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IMPACT OF COMMUNITY RADIO ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
IN THE UNITED STATES

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A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master Sustainable
Development at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

2 May 2022

Advisor: Dr. Victor Tricot, Academic Director

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ABSTRACT

Community radio is a community-led broadcasting service that serves as a tool for development for communities around the world. This research study explores the development benefits of community radio in the United States using a case study of Federal Communications Commission (FCC)-licensed FM community radio stations to evaluate the role of community radio in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development. To fulfill the objectives of the case study, data was collected from 55 community radio stations in the United States using mixed-questionnaire digital surveys and supplementary virtual interviews. Findings indicated that community radio stations in the United States serve as a communication and information-sharing resource to aid communities in overcoming challenges arising from the digital divide. The findings also demonstrated that community radio provides direct development benefits to communities such as aiding in grassroots initiatives, community building, empowering community members, and promoting diversity and inclusion, among others. If provided proper support to overcome barriers and ensure the sustainability of the field, community radio could prove a valuable tool for communities to achieve sustainable social change and development.

Keywords: community radio, community development, digital divide, development benefits, sustainability

Introduction

Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and recognition that increased access and availability of information and communication technologies would aid in bridging the digital divide and contributing to human progress, the United Nations General Assembly made an addition to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and declared access to the internet a human right (United Nations, 2016, p. 1). Although recognized as a human right, access and availability to the internet in the United States remains an unresolved issue, leaving an estimated 14.5 million people, or 4.4 percent of the country's population without internet services as of 2019 (Federal Communications Commission, 2021b, p. 55). For the individuals and communities that fall on the wrong side of the digital divide, they are more susceptible to socioeconomic consequences stemming from the lack of access to the internet and its resources. Additionally, rural communities and Tribal lands in the United States are disproportionately impacted compared to urban areas due to the limited rollout of broadband and internet infrastructure.

Considering the continued impacts of the digital divide in the United States and its disproportionate impact, this research project asks how a community-led broadcasting service, community radio, could support communities by playing a role in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development. As a service that requires no access to the internet or broadband infrastructure, community radio “leaps the barriers of isolation and illiteracy and it is the most economical medium to broadcast and receive” (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 2002, p. 70). Abroad and in developing countries, “community radio plays a significant role, especially in rural communities for aiding in rural development” (Khan et al., 2017, p. 101), however, in the United States, community radio “has a

long legacy of struggle for its right to exist” (Cammaerts, 2009, p. 636). This research project will explore the development benefits of community radio using a case study of Federal Communications Commission (FCC)-licensed FM community radio stations in the United States to discover:

How can community radio support U.S. communities by playing a role in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development?

This research study contributes directly to the conversation about how community radio can contribute to community development in U.S. communities. The broader impact of the research study is to identify how community-led broadcasting services can play a vital role in responding to continued development disparities in the United States. In the development field, ensuring positive social and transformative change in development initiatives requires input on a local level with the incorporation of community voices. This research study explores community radio and its ability to not only increase the connectivity of its community members, but also its potential to serve as a development tool in aiding grassroots initiatives, increasing participatory engagement and community building, and promoting positive social change and development. If community radio proves to be an advantageous development tool in the United States as it does abroad, the community radio network can be expanded to reach new communities, especially those most impacted by the digital divide.

To identify how community radio can support U.S. communities by playing a role in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development, this paper will begin with an examination of current literature situating the United States’ status of the digital divide and the field of community radio. The review of current literature will also include an exploration of the history of community radio and how it is tied to

community development through Political Theory and recent case studies. Next, the paper will outline the qualitative case study's design and methodology, followed by an overview of the ethical considerations, as well as the qualifications and positionality of the researcher. The next section of the paper will follow with a results analysis and discussion which will include an in-depth look into what the findings of the study indicate about the digital divide, the structure of community radio in the United States, the role of community radio in development, and the barriers of community radio. The paper will then conclude with the final two sections including recommendations and the future of community radio relevant to the sustainability of the field, increasing community engagement, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation in the field, as well as concluding thoughts on the study overall.

Conceptualizing the Literature

Digital Divide

This research asks how a community-led broadcasting service, community radio, could support U.S. communities by increasing communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development on a local level. As a service that does not require access to the internet or broadband infrastructure, community radio is a medium available to many U.S. communities and can be a useful tool for those who are disproportionately impacted by the digital divide. As defined by Rachfal (2021), the digital divide in the United States “has been used to characterize the gap between Americans who have access to telecommunications and information technologies and those who do not” (p. 2). As the main subset of the digital divide, broadband access, or access to high-speed internet, is a service provided by a variety of connectivity technologies such as fiber, cable, fixed wireless, which permits users access and support to “a wide range of applications, including voice communications, entertainment,

telemedicine, distance education, telework, e-commerce, civic engagement, public safety, and energy conservation (Rachfal, 2021, p. 2).

Since the 1990s and the initial deployment of broadband, the United States government has sought to combat the digital divide by appointing two federal agencies, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to take lead in mapping initiatives and broadband data collection, and initiated federal support through broadband rollout and assistance programs (Rachfal, 2021, p. 9). Although institutions and programs are underway to address the digital divide in the United States, approximately 14.5 million Americans have no access to internet services as of 2019 (Federal Communications Commission, 2021b, p. 2). Of those 14.5 million Americans who are denied their human right to have access to the internet, more than 17 percent of Americans living in rural areas lack access and nearly 21 percent of Americans living in Tribal lands lack access (Federal Communications Commission, 2021b, p. 56).

For those who fall on the wrong side of the digital divide, it is argued by many U.S. policymakers and development advocates that those disconnected populations will face adverse economic and social consequences (Rachfal, 2021). Due to recent events and the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the United States witnessed a major shift in the U.S. population transitioning to remote work and distance learning since March 2020 to mitigate the spread of the virus (Rachfal, 2021, p. 7). For most of the U.S. population, existing access to the internet made this transition relatively simple, however many others faced significant challenges due to the lack of affordable or easily available high-speed internet access. As further impacts resulting from the digital divide began to emerge following the arrival of the COVID-19 global pandemic, one development example linked to the shift in distance learning brought on by the pandemic

was the emergence of the Homework Gap. As defined by Auxier and Anderson (2020), the homework gap refers to “school-age children lacking the connectivity they need to complete schoolwork at home [which] is more pronounced for Black, Hispanic and lower-income households.” The disproportionate impact of the digital divide on American students is just one of the many examples where lack of access to the internet can lead to a variety of economic and development challenges for American households and communities.

Community Radio and Development

Given the role connectivity can play in advancing the socioeconomic status of communities and addressing development challenges, other communities around the world have found alternative avenues to aid in the connecting of community members and contributing to local development. For both developed and developing countries, one such avenue that is not bound by a dependency on the internet or broadband infrastructure is community radio. Defined by Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (2002), community radio “is a non-profit service that is owned and managed by a particular community (...) and its operations rely mainly on the community’s own resources” (p. 70). The programs and content produced by community radio are “based on audience access and participation and reflect the special interests and needs of the community” (Restrepo-Estrada, 2002, p. 70). Compared to mainstream commercial media, community radio “deals with local issues in the local languages and cultural context, relating to local problems and concerns, and [aims] to help the community develop socially, culturally and economically” (Restrepo-Estrada, 2002, p. 70). More specifically, community radio provides a variety of functions that directly support its local community such as reflecting and promoting the local identity, providing a platform for the sharing of diverse voices and opinions, encouraging open dialogue and the democratic process, contributing to social change and development, promoting

good governance and civil society, sharing information and innovation, among others (Restrepo-Estrada, 2002, p. 70-71).

From a development perspective, effective community radio stations are often seen as “community development resources which happen to use radio as their tool” (Gaynor & O’Brien, 2012, p. 437). As defined by Kenny (2007), community development is a process where community members come together and take “a holistic approach in principles of empowerment, human rights, inclusion, social justice, self-determination, and collective action.” According to Political Theory, there are two prominent strategies in which community radio can be utilized for community development. First, the Participatory Strategy, when considered in the context of development projects, is best understood as the role of network and community building that can potentially emerge through community radio’s link “to a grassroots movement for ‘participatory development’ in which local communities are encouraged to join together to define their communities’ problems, rather than the top-down approach of traditional development projects” (Tucker, 2013, p. 402). The second strategy, explored by Tucker (2013) is the Information-diffusion strategy of Political Theory, which is one of the most popular uses of community media for community development and involves community radio broadcasting “content that is developed by NGOs or development organizations on health, education, and social issues” (p. 402). According to Feek (2005), engagement in community radio as a communication tool and in engaging the Information-diffusion strategy is essential for any successful development project.

While community development can be complex, a main contributing factor to instigating positive social change and transformative development initiatives is the inclusion of the voices and opinions of the local community members. Community development endeavors are “the imperative to work ‘with’ and not ‘for’ the people, opening up spaces for marginalized

community members in particular to articulate their concerns and aspirations for themselves and their communities” (Gaynor & O’Brien, 2012, p. 437). As a platform for marginalized and community voices, community radio serves as a space for local discussions on issues, challenges, and development initiatives that directly impact the immediate community. Because of the role community radio can fulfill for a given community, it “represents a key element in empowerment, development, and consolidation of local communities – a key element in other words – of community development” (Gaynor & O’Brien, 2012, p. 438). To explore the potential impact of community radio on community development for both developing and developed countries outside of the United States, two case studies and their findings can be further examined for this research study.

