



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS,  
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS

**Reference: Community broadcasting**

WEDNESDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 2007

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE  
ARTS**

**Wednesday, 28 February 2007**

**Members:** Miss Jackie Kelly (*Chair*), Ms Owens (*Deputy Chair*), Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Garrett, Mr Hayes, Mr Johnson, Mr Keenan, Mr Laming, Mr Ticehurst and Ms Vamvakinou

**Members in attendance:** Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Hayes, Mr Johnson, Miss Jackie Kelly, Mr Laming, Ms Owens, Mr Ticehurst and Ms Vamvakinou

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

- The scope and role of Australian community broadcasting across radio, television, the internet and other broadcasting technologies;
- Content and programming requirements that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity;
- Technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks; and
- Opportunities and threats to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters.

**WITNESSES**

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**Committee met at 9.21 am****MEADOWS, Associate Professor Michael Hugo, Associate Professor of Journalism, Griffith University**

**CHAIR (Miss Jackie Kelly)**—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts inquiring into community broadcasting. The inquiry arises from a request to this committee by Senator the Hon. Helen Coonan, federal Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. Written submissions were called for and 132 have been received to date. The committee is now conducting a program of public hearings and inspections, and this hearing is the 12th for the inquiry.

I welcome Professor Meadows. Do you have any comments to make about the capacity in which you appear?

**Prof. Meadows**—As well as being Associate Professor of Journalism at Griffith University, I am associated with the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas at the university.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament.

Would you like to make a brief statement? We have the executive summary of your report, but you might like to expand on it. I know that Anthony has the full report, but we do not, so if you would like to make any introductory remarks it would be really appreciated.

**Prof. Meadows**—Thank you very much, first of all, for allowing me to come and elaborate on some of the issues that we raised in our earlier submission. The project that we have been undertaking with community radio audiences and television audiences around the country has just come to a closure. We are working on the final report, and that draft is in fact a draft. I will be sending Anthony and the committee a copy of the final draft either later this week or early next week. There is some final copy editing to be done. You can see from this page in front of me that there is still a little bit of work to do.

The main thing to say is that the report comes out of a long engagement that I and particularly my colleague Dr Susan Ford have had with the community broadcasting sector over the last seven years or so. We instigated the study of the sector in 1999 and that revealed some of the information that we were able to follow up in this report. It gave us a sense that the sector was doing something quite special in Australia compared with sectors in other countries. What was evident from that first study was that the audience had not been consulted. There was a huge gap in the research both here and, in fact, internationally. It is one of the most difficult kinds of research to undertake, as to how the audience is identified and how you get a sample of people to talk to and make sense of what they say. This was the challenge we had and hence this project. The findings in many ways confirmed what we had found in our earlier study, but I have

summed them up briefly to give you a sense of where we think we have come to after these years of work.

One of the words that really stick out for us throughout this whole debate and discussion we have had with people around Australia is the sense of empowerment. That is a word that for us seems to encapsulate what audiences have in common and what they are telling us across this incredibly diverse sector, from Indigenous audiences in remote areas, to audiences in regional areas and urban centres, to ethnic community audiences—we spoke to and sampled 10 different language groups—and to audiences of generalist stations, from regional areas to capital cities and beyond. The idea of empowerment coming from the audiences was very strong, in a sense of giving them an identity within their own communities. Many saw this as very important, particularly in terms of globalisation and the drawing together of ideas of what it means to be a citizen in the modern world. They felt that community media has been able to give them that sense of who they are as individuals and who they are in terms of their own local communities, so that sense of identity.

The other aspect of that is that community media also creates what we have identified as community connections. It goes well beyond just what is happening in the radio stations or community television stations around the country. Most of the work that goes on in the community media sector happens off air—it is the volunteers and people working on something as mundane as putting flyers in envelopes or talking to community organisations to try to get sponsorship for programs or liaising with community groups to encourage them to come and present their ideas on air. That sense of volunteerism is extraordinarily high, and people engage in this a very passionate level. It is about 2½ times the rate of volunteering in the general Australian community, and that says something about the sector; it is doing something to engage people and create ideas of community.

