The power and the passion: a study of Australian community broadcasting audiences 2004-2007

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Abstract

This paper reports on the first qualitative audience study of the Australian community broadcasting sector and concludes that the processes identified disturb the established power base of mainstream media. The efforts of community media producers and their audiences interrupt 'common sense' mainstream media representations by offering 'good sense' –alternatives which reveal the diversity of Australian culture at the local level. This is empowering for participating audiences who are either not represented or misrepresented in the mainstream media. The dissemination of different ideas and assumptions about the world and our place in it affirms a place for millions of Australians by validating their 'whole way of life'.

Introduction

Community broadcasting worldwide is a diverse and expanding enterprise which, despite a mélange of influences, maintains a largely local and participatory relationship with its varied communities. In fact, it continues to be the very nature of

this relationship that defines it. From the turn of the new millennium, the growth of community media globally has been accompanied by an equivalent increase in interest, from both practitioners and researchers alike, in why this is happening. Multifarious academic perspectives have emerged, including those with a broad focus on theorising the nature of community media (Rodriguez, 2001; Atton, 2001; Downing, 2001), describing global trends (Fraser & Estrada, 2001; Rennie, 2006; Fountain, Dowmunt & Coyer, 2006; Chitty & Rattichalkalakorn, 2007; Fuller, 2007; Kidd, Stein & Rodriguez, 2007), a focus on specific regions (Howley, 2004; Forde, Meadows & Foxwell, 2002), on ethnic community media (Husband, 1994; Shi, 2005; Deuze, 2006,) and analyses of Indigenous media production (Molnar & Meadows, 2001; Roth, 2005). This array is by no means exhaustive – a quick search of relevant academic journals, for example, reveals entire editions devoted to community media and their impact both locally and globally (see, for example, emergence of the new online journal, *3CMedia*, *Journalism* [2003], and *Transformations* [2004]).

This flurry of interest has produced a formidable array of knowledge about community media around the world. But what is conspicuously lacking from this body of work are detailed studies and analyses of community media *audiences*. While there are some examples of quantitative audience research, numbers alone cannot explain why people listen and/or watch. There are good reasons for this absence. Qualitative audience research is perhaps the most elusive element of media analysis and it was precisely this challenge that spurred us to undertake what appears to be the first qualitative audience study of an entire national community broadcasting sector. Our study offers a unique insight into the processes that capture around 25 percent of Australians aged 15 years and above – four million listeners across the country in an average week. This compares with about seven million weekly listeners to national,

publicly-funded broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), and almost 11 million who tune into commercial radio (McNair Ingenuity, 2006, p. 30). In this paper, we explore why a significant and increasing number of Australians listen to community radio and/or watch community television, why they value it, and how it meets their needs.

Community broadcasting in Australia began in the early 1970s with the establishment of the first metropolitan community radio stations. Community television is a comparatively recent development dating from the early 1990s and the data presented here on this much smaller sub-sector is necessarily more limited than that pertaining to community radio. In contrast, Australian community radio is a mature industry catering to a wide variety of interests and so the bulk of our study deals with audiences for 'generalist' stations in metropolitan and regional Australia and for the first time, explores audience responses from two major interest groups – Indigenous and ethnic communities. Audiences for the emerging community television industry provide a further focus. The thematic analysis of audiences' views we offer here is based on hundreds of hours of face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions with individual listeners/viewers and station managers, along with representatives of community groups accessing community radio and television stations from urban centres to the most remote parts of the continent. We travelled tens of thousands of kilometres within Australia over a two-year period in an attempt to capture the essence of the diverse audiences who define community broadcasting. The longevity and nature of the sector in Australia suggests the implications of this study extend well beyond our shores.

The international context

The aims and scope of this study are unmatched internationally. There are few, if any, audience studies of community broadcasting per se, apart from a handful of unrelated quantitative analyses which focus exclusively on numbers of listeners and/or viewers. An extensive literature search, along with exploration of international community media networks has failed to reveal any significant qualitative audience research in this realm (de Wit, 2007; Hollander, 2007; Lewis, 2007). But it is important nevertheless to place the Australian sector and its current state of evolution within a global context to better understand how the methodologies we employed here might be adapted or adopted by researchers elsewhere seeking qualitative audience feedback.

