
**Sounds like a whisper:
Australian Community Broadcasting hosts a quiet revolution**

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Abstract

Recent research into the Australian community broadcasting sector has revealed a developing role for community radio, in particular, in reviving notions of democracy by enhancing public sphere engagement by audiences. This paper is drawn from the first national qualitative audience study of the sector undertaken by the authors and provides strong evidence to suggest listeners are challenging globalised views of the world. They see community radio as ‘theirs’ and the only media able to accurately reflect Australia’s cultural diversity. This is enabling a revival of public sphere activity in the face of restrictions on democracy following an upsurge in global terrorism. We argue that the community broadcasting sector in Australia is providing citizens with services largely ignored by commercial media and to some extent, the publicly-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Introduction

It’s for us, about us (Focus Group, Roxby Downs ROX FM, 2005).

I think the idea of it being community...it’s got a community base and it makes us feel like we’re in a *common unity* (Focus Group, 2QBYN Queanbeyan, 2005).

In 2007, the authors completed the first national study of Australia’s community radio audiences and the first of its type undertaken anywhere in the world. The two excerpts at the beginning of this paper, along with numerous others used throughout, come from this exercise. The final report, *Community Media Matters*, is the culmination of two years’ research involving extensive fieldwork.

The audience study is largely a response to the absence of voices of the audience in the first national community radio station-based project, *Culture Commitment Community: The Australian Community Radio Sector* (Forde et al, 2002). Our audience study completes examination of the circle of production and consumption, an absence in the research literature on community media identified by many, including Helen Molnar and Michael Meadows (2001), Clemencia Rodriguez (2001), John Downing (2001, 2003); Chris Atton (2002).

One of the key findings from *Culture Commitment Community* was the role community radio is performing as a ‘cultural resource’ — a concept which refers to the capacity of these stations and their (mostly) volunteers to provide a space for the representation and communication of a multitude of Australian cultures at the local level. In this way, the sector re/produces and affirms the local cultures of Australian communities. The clearest message we have received from our recent audience research is that there is a consensus of opinion on this between station volunteers, producers and their audiences. If a critical goal of the Australian community radio sector is to provide a space for the representation of local communities — and by extension, cultures — which would otherwise be unavailable, our recent work reveals a degree of success in achieving this. The recent development of a community radio sector in the UK is further evidence of the global growth of community media and we are fortunate in Australia to have had the opportunity (and funding) to conduct national studies on producers, stations and now, audiences. The Australian community broadcasting sector, as an ‘elder’ of the government-sanctioned arm of participatory media, is fertile ground for research and reflection with both national and international relevance.

The diversity of Australian culture fosters a diversity in producers and audiences which will find appeal and utility elsewhere. Community radio in Australia has grown from a few stations in the 1970s to about 450 licensed broadcasters at the time of writing. In 2007, there were 361 community radio licenses, 79 Indigenous community television licenses and six community television stations (four of which hold permanent licences with the other two operating on Open Narrowcast licences). In comparison, the commercial radio sector has 274 operating licenses (Meadows et al, 2007, 4). In around 40 communities in Australia, community radio is the *only* broadcast service (Meadows et al, 2006). Although community radio began in metropolitan areas of Australia, it quickly spread to regional, rural and isolated parts of the country, filling the gaps in local media markets. Community radio is a strong force in metropolitan areas, with the majority of audience members located there, although more stations are now found in regional, rural or remote parts of the country. Most (63 per cent) Australian community radio stations cater for generalist audiences — they do not specialize in music, politics or the provision of services to specific ethnic communities. The remaining 37 per cent are ‘specialist’ format stations catering (in descending order of frequency) for specific audience needs: religious, Radio for the Print Handicapped (RPH),

Indigenous, ethnic, fine music and youth formats. These formal classifications are useful but in no way account for the diversity encompassed by the sector. Our qualitative audience project added another dimension to quantitative data commissioned by the sector in 2004 and 2006. Undertaken by McNair Ingenuity, these national studies have confirmed that community radio listeners are significant. About 47 percent of the Australian population (around 7 million) tune in to community radio at least monthly — one in six community radio listeners are ‘exclusive’ listeners and their primary reason for listening is for local news and information (McNair Ingenuity, 2006, 8).

