Half a century of independent radio stations in Catalonia. The sustainability of the sector in the present day

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Abstract

The emergence of independent radio stations in Catalonia was facilitated by the strong political and cultural mobilisation at the beginning of the democratic transition. Driven by not-for-profit groups and associations, they spread the issues and points of view of a wide variety of collectives and social movements. Half a century later, the independent radio stations are still there, although from the forty stations that existed in Catalonia at the end of the 1980s it has fallen to the current figure of nine. The aim of this article is to contribute to understanding the current situation of Catalan independent radio stations through a historical and regulatory contextualisation, a census and two case studies. Starting from the theories of alternative and community communication, we apply a qualitative methodology to find out the situation of these radio stations and the factors that affect their sustainability.

Keywords
Independent radio stations, sustainability, communication policies, Catalonia.

Resum

El sorgiment de les ràdios lliures a Catalunya fou propiciat per la forta mobilització política i cultural als inicis de la Transició democràtica. Impulsades per agrupacions i associacions sense ànim de lucre, difongueren els assumptes i punts de vista d'una gran varietat de col·lectius i moviments socials. Mig segle després, les ràdios lliures perduren, si bé de la quarantena d'emissores existents al país a finals dels vuitanta s'ha passat a les nou actuals. L'objectiu d'aquest article és contribuir a conèixer la situació actual de les ràdios lliures catalanes a través d'una contextualització històrica i normativa, un cens i dos estudis de cas. Partint de les teories de la comunicació alternativa i comunitària, apliquem una metodologia qualitativa per conèixer la situació d'aquestes ràdios i els factors que incideixen en la seva sostenibilitat.

Paraules clau
Ràdios lliures, sostenibilitat, polítiques de comunicació, Catalunya.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of independent radio stations began in the 1970s with the promotion of radio stations in France and Italy by social movements and citizens. Their existence and claims would call into question the radio and television monopolies of these countries and place them in a position of counter-hegemony. In Spain, the beginning of independent radio is located with the Catalan Ona Lliure (1978), which would have as antecedents Ràdio Maduixa in Granollers (1977) and Radio La Voz del Pobre in Madrid (1976) (Pérez and Reguero, 2021). The

democratic transition would channel the need to enjoy freedom of expression at a time when private broadcasters, created in the 1920s, had been restricted and strongly controlled by the Franco regime (SER, regional and local channels), or were an arm of religious power (COPE). Stations such as Contra Radio, La Campana de Gràcia, El Avispero or l'Estel would be the mouthpieces of social movements and would gain prominence in the 80s, at the same time that commercial radio was also gaining momentum. The independent radio stations, however, would be subjected to persecution and to regulations that stigmatised them, in a context of control and domestication of

radio participation by the Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD) government (Prado, 1980).

In 1983, during a national meeting in Villaverde (Madrid), the principles and characteristics of independent radio stations were defined. The absence of profit and a self-managed operation were established as differentiating elements, along with social participation, the non-professional nature and autonomy from political or economic pressure groups, which is why they reject advertising. Also, the *Villaverde Manifesto* (Coordinadora de Radios Libres, 1983) stated that the mission of independent radio stations is to serve the community where they are integrated, to promote the unification of the sender and the receiver and to oppose the centralisation of communication. Along with independent radio stations, another model of participatory communication would gain popularity, community radio stations. These prioritised service to their neighbours, leisure and culture over political demands, so that they received proposals for action from different institutions and from the public Administration. This would produce a separation —with particularities depending on the territories— of the independent radio stations, bound by the *Villaverde Manifesto* (Pérez and Reguero, 2021). Today, both models are still present in Catalonia and Spain, and some stations collaborate in the Red de Medios Comunitarios (REMC).

Focusing on independent radio stations, this article addresses their current situation in Catalonia and proposes a methodological tool to analyse their sustainability. A qualitative methodology is adopted, which complements the documentary analysis with a census and two case studies.

2. Theoretical framework

The study of independent radio stations is a practically non-existent field and linked to other minority areas of research such as alternative communication, the media of social movements and counterculture (Senecal, 1986; Downing, 2001 [1984]; Atton, 2001). In Catalonia, Bassets (1981) investigated the militant side of independent radio stations, and Prado (1980, 1981) analysed their operation and the political and commercial environment, in addition to criticising the regulatory frameworks that affected them. These studies show that the decision-making of independent radio stations takes place in assemblies that define the general lines of the programming. From the beginning, advertising and economic benefits have been rejected, and production has been collective, without social division of labour, with access and bidirectionality as milestones (Prado, 1980).

