

# The Later Life Audio and Radio Co-operative:

considering radio as a technology to promote citizen dialogue in later life

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## ABSTRACT

The Later Life Audio and Radio Co-operative (LLARC) is an England-wide network of older content creators, age-inclusive radio stations, third sector organisations, local authorities and academics working on ageing issues. The co-operative was established in 2019 as an outcome from a participatory action research project. Aiming to promote talk-based content created by older adults, the LLARC advocates for greater representation of older adults in broadcasting. This paper considers radio production as an approach to support civic participation in later life. Firstly, we present findings from a two-day radio festival for older adults at which the LLARC was launched. Drawing on discussions at the radio festival, we highlight three themes that underpin the LLARC's mission: 1) challenging ageist stereotypes; 2) advocating for intergenerational cohesion; and 3) considering radio as a technology for community engagement. Secondly, based on observations, we report on the organisation's ongoing digital development and adaptation to remote digital production workflows in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We discuss the potential of radio as a technology to involve older adults in citizen dialogue. Due to its combination of digital and non-digital elements, we conclude that radio production can be an accessible technology for older adults to engage with in order to have their voices heard more widely. Our work contributes to key debates at the intersection of technology use and community engagement in later life, suggesting a central role for audio and radio as accessible routes to support public debates and promote citizen dialogue in later life.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centred computing**; • **Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms**; • **Collaborative content creation**;

## KEYWORDS

Audio Engineering, Ageing, Civic Participation, Radio, Ageism;

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Radio has undergone changes in listenership and content provision in recent years, along with other traditional broadcast media. With the rise of on-demand audio content many radio stations now rely on older adults as their primary audience [6]. In a society where most broadcast content is created by younger people, older people are less commonly perceived as content creators [17]. However, within the context of active ageing, it is important to question and shift perceptions about older adults' interactions with broadcast media.

This paper reports initial findings from a participatory action research project that led to the creation of the Later Life Audio and Radio Co-operative (LLARC). Drawing on transcripts from discussions at a radio festival for older adults, we outline the views and experiences of older participants that underpin the LLARC's mission. Based on observations, we also report on how the LLARC responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. We reflect on the potential of audio and radio technology to include older adults in citizen dialogue and promote community engagement through both digital and non-digital elements of the production process.

## 2 BACKGROUND

With the growing digitalisation of society, civic discourses are increasingly shifting to digital spaces. Individuals who wish to take part in civic life are often required to use the internet as a means of participation. This creates opportunities, for example the possibility of having one's voice heard online. However, people who are disproportionately affected by the digital divide, such as older adults, are at higher risk of exclusion from online civic participatory activities [16]. Despite digital inequalities, many older adults are contributing content in online spaces or using the internet as a tool to increase connectedness in later life [17]. Yet with issues that directly affect older adults, for example policy around the COVID-19 pandemic, we still observe scenarios in which older adults are talked *about* instead of directly contributing their own voices to the discussions. Drawing together discourses on civic participation and audio/radio production, the LLARC project aims to promote an age-friendly approach to achieving dialogue and engagement in later life.

## 2.1 Audio and Civic Participation

We have previously shown the potential of using audio, and specifically community radio, as a pathway for older adults to participate civically [13]. Whilst the term civic participation is used differently depending on context, it can be broadly defined as active citizen participation with the goal to shape a community's future [1]. Technologically-supported content creation activities can be accessible civic participatory activities [5]. Engaging with the creation of audio and radio content can be a way to combine technical and creative skills and open up civic discussions. Indeed, an increasing number of older adults are creating audio and radio content [2, 11], demonstrating the importance of community radio stations as pathways to civic and local participation, regardless of the content creators' chronological age.

## 2.2 Ageism

Within the field of Human-Computer-Interaction (HCI), Vines et al. (2015) identified that discourses around technology and ageing can be affected by ageist assumptions, with technology viewed as a solution to address biomedical or social decline in later life [15]. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the public discourse has become increasingly ageist, portraying older adults as homogeneously frail, lonely or passive, with little value to society [3]. However, researchers within the field of HCI are challenging ageist stereotypes with research that highlights diversity in later life [14] and adequately reflects older adults' active uses of technology as well as their digital contributions [10, 17]. Recent research has highlighted an urgent need to influence the public discourse to highlight diversity in later life rather than reinforcing ageist behaviours [3]. Including older adults in public debates, for example on ageing and COVID-19, would ensure that older voices are heard more widely.