The first case study carried out by Khan et al., (2017) examined the role of community radio in community development in Bangladesh. As a developing country, the researchers were interested in exploring the importance and effectiveness of community FM radios, especially in remote, rural areas of Bangladesh, to see how they contributed to the development and needs of the local communities (Khan et al., 2017, p. 95). The research methodology included a context analysis of secondary data collected to understand a comprehensive picture of community radio in Bangladesh and resulted in recommendations from the researchers on how to best scale-up community radio stations, especially for hard-to-reach areas, to benefit people and those communities. Although traditional radio in Bangladesh had a history of political influences and being used for political propaganda, Khan et al., (2017) found that community radio served as “the voice of vulnerable and marginalized population of [the] community, facilitate[d] rural development and agricultural promotion, ensure[d] local level good governance and

accountability, [provided] disaster preparedness and management, ensure[d] gender equality, community empowerment as well as protect[ed] the local and community culture” (p. 101).

The second case study was an ethnographic review of a pilot project that was first organized in 1994 by the national broadcasting regulator of Ireland as an effort to acquire greater diversity in radio programming and organization (Gaynor & O’Brien, 2012, p. 441). Since the initiation of this pilot project, twenty-two licensed community radio stations were established throughout Ireland, both in urban and rural communities. Through a series of interviews with community radio staff and community development representatives, the participants initially saw no correlation between community radio and community development, however, following further exploration, both parties agreed that community radio provided a valuable service to the local community (Gaynor & O’Brien, 2012, p. 442). Compared to the undeniable positive impacts of community radio found on community development in Bangladesh, the research study in Ireland posed a less immediate correlation. This divide between developed and developing countries in utilizing and acknowledging community radio as a tool for community development is a key area or gap when assessing community radio in the field of sustainable development that requires further exploration.

History of Community Radio

Community radio is one of three radio broadcasting services, next to public and commercialized radio, that is utilized by communities worldwide. The origins of community radio are debated by scholars, however, the service’s evolution into a media institution serving communities is seen as a “result of a history of struggle and media activism engaged among disparate movements and actors who often captured the airwaves in defiance of state-run and for-profit broadcasters” (King, 2017, p. 18). To best understand how community radio became one

of the leading broadcast services today utilized by communities around the world, it's useful to explore its possible origins. Elements such as the periods in which community radio emerged as well as its geographical founding are debated. For example, some scholars believe community radio emerged in the 1940s in the Americas with strong ties to community Indigenous groups, while others tie its origins to “insurgents and revolutionaries who temporarily took over radio infrastructure in Europe during World War I” (King, 2017, p. 19). Some scholars even argue that the broadcasting service goes as far back as 1906 following the introduction and development of the supporting technologies that could first transmit voice and music over radio waves (King, 2017, p. 20).

Although there is debate around its origins, researcher Gretchen King (2017) identified four key periods of evolution of community radio that provide insight into how the broadcasting service transformed into the community tool and service it is today. The first significant period of community radio occurred from the 1900s to the 1940s and is identified by King (2017) as the *Experimental period* (p. 21). During this time, global communities, mostly in the Americas and Europe, were seeking airwaves just before the first World War. The most common community-based broadcasting was individuals experimenting with the service to contest “state (or military) and commercial domination over the airwaves” (King, 2017, p. 21). An example of this type of use of community radio occurred from the mines of Bolivia when union members used the broadcasting service as a media access point for themselves and their families during a labor strike (KHOI FM, 2018).

The second evolutionary period of community radio occurred from the 1950s to the 1960s and is identified by King (2017) as the *Wildfire period*. This period led to the “rapid spread of community broadcasting across North and South America, Europe, and Africa” (King,

2017, p. 22). Many of the stations that emerged during this period did not have licenses and were “proliferating political groups operating clandestine stations” that “developed in isolation, but collectively acted as a propellant expanding community radio practices to several continents” (King, 2017, p. 22). The expansion and rapid growth of these clandestine stations challenged the colonial media models and broadcasting services that were put in place through the post-war modernization programs (Curran & Park, 2000, p. 5). The third evolutionary period for community radio occurred from the 1970s to the 1980s and is referred to as the *Solidarity period* (King, 2017, p. 24). This period tied the broadcasting service to “new funding mechanisms, the successful passing of supportive legislation and regulation in several countries, and the growth of regional, national, and international networks (King, 2017, p. 23). While community radio remained illegal in many places, new clandestine stations continued to open and operate globally. This period also marked the “development of new opportunities when postcolonial demands converged to balance and correct the flow of global communication” (King, 2017, p. 23).

The final evolutionary period that is where community radio exists today began in the 1990s and is referred to as the *Resurgence period* (King, 2017, p. 27). The new market-based priorities in policy development during the 1990s shifted media regulation towards private and commercial media, which challenged community-based media and broadcasting (King, 2017, p. 27). Although this challenge exists, community radio around the world continues to persist, followed by increased development of new regulations and the formation of associations to protect the community media. The continued growth of community radio stations is also matched with an increase in the “accessibility and affordability of radio production and distribution of technology” (King, 2017, p. 29). Like its initial evolutionary period, community radio is

experiencing a renaissance of grassroots activism and is utilized as a tool for development in communities around the world.

Community Radio in the United States

Community radio emerged in the United States as a direct contrast to mainstream media, embodying ideologies of being “based on noncommercial status, local involvement in program production, and democratically governed operating practices and processes” (Huntsberger, 2007, p. 33). In 1967, the Public Broadcasting Act was issued by Congress to “establish the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private, non-profit corporation managed by a nine-member board appointed by the President and approved by the Senate to funnel government support to public stations and producers nationwide” (The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, n.d.). In 1975, following the rise of various community radio stations, the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) was established and continues today as “the oldest and largest organization of community-oriented, non-profit radio stations in the United States” (Huntsberger, 2007, p. 3). Since its formation, the NFCB has been a leader in rallying support and advocating for the protection of U.S. community radio. Through the decades, various challenges in the field of community radio emerged, mainly in combatting threats based on issues of localism and financial control instigated by U.S. government agencies such as the FCC. The outcomes of these challenges resulted in issues such as deliberations over the lack of effort to roll out community radio infrastructure to rural areas or debates over the spectrum allocations for Low Power FM services (Huntsberger, 2007, p. 3).

While community radio in the United States has faced many challenges in both its formation and application, the network itself is diverse and includes stations in all fifty U.S. States. Of the available radio broadcasting in the United States, there are two types of frequency

modulation (FM) that operate within the lens of community radio: FM and low power FM (LPFM). FM Radio refers to “full power, low power, translator and booster stations operat[ing] in the 88-108 MHz band” (Federal Communications Commission, 2021a), that can transmit between three to sixty miles from the transmitter site. Currently, there are approximately 285 FCC-licensed FM community radio stations in the United States, 189 of which are members of the NFCB (NFCB, 2021). The service of LPFM radio was created by the FCC in 2000 to authorize for noncommercial educational broadcasting and “operate with an effective radiated power (ERP) of 100 watts (0.1 kilowatts) or less, with a maximum facility of 100 watts ERP at 30 meters (Federal Communications Commission, 2021c). According to the Federal Communications Commission (2021c), LPFM stations can transmit a service range of about a 3.5-mile radius and are not protected from FM station interference. There are more than 1,500 LPFM stations across the United States that serve rural and urban communities and cater intensely to their local and niche audiences (Vogt, 2016).

Given the extensive sprawl of community radio and its networks across the United States, it poses the question of why the field of U.S. community radio and its ties to community development are not more prevalent in current development literature. For the United States, a country that touts itself as a global leader, the position it takes on incorporating community radio into community development is disappointing. As explored by Cammaerts (2009), “while many international organizations, such as UNESCO, but increasingly also the World Bank as well as Western development agencies have been or have become strong advocates for the introduction of local community radio stations in Africa, Asia or Latin America, community radio in the West has a long legacy of struggle for its right to exist” (p. 636). Whether it is the competing environments of developing versus developed countries and their nature to foster and encourage

the incorporation of community radio into community development, it is apparent that community radio in developed countries has faced slower adoption. While current research literature on community radio's impact on community development is vibrant with case studies from developing countries, research geared towards the impact of community radio on U.S. communities is limited and undefined. The significance of this research study is to respond to the current limiting research and identify the impact of community radio on U.S. communities, specifically as it contributes to local community development initiatives.

Research Design and Methodology

This research study's design explored the development benefits of community radio using a qualitative case study of FCC-licensed FM community radio stations in the United States to discover how stations play a role in communication and information sharing and aiding communities towards sustainable social change and development. The selected research design was beneficial to the study because of its flexibility for the integration of "multiple perspectives, data collection, tools, and interpretive strategies" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 19). By engaging in a case study methodology, the study enabled the incorporation of methods that generated qualitative and quantitative data and provided an opportunity to explore both the context of the issue and the specific case study of community radio in the United States. Further exploration into the research design and methodology, including research sites, sampling and methods, data analysis approach, and ethical considerations is provided below.