Looking for a broad view that includes the diversity of not-for-profit initiatives, some authors have conceptualised citizen communication (Rodríguez, 2001; Camps, 2019) or the Third Sector (Mayugo, 2006; Sáez, 2008). The taxonomies are useful to grasp the differences between the principles and the ways of functioning of experiences such as the radio stations at schools, universities, prisons, NGOs, foundations

or churches. Visualising the political and cultural value of local communication, Moragas (1988) distinguishes three types of broadcasters apart from commercial ones: 1) the broadcasters of the municipal administration, 2) those of cultural institutions, driven by civil society groups that, without renouncing the resources of the market and the administration, seek to be independent (we can consider them the equivalent of community radio stations and other Third Sector initiatives), and 3) independent radio stations*,* of a political-alternative nature. Moragas, would affirm that "the spontaneity and proactive nature of the sender were insufficient for the consolidation of these experiences" (*Ibid*: 72-73).

Studies regarding the community radio model contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of independent radio stations as part of wider media processes driven by social groups. Experts of reference in this area (Jankowski, Prehn and Stappers, 1992; Jankowski and Prehn, 2002) attribute the bidirectionality between community and media dynamics as a defining feature of community radio stations. However, unlike independent radio stations, ownership and control are often shared by community residents, local government and other organisations. The overall budget includes corporate sponsorship, advertising and government subsidies (Jankowski & Prehn, 2002). Authors who investigate community experiences claim that financial fragility should not be inherent to them, just as it would not be negative to have abundant resources (Fisher, 2019).

UNESCO and the Council of Europe have studied and promoted the different forms of community communication, including independent radio stations, especially in early studies. This is probably explained by the influence of some personalities linked or close to the movement. For example, the president of UNESCO's Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, Séan MacBride, was a member of the board of trustees of the defunct European Federation of Independent Radio Stations (FERL), which, moreover, referred to the MacBride Report in its statement of principles (Reguero, 2017, 2023). In the same way, the study entitled *Media Communautaires?* (Beaud, 1980), commissioned by the Council of Europe, applies a taxonomy of local media outlets according to the way they are launched: 1) following the decentralisation of the public service; 2) media outlets that are not part of the public service but depend on the public Administration, and 3) self-managed media outlets, created independently, considered the "authentic" community radio stations [*sic*]. The study notes that, after the provision of public aid, certain media outlets continued their work of militant counter-information while others opted for the underground. Currently, the European Parliament recommends the promotion and protection of Third Sector media outlets for their contribution to the progress towards more participatory, plural, inclusive and digitally literate societies (European Parliament, 2008).

Based on the references presented and on the *Villaverde*

Manifesto (1983), we understand *independent radio station* to mean a station that broadcasts on FM and/or the internet, which is not-for-profit and managed by civil society groups (without organic ties to the Administration or political organisations), offering content that reflects social diversity.

2.1. The sustainability of independent radio stations

In Catalonia and Spain, the tradition of independent radio stations and the connection with the academic world have led to a certain amount of studies, many of them action research. The first works that would address the sustainability of independent radio stations in Catalonia and Spain as a whole would be those of Prado (1980 and 1981) and Dolç *et al*. (1985). More recent studies address the sustainability of independent and community radio stations as a whole (Fleischman, Reguero and Sáez, 2010; Barranquero and Candón-Mena, 2021). All of them, and those that focus on communication policies (Bergés, 2012; García, Reguero and Sáez, 2012; Meda, 2015), report a hostile legal context, with mutual support networks being one response (Ramos, Morais and Barranquero, 2018; Reguero and Pérez, in the press). We also have comparisons between Spain and other countries, including self-managed television (Sáez, 2008, Reguero, 2017), as well as the use of free software and Creative Commons licences (Reguero, 2017; Reguero *et al*., 2022).

On an international scale, comparative studies such as Lewis and Booth (1992), Gumucio (2001) or Pulleiro (2011) stand out. Unesco (2017) has also investigated the sustainability of community media outlets. This research shows that a purely economic evaluation would not include aspects which are essential for the viability of independent and community radio stations, such as the socio-political and economic environment, the social mission or participation.

Gumucio (2005) compares the sustainability of community media outlets with the art of tightrope walkers and proposes to get to know the different models in depth, going beyond the definitions to understand community communication in a global way. The analysis framework proposed by this specialist in the sustainability of community media outlets is what we have used to approach independent radio stations. The approach consists of three dimensions of analysis: social, institutional and economic sustainability (Gumucio, *ibid*.).

