

Putting the citizen back into journalism

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Abstract

Australian journalists working in mainstream media, like most of their international counterparts, are held in low esteem by their audiences. The environments in which they work increasingly are being defined by corporate agendas through public relations and networked news agencies. So it is perhaps not surprising that audiences are feeling increasingly alienated from dominant media institutions and their products. But it is not happening everywhere. Around four million listeners in an average week tune into community radio stations around Australia, primarily to hear local news and information. It has created arguably the highest per capita listenership globally for a national community broadcasting sector. This discussion draws from the first national qualitative audience study of the Australian community broadcasting sector and argues that community journalism is playing a crucial role in the democratic process by fostering citizen participation in public life. This suggests a critique of mainstream journalism practices and the central place of audience research in understanding the nature of the relationships and processes involved. I will suggest that the nature of community journalism aligns it more closely with the complex 'local talk' narratives at community level that play a crucial role in creating public consciousness. I will also suggest that in the light of global environmental and economic change, the need for journalism to re-connect with local audiences has never been more important.

Introduction

Despite concerted efforts by a wide range of journalism-related organisations and entities in Australia, the credibility of journalists working in the mainstream remains firmly lodged around the level of 'advertisers, real estate agents and car sellers' (Australian Press Council 2006; *Sydney Morning Herald* 2007). One poll rates journalists' credibility alongside that of

sex workers (*Readers Digest* 2007)! Interestingly, television journalists consistently outperform their newspaper colleagues in the credibility stakes although it is hardly something to celebrate when 85 per cent believe newspaper journalists are ‘often biased’ versus 74 percent for television reporters (Roy Morgan Research 2007). And journalists come in around the mid-twenties on the 2008 credibility list headed by nurses, pharmacists, doctors and teachers (Roy Morgan Research 2008). The representative organisation for the majority of Australia’s journalists—the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA)—has attempted to address these negative perceptions over the years through a series of professionally-orientated seminars, release of an annual summary of local issues in its *Press Freedom* series, along with articles in its regular magazine, *The Walkley*.

From the academic side, there has been a swathe of books and journal articles in recent years dealing with journalism ethics, along with research projects investigating the shortfalls of journalistic practice, all designed to improve the way journalists do their job—and perhaps more importantly, the way they are *perceived* to be doing their job. Citizen journalism has become almost a catchcry in the panoply of ideas. But all of this seems to little avail. British journalist Nick Davies’ investigation into journalism practices there has revealed that around 12 percent of the more than 2000 stories he examined were generated by reporters—the remainder had their genesis in wire service copy or public relations’ handouts, a process Davies describes as ‘churnalism’ (Beecher 2008, 15; Davies 2008). A 2008 survey of 60 journalists by a Brisbane-based public relations company concluded that PR and journalism have never been closer bedfellows in the Sunshine State. Around 50 percent of respondents acknowledged that the biggest attraction of PR was its ability to ‘identify’ stories. This is more than double the number who responded to this question in the same survey two years earlier. In 2006, just 20 percent of journalists acknowledged that they relied on press releases to generate stories. Now that figure has almost trebled to 55 percent. And not one of those surveyed acknowledged that PR could **not** help them in their work (BBS 2008, 4). It seems that ‘churnalism’ is alive and well in our own media environment. Crikey co-owner Eric Beecher has drawn from this changing environment to argue for an increasing diversification of media audiences. Almost half of all Australians surveyed in 2006 found it difficult to read text from newspapers, magazines and brochures (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). This, according to Beecher (2008, 15) suggests that the future of journalism lies in it offering specific content to increasingly fragmented audiences.

Apart from Beecher’s speculation—and wishes—evidence from the community broadcasting sector suggests that this is exactly what is happening locally. Analysis of audience focus group discussions conducted around Australia reveals that journalists who work closely with

their communities have won the respect of their audiences at the expense of mainstream practitioners. It suggests the need for mainstream journalists to closely examine why this might be so and how it might impact on their own attitudes and approaches which have been clearly identified as flawed by the vast majority of mainstream media audiences in Australia and elsewhere. I also suggest that it is at the level of the community that journalism seems to have achieved one of the desired outcomes of the problematic public journalism movement—engaging their audiences. Much of the evidence on which I base this paper comes from a recent audience study of the community broadcasting sector in Australia (Meadows et al 2007). It was the first such qualitative investigation undertaken globally of an entire community broadcasting network and offers stark insights into a schism between mainstream journalists' perceptions of their role and those of their audiences. The study concluded that audiences for metropolitan and regional community radio and television stations in Australia tune in for four principal reasons: they perceive community radio to be accessible and approachable; they like the laid back, 'ordinary person' station presentation style; they want to access local news and information; and they appreciate the diversity represented in station programming in terms of both format and content (Meadows et al 2007).

