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General section

'The untapped potential of participation': Evaluating community-media audiences

Susan Forde, Michael Meadows, Jacqui Ewart and Kerrie Foxwell

The community media sector world-wide is expanding at an unprecedented rate. With the United Kingdom recently allocating its first permanent community media licences, and with the Australian community radio sector more than doubling in size in the past eight years to more than 260 stations in 2004, it is one of the few growing sectors in the traditional media landscape (Pew Centre 2003). The authors are currently undertaking a qualitative audience project examining the nature and motivations of community radio and television viewing in Australia. The audience focus groups for this project – 47 around the nation – are currently underway with a range of audiences from generalist, ethnic, Indigenous and specialist community broadcasting stations. This paper will canvass theoretical and methodological aspects of audience research, including a new approach the authors have adopted in enlisting community stations themselves as participants in the data-gathering process. One aim is to develop a cost-effective and reliable qualitative audience research method that could be used by community broadcasting stations globally. This paper will examine earlier research on audience and community media research methods, and provide original data regarding the authors' own research methods which engage the community media sector itself. The paper is designed to assess reflectively methodological issues in order to enable other media and journalism researchers to apply these methods to other fields of study.

Evidence emerging from around the world suggests independent and community media comprise the only sector that is actually growing in the Western mediascape. Certainly, in terms of the number of outlets the community sector is burgeoning worldwide. Research by multifarious authors attests to the growing importance of community, "grassroots", alternative and radical media sources. Much of this activity around the world has always been considered to be on the periphery of public sphere activity. Regardless of the difference in terminology, all of these incarnations essentially refer to different parts of the same sector—the non-commercial, niche publications and broadcast outlets which do not belong to any of the major media ownership chains. The Project for Excellence in Journalism reported recently in the United States that, along with the niche ethnic press, the alternative press in the US was the only part of the news media that had an increasing, rather than a shrinking, audience (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004). There are obvious signs that the US growth of alternative media outlets is also being felt in Australia and Europe – the phenomenal growth experienced by the community radio sector in Australia over the past decade is just one example. The number of community radio stations now surpasses the number of commercial broadcasting stations. The Australian Broadcasting Authority lists around 350 community broadcasters (including 77 specialist remote Indigenous community broadcasters) and 30 active aspirant stations working toward a full licence in 2005. In comparison, there are 255 commercial licences. In approximately 40 communities in Australia, community radio is the *only* broadcast service.

To complement this growth in the number of outlets, a 2004 quantitative survey of the community-broadcasting sector indicates that one in four Australians had listened to community radio in the previous week—and two in five had listened in the previous month (McNair Ingenuity 2004). These are surprisingly high audience figures and suggest an increasing audience for community and grassroots media outlets. It also suggests a change in the *raison d'etre* for community media in Australia to take a more serious approach to its

role in the public sphere as a genuine "third sector" in the broadcast environment. The authors' previous work has revealed a shift by community radio into regional Australia, the emergence of significant numbers of Indigenous and ethnic stations, and the existence across the sector of an estimated 25,000 volunteers who perform work estimated at $145 million each year (Forde, Meadows and Foxwell 2002). The authors' research has suggested that the community-broadcasting sector in Australia plays a significant role in contributing to public sphere debate through its program production processes. In this paper, the authors examine the methodological issues associated with conducting the first national qualitative audience study of community radio and television audiences around Australia. This work is particularly relevant to journalism educators and media researchers engaged in their own audience studies, and to scholars specialising in community and grassroots media forms who are looking for alternative and innovative ways of evaluating these organisations. This paper will examine, briefly, the contemporary nature of community media organisations and will background the current qualitative study, "Regional, Remote and Radical: Australia's Community Broadcasting Audiences Talk Back".

