

Submission 89

**GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY
CENTRE FOR PUBLIC CULTURE AND IDEAS**

TUNING IN TO COMMUNITY BROADCASTING

**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
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1. Introduction

Since 1999, researchers from Griffith University have undertaken national research on Australia's community broadcasting sector. This research has involved two national projects. The first project (1999-2001) was station-based and was designed to gather data on the sector's stations and participants. The second study (2003-), currently underway is an audience-based study which has gathered qualitative data on community broadcasting audiences. This audience study, *Australia's Community Broadcasting Audiences Talk Back*, is designed to complement the quantitative study of community broadcasting audiences completed by McNair Ingenuity (2004) and also to complete the circle of community radio stations and their audiences initiated by the first Griffith University study. While we are yet to present a final report to our industry partners on the audience based project, much of the fieldwork has been completed and we are currently collating the results. These two projects have drawn international interest for both their scope and methodology. In over thirty years of community broadcasting in Australia, these projects are the first to reveal and record a national snapshot of the sector and its audiences.

Internationally, community broadcasting has, and continues to attract increasing government and academic attention. It is perhaps no coincidence that both the Australian and global augmentation in community broadcasting outlets has occurred at a time when commercial media are characterized by an increase in ownership concentration which has raised concern about the diversity of media content. In Australia, the tendency towards syndicated services and the subsequent shortfall in relevant local news and information (House of Representatives/Local Voices, 2001) has in many cases transformed community radio. This transformation has led to a gradual evolution in some sub-sectors of the community radio industry, prompted by the need for regional community radio outlets to represent local communities in ways which are meaningful to those who would listen, participate, produce and support their local community broadcaster. Community broadcasting is the coalface of a heterogeneous Australia where the local dimension of 'hearing our own voices and telling our own stories' is enabled and enacted.

Our seven-year intensive encounter with community broadcasting stations, volunteers and audiences has given us insight into the philosophy, intentions and indeed, outcomes of the community broadcasting sector. During the course of this research we have spoken to, recorded and collated data from a plethora of communities across Australia. We have spoken to communities defined by their geographic locations and then investigated a little further, only to find another dimension of local diversity supported by community broadcasters. For example, stations classified as 'regional' serve this broad geographical definition but a closer investigation reveals a multitude of *communities within communities* inadequately encapsulated in the 'regional' tag. In a similar vein with corresponding results, we have explored (*inter alia*) metropolitan, Indigenous, ethnic, religious, fine music, youth, RPH (Reading for the Print Handicapped) and religious stations and their audiences ~ finding again that our categorical definitions of station 'types' was a necessary yet inadequate account of the sector and its diversity.

In this submission, we overview our research into Australia's community broadcasting sector. Our research places us in a position to offer information to government on the key areas referred to the Inquiry, especially those pertaining to community broadcasting's role in servicing Australia's diverse communities and the opportunities and threats presented by current and future financial and technological demands. We have outlined below some of the key findings from our first project *Culture Commitment Community* (2002) and preliminary results from the current audience project, *Australian Community Broadcasting Audiences Talk Back*.

2. Culture, commitment, community: The Australian Community Broadcasting Sector (Station-Based Research)

In 2000, the authors secured a Australian Research Council grant to undertake a national survey of community radio stations. This project received financial and in-kind support from the Department of Communication Information Technology and the Arts, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia and the Community Broadcasting Foundation. The final report, *Culture, commitment, community – The Australian community radio sector (2002)* has been sent to all members of this Standing Committee.

2.1 Scope of the Study

This initial three-year study surveyed station managers, general volunteers and news and current affairs worker. In total more than 350 surveys were conducted. The surveys were designed to gather information on a range of issues. Station Managers were surveyed about subscription levels, volunteer participation, their perceived contribution to their local community, training offered, news services and some basic demographics concerning income, age, education, etc (see Forde, Foxwell & Meadows, 2000; 2001). A separate survey of general volunteers sought information about 'everyday volunteers' involved in on-air presentation and program production, asking questions about their programs, aims, audiences and their reasons for involvement in community radio. News and current affairs workers were surveyed about their 'journalistic practices', station policies on news and current affairs, editorial autonomy and if they saw themselves as 'journalists'. All three surveys shared some questions on the respondents' general views on community radio and demographics.

In order to gather more substantive and qualitative commentary on themes that emerged during the survey results and to pursue areas of interest to ourselves and our industry partners, we conducted focus group discussion in the following centres: Brisbane; Townsville; Canberra; Sydney; Bathurst; Darwin; Hobart; Melbourne; Warrnambool; Adelaide; Port Augusta; Perth; and Albany. In each focus group, we posed general areas for discussion which were:

- The role of community radio
- Funding and resources

- The use of new technologies in the sector
- Training
- Representation by key peak bodies and sector representatives
- The future of community radio

The focus group yielded approximately 35 hours of discussion that were categorized using the qualitative research software, NVivo. Alongside this fieldwork, we also interviewed key sector representatives and consulted a vast amount of literature on national and international community broadcasting initiatives.

2.2 Key Findings

In our final report, we conservatively estimated more than 20,000 volunteers in the community broadcasting sector contributing more than \$145 million in unpaid labour. One of the most significant findings was the extraordinary role community broadcasting is performing as a community cultural resource. As some indication of the level of local content and programming produced by these stations, more than two-thirds of station managers across Australia reported 100 or more hours of locally produced content each week (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell, 2002: 37). The role community radio performs as a cultural resource is multifaceted and varies from context to context. In line with this inquiry, community radio represents, services and importantly enables the participation of a multitude of Australian communities in their local media. Our Executive Summary reports on the following key findings:

- The community radio sector is fulfilling a broad but largely unacknowledged role in the Australian mediascape, particularly as a source of local content;
- The sector is under increasing pressure from policy-making bodies to increase sponsorship and income levels, which is affecting the content and operations of many stations
- More than 60 percent of community radio is broadcasting to regional areas – in light of the increasing withdrawal of commercial radio from the regions, the sector is proving the only source of local news and information for many towns
- Experienced workers in the community radio sector are training work experience students and unskilled community members on a daily basis. We estimate approximately 4000-5000 Australians are trained annually in the sector in mostly unaccredited training programs;
- Around 70 percent of the sector are engaged in training programs involving external organisations, usually universities;
- Almost all of the 23 journalism programs around Australia use community radio as a site of work experience for their students
- Indigenous radio stations in particular have forged close links with journalism programs and are providing a key indicator of ‘reconciliation in action’ – practical reconciliation