I am using the term 'audience' here in a way that attempts to recapture the meaning from its current commercial incarnation, most commonly conflated with 'consumer'. My approach is simple: the stark disparity between the terms 'consumer' and 'citizen' underlie my argument. Aligning 'audiences' and 'citizens' offers a much deeper understanding of the processes that are creating and sustaining ideas of Australian culture as 'a whole process of living' (Williams 1977; Grossberg 1988; Kellner and Durham 2006). Australian culture is expressed, represented, reproduced and maintained through the work of journalists and the media. They play a pivotal role in its reproduction through the publication of dominant ideas and assumptions about the world (Gramsci 1971; Hall 1982; Adam 1993). Journalists, like other media workers, have been caught up in the global infotainment—and public relations'—shift and it seems important to reclaim the ground that has been lost to the corporations. It is not merely a case of resisting 'progress' or the inevitable march of information technology—technological convergence does not come with specific instructions on how it should be used. The responses from diverse audiences for local radio and television in Australia confirm international arguments that journalism—whatever it has become—needs to be re-examined (Chomsky 1997; McChesney 2003; Hamilton 2004; Deuze 2005).

In this paper, I want to explore some of these responses in relation to the idea that community-based journalism has elements of 'good sense' that can impact on audiences—and thus, culture and society—in positive ways, countering the 'common sense' approach that

largely defines everyday mainstream journalistic activity in Australia and elsewhere (Gramsci 1971; Coban 2005).

Why is the community broadcasting sector important?

There is little doubt that mainstream media are fundamentally flawed in many respects, particularly in regard to their contribution to sustaining democratic ideals in their broadest sense (McChesney 2003; Hackett and Carroll 2006). It is little wonder then that community media globally are experiencing something of a surge in terms of their ability to attract audiences. And while this alternative media sector might be expected to attract those relegated to the periphery of the public sphere in terms of media misrepresentation—visible minorities, women, gays and youth etc—this is not necessarily the case. Increasingly, there is evidence that the community radio and television demographic now includes audiences who are well-educated and affluent—surprisingly ‘mainstream’ in character but not in preference. A 2007 study (Meadows et al) revealed a widespread dissatisfaction with mainstream media across the country. For some theorists, this perception of failure by the mainstream has come to define ‘community media’ (Howley 2005). Others take a more positive approach, arguing that we should investigate community media for what it is, rather than what it is not (Rodriguez 2001; Atton 2002). Almost by default, then, ‘mainstream’ media become those that are not community, according to the definitions I have suggested here. In general, they maintain the status quo and in doing so, make little contribution to addressing what Hackett and Carroll have usefully described as the ‘democratic deficit’, including the following: public sphere failure through a lack of investigative journalism; concentration of media ownership; homogenisation of media content; reproduction of racial, gender and class inequalities; undermining of the notion of community; corporate enclosure of knowledge; an elitist policymaking process; and the erosion of communication rights (2006, 2-14).

How are community media challenging this? At the end of 2008, the Australian community broadcasting sector included the following: 353 long-term licensed radio stations producing more than 47,000 hours of programming each week; four television stations producing around 165 hours of new programs each week; 46 aspirant organizations operating with temporary radio licences; and two aspirant television stations operating on open narrowcasting licences. The Indigenous broadcasting sector is made up of 96 radio stations (including 21 dedicated Indigenous stations), producing around 1400 hours of programming each week. This is in addition to 79 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS) relaying the National Indigenous Television (NITV) service along with locally-produced programming. The ethnic community radio sector has 123 stations (including seven producing ethnic language

programs full-time) broadcasting around 2500 hours of programming each week. Around 4000 volunteers produce these programs in 97 community languages (CBOnline 2008, 24-25). Most of these outlets broadcast 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Although the commercial radio sector has around 270 operating licenses, its annual turnover is about \$1 billion dollars compared with the community sector's annual revenue of about \$70 million. Community broadcasting's 23,000 volunteers, primarily in the generalist and ethnic community radio sub-sectors, counter this financial disparity, producing more local content, more Australian music, and reflecting a greater diversity of Australian cultures than its commercial and government-funded national broadcasting counterparts (CB Online 2008, 24).

