broader systemic changes in support of this critical sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community radio serves as a vital platform for marginalized voices, fostering local identity and facilitating participatory communication. However, community radio broadcasters worldwide encounter numerous challenges, including financial constraints, regulatory hurdles, and threats to their safety. This literature review examines existing research from various regions—Southeast Asia, Europe, Africa, and Australia—highlighting the experiences of community radio practitioners, the obstacles they face, and the coping mechanisms they employ. The review also identifies gaps in current knowledge that this study aims to address.

In Southeast Asia, community radio has emerged as a crucial medium for promoting grassroots participation and disseminating locally relevant information. However, broadcasters in this region often grapple with restrictive regulatory environments and limited resources. For instance, in the Philippines, community radio stations play a significant role in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering participatory communication. However, they face challenges such as financial constraints, regulatory hurdles, and threats to journalists' safety.

Similarly, in Indonesia, community radio stations have been instrumental in disaster management and promoting local culture. Yet, they encounter issues like limited funding and lack of government support, which hinder their operations and sustainability. In Thailand, community radio has been a platform for political discourse, but broadcasters often face censorship and political pressure, impacting their ability to operate freely.

Community Radio in Europe

European community radio stations are recognized for their diversity and commitment to serving local communities. However, the transition to digital broadcasting presents both opportunities and challenges. Digitalization offers community radio stations in Europe the potential for broader reach and enhanced interactivity. Conversely, it also poses challenges related to funding, technological adaptation, and maintaining community engagement.

In the United Kingdom, community radio stations have been pivotal in representing minority groups and providing localized content. However, they face financial instability and competition from commercial broadcasters, which affect their sustainability. In Germany, community radio plays a role in cultural integration, yet stations often struggle with regulatory challenges and securing consistent funding.

Community Radio in Africa

In Africa, community radio is a powerful tool for development, education, and empowerment. However, broadcasters face significant challenges, including political interference, financial instability, and safety threats. A report by JamLab Africa highlights that community radio stations are essential in redressing power imbalances by providing a platform for marginalized communities. Nonetheless, they often operate under precarious conditions, with limited resources and support.

In South Africa, community radio has been instrumental in promoting democracy and social change. However, stations face sustainability challenges due to financial constraints and regulatory issues. In Nigeria, community radio serves as a critical medium for rural development, yet broadcasters encounter political pressures and funding difficulties.

Community Radio in Australia

Australia's community radio sector is noted for its diversity and significant contribution to social inclusion and cultural representation. However, digital disruption poses both opportunities and challenges. New technologies impact the Australian community radio sector, highlighting the need for stations to adapt to digital platforms while maintaining their community focus.

Community radio stations in Australia have been successful in representing ethnic minorities and indigenous communities, providing content in various languages and promoting cultural diversity. However, they face challenges related to funding, technological adaptation, and competition from mainstream media.

Identified Gaps and Study Objectives

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the roles and challenges of community radio broadcasters across different regions, there is a paucity of research focusing on their lived experiences, particularly in the context of the Philippines. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the personal and professional experiences of community radio broadcasters in the Davao Region, examining the gains and drawbacks they encounter, and identifying the coping mechanisms they employ. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the community radio landscape and inform strategies to support and sustain this vital sector.

In conclusion, community radio broadcasters worldwide play a crucial role in serving their communities, often under challenging conditions. This study endeavors to shed light on their experiences, particularly in the Philippine context, to inspire and inform future practitioners and policymakers.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of community radio broadcasters in the Davao Region. Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences, aiming to uncover the essence of a phenomenon through detailed descriptions provided by those who have experienced it (Giorgi, 2020; Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). This approach is particularly suitable for this study as it seeks to delve into the personal and professional experiences of broadcasters, including their gains, challenges, and coping mechanisms.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in the Davao Region of the Philippines, encompassing a diverse range of community radio stations. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique commonly employed in qualitative research to identify individuals who can provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights pertinent to the research question (Englander, 2019). The inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of three years of experience in community radio broadcasting and active involvement in community-oriented programming.

