

Integral Sustainability Assessment
 Service Learning: Auroville Radio
 Andréa Paige Davis
 Julie Aitcheson
 Living Routes: Auroville
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Auroville Radio: a Model Working Toward Local Sustainability

“Auroville Radio: the news is an echo of the lives of Aurovillians...” The news then fades out with a jingle recorded with the voices of the Auroville choir and the chirp of a local bird “Caw, caw, caw...” Sustainability holds an inherent requirement of locality. The Integral Framework, attributed to contemporary author Ken Wilbur, can be used to analyse the sustainability of any practise. This paper will assess the overall sustainability of Auroville Radio through the “I” of personal experience, the “it” of behaviour and impact, the “we” of community in shared vision, and the “its” of systemic sustainability. The assessment will journey through examination of the local sustainability, the challenges to such sustainability, my personal engagement with sustainability and AVRadio, AVRadio’s presence and role in the Auroville community, the financial support necessary to sustain the project and will conclude with an overall assessment of AVRadio as a sustainable endeavour.

Since the first broadcast on 5 December 2004, AVRadio staff members have been committed to achieving their own enclave dream. From the words of AVRadio, their goal is “To create better communication inside Auroville and build a bridge between Auroville, its local surroundings and the world. In the interest of creating a Community Radio, a team of Auroville’s residents has begun a project that is to give the city a modern and powerful communication tool. This will also benefit the local villages amongst whom the Auroville International Township is emerging, by developing goodwill through effective communication regardless of boundaries and cultural differences.”¹ This mission is clear inasmuch as it is lending to the possibility of sustainability for the station, Auroville and cross-cultural communities everywhere.

First, the radio has made a strict commitment to only play music or interviews recorded personally by members of the staff. This allows for a true sense of accomplishment and confidence in the programs. If we are the only people who record what is aired, we can be confident that we are not only staying with the local, but also providing a decently straightforward representation of Auroville and the happenings here. By refusing to play mainstream music, the radio is also taking a stand against big industry, moneymaking machines and copyright complications. Also, by playing Aurovillians’ music and interviews featuring fellow community members, a sense of local talent and interest is cultivated.

Holistic integration in a workplace coupled with a sense of camaraderie, shared vision and trust,

lead to a sustainable working environment. Another aspect of integral sustainability, approached holistically, involves teaching the entire program-making process to radio volunteers. For example, while my background and experience in broadcasting has centered around the “on camera” aspect, I was challenged at the station to engage myself in the entire process. I learned, over the course of a few weeks, to plan, record, transfer, edit, mix and post my programs. This would not have been possible without the unending support and unconditional aid provided by Samuel and Chloé, my mentors at AVRadio. Furthering the idea of holism in broadcasting communication, the model they teach allows each member to be self-sufficient and thus sustainable. If Sam were to edit every interview and leave volunteers to the interviewing, his absence at any time would nearly paralyze the project. Because I learned the process, I can now support the Radio more than if my instruction and duty-allocation were isolated.

Benefits of a holistic approach extend much further than sheer activity-related work. Previous to the current sustainability model of AVRadio, an Italian man named Andrea was literally “running the show.” He ran so much that he lost his breath and quit, realizing his own need for personal sustainability. Chloé was caught in the puddles after the storm, and she had to swim her way through trying to keep the radio afloat. She was new at that time and admits to the magnitude of stress she was under in trying to figure everything out. The narrative communication of this history and the desire for a new, sustainable model is expressed openly. Through Chloé’s naming of her difficult debut to her regular, verbalised appreciation of Samuel’s presence, Chloé adds to the sustainability of the workplace more than she knows.

Because of my loose work hours (I could show up as late as 10:00 and usually would not choose to leave until 12:30) my needs for tranquil travel and morning time to myself were met. This allowed a level of personal sustainability I know I would not be able to have reached if I had worked in a strict, hierarchical atmosphere. Although I did not cultivate the land, I do feel my interviews cultivated an increase in knowledge, both Auroville and sustainability-related. The former was a desire and the latter was an unexpected gift, surely adding to and enhancing my experience at AVRadio. Also, it is very important for me to be surrounded by people I respect, can learn to understand and trust. From the first day of Service Learning Chloé showed an interest in me as well as a desire to provide whatever freedoms I saw fit to make my experience most rewarding. In the end my production was overwhelming, and they even had a surplus of material which they could not yet post. As far as brief, unexpected challenges go, there were a few days where I would enter the station in the morning and not have a computer on which to work. This then called for me to find work elsewhere by either scheduling an interview for the same morning or by finding worth in a local story (in Town Hall) from which to

make a program. As a vulnerability of any technology-based project, AVRadio surely faces its share of technical errors. These days also called for relocation, but luckily this only occurred when few people were at the station. However, in terms of sustainability, the question of technology must be addressed.