There is little doubt that community radio, in particular, is playing a central role in enabling communities to find a voice in diverse environments around the world. Like most Western democracies, Australia has a system of community broadcasting that has managed to evolve without undue influence from the State, a stark contrast to other parts of the world such as Africa, Asia and Latin America where governments make it their business to control – or at least attempt to control – virtually every aspect of media (Camara, 1996, pp. 20-21; Mdlalose, 1997, p.14). Development radio projects such as those in Nepal (Radio Sagarmatha), Sri Lanka (Kothmale Community Radio), and the Philippines (Tambuli Community Radio) rely on support from NGOs or bodies such as UNESCO to survive in often hostile social and political environments (UNESCO 2003). The recent government approval for community radio development in India offers NGOs and educational institutions new access to the airwaves with some estimating 4000 stations could quickly emerge (UNESCO 2007). With the freeing up of access to the airwaves in 1993, around 150 community radio stations were licenced in South Africa within seven years (Tacchi and Price-

Davies, 2001). The possibilities offered by "innovative and vibrant programming" in various local languages through community media has been identified as having a major impact on rural development (Onkaetse Mmusi, 2002). A 2002 study of broadcasting in Afghanistan concluded that community radio is not only a viable option for that nation, but also a "low-cost and effective way of contributing to medium and long-term efforts for reconstruction, development, democracy and nation-building" (Girard & van der Spek, 2002). Recent political machinations in Zimbabwe have led to similar calls for access to community broadcasting although this seems unlikely in view of the current tight government controls over the airwaves in that country (Zhangazha, 2002). Although Latin American community radio is considered to be the most dynamic and diversified, like Zimbabwe, it operates in a problematic legal and political environment (Girard, 1992; Lopez-Vigil, 1996, pp. 8-9; Truglia, 1996, pp. 10-11). The need for audience research – both quantitative and qualitative – in these emerging environments is obvious.

Japan's unique community radio sector is based in many parts of the country around large shopping centres. Since relaxation of licensing regulations by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication in 1994, the number of community stations had increased to around 189 in 2005, with many of the licencees being local government authorities. Japan's fledgling community television industry set up its first peak representative body late in 2006 – further evidence of a growing global interest in media alternatives (Yamada, 2000; Ishikawa, 1996, p. 10; Kawakami, 2006). In the United States, a resurgence of pirate radio reflects community dissatisfaction with licenced community broadcasters who are becoming "less distinguishable from mainstream media" (Robinson, 1997, p. 17). That country's National Public Radio (NPR) has an audience share of around 10 percent (McCauley, 2005). Further north,

the community radio sector in Canada has been well-established since the 1970s with more than 200 campus and community stations operating on miniscule annual budgets of around AUD$10,000. Native broadcasting in Canada makes extensive use of community radio, particularly in remote areas (Girard, 1992, p. 10; Meadows, 1994; Tacchi & Price-Davies, 2001; Roth, 2005) whereas State-controlled systems pervade the Pacific Islands and Papua New Guinea (Alvarez, 1997, pp. 24-25; Molnar & Meadows, 2001). The innovative and expanding PFNet in the Solomon Islands, supported largely by Japanese funds, continues to use email communication to link hundreds of people in island communities throughout the archipelago (Biliki, Leeming & Agassi, 2005). And perhaps drawing from this success, emerging community radio in the Caribbean is looking at the Internet as a dynamic medium in the struggle for empowerment (Josiah, 2000). Tapping into this expansive trend, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) established an Asia-Pacific arm and held its inaugural conference in Indonesia in 2005.

The recent surge in Western academic interest in community media has been spurred on, in part, by the 'official' establishment in 2005 of the UK community broadcasting sector and a sudden expansion of new community radio and television licencees. At the time of writing, the UK regulator, Ofcom, had issued around 140 licences with around half of them on the air (Community Media Association, 2007). Experiments with 'access' radio in the UK began around the turn of the millennium with pilot projects achieving their 'social gain' goals (Everitt, 2002; Gordon, 2007). Although yet to be the subject of an extensive audience study, anecdotal evidence suggests the growing UK sector is recruiting and training volunteers with most stations linked into existing community networks including local authorities. This parallels the *modus operandi* of community broadcasting stations in Australia. Interestingly, too, already

issues such as volunteer burnout and the difficulty of fund-raising have emerged (Everitt, 2002). Ofcom is considering pursuing various audience research pathways to chart the growth and nature of the burgeoning UK community radio sector (Williams, 2007).

While media activists in the UK have successfully lobbied for change, broadcasting legislation in Eastern and Central Europe has been in major transition since 1989 as nation-states shift from totalitarian to democratic forms of government (Kleinwächter, 1995; Hirner, 1996). Meanwhile, Western Europe has its own problems to confront with public broadcasting under threat from a creeping concentration of media ownership and its attendant limits on pluralism, diversity and quality of information (Peters, 2001). While the European Broadcasting Union has committed itself to supporting public service broadcasting – "the heart of an e-Europe" (European Broadcasting Union, 2001) – AMARC continues its efforts to advance discussion and debate on anti-racism and human rights through its European network of community stations. Countries such as France (with its 600 'free' or 'associative' radio stations) and The Netherlands ('local' radio) continue to support extensive community broadcasting sectors, with the number of radio stations increasing. In 2007, Holland had 335 community radio and television stations as part of its community network now recognized as the country's third tier of broadcasting (Stevenson, 2006, p. 2; *OLONieuws*, 2007, p. 4; de Wit, 2007; Hollander, 2007).

