

10 Low Power FM (LPFM)

IN JANUARY 2000, THE FCC CREATED the low-power FM category of radio station that reaches only a few miles with power of 100 watts or less. The FCC hoped that these new stations would draw “new voices on the airwaves and to allow local groups, including schools, churches, and other community-based organizations, to provide programming responsive to local community needs and interests.”¹ There are already 860 low-power FM stations (LPFMs).² Many, if not most, of these stations are operated by volunteers.³ These stations have the advantage of offering an inexpensive way for aspiring broadcasters to get a radio station.

Although we have no systematic data on LPFM performance, anecdotal evidence suggests that many LPFM stations can, and do, play an important role in reaching underserved communities.

In many cases, LPFM provides a key source of news and information for non-English-speaking communities.⁴ In Oroville, California, KRBS-LP offers programs for its Latino, Hmong, Laotian, and other Southeast Asian communities.⁵ Immokalee, Florida’s WCIW-LP is part of a larger community center that offers one of the only public Internet access points for the community’s migrant workers.⁶ In addition, several LPFMs offer public affairs programs produced by and designed for senior citizens, a population segment with low digital access and adoption.⁷

In some cases, LPFMs emphasize religious programming. Prometheus Radio, the primary organization pushing community radio, describes WBFC in Boyton, Georgia: “When the station first went on the air, it received dozens of calls from listeners overjoyed to find Southern Gospel on their local airwaves. The station broadcasts three hours a day of Christian-oriented youth programming, as well as local Christian music provided by local churchgoers.”⁸ Some LPFM stations provide media and civic training. In Spokane, Washington, law students pair with local attorneys on *Radio Law* to inform listeners about locally relevant legal issues, such as regulation of toxins in the Spokane River and Washington’s assisted-suicide laws.⁹ KKDS-LP in Eureka, California, runs a Teen Platform program that provides hands-on training for area high school students.¹⁰ Other stations train news reporters and program engineers. WSCA-LP in New England broadcasts more than 25 hours of locally produced arts, public affairs, and music per week, providing otherwise unavailable airplay to amateur local musicians.¹¹

LPFMs sometimes partner with other news sites, media outlets, and community organizations to share volunteers and other resources across platforms. In the Urbana-Champaign area, for example, WRFU-LP operates a Community Media and Arts Center that trains volunteers to cover and distribute news across broadcast and digital platforms. KDRT-LP in Davis, California, partners with Davis Media Access to share content and programming with public access radio and television stations.¹²

Finally, the low wattage and strong local ties of LPFM stations make them particularly useful during emergencies. LPFM stations can be powered by small generators or car batteries, and since many households have battery-

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operated radio receivers, they are able to reach residents even when power lines and cell towers fail. LPFM advocates say that these traits have made them invaluable in times of crisis: They were used, for example, to send emergency messages to trapped victims during severe snowstorms in Colorado, to alert Florida migrant workers in their native languages of an approaching hurricane, and to provide critical information and reports for hurricane victims in East Texas who lost electricity for a week. In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina knocked out local power lines, WQRZ-LP station manager, Bryce Phillips, swam to the station with a battery pack to continue broadcasting emergency information for the Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, area. LPFM stations have been so effective during emergencies that in several cities, including Richmond, Virginia, and Davis, California, they serve as official emergency response outlets.¹³

For a variety of reasons, LPFM stations have been limited to rural areas. (See Chapter 26, Broadcast Radio and Television.) But the Local Community Radio Act, enacted in early 2011, is expected to significantly expand LPFM licensing opportunities in larger markets. The FCC is currently working on rules to implement the law and allow for the creation of hundreds of new LPFM stations.