

Community broadcasting and mental health: the role of local radio and television in enhancing emotional and social wellbeing

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Abstract

This article sets out to explore the role of community broadcasting in enhancing the emotional and social wellbeing of its diverse audiences. We argue that community-based broadcasting is having a positive impact on the state of mental health of its audiences. We make our argument by reviewing audience research data from a two-year study of the Australian community broadcasting sector 2004-2007. The findings reveal that the community radio and Indigenous television sectors are making a significant contribution to managing community mental health by empowering audiences to better understand and control issues that impact on their emotional and social wellbeing. This suggests opportunities for health care agencies to consider the potential of enlisting community broadcasting in future mental health campaigns. The study reinforces a claim that mainstream media need to be more aware of a growing dissatisfaction with their inability to 'connect' with their diverse audiences on such issues. It also provides further evidence for community radio as a key cultural resource meeting its expected outcomes in contributing to social gain.

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Introduction

The idea for this article emerged from the first national audience study of the community media sector in Australia undertaken by a team from Griffith University from 2004 to 2007. That project, *Community Media Matters*, set out to explore the broad role of community broadcasting in Australia for its generalist, ethnic and Indigenous audiences. The research identified that community radio — and Indigenous community television — offered its audiences specialised cultural resources in various ways. This included providing specific information and service support, particularly for people from Indigenous and non-English-speaking-backgrounds (Meadows et al 2007).

Community radio in Australia exists in an international context where community radio increasingly is being identified as an important cultural resource. This is evident in a significant boost in academic research attention to community-produced media globally (Rodriguez 2001; Downing 2001; Forde et al 2002; Atton 2002; McCauley 2005; Howley 2005; Meadows et al 2007; Chitty and Rattichalkalakorn 2007; Coyer et al 2007; Fuller 2007; Carpentier and de Cleen 2007; Bailey et al 2008; Gordon 2009; Rodriguez et al 2009; Forde et al 2009; Downing 2011). The official establishment of the UK community radio sector in 2004 is another indication of the significance of this medium of communication with around 250 stations on air at the time of writing (Hallett 2010). Early assessment of the fledgling UK sector confirmed that it was already achieving its ‘social gain’ objectives (Everitt 2002; Gordon 2007; Lewis and Scifo 2007; Scifo 2007; Gordon 2009; Scifo 2009). The importance of community-based radio and television globally continues to grow within the context of the ever-expanding global media industry with its ‘infotainment’ emphasis (Kellner and Durham 2006, xxix).

This article presents the findings of a more focussed project that sought evidence for the specific role of community broadcasting in managing the emotional and social wellbeing of its audiences by reviewing the focus group and interview transcripts from the two-year *Community Media Matters* study in Australia — the only known national qualitative audience study of community broadcasting audiences. The evidence enlisted in this article comes from detailed analysis of transcripts of more than 50 focus group discussions and around 140 interviews with multifarious audiences for community radio across Australia. Specifically, we searched for and identified audiences’ perceptions of community radio in dealing with

issues of community and individual social and emotional wellbeing. We found significant evidence of community radio fulfilling this role, further supporting suggestions that this form of local radio represents a key community cultural resource (Forde et al 2009). We conclude that it suggests community radio in Australia (and elsewhere) is making a significant contribution to social gain, provision of education and training, local content and local news plurality and media literacy (Gordon 2009; Hallett 2010).

We know that community media audiences in Australia are amongst the largest per capita in the world. Biennial quantitative audience studies of the sector by McNair Ingenuity from 2004 reveal that more than one quarter of Australians over the age of 15 listen to community radio programs at least once a week. This figure doubles for listeners who tune in over the period of a month. Significantly, audiences continue to identify 'local news and information' as one of the key reasons for the sector's popularity (McNair Ingenuity 2010). Qualitative audience research over the past seven years reveals an extraordinary passion for community radio by varied audiences across the country, further suggesting the potential for it to play a powerful transformative role with specific and marginalised communities of interest (Meadows et al 2009; Forde et al 2009).