The increasing interest in community media – and research into it – seems inexorably linked to the processes of globalisation and a need for people to remain 'connected' to their local communities. Howley (2005, p. 30) says as much when he observes that "locally orientated, participatory media organisations are at once a response to the encroachment of the global upon the local as well as an assertion of the local cultural

identities and socio-political autonomy in the light of these global forces". The importance of community-based media is clearly growing within the context of the ever-expanding global media industry, producing "less competition and diversity, and more corporate control of newspapers and journalism, television, radio, film and other media of information and entertainment" (Kellner & Durham, 2006, p. xxix). It is indicative of the community media sector's importance in a globalised world where the maintenance and representation of local cultures through the media has increasingly become guided by commercial enterprise rather than being seen as a community service with links to ideas of citizenship rather than consumerism.

The Australian context

In the past decade, the Australian community broadcasting sector has experienced extraordinary growth, not only in terms of the number of licenced stations but also in terms of their audiences. There are now more than 361 radio stations, 79 Indigenous community radio and/or television licences, and four permanent community television stations with two additional services (Adelaide and Lismore) operating open narrowcast services. Open narrowcast licences are issued by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to applicants to broadcast within specified limits – to a special interest group, for a limited time, to a limited area etc (for more details, see http://www.acma.gov.au/web/STANDARD//pc%3DPC_90044). A third open narrowcast community television licence, *Bush Vision* at Mt Gambier in South Australia, was surrendered early in 2007. During 2005-06, an additional 30 temporary community radio licences were issued (CBF, 2005; ACMA, 2006, pp. 83-84; ACMA, 2007). Community media outlets have trebled in number since the early 1990s and almost all of them now broadcast 24 hours a day, seven days a week (CBOnline, 2006, p. 1). The number of community radio stations in Australia far

exceeds the 260 commercial stations licenced to broadcast. But in financial terms, the situation is reversed – the community broadcasting sector has annual budget of $51 million while the commercial sector is worth an estimated $12 billion (Schulze & Sainsbury, 2006). Despite this enormous financial disparity, the community sector broadcasts more local content, more Australian music, and supports a greater diversity of Australian cultures than commercial media. Two sector-funded studies by McNair Ingenuity in 2004 and 2006 revealed that around 47 percent of the Australian population over 15 years old – more than 7 million people – tune in at least monthly to community radio. Around four million Australians tune in at least once a week, with about one in six (almost 700,000 people) 'exclusive' listeners to community radio – that is, they do not listen to either commercial radio or ABC/SBS. The McNair Ingenuity studies determined that audiences' primary reason for listening to community radio across Australia is to hear "local news and local information" (McNair Ingenuity, 2004; 2006).

A global shift to digital broadcasting technologies has local implications for Australia's battling community television sector, originally set and still broadcasting on the analogue spectrum. In early 2007, an Australian Parliamentary committee inquiry into community broadcasting recommended that the federal government support an immediate transition of community television from the analogue to the digital spectrum. At the time of writing, this had yet to be formally addressed (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2007, p. xi).

On a more ominous note, new federal laws relaxing existing cross-media and foreign ownership limits came into force in Australia in April 2007. The government pushed ahead with the change despite opposition from around 80 percent of Australians

(Wilson, 2005, p. 232). The almost inevitable prospect of increasing concentration of ownership of mainstream media suggests an even greater role for localised and independently-run media, typified by the community broadcasting sector.

This is the environment in which we sought responses from the audiences for community radio and television: Why do they listen and/or watch? What does community broadcasting offer that is unique? What are the implications for society in Australia and beyond?

Methodology

Our own exploration of community broadcasting began more than seven years ago and is summarized in the research monograph, *Culture, Commitment, Community* (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell, 2002). It was the first comprehensive study of the sector in Australia. Our focus was on producers rather than audiences and this absence prompted this current project. Our preference has always been for qualitative research approaches – particularly through focus groups and interviews. Thus, we set out to discover why significant audiences are being attracted to community radio and television in Australia and to explore the broader implications of this for Australian society and culture. Our long involvement with the community broadcasting sector – from its peak bodies through to its diverse producers and audiences – confirmed in our minds the importance of adopting a cooperative approach to our research, reflective of the sector's overarching philosophy. As a result, we set up a project advisory committee made up of sector representatives and members of the research team. This forum played a pivotal role, the absence of which would have diminished the quality and reliability of the data we have been able to gather.

