

Rural Roots Rising Episode 7: *Community Radio: Tune In, Speak Out!* — Transcript For more episodes of Rural Roots Rising go to ruralrootsrising.org

Hannah Harrod 00:00

[music intro] Hello and welcome back to Rural Roots Rising by the Rural Organizing Project! If this is your first time listening, Rural Roots Rising is a monthly radio show and podcast created by and for rural Oregonians who are creatively and courageously building stronger and more vibrant communities for a just democracy. My name is Hannah Harrod, and I'm an organizer with the Rural Organizing Project. You may be listening to this episode via podcast or by tuning into a station. Either way, the power of radio goes back decades. And for so many of us it's been felt for generations. I know for me, I can still picture working with my dad, picking up hay bales and listening to local talk shows in the background on the farm truck radio, or circling up with my siblings on the living room rug for a weekly story program in the evenings. In today's episode, *Community Radio: Tune In, Speak Out!*, we'll talk with four local media creators about how public radio is literally a life-saving source of information that keeps communities connected and taking action together.

Arturo Sarmiento 01:08

When you are in a place like the Willamette Valley and you turn the radio on, and you listen, somebody is speaking in your own language, or you're listening to your own music. Oh, wow. That's something unbelievable. It gives you the sense that you are important, that you are someone and someone over there is caring about you.

Hannah Harrod 01:36

We first began Rural Roots Rising after dozens of conversations and requests from folks in the ROP network. Our member groups were concerned that more and more of our local media was being bought up and consolidated by corporations. In rural areas especially, we know that creating and supporting local public media is essential to community survival, from responding to severe storms to helping mobilize neighbors after disaster strikes. The importance of local media has never been more clear than during this global pandemic. Radio and other local media that works for the good of all our neighbors fosters the sense of belonging, resilience and connection that is necessary for weathering the storms we face, both literally and figuratively. But I'll let our friends tell you more about that.

Carol Newman 02:23

We went on the air April 17th, 1983. So we just celebrated our 37th birthday.

Hannah Harrod 02:32

Carol Newman has lived in the unincorporated village of Brownsmead, Oregon for 46 years, fostering culture and connection through dance, music, and art. Carol helped build KMUN Coast Community Radio from the ground up. It was a natural fit for her to host the folk music and local arts shows that have now been fixtures at the station for decades.

Carol Newman 02:55

And it is a vital part of this community in so many different ways. It's the only local public radio station—community radio station—in the area. We do have—the Oregon station has a repeater here. In other words, it comes from Portland. They don't have any feet on the ground or microphones on the ground here. So we're the only ones of public radio doing local.

Hannah Harrod 03:28

Radio is often the only form of media accessible when the power goes down. A lesson learned quickly by Coast Community Radio in 2007.

Carol Newman 03:37

The role of the radio station in emergencies has become really clear. And in fact, in 2007, when there was a huge storm, November/December, and it took out electricity and telephones and everything. For where I live, we were out for six days with nothing, no way to communicate. And all the local stations were off the air except us, and that's because we actually had filled our tank. Our generator tank, unlike the commercial local stations, which had been given tanks and generators years before, for just such an occasion, but they never needed it so they didn't update it. And we did. And so we were the—so the mayor came, the police came, the fire came—they all came to our station to broadcast. And it made everybody—us, as well as the community—aware of how important this is. So our emergency mechanisms have been—we're now—we have a ham amateur radio station, we have a center in the station, so we can use that and it's happening again, now.

Hannah Harrod 05:12

Coast Community Radio, like many stations, has implemented strict social distancing guidelines while still managing to keep content on the air. Many of the volunteer show hosts are able to record remotely and send in their shows. Coast Community Radio is a key source of information about COVID-19, both through the programs they air that speak to the state of the pandemic and public health, but also through interviews with local elected officials and community members as part of the emergency response practices that have continued since the storm. Like almost all public stations, Coast Community Radio is supported by donations. After the storm, they found an innovative way to return the favor.

