

CHAPTER 1

MAKING SPACES: COMMUNITY MEDIA AND FORMATION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPHERE IN AUSTRALIA

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I see the role of community radio to be or I believe it should be based on exactly what it is saying: community radio and community involvement opportunities for the community, serving the community, educating if you want to...informing, entertaining but with the community always in mind. It obviously goes beyond that as well but that is the basis. I think that is a good way to start myself. Even providing opportunities for the community, because every one of us belongs to a community (Melbourne Community Radio Focus Group, 2001).

INTRODUCTION

Community media around the world are attracting increasing attention from audiences who see them as genuine alternative sources of information to dominant forms of media. The term ‘community’ is itself problematic, taking on many different meanings from place to place, culture to culture, including ‘local’, ‘access’, ‘radical’, ‘alternative’, ‘rural’, or ‘non-profit’. While such media have tended to emerge where communities are denied access to existing forms of expression, this in no way seems to limit the desire by communities to seek their own voice. Community media include all manner of communication technologies — from the ‘old’ forms like radio, television, video, popular theatre and print to ‘new’ technologies such as videoconferencing, photocopying, fax, SMS (text messaging) and, of course, the Internet (Magno, 2002). Our concept of ‘community’ will be interrogated a little later in this chapter but suffice it to say here that it is a definition that embraces the multifarious ways in which a wide range of extraordinarily diverse ‘communities of interest’ *define themselves*. In this chapter, we are concerned with the nature of local radio in Australia produced by such ‘communities of interest’ whether limited by geographic, linguistic, social, political or cultural boundaries.

The rise of community media outlets and the subsequent increasing research attention given to them and their products is undoubtedly linked to the content crisis currently being experienced by global mainstream media. At the same time as profit margins increase for major media conglomerates, their audiences have been in steady decline — particularly in the daily newspaper market. In the United States, the majority of journalists seem unhappy with the state of their profession, primarily because of the increasing impact of commercial pressures on their work. Two-thirds feel that increased economic pressure is ‘seriously hurting’ the quality of news coverage and eroding the quality of journalism and news (Pew Research Centre for the people and the press 2003; Kovach, Rosenstiel & Mitchell 2003). The emergence of community media has been touted as the ‘most vibrant and hopeful response to the trend towards globalisation and commercialism’ because local communities identify more strongly with local cultural issues (Herman & McChesney 1997, p. 200). This is strongly supported by early findings from the first qualitative audience study of the Australian community broadcasting sector (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell, 2002). The evidence suggests, too, that community media may be the only sector that is actually

growing in the Western mediascape and their connection to the local may be a critical reason for this growth.

The number of community radio stations in Australia now surpasses the number of commercial broadcasters. In 2006, Australia had 483 licensed, independent, community-owned and operated radio stations with a further 37 temporary and aspirant broadcasters. Around 120 of these produce programs in 97 different ethnic community languages. There are 96 stations producing Indigenous programming and an additional 80 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS) serving communities in the vast, sparsely-populated areas of regional and remote Australia covering most of the continent although most are engaged in re-transmitting available satellite programming, both mainstream- and community-produced (AICA 2006; CB Online, 2006; Community Broadcasting Foundation, 2006). The community broadcasting sector includes four, long-term community television license holders in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth with two community television stations operating on open narrowcasting licences¹ in Adelaide and Lismore. In addition, there is the Aboriginal-owned and run Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) which reaches an increasing number of regional and remote communities with the facility to downlink the satellite signal (PY Media, 2006). A federal government commitment of an additional AUD\$48 million over four years to develop a National Indigenous Television service was under discussion at the time of writing (Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts, 2006). By comparison, there are currently 261 operational commercial radio licenses operating around the country (Garden-Gardiner & Chowns, 2006).

Quantitative audience surveys in 2004 and 2006 have revealed that around four million Australians listen to the Australian community radio sector for an average of 7.5 hours each week with twice that number tuning in each month (McNair Ingenuity, 2004; 2006). This is a startling result, supporting the largely anecdotal evidence that has flowed in from sector activists for a decade or more. It offers concrete evidence of the significant reach and influence of what has been termed the third tier of Australian broadcasting. Commercial radio, which uses markedly different criteria to define its 'consumers', claims to reach around 80 percent of Australians who tune in for around 2.5 hours each day (Commercial Radio Australia, 2006). Clearly, community radio in Australia is a significant and growing cultural force.