The audience research we focus on in this discussion was funded by the Australian Research Council with financial and in-kind support from the federal government’s Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) and the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA). At the beginning of our research, we established an advisory committee which was a source of constant advice and support. The committee was attended by the chief funding partners and other peak sector representative bodies including the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters’ Council (NEMBC), Australian Indigenous Communications Association (AICA), Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) and Radio for the Print-Handicapped Australia. In total, we conducted 25 audience focus groups in metropolitan and regional Australia, 10 focus groups with ethnic audiences, (the equivalent of) 10 Indigenous focus groups and 5 focus groups with community television audiences. The original method we adopted of using the community radio stations themselves to recruit focus group participants was altered to suit Indigenous and ethnic audience nuances. For the metropolitan and regional stations, we conducted more than 60 interviews with community groups who access community radio to broadcast details of events, information, issues and the like. This was at the suggestion of our advisory committee who pointed out that these groups really typify the notion of access and participation central to Australian community broadcasting. The project gave rise to a number of critical methodological issues which are addressed more comprehensively elsewhere (Meadows et al, 2005; 2007).

The contribution in this paper will focus largely on community radio and the implications that flow from an analysis of the audience-producer process we have identified in Australia.

Empowerment as revolution

Like other media research, a single theoretical framework which is able to encapsulate the operations, objectives and outcomes of the community media sector has proved elusive. This is perhaps a reflection of the global state of community media affairs. Our engagement with the Australian example, alongside

our knowledge of other efforts throughout the world, has illuminated the complexity of the community broadcasting project in particular. Diverse platforms, delivery methods, modes of production, communities and their *raison d'être* eschews any steadfast conclusion about definitions of community broadcasting and its effect on communities, media and more broadly, society. It would seem that the more we identify examples of what is variously termed 'radical', 'alternative', 'community', 'citizens', 'development' media, the greater the challenge to our theoretical constructs. Vatikiotis (2004, 4) has outlined the necessity of extending our theoretical concerns with 'communication practice' from representative terms ('for the people') to include participatory terms ('from the people'). In our experience, community radio fails to maintain the distinction between 'representative' and 'participatory' communication practice which tends to confuse usual theories associated with larger scale media. For some academics, including ourselves, the temptation is to romanticise the sector and its efforts in terms of a grand political statement, a revolution against the nefarious impacts of globalisation and the profit-motives of transnational media corporations. For Australian stations and audiences at least, the 'revolution' sounds more like a 'whisper' than an outright placard-waving act of defiance against an existing media hegemony or the like. But this in no way detracts from the revolutionary outcomes we have identified in our research. While audiences are aware of the inadequacy of other types of media, they participate to be heard — often only for 'hearing's sake' or the opportunity to speak. It is, as John Hochheimer (1999, 451) suggests, an extension of an *existing desire to communicate* to establish a sense of personal and community power which motivates community media participants, *in the first instance*. Arguably, this essential desire to communicate is the foundation of all community media efforts, regardless of category or community.

The establishment of a community media outlet, say a community radio station, enables citizens to consummate their desire to communicate. It is at this fundamental level of communication — the communication of culture — that we suggest a multi-faceted theoretical framework is appropriate with the notion of 'empowerment' a key concept. Empowerment or, at least, perceptions of it, is evident in diverse communities — from the Indigenous townships and outstations in remote Australia, through the elderly citizens of suburban Melbourne, to the Croatian population of regional Albury-Wodonga. The term is often an appendage to larger critical concepts such as democracy, citizenship and the public sphere. However, we suggest an undeniable currency for the term across communities and locations to help us to make sense of the meaning of the sector for its producers and audiences. The term affords a certain elasticity which enables its application (and appearance) in various discussions and approaches to community media. Lawrence Grossberg (1987, 95) defines empowerment 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'.

The community broadcasting sector empowers both station workers and audiences to 'live their lives' via the media 'in different ways'. Lest we be accused of romanticism, we acknowledge that community media is not empowering for 'everybody, everywhere'. As Kitty van Vuuren (2006, 380) points out, at the level of station management and operation, 'a process of exclusion ensures that access to broadcasting is limited to those individuals and groups' whose opinions align with a station's purpose and will thus maintain its 'value and purpose'. However, on a continuum of propensity to empower, community media fair much better than any other media. The consistent comparison to other media institutions is problematic though difficult to ignore. Rodriguez (2002, 79) suggests constructively that we should avoid defining alternative media in terms of their opposition to mainstream media and rather focus on the 'transformative processes they bring about within their participants and their communities'. This focus on 'transformative processes' describes the impact of community media in the context of people's everyday lives at the local level, and it is clear that the 'transformative processes' are of greater consequence than are comparisons to mainstream media. However, the global community media sector is a 'mass media' with distinctive production processes which deems comparison to other media inevitable. James Curran (2000, 140) usefully suggests that we abandon the notion that the 'media are a single institution with a common democratic function' arguing that we should promote different media for different democratic functions. Community media, though not without its faults, empowers everyday people with access to the media which, in the 21st century, is the most powerful medium for the communication of culture. On Curran's estimation, community media represents the highest democratic function, empowering citizens on three broad levels which we address in this article: community, media and society.