- Sector representatives feel strongly that they have become a significant de facto trainer for the Australian media industry, which remains largely unacknowledged and unrewarded
- More than 20,000 Australians are involved as volunteers in the community radio sector on a regular basis
- Volunteers contribute about \$2.79 million in unpaid work hours to the Australian community *each week*. This equates to more than \$145 million in unpaid work each year
- 80 percent of stations broadcast a news service, although this is usually a syndicated service. The most used news services are National Radio News service, followed by the Macquarie and Southern Cross networks
- Indigenous community radio is growing and continues to provide communities with a first level of service, as well as acting as a bridge between cultures
- Ethnic community radio stations are providing an essential service to the new wave of migrants to Australia. Anecdotes from the ethnic radio sector provided some of the most moving comments to this project
- As a result of funding decreases, stations are finding it increasingly difficult to remain afloat without significantly adjusting content to attract a larger audience. Some stations feel this is forcing them to adopt more commercial formats, which is against the principles of community radio as outlined in the Broadcasting Services Act (1992)
- The government advertising agency, OGIA, should be encouraged to investigate sponsorship of community radio and its national satellite networks to make more effective use of the sector to disseminate information
- Based on the results of the surveys and focus groups, we find that the community radio sector as a whole is an important cultural resource for the Australian community. While some stations may need to connect more directly with their communities, most in the sector are closely integrated and entwined with their local community or their community of interest.

Some examples of the ways in which these communities participate in community broadcasting are presented below. In the section below we focus on services to metropolitan, regional, ethnic and indigenous communities. It must be noted however, that this is only a snapshot of our findings.

2.2.1 Metropolitan and Regional Stations

More than 60 percent of Australia's community broadcasters are found in regional areas, although audiences tend to be larger for the metropolitan stations primarily due to population density. While the intent to enable access and participation in broadcasting is constant throughout the sector, the communities which are served vary considerably. An obvious example is the difference in services between metropolitan and regional stations.

In metropolitan areas, there are often several community broadcasters that serve specific communities. For example, in Brisbane there are numerous community broadcasters, some serving sub-metropolitan areas and other serving niche audiences such as ethnic, indigenous, arts and fine music audiences. Generally, these stations provide services in metropolitan areas which would otherwise be unavailable. Their status as not-for-profit means that these stations are able to represent and support the participation of smaller or unrepresented communities. While these stations are interested in funding and sponsorship, their bottom line must be to meet the needs of their community and their audience. A station manager participant at our Adelaide focus group summarized this intent:

... in that sense our absolutely priority is not audience share. We are not going for the most successful, biggest rating thing, we are trying to provide things that are not available as well. Though at the same time we do want our programmes to be successful. You want them to be heard and you want them to be good
(Adelaide Focus Group, 2001)

Another participant at our Melbourne focus group (2001) described metropolitan services as 'complementary' whereby stations in the area had relatively clearly defined roles about their communities of interest. For example, Melbourne's 3RRR would not produce programming for 'handicapped people' as this is the domain of Melbourne's 3RPH (Radio for the Print Handicapped).

There is an enormous amount of programming choices produced by these metropolitan stations which would otherwise be unavailable and caters to diverse audiences. For example, 2FBi in Sydney exceeds the Australian music content requirement of 20 percent required of community broadcasters. In their determination to represent Australia's music industry, this station plays 50 percent Australian music of which 25 percent is from the Sydney area. Their commitment to local arts, music and culture is repeated throughout the sector. Another example is 5UV Radio Adelaide which broadcasts 'Art Breakfast' every Saturday, providing information on the Adelaide arts scene. 4MBS in Brisbane produces a monthly half hour poetry program featuring Australian artists and emerging poets.

Regional stations are often only one of a few choices in these areas and often adopt a generalist format which caters to their geographic area as well as the various communities of interest within that region. These regional stations tend to serve a broader and more diverse community than metropolitan stations. Their content varies greatly from simple coverage of the local football league by Fresh FM in Bendigo to outside broadcasts at local cultural festivals such as the Katherine Country Music Muster by Katherine Community Radio. These stations cover events of local significance providing access to the airwaves for local organizers and participants. One participant at the Albany focus group in Western Australia (2001) summed up their contribution to the community:

...I can go from one day to the end of the week and not watch television or watch the news...for me in the short term, I'm not really fussed about what's happening out in the world. I'm sort of fussed about what's happening here, locally, because that's what effects me day to day...you see it on the news about globalization, I think people are getting tired of that, they want to come back to home and find out what's happening in their backyard. I think that's where we are fitting into that niche that has been missing, certainly in Albany for a long time

The opportunity to inform regional communities about their 'own backyard' is a principal achievement of Australia's community broadcasters. In regional areas, this is particularly significant in emergency situations. Katherine Community Radio illustrates this contention *par excellence*. During the 1998 floods in Katherine, the local community radio station continued broadcasting until the water reached the power points. The broadcaster at the time was running down each hour to check the water level of the Katherine River. In the aftermath, while other public and commercial media arrived in town to report on the sensation of crocodiles in the main street, Katherine community radio provided locals with critical emergency service information. There are many more examples reported in more detail in our Final Report, such as Warrnambool and Portland community radio stations who provide up-to-date weather information for the local fishing community.

2.2.2 Indigenous and Ethnic Stations

From its inception, community broadcasting has provided an opportunity for the voiceless to be heard in the Australian mediascape. This is nowhere more apparent than in the case of Indigenous and ethnic broadcasting. Community radio is possibly the only media able to accurately represent the diversity of cultures that makes up the modern Australian population through its philosophy of access and participation. Both the Indigenous and ethnic sectors provide represent their own culture but also act as a bridge between cultures – allowing others the opportunity access, learn and understand Indigenous and ethnic communities.