But why are audiences supporting community radio and television in Australia which arguably has the highest per capita listenership of any community broadcasting system globally? The overwhelming answer to this question—from the mouths of audiences—is *empowerment*. So what does this have to do with journalism? The answer, of course, is everything. Grossberg (1987, 95) usefully 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'. Implicit in this theoretical explanation is the high level of engagement community broadcasting audiences identify with their local stations and the largely volunteer workforce that keeps them on the air. This includes the many media workers—mostly volunteers—who are doing the work of journalists. 'Citizen journalism' has almost become a throwaway term, referring to virtually anyone writing anything that bears some resemblance to 'the facts' or 'the truth', however they are defined. While not wishing to deny the contributions of many individual j-bloggers around the world, I suggest that it is the work of these community-based volunteers who have put the citizen back into journalism. And they have done this because they come from *and remain part of* their local communities. The absence of this level of engagement is a significant element in explaining the current high level of dissatisfaction of mainstream journalists—and their journalism—expressed by audiences. The need to re-engage with audiences is one of the driving forces behind the public journalism movement which has largely failed to meet its objectives (Schudson 1998; Ewart 2002). One of the problems here, I suggest, is that mainstream journalists remain essentially separated from their communities—and thus, their audiences—because of the limitations of modern notions of professionalism (Carey 1980; Meadows 1998)

One way of explaining what is happening with journalism at the level of the local is to consider it through the theoretical lenses of 'common sense' and 'good sense' as espoused by

Italian journalist and influential cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971). This is not to suggest that other theoretical considerations might equally (or better) explain the kinds of processes underway here. But I find this approach compelling in helping me to understand exactly how audiences engage with factual information in various ways and in various cultural settings. I have chosen this approach, too, because of the overwhelming evidence emerging from the analysis of community radio and television audience focus group discussions (around 50) and interviews with community organizations who regularly use community radio and television in Australia (approximately 65) (Foxwell 2008; Meadows et al 2007). I have delved more specifically into this data to extract information relevant to journalism practices and thus, to my argument here.

Common sense, 'good' sense and journalism

Using this broad theoretical approach, journalism can be considered as a positive force that can 'draw out and elaborate' elements of critical awareness and 'good sense' in a society. Mainstream journalism practices, through the 'diffuse, uncoordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment', play a central role in creating 'common sense' explanations for the world and our place in it (Gramsci 1971, 330; Coben 2005). We can see this operating in 'everyday journalism', framing such issues and events as the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the world financial crisis and the reporting of ethnic and Indigenous affairs. But Gramsci argues that 'common sense' contains 'a healthy nucleus of good sense' which 'deserves to be made more unitary and coherent'. In other words, the seeds for creating 'good sense' in journalism already exist, which is where community journalism comes in. Journalism being produced at community level is in an ideal position to transform or 'renew' common sense into good sense. It does this, particularly through community radio, by creating 'communities of interest' amongst audiences—in other words, 'homogeneous social groups'. Gramsci (1971, 419) argues further: 'At those times when a homogeneous social group is brought into being, there comes into being also, in opposition to common sense, a homogeneous—in other words coherent and systematic—philosophy.' A binding element in the process of creating and maintaining this 'homogeneous philosophy' is a connection with the real world—in Gramsci's terms, the 'simple'. He argues (1971, 330):

[One must start with]...a philosophy which already enjoys, or could enjoy, a certain diffusion, because it is connected to and implicit in practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a renewed common sense possessing the coherence and sinew of

individual philosophies. But this can only happen if the demands of cultural contact with the ‘simple’ are continually felt.

To have a chance of influencing social thought, this process must draw from *existing ideas*. It implies that ideological institutions like media—and cultural practices like journalism—that engage with their audiences are more likely to be in a position to enact this philosophical shift. Community journalism practices exhibit these very characteristics. Almost by definition, mainstream media, the purveyors of ‘common sense’, are excluded from this process because of the existence of a barrier between audiences and producers. The editorial policies of the vast majority—if not all—mainstream newsrooms discourage *active engagement* with audiences (and sources) over meaning. In fact for most, this is seen as editorial *interference*. Community journalism, as I have defined it here, has managed to tap into the ‘imaginative capacities’ of its audiences far more effectively than the mainstream (Anderson 1984; Adam 1993). The passion that flows from audiences for local community radio news reflects this, as these audience comments suggest:

[Triple Zed]...does do good local news, because there is someone who is either presenting it, or a friend of a friend that has been involved with that particular story or issue. And so sometimes, their local news coverage is probably as good as anything you’ll find (Focus Group, 4ZZZ Brisbane, 2005).