With such grand possibilities, community media continue to receive relatively little academic attention, though this is beginning to change, especially with the establishment of a UK sector — officially, at least. Perhaps one reason for this is the comparison to globalised mainstream media where the efforts of community media practitioners and the support of their audiences seem inconsequential. However, Nick Couldry (2002, 27) asserts that the difference in power between mainstream and community media outlets is exactly the point — community media is a weapon of the weak and is thus worthy of academic interest. At the local level, the growth in community broadcasting outlets in Australia and elsewhere heralds a small fissure in power relations between the community and the mainstream media. This fissure is a sign of some discontinuity in traditional power and knowledge relations (Foucault, 1977; 1980) between mainstream media producers and their audiences. It is precisely from these fissures that new relations and new media arrangements which are participatory and democratic can emerge. Audiences have always had a degree of power, if only to change channels or in the decoding of the media text. But as the various discussions of media audiences have shown, 'power in reception' should not be confused with 'power in production'

(Ang, 1991a; 1991b; Morley, 1980; 1986). The political economy of the media — particularly the impact of transnational corporations and associated economies of scale — organise and finance their production and distribution. Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (1977) have drawn our attention to the dominance of these groups which acts to exclude and marginalise voices ‘lacking in economic power or resources’. They continue (in McQuail, 1994, 82):

Thus the voices which survive will largely belong to those least likely to criticise the prevailing distribution of wealth and power. Conversely, those most likely to challenge these arrangements are unable to publicise their dissent or opposition because they cannot command the resources needed for communication to a broad audience.

Community media practitioners and their audiences interpolate this by placing the power of production in the hands of ‘ordinary’ people, thus enlisting the processes of ‘the everyday’. Research into this sector has given us an opportunity to celebrate the, albeit comparatively small, power of these local citizens to challenge the dominant ideologies characteristic of mainstream media, as Grossberg (1988, 170) concludes:

Most cultural criticism focuses on culture’s critical relation (negativity) to the dominant positions and ideologies. Politics becomes defined as resistance to or emancipation from an assumed reality; politics is measured by difference. But empowerment can also be positive; celebration, however much it ignores relations of domination, can be enabling. Opposition may be constituted by living, even momentarily, within alternative practices, structures, and spaces, even though they may take no notice of their relationship to existing systems of power.

The relations of power between media audiences and producers is, at least, disturbed by the production and reception of community media — even where there is no overt acknowledgment of dominance, marginalization or conversely, freedom from oppression. Rather than being a mere repository from which global mainstream media can choose to represent communities, in those places fortunate enough to have a local media outlet, communities are active in the representation, production and maintenance of themselves. The fissure in power relations instigated by community broadcasting, in this case, is empowering for communities who, prior to the establishment of the sector, were relatively powerless in their interaction with the media. This fissure has, in turn, empowered individuals and communities themselves as well as having broader societal impacts in terms of participation in the public sphere, democracy and citizenship. In this paper, we consider the impact that community media can have at the levels of community, media and society, drawing from our encounter with Australian community radio audiences. There is of course, some overlap in these three tiers but it is useful to separate them so as to identify the subtle nuances characteristic of each level.

Empowerment: Community

[The station] glues the community together in so many ways, and allows that opportunity to hear in-depth discussion about what matters to the community. The presenters get on air, and then there's a follow-up, so to me it's that nourishing community feeling and sense of understanding about what's going on in the community (Focus Group, Bay FM Byron Bay, 2005).

One of the strongest messages to emerge from audience members themselves is the value of community radio in creating, maintaining and enabling participation in various communities. Access and participation promoted by the community radio sector has empowered everyday citizens to communicate and represent aspects of their community, however it is defined. Station accessibility distinguishes community radio from other media and leads to a sense of engagement between community radio stations and their audiences that is not evident in mainstream media. Audiences comment that station presenters and other staff are approachable and 'down to earth'. A comment from this listener from a Melbourne youth station illustrates the capacity of stations to engage:

And from what Marty is saying, the fact that you can get through. It also provides services that give, like if you want to have a bit of fun and you want to say 'Hi' to someone on the radio, and you want to leave a message. It's only those community stations that do it for you most of the time. It's very hard to get on a commercial station and say something (SYN FM Melbourne, 2005).