This paper does not provide a theoretical consideration (see, for example, Jankowski 2003) of the notion of "community" which, clearly, occurs in many different forms. A "community of interest" such as Sydney's gay community would expect and require quite a different radio service to that of a remote Aboriginal community in the central desert region. And yet, this project seeks to evaluate the audiences from both of those communities. There are many different forms of "community" and community broadcasting occurs in many guises – some models are clearly more successful than others. What the authors' research is attempting to do is not to "evaluate" the success or otherwise of particular community media outlets – that was primarily done as part of the authors' last project (Forde et.al. 2002). What the authors are trying to do is learn *why* community media audiences access community media – is it as a tool for political action? To feel they are "part" of and contributing to their local

community? Or perhaps to undertake voluntary work for a local charity group that runs a program on community radio? To maintain their native language, or indeed, to access information in their own language that they cannot access through the mainstream media? And, importantly, are the station audiences the authors are canvassing satisfied with the service being provided by their local community outlet? What do they like or dislike about the service? Within this research framework the authors are investigating issues of empowerment; civic action; participation; access and community service from the perspective of a range of community media audiences. The qualitative audience research project has received funding from the Australian Research Council, along with financial and in-kind support from the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, the Community Broadcasting Foundation and the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia. The central component of this paper provides an original analysis of the research methodology applied in this research, and the place of this method in the existing literature. Finally, the authors wish to explore the potential for this method to be applied to a range of community media and other general audience studies.

Background to the study

During the authors' previous station-based study of Australian community radio, two interrelated issues emerged in relation to audience research. Firstly, stations generally agreed that their inability to participate in the larger commercial audience surveys adversely affected their ability to provide potential sponsors with market information. Typical of this dilemma, a participant commented that:

> It doesn't matter what your philosophical point of view is—when it comes sponsorship they are all going to ask the question "What am I going to get out of it apart from a nice warm glow feeling that I am helping the radio station?"... That is something we are lacking in community radio. We do not have that statistical information [about audiences]... (Brisbane Focus Group 2001).

Secondly, stations were aware that "audience share" was not an absolute priority and as community broadcasters, servicing an audience ignored by mainstream radio services was an important contribution to their communities of interest (Adelaide Focus Group 2001). The authors' national qualitative project is a response to this expressed need within the sector and indeed, based on comments from the authors' colleagues both inside and outside the journalism education sector. Simply – How can you properly evaluate these organisations if you don't know how many people are actually listening? Or if you have no idea why they listen? The project was designed to complement the national quantitative study completed by McNair Ingenuity Research in 2004. McNair was commissioned by the sector's peak representative organisation, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) to conduct a large-scale survey of the Australian population in order to measure the size of the community radio audience. The report found that just under one quarter of the population aged 15 or more listened to community radio in a typical week and that 685,000 people (aged 15 and over) listened exclusively in a typical week. These statistics are critical to the sector, especially in terms of acknowledgement of its central, cultural role along with offering individual stations some basis for seeking sponsorship. The figures give the sector reliable and certifiable data upon which a myriad of claims, justifications and evidence of "service" can be based. The quantitative project also provides some guidance for the qualitative audience research project.

The qualitative project is investigating in greater depth the reasons why audiences choose to listen, and the role local programs play in their everyday lives. Importantly, it is also concerned with evaluating the role that community broadcasting outlets play within their community – whether that be a "local" geographical community or a community of interest. The qualitative project and its emphasis on an in-depth and contextualised understanding of community broadcasting audiences aims to add a significant dimension to the authors' knowledge of community broadcasting audiences. This is

especially the case where audiences may be comparatively small, such as some ethnic and Indigenous audiences, but nevertheless provide a critical service and/or cultural resource to their specific "community of interest". The National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council, for example, had specific objections to the quantitative study, arguing that an exercise in "counting" would fail effectively to capture its role in ethnic communities.

Ewart (2000) has found that that local media "both produce and maintain the culture of a community" and, in doing so, play a central role in creating a community public sphere. Community media are thus important—and overlooked—resources to enlist and to incorporate into research methods. The authors are using community broadcasters to help them to identify their audiences to enable further focus group work to be done. The importance of using the qualitative research to investigate further some of the findings of the McNair Ingenuity quantitative study cannot be underestimated. A number of the stations have, when the authors have begun organising the focus groups, requested specific numbers about their audiences. "I just want to know whether there's five people listening to me or 500," one regional Queensland announcer explained. While the McNair findings cannot be broken down into individual station figures, they do provide some indication of state-based and national audience size, and the nature of the community media audiences which the authors' qualitative work can now expand upon and investigate in more detail. At the completion of this project, the authors as researchers, the community media sector and the government Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts will have a comprehensive view of the size of community media audiences along with more detailed information about their viewing habits, reasons why they watch/listen and the overall "place" of community media outlets in their communities of interest. In line with the authors' previous project, then, which combined a quantitative telephone-administered survey with a series of focus groups, this study also looks to combine the findings of

both quantitative and qualitative research. The authors' methodology comprises three major components:

- Semi-structured interviews with a "key person" at each chosen radio station, usually the station manager, to discuss the station's role in the project and any audience work that may have gone before
- Semi-structured interviews with a representative from a "key community group" that regularly produces programming for the station, or accesses the station with community notices, announcements, sponsorship etc
- Audience focus groups comprising 6-10 audience members for each radio or television station from a range of metropolitan, regional, and remote locations

Where necessary, one-on-one follow-up interviews with focus group participants who may have been unable, for cultural reasons, to contribute fully to the focus group discussion will occur. This is consistent with advice from researchers well-experienced in focus group method (see, for example, Michell 1999; Baker & Hinton 1999), and also was advice received from some of the authors' industry partners from the ethnic and Indigenous representative bodies. While the focus of the project is the series of 47 audience focus groups, the preceding semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with station managers and community group representatives will provide important data which will complement and to some extent test the focus group data. The semi-structured component of the methodology also sits well with the team of researchers—all former journalists and current journalism educators—who are familiar with the semi-structured interview method (Bowd 2004).

Theoretical basis for the method

Overwhelmingly, the authors were concerned to adopt a research method which would complement the nature, goals and

processes of the community media sector. The authors' primary field of theoretical investigation concerns notions of the public sphere, and the emergence of a true "community" public sphere in the Australian media landscape. As such the democratic and cooperative nature of focus groups held great appeal. Gibson and Cameron, in devising a list of research priorities within the community research field, suggest priority should be given to "researching and developing mechanisms for promoting active citizenship within all types of communities, especially in disadvantaged areas" (2001: 22). By involving community media organisations in the authors' research method, and through encouraging audience involvement and participation in discussions about community media, the authors are—by the very nature of the authors' methodology—attempting to achieve this aim of active citizenship. Further, Gibson and Cameron suggest that an important step towards developing a research agenda on "transforming communities" is to document:

> Best practice examples of projects that promote active and sustained involvement in a range of tasks by community members, especially those usually marginalised from decision-making processes (2001: 22).

The authors' methodology has the potential to empower community broadcasters through providing them with a cheap and effective method for investigating their audiences. This is a significant goal of the research team: to ensure that the participatory and active role of participants in this project is transferred into a tangible and useful method for future application. Rodriguez is supportive of this type of approach but questions the availability of a research method which will be able to accurately assess this community involvement, achievement and cultural contribution provided by such media:

> Given the fact that several of their achievements happen at extremely subtle levels, designing criteria to evaluate citizens' media becomes a difficult task. How can we design and implement criteria to evaluate the transformation of cultural codes or the emergence of a new discourse that forges the

> previously marginalized experience of a disempowered group? (2001: 162-163)

Rodriguez argues that "long-term, fieldwork-rich studies of citizens' media"—both qualitative and quantitative studies—would allow them to detect these types of subtle processes of social change. While not without its critics, qualitative research—and specifically the focus group method—is primarily a cycle of "shared activities and understandings" (Kitzinger & Barbour 1999: 18) where relationships between the researcher and the researched are potentially transformed to enable a more democratic process—essentially, it is about shared responsibility, knowledge and power (Kitzinger & Barbour 1999: 18). This approach, with its emphasis on democracy, sits well with the sector's own philosophies of democratic access and participation in broadcasting. Importantly, the authors' approach uses the actual audiences of community media to evaluate their performance. Of course, audiences will not frame their evaluation in terms of "discourse" and the "transformation of cultural codes". However, these audiences will evaluate community media in terms which relate to its purpose and utility in the context of the quotidian. For example, participants in a regional Queensland focus group (Hervey Bay, 26 May 2005) were asked about the on-air quality of their local community radio announcers, which prompted laughter within the group:

> *First participant*: Oh yes, they do get themselves into trouble sometimes in there. There's always some machine breaking or some music that won't work. It makes me laugh.
>
> *Second participant*: Well, we don't mind that because we know they're volunteers and they're in there doing their best. We appreciate it that they're playing all the music we want to hear so I don't mind if they mess it sometimes. At least we know they're a real person.