The most recent accurate statistics show that at the end of 2010, the Australian community broadcasting sector included the following: 353 long-term licensed community radio stations producing more than 47,000 hours of programming each week; four community television stations producing around 165 hours of new programs each week; 46 aspirant organizations operating with temporary radio licences; and two aspirant community 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 community media outlets broadcast 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Although the commercial radio sector has around 270 operating licenses, its annual turnover is around \$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).

Such levels of diversity and reach represent a significant cultural resource, particularly in light of the specific audiences the sector attracts. It is clear that these culturally diverse local broadcasting services have the potential to play a significant role in reaching specific audiences for specific purposes — including providing information that might contribute to improving the state of community emotional and social wellbeing. This is what we seek to explore in our re-examination of existing audience research data for the purposes of this article.

Media and mental health

We have adopted a definition of mental health that was developed by a consensus of Australian health administrators, specifically defining it as ‘a state of emotional and social wellbeing’ (Australian Health Ministers, 2003). Their useful description of mental health continues:

It influences how an individual copes with the normal stresses of life and whether he or she can achieve his or her potential. Mental health describes the capacity of individuals and groups to interact, inclusively and equitably with one another and with their environment, in ways that promote subjective wellbeing and optimise opportunities for development and use of mental abilities.

The description of mental health reminds us that it is a complex issue which cannot easily be measured — or defined in terms of the absence of mental illness, that is, a ‘clinically-diagnosable disorder’. Mental illness can encompass a wide range of short and longer term conditions including disorders linked to anxiety, mood and substance use (Australian Health Ministers 2003).

Prior studies of the media representation of mental health issues offer some support for our discussion although most are confined to the mainstream. While Blood & Holland (2004) canvass the impact — both positive and negative — of news frames in reporting mental illness, Francis et al (2004) warn that negative framing and portrayal of mental health can have a detrimental impact on community attitudes. But on the other hand, alternative ‘framing’ of mental illness can challenge dominant perceptions (Patterson 2006) — and where better to explore this than in the alternative media sector itself? On a similar tack, Angermeyer, Dietrich, Pott, & Matschinger (2005) argue that commonplace media coverage of people ‘living well’ with mental illness can have a positive impact on general audiences’ perceptions. Extending this line of inquiry, Nairn & Coverdale (2005) suggest positive outcomes are likely by exposing media audiences to more first person accounts of those living with mental illness.

The high per capita level of community radio listenership in Australia suggests that the sector is well-placed to play such a role. Our strong hunch was that community radio — particularly for Indigenous and ethnic communities — was doing precisely this kind of work.

There is an important cultural element in understandings of mental health amongst adolescents in ethnic communities in Australia (Sawrikar & Hunt 2005). In refugee communities, in particular, young people sometimes find themselves having to cope with parents who are suffering major emotional disorders as a result of trauma, for example. Young refugees employ a variety of strategies to deal with such situations — from talking with friends, family, medical practitioners and counsellors to becoming involved in sport, listening to music and participating in community activities (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez & Westoby 2003, 203). The ‘community hub’ nature of community radio in Australia — particularly evident in Indigenous and ethnic community radio — means it is well-placed to enable many of these processes (Forde et al 2009).

Community radio is meeting the needs of Australia’s increasing aged population by providing specialist programming to suit the tastes of this particular cohort. In line with this finding, Brisbane community fine music radio station 4MBS in 2007 began rolling out a specialist music service aimed at elderly patients in nursing homes in Brisbane. The trial by one of Australia’s most successful community radio stations included two Brisbane nursing homes where selected residents were provided with specially-designed radio receivers to pick up the signal sent from 4MBS’s studio via carrier wave. The initiative, called *Silver Memories*, is a 24 hour service designed to meet the musical needs of those in nursing homes, aged care facilities and isolated individuals. The programming features music, serials and other programs relevant to the period when this aged demographic was growing up — material from the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Evaluation of a six month pilot phase based on interviews with nursing home residents and staff concluded that the initiative has had a generally positive influence on the morale and well-being of residents (Australasian Centre on Ageing 2008, 5):

Staff felt that the old-time music was particularly helpful for residents with dementia as it helped them to remember their early years and also appeared to be particularly helpful for residents who had few or no visitors and for those who were lonely or bored.