In this chapter, we will outline the nature of community broadcasting in Australia using both qualitative and quantitative methods. While quantitative research alone can be useful in determining demographics — numbers of stations, listeners, programming hours, for example — our approach here is more holistic, seeking to answer the 'how' and 'why' questions: Why do people engage with community radio? What are their expectations? How are these expectations being met? What role do stations play in creating or expressing community culture? Complementary qualitative and quantitative approaches, we argue, enable us to critically assess the full impact of this burgeoning sector. The first major study of the Australian community radio sector (Forde et al, 2002) revealed the important cultural role local stations were playing in disparate communities around the country. But what was lacking from that first investigation was information about audiences. Our current work seeks to address that void.

THE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The cultural importance of alternative, independent, or ‘citizens’ media’ is particularly pertinent in relation to the present Australian mediascape — arguably the most concentrated in the Western world. There has been a shift in the past 10 years away from strict, centralised and government-controlled broadcasting regulation to an ‘arm’s length’ regime in which broadcasters take more responsibility for determining and monitoring broadcasting standards. This approach by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (now called the Australian Communications and Media Authority) has accelerated the transformation of citizens to consumers, narrowing the range of public sphere debate. A movement towards concentration of media ownership in Australia began early in the 20th century and has resulted in the establishment of “irrevocably commercial” — and conservative — press and broadcasting sectors in Australia. Media control is primarily in the hands of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation (newspapers, pay television, magazines, book publishing, film production, online news, recording industry production, National Rugby League, and Australian Associated Press); John Fairfax Holdings (newspapers and magazines); and Australia’s richest man, Kerry Packer’s Publishing and Broadcasting Limited [PBL] (television, pay television, magazines, cinema exhibition, online news, and gambling interests). Late in 2006, further relaxation of ownership rules by the federal government heralded another phase in Australia’s media concentration stakes — one in which questions of program diversity seem to be taking a back seat (Australian Government, 2006). This is exactly where community radio can claim to have filled a growing void. In addition, the global trend towards falling daily newspaper circulation is reflected in Australia where it has dropped by more than 50 per cent since 1950 — evidence of fragmenting audiences along with the creation of monopoly newspaper markets in all but two of Australia’s capital cities (Schultz, 1994).

Australia’s broadcasting system emerged in the early 1920s and became a hybrid of the USA’s virtually unregulated and Britain’s highly regulated approach. Within a few years, separate commercial and government-funded radio sectors had been established. The first television station in Australia in 1956 (in time for the Melbourne Olympics) was commercial, just preceding the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Commission channel to air. The commission became the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 1983, 51 years after its inception. The ownership pattern in the Australian broadcasting industry followed that of the newspaper industry, and since the late 1980s, Australian commercial television has been controlled by three corporations—Seven Network Ltd (television, pay television, publishing and online interests), Publishing and Broadcasting Limited (PBL), and Ten Network Holdings (television and advertising interests). Ownership is more diverse in the commercial radio sector although several large organisations control the profitable city-based FM licences (*Communications Update*, 2005). Radio reaches about 95 percent of Australians with an average of five radio sets per household. Satellite delivery of program content remains a central organising element of national networking for all Australian television stations along with ABC radio. Australia first launched its own domestic communications satellite — AUSSAT — in 1985 following pressure from commercial television stations. The community radio sector established its own satellite distribution network — ComRadSat — in 1993. It offers a

range of core programs to community stations that subscribe, along with a 24 hour, seven-days-a-week national feed for participating stations. Around 180 community radio stations access ComRadSat in varying degrees. Stations pay a quarterly flat fee, based on their income, to access available programming (Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, 2005).