Social sustainability refers to the participation of social actors, both in terms of frequency and quality of engagement. Involvement in media management is a key aspect, alongside content production; this participation and the link with the environment should be reflected in the programming. Gumucio includes a sense of cultural and linguistic belonging, especially in contexts of assimilation, and reminds us that radio is the media form that has allowed the greatest level of linguistic and cultural democracy.

Institutional sustainability is deployed internally and externally. The internal dimension is shaped by the ownership model, the organisation and working relationships, participation and transparency. Their ownership is the most important factor. Gumucio (*ibid*.) notes that very few media outlets really belong to the community, and that behind some that present themselves as community-based are in fact NGOs, the Church or the Administration. Participation analysis includes management and programming. External sustainability is shaped by Spanish national policies and collaboration networks with other media outlets. On this, Gumucio points out the paradox that some governments have given them legal support, since they represent a confrontation or alternative to order.

Thirdly, economic sustainability includes expenses (equipment, basic supplies, performance of activities or wages, if applicable) and income, which can be direct community contributions (work, money and in kind) or indirect (collection of services, such as local ads). Gumucio is a supporter of the appropriate use of advertising.

Other authors have taken more of an in-depth look and added more detail to these dimensions. Villamayor (2010) adds comprehensive sustainability, which includes political-cultural, communicational, organisational and economic aspects. Barranquero and Candón-Mena, 2021) highlight five aspects: economic (the origin and diversification of earnings), political/legal (legal frameworks and legal form), organisational (channels and forms of coordination), economic/social (support community, evaluation of social milestones) and infotechnological (use of digital tools for participation and free software, technological innovations).

3. Methodology

Research on the sustainability of independent and community media in Catalonia has mainly focused on political/legal and activist aspects (Fleischman, Reguero and Sáez, 2010; Bassets, 1981; Dolç, Deó and Sanchis, 1985; Moragas, 1988; Prado, 1980 and 1981; Sáez, 2008). To complement and update it, this article also takes an in-depth look at the social bond and the economy. A historical perspective and a qualitative methodology are adopted to grasp the different forms of the phenomenon (Lindlof, 1995), combining the descriptive approach, in order to define and detail it, with explanations, to identify causal factors (Eiroa and Barranquero, 2017). The global view obtained with the traditional bibliographic review is enhanced by two case studies, Ràdio RSK and Ràdio La Floresta, to which the analysis tool developed in this section is applied.

The cases are selected using non-probability convenience sampling (Taherdoost, 2016), a common selection method in case studies, through which cases are chosen from the range available to the researcher, who sets representativeness criteria to justify the choice. In this research, the selection is based on history, the current reality and the diversity of the independent radio stations around the country. In Catalonia, 125 socially-based media outlets were registered in 2016 out of a total of 345 across Spain (Lema-Blanco and Barranquero, 2015). With

Table 1. Census of independent radio stations in Catalonia (2024)

Radio station	Founded	Location	Broadcasting on
1. Ràdio PICA	1981	Barcelona (Gràcia)	96.6 FM / online
2. Ràdio RSK	1985	Barcelona (Nou Barris)	107.1 FM / online
3. Ràdio Bronka	1987	Barcelona (Nou Barris)	104.5 FM / online
4. Radio Line IV	1988	Barcelona (Nou Barris)	Online*
5. Ràdio 90	1990	Olot	Online / 101.4 FM until 2022
6. Contrabanda FM	1991	Barcelona (Ciutat Vella)	91.4 FM / online
7. Ràdio La Floresta	2012	Sant Cugat del Vallès (La Floresta)	Online / 90.0 FM until 2023
8. Radio Pájaros	2017	Barcelona (Sants)	Online
9. La Otra Orilla	2023	Barcelona (Ciutat Vella)	Online

Source: own work.

* The station was asked if it is currently broadcasting on FM and no answer was obtained. Its last recorded frequency is FM 103.9.

regard specifically to radio stations, the most recent census in Spain indicates that there are 47 Third Sector stations in Spain.[1] To these we need to add 54 additional radio projects by the TSC (XRCB, n.d.). Applying the operational criteria to define an independent radio station (see section 2), the research universe is, as of September 2024, a total of nine active stations,[2] as shown in table 1. The case study does not establish an ideal number of experiences to be analysed (Eisenhardt, 1989), on the other hand, given the small size of the universe, the two broadcasters with a chosen profile, chosen for convenience, and their contextualisation allow us to grasp the current state of the phenomenon.

Given the historic demand for frequencies, the aim has been for the selected cases to be broadcast on FM. Ràdio RSK broadcasts on FM, in addition to the internet, and Ràdio La Floresta was broadcast on FM until the beginning of 2023 (when the interview took place), and at present is only on the internet.