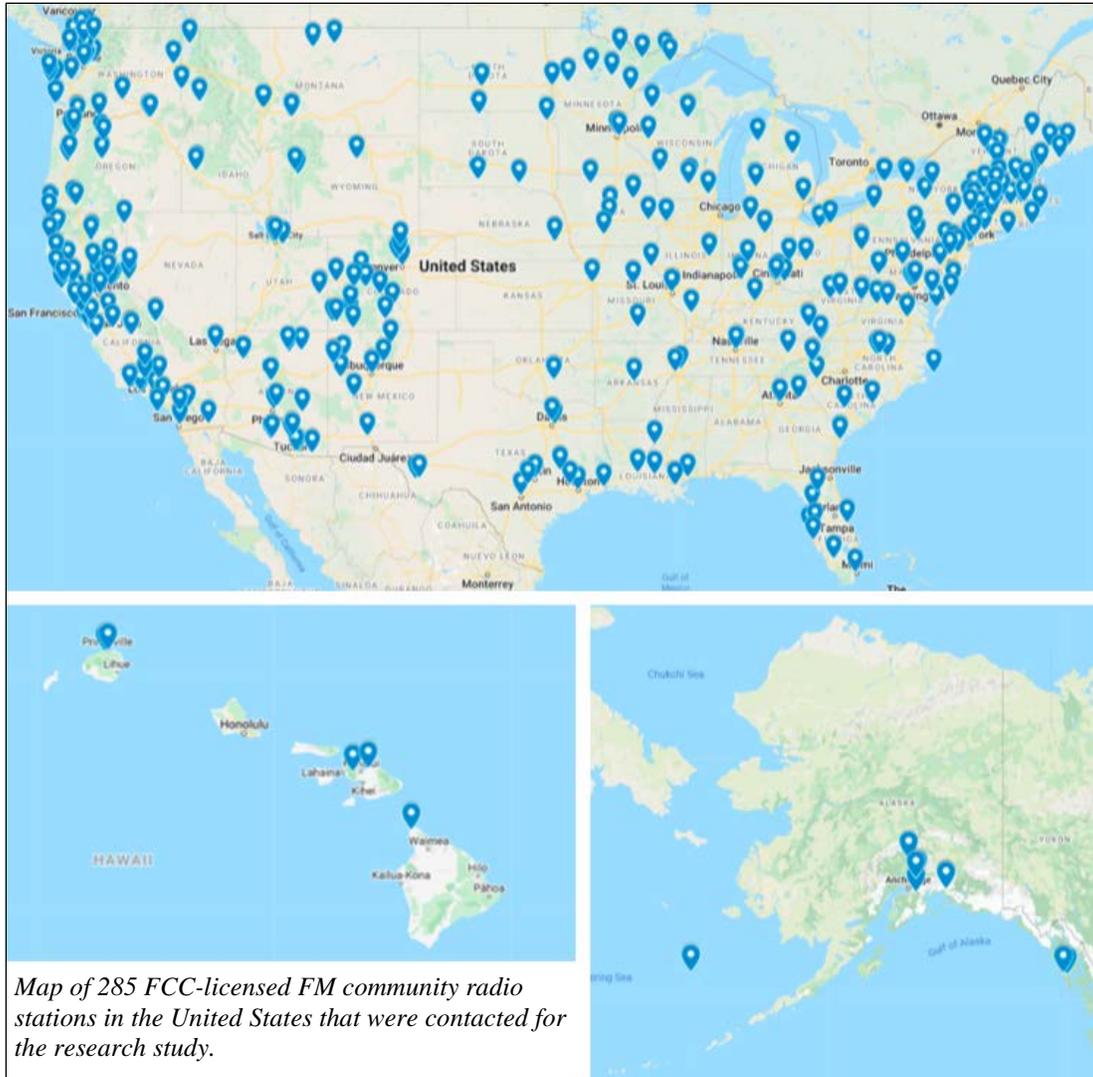
Research Sites

This research case study aimed to discover how community radio can support U.S. communities by playing a role in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development. The site of the research study was the Internet which

allowed access to participants that the researcher would not otherwise have access to because of the diverse and expansive network of community radio stations across the United States. The Internet was an advantageous site for this study because it permitted the researcher to conduct interviews and surveys with individuals from remote and rural areas and speak with individuals who may not be able to participate in face-to-face interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 30). While this research site method challenged an opportunity for rapport-building, it was ultimately a beneficial tool for the researcher to conduct and distribute emails and web-based surveys and interview participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 30).

Sampling and Methods

The research methods utilized for data collection in this qualitative case study included an online mixed-questionnaire survey and semi-structured virtual interviews. The participants of the study included community radio staff from the approximately 285 FCC-licensed FM community radio stations operating in the United States. The approximately 285 FM community radio stations licensed under the FCC include a broad and diverse spectrum of community radio stations in the United States that are operating in urban, rural, and Tribal land communities. The participants were recruited through the listed email addresses and contact information provided on the FCC website of licensed FM community radio participating stations and their associated community radio station websites. All participants were contacted via email and asked for their voluntary participation in the study. If multiple community radio staff were listed on the station's website, the most senior staff member was recruited to participate in the research study.



For initial outreach and to achieve a good response rate, participants from all the approximately 285 FCC-licensed FM community radio stations were contacted via email and provided with an invitation letter to participate in the study as well as provided with the link to the digital survey. The digital survey utilized a mixed-questionnaire method incorporating both open-ended and close-ended questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 177). Additionally, the digital survey included a series of statements to which the participants were asked to respond to using a 5-point Likert-type scale. The Likert-scale responses available to the participants to choose from when selecting the best response to align with their agreement to the provided

statements in the study included Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The selected method of a digital, mixed-questionnaire survey provided anonymity which allowed participants the opportunity to share insights about topics they might not feel comfortable speaking about forthrightly in an in-person or interview setting. The digital survey utilized for this research study can be found in Appendix A. As part of the digital survey, participants were asked to note whether they were willing to participate in a supplementary virtual interview. For the research study, 10 community radio staff were selected to participate in the supplementary interview portion of the study conditional on convenience, interest, and availability. As the second method to be utilized in the case study, individual, semi-structured virtual interviews with community radio staff provided a supplementary approach for data collection. The virtual interviews permitted further engagement with research participants and allowed for the opportunity to learn more about their thoughts and perceptions on the topic of the study. The interview protocol utilized for this research study can be found in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

The research data from both the digital surveys and virtual interviews were organized and stored on a cloud-based, encrypted platform. The quantitative and qualitative data results for this study were individually transcribed and evaluated by the researcher. To ensure a thorough examination of the data collected, each survey and interview was coded and transcribed following a list of 58 selected codes which identified key variables for emergent themes related to community development as impacted by community radio. Examples of selected codes include station design, engagement, role of community radio, tools for community development, barriers for increasing impact, motivation, among others. Following the transcription and coding of data, the researcher engaged in an extensive data analysis which consisted of identifying

trends, code co-occurrence, and similarities within and across all participants' experiences and perceptions to ensure credibility in the findings and complete a thorough analysis of the data.

Ethics of Research

To ensure a safe research design and methodology were incorporated into this research study, ethical considerations were implemented to protect all participants and acknowledge potential topic sensitivities. The informed consent protocol was initiated from the start of the research study and all participants were provided consent for the study through an opt-in question via the digital survey. Participation in the study was voluntary and there was no risk for participants to feel pressured to join the study because there was no existing power differential between the researcher and participants. In the initial survey, participants were given the option but not required to provide identifying information, including information relating to their community radio station's call sign and city of work. If identifying information was provided by the participants, this information was removed from the final report. Additionally, if participants agree to participate in a supplementary interview, answers and insights provided as part of the interview that were included in the final report have identifying information removed. Prior to participating in the supplementary interview, participants were required to review and sign a participant informed consent form to ensure the researcher shared all the essential information with participants pertaining to the study and that participants acknowledged potential risks. A template of the participant informed consent form can be found in Appendix C. To ensure privacy during recruitment, data collection, and within the study's results and analysis, all participants were informed and in control over the extent to which information they provided was shared. The data collected in this study will be stored for up to five years and then discarded, however, the summarized results of the data will be preserved.

Limitations of the Study

The chosen research design and methodology for this study provided an opportunity for an in-depth exploration of the issue specific to the case study of community radio stations in the United States. Although the study included access to staff from community radio stations from across the United States to evaluate their perceptions of the impact of community radio on community development, the study itself had limitations. The main limitation of the research study was the restricted time in which the study could be implemented. Due to the limited time, the scope of the research study, including participant numbers and participant group types, was restricted. For example, if more time was available, the study could have included additional supplementary interviews with community radio staff to gain further insights on the research topics. Additionally, with more time, the study could have sought to evaluate the perspectives of other participant group types, such as the perspectives of community members or volunteers who interact with their local community radio stations, especially those from marginalized groups, to evaluate their perception of the impact of their local community radio stations on development in their communities. Another limitation of the research study was the overall response rate from participants. The case study included the approximately 285 FCC-licensed FM community radio stations for the initial outreach but only participants from 55 stations volunteered to participate in the study. Although the participant size for the research study did provide valuable data, the inclusion of data from all the approximately 285 FCC-licensed FM community radio stations would have provided more robust data with a larger response rate.

Researcher Positionality

As a university-educated, white, middle-class citizen of the United States, I acknowledge that my upbringing and background impact my perceptions. Before undertaking a master's

degree program, I began working for a non-profit where I oversee the management and implementation of professional exchange programs funded by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. In the five years I have worked in this role, I have overseen a handful of public diplomacy programs addressing development themes and challenges around the world, one of which was a catalyst for this research endeavor as it hosted policy and technology experts from the South Pacific and the United States that focused on the impact of increased Internet connectivity and broadband infrastructure on economic and social development. As part of my MA program for Sustainable Development, I also participated in community development residencies in Oaxaca, Mexico and Nepal to engage NGOs and community-led organizations and learn about local sustainability initiatives in the region. During these residencies, I met with representatives of community radio networks who then shared insights on the role community radio plays in local community development initiatives.

The combined elements of my professional work with public diplomacy programs, participation in community development residencies, related coursework, and previous research, encouraged me to select the impact of community radio on community development in the United States as my research subject for my MA capstone project. My personal and professional experiences, as well as my education, affect how I interact with the world and leave me with inherent biases. I am not personally impacted by the digital divide, nor do I listen to or participate in local community radio, however, I am personally interested in the topic area. As a graduate student in the Sustainable Development program, I am personally invested in development issues, especially those impacting the social and economic well-being of marginalized groups in the United States. These biases contribute to my background as a researcher and impact my desire to pursue research in this field.