Community radio — first known as public radio — emerged in the mid-1970s through lobbying by a collection of fine music, education and left-wing political groups. In 1992, Australia's 50-year-old broadcasting legislation was re-modelled into the *Broadcasting Services Act*, creating seven discrete categories to cater for a diversifying broadcasting environment. 'Community' was one of the categories identified in Section 15 of the legislation, defining it as free-to-air, non-profit and community-orientated (*Broadcasting Services Act* 1992). Australia's growing multicultural community gained access to two specialist community radio stations in 1975, leading eventually to the establishment of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) in 1980 and its national free-to-air multicultural television channel in 1984. Albeit with a limited audience, SBS TV broadcasts English language subtitled programs translated from 60 languages and is still the only Australian 'mainstream' broadcaster to openly adopt a policy of anti-racism. Within a few years of Pay TV's introduction in 1995, company names linked to these 'new' stations bore a striking resemblance to those in the so-called 'free-to-air' sector. Pay TV (or 'cable') reaches less than one-quarter of Australian homes (Garden-Gardiner & Chowns, 2006). Both the ABC and the SBS have been under sustained funding pressures from indifferent federal governments who seem persuaded by the economic rationalist approach that treats media like any other business, regardless of its role. So like many other countries around the world, publicly-funded broadcasting in Australia is under threat. Recent moves to lift restrictions on foreign and cross-media ownership in Australia have created even more opportunities for mainstream media dominance.

This is the modern Australian communications environment in which minority voices have increasingly turned to community media to find communication spaces.

A COMMUNITY PUBLIC SPHERE

The community media sector is a cultural resource that facilitates cultural citizenship in ways that differentiate it from other media. Embodied in this process is the nature and definition of the term, 'community'. Rodriguez (2001: 164) warns that the polymorphic nature of community or citizens' media rejects tight definition and offers a useful framework, describing citizens' media as the result of "a complex interaction between people's attempts to democratize the mediascape and their contextual circumstances." Downing supports this notion in his theorization of 'radical' media. He acknowledges (2001: 3) that popular cultures "are not automatically oppositional or constructive" and defines radical alternative media as constituting "the most active form of the active audience" expressing "oppositional strands, overt and covert, within popular cultures." The community radio sector in Australia is unique in that it incorporates a broad range of popular cultures. It represents views ranging from the extreme left to the far right with the majority of stations identifying with middle of the road politics. So in this way, it does not easily fit into definitions drawn from particular social, political and cultural arenas because all are represented. Perhaps the common bond is that each sub-sector sees itself as operating in a particular public sphere in which it is viewed as a minority.

Following on from this, rather than adopting the idea of a single, all-encompassing public sphere, we might think of media operating in terms of a series of parallel and overlapping “public arenas” — spaces where participants with similar cultural backgrounds or ‘communities of interest’ engage in activities concerning issues and interests of importance to them (Fraser, 1999: 126). This, then, helps to define our notion of ‘community’ in terms of how we use it in this chapter. Communities of interest 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” (Fraser, 1999: 126). What we might term a ‘community public sphere’ or ‘community public arena’ could be seen as a discrete formation or space that develops in a unique context and is the product of contestation with the mainstream public sphere. And, as Fraser (1999: 127) reminds us, “the unbounded character and publicist orientation of publics allows people to participate in more than one public, and it allows memberships of different publics to overlap.” It is clear from our research in Australia that not all community stations see themselves as *necessarily* resisting the mainstream. In fact, some aspire to mainstream status in terms of both programming and philosophy — but they work within the discursive arena of the local community or from a perceived minority status. Rodriguez’ concept of “citizens’ media” provides some support for our idea. She urges us to move beyond definitions of community media that rely on *what it is not* and to consider the “transformative processes they [media] bring about within participants and their communities” (Rodriguez, 2002: 79). Thus, community media should not be seen as the starting point for organising people, but rather as an extension of an *existing desire to communicate* to establish a sense of personal and community power (Hochheimer, 1999: 451).

This transformative process is clearly evident in some Indigenous and ethnic media enterprises where production practice and organisation have strong links to traditional community frameworks (Morris & Meadows, 2001; Roth, 2005). A national inquiry into broadcasting acknowledged in 2000 that Indigenous media in Australia was providing “a first level of service” — in other words, the primary media service — to its communities as well as acting as a ‘cultural bridge’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Productivity Commission, 2000: 3). Our recent audience research has underlined this critical role. So how have the transformative processes evident in the community media sector elsewhere been given substance in Australia?

THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY RADIO SECTOR

Community radio — first called public radio — emerged in Australia in the mid-1970s on the newly-available FM band. In line with similar developments with the independent press, the sector has seen the rise of Indigenous and multicultural radio — claimed as the world’s most linguistically diverse (SBS, 2006) — and local community radio serving a wide range of communities of interest. Community broadcasting has become one of the largest growth sectors in the Australian media industry (Forde et al, 2002: 9-19).