So 3CR gives people a chance to give their opinions and, and they hear them and listen to them which I find, find very rewarding and they don’t, you know, criticise, or, or, they don’t come back once the, you’re off air giving your view and having a snide comment as I’ve found (Focus Group, 3CR Melbourne, 2005).

McCallum (2007, 27) has identified ‘local talk’ as ‘a powerful resource for understanding public opinion’ by highlighting the complexity of such community-level narratives when compared with the consistently narrow frames adopted by mainstream journalism. This insight alerts us to the importance of this process in the formation of the public sphere. It also suggests an important role for community radio, in particular, in enabling such ‘local talk’ processes. Commercially-orientated media audience analysis largely ignores such issues, focusing instead on the primary objective—delivering audiences in appropriately defined categories, to advertisers. While this does not preclude some level of audience engagement with commercial media (and their journalists), it is significantly constrained by the philosophical and economic framework in which commercial media—and journalists—must

work. It is the *community element* of community journalism that places it closer to such complex 'local talk' processes.

...the sort of topics that they cover, you just, would never hear about anywhere else and they're really important, you know, important information about things that affect people, ordinary people, you know (Focus Group, 2SER, 2005).

Changing definitions of news

Community radio audiences in several recent studies have expressed strong support for the community broadcasting sector's role in providing *local* news and information because of its virtual absence in both commercial and publicly-funded news. While some regional newspapers do provide this service, albeit tempered by the constraints of commercialism, contra-deals and advertising expectations, audiences for community radio say they are underserved by the mainstream when it comes to local news and information. Most importantly for this argument, it is at the top of their list of reasons for listening and/or watching community media (Forde et al 2003; Meadows et al 2007; McNair Ingenuity 2008; Meadows et al 2009):

I mean I don't want to listen every hour that somebody has been charged with murder or somebody has been raped or you know the London things. I mean that's what I am trying to get away from, I'm sorry. So if we define that as news, I'm glad it's not on Triple R (Focus Group, 3RRR Melbourne, 2005).

The local news component on Radio Nag comes through the programs, because most programs have news and information in them and they tell you what is happening locally. It is about local stuff that is happening here that you hear in each of the programs. The groups that present programs like RSL and Land Care talk about what is happening locally too. It is in-depth information and a wide source of information about the community (Focus Group, Radio Nag Yeppoon, 2005).

...it depends how you define news. Like, I think the news about the arts, the news about, I mean, music — that's news; arts is news, some theatre is news. Like news isn't just, you know, bombs went off in London or the football. I mean we don't have to listen to endless shows about football or cricket. I mean, it is your definition of news. There's a lot of news on it but it's not necessarily the way it can be defined on other stations (Focus Group, Bay FM Byron Bay, 2005).

Local news is often not framed in terms of mainstream news values but more commonly overlaps with what some may term ‘community service announcements’. This ranges from information on the cancellation of local sporting events or community meetings to vital local advice about cyclones, floods and bushfires. Mainstream journalists are unable to focus on such specificities given their large readership or broadcast footprints. It is precisely this void that community journalism is able to fill. And in around 30 small townships in Australia, community radio is the *only* source of local news and information apart from regional ABC radio. Community radio stations are expected to do this under the provisions of the *Broadcasting Services Act (1992)* which states that they must support their communities, particularly in times of emergency.

By way of example, in 1998 and again in 2004, floods inundated and isolated the town of Katherine in the Northern Territory. Local community radio station volunteers provided regular updates on flood levels during these trying times by walking to a nearby bridge to check the water level in between other on-air activity, including organizing medical help for a listener:

There was a woman rang in—her nebuliser had gone under water she had asthma so needed help. We put out calls over the radio. A woman over in East Katherine had one that she was willing to lend the woman if someone could pick it up. A taxi driver heard the call, went over and picked it up, delivered it. Radio was able to do that urgent call on the spot—it’s the immediacy of radio, community radio (Focus Group, 8KTR Katherine, 2005).