In the case of ethnic broadcasting, stations all over Australia (either dedicated ethnic stations or programs produced within generalist stations), community broadcasting offers a source of news, information, education and entertainment in more than 100 languages. The ethnic sector is a critical service for both established ethnic groups, ethnic youth and in particular new and emerging ethnic communities. While SBS services are also important, community ethnic broadcasters are able to provide broad-based information as well as locally specific information. The community ethnic broadcasting sector produces at least three times as much broadcast content as SBS (Francis, 2001). Content quantities aside, these stations enable local ethnic communities to be heard and are a positive affirmation of their place and importance in Australian society. For example, when a group of Albanian refugees was brought to Australia to escape the Kosovo conflict, Hobart's 7THE responded by seeking out Albanian journalists within the refugee community. Station representatives drove 40 minutes each way to pick up the Albanian

journalists to allow them access to the local airwaves which provided news from Albania and also critical information on accessing local services and support. There are many more examples which showcase the efforts of community broadcasters to service ethnic groups. It is particularly heartening to hear these stories when they are placed in contrast to the often-negative images of ethnic populations (particularly refugees) typical of mainstream media. Hobart's 7THE includes programming for Polish, Indian, Croatian, Greek, Dutch, Pakistani, Macedonian, African, Serbian, Spanish, Dutch and French communities. Not only is this programming produced but it is done so in a relative harmony:

It's something that's very interesting though, if you look at ethnic broadcasting – with all the conflicts throughout the world – we have potential here for World Wars III, IV and V. We have the Serbians, the Croatians, the Bulgarians, the Kosovos – all at once. We're very fortunate ...we've never had any problems. They're very sensitive in their own areas – it's a credit, really (Hobart Focus Group, 1 July 2001)

Interestingly, stations reported that audiences outside these ethnic communities also listened to these programs often for the music but also just to hear a different language. This has been confirmed by our audience-based research which affirms ethnic broadcastings' role as a bridge between different cultures.

Community broadcasting is the largest component of Indigenous media in Australia and Indigenous broadcasting is in turn, the fastest growing sector. The 1998 ATSIIC review of Indigenous media, *Digital Dreaming*, found that where local radio production was being undertaken regularly, stations were perceived to be playing an important role in maintaining local cultures and languages (ATSIIC, 1999). For example, 5UMA (Port Augusta) provides culturally relevant information to Port Augusta's Indigenous population (around 7000 out of a total population of 17,000). The station estimates 10 Indigenous languages in the area of which two are broadcast by 5UMA because of their intelligibility across several language groups. The station also prides itself on broadcasting in 'plain English' which is at the least, a second language for many in the Port Augusta Indigenous community. Examples such as 5UMA confirm the role these stations in reflecting local cultures in ways which are impossible for other broadcasters.

The key element in distinguishing Indigenous broadcasting from other types of community broadcasting is that it provides communities, especially in regional, remote and rural Australia, with a 'first level of service' (Productivity Commission 2000).

2.2.3 Training

Our research with station managers and volunteers found that almost all community radio stations around Australia were providing some level of training to members from the outside community, and to people wishing to participate in community radio. Based on figures provided by the stations, we have estimated around 4-5000 people per year are

being trained by community radio outlets in a variety of areas. The key training areas as identified by station managers are:

- Panel operation
- Station policy and structure
- Broadcast law
- Interviewing techniques
- Scriptwriting and copy writing
- Reception duties
- Computer skills
- Outside broadcast skills and technical expertise
- Station management
- Conflict resolution.

News volunteers and general volunteers identified similar major areas of training. The nature of the training provided varies considerably – some run professional courses operated by former commercial or ABC broadcasters, and charge participants to take part; others offer informal on-the-job training to community members who walk through the door and want to be involved. Just under 99 percent of stations offer some form of training, and around 83 percent of the sector offer a combination of formal and informal training methods. Many adopt a flexible approach to their training, and, as with the bulk of the sector, are able to cater their training programs to volunteers needs who may have limited time available, outside their own paid work commitments, to spend on training for the sector. A station manager from our Hobart focus group reported:

We don't have a training guidelines as in 'you will spend 6 weeks or 8 weeks' – it's up to the individual. We had one chap who took 12 months to train. Others take to it like ducks to water, a couple of sessions and they're away. We leave it up to the individual. We're happy to train them at their own speed.

One of the most commonly expressed feelings during the focus group interviews was a desire by Station Managers and volunteers for some acknowledgement of the benefits community radio training programs make to the broad Australian media industry. Training plays a central role in the ability of community radio workers to be able to make important connections with local audiences and organisations. The single, most functional benefit of training identified by almost three-quarters of volunteers was their confidence in the use of broadcasting equipment.

Importantly, the vast majority of community stations undertake training involving institutions in the wider community – the most significant element of this training is work experience. These outside institutions may include universities, local government bodies, other community organisations, and emergency services. The stations' involvement with bodies outside the sector represents a highly significant contribution to workplace training that until now has remained largely unquantified. Our Bathurst focus group summarized this issue well:

I mean, we look at who's come through 2MCE in the last 25 years, and we're talking of people like Andrew Denton, Amanda Keller, Jessica Rowe, Jacinta Tynan from the ABC, Selena Edmonds and Natasha Belling from Channel 10. These are the names that have come through here, and I think it needs to be recognized by, not necessarily governments, but other sectors as well. That this is where the talent comes from. It starts with community radio and because we are associated with the School of Communications we get those people coming through a students, and they then go on to have careers and become big names. I think it needs to be recognized that this is the yearly breeding ground, the early training ground for the future top journalists, top broadcasters, radio, TV, print. No matter what, they are going to come through this sector. I think there needs to be the resources there to ensure that they are getting the best grounding that they can (Bathurst industry focus group, 2001).

Across the board, our research indicated that while a great deal of training was occurring within the sector, many community radio volunteers and paid workers saw the need for more formal and accredited training across the sector, and more specific training targeted towards those who want to work in music programming; news and current affairs; talk back and other specialized areas of broadcasting.