The third thing to talk about under that general heading of empowerment is the idea of media itself. Community television is still fairly new and finding its feet. The report that you issued a couple of weeks ago is the first step in trying to bridge some of the gaps that the sector sees exist in its long-term survival. I draw attention to Indigenous communities and ethnic communities because in many of those cases community radio is their only source of information, apart from word of mouth, about what is going on in the outside world. For example, in the ethnic community sector we found that, contrary to a belief which was quite widely held across the industry, ethnic community audiences preferred to hear news about Australia rather than news from overseas. They wanted to find out what was going on here and how to access services or networks here, rather than only hear about information from overseas. Although that was important for identity and maintaining culture, they wanted local information.

We also found that music plays a really crucial role in bringing those communities together and lifting people out of things such as loneliness and isolation. On countless occasions, people said hearing music on the radio made them feel joyous and as though they were alive again. It made them want to re-engage with the community and with life. Music plays a much larger role than we had previously thought. We thought it was just a kind of entertainment. But, particularly for refugees and newly arrived immigrants, it seems to be providing not only a crucial link with their homeland and sense of identity, but the talk on those programs then creates those communities. In a nutshell, all of this suggests to us that the community media sector, particularly broadcasting, is playing a very important democratic role in Australia. Certainly

mainstream media as perceived by audiences and many research observations around the world suggest that commercial media tends to focus on a narrow middle ground. All commercial stations are potentially after the same kind of—

**CHAIR**—I am sorry to interrupt but there is a division in the chamber and Bronwyn has to go, so we will have to form a subcommittee before we go. There being no objection, that is so ordered.

### **Proceedings suspended from 9.30 am to 10.02 am**

**CHAIR**—Please continue, Michael.

**Prof. Meadows**—I was just about to finish my initial statement. The only thing I wanted to add to what I have already said based on the evidence we have gathered over the last seven years, particularly through this audience study, is about the role the sector is playing in terms of the democratic process. There is pressure on commercial media to focus their attention towards narrow sectors of the market and identifying people as consumers rather than citizens. Something that came out very, very strongly across the sector is that audiences perceive themselves as taking part in the process because their stations are providing them with alternative sources of information, in some cases sources that they cannot get from other media outlets. It is a reaction against the mainstream.

There was a very strong reaction right across the country against commercial media. I explain in the report that it is probably because of the nature of the audience identified. They were dedicated community radio listeners, so you would expect them to be listening for a particular reason. Interestingly, that same idea came out in the McNair Ingenuity audience—the quantitative study which you have heard about. It was done by 5,000 telephone calls across the country in 2004 and 2006. So similar kinds of ideas came out of that research; they have been supported by ours. There is a dissatisfaction with mainstream media and their ability to tap into local communities and the diversity that is the Australian culture. That came through very clearly.

The last thing to say, before any questions you may have, is to reinforce that this is the first qualitative audience study that has been undertaken in the sector. Essentially we were trying to get behind the numbers and say: why do people listen, why is it becoming so popular, what it is about the sector that creates so much passion in members of the audience? That was something that really struck us very strongly throughout. I remember doing a Triple R focus group in Melbourne a couple of years ago and that was the first time we had posed this question which we pose to all focus groups: if this community station we are talking about now stopped tomorrow, how would it affect your life? There was one guy in Melbourne who I thought was going to burst into tears. He was obviously very passionate, and he was at a loss. He said, ‘I know this sounds pretty tragic, but I do not know what I would do.’ His life was so geared around Triple R and announcing the gig guides and what was going on in the local community.

But that response was not an uncommon one across the sector. People said, ‘We would be out on the streets, we would be marching.’ So there is an incredibly passionate following out there. There are seven million people now tuning in at least once a month, and a growing number who see community radio only as their source of information. Their reasons for listening are issues

like connecting communities, local news and information, and speciality niche music. Reflecting the diversity of Australian communities has come across very, very strongly in our audiences.