Station demographics

The vast majority of community radio stations in Australia produce general programming with the remainder divided into specialist groupings: Christian,

Indigenous, Radio for the Print Handicapped, Fine/classical music, Ethnic, and educational. By the turn of the new millennium, almost 65 percent of community radio stations in Australia were broadcasting in more conservative regional areas. These are sparsely-populated zones outside major urban areas which tend to hug the eastern and southern coastline of the continent. Around 20 percent of community stations are in capital cities with a further 15 percent in near-city areas. The emphasis on broadcasting to regional Australia is partly a response to the increasing withdrawal of local commercial radio from non-urban areas, leaving community radio as the only source of local news and information for many small towns around the country. This shift to servicing regional Australia — generally more conservative politically than urban areas — could explain trends in political preferences that emerged from our study. Overall, the sector considers itself more left of centre than right of centre, although it is most likely to place itself in the middle of the road politically. However, at the time of our survey (2000), the voting intentions of station managers would have resulted in a conservative federal government being re-elected — which is precisely what happened in 2004 (Forde et al, 2002: 1-7). These responses can be clearly contrasted with findings from a study of the independent press in Australia which found journalists and editors were overwhelming from the ‘left’ side of the political spectrum — almost 65 percent identified with the left, with only 11 percent nominating ‘middle of the road’ as an apt political description (Forde 1998).

Personnel demographics

The average community radio worker in Australia is male, over 40 years of age and probably lacks a university education. He is most likely to have been born in Australia of British or Irish descent, and is most likely to place himself politically in the ‘middle of the road’. He is slightly more likely to vote for the left-leaning Labor Party, although if he is a station manager, he is slightly more likely to be a supporter of conservative politics. Almost two-thirds of people working in the community radio sector are male and this is consistent with other areas of media work. Almost 69 percent of community radio workers are over 40, and nearly 41 percent are over 50. There is some concern throughout the sector over the small proportion of younger people working as volunteers although several stations that specialise in youth issues (radical news, current affairs and music, etc.) do have higher proportions of young people on staff. Compared to the general Australian population, community radio workers are reasonably well-educated. Almost one-third have completed tertiary (university) study, and about 40 per cent have at least some level of tertiary study. This compares with about 15 percent in the general population with a university degree. Almost half of community radio workers have at least some form of post-school qualification, comparable with the figures for the general population.

Three-quarters of community radio workers were born in Australia, which reflects almost exactly the proportion in the broader Australian community. A further one in 10 community radio workers were born in Britain, which is slightly above the general population figure of six percent. About two percent of community radio workers were born in either Africa or Asia, with continental Europe comprising the most popular non-Anglo/Celtic place of birth. More than 50 percent of station managers are volunteers and of these, about one-quarter are pensioners or retired from full-time work (Forde et al, 2002: 21-34).

Almost two-thirds of respondents in our survey reported producing 100 or more hours of local programming each week. On average, Australian community radio stations have 65-70 regular volunteers. A conservative national estimate of

regular volunteering would be 20,000 regular unpaid participants. This is equivalent to around AUD\$145 million a year in work for the Australian community. Community radio workers spend two and a half times longer at their work than general volunteers working across the country. This is indicative of a focused, committed workforce and suggests a significant contribution by community radio in providing many in Australian society with a sense of belonging and identity. Unlike most other nations, Australia has developed discrete community broadcasting legislation with the overall aim of encouraging community access and participation in broadcast media.

More than 90 per cent of radio station managers identified (without prompting) “provision of access and participation to community groups” as the important contribution their station makes to the local community. Other identified roles included a commitment to community cultural events and ‘other contributions’ to the community, including the representation of ‘specialist groupings’ such as ethnic communities, young people, etc. ‘Other contributions’ frequently referred to the station’s existence as a local alternative to mainstream radio stations and as a forum for broadcasting local music (Forde et al, 2002: 21-34).

The community sector undertakes an extensive training role with around 4,000-5,000 people involved annually in mostly unaccredited programs. Around 70 percent of the sector is engaged in training programs involving external organisations, usually universities. There is a significant flow of trained personnel from the community radio sector into mainstream media organizations. However, the important training role being undertaken by community broadcasters remains largely unacknowledged by either the government or the mainstream media sector (Forde et al, 2002: 63-81).