Working closely with our project advisory committee, we selected an array of radio and television stations that best exemplified the diversity of the sector. Rather than simply eliciting a mix of urban, regional and remote localities and stations, we had to take into account the multifarious "communities of interest" who have adopted community radio and television as their media of choice. This involved identifying stations with a various focus on youth, seniors, disability, fine music, religion, language, culture, sexuality etc to ensure the voices of these disparate audiences were represented in our study. Our aim was not to come up with a "representative sample" – a usual expectation for quantitative inquiry. A defining feature of the focus group and interview research methods we adopted here is a rejection of "statistical representativeness" in favour of a "theoretical sample" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which aims "to generate talk that will extend the range of thinking about an issue" and thus recruits "groups that are defined in relation to the particular conceptual framework of the study" (McNaughten & Myers, 2004, p. 68). The aim in applying "participative qualitative methods" is to ensure all elements of the research process "feed back into a rich understanding of the particular place and project being developed" (Jensen & Jankowski 1993, pp. 4-5). And this was precisely our aim. It meant we had to identify listeners and viewers of community radio and television – but how?

Our approach was *to enlist targeted stations themselves* to publicise a planned focus group and to invite their listeners to call a 1-800 telephone number to register to attend. We eventually organised and conducted around 50 audience focus groups of between 6-10 people around the country. In addition, we recorded around 60 face-to-face interviews with local organisations and groups who use community broadcasting and a further 70 on-site interviews and eight focus groups with audiences for

Indigenous media in 14 locations around the country. We conducted 10 ethnic community audience focus groups, ranging from 6-15 people, from different linguistic and cultural communities, using translators in most of these. All discussions and interviews were transcribed and analysed using the NVivo qualitative software package. More detail on this methodology is available in the published project final report, *Community Media Matters*, available either from the authors or from the CBOnline web portal (http://www.cbonline.org.au/).

A summary of audience responses

Metropolitan and regional community radio

The vast majority of the audiences we canvassed for this study are passionate about what they see as 'their' stations. They perceive community radio to be accessible and approachable, and feel comfortable about 'dropping in' or telephoning a station at any time. They like the laid-back, 'ordinary person' station presentation style that is characteristic of much of the sector. Although criticised from time to time both from inside and outside the sector as being 'unprofessional', this element of station presentation was identified as a major drawcard by audiences across Australia. Some described this as 'like listening to a friend', distinguishing it from a 'slick' commercial radio style almost universally criticised. This listener captured the feelings of many:

> It's relaxed. It's not pretentious and that's good, because so much of what we get by the media is pretentious, it's based on image and sometimes it's manic. That's the thing you don't have with community radio. It's nice. It makes you feel good (Focus Group, 6CRA Albany, 2005).

Audiences want to access local news and information through community radio that is not being provided by any other source. They feel largely abandoned by commercial

and national broadcasters like the ABC and SBS who do not have the resources – or perhaps the inclination – to access local communities for the information audiences say they want. In several communities, this related to provision of accurate information during times of emergency like bushfires (Tumut), floods (Katherine), a fatal fire (Byron Bay), and cyclones (Top End and the Kimberleys). But it also referred to information about local events – meetings, festivals etc. The majority questioned the very nature of news values and how they should be applied by their local community radio station. A focus group participant from the Bay FM (Byron Bay) focus group summed it up like this:

> But you see it depends how you define news, like I think, the news about the arts, the news about, I mean, music: that's news. Arts is news; some theatre is news. Like, news isn't just, you know, bombs went off in London or the football. I mean we don't have to listen to endless shows about football or cricket. I mean, it is your definition of news. There's a lot of news on it but it's not necessarily the way it can be defined on other stations.

Audiences also want access to specialist and diverse music formats that are not being provided by any other broadcasting services. This is viewed by community radio audiences nationally as one of the sector's most important roles. This was one of many focus group responses on this issue:

> But I find, what I find, like most is the amount of information some of the presenters have, their sort of the knowledge they have about the music they present and it's – the music is so different from what you hear everywhere else, you don't find anywhere else. Because I didn't realise how much there was out there until I started listening to Artsound. Especially the South American and, what's the music, African music? It's just, so much of it – really brilliant (Focus Group, Artsound FM Canberra, 2005).

Audiences for metropolitan and regional community radio generally appreciate the overall diversity represented on their stations, arguing that this accurately reflects the nature of Australian society. Here's a short exchange between two Melbourne listeners that supports this:

> Participant 1: When you think about it, groups like the Palestinians don't have a voice in the mainstream at all. But they are at least given the chance to articulate their views. And that's terribly important. And that also brings people into a community doesn't it?

> Participant 2: It educates the people who can't get access to an alternative (Focus Group, 3CR Melbourne, 2005).