## 3 METHODS

The LLARC is a direct outcome of an ongoing participatory action research (PAR) project with the research aim of looking at *radio as a technology to promote digital and civic participation in later life*. PAR is a collaborative, democratic and community-based approach to research that consists of a constant cycle of planning, action and reflection [8]. Using PAR within the field of HCI offers opportunities to recognise a community and their technological potential, thus moving beyond ageist stereotypes that focus solely on assistive technologies for older populations. In 2019, we hosted a radio festival to explore the potential of creating a network that connects our different research collaborators and other groups of older adults who create radio content. The festival took place over two days and welcomed older content creators and age-friendly radio stations from across England.

### 3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The data we report in this paper are transcribed audio recordings of discussions at the radio festival, and written observations from A.R.'s time embedded in the co-operative as a PAR researcher in the eight months following the festival. We aligned our research with the ethical guidelines of the British Society of Gerontology [7], providing a transparent research setting and valuing the experiences of older radio producers. University ethical approval was granted

for the project (Ref: 14663/2018) and participants gave their consent to be part of the project and to be quoted (using pseudonyms) in this paper.

**3.1.1 Radio Festival Discussions.** Two 45-minute discussion sessions with attendants of the festival explored visions for a radio network for older adults. Discussions took place in three small groups of three older content creators (aged 50+, five female, four male) and radio station managers (one female, two male). All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. We analysed data from the discussions using reflexive thematic analysis [4]. Reflexive thematic analysis is a way of systematically establishing meaning across a dataset with regard to the research aim, whilst acknowledging the active role of the researcher. A.R. coded the transcripts inductively and discussed codes and themes with J.L.

**3.1.2 Ongoing Observations.** As an embedded PAR researcher in the co-operative, A.R. kept contemporaneous written field notes capturing the content of discussions, group interactions and process milestones as the radio co-operative developed. Data from A.R.'s observations and field notes are summarised to provide a contextual documentation of the actions of the LLARC after the festival and within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 4 RESULTS

In this section, we outline the results from the thematic analysis of data collected at the radio festival. We then summarise the LLARC's more recent digital developments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 4.1 Radio Festival: the LLARC's mission

Drawing on the transcripts from the radio festival discussions, we present three themes derived from the data which are inherent to the organisation's mission: challenging ageist assumptions, generating intergenerational cohesion and radio as a technological tool that engages communities.

**4.1.1 Challenging ageist assumptions.** Participants voiced their intentions to use the LLARC as a tool to heighten awareness of ageism in public discourse as well as within the broadcasting industry. Participants suggested that the creation of radio by older adults is in itself an act that challenges ageism, using the medium of community radio as a way of democratising older people's voices. Such approaches allow older adults to contribute their opinions to public dialogue and showcase an active and engaged way of ageing.

*"When I talk about democratising older people's voices it already challenges existing stereotypes. And I think one of the most effective ways of doing that is older people themselves actually changing the narrative. [ . . . ] What is the vision and purpose of the network? For me it's about trying to change the existing narrative about how people think about growing older!" (Mark)*

Changing the existing narrative does not necessarily require individuals to actively speak out against ageism. Simply being an older content creator who engages with technical production tools can highlight an active stance on ageing, contrasting with stereotypical views of the passive nature of later life. Another benefit of hearing

older people's voices and opinions in public debates is that they reflect the actual lived experience of a person, thus acknowledging personhood in later life:

*"I think it's because we feel that we can express these issues better. Because we have actually experienced them as older people. [...] There is a lot more understanding between us." (Sophie)*

Constructing this shared understanding between older adults in the context of creating a radio show can be an alternative and more representative way to facilitate citizen dialogue. By taking part in radio shows older adults can freely express themselves and share their experiences in ways which might not be represented in mainstream media broadcasts. Challenging ageist assumptions through promoting talk-based content created by older adults themselves was agreed as an integral part of the organisation's mission.

**4.1.2 Advocating for intergenerational cohesion.** The second theme captures the role of intergenerational relationships. It was agreed that the co-operative should specifically focus on older adults as content creators and producers, in order to serve the organisation's purpose of enabling discussions of relevance that highlight a diversity of experiences in later life.

