

Audience participation at the ABC: the experiences of rural and regional youth

Submission to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Broadcasting, Online Content, and Live Production to Rural and Regional Australia*

This submission responds to a number of the Inquiry's themes, including broadcasting, online content, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The research discussed in the following stems from the PhD Thesis 'Storytelling and New Media Technologies: Investigating the Potential of the ABC's Heywire for Regional Youth', published October 2015.

Introduction

This submission focusses on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's 'Heywire' as a project providing rural and regional young Australians with an online and radio platform for voice and self-representation. Heywire is a storytelling project that invites 16-22 year olds who live outside of Australia's capital cities to use digital technologies to share true stories about their lives. The project comprises a storytelling, story-sharing website: www.abc.net.au/heywire, and also functions as a competition. The purpose of this submission is to demonstrate the value of projects such as Heywire in offering a minority group of geographically dispersed individuals with a means for self-representation and self-expression, while also illuminating some of the challenges of such projects, and ways in which they might be improved.

The research, findings and recommendations discussed in this submission emerged through a four-year research project undertaken for a Doctor of Philosophy at the Queensland University of Technology. In addition to a review of academic and popular literature addressing young people's uses of new, digital technologies, and research on the evolution, functionality and value of public service media institutions, the research involved:

- Interviews with rural and regional young people (16-22 year-olds) who have participated in the ABC's Heywire project;
- Interviews with ABC Rural and ABC Multiplatform staff members who manage Heywire;
- Organisational research, encompassing an exploration of the wider institutional context of the ABC, analysis of policies around regional audiences, and an examination of how organisational and departmental objectives and obligations shape the Heywire project's aims, functions and outcomes.

The research concluded that Heywire fulfils important functions for rural and regional young people, and it serves purposes unique from those provided by the other media they commonly use, such as Facebook. This submission provides an overview of these functions in order to illustrate the broader importance of opportunities for content-creation and participation provided to rural and regional audiences by the ABC.

Key findings

Participation

Through projects such as Heywire, ABC Open, and ABC Pool (now concluded), the ABC has moved beyond its traditional role as a broadcaster of media content towards a more inclusive model in which audiences can participate in the creation of their own stories. Such a shift is a vital one for the ABC as they demonstrate they are evolving in a fully digitised media landscape.

The ABC has for decades offered its audiences numerous ways to ‘get involved’, and invited them to share their views; yet, for minority groups such as rural and regional people, targeted projects such as Heywire enable a form of participation that is more meaningful.

Rural Australians and rural youth frequently feel that their voices and concerns are overlooked and unheard in urban centres and by the country’s decision-makers. Projects such as Heywire help redress these feelings by providing a legitimate space for individuals to describe the nature of their lives, and by promising an audience for their voices and stories.

Heywire asks rural and regional youth to use the media of their choice to share their experiences of life outside Australia’s big cities, and to express their views on subjects that are important to them. The young people who use Heywire to tell their stories feel it is a space specifically for them, and in which their opinions and stories will be heard. As such, it instils in participants the sense that their lives have value and their stories are worthwhile.

Additionally, Heywire enables young rural people to construct a sense of their place with others, and to align themselves with a specific identity category, resulting in feelings of belonging. By asking for the stories of rural youth – as opposed to urban youth – Heywire prompts young people to claim allegiance to the identity category “rural youth” and establish a sense of belonging with others.

Heywire’s nature as a storytelling platform that asks specifically for narrative self-representations is also significant. To tell a story about one’s life on the Heywire website requires a large degree of self-reflexivity and introspection. Subsequently, the Heywire project does not facilitate random, impulsive, or spontaneous forms of self-representation or identity construction, such as those that can be found on social media; rather, on Heywire, young people’s identities are carefully constructed, deliberate self-representations that demonstrate processes of self-reflection and self-evaluation. Such processes are especially important for adolescents and young adults as they negotiate their positions and belonging in the world, and consider how they want to be seen by others.

Despite the value of projects like Heywire and the increasing prevalence of personal stories and other forms of user-created content at the ABC, fostering participation is in many ways challenging or problematic for the broadcaster, as well as the audience. For the ABC, challenges exist around producing quality content, and the need to maintain the ABC’s reputation as a trusted, authoritative institution, while also incorporating the personal stories of its audience. In Heywire, such challenges are evident in a number of areas.

For example, Heywire is managed as a competition where some young people’s stories are identified as somehow better or more worthwhile than others – a feature that is at odds with the

ABC's aims around inclusivity and participation amongst minority groups. According to the Heywire website, this project has captured more than 9,000 stories since its initiation in 1998. However, it is likely Heywire is only meaningful to the 562 young people who have been named competition winner over the years, and had their stories broadcast on ABC Radio. This is a possible area for the project's future development – rather than only amplifying the voices of a select few Heywire participants, the project could endeavour to celebrate and amplify more of the stories it captures. This would extend the project's benefits to a broader population of rural and regional youth.