Indigenous radio and television

The burgeoning Indigenous community radio network that spans the continent has attracted a passionate audience, primarily of Indigenous listeners who proclaim it as a key cultural resource. Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) began broadcasting in 2004 on a spare channel provided by the Aboriginal-owned commercial television station, Imparja television in Alice Springs. Since then, ICTV has created an important public space for Indigenous video programming supporting cultures, languages and performing a significant education role (AICA, 2007). We spoke to audiences for Indigenous radio and television in urban, regional and remote Australia, conducting focus groups in Darwin (two), Alice Springs, Port Augusta, Broome, Cairns, Brisbane and Melbourne. In addition, we visited a range of community cultural events to conduct audience interviews in Arnhem Land, Cape York, Alice Springs, Palm Island, Townsville, Woorabinda, Yuendumu, the Kimberleys, and Umuwa in the Central Desert. In addition, over a period of one week, we invited listeners to the national, award-winning, Indigenous-produced radio talkback

program, *TalkBlack*, to call in with their views and experiences of Indigenous media. During that time, we had 20 responses with comments relevant to our project.

It is clear from this extensive fieldwork that audiences for Indigenous radio and television see them as essential services. In locations where it is active, Indigenous media plays a central organising role in community life, captured in part by the observations of this Palm Island interviewee:

> 4K1G provided our mob with a balance by getting what we wanted to say on national talkback radio through the Indigenous network … That's why black radio and black media needs to stay around as long as it can because it's the only tool we've got here. It's our vehicle to tell our stories and what's important to us (Interview, Palm Is, 2005).

Indigenous media help their audiences to maintain social networks by enabling kinship ties to be strengthened through a range of activities from dance, interviews, stories, prisoners' programs and by playing music and video requests:

> Interviewer: What does it do for young people?
>
> Interviewee: They're learning
>
> Interviewer: What do they learn about?
>
> Interviewee: Culture, and some *inma* [dances, songs]. The older people have been dancing before and they're watching and they're learning from that culture…Very important one for children learning…later they singing and some people learning singing and dancing (Interview, Umuwa, 2006).

In the eyes of their audiences, Indigenous media are playing a strong educative role in communities, particularly for young people. This was a universal view from urban to remote regions. Indigenous media offer audiences an alternative source of news and

information about the community which avoids stereotyping of Indigenous people and issues. It promotes self-esteem, as this comment from Central Australia suggests:

> Radio is one of the coolest things that they can do and we usually have a queue of our young people wanting to work with Warlpiri Media all out there but particularly on those multimedia projects…we have all the same issues as any other community but we also have extremely strong people, not only elders, now the young people they're taking action and they're not accepting those unacceptable ways of life (Interview, Yuendumu, 2006).

Indigenous-produced media are helping to break down stereotypes about Indigenous people for the non-Indigenous community, thus playing an important role in enabling cross-cultural dialogue. This was evident in our earlier research (Forde *et al*, 2002) and suggests a continuing role for the many Journalism programs around Australia that are linked to local Indigenous radio and television stations. This focus group member in Brisbane sums it up:

> I would say that another reason I like tuning in, too, particularly to 'Let's Talk' show [by Tiga Bayles] because it's a credible alternative to mainstream news that it's more balanced and you're given the truth. And as I say, it's out there – discrimination and the racism – and there's a lot of things that go on that you just don't get a balanced view in mainstream media (Focus Group, 98.9, 2006).

Audiences identified Indigenous radio and television as a crucial medium for specialist music and dance – without this outlet, it is doubtful if any Indigenous-produced music and video would ever be seen or heard. Indigenous radio and television virtually alone support the huge Indigenous music industry that remains largely unknown to most of non-Indigenous Australia. The role of music – particularly requests – in cementing kinship ties is evident in this response:

> [It's] getting to hear your local family, you know, singing as well, which is often not
> been the case because they never had the opportunities in the past to get their music
> out there … and that really goes to strengthening family ties … it's a multi-faceted
> sort of issue because … where people have never, not had the opportunity to talk
> about their lifestyle or their feelings or anything, you know they can bring them out in
> their music. And you know it's going to get out into the community and … I think
> that's a really good way of really empowering Aboriginal people (Focus Group,
> Umeewarra Media Port Augusta, 2006).

Ethnic radio

There are some clear parallels between ideas expressed by audiences for Indigenous and ethnic media in Australia. We conducted focus groups for community radio programs broadcasting in Greek, Vietnamese, Sudanese, Tongan, Indonesian, Filipino, Serbian, Macedonian, Turkish and Chinese languages. Overall, audiences for ethnic community radio tune in because they see either stations or, more particularly, programs, as playing a crucial role in maintaining culture and language. This response was typical of many:

> First of all it's because it's in my language and it concerns me. Yeah, also it
> encourages me and it actually attracts me to listen to it because it is, it is in my own
> language. It also reminds me of my own country and the same kind of songs and it
> informs me of certain people and different issues that I love to keep abreast with
> (Sudanese Focus Group, Melbourne, 2006).