This exchange indicates that issues such as the "amateur" voices sometimes heard on community radio are indeed the very reason

people listen – because they feel the announcers and programme producers are "one of them" rather than a far more skilled and unapproachable professional. Further, this focus group exchange shows how audiences members can describe their shared (or not) responses and reactions to their community media drawing on their everyday lives.

Another critical aspect in the authors' theoretical approach is specific identification of "alternative" media audiences as both producers and audience members. The vertical communication model evident in most (particularly mainstream) media organisations does not apply in alternative media nor in community broadcasting outlets – horizontal communication between producers and audiences "will be crucial in furthering the primary aim of social change" (Atton 2002: 51). Atton identifies that many audience members for alternative press outlets will be both "writers and readers" – the same scenario is evident in community radio. The authors' method is designed to determine the levels to which the key community groups which are regularly accessing and participating in community broadcasting are both "writers and readers". The authors concur with Carpentier et al (2003:63) that the opportunities for two-way communication are hampered by the "abundance of specific technologies oriented towards one way communication" and the concurrent lack of "two-way communication skills and interest". However the two-way communication that exists between community media producers/volunteers and their audiences is nevertheless a significant site of public sphere activity. The recent increase in community media and its propensity to democratise *through* the media (Wasko & Mosco 1992: 13) signals an opportunity for social change. As such, the authors' project could be described as "participatory research" which allows the researched to do (or guide) their own research with a view to instigating social change. Servaes (2001:6)

> Why is it such a great deal of research has been conducted about participation in a non-participatory manner?

Involving the audience and community groups in research about their local community media and the flexibility fostered by both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions creates an opportunity for the "researched" to participate in the project in a meaningful way – especially by challenging power relations between the authors and their research subjects – community media audiences.

The authors' previous research has suggested that community media in Australia generally feel they are under-valued and unrecognised by other media sectors and by policy makers but that, given the chance for comprehensive research, their important cultural and community role would be substantiated. In his study of an Amsterdam community television station, Jankowski found that "qualitative methodologies were the foundation of a better understanding of what community media are -- and might become" (1991: 173). Jankowski perceptively notes that at his time of writing, most of the qualitative research on community media remained to be undertaken, and also noted the great need for work "on the tension between professional media routines and "ordinary" citizens seeking a medium and a form of expression for their concerns" (Jankowski 1991: 173). He goes further:

> Similarly, the audience use of community programming is not well understood, in part because it has been almost exclusively studied with quantitative methodologies. The qualitative approaches to audiences' needs and experiences of mass communication . . . will be highly relevant in the context of community media.

Why focus groups for audience research?

In the late 1990s there was a three-fold increase in the number of focus group studies published in academic journals, with the

method gaining particular ground in the media/cultural studies fields, health research, and a wide range of social sciences (Kitzinger & Barbour 1999: 1). Wimmer & Dominick point out that focus groups work best, however, when combined with other methodologies due to the fact that focus group sizes are often small – and also that the success of focus groups depends heavily on the skills of the moderator/facilitator (1987: 151-153). While market researchers have been the most enthusiastic proponents of the focus group method, they see participants as "consumers" rather than as the "citizens" (see Cunningham-Burley et al for more on this contrasting view of focus group participation 1999). Green sees the shift towards focus groups as a popular research tool among academics as evidence of the "commercialisation" of university research, and evidence of the current environment which requires academics to become more industry-relevant (1999: 42). It has been the authors' experience, however, that while commercial market research companies – and media organisations – may find the focus group method useful for gauging group responses, it is independently useful also to the authors' type of research which is investigating the cultural aspects of community broadcasting and attempting to determine how "an audience" (which is a group of individuals) perceives, discusses and relates to community radio and television.