**CHAIR**—You state that volunteers in the community radio sector are working at least 2½ times longer than the volunteers in the general community. How did you come to that figure?

**Prof. Meadows**—That came about from the first study Dr Ford and I did in 1999. We surveyed station managers and volunteers and were able to gain a sector-wide view of how many hours volunteers participated in station activities. We compared our figures with the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures which looked at volunteerism generally in Australia and arrived at that figure.

**CHAIR**—Why do you think people are willing to give so much more of their spare time to a community radio rather than to other community activity?

**Prof. Meadows**—There are a number of reasons. I think individuals seem to get different things from it. For example, studies outside Australia—and our study supports this—show the main reason for the existence of community radio is that the programming is almost secondary to the type of work that it is doing in the community in bringing groups together and enabling people to connect and disseminate. The radio is simply a medium for doing that. The on-air presenters are just the tip of the iceberg. All of the activity goes on out in the community with the station as a type of mediator of local cultures.

**CHAIR**—Presumably with a 4.2 per cent unemployment rate you have a lot of full-time employed people involved as well in the spare hours available there. How do you see that affecting the future of community radio in terms of the volunteers required from, say, nine to five, Monday to Friday?

**Prof. Meadows**—The most recent study, from 2004 to 2006, suggests that listenership is increasing. Since our study that was published in 2002 that looked at volunteers we have not looked again at the sector, although the sector itself has through its online surveying of stations. There is a suggestion there that the hours of volunteerism are either remaining constant or increasing. I suspect it is due to a small core of people doing more, rather than more people coming in because of the reasons you mentioned. Whatever it is, there is something quite special about what is happening here in Australia, which is interesting to delve into.

**CHAIR**—In terms of the quality of the volunteers, obviously some of them receive training with the station, although it is not much. We have evidence that there is a crying need to have more formalised training recognised. But even that training needs to be done in their own time. A lot of them then leap to the commercial or national broadcaster, so it becomes a training ground for them as well. In terms of the experience or helpfulness of the volunteers, is the pool you are pulling from outside of the full-time workforce? Is it people on disability support pensions for your daytime things? Is it people on unemployment benefits? Is it the retirees who over 65 or your stay-at-home mums? What creates that volunteer group and where do they get the time to get the training and experience up to the levels required by the industry?

**Prof. Meadows**—Thinking back to my first study—and I am not sure whether we sent you a copy of that first report—we cover that in more detail there. I will have to check that to verify

the figures, but my recollection is that volunteerism was pretty much across the sector, with an emphasis on people who are part-time workers or who are unemployed, because they simply had more time to do it. There certainly was a significant proportion of full-time employed people who volunteer. I know of one case recently—he is actually a student of mine at the moment—who had worked with the University of New England radio. He was working full time with the council at the time and he was volunteering there for six years, running a program. He said he did it when he could because he was so passionate about it. It is something that gets people in.

**CHAIR**—With digital these days you can chop and pre-program 24 hours and let it roll. That is in the broadcast areas, but you still have the program content to put together.

**Prof. Meadows**—Yes, that is right. People now have freeware and you can edit sound on home computers. A lot of people use those facilities to put their programs together at home and bring it in on a memory stick and they can put it to air like that.

**Ms OWENS**—In terms of the surveys of the audiences, is there something else that the audience is looking for? Did you just survey them on what community radio is actually doing?

**Prof. Meadows**—We asked them for improvement and in most cases we had to really push them. They were used to what they were hearing or seeing and thought that that was enough. Certainly more local news and information was an issue that came out above everything else.

**CHAIR**—When you say ‘news’, are you referring to, say, the local car accident down on Penrith Road? What do you mean by news?

**Ms OWENS**—Is it local?

**Prof. Meadows**—It would be local government information and information that was not readily available through commercial or even ABC television or radio news because they tend to focus on state or national issues. It about what is happening in the local community, the council report, the road works or developments down the road.