Programs help audiences to maintain community connections and networks by informing newly-arrived refugees, for example, of local services available to them and of the existence of local support networks. There is some evidence that community radio plays a mental health management role in helping refugees to

overcome feelings of isolation and depression. Overwhelmingly though, audiences for ethnic community radio see it as drawing communities together:

> The radio, this radio station is not separating us from Australia, as our friend said before, it's integrating us to Australia. It's very important. Our children are growing up Australians anyway, maybe they're having difficulty adapting culturally, but through the radio, they will be able to get some help or adapt anyway. And also we see our differences as richness, in Turkey too, where we come from different backgrounds and things that, backgrounds, we're living the same thing here too and we're happy about that. Everyone's got their own different folklore, folklore and songs and everything else so we have that here too and we're happy with that (Turkish Focus Group, Melbourne, 2006).

Listeners to ethnic radio want to hear specialist music from their home countries to help them to maintain a sense of identity although all are adamant that they see themselves as Australian first. Some programs, like one produced by the Vietnamese community in Melbourne, take on an unconventional format:

> Participant 1: Yeah, elderly people like myself like the music program. And we all take part in that, I sing, she sings, he sings.
>
> Mediator: Karaoke on radio?
>
> Participant 1: Yeah
>
> Participant 2: We can play guitar.
>
> Mediator: Oh great!
>
> Participant 2: Play guitar and sing karaoke sometimes (Vietnamese Focus Group, Melbourne, 2006).

Audiences for ethnic community radio want to hear local community news and gossip on the radio to maintain important social, local links as this focus group exchange suggests:

> Participant 1: It is a really effective communication tool. Everyone knows what is going on and where you should be.
>
> Participant 2: It is the last confirmation for us. Hearing things on the program reminds us that they are on.
>
> Participant 1: Really, it is like the final confirmation to cement plans and that is a more effective way of doing it (letting us know about events), than phoning people or emailing them.
>
> Participant 2: You hear that radio every Friday and you know what is going on for the weekend (Tongan Focus Group, Adelaide, 2006).

Ethnic community radio audiences place a slightly higher importance on hearing news that is relevant to their lives in Australia than on news from their home countries, although relevant international news remains highly significant, as this comment suggests:

> Another thing as far as the importance of the station for me, almost all the information that we get, for example on Sudan through the other media, like television and so on, the news, it's basically when something is happening, something big with a foreign major disaster or something, they bring in and they concentrate on that particular area but they don't talk about the street life, about daily life in general, how is it happening there, that's not giving them any information from any of the other media (Sudanese Focus Group, Melbourne, 2006).

The evidence we gathered from audiences in this sub-sector suggests that ethnic communities – or at least the 10 language groups we canvassed – see Australia as

their home and community radio is enabling homeland differences to be set aside for most. They see local language broadcasts as an essential service to access otherwise unavailable information that is relevant to their day-to-day lives.

Community television

We conducted focus group discussions with five of the seven community television stations on air at the time of our study – Channel 31, Melbourne; TVS, Sydney; Channel 31, Brisbane (formerly Briz 31); Channel 31, Adelaide; and Access-31, Perth. The CTV sector has effectively been in a policy limbo since the first licences were issued in the early 1990s and, as mentioned in the introduction to this article, the question of a shift to the digital spectrum remains unresolved. Regardless of the policy issues confronting management, audiences for CTV clearly use the stations to access alternative programming not offered by commercial and national public television stations (ABC and SBS), as this exchange suggests:

> Participant 1: I flick straight on to Briz31 … you see more obscure stuff. And I like the obscure stuff. I don't like Top 40 garbage. I like, you know, alternative music.
>
> Participant 2: And I think that's why we all like watching this channel. Because it has obscure stuff.
>
> Participant 1: And because it has an alternative point of view (Briz 31 Focus Group, 2006).

Although espousing a different concept of 'community' than their radio counterparts, CTV audiences watch local television to access information that they don't feel they can get anywhere else. This participant explained what he liked about community television programming:

It's what is going on in sort of the local area, in the Blue Mountains, like

down to Sydney, but it's all relevant and local and I mean, I like the

Melbourne shows, all the local knowledge shows, if it's to do with what's

in our country and I am also involved in teaching in the Blue Mountains

and I find that I am trying to get the students involved in the community

themselves, so it is actually very helpful for me as a teacher to see what's

going on and then hopefully, for the students to focus on various things in

the community (TVS Focus Group, Sydney, 2006).

CTV audiences want to receive news and information in non-traditional formats and are happy to hear it presented within the context of a specialist program (arts, sport, motor racing etc) rather than in a traditional news bulletin. This preference for an alternative to news bulletins, and even current affairs programs, was even stronger with community radio audiences. This Melbourne CTV viewer explained his preference:

But then if you look at some of the programmes, it's actually giving you news

or information regarding different topics or things within your own community.

It could be via a story that you didn't know about and all of a sudden you now

get that, so that's technically news as well. So it really comes down to the

definition of what you call news (C31 Focus Group, Melbourne).