Funding

The major focus of conflict across the community media sector in Australia is in trying to balance station independence with an increasing need to generate funds from local sponsors. While there are some paid positions within community radio stations, 30 percent of stations operate entirely on a volunteer basis and 35 percent of stations employ three people or fewer. The majority of paid positions are in sales and administration. Thus, volunteers, rather than paid staff, are responsible for program/content production. Unlike commercial broadcasting, service to smaller and heterogeneous audiences characterises community radio. Community radio volunteers often see themselves as a “community within the station as well as a community outside the station” (Melbourne Focus Group, 2001). Ironically, it is the diversity of aims and audiences that unites the sector. Annual funding for permanently licensed stations from the Federal Government Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) has remained virtually on the same levels in real terms since 2000 — at around \$22,000 per station. Overall, the funding for the sector has fallen in real terms since 1996 with the 2005-2006 federal government contribution just under AUD\$8 million — a fraction of the sector’s total income (2003-2004) of around AUD\$51 million (Community Broadcasting Foundation, 2006: 2; CB Online, 2006: 12). This has placed increasing pressures on community stations to generate their own funds through sponsorship announcements, subscriptions, donations, and/or other events. As a result, stations are finding it increasingly difficult to remain afloat without significantly adjusting content to attract a larger audience. Some stations feel this is forcing them to adopt more commercial formats, which is against the principles of community radio as outlined in the

Broadcasting Services Act. Many focus group participants voiced concerns that this commercialisation will further compromise program production with more controversial material being abandoned in favour of programs that please local sponsors. On the other hand, there is a strong feeling across the sector that it has to become independent of government, and many participants see an increase in local sponsorship as the answer. Under the terms of the *Broadcasting Services Act*, community stations cannot carry advertising. They can run sponsorship announcements only (mentioning only the name and address of the sponsor), and these are limited to five minutes per hour (Forde et al, 2002: 95-108).

Diversity

Given the shared philosophy of access and participation across the sector, there are some significant differences in the services offered by regional and metropolitan areas. In the cities and large towns, there are often several community stations that serve specific communities. For example, in Brisbane 98.9 FM is an Indigenous station that has focused on country and Indigenous music, attracting an audience of around 100,000. Radio 4MBS caters for fine music tastes (from jazz to opera), 4EB caters for ethnic groups, and 4ZZZ caters for 'alternative'/marginalised groups and opinions and local music and arts talent, particularly for young female listeners (Meadows & van Vuuren, 1998). Metropolitan stations perform a different cultural role in their communities. As one metropolitan volunteer commented, "city stations see their role as 'alternative' because there is no point in replicating that which already exists [in mainstream radio]" (Adelaide Focus Group, 2001). Regardless of location, the strategies employed to service local communities are often taken for granted in the day-to-day operation of Australia's community broadcasters:

We have a local news as well as a national news service. We have community announcements, we have interviews, and just comments that presenters make on air about things, etc. We have our council that's actually involved with the station and is supportive of the station. They have airtime talking about issues. We have our local member talking about things, so it's through a whole range of things. A little bit of talk back, from time to time (Brisbane Focus Group, 2001).

Not enjoying a similar 'critical mass,' regional stations often adopt a generalist format catering to a local geographic community and/or to communities of interest within the region. Further, regional stations are often the only local broadcasters and thus serve a broader or more diverse community than their metropolitan peers. There are around 30 regional areas in Australia in which community radio now provides the *only* radio service. As such, stations like these play a critical role in disseminating local news and current affairs and information about cultural events (Forde et al, 2002: 35-46).