Audience members speak consistently of a sense of 'belonging' which is a direct consequence of stations' accessibility to everyday people. The style of presentation and the lack of 'slick' commercial ambience decreases the distance between stations, presenters and listeners. We had expected some criticism by audiences of community radio style, distinguished by the occasional on-air mistakes and unpolished delivery. On the contrary, we found that audiences respect the contribution by station presenters and their relaxed style is a key factor in their reasons for listening — this 'ordinary person' style makes listeners feel as if presenters are 'one of them', as this comment suggests:

... it's like talking to a good mate or something like that. There's no barrier: 'I'm just a professional here and you're just somebody listening.' It's like they're actually talking to you all the time which makes it a lot easier to listen to. If something goes wrong, they just laugh and get along, go on with it, and everything else and they will just give their point of view. They will play something and say, 'Whoops, I forgot to put in a warning about language' and things like that. They're just easy going; it's a very easy thing to listen to (Focus Group, 4ZZZ Brisbane, 2005).

This sense of belonging is particularly the case for metropolitan and regional audiences with some differences. A growing syndication of commercial radio services means that regional programs are delivered by satellite from metropolitan centres, often thousands of kilometers away — community broadcasting is able to give such areas a radio service which reflects where they live. This listener from regional Western Australia (Focus Group, 6CRA Albany, 2005) highlights how local community radio helped her to settle in to her new home:

Particularly in the first few months I lived here, and made this big, big move from Melbourne which was quite a big move. It was lovely us setting up the house, just to listen to the radio and the announcers and you really got a feeling of what was going on here.

In metropolitan areas, community radio serves a similar function though in these areas, the benefit for listeners is in finding other like-minded people in a larger population. One youth-orientated arts and culture station in Sydney furnished this listener with a conduit through which like-minded citizens could connect:

I feel like I'm part of something bigger...in a very real sense that the world is out there and without even you know, kind of realising it, I was listening one day and I went, 'Oh I know that girl', you know, who does a particular show and it was like, oh, like all of a sudden there were these networks of life and world and music and venues and just things that are happening and they're being engaged with in a, just in a real way that you feel you can participate [and] if you don't want to participate in the world, it's happening anyway and I find, I like that, I like to know that that's happening. And I appreciate that so much more than just kind of this bombardment of either egos as you were saying or just hype.... like [2FBi] it's organic and it also is kind of material and real and about you know, stuff that I do want to participate in and be part of (Focus Group, 2FBi Sydney, 2005).

This is a role other media are unable to fulfil, due to budgetary and time constraints, coupled with their different intent. It is of course, unprofitable to produce programming where a potential market reaches a comparatively smaller number of 'consumers'. It is the quotidian function of community radio which makes it meaningful to its audiences (Atton, 2002). Indeed, the cultural role of community radio is often quite 'ordinary' (Williams, 1958). For example, audiences in several regional centres commented on the coverage of local sporting events, some noting that the broadcast of cancellations which would otherwise involve numerous phone calls can be handled with ease through their local radio station. Examples of the ways in which community radio is able to participate in the cultural life of its communities are often not particularly grandiose but the impact at the community level is beyond measure. In short, this cultural role encompasses ideas and beliefs which are not represented or considered by mainstream media.

This array might include different musical styles, local cultural events, local news and information and the like. Community radio empowers local citizens to participate in their communities via the broadcast of cultural events from music festivals to local parents and citizens' meetings, political rallies and protests, and a deluge of other community functions which would otherwise receive limited or no media coverage elsewhere.

Audiences overtly appreciate the extent of access they have to station staff. In most cases, listeners feel they can telephone a station and the call will be answered — sometimes by the only person present in the station who is the on-air announcer. Audiences frequently call stations about music or musical events — often this is to find out the name of a song or a band that has been played. The diversity of music embraced by Australia's community radio sector is applauded by its audiences and is clearly a major drawcard for them. From bluegrass, to jazz and techno, Australian community radio broadcasts a multitude of musical genres which do not receive airplay on other media. One insightful example of the importance of music to community radio's local populations came from a senior's station — Golden Days Radio in suburban Melbourne. Audience members reminded us that their 1930s-1950s musical tastes are not catered for by *any* other radio station in the city. For this cohort, Golden Days Radio is a companion, combating the isolation too often felt by elderly people. One man aged in his 70's explains:

Golden Days Radio fills a void in my life which other broadcasters do not. It takes me back to when I was young, in my adolescence and early 20's. It brings back pleasant memories about the things I thought I wanted to do at that time. Sometimes I am thrilled listening to it and sometimes I am sad (Focus Group, 3GDR Melbourne, 2005).

As this case exemplifies, community radio is about more than the music. Through the broadcast of their musical preferences, such communities of interest are validated, nurtured and legitimised — a conclusion we reached in relation to a broad range of programming across the Australian community radio sector. Community radio is also able to support local musicians and local industries providing a place for airplay, recordings, distribution and promotion of local musical events.