Audiences for community television told us they like the diversity of programming offered, particularly from niche interest groups. Several participants acknowledged watching programs in which they had no real interest but admitted a fascination for the 'unpredictability' of programming. This viewer echoes the comments of others:

There's just more specialised content on community television, which really

caters to the community. I guess in that it's very multicultural and there's lots

of specific shows that cater to different cultures (Briz 31 Focus Group, Brisbane, 2006).

Discussion

While there are different emphases evident in the various audience sub-sectors we have explored here, a number of common elements have emerged. A strong thread running through our data is a need and desire for local news and information. Audiences generally feel they cannot receive localised or community-specific information from other media sources, although they often access publicly-funded broadcasters like the ABC and SBS for state or national news. Another common theme to emerge, regardless of the sub-sector, is a desire to access and hear diverse music styles and formats. Audiences regularly express either boredom or dissatisfaction with the narrow range of commercial and usually international (US and UK) music repeatedly broadcast on (particularly) commercial radio. Thirdly, audiences say that community broadcasters are providing an important 'community connection' role by publicising local events, engaging in community 'gossip', using local people as presenters, and projecting an approachable and accessible front to the community and their listeners. While this theme was less likely to be mentioned by community television viewers, it was prominent in comments from metropolitan/regional generalist, ethnic and Indigenous audiences and thus permeates much of the data. A fourth theme evident in audience responses is the sector's ability to reflect social and cultural diversity in its programming. For many of the participants in this study, this is an important social responsibility function offered by 'their' local community radio stations, in particular, with which they identify and support.

Empowerment is *the* unifying concept emerging from our previous station-based study and now, this audience-based project. It has become apparent during our involvement in this research that the term demands a primary position – it best answers for us the question: "What is the sector about?" We suggest the idea of 'empowerment' as an overarching term which encapsulates most, if not all, of the sector's operations, functions and services. Grossberg (1987, p. 95) defines it as "the enablement of particular practices, that is … the conditions of possibility that enable a particular practice or statement to exist in a specific social context and to enable people to live their lives in different ways". Adopting this argument, community radio and television empowers station workers and audiences to 'live their lives' through the media 'in different ways'. Of course, it is not the case that community media is empowering for 'everybody, everywhere'. As van Vuuren (2006, p. 380) points out, a station's identified values and purposes prevents unlimited access, particularly by those whose ideas and assumptions about the world do not align with those of the station's. However, on a continuum of potential to empower, community broadcasting fares much better than other media.

It is clear from our study that citizens of community broadcasting in Australia are empowered in terms of their capacity to participate in democratic processes through access to local radio and television. Empowerment at this level refers to the impact of community media in enhancing broader societal concepts such as citizenship, democracy and participation in the processes of the public sphere. These are terms which, at first glance, seem somewhat removed from the day-to-day efforts of station volunteers and the habits of community broadcasting audiences. But it is precisely individuals' involvement in these micro-instances of participation which make the terms relevant to this analysis.

The nature of community media and the multiplicity of ways in which they function in terms of democracy and citizenship complicate attempts to theorise community media, as Rodriguez (2001, pp. 160-161) has eloquently suggested:

> Too many analyses of the democratization of communication lack acceptance and understanding of the diffuse nature of power struggles and negotiations. Only when we learn to design theories and methods able to accompany the fluidity of citizens negotiating power will we do justice to people and their actions of shaping everyday lives.

In the same vein, Carpentier, Lie & Servaes (2003, pp. 58-59) draw attention to the problematic link between community media and civil society. In this configuration, community media is situated between the domain of private economic organizations (for profit) and private personal and family relations – and public state-owned economic organizations and state and quasi-state organizations. As intermediate organizations (like charities, political parties, pressure groups, etc), community media function as a part of civil society crucial to democracy by fostering citizens' participation in public life. The instances of "micro-participation" thus enabled contribute to a broader "macro-participation" as participants actively adopt civic attitudes and actions and perform a pivotal role in a healthy democracy – a critical element in the transformation of "common sense" into "good sense" (Gramsci 1971, p. 330; Coban, 2005).

The distinction between community media, the state and the market fosters social antagonisms which do not capture community media's role, or potential role in broader society. The antagonistic relations borne out of a media sector which, on numerous fronts, opposes the state, the market and mainstream media, places community media in a position of 'discursive isolation', unable to engage with some of the most powerful and critical discourses and their attendant institutions (such as

the state, the market and the media) in any meaningful sense. As a remedy, Carpentier, Lie & Servaes (2003, p. 61) suggest the need for a more fluid conception of state and civil society relations by applying Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) notion of the rhizome, characterized as non-linear, anarchic and nomadic, connecting any point to another point. It enables us to take account of the multifarious roles performed by community media, clearly evident in our earlier research, and now reinforced by this study (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell, 2002). This approach aligns with recent applications of radical democratic theory to community media where power is enacted and citizenship expressed in a multiplicity of forums. Rodriguez (2001, p. 158) concludes:

> … citizens' media are similar to living organisms that evolve and develop uniquely in permanent interaction with their complex environments/contexts: at some point they strengthen their struggle against one target, but later they can abandon a target and take on a new one, which, in turn, can be abandoned to focus on a third one. It is in the play of articulated historical conflicts and struggles where the richness of citizens' media resides, in terms of their potential as forces of resistance.