“members of my community are impacted by the digital divide,” 83.6 percent (n=46) of participants strongly agreed or agreed that their community was impacted. Additionally, 74.6 percent (n=41) of participants strongly agreed or agreed to the statement that “a portion of my radio station’s listeners does not have access to the internet.” In speaking with the participants, many respondents confirmed that their community radio stations are based in communities with “rural or remote areas that do not have access to high-speed internet” (Interviewee 2, February 2022) due to “geographical barriers preventing the rollout of internet infrastructure” (Interviewee 6, February 2022). In cases where access to the internet due to limited infrastructure is not the issue, the digital divide persists for some communities because members of the community do not engage the internet by choice due to a “lack of interest or distrust” (Interviewee 2, February 2022).

Given the prevalence of the digital divide in communities that were considered for this study, it was valuable to ask participants about the role their community radio stations play in communication and information sharing. Of the participants surveyed, 65.4 percent (n=36) strongly agreed or agreed that their radio station serves as a primary source of information for their community. While the prevalence of the digital divide may vary between communities, community radio stations can pursue various solutions to ensure all members of their community have access to receive their broadcasting service. One participant expressed the importance of this goal and shared that their station employed “transmitters around the entire county to ensure everyone could get a signal” (Interviewee 6, February 2022) and receive the information shared by the station. Access to a community radio station is valuable and can serve as a useful resource, especially for community members who rely on landlines or phone calls to the station

as their primary channel for receiving information. For example, Interviewee 9 (January 2022) shared how their station screens calls and provides varying information-sharing services:

“Somebody will call who needs something and they don’t know how to get it or communicate with the greater community on their needs. They call us and we transcribe whatever their need is into a public service announcement. If it’s a ride for a doctor’s appointment, we will put it on our ride-board or if somebody is trying to sell something.”

Challenges of the digital divide were further amplified by recent events following the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic. As U.S. communities transitioned to remote work and distance learning, community radio stations recognized the increased challenges that their community members faced, especially for those who did not have access to high-speed internet or lived in rural and remote areas. Nearly all participants interviewed in the research study noted how their community radio stations played a prominent role in information sharing and providing updates specific to the COVID-19 pandemic for their community. One participant shared:

“The pandemic helped us realize how necessary local communication platforms are for sustaining community wellbeing; we generated different programming types in response to COVID’s effect on society” (Survey Participant, January 2022).

The initiative to generate specialized programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a shared experience across many community radio stations. Examples of specialized programming included tailored news programming focused specifically on community members with limited access to high-speed internet, such as professional skill-building and trainings, and educational programming for youth. A participant also shared how listenership and engagement nearly doubled during the pandemic because “people were at home and wanted to engage and feel connected, so they turned to the radio station” (Interviewee 9, January 2022). Aside from other roles community radio may have in their communities, it is evident that they play a vital

role in communication and information sharing, especially for community members impacted by the digital divide.

Structure of Community Radio

Station Design

Compared to other models of broadcasting such as commercial or public broadcasting, community radio stations often have fewer personnel, smaller operating budgets, and a more limited geographic reach. When discussing the organizational structure of community radio stations during the study, there were mixed responses from participants. Depending on the stations' operating budgets, stations were either structured as mixed full-time staff with volunteers, full-time and part-time staff with volunteers, part-time staff with volunteers, or fully volunteer-run by community members. Whether the positions were paid, or volunteer-based, standard staffing roles included Station/General Manager, Operations Manager, Music Director, and Underwriting Coordinator. For some community radio stations, additional staffing positions included community-focused positions such as Community Engagement Coordinator, Development Director, and Education and Outreach Coordinator. Another layer of the organizational structure of community radio stations is the Community Advisory Boards. The purpose of a Community Advisory Board is regarded as:

“A group of community representatives who are brought together regularly during the year to provide station management with feedback and suggestions on the content of their broadcast station. They don't get to vote, they don't enforce policy, but they provide [stations] with a sounding board for what [they] have and new ideas of what to bring to the organization” (Interviewee 10, January 2022).

The incorporation of a Community Advisory Board is one of the components required for community radio stations to receive funding through Community Service Grants (CSGs).

Distributed by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to community radio stations,

CSGs are one avenue of funding for “noncommercial public television and radio stations that provide significant public service programming to their communities” (Community Service Grants, 2021). In addition to grant funding such as CPB grants, community radio stations can receive funding through underwriting announcements. As outlined in the FCC-licensing agreement, community radio stations cannot broadcast commercials or advertising on behalf of for-profit entities (The Public and Broadcasting, 2021). Alternatively, community radio stations “may receive contributions from for-profit entities and are permitted to acknowledge these contributions or underwriting donations with announcements naming and generally describing the contributing party or donor” (The Public and Broadcasting, 2021). Although the prevention of advertising by community radio stations may seem discouraging for funding purposes, the process of underwriting is an important community-building tool provided by the stations as it increases community participation “from local businesses who employ local people which keeps more money in [the] community” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Additional funding sources for community radio that are vital to the station operating budgets as well as strong indicators of community support include station memberships and community donations.

Programming and Content

The programming and content creation of a community radio station are the threads that connect stations to their immediate communities. Reflected both in the survey results and through the conversations with interview participants, the programming and content of community radio are significantly driven by its community members and volunteers (Survey Participant, January 2022). When responding to the statement, “community members play a vital role in the planning and programming of the station,” 72 percent (n=40) strongly agreed and 20 percent (n=12) agreed with the role of their community members. Considering programming and

content of community radio stations are driven by the community, it was also valuable to the study to determine what types of programming were most popular. When responding to the statement “what types of radio programming are most popular for your station,” participations chose from a pre-selected list which resulted in 69.1 percent (n=38) for Music, 16.4 percent (n=9) for News, 5.5 percent (n=3) for Talk Show, 5.5 percent (n=3) for Other, and 3.6 percent (n=9) for Educational. To explore beyond stations’ most popular shows and evaluate the diversity of programming and content that can be shared by community radio stations, participants were also asked to provide a brief synopsis of their programming profiles. To illustrate the expansive and diverse types of programming that are incorporated into community radio across the United States, a few summaries are below that were provided by participants:

“Music not widely heard (or heard at all) on other stations, programs addressing local issues of food production, environment, arts, education, transportation, government. News programs from the underrepresented, national and international voices not heard on and critical of corporate-owned media” (Survey Participant, January 2022).

“We are an eclectic station, with hosts offering talk, music, diverse language, and occasionally spoken word or theater” (Survey Participant, January 2022).

“Our station is 90% music and 10% spoken word news and information. Music runs the gamut from classical to rock to folk to jazz. Information programming includes health, spirituality, ecology and environment, and the arts as well as hard news” (Survey Participant, January 2022).

“Diverse news and music, public affairs, poetry, and programs of/by Women, Native, Chicanx, Black, and Queer communities.” (Survey Participant, February 2022).

While community radio stations focus their programming and content through a community-driven lens, many also incorporate news and information sharing from outside the immediate community. Beyond hosting local voices on air, stations will program national and international news, public radio such as National Public Radio (NPR), and syndicated programming such as *Democracy Now!*.

Listenership

Community radio “helps build a community among listeners and is a great community in itself” (Survey Participant, January 2022). The community radio stations that participated in the study operate with an ERP watt range of 21 to 100,000 watts. Although listenership data can be challenging to collect due to community radio being a one-way medium service, participants provided estimated data on overall listenership. Like the sprawl of operating ERP watt range, participants of the study reported that their listenership ranged from as low as a few 100 weekly listeners up to over 100,000 weekly listeners. Similarly, when asked to estimate what percent of the immediate community engaged with the community radio station, participants suggest anywhere from 1 percent to 75 percent. While the range of listenership and community engagement varies across each station, there appeared to be a shared sentiment that community radio stations are “listener-supported stations, so [listeners’] tastes and interests are critical” (Survey Participant, January 2022).

Participants of the study were also asked to briefly describe their listenership. Of the response, the most common qualities participants expressed about their listenership is that they are engaged, diverse, and loyal. When asked to provide the estimated age range of their listenership, participants selected ages all within the range of youth to 80 plus, however, the most selected age range was adults ages 45 and up. Although it is common for listenership data to remain unknown to some stations, many have found alternative avenues to collecting some form of listenership insights. As an approach to increase the accessibility of their programming as well as provide an archived source for their content, community radio stations will utilize web-based platforms to stream and store their programs online. Many of the online platforms not only provide listenership and engagement data to the stations, but also expand the reach of their

programming beyond their immediate communities. A few stations have reported how the transition to streaming their content online has led to their programs gaining international popularity.

Role in Community and Community Development

As part of the key objectives of the study, it was necessary to evaluate the role community radio stations have both in their communities and specifically in community development. Through the conversations with community radio staff as well as in the results provided in the digital surveys, four evident focus areas illustrate and define the role of community radio in U.S. communities. The four areas that will be explored in this portion of the research include community radio's incorporation of a local lens, the establishment of trust between stations and their communities, the current development benefits provided by community radio, and the broader activities carried out by stations outside of their core operations.