Empowerment: disadvantaged communities

The Indigenous and ethnic components of our audience research reveal a need to differentiate between groups who are comparatively privileged socially, economically and/or politically and those groups who are not. The distinction between these two 'contexts of empowerment' is not absolute and is certainly not evident, nor is it defined on a station by station basis. Clearly there is a qualitative

chasm between enabling a local sporting club to announce weekend fixtures and providing a newly-arrived refugee with information about community health services. This is particularly the case for remote Indigenous communities, newly-arrived refugee communities and associated supportive community groups.

In the case of Indigenous communities, their media operate as a 'first level of service' as well as establishing a 'cultural bridge' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (Meadows, 1994; ATSIC, 1999; Productivity Commission, 2000; Molnar and Meadows, 2001). Discussions and interviews with Indigenous listeners in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia confirms this assessment and offers a further dimension to this role. It is apparent that in locations where an active Indigenous media outlet exists, it becomes a critical site of community organisation. The impact on the everyday lives of Indigenous communities is evident in this sample of audience views:

The message is getting, getting the vital information out to the people that affects their lives, you know, their daily lives — like government policies, you know, community events, you know information from service providers, all that sort of stuff. If, if we had to lose Umeewarra then that information just would, take a long time getting to people — if ever (Focus Group, Umeewarra Media Port Augusta, 2005).

It's good for, to listen to local and Aboriginal news and other news and well, it informs us about Indigenous news around Australia and local areas and I find it good, I enjoy it (Interview, Beagle Bay Dampier Peninsula, 2006).

It's a good way of communication and talking and message you know, listen to one other, or what other special funerals is on. That's one thing good about Goolarri and PAKAM [local Indigenous media association], they'll tell each other when such and such funeral is for, you know. Or any, any community events, like big events (Focus Group, Goolarri Media Broome, 2006).

Yes, the radio 5NPY that's good for them young ones; young ones to ring him up to find out what's happening...and somebody's got a problem they've got to let the families know. And people are talking in Pitjantjatjara and they understand. *Owa*. PY Media, that's a part of the culture (Interview, Anangu-Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara Lands Umuwa, 2006).

In *Community Media Matters* (2007), we identify Indigenous media as an essential service which enables the re/production and maintenance of community, culture and language. Overall, Indigenous media empowers these communities by facilitating maintenance of social networks; promoting education; acting as a primary source of information and as a crucial medium for music and dance. All of these processes are central to Australian Indigenous cultures and communities. One listener on Palm Island (near Townsville in North Queensland) observed:

It certainly arouses people when they can hear something that belongs to us; that's about us. It's a very special tool to Aboriginal people. We still need to move into what the whole program is going to be about, those sorts of things, and it gives the community some feeling of power, doesn't it? (Interview, Palm Is, 2005)

Ethnic communities experience similar benefits from community radio — and on a comparable scale. Various waves of migration to Australia have exposed endemic racism — an especially shameful feature of both historical and contemporary life. Needless to say, the experience of some migrant communities has been difficult from many perspectives not the least of which is the extent of racism and their personal trauma at leaving their 'homeland' and settling in a new country. Those communities with access to a community broadcasting service are able to better find a place in the Australian mediascape to represent their own community and the values, beliefs and traditions important to them. It is clear from our work that ethnic community radio in Australia is enhancing the settlement process for immigrant and refugee communities alike. Such audiences highlight the importance of radio in bringing communities together through the recognition of the values of their own languages and cultures through broadcasting, thus providing a space for knowledge exchange and/or celebration of associated events and traditions:

Well in my case, it's just like listening and speaking and thinking English for so long, I just like kind of want to hear my first language for a moment, I feel like, 'Oh', just like that [when I hear it] (Chinese youth Focus Group, 4EB Brisbane, 2006).

Yeah, it preserves the culture and the national origins and it keeps people, makes it easier for people to, to settle knowing that they are not really total strangers (Sudanese Focus Group, Melbourne, 2006).

An Islamic Turkish focus group participant who had arrived in Australia 12 months previously with limited English language skills, found the religious and Ramadan programming provided on ethnic community radio to be extremely important to his settlement experience. He further comments on the positive feelings that arose upon hearing his own language after his arrival in Australia:

And I like the, these radio programmes as well, we came to a country where we didn't know the language or the religion but to be able to hear our own language on these radios, even for a short time, it's quite, it's quite good, we're happy (Focus Group, 3CR Melbourne, 2006).

The Sudanese focus group discussed the importance of its radio program — just half an hour each week! — in creating community connections. Our findings indicate this is perhaps more important to emerging communities.