ABC staff often edit Heywire participants' stories to enhance them in terms of sound and visual quality. This ensures young people's stories are appropriate for distribution via the ABC's multiple platforms, and that they are the quality the ABC audience expects from its national broadcaster. However, such clear shaping of young people's participation and storytelling raises questions of ownership and authenticity: while the ABC aims to give voice to rural and regional young people, its shaping of their narratives might diminish the project's success in amplifying their voices and stories in a way that is authentic for the participants.

While such challenges exist, projects such as Heywire are increasingly important for the ABC as they evolve in the digital era, and to an ABC audience who no longer passively consumes media content, but expects to actively participate in its creation. In Heywire, tensions exist around quality content, editorial guidelines and the idea of amplifying authentic voices, but the project remains important to its rural and regional participants as a legitimate avenue through which to participate in the creation of meanings and identities. For ABC audiences, the value of Heywire is that it provides insights into young people's ideas and concerns that cannot be gleaned from journalists, and it reveals truths that are often silenced in other representations of the issues rural people face.

The ABC's contribution to the digital sphere

In a media saturated era, people seemingly have numerous platforms and avenues for expressing their views, representing their lives, and participating in the construction of meanings and identities. The uniqueness of opportunities and platforms such as Heywire is that they fall under the auspices of the ABC and they validate or legitimise people's voices and stories as valuable and worthwhile. Furthermore, the ABC enables the seldom-heard voices and views of minority groups such as regional youth to reach new audiences.

While young people seemingly represent themselves and express their views every day via social media such as Facebook or Twitter, on personal websites and blogs, rural youth find Heywire fulfils functions that are unique from those provided by these other platforms. Despite the plethora of media and online platforms for self-representation, many young people feel that they have limited opportunities to express themselves in any meaningful way. One Heywire participant, describing what she valued about Heywire, reported: "I just thought it was a great opportunity for me to voice my opinion, and I find sometimes that you feel as though you can't" (interview, January 2013). In a similar vein, another participant stated: "Heywire gives a voice to young rural Australians, when we might not have a chance otherwise" (interview, December 2013). Although both these interviewees acknowledged using Facebook, their words suggested Heywire is more meaningful because it was safe, accepting and it not only promised 'voice', but – more importantly – listening.

While a fully digitised media landscape means there are ample opportunities for ‘voice’, ‘being heard’ or having one’s opinion acknowledged remains a struggle for minority groups and marginalised individuals. For rural and regional Australians, the ABC is an important mechanism that, through projects such as Heywire, can operate as a vehicle for being heard.

Furthermore, while people’s participation on platforms such as Facebook, or self-expression via personal blogs is confined to a select audience of ‘Friends’ or followers, the ABC enables people’s stories to reach new audiences. Widening the audience for personal stories is a significant part of Heywire’s value: by providing avenues for people to express themselves and represent their own lives, the ABC illuminates lives and amplifies voices that may not otherwise be heard, and thus moves beyond homogenising representations of rural and regional Australia, and of youth. Through projects such as Heywire, the ABC can be seen to be genuinely attempting to reflect the multiplicity of voices that comprise Australian society. Fuller, more nuanced representations of cultures, lives, and identities, and diversifying the voices that may construct such meanings, are vital components of any democracy. Projects such as Heywire increase people’s understanding of the conditions of other people’s lives, and thus have the capacity to contribute to the development of a more empathetic society.

Conclusions

Heywire is an example of some of the exciting opportunities that the ABC can contribute to the contemporary media sphere. As the national broadcaster, the ABC is uniquely placed to amplify the voices and views of minority groups such as regional youth, and ensure their stories reach a wider audience. For audiences, projects like this are important for affording people some control and ownership over representations of their own lives. Such is particularly vital for minority groups such as regional people who frequently feel their lives are misunderstood and opinions silenced in the mainstream media. The integrity of the ABC and its reputation as a respected, trustworthy media institution means it can legitimise “ordinary voices” and amplify them within the public sphere in ways that cannot be achieved through other media, such as social or commercial media.

Projects such as Heywire, and indeed all instances of audience participation and user-created content, present numerous challenges for the broadcaster. However, these projects are a vital means through which the ABC fulfils its public service remit in a digitised media environment. By providing avenues for engaging and amplifying previously unheard voices, the ABC is radically expanding the array of viewpoints that may be articulated in the public sphere. As the ABC continues to evolve in changing media landscape and strives to remain relevant and important to its audiences, participatory projects such as Heywire that involving audiences in the creation of meanings and identities will remain a crucial and worthwhile endeavour.