*"I think Radio is a way of enabling those discussions. [...] Make the Radio experience for older adults exciting and new. And draw on people's experiences. [...] So one of the fundamental purposes of the Network is to get older people in front and behind the mic." (Mark)*

However, despite agreement that the network should predominantly showcase content developed and produced by older adults, participants advocated for an intergenerational network. Participants wanted to emphasise intergenerational cohesion within the network, and to consider intergenerational content choices:

*"We had discussions around older people [...] leading and volunteering and driving content in programming. But [...] why wouldn't we be looking at something that was more intergenerational? [...] We want to try and find a way of expressing and cohesion that isn't proving of being divisive." (Grace)*

As Grace outlined, intergenerational cohesion within the network was seen as an important factor not just in terms of membership, but also to reflect the lived reality within communities. Capturing older adults' voices at many stages across the life-course and using those different experiences as a catalyst for the network was perceived as an important way to highlight diversity.

*"We have to remember that as we age, we might need younger people to come in and support us [...] And I know some people have objections to 50, but if we don't capture people at that age, they aren't going to be there at later life to take over from us." (Hannah)*

Inviting older adults of different age groups to be part of the network was seen as an important factor to contradict misconceptions about later life consisting of only one generation, whilst at the same time ensuring that the network has a continuity and intergenerational dynamic. Like the first theme (challenging ageism), advocating for intergenerational cohesion was also incorporated into the organisation's mission.

**4.1.3 Considering radio as a technology for community engagement.** The third theme addresses participants' ideas about using radio as a tool for community engagement. The discussion groups highlighted the necessity for the network to operate in digital as well as physical spaces, in order to be inclusive of people with and without digital skills: *"I'm excited about the online, but we also have to respect our members [older people who might not use the internet]" (Hannah)*. Using both FM and digital broadcasting can also reach a wide audience from different backgrounds. In terms of the network's membership and potential audience, it was therefore important to be *"an open network" (Mark)*, attracting both UK regulated and web-based stations. The discussions also revealed that radio was seen as raising less privacy concerns than other digital technologies or tools, such as TV or social media: *"a lot of people don't want to be filmed, but they don't mind their voices being heard" (Grace)*. Additionally, the ubiquitous nature of industry broadcasters was depicted in stark contrast to community radio, which has the ability to capture a person's unique and individual experience and emotion and therefore allows for different types of engagement between presenter and listener beyond the mainstream narrative.

*"But with Community Radio you hear the passion in their voice. [...] There are communities that have got things to say. I'm beginning to realise that I've been engrained in the world of the BBC. [...] it's so powerful and it's everywhere. But this is exciting that [community radio] is there." (Grace)*

Mark's comments below emphasise the potential of community radio to reach a variety of audiences, alongside recognising a need for the network to strategically acknowledge different types of communities and consider how those communities might be engaged with diverse programming.

*"For me the thing about Radio is that it breaks across and into a whole range of different communities, which can be within but also very much without a geographical space. So it's around how does this network develop and acknowledge that community means belonging in whatever way? [...] It's about how do we develop programming that captures those various communities?" (Mark)*

To summarise, we have detailed the main ideas that underpin the LLARC's mission: challenging ageism, promoting intergenerational cohesion and considering radio as a technology to engage communities. The next section outlines the LLARC's digital development after the radio festival, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 4.2 Digital Development as a Response to COVID-19

This section draws on A.R.'s observations as an embedded PAR researcher to give a brief overview of the LLARC's recent digital developments. We elaborate on challenges resulting from COVID-19, and how the co-operative adapted to using digital production workflows.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the LLARC was looking at ways to facilitate remote working in order to connect members across England. The organisation's last in-person meeting took

place in February 2020. Since then the team have connected remotely via Zoom. The LLARC also had to shift their production online. As a first step, a Mixcloud page was established as a hub to showcase talk-based content created by older adults that was produced by individual LLARC members or member stations [9].

The LLARC felt it was important to address the ageism they were witnessing in mainstream media by promoting the voices of older people in discussions around COVID-19. Making use of Zoom as a production tool, the LLARC members recorded conversations in order to broadcast older adults' voices in the current public debate. Four episodes with conversations about COVID-19 were created remotely and uploaded to Mixcloud. Additionally, other non-pandemic related productions were created and uploaded, based on the members' interests. None of the LLARC members had previous experiences with using zoom or smartphones to record a radio show. However, by leveraging professional support (e.g. with editing) from within the LLARC, content creation activities continued remotely throughout the lockdown.