Australian and local content

Around 80 percent of community stations broadcast a news service, although this is usually syndicated. The sector's own satellite-distributed National Radio News (NRN) service is the most used, followed closely by commercial networked news from either the Macquarie or Southern Cross news networks. National Radio News is run by three full-time journalists working with journalism students at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, in New South Wales. Around 90 community radio stations take the news feed each day compiled from a variety of local and international sources (including the BBC World Service). Overall, around one-fifth of the community radio sector is

producing original news and current affairs, in most cases, on a daily basis. Those stations that produce their own content are providing high levels of training for their workers in news and current affairs production, and a large number of the workers or volunteers have formal training in journalism. The news and current affairs services are strongly anchored in their communities of interest with news workers relying heavily on local meetings, conversations, regular contacts and local newspapers for story ideas. Three-quarters of the news and current affairs produced by the sector is specifically relevant to the local community, and news workers feel they have complete autonomy to select and report on stories of importance. Additionally, the majority of workers producing local news identify provision of this service as their station's most important role, along with its ability to provide 'alternative' information from mainstream media. These ideas resonate strongly with those of their counterparts in the independent press sector.

The production of Australian content, such as radio drama, poetry readings, live recordings of Australian music, new Australian classical music and regular support of local theatre and literature, is clear evidence of the contribution community radio makes to Australia's cultural landscape. The network of 'fine music' stations has long-standing strong connections to the arts community through their support of Australian composers and live recordings of new jazz and classical music. With Christian radio stations making up around 15 per cent of community stations across Australia, this network has made concerted efforts to link with relevant local arts communities, particularly with musicians and theatre groups. There are several national projects funded by the federal government and designed to facilitate the development of contemporary Australian music for broadcast on community radio via the sector's satellite channels (Owens 2000: 3-4; Forde et al, 2002: 43-44).

Indigenous Broadcasting

The community sector has proved to be a major communications outlet for Indigenous voices in Australia with around 80 licensed stations in remote regions broadcasting more than 1,000 hours of Indigenous content weekly and a further 50 stations in regional and urban areas. There are three Indigenous narrowcast radio services (one is an open narrowcast licence) and an Indigenous commercial radio station. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have won access to the airwaves following persistent campaigns. Most major urban and regional areas have an Indigenous broadcaster complementing existing media. In addition to the community stations, there are two Indigenous radio networks. The National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) was launched in 1996 and enables Indigenous community radio stations across Australia to either link into national programming or choose to broadcast locally. In 2001, the National Indigenous News Service (NINS) began operating out of studios in Brisbane, providing a general, independent, national news service which features Indigenous stories and Indigenous perspectives on general news (Molnar & Meadows, 2001).

Community broadcasting is the largest component of Indigenous media in Australia. The value of hearing local voices and stories is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify and is the distinguishing feature of all community broadcasting. This is particularly evident in the report of the national review of Indigenous media, *Digital Dreaming* (ATSIC, 1999). Where local radio production was being undertaken regularly, stations were perceived to be playing an important role in maintaining local cultures and languages. Where local and culturally appropriate frameworks are used

to structure community media, then these media become part of the local community, that is, part of local culture. For example, 5UMA (Port Augusta, in South Australia) estimates there are 10 Indigenous languages still spoken in the area, and two have been chosen for broadcast because of their intelligibility across many tribal groupings. The station prides itself on covering Indigenous issues in these languages and in 'plain English,' thus accommodating those in the Port Augusta community for whom English is a second, third or even fourth language (Port Augusta Focus Group, 2001; Forde et al, 2002).

Ethnic broadcasting

The National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council (NEMBC) identifies 104 stations (58 regional and 42 metropolitan) across Australia producing in excess of 1700 hours of local programming weekly in 100 different languages (NEMBC, 2006). Ethnic media have become core elements of Australia's multicultural society—both the government-funded arm (SBS) and the community arm. Notably, the community arm produces about three times as much broadcast content as the government-funded SBS (Francis, 2001). Our most recent research has revealed innumerable practical examples that demonstrate the pivotal role played by ethnic and multicultural broadcasters and the crucial community services they perform — confirmed by focus group discussions with audiences from 10 different language communities.

In late 2000, when a group of Albanian refugees were brought to Australia to escape the Kosovo conflict, Radio 3ZZZ in Melbourne arranged an Albanian language program to be delivered each day to inform the refugees of happenings in their home country as well as their status in Australia. In the Tasmanian capital, Hobart, radio station 7THE responded to the needs of Albanian refugees and found journalists within the refugee community. Volunteers from the station drove forty minutes each way to pick up the Albanian journalists to enable them to deliver their programs (Hobart Focus Group, 2001).