This situation should improve with the Federal government's commitment of \$2.2 million for a National Training Fund to facilitate the roll-out of a national training project of accredited training for community radio (managed by the CBAA). This roll-out is expected to occur over the next four years, and represents funding of approximately \$550,000 per year for the next four years to the sector. While an important contribution, this funding represents only the beginning of the development of formal accredited training in the sector.

That concludes our discussion of the findings from our earlier work investigating the views from within the sector itself. This submission will now move to findings from the current project, the qualitative audience project, *Australian Community Broadcasting Audiences Talk Back*.

3. Qualitative Audience Research Project

In 2004, we secured an Australian Research Council Linkage grant to explore community broadcasting audiences. This three-year study is funded by the Australian Research Council with additional financial and in-kind support from the Department of Communications, Technology and the Arts, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia and the Community Broadcasting Foundation. Other representatives of the sector are also represented on our advisory committee including the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council, Australian Indigenous Communications Association, Indigenous Remote Communication Association and Radio for the Print Handicapped.

This project is in part a response to key criticisms of prior research where stations showcased their propensity to serve a diversity of audiences but confirmation from actual audiences was absent. This qualitative project is also designed to complement the sector's quantitative survey completed by McNair Ingenuity (2004) which found that one-in-four Australians listened to community radio in the previous week—and 40 percent listened in the previous month. These numbers are particularly useful for the sector and affirm a significant audience. However, audience figures can fail to grasp the social and cultural benefits of community broadcasting, especially when audience numbers are comparatively small. By applying a series of participatory qualitative methods which engage both the sector and its audiences, we have the opportunity to hear the voices of these audience members. This approach ensures an adequate and appropriate understanding of the role community broadcasting is performing in a range of communities.

The project is due for completion in December 2006. We have completed the vast majority of the fieldwork and have begun the process of collating the results. During the course of the project, we have published various articles on the project which are available from the authors upon request. We present below some of the preliminary results of this project.

3.1 Scope of the Study

The current study engages with a representative sample of the community broadcasting sector. Broadly, we have sought an engagement with metropolitan and regional, ethnic, Indigenous and community television audiences. We have conducted audience focus groups at 25 metropolitan and regional stations (the majority at regional stations). At each metropolitan or regional station, we organized 10-12 audience members to discuss why they listened to community radio, what they were listening to, their criticisms, use of other media etc. We have also conducted interviews with community groups which use the station to broadcast information, events, etc. These community group interviews are a critical part of our method as these groups best embody the ideal of access and participation embraced by community broadcasters. The attached schedule outlines the stations and community groups we selected for the project. This component of the research is complete.

The Indigenous component of the project aimed for an equivalent of 10 focus groups. In these communities, we often conducted interviews with audience members through attending major Indigenous cultural events such as the Laura Dance and Cultural Festival in far-north Queensland and the Garma Festival in Arnhem Land. This component of the project has demanded a great deal of travel to regional and remote Australia. We have visited Thursday Island, Palm Island, Alice Springs, Woorabinda (central Qld), Townsville, Melbourne and Cairns. This component of the project is near completion with visits still planned to Port Augusta, Broome and the Kimberleys, Darwin, and some central desert communities. Towards the end of last year, Bumma Bippera Media in

Cairns devoted a portion of their successful talk back program ‘Talk Black’ to the project, with a week-long focus on Indigenous community broadcasting.

The ethnic component of the project is currently underway with focus groups planned with 11 ethnic language grouping recommended by the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council. These language groups account for new and emerging ethnic communities, established ethnic communities in metropolitan and regional Australia and youth ethnic groups. The languages selected are:

- Macedonian
- Turkish
- Sudanese
- Tongan
- Filipino/Tagalog
- Indonesian
- Serbian
- Croatia
- Chinese
- Greek and
- Vietnamese.

This selection of focus groups represents a cross-section of ethnic broadcasting in terms of established and emerging communities; small and large migrant communities; and programming for ethnic youth and older ethnic community members. This component of the project targets specific programs and their audiences. We are employing interpreters and taking other measures to maximize participation by these communities by ensuring a comfortable and culturally appropriate environment for discussion.

The community television sector is also currently underway. We used the community television sector as the pilot for our method. As a result, we have some data from community television audiences. We are conducting audience focus group discussions at all of the community television stations throughout Australia.

3.2 Preliminary Findings of Audience-Based Research

Until this audience-based project, most of the actual evidence of community broadcasting fulfilling their charter to service ‘communities of interest’ was anecdotal. The opportunity to actually speak with audience members is giving community broadcasters an avenue to prove the impact they are having at the local level. As a qualification, this research project necessarily selected stations with the likelihood or propensity to help organise a successful focus group. Their involvement is crucial to the success of the project and to the integrity of the data.

The results collated so far indicate that audience members, above all, value the local and diverse nature of community radio. Overwhelmingly, audience members report that

community radio is playing a significant role in the context of their everyday lives and in maintaining and affirming the fabric of their communities ~ communities defined by interest, geography, ethnicity, etc. We illustrate below some of the major themes emerging from the focus groups thus far. Again this is a snapshot of the overall results but will be some indication of the breadth of impact of community broadcasting on Australian societies. Key issues identified by audiences so far are:

- Their appreciation of the diverse nature of programming on community radio
- A feeling of ‘comfort’ and familiarity they feel in hearing ‘ordinary’ voices on the radio, rather than developed professional voices
- An appreciation of the role volunteers play in providing what many audiences see as an essential part of their daily life – their local community radio programs
- A recognition that community broadcasting is one of the few places to offer opportunities for local musicians and artists to obtain a broader audience for their work
- A feeling of belonging to the station, and to the community that it creates – and the sense that they can ring up the station anytime to talk to presenters and provide input on their programming.
- Audiences want to see more formal local news and information from their community broadcasters

We will address these issues in further detail.