A more detailed evaluation of the *Silver Memories* project, being rolled out to selected locations across Australia, was underway at the time of writing. During the initial stages of the project, 4MBS manager Gary Thorpe received several calls from elderly women who had started listening to the program. One told him she had ‘taken up knitting again’ after an absence of many years because she felt uplifted by the programming. Another woman reportedly startled nursing home staff when she started speaking again after hearing *Silver Memories* music. This

followed years of self-imposed silence which began shortly after she was institutionalised (Thorpe 2008). While this is anecdotal and early evaluation of the project, it nevertheless suggests a potentially significant role for community radio in dealing with the issue of social isolation amongst senior members of the Australian community. Preliminary results from Silver Memories also point to the potential of familiar voices, sounds and music in fostering emotional and social well-being for those otherwise isolated by the mainstream media. The *Community Media Matters*' study identified community radio's role in connecting with Australia's ageing demographic (Meadows et al 2007). And while *Silver Memories* is one example of an innovative use of community radio to meet a clear community need, there are many other community radio programs on offer across the country targeting this cohort.

Young people in Australia's refugee communities are active in constructing 'positive futures' for themselves by talking of their 'degree of connectedness within their family, their own ethnic community, their friends, and within Australian society at large' (Brough et al 2003, 206). The authors of this study concluded that this pro-active approach was preferred to framing their lives in terms of 'illness boundaries':

This exemplifies the importance of promoting supportive social environments within public health approaches to refugee health. Biomedical dominance tends to highlight individual dysfunction in our understanding of health. Whilst this has a place, it is essential we also attempt to look at the larger picture. Community development strategies which connect young people to communities and communities to young people are of critical importance (Brough et al 2003, 206).

Community Media Matters reveals the stand-out ability of ethnic and Indigenous community broadcasting, in particular, to create and promote such an environment. These media are able to facilitate identity construction in multifarious ways — an important process which is integral to the role being played by community-based media in managing mental health issues. The process involved is outlined in a study of ethnic Chinese communities and community media where the author (Shi 2005, 69) concludes:

Ethnic media provide socialising topics and contexts, and facilitate the imagination of a transnational Chinese community. They create a sense of cultural coherence and unity through symbolically reviving the memories of the past and retelling the history, which anchors the identification of the diasporic floating lives'... 'a shifting realm of differences and contradictions'.

The real strength of Australian community radio — and Indigenous community television — is their ability to provide powerful social support networks for participants or audiences. It suggests that the impact these media are having on such issues as Indigenous-non-Indigenous

reconciliation and the settlement process for ethnic community groups may have been underestimated — as has the impact on the emotional and social wellbeing of listeners and viewers. Audiences for these media already identify their empowering nature above all else and it is this element that may be most significant in explaining how community-based media are playing a role in managing mental health, particularly in culturally-diverse communities across Australia (Forde et al 2009).

Community radio, in particular, provides an important ‘community connection’ role as well as being an accurate reflection of Australia’s social and cultural diversity. It does this not only through the programs it produces and the on-air services it provides, but also through the facilitation of extensive social networking which takes place largely ‘behind the scenes’. This includes close and interactive links with community organisations and groups who have something to say — and who have chosen community radio and/or television as the best media to enable this communication (Meadows, Forde, Ewart and Foxwell 2007). The idea of ‘community connection’ is an important one identified, too, by Tsagarousianou in her exploration of the understanding of diasporic phenomena so embedded in the history of modern Australia and many other nation states. Although her study focussed on communities in the UK, she is nevertheless able to draw attention to the importance of ‘connectivity’ and cultural politics that make ‘the imagination and activation of the complex nexus of transnational/diasporic linkages and dynamics possible’. She observes (2004, 64):

Diasporic cultures are therefore premised on the institution of diasporic imaginaries and communication infrastructures (diasporic media and cultural spaces) upon which multiple and diverse processes of identity and community are constructed, and depend on the production of narratives and discourses that reproduce and sustain relevant frames of self-identification, and collective action.