Local Lens

The effectiveness of community radio as a broadcasting service in generating a positive impact on its immediate community is strongly tied to its incorporation of a local lens throughout every angle of its core operations. Community radio is “locally owned and operated, with a mission to serve the community, rather than profit from it, which allows for distinct, locally-focused programming that cannot be heard elsewhere” (Survey Participant, January 2022). As content is locally produced and free from commercial restraint, community radio stations have the freedom and capability to ensure that their programming aired to the community is safe and easily accessible (Survey Participant, January 2022). Incorporation of the local lens also ensures that “the character of the community is represented and built upon through community

broadcasting” (Survey Participant, January 2022). While community radio stations produce a variety of programming and content, some of which focuses on content and information sharing from outside of the immediate community, most of the content is within the scope of the local community. This content includes hyper-local programming on topic areas such as journalism, arts and culture, government proceedings, weather, emergency information, local issues, business, the environment, among others. When asked why community radio is an important broadcasting service, one participant shared:

“As a community radio station, we are called upon to serve our town by making sure that a local perspective that represents everyone in the community is our priority and guides our content” (Survey Participant, January 2022).

This priority of incorporating a local lens into the work of community radio also serves to provide the community with a space of local knowledge that is collected and shared. In this shared space, community members are also able “to hear different viewpoints, be entertained with music and other content, learn about events and opportunities in their area – it connects people to their local world” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Another avenue of incorporating a local lens and connecting members to their community is through the underwriting process. Community radio stations “are not beholden to advertisers and [their] underwriting partners are local businesses that care about the community and want to better the community” (Interviewee 8, February 2022). Beyond programming and content, the emphasis on local voice was expressed by all research participants. Community radio stations serve as a platform for local voices to share their content, whether it is live on air or pre-recorded, to connect with their immediate community about their community.

While some community radio stations may seek to reflect their entire community in all content, the incorporation of a local lens also allows for stations to tailor their programming and

content to a specific audience or demographic. This approach was utilized by a few of the community radio stations that participated in the research study that stood out because of their engagement and tailored programming to specific audiences or themes. For example, one community radio station has a long history of serving news and programming to the farmworker audience within its community. While the station provides a wide array of other programming such as public affairs programs covering topics of social justice, civic engagement, immigration, music, and educational programming to the greater community, a significant portion of the programming is created and produced specifically for the farmworker audience (Interviewee 1, February 2022). Other examples of community radio stations aligning with specific audiences or themes include stations geared toward youth demographics and educational programming as well as stations programming local business and economic opportunities.

Trust Building

Similar to the incorporation of the local lens, community radio stations are effective in their role in the community due to an established sense of trust between stations and their community members. Compared to other media and broadcasting services, participants in the study shared that community radio stations provide community members a place “to get information first and from the most trustworthy account” (Interviewee 9, January 2022). The established trust or ability of community radio stations to build trust between themselves and their community members is possible because the stations are locally run and operated, which ensures a degree of familiarity and accountability. To emphasize the level of trust established by local voices, one participant shared:

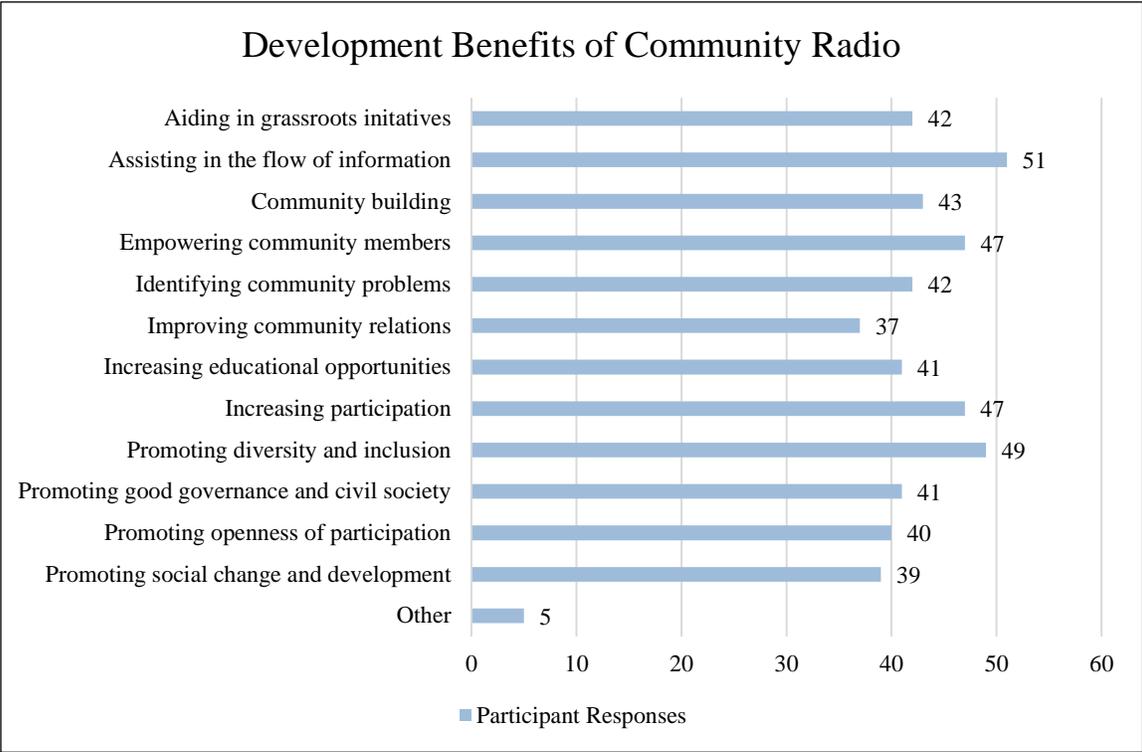
“The hosts and volunteers are your neighbors, coworkers, friends – the ones that are bringing you the radio. This brings a whole sense of community around the whole thing which builds the community” (Interviewee 6, February 2022).

Trust is further established through local representation and engagement which “bonds communities and provides authentic resources” (Survey Participant, January 2022). As previously mentioned, when discussing the challenges brought about by the digital divide, other avenues of information and communication sharing such as online media may engender distrust among individuals. In the era of mass communication, community radio serves as a platform “curated by humans from the community for the community which provides a sense of trust” (Interviewee 9, January 2022). Trust between community radio stations and their communities is also built when considering the sources of funding for the stations. Aside from grant funding, community radio stations’ main sources of funding are community-based, through underwriting, memberships, and donations, which indicates a degree of trust and support from community members.

Development Benefits

The main objective of this research study was to explore how community radio stations in the United States could play a role in their communities relating to community development. To evaluate the role of community radio stations in aiding and promoting community development, participants provided a detailed overview of the development benefits of community radio. When asked if “community radio is an important tool for community development,” 76.4 percent (n=42) strongly agreed and 21.8 percent (n=12) agreed with the statement. Similarly, when asked if “community radio is an important tool for engaging locally-driven initiatives, 63.6 percent (n=35) strongly agreed and 36.4 percent (n=20) agreed with the statement. In the process of developing programs and content creation for their stations, 34.5 percent (n=19) strongly agreed, and 41.8 percent (n=23) agreed that they “utilize a community development lens in the planning and programming” process. While there are many potential development benefits afforded by

community radio, participants were asked to review a pre-selected list of 12 development benefits and select which benefits their station provides or promotes to their immediate community. The data chart below shows the results provided by the participants who completed the digital survey.



All 12 development benefits were selected to some degree as benefits provided or promoted by community radio stations across the United States. Of the 12 development benefits, there were seven benefits mentioned most frequently that were selected by 75 percent or more of the participants. To better understand these more significant benefits, it is important to analyze each of the seven development benefits and how they were perceived by participants.

The first development benefit, *assisting in the flow of information*, received the highest response rate from participants, with 92.7 percent (n=51) of participants sharing that their radio station provides this benefit directly to their community. One participant shared that community

radio is “the best way for local news and information to reach the maximum amount of people in their community” (Survey Participant, January 2022). This is particularly true for rural communities, “where access to broadband is very limited and radio becomes the main mode of information” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Of all the development benefits, assisting in the flow of information aligns most with the Political Theory’s Information-diffusion strategy. The Information-diffusion strategy suggests that community media can serve as a tool for broadcasting content developed by NGOs or development organizations (Tucker, 2013, p. 402). Participants in the study shared a similar sentiment in that community radio “allows for all members of the community to take part in information sharing with very few barriers for entry” (Survey Participant, January 2022).

A second development benefit that received a high recognition rate in the study was community radio’s role in *promoting diversity and inclusion*. For this benefit, 89.1 percent (n=49) of participants agreed that their stations aid in promoting diversity and inclusion within their communities. This development benefit is promoted in two ways by community radio. First, community radio stations promote diversity and inclusion through their programming. One participant shared that fostering social change and healthy communities is achieved “by entertaining, informing, and educating through diverse music, culture, and public affairs programming” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Additionally, the programming should not only be diverse itself but “reflect and promote the diversity of the local community” (Survey Participant, February 2022). A second way community radio stations can promote diversity and inclusion is through access. Community radio is a unique medium in that it “gives members of diverse communities direct access to the public airwaves” (Survey Participant, January 2022). This feature is unique because as a broadcasting service, community radio recognizes “the

diversity and complexity of the freedoms that individuals have (...) and creates space for these freedoms to be articulated and pursued within the contemporary media landscape” (Backhaus, 2020, p. 4658).

A third development benefit, *empowering community members*, received a high response rate of 85.5 percent (n=47) of participants agreeing that their stations contribute this benefit to the immediate community. One participant shared that community radio “is a small but powerful tool for local validation and empowerment” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Similar to the previously discussed development benefit, community radio’s role in empowering community members is a particularly important tool for marginalized groups in communities. Community radio “empowers people, especially ethnic minorities, low-income, and other marginalized groups, to strive for a more just and sustainable world” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Empowerment stemming from community radio occurs both through self and collective empowerment within communities. As explored by Howley (2013), when contributing to self-empowerment, community radio is supporting individuals to “find one’s voice” (p. 379), and when contributing to collective empowerment, community radio is promoting local groups to “work together and effectively address common interests and concerns” (p. 347).