More recently, our research has revealed the critical role played by ethnic community radio in providing access to specialist information about Australian society for specific audiences, as well as promoting cross-cultural understanding for the broader Australian community. This has been identified by audiences as central to the role of multi-lingual ethnic community radio, identifying it as an essential service. Ethnic community radio audiences see it as especially important at a time when Australian government policy towards refugees has been seriously questioned by human rights organizations locally and internationally (Forde et al, 2002: 55-60; Turkish Focus Group, 2006; Macedonian Focus Group, 2006; Filipino Focus Group, 2006).

Audience research

In November 2004, the first national quantitative audience study of the Australian community radio sector startled critics (mainly commercial broadcasters) by reporting that around one quarter of Australians (four million listeners) tuned into community radio each week — and the figure increases to almost 50 per cent over a month. The survey of 5,000 people around Australia revealed that almost 700,000 people were *exclusive* community radio listeners. The study found audiences fairly evenly split on gender lines (male 53 per cent; female 47 per cent) with just over half aged 40 and above (McNair Ingenuity, 2004). Two years later, the national survey was repeated — confirming the data gathered in the earlier study (McNair Ingenuity, 2006). While numbers alone are limited in what they can tell us about 'how' and

‘why’ people listen and/or watch, for example, there is little doubt that the community radio sector in Australia has attracted a significant audience.

Preliminary findings from the first qualitative audience study of the sector in late 2006 suggest strong support for the important cultural role being played by community radio in Australia. Responses from around 50 focus groups and scores of ‘key people’ interviews (individuals and organisations who use community radio and television) have enabled us to delve more deeply into the processes that create and sustain communities. Local radio has clearly become a central organising element of Australian society.

Audiences have welcomed diversity in programming — from talk to music — and have articulated significant support for alternative ways of receiving factual information through individual programs rather than using traditional formats such as news bulletins. And they are emphasising the importance of community radio providing an alternative by focusing on local rather than global news events, arguing that existing publicly-funded organisations like the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) already provide independent sources of news and information and have the resources to cover national and international news — so why should community radio compete (Bay FM Focus Group 2005)? One focus group participant summed it up like this:

...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 [the station] but it’s not necessarily the way it can be defined on other stations (3RRR Melbourne focus group, 2005).

Our research has revealed an extraordinary level of passion for community radio, with almost all audience focus group participants describing their relationship with a local station as like being ‘part of a family.’ Others speak about the strong appeal of ‘ordinariness’ in being able to identify with a presenter or a person being interviewed on air. Many confess they would be ‘devastated’ if their local community radio station went off air (3RRR Focus Group; Bay FM Focus Group, 2005). These are powerful indications of the varied ways in which audiences are engaging with community radio. It suggests that a high level of interaction — either perceived or actual — between audiences and producers would seem to be fundamental to the very definition of community radio. It suggests a significant dismantling of the idea of an audience-producer barrier.

One stark example comes from Indigenous audiences in north Queensland. In November 2004, Aboriginal people on Palm Island, near Townsville, stormed and burned down a police station on the island following the death in custody of a young local man. While mainstream media have branded the incident ‘the riot’, Indigenous voices on the Indigenous airwaves speak about ‘the resistance’ with a locally-produced and nationally-broadcast talkback program, *Talkblack*, providing listeners with views other than those from sources such as State politicians and the police — in short: ‘black voices and black issues’ (Palm Island interviewee, 2006). The program won an award for the best coverage of Indigenous Affairs at the 2006 Queensland Media Awards. Indigenous audience representatives have identified their community radio as the only real alternative available to them in such times of community crisis. One avid listener captures the feelings of many when he observes:

I think the only tool the community has to use is using places like 4K1G [a local Aboriginal radio station] to make sure that what was being bought out of the Palm [Island] community as a whole was projected in the right manner, not in a negative manner. That's only one part of the importance of Murri [Aboriginal] media or Indigenous media. It provides places like Palm, 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 (4K1G listener, 2005).

There is strong evidence from other audience focus groups to suggest that the multiple roles of community radio are not confined to the Indigenous sector alone. Preliminary analysis of audience responses are not only reinforcing earlier perceptions of the sector and its role, but also extending our understanding of community radio *processes* by providing an insight into the often intimate, diverse and intensely personal relationships listeners have developed with their local community radio stations in Australia. Audiences are telling us of the significant role played by community radio — and *only* community radio — in crisis situations like floods, bushfires and major weather alerts; of dealing with multiple deaths in a community by offering on-air counselling for listeners; of offering the alternative views of 'citizen journalists' who challenge mainstream versions of events; by providing listeners with a sense of community likened to being part of a family; and of rejecting globalising information processes in favour of what affects the local and the everyday lives of listeners.