Community media play a critical role in this process as an increasing range of studies suggest. For example, Chand (2004, 152) identifies a significant role for ethnic media — newspapers, magazines and radio programs — in ‘defining the identity of Fiji and South Asian Indians’ in Sydney. This role is being played out by the broader ethnic community radio sector in Australia in the production and reproduction of local ethnic communities and their culture. Importantly, news primarily about events and issues in Australia is often central to this process (Forde et al 2009). However, the community preference for particular kinds of news is not uniform. Although an overall preference by 10 different ethnic community language communities across Australia for news about their ‘new home’, this is not the case for Chinese and Korean immigrants in the United States who prefer to hear news about their home *countries* (Lin & Song 2006).

While preference for news content may vary geographically, it seems clear that ethnic groups use media in various ways to simultaneously ‘become part of and to distance themselves from other groups’ (Deuze 2006, 271). Indigenous and ethnic community radio and television — in Australia at least — are perhaps more significant for their social networking functions rather than their ability to produce programs (Forde et al 2007). As Cohen (2003, 146) suggests:

The media, while undoubtedly a site of struggle over the ‘community’ and ‘locality’, are also where the diasporic experience is being constructed and particular identities are performed. The music, the cultural content of the programs, their style of presentation and the ways in which their performances of ‘culture’ become a form of migratory gathering, enable the broadcasters and the audiences to construct a feeling of being at ‘home’ in the new place. Attempts to stay connected to their countries of origin are the means by which migrants come to understand and experience their life in a ‘new’ place. Such attachments are not merely an act of nostalgia or part of the effort to maintain culture, as depicted by multiculturalism. Rather, relations with the homeland are part of the ambiguity of ‘home and away’ that constitute the life experiences of many immigrants and construct their various ways of generating ‘communities’ in their new context.

It is clear that a wide range of audiences access Indigenous community radio and television for various reasons: they feel Indigenous media offer an essential service to communities and play a central organising role in community life; Indigenous media help people to maintain social networks; Indigenous media are playing a strong educative role in communities, particularly for young people; they offer an alternative source of news and information about the community which avoids stereotyping of Indigenous people and issues; they are helping to break down stereotypes about Indigenous people for the non-Indigenous community, thus playing an important role in cross-cultural dialogue; and the stations offer a crucial medium for specialist music and dance (Meadows et al 2007). This knowledge contributes to claims that that community media, in general, create an environment which can sustain ‘a more engaged and participatory culture’ (Deuze 2006, 271). But we would add one proviso — that an existing ‘will to communicate’ is the driving force (Hochheimer 1999, 451).

When it comes to the practical relationship between community media and broader health matters, a ‘compelling health story’ is much more likely to be talked about and shared in ethnic communities. For example, a study of Latino media in the USA concludes that these media can play an important role in helping their audiences to overcome and prevent health problems. Importantly, the study also reveals that that the Latino population is engaging with these media with the expectation of gaining health

information (Wilkin & Ball-Rokeach 2006, 314). Community broadcasting in Australia is performing a similar role.

In theoretical terms, empowerment is the single, overwhelming answer Australian audiences give when asked why they engage with community broadcastings (Meadows et al 2007). This draws from the idea that media operate as a series of parallel and overlapping ‘public arenas’ — spaces where participants with similar cultural backgrounds or ‘communities of interest’ are able to engage in activities, and to discuss issues and interests of importance to them (Fraser 1999, 126; Forde et al 2003). It creates a powerful communication hub where ‘ordinary people’ are able to engage with ‘other ordinary people’, sharing their experiences, their problems and their solutions. We suggest that this rich zone of engagement enables communication both between and within particular communities of interest. Such communities clearly include those with mental health concerns.

Community media theorist Clemencia Rodriguez has urged 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).

And so to the role of community radio and television in the representation and management of mental health.

Discussion

In order to address this question, we re-examined transcripts from 43 national community media audience focus groups and more than 160 face-to-face interviews to identify comments, perceptions and observations relating to audiences’ emotional and social wellbeing. This material had been previously gathered during the *Community Media Matters* project. The vast majority of data were in the form of indirect references — for example, to self-esteem, pride, happiness, connectedness, social isolation, loneliness, depression, sadness, shame, and anger. Although these comments were identified across the broad range of audience focus groups and interviews — from ‘generalist’, through ethnic to Indigenous audiences — there was an increasing emphasis on references to emotional and social wellbeing as communities become more marginalised.