**CHAIR**—It would be things based out of the local community newspapers?

**Prof. Meadows**—Similar in a way, but it got down to things like: ‘We want to know what is on; when is the P&C committee meeting next; what community organisations are holding events that are going to be of interest to us?’

**Mr HAYES**—It would be almost metropolitan based community radio.

**Prof. Meadows**—Yes.

**Mr HAYES**—As opposed to rural or regional services out there.

**Prof. Meadows**—That was a view that was put forward by focus groups in the regional areas as well. They wanted to know what was going on. For example, in Tumut, a bushfire was raging around the hills a couple of years ago and there were all kinds of reports on ABC radio and commercial radio, and people were really worried until the local radio station actually spoke to

the local fireys there and they said, 'Well, no, it is not a problem at all.' They actually heard their news from the local station. They could not get it from the ABC or commercial because they did not have the resources to chase up what was happening locally. It is that type of information people are saying that they want more of.

**Ms OWENS**—It varies, too, because you will find that sometimes with an international story—like the Sri Lankan refugees, for example, at the moment—you will find that there will be some communities that will want much more information about it. They will want to do talkback and discuss it to share their views so that the community understands how they are responding. A national political story may have a local impact so they will want to talk about it in terms of the local hospital. It varies greatly, but what they are doing through those new services is creating community views. They are letting information flow and sharing perceptions. For some new communities especially, it is really important, and it can take them a while to figure out how they respond as an Australian Sri Lankan to that event. They actually need to have information and ideas flowing. It is local, but the story does not always generate from a local geographic area. It can come from wherever. A lot of the newer migrant groups still want news services from their homeland, but they do not want their homeland news service because they are not, for example, Somalians anymore. They actually want to look at those stories from the perspective of the Australian community. It is a really complicated community information sharing and growing process. The news, of course, is one of the most extensive items that community radio produces, so it is very difficult.

**Mr HAYES**—To what extent do they fulfil a need as opposed to creating a need in terms of their audience's minds?

**Prof. Meadows**—I think they are fulfilling a need. Our research showed pretty clearly that they are listening to the feedback of what their audiences want and, sector wide, the stations are responding to that, apart from some of the niggles—'We want more of this, we want more news and information, but we realise that it is costly to set up a proper news service.' People have said: 'We do not want you to compete with the ABC. If it is a big issue we will turn to the ABC, but we will turn back to community radio to find out what is going on down the road.' In that sense, they are meeting a need. As to creating a need, there is probably a fine balance. With respect to the audiences in ethnic communities with newly arrived immigrants, for example, almost without exception every one of the focus groups that we conducted said that they wanted more time on radio: 'Half an hour a week for the Sudanese program is not enough for us to canvass our issues.'

**Mr HAYES**—In terms of the latter, it then falls to the quality and availability of the various volunteers to get involved and their motivation in driving it as opposed to whether it is just a Sudanese program or anything else. To some extent it really is an industry which is very much determined on the quality of volunteers that get involved.

**Prof. Meadows**—I think that is absolutely right. The relationship between the audience and the producers in community radio is a very different relationship than exists between audiences and commercial media, and even the ABC for that matter. Most people would not think that they could walk into an ABC station or a commercial station and say, 'I want to do this,' or 'I do not like the way you did that.' Even with community television, audience members are reluctant to engage because television is too difficult for volunteers. But with radio that is not the case. It is

almost like the barrier between the audience and the producer has dissolved and people feel as though 'it is ours'. That word 'ours' was very commonly repeated.

**Mr HAYES**—Particularly with country community TV we found that was really the incubator for a lot of the commercial television.

**Prof. Meadows**—Absolutely. I think the programs, the people and the movement of volunteer staff through the sector to commercial—

**Mr HAYES**—I am not sure that it naturally follows out of community radio, though.

**Prof. Meadows**—There is a huge movement of staff from community radio into the commercial and ABC sector. I was talking to someone at ABC Radio National who was a former student and he said that basically everyone in the section started their careers in community radio. It is huge and unacknowledged.

**CHAIR**—Is the audience listening on car radios; home radios; computers or the office? What is the main device that your audience surveyed were using?