> Focus groups are group discussions exploring a specific set of issues. The group is "focused" in that it involves some kind of collective activity – such as viewing a video, examining a single health promotion message, or simply debating a set of questions. Crucially, focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by the explicit use of group interaction to generate data (Kitzinger et al 1999: 4).

Consistent with the authors' concern to leave the research framework relatively open, and to ensure community radio and television audiences were expressing—in their words—their responses to the community nature of their media outlets, the focus groups are;

> particularly useful for allowing participants to generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary. . . interviews are more effective for tapping into individual biographies, but focus groups are invaluable for examining how knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges operate within a given cultural context (Kitzinger et al 1999: 5).

These issues are particularly important in dealing with ethnic and Indigenous community media audiences, but are also essential in accurately evaluating audiences for generalist metropolitan and regional community media outlets. As Seale et al (2004:2) suggest, qualitative research practice is not a linear process. It involves "an engagement with a variety of things and people", including the research team's own past experience and aspirations. They conclude practicing researchers should write about their work in a "methodologically reflective way" in order for other researchers to learn from their experience (Seale et al 2004: 2).:

MacNaughten and Myers offer the example of public opinion on environmental problems as an example of a topic worthy of focus group discussion. Where surveys of public opinion on environmental problems would assume a certain "understanding" of what the "environment" is, or what an environmental problem is (and indeed how the interviewee relates to these problems), the focus group would in fact discover that different people may have very different perspectives on what the environment is—what constitutes an environmental problem and what role or influence they may have on the problem (2004: 65). Similarly, the authors are exploring notions of "community" through a study of community broadcasting, but it is not enough to simply survey audiences and ask them what the station means to them according to a range of categories. The authors are discovering that people have different perceptions of what the term "community" means—focus group participants sometimes ask for clarification when the authors ask general questions like, "What sort of contribution is the local [community] station making to your community?" Focus groups, in the authors' case then, enable deeper investigation of notions of community and also allow them to delve

further into issues that are of particular interest to the research team such as delivery of community news; the ways audiences use community radio and television as a source of news and current affairs; and the importance of local content.

Evolution of the methodology

Horsfall et al refer to "critical moments" in research, suggesting that most researchers reach points at which their method either does not work, their subjects fail to cooperate or the synthesis of data and previous research just does not occur as easily as it should (2001: 3-4). They suggest that while published articles and books give the impression that research is a simple, seamless process, in fact most researchers confront these critical moments in their research projects. While the authors' methodology is working successfully more than 12 months into the project, this does not suggest the authors have not had the authors' share of "critical moments" and the authors wish to outline some of them here, as a way to inform other scholars about the strengths and weaknesses of the various methods the authors are applying.

There was significant debate in the early stages of the project to identify the 45 stations that would be the focus of the authors' work – 25 generalist stations in metropolitan and regional areas; 10 Indigenous stations in regional and remote areas; and 10 ethnic language groups that could be used to investigate programming in that particular ethnic community. A more detailed discussion of the process the authors went through to identify the stations is detailed elsewhere (Meadows, Forde, Ewart, Foxwell 2005) – but it was an important component of the process for them as researchers, and for the authors' industry partners as sector representatives, to arrive at an appropriate representative and broad final list. Certainly, the evolution of the authors' methodology has been influenced greatly by the authors' frequent meetings and discussions with the authors' industry partners and sector representatives from Australia's

community-broadcasting sector. Their input, as either bureaucrats (often with a history of volunteerism in community media) or sector representatives has provided very specific insights into a diverse and complex sector.

The complexity of interests represented by the Australia's community radio sector – from regional ethnic groups to Perth's radio for the print handicapped, to remote indigenous radio in the Kimberley region and Melbourne's popular 3RRR – deems the on-the-ground and specialist insights of the authors' advisory committee critical to the authors' methodology. The authors have learnt that while their theoretical musings (and those of theirs colleagues) about community media are both interesting and useful, there is no wisdom like experience. For example, the authors' interaction with the NEMBC (National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters) enlightened them about specific ethnic tensions within stations and to the various cultural protocols which need to be considered before choosing and approaching ethnic audiences. These quite incidental findings which arise when you seek the opinions and advice of the "researched" epitomises the key advantage of participatory qualitative research.