Carol Newman 05:52

One of the thank you gifts that we have given for contributions has been a wind-up radio. So this is a radio that you can—you can play it with batteries, but you can also play it by winding it. So when the electricity goes out, and when the phones go out, and when you have no way of communicating, you can wind up that radio and you can still hear what's going on. Now, you could turn it to other stations, of course, but why would you do that? If you can listen to what's going on in your very own community. And that's what we did in 2007. As a matter of fact, right now, because the fellow who at that time was reporting the news, he was in the station in the air room, when a tree fell on the station. We were on the air, and stayed on the air. He stayed on the air—crazy! He should have run hell away then. He stayed on the air, and obviously, that

caused some problems and had to be fixed, but in the meantime, people all over this area—we got awards for what we did by staying on the air, not just for the tree, but during this whole crisis. When the, all the—911 wasn't working, even. So, the ham radio was the only thing working and after that a lot of us including myself, took the training and became ham radio operators. We let our listeners know this is the local station doing it. And we report on what's going on here. So, again, feet on the ground, brains on the ground, hearts on the ground, hearts in the community. If we can do it, anybody can do it. But only with community support. And I mean community. So that's why I feel it's a two-way street. And I think local people understand and feel it even more strongly when there's a crisis.

Hannah Harrod 08:42

[Music intro] Ana Elisa Wilson is an organizer with Oregon Rural Action. She has been instrumental in getting out public service announcements to the Guatemalan community in northeastern Oregon. She grew up in Sonora, Mexico, and recalls radio as a central part of her childhood.

Ana Elisa Wilson 09:01

And I remember my abuela and abuelo, you know, my grandma and my grandpa and also my mom, my dad, you know, they like to hear the radio news locally, the state, for the nation, you know, in those times. You can, you can think a lot—40 years ago, you know, 45 years ago—we got a television. I think it was white and black, but not too much information but for the television news, you know, and used was that the radio. I remember my Nana, when my Nana was you know, having to make a flour tortillas, the fresh tortillas, the fresh refried beans, she'd say, Ana, please I would like to listen to the news in the morning, and the music, you know, the traditional music. "Okay, I'm gonna turn it on—you know, turn it on the radio station. What do you like?" And you know what, but the radio was part of my culture, you know, since too many years ago.

Hannah Harrod 10:04

Before moving to the US, Ana worked in radio and as a writer for the local news, among other work aimed at serving her community. Now Ana hosts public health workshops for agricultural workers in the fields. The community knew and trusted Ana's voice. So when COVID-19 hit, she

worked with her friend, José García, to use radio as a platform to respond to the crisis. Many of rural Oregon's recently arrived refugees are originally from indigenous communities in Guatemala. Mam is not a written language, so distributing written resources isn't possible, which makes radio one of the only ways to get the word out. Now beyond Umatilla, and Morrow Counties, Ana's friends in Mexico, Italy and Japan also tune in.

Ana Elisa Wilson 10:49

But it was so important that you know what, because some of the Guatemalan workers, they like to hear the radio. You know, and when they're going to hear, you know, that somebody's speaking in Mam. Oh my goodness, it was, the impact, it was so amazing, because they feel, you know, if somebody is looking for me, you know, I'm very important. And I'm gonna give that information in my own language, and Miguel, he's a very recognized leader, you know, and everybody knows Miguel.

Hannah Harrod 11:21

Miguel Ángel Ramírez, who Ana just referenced is a trusted community leader who goes on the air to give regular reports on prevention and care during COVID-19 in the Mam language.

Ana Elisa Wilson 11:33

They are losing their jobs, they are losing their houses, and they are looking for the families, and the families were established in, you know, in Umatilla, in Hermiston, in Boardman, and the people there aren't gonna, they're not gonna say, don't come, because they are family, and this is another huge problem that we are having right now. You can find two, three families living in a small place, in small houses, or maybe in an apartment, you know, and they can't maintain the social distancing as well, you know, the highest highest—I'm sorry—recommendation as well. It's too hard to maintain, because they want to stay together. They want to support, you know, the family and friends, but at the same time, you know, they need to do something, and this is what we create, you know that Miguel. I tell them something that is going to be important for them, and safety, and a good recommendation to stay healthy, you know, and they need to know in their own language, and this is why we try to do it.

Hannah Harrod 12:47

Beyond sharing vital information in a crisis, local radio that reflects our families and our cultures helps to foster that sense of "This is my place. I belong here."