While mainstream journalists were reporting crocodiles swimming down the main street, local journalists felt it more important to provide their community with information on where to get help or to access emergency food supplies. In another example, the small bushfire-prone township of Tumut in regional New South Wales relied heavily on its own community radio station in 2005. At the time, a regional satellite-delivered commercial television news service provided inaccurate information that bushfires were threatening the town—but it was the local community news service that was able to put the record straight and ease the grave concerns of townspeople:

We could see the fires and were wondering what was happening...But then I rang the station and spoke to Dave who was on air at the time and Dave said, “We’ve got the latest report, we’re just about to broadcast it, everything’s fine, it’s all under control,

you know, there's no need, there's no worry." So almost instantly, you just had that news and sure enough they broadcast the latest update on the fires around town, everything's under control (Focus Group, 2TVR Tumut, 2005).

There were many examples given by audiences of their community radio stations helping to solve local problems. In Byron Bay, a backpacker died in a fire in town and the local station, Bay FM, held an extended on-air counselling session to enable listeners to come to terms with the tragedy. In a less tragic situation in Bendigo, the community station again stepped in to assist a local resident:

The commercial station wouldn't do it. We know a lady, we had a really bad storm and her dog ran away because of the storm and she rang one of the commercial radio stations and they said no, we can't do it. And they rang here and they put the announcement over, and they did it for a couple of days and she did find her dog (Focus Group, 3CCC, 2005).

But is this journalism? In fact, there are many forms of journalism at work here and elsewhere, beyond the constraints of mainstream newsrooms and industry-determined definitions. 'Citizens' journalism' is a recent form that has emerged alongside multifarious activities and sources that are redefining the very nature of journalism practice—the Internet, blogs, digital photographs, mobile or cell phone images have all become 'legitimate' technologies of newsgathering. The necessary prerequisite for the process of communication is 'a desire and a will to communicate' (Hochheimer 1999). This is of particular relevance for community journalism because of its ability to engage with its audiences. And for these audiences, the problematic notion of objectivity has been largely dismissed in favour of honesty, as these comments suggest:

I'd prefer to get an informed personal opinion as opposed to just gloss over something. We see people interviewed on mainstream television all the time or in mainstream newspapers, and interview the person only because of a very small sound byte, they might only get two or three sentences, very short sentences in a newspaper article even though the article might be quite long to convey their opinion and even less on television, whereas depending on the programming here, you are likely to get a more in-depth version of their opinion (Focus Group, 3CR Melbourne, 2005).

And in fact, they'll sometimes admit they are being unprofessional about it, because they're so passionate about it which...makes it more, to me, more objective (Focus Group, 3RRR Melbourne, 2005).

Listeners to community radio across Australia offer definitions of 'news and information', along with the format in which it is produced, that challenge accepted traditional concepts. Audiences have adopted a much broader definition of 'news and information' than most news organisations, journalists, and journalism courses might acknowledge. News for audiences includes information about local music or cultural events, for example, which need not be presented in a formal news bulletin. In fact, a desire by audiences for community radio and television across Australia is for news and information to be presented in context—arts news in an arts program; sports news in a sports program, and so on—avoiding the bulletin or specialist program format that confines news and current affairs in the mainstream. This is most probably related to the high emphasis placed on music by most community radio stations along with a lack of resources to staff full- or even part-time news operations.

Local journalism and audience empowerment

Community-based or 'public arena' journalism in Australia has emerged as a result of a range of 'new, interactive relationships between producers and audiences' (Roth and Valaskakis 1989, 232; Meadows et al 2007). Audiences explain that local news and information enables them to participate in the social and political life of their communities. This is done in various ways across the country—regular on-air spots for local councillors, police, school representatives, community elders, talkback etc. Outside the realm of formal information, the stations act as a conduit for news about controversial issues. For example, listeners in Katherine identified their community station's role in informing them about a proposal to establish a nuclear waste dump in the area while in metropolitan Melbourne, audiences identified their station as *the only place* where you could find out about local political rallies and activities:

And when you were talking about activism, a lot of word of mouth I would imagine is really big in that area like 'From Little Things Big Things Grow', an alternative group or an independent group needs some sort of action or some sort of voice would come from here (Focus Group, 3CR Melbourne, 2005).

It is abundantly clear that in both metropolitan and regional areas, community radio performs a pivotal role in representing diverse interests. Audiences consistently spoke of feeling 'part

of the community', simply by listening. And it is largely the broadcasting of factual information that has created this high level of ownership. One listener summed up the feelings of many, referring to the tendency of new information technologies like the Internet to contribute to feelings of isolation:

It [3RRR] is something that actually brings the community together, whereas a lot of the stuff in the world today seems to be isolating us. You know, you can get all the information you need, sitting at home in front of your computer, and that sort of thing, whereas this is something that actually gives you a reason to get out and into your community, and a community that is open and accepting of you (Focus Group, 3RRR Melbourne, 2005).