Yielding the same response rate as the previous development benefit, 85.5 percent (n=47) of participants also agreed on the fourth development benefit, *increasing participation of community members*, is provided by community radio. One participant of the study explained how community radio “provides opportunities for active participation in community life and the democratic process” (Survey Participant, February 2022). Increasing participation of community members involves increased participation with the individual community radio stations as well as utilizing community radio as a democratizing tool to support community initiatives. For direct

participation with community radio stations, Mawokomayi and Osunkunle (2019) describe how this effort “entails involving communities in management structures and production” (p. 92) in station operations. Alternatively, as a democratizing tool, community radio “encourages participation and involvement in local, political, and social affairs” (Tucker, 2013, p. 395).

A fifth development benefit that received a high response rate was community radio’s role in *community building*. For this benefit, 78.2 percent (n=43) of participants agreed that community radio is an “important tool to serve as a connector to community building” (Survey Participant, January 2022). In a community, profit and nonprofit organizations often work with stations and utilize them as a resource “for information on how things work for events, to build coalitions, and create growth” (Survey Participant, January 2022) in their work. This development benefit aligns with Political Theory’s Participatory strategy because community radio can serve as a tool for strengthening networks and community building, enabling listeners to support grassroots initiatives and increase participatory development (Tucker, 2013, p. 402).

Like the previous topic, the sixth development benefit, *aiding in grassroots initiatives*, received high response rates in the study where 76.4 percent (n=42) of participants shared that their station contributes this benefit to community members. For communities engaging in grassroots level initiatives, accessibility to the media, both as receivers and producers of content is one of the most important factors for increasing participation (Birowo, 2010, p. 1). Compared to other broadcasting services, community radio is unique in that it can “connect folks on grassroots and hyper-local level for social, political, and other reasons” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Other media and marketing services in a community can also be expensive for local groups to promote their grassroots work, but community radio “provides an opportunity to

come on air to discuss their work and reach out to volunteers which is vital for their message” (Survey Participant, January 2022).

The final development benefit that was highly responded to through the study was community radio’s role in *identifying community problems*. Relating to this benefit, 76.4 percent (n=42) of participants shared that their stations “provide a platform for voices in the community to discuss local issues” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Community radio is “an organizing and public awareness venue for this work, as communication are an important aspect in the process” (Survey Participant, February 2022) of identifying and resolving community problems. Many of the stations that participated in the study expressed a shared obligation in their role “to educate and enlighten the community on issues faced locally and nationally” (Survey Participant, January 2022). An example of an effort that aligns with this development benefit of community radio is one station’s project initiative, “Critical Conversations,” which intentionally and systematically identifies new conversations to discuss on-air, as well as hosts town halls to talk about important issues their community and society are all facing. The community radio station has facilitated these conversations for years with environmental justice leaders, community activists, racial justice leaders, nonprofit leaders, among others, but now they intentionally pull together the conversations into one archived location online so that community members and organizations can access the conversations and use them to promote and inform the public on their work (Interviewee 8, February 2022).

For this study, only seven of the 12 development benefits explored in the research were further analyzed through the findings discussion. In addition to the initial 12 development benefits, there were a collection of further benefits identified by participants as ways community radio contributes to community development. Based on the coded surveys and interviews, other

development benefits provided by community radio and emphasized by participants included the promotion of local music, art, culture; promotion of creative expression; support of the local economy; sharing of emergency information; skill-building and education; creating access to airwaves; youth engagement; preserving cultural identity; and promoting environmental equity.

Broader Role in Community

In addition to the traditional activities that align with the work of community radio, participants of the study shared about the broader activities carried out by their stations outside of the core operations. While producing programs and content creation tailored to community members is key to any community radio's mission, identifying additional roles a station can play in their community was a common theme that contributed to community development. One participant shared that this was the "beauty of community radio – you do not have to only be on-air, it is just one venue to reach out to the community and you can also reach out through events and other resources" (Interviewee 4, February 2022). Of the broader activities shared by participants, the most common activity implemented by community radio stations beyond their core operations is managing community campaigns and outreach programs. When there is a topic or issue deemed important to the community, community radio stations can organize campaigns and collaborate with other partner organizations in the community to create a positive impact. One example of a recent campaign developed and managed by a community radio station was in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. A participant from the study shared how the pandemic brought about disparities within their community, so they decided to collaborate with different local partners to create a COVID-19 outreach campaign. As part of the campaign, the community radio station served as a vaccination site for one day a week "where community members could come and get vaccinated as well as meet with a health professional to receive

facemasks and health supplies and receive more resources and information for the community” (Interviewee 1, February 2022).

The community campaigns and outreach programs shared by participants were often health-related and included campaigns topics such as HIV-AIDS, Substance Abuse, and Dental Care, but also included other community elements such as the construction of new community buildings or shared public spaces. In addition to campaigns and outreach programs, another broader activity that is at times implemented by community radio stations is the development and implementation of community training programs or workshops. One example shared by a participant was a stations facilitation of DJ training programs for community college students as well as youth ages 10-14 that teach individuals in the community how to “produce shows, edit, and what goes into making a show” (Interviewee 8, February 2022) for community radio. A final broader activity that was expressed by participants in the study about their work in community radio was their role in hosting or serving as a venue for community resource fairs. This effort unites various development benefits explored in the study and illustrates the role community radio can have in serving as a connector between community members and in community building. To support these broader activities, community radio “might apply for external grants or programs to fund additional projects, such as awareness grants,” (Interviewee 1, February 2022) to integrate them with the traditional avenues of funding for community radio.

Barriers to Community Radio

While community radio plays a vital role in community development and contributes to broader activities within its immediate community, some barriers exist which prevent stations from increasing the impact of their work. Through the conversations with community radio staff as well as in the results provided in the digital surveys, there were three key barrier areas

identified that impact the work of community radio. While three distinct barrier areas were found in the study, they each interlink and impact one another. The three barrier areas that will be explored in this portion of the research involve operational capacity, monitoring and evaluation, and engagement.

Operational Capacity

The barrier of operational capacity in community radio is linked to both funding availability and personnel bandwidth. Each participant in the study discussed the unique design and capacities of their station, however, most participants shared that their stations are volunteer-run and have low operating budgets. For funding availability, the operating capacity of any station is limited by the available funds and resources that contribute to sustaining personnel, purchasing and maintaining broadcasting equipment, and directly engaging with the community. To operate a station, a competent and dedicated staff, either paid or volunteer, must be involved, however, “funding limits how many staff a station can have and train” (Interviewee 1, February 2022). While many stations are volunteer-run, a participant acknowledged that “it would always be nice to have available funding for a couple more staffing positions” (Interviewee 7, January 2022).

When addressing the impact of funding availability on purchasing and maintaining broadcasting equipment, one participant shared how radio “equipment is expensive and always a challenge to sustain, for example, if an antenna or transmitter breaks down, it will take a massive fundraising effort to replace it because of how expensive it is” (Interviewee 1, February 2022). Beyond funding availability, personnel bandwidth is another barrier that affects the operational capacity of community radio. In the field of community radio, many stations face challenges in determining “how to maintain staff and find new staff interested in the work because the newer

generations are not as interested in radio and pursuing a career on the radio” (Interviewee 1, February 2022). Because personnel is limited both by funding availability and bandwidth, stations also are unable to “carry out all of the projects they want to do as a station and ways they want to engage the community” (Interviewee 8, February 2022). Beyond the direct barriers posed by operational capacity, other barriers to community radio are similarly impacted.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The process of monitoring and evaluation in community radio is another barrier stations face when assessing the impact of their work on communities. Community radio is primarily listened to on an FM-radio wave which is a one-way medium, so there is no inherent feature to track data such as listenership, engagement, or receive feedback. For many stations, a complete picture of the listenership and engagement data is unknown, however, they may utilize a web-based platform to stream their programming which can provide some insights into engagement data. Although this barrier exists in community radio, participants in the study were asked to consider if their station incorporates efforts of monitoring and evaluation into their work. When responding to the following, “my radio station seeks to measure the impact of community radio on the community,” 25.5 percent (n=14) strongly agreed, 29.1 percent (n=16) agreed, 36.4 percent (n=20), 5.5 percent (n=3) disagreed, and 3.6 percent (n=2) strongly disagreed with the statement.

Considering the range of responses, participants were asked to provide more context for why their station did or did not incorporate monitoring or evaluation into their core operations. Relating to the first barrier, a common response shared by participants suggested that limited funding availability often discourages community radio stations from pursuing formal monitoring and evaluation of the impact of their station on the community. While there is no

inherent built-in feature for tracking listenership and engagement in community radio, external services are available to assess station data, however, many community radio stations are “too small to audit and measure listener data” (Interviewee 3, January 2022). Some stations in the study shared that they utilize the Nielsen Digital Audio Measurement, which is an independent audience insights and data analysis firm that measures key performance indicators in community radio (Nielsen Audio, 2022). The Nielsen Digital Audio Measurement provides a better understanding of the performance and impact of community radio, but once again, this is often a service that many community radio stations cannot afford.