Ràdio RSK is one of Catalonia's oldest independent radio stations, founded in 1985 in the Nou Barris district (Barcelona), while Ràdio La Floresta, which started in 2012 in the neighbourhood of the same name in Sant Cugat del Vallès, represents the new radio stations. RSK defines itself as a media outlet which is "neither institutional nor commercial, with an internal operation of an associative, assembly and self-managed nature, without any desire for profit or advertising, nor political parties, non-municipal and essentially based on cultural and social content" (Ràdio RSK, online). La Floresta presents itself as a "self-managed cultural project by residents of La Floresta Pearson" (Ràdio La Floresta, online).

To create the radio sustainability indicators, the variables have been adapted from the pilot test process of the R&D project "Sustainability of the Third Sector of Communication" (SOS-COM, 2021-2004), in which the authors of this article took part. The variables are based on the dimensions of analysis established by Gumucio (2005), supplemented by recent contributions (see section 2.1). Table 2 lists the indicators for each analysis dimension.

The data for the case studies are obtained from a representative of each of the broadcasters, collected through a questionnaire of 60 closed questions, answered face-to-face at the respective headquarters in interviews of approximately one hour (Ràdio RSK, *Pitu,* 28 November 2022; Ràdio La Floresta, Dionisio Giménez, 20 February 2023). The questionnaire makes it possible to collect information in a systematic way around the concepts on which the research pivots (Eiroa and Barranquero, 2017). These data are completed with the programming schedules, the content on the broadcasters' websites and the analysis of the applicable legislation. These primary sources are reinforced with secondary sources, such as studies and media surveys.

4. Results

4.1 Social sustainability

Historically, Catalan independent radio stations have been based on the interest and need of a wide range of individuals, groups and collectives to communicate their vision of reality (Dolç, Deó and Sanchis, 1985). For example, women immediately became involved in production. At stations such as Ona Lliure, Ràdio Venus or La Campana, women found a place to produce specific programmes and talk about issues such as abortion. Expressing oneself in Catalan in a normal way was another incentive (Camps-Durban, 2022). At the beginning of the 20th century, programmes from migrant communities were added, some made in their languages of origin, or from groups diagnosed with mental health problems, highlighting Ràdio Nikosia, under the umbrella of Contrabanda FM, which was 20 years old in 2023.

Table 2. Sustainability of independent radio stations in Catalonia. Dimensions and indicators

Dimension	Indicators			
Social sustainability	Legal form			
	Broadcasting channels			
	Mission and values			
	Public information about the media outlet			
	External communication	Website		
		Electronic newsletter		
		Social networks	Presence	
			Frequency of updating	
			Purposes of use	
		Other communication actions		
		Contents		
		Monitoring		
		Mechanisms of interaction with the audience		
	Link with the environment	Content related to the local community		
		Content that promotes socio-cultural diversity		
		Membership or participation in other organisations or networks		
Institutional sustainability	Internal	Organisational structure	Management bodies and positions	
			Assembly	
		Members	Number of regular members	
			Frequency of participation	
			Ways of participation	
			Gender parity	
			Diversity of collaborators	Retired or over 65 years old
				People with disabilities
				Members of ethnic minorities
				LGBTQI+ people
			Incorporation routes for new members	
			Promotion of inclusion	
			Training for members	
			Causes of abandonment	
		Community property		
		Contracted workers		
		Internal organisation and labour relations	Transparency	
			Freedom (no impositions)	
			Decent contracts	
		Decision-making about the technology used		
		Measures to promote coexistence at the media outlet		
		Headquarters		
		Internal communication		
	External	Normative and regulatory frameworks		
		Legal advice		
		Licence		
		Media outlet declared to be a public utility		
		Legal or political actions linked to the broadcaster or the sector		
		Fines for radio activity		
		Pressure due to radio activity		
		Participation in media networks	International	
			State	
			Regional	
			Local	
		Agreements with public or private institutions		
Economic sustainability	Member contributions	Voluntary work		
		Money		
		In kind		
	Budget			
	Income			
	Expenses			

Source: adaptation of the indicators of the R&D project "Sustainability of the Third Sector of Communication" (SOS-COM, 2021-2024). Own work.

Ràdio RSK presents itself as "a means of denunciation and struggle" to promote "the democratisation of communication" (RSK, n.d.), and Ràdio La Floresta "is made and directed by citizens who try to give an objective and [*sic*] independent vision explaining the tangible reality in the first person and from all areas with music, current events, culture and sports programmes" (Ràdio La Floresta, n.d.). Both define themselves as independent radio stations and orient their mission towards cultural animation and leisure, with political and vindictive content. They have moved between the informal grouping and the formal constitution. RSK operated for years under the umbrella of Taller Jove d'Informació Urbana, the association that gave it legal cover (now defunct), while La Floresta was formalised by constituting the Associació Altaveu Floresta in 2021.