3.2.1 Connecting Communities

Our fieldwork suggests that community radio acts as a conduit for information and education about local individuals, groups and events. Of course, community radio stations are required by legislation to enable access and participation to those groups who would be otherwise denied participation in the media. Learning of the ways in which this mandate manifests itself in station practices and philosophy has been one of the most rewarding aspects of our current research. The key to community radio’s success in this regard is its accessibility to locals in the area. The accessibility of the stations was identified by audiences as a repeated benefit during the metropolitan and regional audience discussions. Examples given were as simple as a place to report lost dogs, organizing car rides to metropolitan centres, in-depth information about local events or cancellation of local sporting events. In both metropolitan and regional areas, syndicated services from either commercial or public broadcasters were not as accessible to community members, if at all. Many of the participants noted that commercial broadcasters were not able to provide the same sort of access as community radio –noting commercial imperatives and rigid playlists as the reasons why the openness and flexibility of community broadcasters appealed. Typical of these comments, audience members at Tumut and Adelaide remarked:

...you can participate, ring up and request songs and always hear a lot of local people doing sports reports and that. That’s always good. You know, they’ve got

local knowledge, know what they're talking about (Tumut Audience Focus Group, 2005)

I also like the fact that you can ring up while on the air and you can actually speak to someone that's presenting the show. Doesn't mean that your voice is coming on the air...I think it's great that you can actually ring up and request songs and put in you know, some ideas and your opinion (Radio Adelaide Audience Focus Group, 2005)

The accessibility of the stations worked in ways which were both similar and distinct in metropolitan and regional areas. In regional areas, simple access to the radio station and the 'local knowledges' mentioned above gave community radio's role additional importance. While metropolitan stations provided similar access to local information and access, the actual meaning in the context of audience members' everyday lives was different. In metropolitan areas, the presence of a community radio station enlightened members of a larger and more populated area – in effect, bringing a big city closer. In metropolitan areas community members with diverse or alternative interests to that typically presented by mainstream media found a place where their views and interests were supported and embraced. This notion of finding a 'community' via a community radio station was often repeated and some examples are presented below:

...I moved to Melbourne about three years ago and got onto Triple R, probably six or eight months after I moved here. And just hearing all the stuff that is on, you get a sense of belonging to a community...I didn't know many people and you get that sort of sense of belonging. You start going to a couple of Triple R events or whatever, and while you don't know anyone, you sort of feel like you belong because you know everyone is sort of thinking the same, on the same wavelength (3RRR audience focus group 2005)

...I mean, I love feeling that there is a whole other thing going on in Sydney. I think, you can sometimes get a bit down on this town and go, there's nothing going on...but I feel it can be a really small world...like you feel like you're part of something (2FBI Audience Focus Group)

Australian community radio supports a diversity of what we have termed 'community public spheres'. In effect, this means that rather than speaking of a singular public sphere, we should understand the public sphere as a rhizome of smaller public spheres which achieve a certain convergence because of the role community radio performs at the local level. Enabling a diverse number of groups and interests access to the media – the development of community public spheres – is essential to the definition of the role community radio performs in Australia. The extent of this diversity is difficult to fathom when you consider the number of interests which are represented via Australia's community broadcasting network. A clear example of supporting and representing Australia's diversity is the representation of music styles on community radio. In terms of support, community broadcasters are notable for their accessibility to local musicians and their ability to play new material and promote local music events. Our audience focus

groups have identified this as a key benefit of community radio. In particular, airplay for local musicians is an important role for community broadcasters where listeners are given the opportunity to hear something locally produced and then in turn, seek out local musical events. Evidence presented below is only a very small portion of the data we have collected which affirms community broadcasting's role in the support and maintenance of local and diverse musical genres:

I guess I can only speak from the perspective of a musician and obviously I'm passionate about the Melbourne music scene and I doubt that would have been the case without stations like RRR and PBS. Knowing that, have that foundation, having that backbone, that artists, regardless of the many other challenges to them, whether it be developments in digital technology, the gentrification of inner city areas which is closing down venues, Triple R is always going to be there...I guess that's where a lot of the value of it comes from, just that solid foundation of support for local and independent artists (3RRR Audience Focus Group, 2005)

Yeah, I come from a fairly conservative background, I always thought things were pretty dull. But listening to the radio, you get to know a hell of a lot. A broader variety in music and how incredibly lively the entertainment scene is around the place and views of different people which becomes very interesting...[4ZZZ] broadens both ideas and my music range. Incredible (4ZZZ Audience Focus Group, 2005)

'...It gives an appreciation of world music and I know, it's probably given me an impetus to go to like the Woodford Folk Festival...It broadens people's minds to go and have a look at other things' (4ZZZ audience focus group, 2005)

But, what, what's funny about the way FBi does it though is they...open the door up for all of [us/musicians], to sort of like go in there and hand them a demo (2FBi Audience Focus Group, 2005).

We have also visited stations where the majority of listeners were older Australians. It was particularly heartening to hear an audience of 3GDR (Golden Days Radio) listeners relate the importance of hearing music which is familiar to them. They spoke of music from the 1930's, 40's and 50's and recounted stories before the advent of television and the role music and the radio performed in their families. An elderly gentleman at the 3GDR eloquently summarized the importance of this radio and its music:

3GDR fills a void in my life which other broadcasters do not. It takes me back to when I was young, in my adolescence and early 20s. It brings back pleasant memories about the things I thought and wanted to do at that time. Sometimes I am thrilled listening to it and sometimes I am sad.

Overall, community broadcasting audiences reported that not only did they feel the stations were accessible but also that they felt like they knew the presenters (this was often true in regional areas). The down-to-earth, somewhat casual and organic style of

many community radio stations gave listeners a sense of familiarity – many used the word ‘family’ to describe their relationship with the local community radio station. Older listeners recounted how the radio station kept them company while others noted the lack of sleek professionalism characteristic of community radio made them feel like the presenters were ‘one of us’.