Data Collection- Data collection was carried out using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a method highly effective in phenomenological research as it enables participants to articulate their lived experiences in their own words and from their unique perspectives (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). The interview protocol was meticulously designed to elicit detailed and comprehensive narratives, with questions focusing on the participants' perceived benefits, the challenges they faced, and the coping strategies they employed in their roles. To ensure comfort and authenticity in responses, interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language, either English or Filipino. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, providing ample time for participants to delve deeply into their experiences. With the participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to capture the nuances of their accounts accurately. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness of the data for thorough analysis.

Data Analysis- This study sheds light on the lived experiences of community radio broadcasters in the Davao Region, emphasizing their gains, challenges, and strategies for resilience. Broadcasters reported several significant positive outcomes from their work, most notably community recognition and trust. Their roles as reliable sources of information have garnered them respect and acknowledgment within their communities. This trust has not only validated their efforts but has also strengthened their connection with local audiences. Many participants expressed a profound sense of fulfillment in their work, particularly in advocating for marginalized communities and raising awareness of critical social issues. Additionally, community radio has provided a powerful platform for social advocacy, enabling broadcasters to amplify voices often ignored by mainstream media. These findings echo earlier research highlighting the importance of community radio in fostering trust and strengthening local identities (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2019).

However, participants also encountered significant challenges, reflecting the broader struggles of community media practitioners globally. Financial constraints were the most pervasive issue, with broadcasters reporting difficulties sustaining their operations due to limited funding and scarce advertising opportunities. This finding aligns with global trends indicating the financial precarity of community media outlets (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Threats and harassment emerged as another critical challenge, as participants recounted instances of intimidation and pressure from influential individuals or groups, underscoring the profession's inherent risks. These safety concerns resonate with studies on press freedom and journalist safety in Southeast Asia (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Furthermore, technological barriers, such as outdated equipment and inadequate access to modern tools, significantly hindered broadcasters' ability to compete with larger, more resource-rich media organizations. Such challenges highlight the urgent need for systemic interventions to support and safeguard community broadcasters (Giorgi, 2020).

Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability through a variety of coping mechanisms. Many broadcasters sought external support by building partnerships with local businesses and NGOs to supplement their funding and sustain their operations. Community engagement was another vital strategy, as broadcasters relied on direct interactions with their audiences for moral support and validation of their efforts. Additionally, professional development played a critical role; participants attended workshops and training programs to enhance their skills and adapt to the evolving media landscape. These efforts underscore the importance of ongoing learning and innovation in overcoming operational and systemic challenges (Smith, 2020).

The findings reveal the critical role community radio plays as a trusted bridge between media and local communities. Broadcasters not only facilitate participatory communication but also empower grassroots movements and foster social

cohesion. Their ability to build trust and strengthen community connections highlights the unique value of community radio in promoting inclusivity and equity (Braun et al., 2020). However, the prevalence of financial instability, safety risks, and technological limitations underscores systemic vulnerabilities that threaten the sustainability of community radio. Addressing these challenges will require comprehensive policy reforms, including increased funding opportunities, safety measures for journalists, and greater access to modern broadcasting technologies (Nowell et al., 2019).

The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by community broadcasters highlight their determination to sustain their roles despite significant barriers. Their strategies for seeking external support, engaging with their communities, and pursuing professional development provide a blueprint for future practitioners in the field. These findings emphasize the urgent need for coordinated efforts from policymakers, media organizations, and communities to support the vital work of community radio and ensure its continued relevance in the ever-changing media landscape (NVivo, 2023).

Ethical Considerations- Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participants were provided with informed consent forms detailing the study's objectives, their rights, and measures to ensure confidentiality. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants, and data were securely stored with access limited to the research team. The study complied with ethical guidelines set forth by the relevant institutional review board (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Justification for Methodological Choices- The phenomenological design was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the broadcasters' lived experiences from their own perspectives. In-depth interviews were selected as they allow for rich, detailed accounts of personal experiences, aligning with the goals of phenomenological inquiry (Englander, 2019; Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for identifying and interpreting patterns within the qualitative data, providing insights into common themes across participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Nowell et al., 2019).