Established communities such as the Greeks and Serbians have more avenues through which to bring community members together — regular church gatherings, cultural events, clubs and so on. Radio programs are not necessarily directly involved in any of these. For more emerging communities, however, these organised social groups are non-existent, which means community radio takes on a central communicative role, providing a more important source of ‘community glue’.

In both Indigenous and ethnic communities, listeners confirm that community radio performs a critical role. This is all the more important for such groups which experience a significant degree of disadvantage, adding weight and depth to the contention of the significance of empowerment in theorizing this process.

Empowerment: media

The media perform a central role in the production and maintenance of cultures through the broadcast of music, news and information, representations of community — a ‘whole way of life’. Participation by community members in such processes is precisely a site of empowerment. This dissolves traditional notions of the boundary between media producers and their audiences. On our journeys across Australia, audiences referred to their local stations as ‘family’ or ‘friends’ with surprising frequency. This is some indication of the success of community radio in restructuring traditional producer/audience relationships. The following excerpts offer further examples:

I mean, you feel like you’re part of the, you’re part of the radio station when you help them and you join up. You get to know them personally and, it’s sort of like a large family (Artsound Canberra, 2005).

No, I love it. I just can’t fault it actually because I am starting to feel like I know them personally. Well, they are talking to me personally (Fresh FM Bendigo, 2005).

It’s just my friend as far as I’m concerned (2QYBN Quenbeyan, 2005).

Listeners express dissatisfaction with mainstream media, noting their relative sense of powerlessness in any engagement with these larger corporations. Community broadcasting empowers communities or groups with a platform for the dissemination of their ideas to a much larger audience. They have the capacity to challenge the status quo by providing a space where citizens can encounter, debate or experience alternative viewpoints and lifestyles. As such, the community broadcasting sector supports a diversity of lifestyles as a matter of principle rather than as a concession. This is a cornerstone of the sector’s philosophy, providing a conduit to embrace, legitimise and validate difference and diversity, as these listeners suggest:

It's professional without being corporately slick and that, for me, is a big turn off in a lot of other media. You get this kind of formulated stuff that... You know what their play list might be. You can tell there's a method, there's a brand to a station and I find that really irritating. I love the fact that EDGE don't do it (EDGE FM Hobart, 2005).

Yeah, [mainstream media is] to do with money, somebody upstairs, that you will play a certain playlist; you will run a certain commentary; you will run a certain by-line, of, you know, sort of political mindset or whatever because big corporations own it and there's money involved. Somewhere like this, you can be as left-wing, or as right-wing or anywhere in between and you can get your five seconds' worth on radio or talkback or at least get your commentary (3RRR Melbourne, 2005).

Empowering communities through the representation of other cultures, ideas and beliefs is community radio's strongest contribution to 'communicative democracy' in Australia. Of course, this is the mandate of the community broadcasting sector and it is unfair to gauge these efforts only in comparison to mainstream media — and vice versa. The point is that given the saturation of mainstream media services, the penetration of community radio is critical in providing and affirming a sense of difference and by extension, belonging in the communities to which it broadcasts. Rodriguez (2001, 154) encourages us to see community radio for what it is, rather than what it is not:

Citizens' media do not have to compete for global markets; they do not have to reach all audiences; they do have to 'talk to everyone' and therefore, local dialects, local issues, and local codifications of social reality find their way into citizens' media programming...citizens' media are in a privileged position to delve into, to explore, and to articulate (differences between subordinate groups)' — unlike mainstream media which tend to generalize and smooth away such differences.

In Australia, Indigenous community radio and television production has become a distinct industry in its own right. Indigenous people are some, if not the, most disadvantaged people in Australian society. Social indicators reveal life expectancies much lower than the general population, significantly increased infant mortality rates, higher rates of imprisonment and unemployment and socio-economic disadvantage as a consequence of more than 200 years of colonialism, racist and ineffective or inappropriate policy. In this context, the empowerment role of community radio and television is clear. It is the only site where 'blackfella [is] listening to blackfella'. Indigenous radio and television also resist the marginalization of Indigenous people by providing positive representations of themselves. One avid North Queensland listener captured the feelings of many when he observes:

It provides places like Palm [Island], Woorabinda, the Cape [York] and other Indigenous communities, particularly the Indigenous population in the mainstream, with a voice, a balance, projecting our stories, our culture, our language the way we want to hear it but giving it to the wider audience too, people who live in the mainstream, people who don't often come in contact with Indigenous people (Interview, Townsville, 2005).