Ràdio RSK is located in Nou Barris, a district of Barcelona where 170,000 inhabitants live.[3] It is a fertile place for independent broadcasting experiences: the now-defunct Farigola and Àgora were also founded there and Bronka and Línea IV are currently broadcast there, in addition to other TSC stations (XRCB, n.d.). The proliferation of these radio stations is explained by the strong implementation of the neighbourhood and labour movement in Nou Barris (Huertas and Andreu, 1996), which currently has 335 associations, according to the General Database of Citizen Entities of Barcelona City Council. RSK participates in associative life, either as a broadcaster or through specific programmes. Having the studio in the Can Basté Civic Centre helps it to be in contact and coexist with the associative and neighbourhood fabric (on its website it offers a directory of independent entities and media in the district), in addition to joining and participating in local mobilisations. The most notable events organised by the radio station are the emerging performing arts cycle "El Generador", the Turó Rock festival and the radio's anniversary party. In addition, the film programme *La Cinemoteka* promotes a cycle of short films directed by women. Regarding the link established between programming and the environment, RSK broadcasts programmes about racism and repression of social movements (*Anarkústika*), the trans collective (*Red Trans Ràdio*) and people with mental health problems (*Radio Nossal*). Also, programmes from other independent radio stations in Spain are broadcast.

Radio La Floresta operates in a very different context; the neighbourhood of the same name in Sant Cugat del Vallès has 5,000 residents,[4] with a certain increase in the summer. The origin of the neighbourhood, in the Collserola mountain range, is found in the holiday homes built by the upper middle class; it would be in the 1970s, when it would become a countercultural nucleus (Marcén, 2004). Today there are sixty-one registered entities, according to the Directory of Entities of Sant Cugat del Vallès City Council. The station was created from the combination of a group's desire to use the radio and the humanitarian work of a journalist from the area, Dionisio Giménez, who had been active in the free station Contra Radio (Barcelona) and still had the issuer. Later, upon receiving

compensation, Giménez would bring in a new team and help organise and consolidate the project. The intention of the radio station is to be an "instrument for local residents to have their say", a space for the expression of ideas based on respect and "non-offensive" discourse (Dionisio Giménez, personal interview, 20 February 2023). It broadcasts programmes about local news (*Punt i a part*), commentary and interviews on local issues (*El Bastón de Merino*) and political current affairs (*The Republic*). With a historical perspective, *Visca la terra* collects and comments episodes and cultural activities relating to Catalonia throughout the centuries. In praise of humanitarian acts, *Esta es tu vida* analyses the biography of anonymous people considered an example of dedication to work and cooperation. *Las alas de Hermes* collects the voice of different cultures and worldviews about the human condition and self-knowledge. Music is also present in the programme *Vinilos ye ye*. One of the main values of the radio station is anti-racism, which is guaranteed in all programmes (Giménez, *ibid*.). The radio station is part of the Neighbourhood Council, participates in festivals and organises public events, meetings and concerts. It also belongs to a neighbourhood exchange space for local news, the "Vivir en La Floresta" group, on Facebook.

Regarding external communication, both radio stations have their own website, which they update occasionally. RSK does not publish any digital newsletters and Ràdio La Floresta has done so occasionally. Both use the networks to disseminate content from the media and similar actors, as well as consult content and look for sources of news. RSK has profiles on Facebook and Instagram, which it updates weekly, in addition to publishing content on YouTube. Ràdio La Floresta, which currently only broadcasts online, has a profile on Facebook, updated occasionally, and some programmes can be found on YouTube.

Neither of the two broadcasters has audience measurement mechanisms, so quantitative knowledge about the audience is very limited. RSK has access to the data of downloads and playbacks of the programmes and podcasts, as well as of the users of the streaming of the programmes, although it does not systematically track them. At Ràdio La Floresta, they are not concerned with audience data, but with radio being "an element of reciprocity between people" and being part of "the future of the neighbourhood and the entities" (Giménez, *ibid*.). The main feedback is received in the activities they organise.

4.2 Institutional sustainability

4.2.1 Internal institutional sustainability
The radio stations RSK and La Floresta define themselves as horizontal organisations and have not established governing bodies. At RSK, currently without legal status, the assembly takes decisions relating to management and administration, as well as certain daily tasks. At La Floresta they emphasise the daily tasks and explain that the assembly proposes and coordinates the programmes but does not get involved in the

content, as long as respect is encouraged (neither racism nor male chauvinism is allowed); they were set up as an association to have a legal umbrella, although in practice there are no governing bodies, but an assembly.