Emotional wellbeing

This category included expressions of pride, self-esteem and happiness stemming from audiences’ engagement with community radio and

television programming and processes. Although the overwhelming tenor of audience commentary on the impact of community broadcasting was positive, there were nevertheless references — directly and indirectly — to negative feelings such as shame, depression, sadness and anger. However, in virtually all cases, these negative emotions were raised in the context of having being countered by engaging with community broadcasting. This is a significant finding in itself.

So how do audiences talk about their emotional wellbeing? More marginalised audiences — Indigenous and ethnic communities — responded to this far more strongly than those from the ‘generalist’ community broadcasting sector. However, this does not exclude ‘generalist’ listeners from the empowering processes involved. This focus group participant from Byron Bay expressed the feelings of many by referring to the ‘pride’ flowing from recognition of community diversity by local community radio station, Bay FM:

It’s a little bit of a hub for the community and it’s a bit of a voice for the community and I feel very proud of it. You look at how many people have the stickers on their cars saying Bay FM, supporting Bay FM, so I think it’s something the community is very proud of. And in this day and age where people feel very divided in their community, it’s one thing that actually stays really constant and there’s a voice there for people (Byron Bay Focus Group 2005).

For ethnic communities, the joy of hearing a familiar voice or piece of music on radio was a common example cited for making audiences ‘feel better’. One Macedonian listener described the transition from feeling depressed on arrival here to one of joy: ‘I was happiest when I heard the Macedonian radio and [then] Australia was very nice.’ Others talked about the camaraderie that stems from being aware of a supportive cohort and having easy access to it by being able to call a station and to talk to others on air.

The influence of community radio and television in boosting self-esteem and dispelling feelings of ‘being alone’ was strongest amongst Indigenous audiences. As we suggested earlier, this is almost certainly linked to the marginalisation of Indigenous people in Australian society. Continuing misrepresentation of Indigenous affairs in mainstream media was identified by interviewees and focus group participants across Australia and is indicative of the deep resentment of this treatment felt by many Indigenous people (Meadows 2001). Stereotyping, negative coverage, focus on ‘bad’ aspects of Indigenous affairs were all commonly raised as reasons for seeing Indigenous-produced media as offering communities an authoritative information alternative, apart from word of mouth. These comments capture the essence of those expressions:

When you listen to, like, mainstream radio, it’s, like, there is a lot of negativity (Bumma Bippera Focus Group Cairns 2006).

I see *Anangu* on whitefellas' TV and...that's very different from ICTV [Indigenous Community Television]...Whitefella TV, that really saddens the people — too many fights, something happening on TV and that's not good for Anangu people to watch (Interview Umuwa 2006).

The overwhelming conclusion drawn by audiences for Indigenous community radio and television is that it plays a central role in boosting self-esteem, pride and happiness in the face of mainstream media coverage and perceptions of Indigenous people that engender feelings of shame, depression, sadness and anger. This traditional Aboriginal woman explained her emotional roller-coaster in listening to Indigenous music in the Kimberley region of Western Australia:

I might ask to put on a song that reminds me of my, what my brother bin dead ... and that make me cry sometimes when I think back to my brothers, or the other family I lost, that make me think of them and I cry sometimes. And that's very good (Broome Focus Group 2006).

When we visited far north Queensland, it was barely 18 months after a police station was burned down on Palm Island, near Townsville, with several Indigenous people arrested for taking part in an alleged 'riot'. This followed the death in police custody of 36 year old Aboriginal man, Cameron Doomadgee. Palm Island residents referred to the incident as 'the resistance' and argued that their local radio service was the only place where people could speak openly about the issue. One resident succinctly summed up the significance of the radio station like this (Interview Palm Island 2006): 'Black voices; Black issues'. Almost all Indigenous people interviewed described the positive feelings they get whenever they hear Indigenous voices on the air waves:

You get to know about your own culture and everything. It's good to hear your own culture (Interview Townsville 2006).

Black people talking over the air, people telling the stories of their lives — I like listening to that (Interview Palm Island 2006).