Likewise, ethnic community listeners experience a distinct benefit from access to their own media. In particular, they identify the role of news and information from home — and from their new home — as critical services. There is a sense among these listeners that the only time the mainstream Australian media cover their home countries is when there is a war, major disaster or an event involving 'Australians'. What they really desire is general, day-to-day news from their homelands, as this focus group participant explains:

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, 3CR Melbourne, 2006).

Like Indigenous media, ethnic community radio provides a space for the reflection and representation of Australia's diversity. This is the coalface of Australian multiculturalism where the reality is far removed from government rhetoric and is being enacted by ethnic community radio. It is through this medium that such diverse ideas and assumptions are heard and incorporated into Australian culture. In the same way, Australian culture — through the 60 or so languages used on ethnic community radio in Australia — seeps into the psyche of newcomers. This Turkish listener explains:

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 (Turkish Focus Group, 3CR Melbourne, 2006).

Empowering communities through their own media, to organise and distribute representations of themselves, is a quiet revolution. Given the ever-growing concentration of ownership characteristic of Australian media (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2007) and indeed, global media, it is of enormous consequence that community radio is able to jostle into position — and stand 'small' yet powerful alongside media with far greater resources.

Empowerment: society

Empowerment at the level of society offers a much broader context for analysis of the production and reception of Australian community broadcasting. Here, empowerment refers to the role of community radio and television in enhancing broader societal concepts such as citizenship, democracy and the public sphere. While this conceptual level is far removed from the recounts of everyday listeners — predictably, there were few who mentioned ‘public sphere’, ‘democracy’ or ‘citizenship’ — there is strong evidence of everyday experiences of ‘micro-instances’ of public sphere activity, democracy and (radical) citizenship. At the levels of community and media, audiences are adept at describing their experiences and it is precisely these individual instances of participation which deem such ‘academic’ terms relevant to the operation of the community broadcasting sector. It is the freedom of citizens to communicate a diversity of cultures and viewpoints within their ‘community public sphere’ which is community radio’s key democratic function (Forde et al 2003). The instances of ‘micro-participation’ enabled by community media contribute to a broader ‘macro-participation’ as audiences actively adopt civic attitudes and actions and perform a pivotal role in a healthy democracy. Carpentier et al (2003, 60) agree:

Community media can overcome the absolutist interpretation of media neutrality and impartiality, and offer different societal groups and communities the opportunity for extensive participation in public debate and for self representation in the (or a) public sphere).

At the conclusion of the first national community radio study in 2002, we suggested a reformulation of the idea of a ‘single, all-encompassing public sphere’, opting for the notion of a ‘series of parallel and overlapping public spheres’ where people with similar interests or backgrounds participate in activities important to them and their identities (Forde et al, 2002; Forde et al, 2003). In this way, they articulate their own discursive styles and formulate their own positions on issues that are then brought to a wider public sphere where they are able to interact ‘across lines of cultural diversity’ (Avison and Meadows 2000, 351-353; Fraser, 1993, 13; 1999). What we might term a ‘community public sphere’ should be seen as a discrete formation or space that develops in a unique context as the product of contestation with the mainstream public sphere. This process enables local communities of interest to communicate, to develop their own counter-discourses, and to interpret their own identities and experiences, through dialogue. Listeners identify the importance of extending the range of ideas available for mainstream public sphere debate:

What I like is hard information and to form your opinion when you’ve had a whole range of views and then it’s nice to be able to come on to 3CR to listen or to be able to talk about some of these things that you’ve learned. And so you can share your information because I like to share things and

people can form their own opinions; they can agree or disagree — that doesn't matter — but I think the wider the views you can express that they're not getting in the mainstream. You need to build up. I think, people are aware of what's happening around them, because it's going to catch up with them even if they say it doesn't matter. You know there's a whole lot of issues, global warming, I mean there's just so many different issues (Focus Group, 3CR Melbourne, 2005)

[I like to hear] community things which you wouldn't expect to hear on just general, national media. I really appreciate that ...I find that really, really important and the fringes like the...you know certain groups within society like the people in prison or mental health issues or you know, people who have specific interests that's addressed. I really enjoy that too, 'colourful' I call it (2SER, Sydney).

The evidence we have gathered from the community broadcasting sector suggests that an important element of community radio here is its ability to provide access for Australia's multicultural communities and their diverse range of social, cultural and political perspectives. Such stations offer exposure to music, news and cultural issues that other media outlets can not or will not cover: Three listeners' comments highlight the significance of this:

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 (Focus Group 3CR Melbourne, 2005)?

It educates the people who can't [otherwise] get access to an alternative (Focus Group 3CR, Melbourne, 2005).