Stable collaborators are key to the constancy of the broadcast activity of both initiatives. At RSK they range between 5 and 10, and at La Floresta, between 11 and 15. Men are in the majority at both radio stations, and the Vallès-based station includes people over 65 and from ethnic minorities; one highlight is the group of young people from a Moroccan cultural background who make the programme *Música del Mundo*. The headquarters has been made accessible for people with disabilities and functional diversity. From RSK the aim is to actively promote "the participation of people with functional, ethnic, sexual, bodily diversity, etc." (RSK, n.d.). Personal contacts and the organisation of cultural, training and leisure activities are the main ways of incorporating collaborators. This is an informal exchange; none of the broadcasters has formalised the figure of these collaborators although they are provided with training when they join.

Both broadcasters have public and accessible information about the organisation's goals and values. RSK does not use any specific channel for communication with collaborators, while La Floresta uses instant messaging (WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) and an occasional e-newsletter. Contributors can send opinions, complaints or suggestions by email (RSK) or instant messaging (La Floresta). At RSK they add that they have adopted several measures to promote coexistence at the media outlet: optimisation of the distribution of tasks, improvement in participation and the incorporation of new members. As for the reasons for abandoning the project, both broadcasters indicate that they came down to fatigue or a lack of motivation, as well as lack of time.

4.2.2 External institutional sustainability

The legal recognition of independent radio stations, under the denomination of "cultural and educational not-for-profit organisations" (BOE, 1978) came very early in the piece, with a decree promoted by the UCD government. The high expectations, however, would be frustrated. The sector was forced to undertake at least a minimum level of programming and the production of its own general news items, which made production excessively expensive (Prado, 1981). As a result, it was considered that the decree was "tailor-made to abort the movement of independent radio stations" (Prado, 1980: 163). The commercial stations would obtain licences in the 1981 and 1982 competitions. Out of 300 FM concessions, none were for independent and community radio stations, while the independent radio stations were closed –cases like that of Ràdio Pica, in 1987, would force a public response. The new technical plan of 1989 forced them to cease broadcasting in order to participate in the competitions, a fact that, added to the previous situation, would lead many initiatives to disappear. Some, such as Contra Radio, would do so immediately after the closures, while others

would persist in working in a semi-clandestine fashion despite the spark provided by the concession in Valencia granted to Ràdio Klara (1989) and the recognition of the "educational and cultural stations of local area" by the Generalitat de Catalunya (Government of Catalonia). Decree 80/1989 indicated that the Generalitat would grant FM concessions in Catalonia. The educational and cultural broadcasters were to be not-for-profit and were not permitted to broadcast advertising, except for institutional publicity or programme sponsorship by local entities and external subsidies. They had to broadcast a minimum of thirty hours a week, and 50% of the broadcast time would correspond to programmes of their own production (Parliament of Catalonia, 1989).

In the 1990s, other radio stations would emerge, many of which would cease to broadcast. In the early 21st century, the mobilisation of a hundred collectives brought together in the Assembly for Social Communication (ACS) led to the inclusion of not-for-profit audiovisual communication services in Law 22/2005, of 29 December, of audiovisual communication in Catalonia, allowing the advertising of the social economy and the Third Sector and establishing a reserve of public communication space. However, the Generalitat (Government of Catalonia) and the Spanish Government attributed to each other the responsibility for the reservation of frequencies (García, Reguero and Sáez, 2012). As of 2024, no licences have been granted and the regulatory developments are still pending approval, the project of which would once again be labelled *a suffocation* at the "Not-for-profit audiovisual media" conference, organised by the Generalitat de Catalunya and the Catalan Audiovisual Council (10 December 2009). In 2023, the Spanish State secretariat for telecommunications and Digital Infrastructure initiated a special procedure for community licences,[5] with ten applications from Catalonia out of a total of one hundred and fifteen in Spain as a whole. The figure at state level exceeded the number of community broadcasters prior to the call, and it is suspected that media outlets that are neither independent nor community-based took part (García, González and Barranquero, 2024).

Also in 2023, the preliminary report on the draft law amending Law 22/2005 was approved, a process in which historical activist claims were recalled: granting broadcast licences, securing radio spectrum and having public spaces for antennas and transmitters. In addition, free licences were demanded as a historical debt and the stoppage of processing files, sanctions or fines, given that the situation is due to administrative inaction (Contrabanda FM, 2020). Historic radio stations such as Bronka, PICA and Contrabanda have received complaints and fines of thousands of euros, they have had to move on the dial because they were trampled on by public or private broadcasters and they have had to dismantle part of their technical teams (Contrabanda FM, 2020; Ràdio Bronka, 2013).