4. RESULTS

This study highlights the lived experiences of community radio broadcasters in the Davao Region, focusing on their gains, challenges, and coping mechanisms. Participants shared several positive outcomes from their work, including community recognition and trust. Broadcasters emphasized how their roles allowed them to become reliable sources of information, earning respect and acknowledgment from their communities. Many participants expressed a strong sense of fulfillment, derived from advocating for marginalized communities and raising awareness about social issues. Additionally, community radio provided opportunities for social advocacy, offering a platform to amplify the voices of those often overlooked by mainstream media. These findings align with previous studies that underscore the vital role of community radio in fostering trust and strengthening local identity (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2019).

Despite these gains, broadcasters faced numerous challenges. Financial constraints were a pervasive issue, as participants reported difficulty sustaining operations due to limited funding and insufficient advertising revenue, a trend consistent with global struggles in community media (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Many also recounted experiences of threats and harassment from influential individuals or groups, reflecting the precarious nature of their profession. Such risks are corroborated by research on journalist safety and press freedom in Southeast Asia (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Additionally, outdated equipment and limited access to modern broadcasting tools were common technological barriers, hindering broadcasters' ability to produce competitive content. These challenges emphasize the need for policy interventions to protect and support community radio practitioners, as highlighted by Giorgi (2020).

In response to these challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience through various coping mechanisms. Many broadcasters sought external support by partnering with local businesses and NGOs to supplement their funding and sustain their operations. Community engagement also played a crucial role; direct interactions with audiences provided moral support and reinforced the relevance of their efforts. Additionally, continuous professional development through workshops and training programs enabled participants to enhance their skills and adapt to technological advancements, underscoring the importance of ongoing learning in overcoming obstacles (Smith, 2020).

These findings reveal critical insights about community radio's unique position as a trusted bridge between media and local communities. Broadcasters' ability to foster participatory communication and grassroots development demonstrates their pivotal role in empowering communities (Braun et al., 2020). However, the frequent experiences of threats and financial instability underscore systemic vulnerabilities in the sector, highlighting the urgent need for enhanced protections and sustainable funding models (Nowell et al., 2019). The resilience and adaptability displayed by broadcasters, particularly through their diverse coping mechanisms, are vital for maintaining the relevance and impact of community radio in an evolving media landscape (NVivo, 2023).

5. DISCUSSION

This section interprets the findings of the study, exploring their significance in the broader context of community radio broadcasting, their implications for practitioners and stakeholders, and potential directions for future research.

Interpreting the Findings

Community Recognition and Trust. The broadcasters' ability to build trust and gain recognition within their communities underscores the pivotal role of community radio in bridging information gaps and fostering social cohesion. This aligns with Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019), who highlight the role of trust in enhancing the effectiveness of grassroots communication platforms. The finding that broadcasters derive fulfillment from their work suggests that community radio is not merely a profession but a meaningful engagement that directly impacts lives.

Challenges and Systemic Vulnerabilities. The challenges faced by broadcasters—financial constraints, harassment, and technological limitations—mirror global trends in community media. These findings are consistent with Braun and Clarke (2019), who emphasize the precarious position of journalists operating in under-resourced media environments. The study reinforces calls for policy interventions to address the systemic vulnerabilities of community broadcasters, particularly in terms of funding and protection against external threats (Giorgi, 2020).

Resilience Through Coping Mechanisms. Broadcasters' coping mechanisms, including seeking external support, engaging with their communities, and professional development, reflect resilience and adaptability. This resonates with Smith (2020), who underscores the importance of continuous learning and adaptability in overcoming challenges in evolving media landscapes. The broadcasters' ability to engage with their audience for moral and practical support highlights the community-centric nature of their roles, as documented in similar studies (Nowell et al., 2019).

Implications and Significance

For Broadcasters: The findings demonstrate the importance of resilience, community engagement, and professional development in sustaining community radio operations. Broadcasters can leverage these strategies to navigate systemic challenges and enhance their impact.

For Policymakers: The challenges identified call for comprehensive policy frameworks that support community radio. These may include subsidies, capacity-building programs, and mechanisms for protecting broadcasters from harassment. Policies promoting access to modern broadcasting technologies are also essential for ensuring the competitiveness of community radio stations.