Although monitoring and evaluation is a barrier due to funding availability as well as access to listenership data, there are some methods by which community radio stations can evaluate their impact. The main method available for measuring impact is through direct feedback from community members. One participant reported that their station receives around “10-20 feedback emails per week as well as 5-10 feedback phone calls in a given day” (Survey Participant, January 2022). Similarly, another participant shared that their station “gets feedback every day, whether it is a letter in the mail or on social media, and as long as we know someone is out there listening, we will be here doing our job” (Interviewee 4, January 2022). Evaluation in community radio can also be achieved through a change in programming and content. One participant shared how “any time we make program changes we really consider them strongly – we might think not many are listening to a certain program, we decide to pull it, and it is a landslide of complaints” (Interviewee 4, January 2022). Aside from direct feedback from listeners, memberships and donations to stations are also strong indicators of how a community radio station’s programming is received and impacts a community.

Engagement

Consistent community engagement between community radio stations and their community members is another barrier that arises in the field. While most stations in the study have a long history with the communities in which they operate, there are challenges in ensuring that “engagement of radio is long term and continues as a popular medium” (Interviewee 2, February 2022). Similar to the barrier of staffing capacity, one of the engagement barriers of community radio is engaging younger people in the work. For many stations, listenership and memberships tend to be dominated by members of the community from older age groups, and engagement of younger members of the community remains low. Another challenge for engagement and community radio is posed by geographic location. One participant explained, “if a station is in a rural area and community members don’t have a car, it can be limiting for people to come and do a show” (Interviewee 5, February 2022). Geographic location does not just limit engagement for “broadcast, but for access for people to do a show, be on shows, and access the station” (Interviewee 5, February 2022).

The challenge of engagement due to personal access to the station and community radio staff has been amplified due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, community radio stations could engage their community by hosting “volunteer meetings, bringing people in to learn about the station and to get new volunteers, having open houses to invite people in, which has now changed quite a bit and required new ways to engage the community” (Interviewee 6, February 2022). One participant also shared how in-person engagement is valuable to community radio because “having a presence at community events makes sure people know we are here and what we do and is the best way to market that” (Interviewee 2, February 2022). While the COVID-19 pandemic has limited the opportunities for

in-person engagement, community radio continues to face other engagement barriers that may limit the impact of their work with community members.

Recommendations and Looking Forward

Community radio is a unique broadcasting service that enables local stations to connect directly with their community members and create programming that reflects the needs and interests of their communities. To further support the work of community radio, three target areas require further consideration looking forward. These target areas include the sustainability of community radio, increased community engagement, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation.

Sustainability of Community Radio

The field of community radio has evolved over the last century and demonstrated its unique ability to adapt to a changing environment. While community radio in the United States has faced significant existential challenges, the field must now look for opportunities to better sustain the work of community radio. In this research study, one of the most significant barriers to community radio was identified as operational capacity related to funding availability. Fortunately, community radio stations are a sustainable platform in that they can run at low operating budgets, however, opportunities to increase funding capacities would serve to benefit community radio stations and provide them greater access to resources. Community radio stations receive funding through federal or CPB grants in accordance with their FCC licensing which covers a portion of their operating costs. To expand their funding availability, community radio stations could continue to seek creative avenues for funding outside of their traditional funding streams, allowing stations to take on greater roles in their communities beyond their core operations. One such example of a creative funding avenue includes applying for additional grant

funding for specific community projects, which also serves to aid in sustaining station personnel. A second approach to increasing the sustainability of community radio is diversifying types of programming. While some community radio stations already do so, other stations could expand beyond their regular programming and begin producing community development-based programming such as educational content.

Increased Community Engagement

Efforts to increase overall engagement with the community are another consideration that will positively contribute to the field of community radio and ensure the sustainability of the field. The first step to increasing community engagement involves broadening the demographics of listenership. Compared to commercial or public broadcasting services, community radio is one of the easiest mediums to engage with for communities because it is operated by the neighbors, coworkers, and friends of community members. Many stations that participated in the study shared that it was a priority for the station to reflect the community, but also that there is always an opportunity to broaden the diversity of those on-air and involved in the programming. In enhancing the diversity of programming and community voices, stations can draw in more community support. Additionally, the incorporation of younger generations into the listenership of community radio was identified as one of the barriers in the work. To further engage the community and ensure the sustainability of community radio, stations need to identify new ways to engage younger people and encourage their greater involvement, especially considering that they represent the future of community radio. One method of doing so that will increase overall engagement is by further integrating community radio content with social media and new technologies such as podcasts. Nevertheless, it remains necessary to maintain the traditional FM component of community radio because FM broadcasting is crucial for visibility and access.

A second approach to increasing community engagement is through increased partnerships with organizations within the community. This approach goes beyond the core operations of community radio, such as underwriting and content creation, and instead focuses more on broader activities such as collaborating with organizations on campaigns and outreach programs. Another example of a partnership effort would be a community radio station partnering with other media outlets in the community such as a local newspaper to support one another and share resources for news programming or about events taking place in the community. Community radio stations could also partner with local organizations to increase their opportunities of receiving additional project-based funding for community initiatives.

Enhanced Monitoring and Evaluation

Throughout the research study, it was evident that monitoring and evaluation in community radio is not always a priority. This reality is not necessarily because a station is not interested in measuring the impact of its work on the community, but because of barriers such as access to data, high costs for measuring data, and limited staff capacity to facilitate data capture and analysis, among others. Given the structure of community radio as a one-way medium, future research considerations can look to new ways for stations to measure the impact of community radio on communities in ways that overcome these current barriers. This could include identifying new measurement tools or guidance that are more affordable and accessible to community radio stations. It is important to note that the availability of quantitative data such as listenership and engagement does not tell the whole story of community radio, so the real challenge for future research is to identify a qualitative approach to monitoring and evaluation of community radio that effectively evaluates the relationship between a station and its community, as well as the overall impact the community radio has as a resource to its community.

Conclusion

Community radio has a powerful history of serving as a tool for development for many communities around the world. Considering the impact of community radio abroad, the purpose of this research study was to assess the status of the field of community radio in the United States using a case study of FCC-licensed FM community radio stations and evaluate whether the community-led broadcasting service can serve U.S. communities by playing a vital role in communication and information sharing, as well as in promoting sustainable social change and development. Through the shared perspectives of U.S. community radio staff, the research study gained insights into the impact of community radio and how the broadcasting service could continue to serve as a useful tool for diverse communities across the United States.

The research study looked at community radio's role in communication and information sharing as means to serve as a valuable and useful resource that can aid in overcoming challenges arising from the digital divide. Until the digital divide is resolved in the United States, alternative services and resources must be maintained and bolstered to best support the needs and well-being of U.S. communities. The findings of this research study have proved community radio can provide a useful service to communities in mitigating challenges posed by the digital divide because it does not require access to the internet or broadband infrastructure. As many U.S. community radio stations are in rural communities that lack sufficient broadband infrastructure or serve community members that lack access to the internet for other reasons, the service proved to play a significant role in communication and information sharing for those most impacted by the digital divide. Additionally, the current COVID-19 global pandemic has revealed challenges posed by a greater shift to a digital world now that more individuals are reliant on internet infrastructure and connectivity. For households that struggled with this shift to

remote work and distant learning because of the digital divide, participants in the research study provided unique examples of how community radio served to overcome such challenges by developing content and programming such as professional skill-building and educational programming to impacted communities.

Beyond community radio's role in overcoming challenges of the digital divide, the broadcasting serves also provides direct development benefits to U.S. communities. The research study explored 12 significant development benefits tied to community radio globally and identified the seven development benefits most promoted by community radio stations in the United States. The seven development benefits most promoted by U.S. community radio stations included assisting in the flow of information; promoting diversity and inclusion; empowering community members; increasing participation of community members; community building, aiding in grassroots initiatives; and identifying community problems. Although these seven development benefits were highlighted in the study, this is not a comprehensive list of the development benefits provided by the field of community radio. The role of community radio in promoting sustainable social change and development is vast and because the design of community radio involves the incorporation of a local lens as well as trust-building, the development purposes a station serves and promotes are highly tailored to the needs and interests of a specific community.

The research study confirmed that the field of community radio in the United States plays an important role in communication and information sharing, as well as promoting sustainable social change and development, however, it also shed light on the other broader and valuable roles community radio stations play in their immediate communities. Compared to other broadcasting services, community radio is a unique medium that both reflects and serves its

community members. The design and resourcefulness of community radio stations are diverse and fueled by the dedication and support of its volunteers and community members. If barriers such as funding availability and personnel bandwidth were reduced, community radio stations could continue to broadcast enriched programming, expand local partnerships, engage community projects, broaden their roles outside of their core operations, and increase their positive impact on their communities. Beyond current barriers, the long-term sustainability of community radio is an important concern that stations need to begin addressing to ensure the continuity of the field by tackling challenges such as finding ways to engage younger generations in their work. In addition to increasing community engagement and connecting younger generations to community radio, the field also requires further research into innovative and affordable approaches geared towards monitoring and evaluation, and how to best incorporate these efforts into the core operations of community radio to provide a thorough understanding of the impact a station has on its immediate community.

Fortunately, the field of community radio is an enthusiastic one, filled with creative and driven individuals who are dedicated to the work and their communities. With growing environmental threats and development concerns increasing globally, U.S. communities will need to begin incorporating more sustainable practices into their everyday lives. Community radio has proved itself both globally and in the United States as a useful service, platform, and medium to connect with community members to increase information and communication sharing, promote development benefits, and overcome challenges posed by the digital divide. The positive impact of community radio stations around the United States is evident, but the reach of the field of community radio could be expanded and further supported to increase the impact of the broadcasting service overall. Given additional support, both in exposure and

funding, community radio can expand its role in aiding U.S. communities in the transition into incorporating more sustainable practices and serve as a vital tool for positive social change and development.