The beginnings of Ràdio RSK, in 1985, were marked by the closure ordered by the Spanish Ministry of Telecommunications. In response, it would merge with Ràdio Canal 8 until 1987.

In the late 1990s, RSK would receive a complaint from the Mossos d'Esquadra Catalan police corps for allegedly interfering with the Barcelona Airport frequencies. From the early 2000s until 2007, RSK would lose momentum as a high-powered pirate radio station crowded onto the point on the dial on which they were broadcasting, 107.0, so they had to move to 107.1. The beginning of Ràdio La Floresta was simpler, partly because the spectrum in that area does not have the same saturation as the city of Barcelona.

At the time of conducting the interviews, neither of the two stations had a broadcasting licence nor had been declared a public utility. Ràdio La Floresta considered that it did not need the licence, but soon afterwards it would abandon the dial due to the impediments that this entailed and the high costs: "Broadcasting through airwaves is the most genuine —and romantic— thing about radio, but the location of the antenna and the cost of the broadcasting equipment is a pain. Band concessions are unattainable, only economic groups and monopolies can afford them" (Dionisio Giménez, consultation on 19 September 2024). RSK has fought for decades to achieve its licence: it submitted proposals and arguments to the laws and established political contacts for this purpose. Neither radio station has been fined. Neither of them has filed complaints to defend their activity and they do not have legal advice.

An essential dimension in external institutional sustainability are the collaboration networks, which arose due to the repression during the Transition. From the national meeting of independent radio stations held in June 1979 in Barcelona, the exchange of information, programmes, technical assistance and joint legal defence would begin (Prado, 1980). Between 1982 and 1983, the Coordinator of Independent Broadcasters of Catalonia (Coordinadora d'Emissores Independents de Catalunya, CEIC) was formed, with twenty radio stations from Barcelona and the Metropolitan Area. In the 1990s, a group of Catalan independent radio stations came together to request legalisation, and in 2010 the collaboration resumed under the so-called Coordinator of Independent Radio Stations (Coordinadora de Ràdios Lliures), to present allegations to the draft regulations of Law 22/2005. It currently brings together Bronka, Contrabanda, PICA, Línea IV, Bala (inactive) and RSK. The latter is also part of Radios Libres, the national coordinator in Spain, through which it has participated in broadcast days in the form of a marathon and in a chain between initiatives from inside and outside of Spain. RSK is also involved with the network of Independent Radio Stations of the Valencian Community (Ràdios Lliures del País Valencià). Ràdio La Floresta does not maintain contact with any network, although it has expressed an interest in doing so.

4.3 Economic sustainability

From the beginning, the independent radio stations in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain decided to reject "economic benefits" and all kinds of advertising (Prado, 1980: 162). Funding came from the contributions by the radio station's members, producers and listeners (membership fees in the case of associations), donations and profits from the organisation of events and the sale of merchandise. The main expenses are usually the technical equipment, the studio and the supplies. Some radio stations have shared expenses and equipment, such as PICA and Bronka between 2009 and 2010 (Ràdio Bronka, 2013). In 2018, a survey by the Community Media Network (Red de Medios Comunitarios) showed that twenty of the forty initiatives consulted, including independent and community initiatives, had less than €5,000 per year. The informants made it clear that they had difficulties in increasing resources, despite enjoying economic stability. Recently, some independent radio stations are accepting certain types of advertising and exploring crowdfunding.

The annual budget of the two radio stations studied is less than €1,000 and they reject any type of advertising. RSK's funding channels are the sale of merchandise and the organisation of events. Unlike RSK, Ràdio La Floresta has membership fees, a way that accounts for more than 80% of the income, complemented by the sale of books and the organisation of cultural events. The main expense of both broadcasters is the purchase or rental and maintenance of technical equipment. The other important expense for RSK is the organisation of activities —mainly concerts— while for La Floresta it is the payment of copyrights and software licences. Decisions about the production and circulation of content and the use of paid or free software are political. RSK has decided not to pay copyright royalties, uses Creative Commons licenced content and only uses free software.

The economic viability of both projects can be explained by the selfless work and the transfer of spaces, which includes the supplies: RSK has had its studio in a leased space since 1997, in the Can Basté civic centre, in the Turó de la Peira neighbourhood, and La Floresta in a premises leased by the Sant Cugat del Vallès City Council. The Vallès-based station maintains a friendly relationship with the City Council that allows them to use the space but prefers not to identify with the government's discourse so that it can follow its own course. Neither of the two radio stations has paid staff: all their management and production tasks are entirely voluntary. Nor do they have collaboration agreements with educational centres, although in La Floresta some students have collaborated in programmes.