The rhizomatic approach questions some of the radical foundations of community media arguing that their antagonistic relationship with the state and the market neglects their bridging position between the state and civil society (Carpentier, Lie & Servaes, 2003, p. 61).

This reflects our own experience of community broadcasting in Australia. Radio stations, in particular, often find themselves in an uneasy situation of compromising their principled stance towards the state and the market while consistently seeking either funding (from the state) and sponsorship (from the market). Their supposed distance from the state and market is complicated by the range of community groups,

including state, quasi-state and private organizations, that produce programming through the stations for broadcast to local communities. Community broadcasting enables these organizations to access and participate in dialogue with their audiences at the local level (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell, 2002). The debate is further informed by strong audience preference for an alternative to commercial broadcasting, in particular, expressed most often as a strong dislike of advertising of any kind. Yet even here, audiences, when questioned, acknowledge a tolerance for sponsorship announcements if it means 'their' stations remain viable.

In the case of its attitude towards mainstream media, our current research project epitomizes the industry's efforts to gather data which will simultaneously strengthen its position as a serious media outlet in the broader public sphere while recognising the nuances inherent in participatory media providing access and participation at the local level. Rodriguez (2001, p. 155) reminds us:

> Although this inclination to think 'bigger is better' is perfectly understandable, fostering the growth and expansion of citizens' media should be carefully considered. When it comes to media production, the consequence of losing one's ability to articulate the local constitutes a critical component of the political potential of citizens' media.

Conclusion

The media is a powerful element in the representation of culture and as such, participation in media processes by diverse communities is an empowering experience. Our encounter with the Australian community broadcasting sector suggests this is a unifying theme which exemplifies both its impact and its potential to achieve stated objectives. At the level of community, media creates, then empowers, homogeneous social groups to represent their own cultures or ways of life. In terms of

empowerment and different social groups, we suggest there is evidence of a 'continuum of disadvantage' (although not easily defined) which means that the importance of the services provided through community radio and/or television to some communities is of far greater significance than it is to others. Embedded in this mix is the question of identity. Community broadcasting's very ability to create 'communities of interest' places it in an ideal position to transform "common sense" into "good sense" – an objective proclaimed, albeit in a different language, in virtually all community media sectors' mission statements.

In terms of empowerment and the media, the processes of community broadcasting disturb the established power base of mainstream media – a central element in the representation of culture. The efforts of community media producers and their audiences are able to interrupt 'common sense' mainstream media representations by offering 'good sense' – alternatives which reveal the diversity of Australian culture at the local level. This is empowering for participating communities who are either not represented or misrepresented in the mainstream media. The dissemination of different ideas and assumptions about the world and our place in it affirms a place for millions of Australians by validating their 'whole way of life'.

Our research supports the notion that the 'citizens' of citizens' media (producers and their audiences) have access to a unique avenue through which to participate in democracy. The very existence of the community broadcasting sector enables such micro-participation by citizens in the public life of their communities. This, in turn, feeds into the broader ideal of public participation in democratic processes. We suggest that the antagonistic position of community media in relation to the state and the market may not serve the sector particularly well. The suggestion is not that Australian community radio and television stations should 'sell-out', but rather that

they might consider embracing existing relationships with traditional 'opponents' and explore the democratic potential therein. Allowing for fluidity and complication in its relations with the state, market, and civil society has the potential to empower the community broadcasting sector in entirely new ways, perhaps strengthening this already 'marginally' powerful component of the public sphere in Australia. This will be especially important with an expected further concentration of mainstream media ownership.

This overview of our research offers strong support for the conclusions we reached in our 2002 study – that in a multitude of Australian communities, community radio and television producers are listening to the voices of their audiences, enabling communication of a diverse range of assumptions and beliefs about the world (Forde, Meadows, & Foxwell, 2002). It is clear that both audiences and producers see the community broadcasting sector in Australia as a key cultural resource. It acts to affirm listeners' and viewers' perceptions of their places in local communities and by extension, the broader Australian community. It is the opportunity for empowering participants that draws what are clearly diverse audiences together. It is evident in audiences' positive responses to the ways in which local stations enable a sense of belonging and identity by acknowledging the value of creating an environment where community voices, albeit along a continuum of disadvantage, *can* be heard.

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