**Prof. Meadows**—Most of the responses were from home listeners and car radio listeners. A few said computers, but that was largely confined to the youth stations like Syn FM in Melbourne which is an amazing, innovative place. The station there does not want to call it a radio station; it is a media entity, which involves a whole lot of digital—

**CHAIR**—I asked that because just lately, walking around Penrith, our local community radio station is on air in the shopping centres and in the hairdressers. I thought it was like elevator music, but it actually works because it is talking about Penrith and you are picking things up as you are going through the plaza. I thought that was bizarre, and I wonder how much of that is going on in terms of being the station of choice for your phone, when you are on hold, and all those sorts of things. Are businesses and the communities around those community stations doing that sort of thing? I am not sure whether that is Penrith specific.

**Prof. Meadows**—It is an interesting question. I cannot answer that directly because we did not explore that kind of aspect, but, given what audiences were telling us about where they listened and how they listened, there were many cases where people said that they will walk down the street and will hear their local community station.

This is particularly interesting in a place like Port Augusta, where we did a focus group with listeners of the Umeewarra Aboriginal Media Association Inc., which is an Indigenous group. They felt that the radio station had done an enormous amount in that community to try to break down some of the stereotypes. You hear it in taxis. For example, in Brisbane, most taxi drivers listen to 98.9, an Aboriginal radio station that plays country music—which is probably why they listen to it. Nevertheless, the Murri news comes on every hour and Tiger Bales, the station manager, always has a wry smile when he talks about it. He said he wonders what impact it has on taxi drivers who are not usually known for their liberal views on some of these issues. That is not to stereotype taxi drivers, of course.

**CHAIR**—It is imbibing it—I call it the elevator factor, the elevator music. I have recently picked it up in my local area; I just seem to keep on hearing the local station. I am not listening to it at home; I do listen on the car radio—but how often are you in the car? But then you still seem to pick up a lot of news just by doing your normal functions.

**Prof. Meadows**—I cannot really give you a specific answer as to the extent that that is happening, but it is happening. It is because the communities that we looked at were all individual communities. They are like a radio station in different ways, but certainly that was an issue that was raised quite commonly across the sector. Now the local shop is playing it or whatever, you hear that public kind of playing. It suggests more and more that communities are engaging with it and saying, ‘This is ours,’ and, to demonstrate that, will play it.

**CHAIR**—Twenty-three journalism programs around Australia use community radio as a site of work experience for their students. Is there any work being done to put a structure around that in terms of tracking and formalising it; rather than saying, ‘Look, I have this student at this time in there’?

**Prof. Meadows**—Again, it varies with every journalism program in the country. I teach journalism at Griffith and I have had students working with community radio over the last 15 to 20 years with Radio Logan, 4ZZZ and Bay FM. Those are three that we use a lot. There are no formal programs that I could talk about. From time to time James Cook University has had a formal program with TAIMA, one of the Indigenous radio stations in Townsville. UTS has a formal arrangement with 2SER because it is in the same building in Sydney; Radio Adelaide has a link with Radio Adelaide Journalism. It seems to come and go, depending on the individuals involved.

**CHAIR**—Do any of the universities use a commercial radio?

**Prof. Meadows**—They do. We send students to commercial radio, television, ABC and community radio. We do not discriminate in that sense. Community radio and television is often where they get the best chance to actually do something and get on the air.

**CHAIR**—So those journalism programs would use community radio and they would also do exposure in commercial radio and TV?

**Prof. Meadows**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—This program through community radio is not a site of work experience because you could not get access to any others; therefore, community radio was a choice?

**Prof. Meadows**—Yes, it is; and it is a choice because it is easier to access. We know that, if we have any students who want work experience, community radio is available. It is much more difficult to get access to commercial and ABC. We have a scheme, for example, in Brisbane where the three universities based in Brisbane have allocated a certain number of places at ABC Radio and TV, and the commercial television stations do the same. We have an equal number of student placements but, once we exhaust that, that is it.