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APPENDIX A



Survey Instrument

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Impact of Community Radio on Community Development in the United States

RESEARCHER NAME: Jillian Hermansky

This research study will include an electronic survey of up to 285 participants of Federal Communications Commission (FCC)-licensed community radio stations in the United States. Participants will receive an email requesting their voluntary participation in this survey. All data received through this survey will be anonymized in the final report.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can community radio support U.S. communities by playing a role in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development?

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this brief survey for the case study “Impact of Community Radio on Community Development in the United States.” The results of this survey will be used to assess how community radio stations can support U.S. communities by playing a role in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development?

CONSENT FOR SURVEY PARTICIPATION

Please mark the check box below to signify your consent to participate in this study.

[check box] I have read the information in the email invitation for this research study on the developmental benefits of community radio. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older and I consent to participate in this study and understand that my participation is completely voluntary. I may choose to forgo any questions and may withdraw my consent to participate at any time.

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Please provide the Call Sign of your community radio station.

2. Please provide the city and state (City, State) where your community radio station is licensed to operate.
_____, _____

DIGITAL DIVIDE

Please choose the response that best aligns with your agreement to the following statements.

1. In the United States, the “Digital Divide” refers to the gap between Americans who have access to telecommunications and information technologies and those who do not. I am familiar with the Digital Divide in the United States.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
2. Members of my community are impacted by the Digital Divide.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]

3. My radio station serves as a primary source of information for my community.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
4. A portion of my radio station's listeners does not have access to the internet.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]

COMMUNITY RADIO IN GENERAL

Please choose the response that best aligns with your agreement to the following statements.

1. Community radio is an important broadcasting service for communities.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
2. Please explain why you think community radio is or is not an important broadcasting service for communities. (short answer)
3. In general, community radio is an important tool for community development.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
4. Community radio supports communities by increasing communication and information sharing.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
5. In general, community radio provides developmental benefits to its community members.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
6. Please explain why you think community radio is or is not an important tool for community development. (short answer)

YOUR COMMUNITY RADIO STATION

Please choose the response that best aligns with your agreement to the following statements.

1. Please describe what types of programs you broadcast regularly. (short answer)
2. What types of radio programming are most popular for your radio station?
[News, Entertainment, Music, Talk Show, Other]
3. How often do you consider community development in your work in community radio?
[Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Very Often, Always]
 - a. Why or why not? (short answer)
4. Community members play a vital role in the planning and programming of my radio station.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
5. What do you think are the developmental benefits of the radio station for your community? (short answer)
6. My radio station utilizes a community development lens in planning and programming.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Please choose the response that best aligns with your agreement to the following statements.

1. How many community listeners does your station engage each week? (short answer)
2. How much or what percent of the community population engages with your radio station? (short answer)
3. On average, how many hours do listeners spend each week listening to your radio station? (short answer)
4. In a few sentences, can you describe your community listeners? (short answer)
5. Community radio is an important tool for engaging locally driven initiatives.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
6. My radio station seeks to measure the impact of community radio on the community.
[Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree]
7. Please select from the list below the developmental benefits your radio station provides to your community. (Please select all that apply).
 - a. Aiding in grassroots initiatives
 - b. Assisting in the flow of information
 - c. Community Building

- d. Empowering community members
 - e. Identifying community problems
 - f. Improving community relations
 - g. Increasing participation
 - h. Promoting diversity and inclusion
 - i. Promoting good governance and civil society
 - j. Promoting openness of participation
 - k. Promoting social change and development
 - l. Other
8. Are there other developmental benefits not listed in the previous question that your radio station provides to your community? (short answer)

CONCLUSION

1. If you would like, please provide any additional comments, thoughts, or information about the topic of developmental benefits of community radio in the box below.

2. If you are interested in participating in a supplemental virtual interview following your completion of this survey, please provide your name and email in the box below. The researcher will contact you shortly to follow up about the virtual interview. Please note that your name and email address as provided here will not be tied to your survey answers in the final report.

APPENDIX B



Interview Protocol

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Impact of Community Radio on Community Development in the United States

RESEARCHER NAME: Jillian Hermansky

This research study will include a semi-structured interview of up to 20 participants of Federal Communications Commission (FCC)-licensed community radio stations in the United States. Participants will volunteer to participate in the interview following the completion of the initial survey of the study. This interview will be semi-structured using a prepared list of questions that complement the survey questions and responses received. These questions will allow for flexibility within individual conversations in case additional topics or questions develop. All participants have been explained in more depth in the initial email and informed consent form the purpose of this research study and will be provided a copy of the study's results and findings following the completion of the study.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can community radio support U.S. communities by playing a role in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development?

INTRODUCTION

The PI will begin the conversation by introducing herself and the research study using the information listed above.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview and for completing the initial survey. As a student and professional interested in community development, I look forward to speaking with you about your thoughts on the research topic.

As you are aware, I am conducting a case study to explore how community radio can support U.S. communities by playing a role in communication and information sharing and promoting sustainable social change and development. To do this, I am facilitating these interviews with community radio station staff to learn more about how community radio is perceived to impact community development and gain insights on how individual stations are engaging the development lens in their programming. For this interview, I will ask you a series of questions regarding your background and role with the radio station, insights about how your station engages the community, and conclude with a few questions on community development and impact.

INTERVIEW

PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND – ROLE AT RADIO STATION

1. To gauge your experience in the field, please tell me about your professional background.
2. In your professional history, have you done any community development work?
3. Can you tell me about your history with your community radio station? For example, how long have you been working with the station? What is your current role?
 - a. Have you held other roles in community radio or engaged with the station in other capacities?

DIGITAL DIVIDE

1. As shared in the survey, the “Digital Divide” refers to the gap between Americans who have access to telecommunications and information technologies and those who do not. Can you describe your familiarity with the Digital Divide in the United States?
2. Do you think the Digital Divide impacts members of your community? If so, is it a widespread problem or does it have a minimal impact? How do you think it impacts your community?
3. In your opinion, to what extent is your station a primary source of communication and information sharing for your community?

COMMUNITY RADIO IN GENERAL

1. Do you think community radio is an important broadcasting service for communities? Why or why not?
2. What role(s) does community radio play in a community?
3. In what ways does community radio impact community development?
 - a. Can you list specific developmental benefits of community radio and/or provide examples from your own community?

YOUR COMMUNITY RADIO STATION

1. Please describe in detail what types of programs your broadcast regularly.
 - a. Which radio programs are most popular?
 - b. Do community members have a role in any specific radio programs?
2. Do any of your radio programs consider community development initiatives or sustainable development in their programming? Why or why not?
 - a. Do you have examples?
3. Do you think your radio station could play a greater role in community development? If so, how?

COMMUNITY IMPACT

1. Please describe in detail your community listeners and engagement. For example, what are the demographics of your listeners? What percent of the community engages with your station?
2. In what ways does your radio station engage with locally-driven initiatives?
 - a. Does your station broadcast information about community development or serve as a source of community development?
3. Does your radio station seek to measure the impact of community radio on the community?
 - a. If yes, how do you measure the impact?

CLOSING

1. Looking at the role of your radio station in the community and the field of community radio in general, how sustainable do you think the field is?
 - a. How do you see community radio changing in the future?
2. What barriers are there to increasing the impact of community radio for U.S. communities or your own community?
3. Are there any additional comments or information you would like to share that you think would be relevant or helpful to the purpose of this study?

APPENDIX C



Participant Informed Consent Form

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Impact of Community Radio on Community Development in the United States

RESEARCHER NAME: Jillian Hermansky

My name is Jillian Hermansky. I am a student with the SIT Sustainable Development program. I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for partial fulfillment of my MA in Sustainable Development. Your participation is voluntary.

Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to participate, please sign this form and you will be given a printed or electronic copy of this form.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the developmental benefits of community radio on U.S. communities using a case study of Federal Communications Commission (FCC)-licensed community radio stations in the United States.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Your participation will consist of one virtual interview to allow the researcher to gain more insights into your perspectives on how community radio impacts community development in your community. The virtual interview will require approximately 40 minutes of your time. The researcher will request to audio/video-record the virtual interview, however, this is not required if the participant does not wish to be audio/video-recorded.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study and no penalties should you choose not to participate; participation is voluntary. During the virtual interview, you have the right not to answer any questions or to discontinue participation at any time.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

This study will contribute to the conversation and research about alternative community-led, societal services that can play a vital role in community development. Potential benefits to society include identifying the role of community radio in increasing the connectivity of its community members, serving as a developmental tool for aiding in grassroots initiatives, increasing participatory engagement and community building, and promoting social change and development.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. All data will be stored and analyzed on an encrypted platform, which serves as a data management system that employs the highest levels of data encryption for data storage, backup, and transmission. Access to the data will only be available to the individual research. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no identifiable information will be used. To ensure privacy during the recruitment, data collection, and within the study results

and analysis, all participants will be informed and in control over the extent to which information they provided is shared. The data collected in this study will be stored for up to five years and then discarded, however, the summarized results of the data will be preserved.

FUTURE USE OF DATA

Participant information and data collected in this study will not be used for future research studies or distribution. The data collected in this study will be stored for up to five years and then discarded, however, the summarized results of the data will be preserved.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

RESEARCHER'S CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, please contact me at Jillian.Hermansky@mail.sit.edu or my advisor at Victor.Tricot@sit.edu.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT—IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by the SARB or SIT IRB. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant or the research in general and are unable to contact the researcher please contact the Institutional Review Board at: irb@sit.edu

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"I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older."

Participant's Name (Print): _____ *Date:* _____

Participant's Signature: _____ *Date:* _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ *Date:* _____