5. Discussion

The thirty-nine years of broadcasts by Ràdio RSK, which were interrupted, and the recent abandonment of FM by Ràdio La Floresta illustrate that the evolution of independent radio stations in Catalonia has been held back by external conditions derived from the regulatory frameworks, such as interference, closures and fines. This situation shows that the desire of the

groups is not enough to make these broadcasters sustainable (Moragas, 1988), in addition to the paradox of legal recognition (Gumucio, 2005). The adversity of this external institutional context (Barranquero and Candón-Mena, 2021; Bergés, 2012; Dolç, Deó and Sanchis, 1985; Prado, 1980) is compensated by internal strengths, such as the organisational and productive capacity of social groups. Thus, despite the driving forces being few in number, they achieve strong social ties and maintain regular radio schedules.

RSK's content prioritises transformative social movements and less institutionalised culture, while La Floresta's radio station puts the spotlight on current events and reflection in a local and political context, as well as cultural and social history. The programming of these radio stations reflects the associative and socio-political dynamism of their environment (Gumucio, 2005) as well as the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, origins and genders, contributing to pluralism and media literacy (European Parliament, 2008).

The scarce financial resources are explained by the fact that they seek financial independence and prioritise action over the economy (Coordinadora de Radios Libres, 1983; Villamayor, 2019; Fisher, 2019). Voluntary work and collaboration, including the practices of free culture, are a key contribution to its sustainability (Reguero, 2017; Reguero *et al*., 2022). The dynamics of self-management, the participation of non-professionals and the rejection of advertising show that, in addition to adapting and innovating, Catalan independent radio stations maintain their founding principles (Camps, 2019).

6. Conclusions

To understand the sustainability of Catalan independent radio stations, it is necessary to attend to the social dimension. Grassroots participation is the driving force, while also explaining the thirty-nine years of Ràdio RSK and the emergence of initiatives in the midst of the digital age, such as Ràdio La Floresta (inaugurated in 2012 on FM) or La Otra Orilla, launched online in 2023. The bidirectionality between radio and the environment is reflected in different aspects that include radio programming and equipment donations to the transfer of premises, through the involvement of broadcasters in the activities of the territory. This fabric and the various forms of collaboration allow a certain economic balance despite the lack of monetary income. The number and diversity of programmes on Ràdio RSK and Ràdio La Floresta contrasts with their budgets, around €1,000 per year, in an economic scheme that rejects advertising.

Now, there are nine active stations, four of which can be tuned to the Catalan dial. The figure is small compared to the totality of local stations, but it is significant if we take into account that even after the not-for-profit stations have been legally recognised, independent radio stations have remained in a hostile legal environment, debating between legalisation or remaining underground. Despite the complaints, no licence has been granted in Catalonia. Pessimism and fatigue have caused many broadcasters to disappear or flee to the internet. Ràdio RSK broadcasts on FM with the aim of promoting the democratisation of communication, while Ràdio La Floresta has recently been forced to leave the dial due to the impediments of not having licences and the high technological costs. The generational component also explains the interest in FM despite the impossibility of obtaining licences; in both stations there are members with long experience in independent radio stations. The social self-management of radio is also significant as a countercultural practice in a context in which cultural consumption, mediated by commercial social networks and large platforms, is increasingly individualised and segmented.

The sum of these factors makes it possible to understand the persistence of independent radio stations. They maintain a communication space (Moragas, 1988) started in the 1970s with the desire to democratise radio. Women were present from the beginning, although in the cases studied men are the majority. It will also be necessary to follow the generational shift and the appropriation of independent radio stations by digital natives.

Notes

1. Disaggregated data from the study by Lema-Blanco and Barranquero (2015), provided by the authors.

2. In May 2024, fourteen independent radio stations had been identified. However, in September 2024 it was found that five radio stations identified as independent in the directory of the Barcelona Community Radio Network (Xarxa de Ràdios Comunitàries de Barcelona) are no longer broadcasting.

3. Data consulted in Idescat (2023).

4. Data consulted in Idescat (2023).

5. At Spain level, the General Audiovisual Law (BOE, 2010) was promulgated, which includes the concept of *community media*, and would be replaced in 2022 by the General Audiovisual Communication Act. The third transitional provision establishes a special procedure for requesting licences for community services. The list of requests from Catalonia could not be accessed.

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