**Ms OWENS**—Those placements would be for gofers; they would not be on air?

**Prof. Meadows**—No, or very seldom.

**Ms OWENS**—Whereas in community radio they can do the research, they can do—

**Prof. Meadows**—They can do everything. For example, I had a student who was working with ABC Radio programs in Brisbane—I just read a report of his last night for assessment—and he was essentially producing the program.

**CHAIR**—At ABC Radio?

**Prof. Meadows**—At ABC Radio, when it got to the end of his period. He was the one who had had a lot of experience coming through Community Radio New England. They saw that he could actually already do this and they said, ‘Okay, you can produce the program today,’ and he did it. His comment to that was that his background in community radio really helped him to do the hands-on production work. He said that, on the managerial side, community radio did not prepared for the ABC hierarchy at all—but maybe nothing can.

**Ms OWENS**—Do you get the impression from your surveys that there is sufficient community radio or has it filled up its available space?

**Prof. Meadows**—I think in some places there seems to be sufficient. From what audiences are saying, for example, in urban centres, they have a choice of community stations. I am not sure how many stations there are in Brisbane. There may be 10 community stations in greater Brisbane that people can assess. Certainly in other areas, for example Adelaide, I know the Indigenous group there were saying that they would love to have their own licence in Adelaide but they cannot get one—it is not available. Radio Adelaide makes available some time so that they can put some programs to air there. There are those pockets where people say they would like to have a licence. Certainly amongst the ethnic community audiences there is a real feel that they would like more time and their own stations but they realise that that is impossible.

We had an example of one of the things that drives the idea of wanting more time when we were talking in Melbourne to a Sudanese group, and the Macedonian group said the same thing. They said people did not realise that in Sudan, and in Macedonia, they have a whole lot of different cultures. They said, ‘Australia is a place where all of those differences can be pushed aside. Having a program or a time on air, we can talk about what we have in common. People come here because they want to get away from all of that, and this is an opportunity for us to do that.’ They were quite adamant that with more time they could do more of that kind of community building.

**Ms OWENS**—Can we just stay on that for a moment, because it is one of those interesting things. Some people think that ethnic communities get together in order not to be Australian, but you seem to be saying that they get together in order to deal with being Australian, that it is actually part of their contribution?

**Prof. Meadows**—Yes, that came through very, very strongly in the 10 different language groups that we surveyed. Those groups still want to keep a connection with their homeland, they still want to know what is going on there. Someone made the point that they did not want to hear their own news services; they wanted a distillation of what is happening in their own country, in

their own voices. Their primary interest is to find out what is going on here in their own languages. For people whose English is not very good, they can watch ABC and SBS and maybe catch half of what is happening and think, 'What was that story about?' If they can tune into their program they can get a distillation of what that news item is about.

**CHAIR**—It is interesting to see that of the 11 ethnic groups that you have chosen for further project study, one is Croatian. I know from my own personal experience that a lot of the Croatian programs actually upset a lot of the local Australian Croatians because they had left the former Yugoslavia and a lot of the broadcasts seemed to have a pro-Yugoslavia slant. It actually created tensions rather than resolving them, so it was the opposite of what you were saying.

**Prof. Meadows**—It would be naive to think that particularly ethnic community radio, Indigenous radio or any community radio, for that matter, does not create tensions by its very nature. That is the nature of democracy in a sense. Individual language programs do create tensions within stations and within communities.

**CHAIR**—How do you deal with that? I think it was SBS, but when complaints are made to the national broadcaster there is a dispute resolution mechanism and it is all investigated. What happens on community radio? How do you deal with that?

**Prof. Meadows**—I was talking to the manager at 4UB in Brisbane specially about this. He said, 'Every day we have an issue to resolve; somebody does not like what we have said on this.' They have a kind of dispute resolution mechanism. I think the Community Broadcasting Association and the NEMBC have guidelines for stations that say that, if they have issues, these are some guidelines about how to deal with it. All stations really have to have that in place, otherwise they find very quickly—

**CHAIR**—Yes. It would be helpful to have a formal structure and architecture in place to deal with that for community radio the way that we do with ABC and SBS?