I think for someone living up in the hills alone you often know some of the presenters or get to know them with radio being as intimate as it is, so your family increases (BAY FM Audience Focus Group, 2005)

Coming back to the amateurism, if you want of the announcers, it’s like talking to a good mate or something like that (4ZZZ Audience Focus Group, 2005)

...Because I am starting to feel like I know them personally, well they are talking to me personally (3CCC Audience Focus Group, 2005)

You get to know presenters on the radio and it is nice to be able to say hi to them when you go down the street. There is a sense of ownership of the radio station (Fraser Coast Radio audience focus group, 2005)

3.2.2 Local News and Information

In our original station-based study, we found one-fifth of stations surveyed did not provide a committed news program – syndicated or local news service. However, definitions of ‘news’ vary and this project is revealing that our ‘professional’ definition of news is quite different to audience members’ understanding of what news really is. We are finding that audience members are turning to their community broadcasters to find at least, information about their local community:

But you see it depends how you define news, like, I think, the news about the arts, the news about, I mean, music—that’s news, arts is news, some theatre is news. Like, news isn’t just, you know, bombs went off in London or the football. I mean, we don’t have to listen to endless shows about football or cricket. I mean, it is *your* definition of news. There’s a lot of news on it [the station] but it’s not necessarily the way it can be defined on other stations (3RRR Audience Focus Group 2005).

We have found that audience members would like more dedicated local news and current affairs from their local broadcaster. Of course, this type of programming requires significant resources which are either beyond the financial capabilities of the station or require too much volunteer effort that some stations cannot muster. It is an important part of our audience feedback, however, which will interest the sector. When audience members were asked about news and current affairs, they often referred to community announcements via the participation of community groups at the stations. This type of ‘news’ included information about arts, music or cultural events, fundraisers, sporting

associations, etc. The type of news being broadcast was quite varied, depending on the program and presenter. Nevertheless, this information was important to audience members in both metropolitan and regional areas:

...because most programs have news and information in them and they tell you what is happening locally. It is about local stuff that is happening here that you hear in each of the programs. The groups that present programs like RSL and Land Care talk about what is happening locally too. It is in-depth information and a wide source of information about the community (Fraser Coast Radio audience focus group 2005)

I joined a women's group last week and there were a lot of them saying they were feeling isolated and I thought how valuable the radio is with local news and information and someone chatty. Lets you know about the place that you live. You hear what is on and gather local information and laughter (Fraser Coast Radio Audience Focus Group, 2005)

During our round of metropolitan and regional audience discussions, we also interviewed more than 60 of these community groups. This part of the research project was completed on the advice of one of our industry partners who emphasized that community groups who regularly access the stations embody the principles of access and participation in broadcasting, and that a full understanding of the place of community radio in Australian lives could not be measured without their input. These interviews have certainly added a richness to the audience focus group data. The attached schedule outlines these groups. The diversity of community groups we have encountered range from local primary schools in Tumut and Katherine, to Bendigo's Gay and Lesbian community and the local football league, the Sound Preservation Society and Fringe Festival in Hobart to the Country Women's Association, Caulfield Gardening Club, The ACT Jazz Society and Hervey Bay's Urangan Bowls Club – all affirm the role of community broadcasters as a significant cultural resource which supports various groups throughout Australia. A representative from the Byron Bay Writers Festival summed up the benefits of community broadcasters to local community groups:

The other thing we were talking about earlier is the immediacy of community radio, because you are talking to people who live locally and they're all right here, so you can go in the day before and talk about something and get a response whereas anything else you've got to have a very planned publicity attack for weeks before so radio is so immediate, because Bay FM see themselves as, they're very open and readily accepting of people ringing up and saying can I come on and talk about what I've been doing at the last minute, they'll usually say yes, and you can see the impact of that on ticket sales sometimes and attendances...I don't listen all the time, I jump stations but the thing I find is that if I haven't heard it someone else will tell me did you hear on Bay FM? Somehow it filters through the community because people regard it as their own station and have ownership of it and they want to support it and listen to it....(Byron Bay Writer's Festival Interview 2005)

The other outstanding example of a local news and information services performed by community broadcasters was in emergency situations. We have already cited the 1998 Katherine River floods as an example. There are many other examples no other media had the inclination or propensity to serve these local communities. In Roxby Downs, for example, the station acted as a conduit for information about a mining accident. In Byron Bay, there was a fire in the town where four teenagers were killed. Zenith Virago from one of the Byron Bay community groups explains the event:

...and it rocked the whole community, and everybody... I heard it on BayFM, and I thought somebody needs to do something about that and I thought that's me. So, I drove into town and came on the radio and we opened up the centre for anyone that wanted to come, and we got the information from the police as to who the people were – people were ringing us to say we're coming in, and who are they and is it this person. And although we couldn't say who it was, we could say 'no, it wasn't this person', so the police were prepared to do that because they're governed by other rules. Then we launched an appeal on BayFM and through the media for people to donate things, and it gave people instant information and when everyone was walking around saying we must do something, they were listening because the information got updated all the time, and if they wanted to come they could come and find out. The next few weeks flowed on but because there was an immediate response and people were aware of that through BayFM, it wasn't an emergency situation, but it was a critical moment, and it really assisted everyone to be able to tap into and get that information on that day and the next couple of days at a really deep community level (Virago Interview, 2005)

The community radio station in Tumut performs a significant role in the bushfire season by providing immediate information to locals often living in isolated areas. A woman at the Tumut audience focus group recounted her experience:

I rang the station, first of all I listened, and I listened for maybe ten or fifteen minutes when I switched it on. But then I rang the station and spoke to Dave who was on air at the time and Dave said, we've got the latest report, we're just about to broadcast it, everything's fine, it's all under control (Tumut Audience Focus Group Discussion, 2005).

The most significant conclusion which can be drawn from this evidence is community radio's inclusiveness of different facets of community. Audiences appreciate the local news and information that community broadcasting already provides – and they would like to hear more.

3.2.3 Indigenous Audiences

Our indigenous fieldwork has required numerous visits to metropolitan, regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Overwhelmingly, Indigenous

audiences are telling us that the stations they listen to are the only place where they can feel truly linked to other parts of their community, and where they feel their ‘own mob’ are contributing positively to coverage of their community, and news about their community. There are a number of primary discussion points coming out of the Indigenous focus groups, generally encompassed by notions of bringing community together; providing an alternative viewpoint on Indigenous issues, providing community news and information; access for the community; an easy-listening ‘laidback’ atmosphere of the programming; and a connection point for members of the community who might be located nationally or sometimes internationally.