Commercial radio makes me despair for this country and I find it quite depressing and so listening to Artsound FM reminds me that not everybody belongs to commercial radio land and there is community out there. And in that sense, it's given me a sense of connectiveness and it also reminds me that it's necessary to keep striving for that, that it's not a natural or a given and that's one reason why I will support community radio because it's an alternative to the mass (Focus Group, Artsound Canberra, 2005).

Nowhere in the multifarious processes of the Australian public sphere is the cohesive power of communication more obvious than in the community broadcasting sector. For Indigenous communities and their audiences, community radio and television offer ideas and assumptions of the world that transcend the narrow frames offered by mainstream media (McCallum, 2007). For the 160 or so different cultural cohorts that have decided to settle in Australia, community radio is a catalyst in enhancing that process. For the dominant generalist community radio sector, in particular, audiences perceive that it fulfils functions that align

closely with notions of citizenship, democracy and the public sphere. We suggest that this brief exploration of community broadcasting in Australia through the disparate voices of its audiences is indicative of its empowering processes and potential.

Conclusion

Community radio and television empowers a broad spectrum of disenfranchised and disadvantaged groups in Australian society — Indigenous people, ethnic groups, prisoners, gays and lesbians, the print-handicapped and vision-impaired, seniors and so on — enabling the communication of their ways of life, priorities and agendas. But it also empowers ‘ordinary’ people who feel that their interests are not being met by existing media. This quiet revolution enables citizens, regardless of their social status, to participate in public sphere processes by interrupting or ‘disturbing’ the established dominance of mainstream media and society. Our analysis of audiences across the community radio and television sector in Australia identifies empowerment as the single, unifying response which links affluent, middle-class listeners in capital cities, for example, to Indigenous viewers of community television in the central Australian desert. Its empowering nature is evident in the ‘enabling practices’ which allow people to ‘live their lives in different ways’ (Grossberg 1987, 95). The processes we have identified at work in the community broadcasting sector enable the micro-participation of citizens in the public life of their communities. The citizens of citizens’ media — community broadcasting station workers, volunteers and their audiences — are empowered by gaining access to public sphere processes.

At the level of ‘community’, locally-produced radio and television empowers people to represent their own cultures or ways of life by creating, sustaining and re-creating ‘community cultures’, whether these are defined in terms of geography or areas of interest. We have suggested a loosely-defined ‘continuum of advantage’ which acknowledges that services provided to some communities is of far greater significance than to others.

Community radio, in particular, disturbs the established power base of the mainstream by interrupting dominant representations and frames by revealing the heterogeneity of Australian culture. While this is clearly empowering for communities either ignored or misrepresented in the mainstream media, it also offers ‘ordinary’ people access to ideas and assumptions of the world beyond the experiences of the ‘everyday’. Thus it has become a medium able to affirm a place for millions of Australians in validating their ‘ways of life’.

Talk of revolution without overt acts of defiance challenge the popular stereotype of this process. But we suggest that this is exactly what appears to be happening in Australian society with the community broadcasting sector — and radio in

particular — the catalyst. Defiance, resistance, a demand for alternatives — call it what you will — is implicit in the actions of citizens who produce, mediate and interact through community radio and television rather than seeking public attention through dominant media. Of course, there are many such catchcries of discontent and they are often heard on the community and mainstream airwaves alike. What matters is who produces them and under what circumstances. And perhaps most importantly, what processes ensure that such ideas, along with the myriad others competing for attention in the public sphere, find their way into the labyrinth of everyday life so that they become topics to be discussed and negotiated through ‘local talk’ (McCallum, 2007).

In many ways, community radio is offering a medium for such ‘local talk’ and it is able to do this because of the collapse of the barrier between producer and audience. And here, again, we must introduce the idea of a continuum to accurately describe the diversity that defines the Australian community broadcasting sector. In Indigenous community broadcasting, the producer-audience barrier has been dismantled and the ‘revolution’ — in terms of empowering processes — is well advanced. Much ethnic community radio can be defined in the same way with appropriate nuances, and the barrier appears to remain, albeit in a weakened state, in much of the generalist community broadcasting sector. We suggest that the very nature of this producer-audience process is one that defines community radio, in particular, and community media in general. This is revolutionary when compared with almost any other mainstream media process, including recent piecemeal attempts by newspapers, television stations and online news sites to involve consumers through blogging and email — essentially, electronic letters to the editor. The BBC’s diverse attempts to engage with its varied audiences may be an exception here (Born, 2006) but we must remain sceptical of movements driven by consumer demand rather than genuine attempts at citizen engagement. Our work with Australian community radio and television producers and audiences suggests that we may be talking about a revolution, given that audiences are now choosing to ‘tune in’ to programs — and processes — with which they can engage. It may be quiet, but it’s happening.

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