The Internet is surely a mastermind in terms of sustainable business and communication. “The Internet continues to operate more like a farmers’ market, where millions of people bring their produce to sell. Or, really, to give away.”² While the Internet and www.aurovilleradio.org are free to access, computers, a prerequisite to using the Internet, are expensive and potentially as unreliable as their user. Other vulnerabilities also arise, and AVRadio members tell horror stories of viruses their computers have contracted in the past from flash drives and un-secured USB sticks. Even if AVRadio’s forum for communication with the world can be accessibly and financially sound, its unreliability and prerequisites are impractical. While never affected by a power outage due to ownership of a generator, such power sources are indeed exhaustible, as AVRadio has had trouble with the generator dying in the past. The assumption of the presence of the Internet is one made by people all over the world today. Very easily can the Internet be censored or restricted, and a key part of Auroville’s communication with the world will be inaccessible. It also must be noted that there is indeed a bit of cultural lag with the Internet requirement. Even the 24 hour live-streaming radio is only available through the website, and thus inaccessible to those who do not have knowledge of nor access to a computer. However, this frees AVRadio from having to deal with Indian bureaucracy over fighting (or paying) for airwave space.

From a global perspective, the radio is remarkably sustainable with the variety of people collaborating for new postings. There are programs in English, French, Tamil, German and Spanish, and thus the access to hearing the happenings in Auroville extends beyond just the international English-speaking community. This is also rather inviting in terms of finding, attracting and involving volunteers. The multi-lingual platform does not restrict guests or Aurovillians from participating in AVRadio activities if their English skills are not polished. My and Vika’s presence at the station and the volume of work we produced encouraged the permanent team to solicit more volunteers from the community at large.

In reference to chapter four of the acclaimed book Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future by Bill McKibben, local radio stations are one step to reinvesting in communities. Not only does local broadcasting act as a necessary hub for communication and various announcements, but it also builds a sense of community achievement through displaying the works and talents of various members of the community. “We learn once again what skills and gifts our neighbors possess, and they become valuable to us again, literally valuable, people we can start to depend on for some of our food, our fuel, our capital, our entertainment.”²

Zooming in on AVRadio, many postings are recordings of events or seminars that have taken place in the community. The availability of these recordings is key to catching up Aurovillians and guests who may have missed out and allow a chance to share a part in the presentation's message. This pseudo-presence is also available through fiber-optic cables to people all over the world. Through these fiber-optic cables, my friends and family can see the work I've created seconds after it has been posted. This sharing of my work and experience in Auroville with people I know and love is comforting to me, and I can only imagine that this model can be retracted to fit Aurovillians themselves. Any Auroville event covered by the radio is soon available to be shared with friends and family abroad. The mode of output - colorful sound - is enticing, as someone abroad can close his or her eyes and mentally bring his/herself to Auroville and participate in the event, even if only for 10 minutes. The website also provides access to potential benefactors needed for continuation of the community. Auroville depends on support in the form of grants from global donors. The donor's ability to actually cut open and inspect the community via AVRadio's website may be crucial to the continuation of these financial investments.

While no inexpensive pursuit, AVRadio aims to sustain its technology upon donations and professional recordings taken for special events like the monthly Pavilion de France meeting. Making use of the numerous recordings taken weekly, radio team members burn compact discs of concerts, lectures, seminars and any other event which calls attention. In weeks following the event, many people stop by the radio office and request copies of the recordings. The radio then opens up the possibility of a donation for the CD. This system of donation works temporarily for covering costs. Given, AVRadio required a good deal of money for start-up costs to buy the needed technology. This mainly came from a Dutch foundation called *Stichting de Zaaier*. As a couple of the team members are quite savvy with computers, AVRadio is not likely to ever pay repair fees. As for the rented space and electricity, AVRadio tries its best to barter for discounts from Auroville Centre for Urban Research. A special committee working with AVRadio is currently researching alternative derivations of income, but until then the radio is still afloat.

The lack of advertisements on AVRadio's website keeps it clean from external propaganda and forced agendas. This separation from participation in the world economy, dominated by capital exchange, is also a step toward sustainability. If AVRadio indeed relied on funding from advertisements, the advertisers could suddenly have a bad year and advertising would not make their budget. Such a situation would stab a potential vulnerability of AVRadio. "Public radio stations testify to the instinct for community if only because they all rely on listeners being willing to pay for something they can get for free. Its not a business model many economists would endorse, but it clearly works."² Detachment from the erratic world economy is key to the sustainability of any modern pursuit.

Through it all I am only now able to turn around and see the roses lining the path I've been led down through the garden of service learning. I always appreciated the work, the environment and the productions, but I had not previously seen how truly sustainable of a system it was with which I engaged. There is still minor fault and external reliance, but such is the nature of the beast.³ The integral approach to sustainability is one which encompasses a sustainable working environment, a contribution to the community – local and global – and a sustained financial or support system. My hope is now to internalize this integral sustainability to the extent that I will be able to internalise and reproduce it under various circumstances in the future. I also have high hopes for Auroville in a transition into a more sustainable, localized community, supported by use of AVRadio communication. Also, as the world has access to this creative representation of Auroville, much can be learned from abroad about sustainable community structure. While the carbon footprint from running a computer 24 hours, seven days a week, is nothing to overlook, it hopefully can do more good than harm by helping promote environmentally friendly practices at very least through the Toward Sustainability program. The various levels of sustainability throughout the entire AVRadio project greatly outweigh the vulnerabilities, and I can easily see the project continuing for many more generations into the future.

¹ Auroville Radio website, 'About Us,' <www.aurovilleradio.org>.

²McKibben, Bill, Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future, Times Books, Henry Holt and Co., New York, NY: 2007, pp 129-139.

³The "beast" in this case (and many cases of the 21st century) is the reliance upon technology and the constant exchange of capital, leading to compulsory and unsustainable growth.