It's a good way to actually hear the people not someone who's not Indigenous, like, talking for them, talking for the people. It's a good way to represent the Indigenous people of Australia (Interview Townsville 2006).

Audiences for Indigenous broadcasting across Australia highlighted the morale-boosting role of Indigenous radio, in particular, in re-connecting prisoners with their families. This comment on requested music played on Townsville's Indigenous radio station, 4K1G, is typical of many:

It was a good message for the young boys that were in Cleveland and in Stewart [prisons], so they could send out their little message to their loved ones (Interview Townsville 2006).

Others point to the important role of Indigenous radio talkback programs, in particular, in enabling often stereotypical portrayal of community

issues to be discussed openly. But for many, music remains one of the most powerful ways of boosting Indigenous self-esteem and pride. A young Indigenous woman spoke about the impact local Indigenous radio station 98.9 FM in Brisbane has had on the Indigenous community in the nearby suburb of Inala:

I remember when I was about 16. I don't know if any of you have heard of the *Indigenous Intrudaz*? Well, I remember when those boys first started. I went to school with them and the first big break they ever had was at 98.9. And I remember driving them in and how exciting it was for them to come to this radio station and meet all of these people. So every time I listen to 98.9, I hear voices I know from my community like *Mop and the Dropouts*, *Angus Rabbit* — people I know personally — and to hear them on a radio station, I think, it's pretty fantastic (98.9 FM Focus Group Brisbane 2006).

So what is it about Indigenous community broadcasting that enables it to have this kind of impact? A listener to the Indigenous community radio station in Port Augusta — Umeewarra Media — offers this suggestion (Umeewarra Focus Group 2006): 'And when you get back in range, you switch over to Umeewarra and [you] feel a whole lot intrinsically alive and vibrant and supported and, and a part of the community, yeah.' In the remote Northern Territory community of Yuendumu, a former community radio worker describes a different process in action with the radio production process itself playing a direct role in youth rehabilitation (Interview Yuendumu 2006):

I see nowadays I see a lot of people working on the radio and driving, working, mentoring programs and they once were petrol sniffers which are really great and they are happy — they have kids now. They look back, they've done it; they've been there, which is really great.

Social wellbeing

A second theme to emerge from our analysis concerns social networking and the central role of community radio and television in enabling this process. Again, the overwhelming response from audiences was that community broadcasting is playing a positive role, although participants tended to speak about it in terms of *countering* feelings such as loneliness, boredom and isolation. Across Australia, without qualification, audiences commented on the ability of community radio and Indigenous television to draw people from various communities of interest together. In doing so, many spoke about the negative influences of commercial broadcasting in terms of what it could not offer when compared with community radio and television. When asked for observations on the primary role of community radio, one responded:

I'd say 'community glue' — it glues the community together in so many ways and allows that opportunity to hear in-depth discussion about what matters to the community (Byron Bay Focus Group 2005).

Another suggests this happens through the accessible nature of community radio, in particular, enabling audience participation on their own terms. This focus group participant particularly liked the way in which 'difficult' topics could be contextualised and spoken about more openly on her local community radio station:

So, you know, when you talk about something, you're not saying, oh, ah this is really scary, you know. If you're a co-dependent person, 'Oh my goodness, you ought to be locked up' kind of thing. It's more like, you know, everyone has a little bit of this and that and we talk about and so it's normalising these psychological topics and counselling topics with people (Interview Perth 2006).

Others derided the commercial media system seeing it creating community divisions — the haves and the have nots — rather than working to bring people together. This example reflects the feelings of many across Australia:

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 connectedness. 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 (Artsound Focus Group Canberra 2005).

The evidence suggests that community radio and Indigenous television are creating a 'sense of belonging' amongst their audiences across Australia. This is having a positive impact on individuals in terms of their perceptions of social wellbeing. One of the key findings of *Community Media Matters* is an acknowledgement by audiences that the community broadcasting sector offers a true reflection of Australia's cultural diversity (Meadows et al 2007). Most ethnic language programs are broadcast on generalist community stations thus 'including' a far wider audience than would be the case if they were broadcast on a sequestered frequency. As many of our interviewees and focus group participants volunteered, this tends to bring cultural communities together — immigrant communities, in particular, suggested that it gave them an opportunity to alert the broader Australian community that 'we are here'. Although some participants acknowledge their lack of comprehension of various community languages involved, they nevertheless persevere with listening because it reminds them of Australia's multicultural nature. And listening to music is identified as being able to transcend virtually all cultural barriers.