Ana Elisa Wilson 12:59

This is a new world. Three languages. And we have to maintain in communication. This is when I say, okay, we have to improve. We have to improve the system that we can organize, and we

have to improve and do different strategies to get more communication with Guatemalan communities. [music plays]

13:35

[Radio announcer]. [radio announcer fades back to ROP narration]

Hannah Harrod 13:38

I spoke with Arturo Sarmiento, station manager for Radio Poder a few weeks ago in his newly created home studio. Radio Poder has moved entirely remote during COVID-19. It has its challenges like interviewing elected officials about the pandemic from a closet, but also its perks, like his new studio assistants, his two adorable pugs. For Arturo, his love of radio goes way back.

Arturo Sarmiento 14:04

In my middle school in Mexico, there was a poetry contest. I decided to participate. I never knew that one of the jurors was an actual professional announcer. And he offered to the winner of this contest—I was twelve years old—go to his radio show and share with the audience this poem. So, I won, I went to the radio station, I did my poem. Right there, that day, at that time, I knew radio was going to be my life, and I grew up with that passion.

Hannah Harrod 14:40

Radio Poder, or KTUP 98.3 FM, was created by PCUN, Oregon's tree planters and farm workers union. On November 20th, 2008, the 96th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, PCUN fulfilled a decades-old dream and months of intensive organizing and construction, and launched their low power radio station, reaching 300 square miles around Woodburn. Their volunteer-driven programming quickly attracted a large and loyal listenership in the Latinx community. 11 years later, PCUN started their high power station, Radio Poder. Many of the voices featured on KTUP are voices never heard on commercial Spanish language radio or by a mass audience, including young people, workers, community organizers, and indigenous people speaking in their own languages.

Radio announcer 15:32

[Radio music] [Radio announcer voice fades in and fades out]

Arturo Sarmiento 15:44

The radio was a very great tool to communicate messages, information, but actually entertainment. A lot of farm workers, a lot of campesinos from the rural areas, you know, they wanted to be connected with their own places, and they started listening to their music, in Radio

Movimiento. Mexican music, but no other commercial Mexican music, you know, more traditional music, more local music from different places. Then we added programming in their own languages, like Mixteco, like Purépecha. So all these people start feeling Radio Movimiento as, really, their, their home, what they could—what they wanted to listen. They got information about immigration, about health, about labor rights, about education, about many things. And we provide this information in their own language—in Spanish and indigenous languages.

Hannah Harrod 16:52

Radio often reflects our community back to us and makes it clear whether or not we're included in that image. In times of great struggle, radio is not just the news or the announcement of the next gathering. It's also a song, a memory, a conversation about home. Through hearing each other's voices, we connect to people in a way that energizes and informs the heart, and not just the mind. And this too, is survival.

Arturo Sarmiento 17:20

As an immigrant, you know that when you make the decision to move from your hometown, from your home, from your own country, you know that you're gonna lost a lot and you're gonna miss a lot. So, when you are in a place, like the Willamette Valley, and you turn the radio on and you listen and somebody is speaking in your own language, or you're listening, your own music, oh, wow. That's something unbelievable. And it gives you the sense that you are important. That you are someone and someone over there is caring about you. We have a— we have a show,

it's called La Hora Mixteca. And this show is produced by Radio Bilingüe in California, so we are affiliated to Radio Bilingüe. So on Sundays at noon, from noon to 2, you tune your radio, and you can talk with the hosts of Radio Bilingüe from the Willamette Valley. But actually, there is another connection that Radio Bilingüe makes at the same time, which is to Oaxaca, Mexico, another radio station in Oaxaca, La Voz Mixteca. So, you have opportunity, if you are from Oaxaca, to call to Radio Bilingüe, and at the same time in Mexico, probably your friends, your family, your compadre, your parents, your grandma, your grandpa are going to listen to you through the radio. And this is in Mixteco. This is not in Spanish. This is in Mixteco, so you know just think about what it means for the audience having this opportunity. That's when we're talking about Mixteca or we have another show which is in Purépecha—is a language from Michoacán, Mexico another Pacific state, Pacific Mexican, Pacific coastal state. The show we have here in Radio Poder, La Hora Michoacana is the only show outside of Michoacán that is produced in Purépecha. A lot of people in Mexico—particularly in Michoacán—listen to our show, because they don't have a Purépecha show on their own place, like right now, that the crisis about COVID-19. So we have to—for people, for keeping yourself healthy, keeping your family healthy, keeping the community healthy, you know. Second, and well, we have to talk with them about resources available for the community. In the bottom, we all have exactly, in the inside, you know, the same, you know, feelings, emotions. That's the most important part to me. And I think our volunteers, it's what they have, you know, this love for what—for who they are, for what they do, but the most important thing, not just the love, but the pride to show. But the

most important part here is when you show who you are. You don't do this, like this arguing way or just trying to, you know, put yourself apart, but try to be part of the whole thing.