For the Field of Community Media: This study contributes to the understanding of the lived experiences of community broadcasters, offering insights into the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of community media. The findings support the argument that community radio is a vital tool for promoting inclusivity and grassroots empowerment (Braun et al., 2020).

Broader Context in the Field- The study's findings fit into the broader discourse on the importance of community media in fostering participatory communication and empowering marginalized groups. Global research highlights community radio as a platform for promoting democracy, cultural identity, and social change (Neubauer et al., 2019; Giorgi, 2020). The specific challenges faced by Filipino broadcasters reflect regional and global patterns, emphasizing the need for localized solutions within a global framework. For example, challenges such as financial instability and safety concerns are echoed in studies from other regions, including Africa (Jamlab Africa, 2021) and Southeast Asia (Nowell et al., 2019). However, the broadcasters' emphasis on community engagement as a source of resilience highlights a uniquely localized strength that can inform best practices in the sector.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- 1. Sample Size and Scope:** The study was limited to eight participants from the Davao Region, which may not fully represent the experiences of community broadcasters across the Philippines. Future studies could expand the sample size and include participants from other regions for a more comprehensive understanding.
- 2. Methodological Limitations:** The reliance on self-reported data through interviews may introduce biases, such as recall bias or social desirability bias. Employing additional methods, such as participant observation, could provide a more nuanced perspective.
- 3. Technological Focus:** While the study highlighted technological limitations, it did not delve deeply into the specific impacts of digital transformation on community broadcasting. Further research could explore this area to provide actionable insights.

7. CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of community radio broadcasters in the Davao Region, shedding light on the gains, challenges, and coping mechanisms they encounter in their profession. Participants reported significant personal

and professional rewards, such as gaining community trust, recognition, and a sense of fulfillment. These findings affirm the pivotal role of community radio in fostering social cohesion and empowering marginalized voices. Additionally, broadcasters highlighted their ability to advocate for social causes, further emphasizing the importance of community radio as a platform for grassroots empowerment (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019; Nowell et al., 2019). However, the study also revealed systemic challenges that broadcasters face, including financial constraints, threats and harassment, and technological limitations. These challenges reflect broader vulnerabilities in the community media sector, echoing global findings on the precarious position of journalists in under-resourced environments (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Giorgi, 2020). Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated resilience through strategies such as seeking external support, engaging with their communities, and pursuing professional development. These coping mechanisms underscore their adaptability and commitment to their work, aligning with global trends in community media resilience (Smith, 2020). This research contributes to the field of community broadcasting by offering theoretical insights into the lived experiences of Filipino broadcasters and practical recommendations for practitioners and policymakers. Broadcasters can adopt the resilience strategies identified in this study, while policymakers are encouraged to design interventions that address financial sustainability, safety, and access to modern technology. Moreover, this study situates its findings within the global context, emphasizing shared challenges and opportunities across regions such as Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe (Jamlab Africa, 2021; Nowell et al., 2019).

The findings of this research have significant implications for the sustainability and impact of community radio. They highlight the urgent need for financial and institutional support for broadcasters, as well as the development of protective mechanisms to safeguard their safety and freedom of expression. Additionally, the broadcasters' emphasis on community engagement and professional development suggests that future strategies should focus on strengthening these areas to ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of community radio.

While this study provides valuable insights, its limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on a small sample from the Davao Region limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may introduce biases, such as recall or social desirability bias. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size, incorporating quantitative methods, and exploring the impacts of digital transformation on community radio operations. Investigating the effectiveness of existing policies and frameworks supporting community media could also guide more impactful interventions.

In conclusion, this study affirms the vital role of community radio in promoting inclusivity, grassroots empowerment, and social cohesion. By exploring the lived experiences of community broadcasters, it highlights their resilience, adaptability, and contributions to their communities. The findings call for a concerted effort from stakeholders to address the systemic challenges faced by broadcasters and to support the sustainability of this critical sector. Future research should build on this foundation, expanding its scope to provide a more comprehensive understanding of community radio in both local and global contexts.

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