A 4K1G listener explained how the station managed this process in its coverage of riots — identified as ‘resistance’ by locals — on Palm Island in November 2004::

...I think the only tool the community has to use is using places like 4K1G to make sure that what was being brought out of the Palm community as a whole was projected in the right manner, not in a negative manner. That’s only one part of the importance of Murri media or Indigenous media. It provides places like Palm, Woorabinda, the Cape and other Indigenous communities, particularly the Indigenous population in the mainstream, with a voice, a balance, projecting our stories, our culture, our language the way we want to hear it but giving it to the wider audience too, people who live in the mainstream, people who don’t often come in contact with Indigenous people.

Another listener confirmed:

The talkback program that 4K1G (transmits) each morning¹, and goes around the country, gave the community the opportunity to have their say to counteract the mainstream media whose stories were running from the powers that be. 4K1G provided our mob with a balance by getting what we wanted to say on national talkback radio through the Indigenous network. That’s why black radio and black media needs to stay around as long as it can because it’s the only tool we’ve got here. It’s our vehicle to tell our stories and what’s important to us.

For many non-Indigenous listeners, Indigenous broadcasting is providing a window to a culture and a part of the community that they previously could not or did not have access to. One listener from our 3KND (Kool ‘n’ Deadly) focus group in Melbourne explained:

I have a very strong interest in indigenous people and I’m kind of working with indigenous people as a drug and alcohol worker and that’s what I want to specialise in, in the future. So I want to learn more about the culture and when I found out about the radio station that’s when I started listening to it. And I am picking up, and I am learning a lot about the

¹ The *TalkBlack* program is produced at Bumma Bippa Media in Cairns each morning, and is picked up and broadcast by a range of other community radio stations – mainly indigenous – for re-broadcast.

culture from the radio station and listening to the indigenous songs that are coming on. The stories that are told in the song gives me a great indication of the culture and you know what their issues are (3KND Audience Focus Group, 2005).

The Cairns focus group for Bumma Bipperra media (BBM) provided views from a range of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous community members who suggested BBM was an important conduit for bringing not only the Indigenous community together but also developing relations with the broader Cairns community. They felt Bumma Bipperra's important contribution was to expose the broader community to another side of Indigenous life:

I think mainstream media tends to focus on a few, so called Aboriginal spokespeople.

..... they (listeners) realise there's so many different perspectives and points of view about any particular issue and Bumma Bipperra allows that spectrum to be heard.

.... that's the whole thing with the other (mainstream) media, they're very selective in who they get.

Additionally, the ability of a station such as Bumma Bipperra to provide a means of communication between community members was greatly valued:

It's just nice to know you've got a radio station in your local township that you can talk to and you can get the message across to your relatives to wish them a happy birthday. My father and mother celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. I couldn't be there but we actually rang and spoke on the air. I mean it's just great because the fact that we couldn't get over for it but we were able to wish them well and talk to them, it was very emotional for me particularly.

As with many of the other audience focus groups – in metropolitan, regional and remote areas – Indigenous audiences also wanted to see even more local news and information from their Indigenous radio stations. While they appreciated the amount they did receive, they wanted to hear even more local history, stories, points of view and community news from their stations.

3.2.4 Ethnic audiences

At the time of preparing this submission, only one ethnic audience focus group had been completed, with audience members from Melbourne's 3CR Vietnamese Youth and Students program. We will not, therefore, report on any generally trends or findings in relation to ethnic radio and audiences as our data is limited. We did, however, find that participants in the Vietnamese focus group – which was run entirely in Vietnamese with

the assistance of a professional interpreter – provided comments which could be compared with those participants in some of our Indigenous focus groups. In particular, focus group participants mentioned the importance of the program in providing community news; updating community members on international episodes involving Vietnamese nationals; maintaining Vietnamese culture and language; and providing unique humour and entertainment to the community. Participants raised their love of the program's 'Live Karaoke' session, which saw listeners ring in to the station and sing their favourite songs down the telephone line, as one of the highlights of the program. They also felt greatly indebted to the volunteers who run the program, who they felt were exemplary in their commitment to the community and the maintenance of Vietnamese culture. Focus group participants found they had learned about many local families through the program, and the program was a means to connect with community members that they might otherwise never see:

We can ring up the program anytime, and talk about our problems or give our opinion on something and everyone will listen. And then sometimes someone will tell about their worries and other people will ring in and give advice to them about what they should do (Vietnamese focus group, 3CR, 2006).

Audience members gave anecdotes that other community members often recognized them in the street just from their voice – they had heard them on the station and came up to say hello because they recognized the tone of their voice. The ethnic focus group conducted in Melbourne was just the start of our ethnic audience data gathering, but already offers some interesting anecdotal information about the central role that some ethnic programming is playing.

3.2.5 Community Television

Results from this component of the community broadcasting sector are still emerging. Due to the only relatively recent allocation of full-time licenses to some stations (after a decade of temporary licenses and uncertainty), we have chosen to leave this aspect of the fieldwork until later in the year. In particular, stations in Brisbane, Lismore and Sydney have not been permanently broadcasting for long enough for us to run an audience focus group until this year. We did, however, complete a pilot at the beginning of this project which involved community television stations. However, findings were inconclusive due to the number of attendees and the 'pilot' nature of this initial fieldwork. We are leaving the majority of this fieldwork till June/July 2006. Early results from the Melbourne community television focus group suggest community television audiences identify the non-commercial nature of community television content, and the diversity in programming, as major benefits of the sector. Suggestions from the Melbourne community television focus group are that community television audiences do not feel (perhaps, due to the nature of television, *cannot* feel) the same level of access and participation that community radio audiences generally report.

The qualitative data on this aspect of the project will be reported towards the end of the year and in time for the committee's consideration.

4. Summary and Conclusions

And that's the whole thing – once people realise what it's about, they don't then say 'Well, you don't sound like the commercial radio stations. You don't do this, you don't do that. But you've got this whole specialness about you because of all the things you offer.' (Bathurst Focus Group, 2001)

Community broadcasting's unique position in the Australian media and its commitment to community should remain at the forefront for those involved in the implementation of policy and planning for the sector. Our research indicates Australia has already achieved a diverse and robust community broadcasting sector which is performing an important role in the Australian community. The goal is to support, improve and preserve that which already exists in a climate of technological change and rapid increase in station numbers. Given issues specific to Australia like the 'tyranny of distance', multiculturalism, Indigenous Australia, regionalism, and so on, community broadcasters are performing an integral and critical role in Australia. Via the broadcast of different cultures and interests, community broadcasters have, in more than 400 locations throughout Australia, already seized the opportunities enabled by the establishment of a community broadcasting sector.