Hannah Harrod 21:19

Connie Saldaña is a longtime activist in Jackson County, where she lives with her grandson and pet birds. Connie helped start the local multicultural association. And as host of the show, *Age of Adventure*, the positive side to growing old, a topic that is close to her heart and her work with elders and people with disabilities.

Connie Saldaña 21:39

And if I were to tell you about my life, about 50% of it would probably be taken up with the radio. [Laughs] When you're working with a lot of volunteers, and there's a lot of work to do, and some aren't very reliable, you end up doing a lot of work, but it's definitely worth it. I mean, it's so necessary in this time in the universe.

Hannah Harrod 22:02

Like all public stations, KSKQ Community Radio is a story of tenacity. They almost lost their construction permit while dealing with a corporate station in town. And there are stories of hauling propane up to the tower in the snow to keep the station on the air.

Connie Saldaña 22:18

We call our station the little station that could.

Hannah Harrod 22:23

For Connie and the crew at KSKQ, radio is more than just a source of community information in crisis. It is a publicly owned good with many benefits.

Connie Saldaña 22:33

Our antenna is on top of a retired fire tower—fire lookout tower—and we've just been going full speed ever since. We do everything. We're all volunteer, we do everything by hand, we got through solid rock with jackhammers just to put in the electricity for that tower up on the mountain. All community radio stations have some sort of really extreme story in the background because there are a lot of obstacles that would try to keep you from having a radio station. Because one thing you see is a lot of people that work in radio, they have a very soft spot for community radio. Because it's not all—well, first of all, obviously, it's not corporate—but there are people in that station all day long. It's not just a computer with one guy who, you know, makes sure the temperature is right in the room. So somehow we manage to get around the obstacles. But we take our role very seriously as media. Well, everything is so partisan right now that everybody's got something to gain by making up something and so, you know, you really

have to go to people who are doing the research on their own. But it's so key. I mean, this—this world is—is just, you know, in the hands of people that have different values than we do, let's put it that way. And unless we keep on top of that, and unless we have the information available for activists so that they can have their rallies or boycotts or the things that actually do make a difference, we just have to keep getting that message. The messages—there are many out there—but just the whole concept of global warming, it is so incredibly important. And it's such a concern for younger people, and yet we still have a portion of the media that's in denial about it. That's why we have to keep looking for the messages that will enable our survival. Really at this point, in some essence, it's about the survival of humanity. So there's the issue of making sure all the voices are heard, making sure that people and organizations that would not have access to the airwaves, that they have it. And incidentally, we keep reminding people that the airwaves are considered a public good. That's why you don't pay money for your federal communications license. It's public good.

Hannah Harrod 25:34

[transition music]

Radio as a public good means more than just keeping radio waves open. It means making sure that those waves are filled with stories that truly speak to the wide diversity of people who call the region home. That is precisely the reason we started this podcast: to make sure our stories are told in our own voices. Every episode, we close with a call asking listeners to send powerful organizing stories. Do you want to help us share about rural organizing stories big and small from across Oregon? Get in touch with us. Ask your local radio station to play Rural Roots Rising, and donate to sustain this project at ruralrootsrising.org.

If you feel inspired by this episode to work on community media, like local radio and newspapers, or community response to emergencies, and want to connect with others in rural Oregon, email us at office@rop.org

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We featured music from The Road Sodas and Trouvaille.

Rural Roots Rising is created by the Rural Organizing Project, a network of over 65 autonomous member groups who are committed to advancing human dignity and democracy across rural Oregon.

To learn more about the Rural Organizing Project, go to rop.org. If you liked what you heard today, you can find more episodes at ruralrootsrising.org.

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