To summarise, during COVID-19 the LLARC shifted its production process to incorporate remote digital workflows and technologies. The organisation's work is an example of how technologies can help older adults to continue being part of continued citizen dialogues during challenging circumstances.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Later Life Audio and Radio Co-operative (LLARC) aims to promote older people's voices in broadcasting. Our findings are based on a small-scale study, which lacks generalisability to other contexts. This is common for participatory projects in HCI [8], which aim to highlight the transferability of findings rather than generalisability. The project responds to the urgency felt by participants to include older adults in civic debates, online and offline. Audio and radio technologies offer a way to give a voice to older people, whilst at the same time fostering community engagement and challenging existing negative stereotypes regarding older adults and technology use. Based on the growing membership of the LLARC, we believe the project to be of wide interest with potential for replication beyond England.

### 5.1 Engaging with citizen dialogues in later life through broadcasting

One main challenge that the LLARC aims to address is the issue of ageism, which exists more broadly on a societal level, but is often reinforced through mainstream media narratives. By enabling older adults to access and to speak for themselves in digital spaces, the LLARC sets an example of how technology can be used in a radio production context to produce media that better reflects diversity in later life. Shifting the view from older adults as 'digital immigrants' towards broadcasting diverse opinions voiced by older adults can contribute to creating a less ageist society. The LLARC shows that by making use of alternative and accessible media channels, such as community radio, people of any age can become digital radio content creators. Echoing previous HCI projects that highlighted community and social aspects in the context of ageing and technology research [14], our study is an example of how participatory media projects can promote community engagement and citizen

dialogue in later life whilst fostering social connectedness over a collective mission. By creating a UK-wide hub and space to connect, radio stations can share content. Productions have the potential to reach a wider audience and therefore create overarching citizen dialogues. We argue that radio and audio can be powerful tools to support community engagement in later life. We suggest that government programmes such as the age friendly cities initiative explore participatory media production as a way to foster citizen dialogue in later life, in order to create a more inclusive civic discourse that counteracts ageist narratives.

### 5.2 Bridging non-digital and digital spaces

Unlike many technologies, radio offers the opportunity to engage in non-digital (e.g. running a desk or presenting) as well as digital ways (e.g. audio editing or online streaming), with broadcasts functioning as tools to bridge the digital divide. Older adults can be particularly privacy conscious when it comes to the use of digital technologies [17]. However, due to its non-digital and human interaction elements, community radio can provide an accessible and secure starting point for trying out digital skills, in comparison to other forms of digital engagement such as online platforms or communities. Radio can, therefore, engage older adults who are not digitally skilled, as well as those who want to engage with technologies at a deeper level. Even without existing digital skills, the creation of radio and audio content can be a pathway to enhanced digital participation in later life [12] and additionally functions as a motivating factor to engage with digital production tools, such as audio editing software [13]. Indeed, recent developments in the LLARC throughout the COVID-19 pandemic showed that all members began to engage digitally, regardless of previous experience, in order to stay involved with content creation activities. This project demonstrates how unique communities of interest can emerge based on a shared interest in a specific (audio) technology. Digital inclusion in later life was supported by social interactions within the group, with members sharing skills and helping each other with the use of zoom or with audio editing. The LLARC in itself challenges ageist stereotypes, with people of all ages, genders and digital literacy backgrounds successfully engaging with radio production and broadcasting in order to present their views, both in digital and non-digital ways. Placing value on the social interactions and dialogues that arise through the collaborative use of a technology, we echo findings from Righi et al. (2017) who suggest that HCI research should take into account how older adults use technologies within community settings [14]. By highlighting successful examples of technology use in a social and community environment, researchers can contribute to shifting the predominant biomedical focus on technology use in later life [15]. Instead, we encourage the development of participatory media tools that facilitate older adults' engagement with content creation activities and in civic debates, e.g. through combining social and digital production elements.

The research presented here explored the potential of using audio and radio technologies to support civic dialogue in later life. By presenting the case of the recently established Later Life Audio and Radio Co-operative, we add to key debates at the intersection of technology use and community engagement in later life. We

highlight the urgency of including older adults in public debates and suggest audio and radio as accessible engagement routes due to the combination of non-digital and digital features in the production process.

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