Fundamentally, these broadcasters are active in the maintenance and affirmation of the different definitions of what it is to be Australian. Community broadcasters are able to perform this task because of their 'open door' policy and their willingness to embrace and nurture local communities of different interests. It is worth noting the 20,000+ volunteers who make the sector possible are the crux of the community broadcaster sector and any future planning for the sector should not underestimate their efforts and impact at the local level.

The majority of community radio stations operate on humble budgets. In addition to volunteer efforts to produce programming relevant to the needs of their community, these stations also expend much effort securing funding for their continued operation. While the 2005/06 Federal budget contained good news for the sector in terms of funding for transmission access and training, the dramatic increase in the number of stations in the past decade has seen a significant decline in core funding. Recent funding analysis by the CBF suggests that total Australian government support provided for community broadcasting over the past ten years through the Foundation has, when adjusted for the effects of inflation, not matched the rapid pace of sector growth. Over this period the number of long-term licensed community broadcasting services has increased by 54 percent while total real (CPI adjusted) funding has increased only by 31 percent. The real value of the sector's core (annual recurrent) funding has actually declined over the decade by 6 percent. Moreover, when the notional level of average funding available per service is considered the decline in resources is even more evident – the real level of total

funding per service has declined by 15 percent and the real level of core funding available per station has declined by 39 percent. As CBF funding is often provided for specific purposes in line with government objectives such as the support of Ethnic, Indigenous and RPH programs, funds are not distributed evenly and many stations have much more limited access to such funds. So alongside the development of locally relevant programming and negotiating 'communities with communities', in our experience, most community broadcasters also struggle with everyday expenses such as rent, electricity – or general operational expenses. Maintaining the everyday momentum of the station is a constant struggle for Australia's community broadcasters.

As this Standing Committee is interested to discover the 'opportunities and threats' to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters, we would suggest that the very real resource issues faced by most – but not all – community broadcasters is an immediate threat to their effectiveness and to their ability to deliver diverse and local content to their communities.

The prospect of digital radio services opens many avenues for stations to improve their services at the local level. The key criteria which differentiates the impact of digital for community broadcasters and other commercial broadcasters is their *modus operandi*. Community broadcasters operate to serve local communities and are able to do so without the demands associated with maximizing audiences and profit margins. Community broadcasting has always been about *people* rather than the capacity of technology to open new profitable avenues, etc as is – necessarily – the case in the commercial sector. They exist because of a need which arose within the Australian community to broadcast different ideas, values, beliefs, music etc relevant to those not represented in other media. From the start their operation was principally about the people and their desire to communicate rather than the propensity of new technology to deliver audiences to advertisers. The danger with the introduction of digital is that the chief reason for the success of community radio – its capacity to represent and connect local communities, or communities of interest – will be lost in the excitement to embrace the next big thing in technology. This exchange at Port Augusta highlights these issues:

So has it made any difference? You're saying that on the one hand it's good that people have the opportunity to upgrade their skills in terms of computers being the now and the future, but on the other hand having those computers there takes away some of that access and participation upon which the community radio was established?

It has the potential to – and I think that people who run these places have got to be very aware to draw the line, otherwise it doesn't become community anymore, does it? It becomes something that is just about completely automated, and there's someone very technically minded there to push the button and make sure it all works. That's not what community is about. Community is about people. If you can give them the skills to do what they need to do but still maintain the people – then you've got it right (Port Augusta Focus Group, 2001)

It is indeed, a delicate balance between procuring the possibilities of new technologies such as digital radio and ensuring that the ‘people’ are still at the forefront of the community broadcasting sector. Extensive consultation with sector representatives and stations will develop appropriate mechanisms to ensure the continued vibrancy of the community radio sector in the digital age. The sector itself has shown its ability to embrace and implement new technologies such as the development of the national content distribution platform, the Digital Delivery Network. Any future planning, digital or otherwise, for the sector must ensure that this valuable national resource is included as a ‘special case’. Given the extraordinary role that the community broadcasting sector is already performing in often pressing circumstances, any additional financial burden associated with the introduction of digital radio should be given serious consideration by governments. Further, any additional training should also be incorporated into delivery and funding mechanisms.

In summary, our research over the past seven years has discovered a robust Australian community broadcasting sector that is providing an enormous amount to the Australian community – regional, Indigenous, ethnic and metropolitan. The sector’s diverse programming, dedicated volunteers, commitment to community and its ability to reach into the lives of ordinary Australians is borne out by our studies with station managers, community radio volunteers, audience members and community groups who regularly access community radio.

The primary threats to the sector’s ability to develop its place in Australian society further are:

- the increasing pressures on individual stations to raise funds for basic operational costs;
- poor or non-existent government information campaigns that might help to raise the profile of the sector, and to enhance its audience penetration;
- lack of skilled station managers and operators in some remote locations that might ensure a more regular and original programming policy;
- lack of resources and skilled operators to provide a greater volume of local news and information.

The primary strengths that should be built upon to achieve a diverse and robust sector are:

- A well-established, experienced sector that, by and large, is well-connected to its targeted communities
- A strong and much-valued ethnic broadcasting sector that can build on the past 30 years of experience to improve the lives of new migrants and established ethnic communities;
- A growing Indigenous media sector that is providing daily examples of practical reconciliation and which is enhancing Indigenous community media skills; and also providing better understanding among non-Indigenous Australians of the unique Indigenous experience;

- An army of dedicated volunteers who are highly committed to their stations and their communities;
- An audience that is passionate about the sector's 'lack of slick', its diverse programming, its ability to provide non-commercial alternative entertainment and information, and for its openness to community participation and access.

The authors would be pleased to deal with any of the issues raised in the above submission in more detail at your public hearings.

Griffith University, March 23, 2006.

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