So community radio stations are often identified by their audiences as the only sources of information about local events and activities, they are also performing important social functions. These comments relating to the power and importance of 'local conversations' are typical of many:

[Our local community radio 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 for 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).

And the other thing is that it makes for us, as a border town, it distinguishes us from Canberra in a way doesn't it? I mean, it sort of, otherwise we're just a suburb of, of Canberra. I mean I know we're a...suburb of Canberra but it, it says that we have our own identity and I like that (Focus Group, 2QBYN Queanbeyan, 2005).

Although media and, by association, journalism, are of central importance in winning consent for particular ideas and assumptions about the world, they take their place alongside other cultural institutions which influence the formation of public opinion—libraries, schools, universities, associations, clubs etc—in the production of this consent. Significantly, all of these entities commonly use community radio and television as their favoured media. With media processes the 'most dynamic' element of this theoretical framework, community journalism—and audience perceptions of it—are well-placed to make a significant contribution to this process (Gramsci 1988, 38-381). Like all forms of journalism, it is impossible to separate practice from the context in which it occurs. And like commercial

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radio, the presentation format of news and information on community radio reflects overall station style. These observations on station style perhaps explain why community radio audiences are so passionate about ‘their’ forms of local news and information:

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).

I guess with the other stations, I mean, all you are is a market, you’re not a person. You’re just a market. What can they sell you, that’s the bottom line and that’s all it is. But that’s not what Triple R is about (Focus Group, 3RRR Melbourne, 2005).

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 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 EDG don’t do it (Focus Group, 7EDG Hobart, 2005).

Conclusion

Journalism—or more precisely, mainstream journalism—has come in for its fair share of criticism in relation to its inability to address the kinds of issues I have alluded to here. Its increasing tendency to pander to public relations agencies as agenda-setters for news seems likely to continue to be one of the driving forces behind the growing audience for alternative media and different forms of journalism. The largely US-based public journalism movement set out to re-engage its audiences by involving citizens more centrally in the communication and democratic process (Schudson, 1998, 132-133). But despite spirited defences of this movement, it has been unable to break free of the constraining framework of the mainstream with agenda-setting and sourcing practices struggling to escape from the influence of elite information networks (Ewart 2002; Haas and Steiner 2006; Barker 2008).

But we must also look beyond global media trends to other trends such as the impending energy crisis. The world has passed its peak oil production and the continuing pressure this will place on global economies is only now being seriously considered. How is this likely to

affect journalism? It seems highly likely to place an increasing emphasis on the local. For example, fewer people will be in a position to be able to travel overseas placing more emphasis on domestic tourism industries (Becken 2008). The global economic crisis has further complicated this. Will this, too, be accompanied by an increasing focus on the importance and relevance of the local? If so, what will this mean for media and journalism? The present evidence suggests Australian journalists working in the mainstream may find themselves even more alienated from local audiences. On the other hand, independent community media are in an ideal position to support local journalism practices that offer audiences a real alternative—relevant local news and information—by applying a more appropriate framework for making sense of the world. It is clear from the Australian community broadcasting audience study that journalism at the level of the local is already playing a key role in this process because it is closer to the community-level ‘local talk’ narratives that play a crucial role in creating public consciousness, contributing to public sphere debate and thus, the democratic process (McCallum 2007; Meadows et al 2007).

There is something unusual happening within the Australian community broadcasting sector, evident by its significant and growing audiences and the broad cultural role it is fulfilling on a number of levels. In the United States, for example, the audience for National Public Radio—a rough equivalent to the community radio sector here—hovers around 10 percent (McCauley, 2006). This pales when compared with the 27 percent of Australians who regularly tune in to their local community stations (McNair Ingenuity 2008). Virtually all of the reasons community broadcasting audiences give to explain their feelings of empowerment and passion—for radio, in particular—relates to the failure of mainstream media to fill the void in local news, information and music. It could be that the most active, successful experiment in public journalism so far is going on here right under our very noses. Whatever it is, it demands closer attention as we seek to re-define ‘journalism’ in ways that must take account of its changing and multifarious forms in the light of global influences that have already changed the world for all of us.

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