The process of inclusion is also manifested in the way that several of the ethnic and Indigenous radio presenters had become well-known celebrities within their own communities. The enthusiasm with which focus group participants and interviewees spoke about such figures — for example, a presenter for a Vietnamese youth program and a local talk back host on Indigenous radio in North Queensland — suggests these programs provide ‘an anchor’ for such communities. A similar process is evident in the relationships between community organisations — for example, the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre in Melbourne — and their local radio stations. The representation of diverse ethnicities or Indigenous cultures — either by generalist stations or via exclusive Indigenous or ethnic stations — communicates the presence of diversity to the broader community. All of this engenders a sense of belonging and, arguably, social wellbeing through a greater understanding of the nature of community and its cultural diversity.

Loneliness was a recurring theme that emerged in thriving urban centres like Melbourne as well as smaller regional centres such as Queanbeyan in New South Wales. The examples below are drawn from these two sites, offering different perspectives on how community radio, in these cases, plays an important role:

To me it broadens my community because I live alone. I live with a certain sort of group that I interact with but this broadens my community because I hear a lot of opinions but also ways of life and styles of living that are not necessarily out of my daily experience (RRR Focus Group 2005).

I’m just very lonely at the moment and over the last couple of years. And I put it on the first thing when I get up and it’s the last thing I put off when I go to bed because I just find that the announcers are really good and there’s all types of music. If you couldn’t hear anything you like you’d be hard to please. I particularly like country, of course (QBYN Focus Group 2005).

The deep emotional impact of the settlement experience on immigrants to Australia was a major issue evident in all 10 focus groups conducted with ethnic community radio audiences. As one Sudanese interviewee commented (Interview Melbourne 2006), ‘When you come to Australia, there are a lot of things very, very difficult for you, you know.’ Another summed up the process of arriving here with little or no English literacy, only to discover a local radio program using a recognisable language as an epiphany (Turkish Focus Group 2006): ‘A lot of them [migrants] say, migration is, you’re deaf and dumb. So, suddenly you’re getting your communication skills back.’ Another said simply (Macedonian Focus Group 2006): ‘When I came to Australia here, I felt like I was on Mars.’

Feelings of isolation, homesickness and loneliness loom large in the settlement experience, according to the commentary from ethnic

community media audiences. To counter this, many groups have turned to community radio in Australia, as this Tongan listener in Adelaide explains (Tongan Focus Group 2006): ‘We started the program because of the isolation the women were feeling.’ More than 2500 kilometres north, members of the Filipino community in Darwin explained how ‘discovering’ a *Tugalog* language program on a local community radio station changed attitudes about being in a foreign land. Hearing news from home, along with information about local support services and music — in a familiar language — helped them to overcome feelings of isolation and depression, commonly described simply as ‘homesickness’ (Filipino Focus Group 2006).

Australia’s Chinese community, too, revealed feelings of social isolation, especially for newly-arrived immigrants or older members of the community whose English literacy was either poor or non-existent. Members of a Chinese youth focus group explain it like this (Chinese Focus Group 2006):

A lot of Chinese people have their cultural lives at home. We provide a constant media to give information and in a dynamic way for Chinese. So it’s a different approach to bringing the culture back. By providing a weekly program it constantly draws them back.

Although audiences are strongly supportive of the role of community radio, particularly in bringing people together, it has not been an easy path for some. Members of the Sudanese community in Melbourne, for example, explain how starting a local program in Australia — their adopted new homeland — has enabled the political division between the North and the South to ‘remain in Sudan’ (Interview Melbourne 2006). Despite trying to deal with the realities of family and friends being threatened, the politics of persecution follow some to their newly-adopted country. This account comes from a woman who worked for some time as a volunteer broadcaster in Melbourne (Macedonian Focus Group 2006):

...they used to threaten me; they used to call me. O yes, they used to tell me, you know, when you come out, there is a bomb under your car and everything. And I used to...listen and say, ‘Thank you very much, is there anything else?’...So the nights I...would put the...receiver [down] and they would call back again and again...But after that, the shiver goes through my spine — oh my god, should I call the police? What should I do?