Audiences in the ethnic community radio sector reveal similar responses: the importance of radio in maintaining languages and cultures, sustaining community networks, and providing a crucial medium for music. Focus group participants identified the prime importance of community radio in providing new immigrants with local news in their own languages *as well as* information from their countries of origin. It suggests an important unifying element inherent in this extraordinarily diverse sector.

Conflict is not entirely absent from the sector: there is tension between individuals, sub-sectors (generalist, indigenous, ethnic), dissatisfaction with some aspects of the representative body — the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia — and awareness of pressure to perform with minimal levels of government funding. But as the annual conference each year confirms, an extraordinary level of cooperation is a hallmark of the community media environment in Australia. Our audience study confirms this, revealing overwhelming support for the current direction stations are taking. Although our audience research participants were to a large degree, self-selected (listeners to particular stations were invited to nominate for focus groups), the wide range of stations involved in the study, a 'theoretical sample' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; McNaughton & Myers, 2004: 68) and random selection minimised possible bias. The single most obvious critique offered by audiences, sector-wide was simple — they want more of the same: diversity, 'ordinariness', accessibility, local music, news and information. All of these core elements are notably absent from, or de-valued by, mainstream media.

CONCLUSION

When broadcasting first began in the early 1920s, it came with a promise of real communication between audiences and producers. But, instead, it has delivered mostly a one-way information flow. The emergence of Australia's unique independent broadcasting sector challenges this. The very idea of focusing on local audiences has meant that community media must be a part of local communities of interest. They cannot exist otherwise. And if they are part of local communities, then they play an important cultural and political role because they are part of community culture. Any suggestion of taking media away from communities where it is well-established brings a lively response. One *Anangu* elder spoke proudly of community television started in her communities in the remote central desert in the early 1980s. She speaks of media and culture as one (APY interviews, 2006):

Travelling in any way in the country, they can listen to music; they can put a TV there — make everybody happy; make everybody awake and think about the land: this is my grandmother's land; this is my *tjamu's* land; this is my *kami's* land, my grandfather's and grandmother's and uncle's and mother's. That's the media we started for *Anangu* children and we can't give it to anybody.

How local media achieve this and the form they take varies widely across Australia, with each working to reflect the community of interest being served. For this to work, communities must establish a process—through dialogue—that enables the diverse elements of their community to work together to produce a 'citizens' media,' and thus, 'public arena' activity. Rather than blindly copying outside models, independent media 'invent' their own ways of making sense of the world.

As national and commercial media policy shifts continue to abandon or neglect remote and regional Australia in favour of more cost-effective urban-centred infrastructure, community media have taken on an increasingly important cultural role — providing communities with a first level of service. Producing community broadcasting might be thought of as a *process* of cultural empowerment and it may be that the *ways* in which community media facilitates community organisation are more important than content production *per se*. Community broadcasting in Australia 'imagine' notions of culture and citizenship through shared meanings, values, and ideals. Put simply, it is a process of 'making sense' of the world and our place in it. In this way, community media workers *both produce and maintain* the culture of a community and in doing so play a central role in creating a community public sphere. Community media are thus resources for building multiple and complex media and cultural literacies through participation on a localised and personalised scale. As Hochheimer reminds us, community broadcasting should not be seen as the starting point for organising people, but rather as an extension of an *existing desire to communicate* to establish a sense of personal and community power. Through the processes and practices we have outlined in this chapter and are slowly beginning to understand, community broadcasting plays an important cultural role by encouraging dialogue between diverse 'public arenas' — a unique way of 'making spaces' integral to formation of the broader public sphere and enhancing the democratic process.

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ⁱ Open narrowcasting licences are offered by the Australian Communications and Media Authority to broadcasting services with a limited and specified audience reach. The limits could be special interest, location, time frame, or audience appeal. For more detail, see http://auction.acma.gov.au/current_projects/lpon/index.asp, retrieved November 23, 2006.