**Prof. Meadows**—Yes. I think most of them do already have that through the peak bodies like NEMBC and CBAA. They have a series of guidelines for stations about how to deal with conflict resolution. I think they say that if you start a station without those kinds of guidelines you are heading for trouble. We did not have any problems during our research, but there was an example in Melbourne with the Turkish focus group. I flew to Melbourne and found out on the day that I arrived that they were unhappy about doing the focus group because they wanted to know more about it—for example, are we going to be identified; is this going to go to the federal government; are we going to be investigated for what we say? There was a real fear of how this information was going to be used.

When we convinced them that they would be anonymous, that their perspectives would be put forward anonymously, they decided they would take part after all. There is certainly an awareness of the power of even local media to bring communities together or drive them apart. The strong impression we had from the community groups we accessed was that community radio programming is performing a positive role in enabling the community to get on and talk about the issues and debate them. We are usually only talking about an hour here or two hours there or thereabouts. There are the inevitable tensions, but the overall feeling was: okay, we upset certain people but this is Australia now and we can talk about it.

**Ms OWENS**—And it would be unusual for it to create a rift; it would probably just stick a stick in one that already existed, I should imagine.

**Prof. Meadows**—I think that is probably the case.

**Ms OWENS**—The Croats are a prime example of a community where the country of origin has changed and they remain where they were when they left.

**CHAIR**—They all grow up in Australia.

**Ms OWENS**—Again, it is one of the roles of community radio.

**Prof. Meadows**—That is right.

**Ms OWENS**—One of the roles of having access to a news service which looks at the news of your homeland from the Australian perspective is to move the Australian community through what is happening elsewhere. There was enormous effort from the Lebanese community, for example, when Syria withdrew and they knew they had to bring people who had been here for 30 and 50 years into modern Lebanon. Then of course other things happened, but there was an incredible community effort to try to pull people along the path that their homeland was going down. Without the opportunity for them to have a space where they can do that, it is very difficult to do in the community.

**Prof. Meadows**—It might be worth mentioning here, too, that there are a couple of spin-offs from this research which go to the heart of what we are talking about here. We have a small grant now to undertake a study in concert with the responsibility project which looks at mental illness and suicide. We are going to go back through our data and identify specifically instances where people referred to community radio as a way of helping them to realise that they were not the only one in the world that was non-English speaking and isolated in the community.

In several of our focus groups, particularly with ethnic community groups, people said that when they first came to Australia it was—as one person said in a very articulate way—like ‘being deaf and dumb all of a sudden’. You come to another country and you are deaf and dumb. It can be really isolating; people talked about depression, and of course mental illness can develop from these kinds of instances. There were a number of cases where people identified hearing their own language or knowing that there is a community group and making a connection on radio helped them to overcome that and to bring them out of a depression; hence this grant to pursue it in more detail. In that case it seems that it is performing an unexpected role, and in the next six months we will be delving into that a little bit more.

**Mr HAYES**—Would you say in the future that you see a greater role for community radio or is it likely as some of the commercials syndicate more and more that a lot of their product is being picked up, particularly in the regional areas, by community radio?

**Prof. Meadows**—It is difficult to say, but the sector now seems to be performing at a level where it is doing a lot of things in Australia society, as we mention in the report. As for the future, I think networking of some programming has taken place in the past in the sector, and I think audiences would respond well to that. It may be a way of improving the kind of connection

that already exists across the sector. Something that really came through strongly with audiences was that they really respect the fact that it is a local station, that it is theirs, that they can identify that the person on air is an ordinary person just like them. It is not different; it is not like a slick commercial announcer—and they use those terms. I think greater networking their sector could actually be the worst thing for it; it could actually destroy the whole nature of the ‘local’ that makes it so popular.

**CHAIR**—As there are no further questions, thank you very much for your time here today, Michael.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Hayes**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Subcommittee adjourned at 10.37 am**