While this may not be a common story, it is not the only case we came across where volunteers working for the betterment of their own communities fell foul of internal political differences. It offers another sobering insight into the enormous emotional strain experienced by some ethnic community radio producers. The notion of empowerment stemming from countering such feelings of social isolation is particularly evident in commentary from ethnic and Indigenous audiences. An Indigenous listener

observes (Umeewarra Focus Group 2006): ‘If it was not the radio, I’d be disinformed, disenfranchised and disempowered.’ In the same focus group, another participant referred to the importance of including Indigenous prisoners through radio programming:

I really like that and no-one feels excluded. Well, no-one basically is excluded, you know...A guy from the prison — he’s a career liaison officer there — and he said how empowering, I suppose, it is for them to do that.

For many of the Indigenous people involved in the audience study, the mere mention of hearing an Indigenous voice on the air waves — or seeing an Indigenous person on television — was enough to raise a smile. One (Interview Laura Cultural Festival Cape York 2005) summed it up simply: ‘I feel more comfortable than when I hear any white man’s radio station. Absolutely more comfortable.’ On Palm Island, one resident explains the importance of identifying with ‘the right voices’ on the local radio (Palm Island interview 2006):

We’ve got that grass roots radio happening. Talking to people; just that grass-roots stuff: none of that high, intellectual stuff — just the Murri [Aboriginal] way of talking and communicating; that’s what I see as really important in that way so that people understand what you’re talking about. You’re from the same place, the same area, the same place and you know what you’re talking about.

Conclusion

Based on this review of audience perceptions of programming and participation, the community broadcasting sector in Australia is making a significant positive contribution to community mental health. There is evidence that the diverse nature of sector programming is playing a key role in enhancing the emotional and social wellbeing of its equally diverse audiences. A major absence in this study — and indeed the *Community Media Matters*’ project — is a more detailed examination of ethnic community broadcasting. The 10 different ethnic communities we have drawn from here represent a small element of Australia’s rich cultural diversity. Despite this limitation, the evidence suggests that community radio and Indigenous television are helping their audiences to more positively deal with feelings of shame, depression, sadness and anger that often stem directly from misrepresentations of communities, particularly those on the margins of society. Although the evidence for this is strongest in ethnic and Indigenous communities, generalist community radio audiences also acknowledge the feelings of empowerment that flow from their participation (Meadows et al 2007).

The promotion of emotional and social wellbeing is especially empowering because of what has been identified elsewhere as a weakening

of the traditional barrier between audiences and producers of community radio and television in Australia (Forde et al 2009). The particular relationship that defines audiences and producers of community broadcasting has created a 'more engaged and participatory culture' (Deuze 2006, 271) which enhances the communication process at various levels. Although this is more apparent with ethnic and Indigenous community radio and television, it nevertheless suggests that it is the very nature of this process that places community broadcasting in a privileged relationship with its audiences. There is clearly a high level of trust within specific 'communities of interest' that enables a more open acceptance of alternative ideas and assumptions than those that tend to prevail in the mainstream. This is especially the case when community perceptions of what is happening in the 'real world' do not accord with those being promoted primarily by media with largely commercial imperatives. While this in no way diminishes the power of mainstream media in influencing perceptions of mental health, it suggests that we need to also look to alternatives to both strengthen public health campaigns and to reach specific audiences. It may well be that the only *effective* way of accessing particular communities of interest is by enlisting community radio and television.

On a broader level, the study underlines the important cultural resource that community radio represents. It offers strong support for arguments that community radio is a medium which has the potential to enhance social cohesion and social gain—arguably the hallmarks of any successful social media. It suggests, too, that perhaps it is *only* at the level of the local that such critical social processes are best managed. And it reminds us again of the importance of continuing to explore the nature of the audience-producer relationships that define community media globally.

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