An important and innovative component of the authors' method sees the project using community broadcasters to help them to identify their audiences. The process of identifying focus group participants begins during the "key person" interview. Either a station manager or someone in a similar coordination role is asked some background information about the station, perceptions of audiences, details of previous audience studies etc, and is asked to put in place a range of strategies to identify focus group participants. These strategies include running a 45-second broadcast announcement on high rotation for about four weeks before the focus group is planned, inviting audience members to participate; placing community notices in local newspapers encouraging audience members to leave their details with a 1800 phone number, OR with

the station; organising a mail-out to all subscribers and/or members inviting their participation; and finally ensuring regular announcers on the station are running specific "program plugs" to encourage participation.

Once a list of potential focus group participants is made, a senior researcher on the project then begins the process of calling back all potential participants, and attempting to ensure their participation. The authors attempt to receive agreement from about 12 people that they will attend – this usually results in about eight people actually turning up. While it is not necessary for focus group composition to be statistically representative (Glaser & Strauss 1967), the authors do of course endeavour to ensure reasonable structured representation in terms of age and gender. The focus group discussions form the core of the study. The authors are conducting between 47 focus groups: 22 metropolitan and regional, 10 ethnic language groups, 10 Indigenous and 5 community television. Once an audience sample has been selected, members of each focus group will be encouraged to nominate their priorities for discussion before canvassing common themes to be explored in every focus group. This process of focus group research organisation and execution is more collaborative than other methods and can be an empowering process for participants (Criterion Research 2002, Catterall and Maclaran 1997) and supports the authors' preference for participatory research.

The size of the focus groups has emerged as something of an issue for the authors' methodology. Initial audience focus groups with community television audiences in Adelaide, Perth and Melbourne attracted six, five and four participants respectively. Advice from the Communications Research Unit within the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, one of the project's industry partners, suggested that the focus groups with only four or five participants should be re-run as the standard literature indicated focus group sizes of eight to 12 were required. In fact, while this is a standard focus group size for market

research most sociological research suggest groups of five-six are more appropriate (Kitzinger et al 1999: 8). Of course, each research project must assess its own minimum number of participants necessary for a viable focus group. In the authors' case, given the high number of focus groups occurring throughout Australia, the occasional smaller group will not compromise the integrity of the project. Following further experience with community radio audiences, the authors have set a minimum attendance of six focus group participants for the authors' study, and a maximum of around 10. Any more than would hinder comments and conversation being shared evenly among the group – but any less than six can be unrepresentative both in terms of attitude and basic demographics such as age and gender.

Michell suggests combining focus group research with one-on-one interviews in some data collection, to ensure all voices have a chance to be heard (1999: 36). It has certainly been the authors' experience in researching community radio audiences that some focus group participants dominate discussion and that in a large group dissenting voices may be reluctant to speak up. In the ethnic language focus groups which will be rolled out through 2005 and early 2006, opportunities for one-on-one comment will be provided, particularly as advice from ethnic community representatives suggested that in some cultures, women or young people may be unable to speak while there are men in the group. Others suggested that if there were elderly men present, the entire focus group would have to listen to that one participant until they were finished what they were saying, on all occasions. For this reason, an additional method which enabled these focus group participants to provide additional answers to a hard-copy open-ended questionnaire, and also to contact the researchers after the focus group ensured more accurate views from these participants could be obtained. Michell summarises (1999: 36):

> I urge researchers always at least to consider the voices which may be silenced in the particular group research settings they employ, particularly when working with "captive populations" where research participants have on-going social relations which may be compromised by public disclosure.

A poor response to some of the early community radio broadcast announcements prompted them to rethink the authors' initial methods of attracting participants, and also highlighted some limitations of the method. The authors were aware that market research focus groups often offered cash payment for attendance at focus groups. One way sociological researchers often worked around this was to run their focus groups at times when their target participants might be meeting anyway – such as after a P&C meeting for a focus group of local parents; or after a football match for a focus group discussing sexual harassment in rugby union (Kitzinger et al 1999: 10). However, there was no real way that some of the authors' community media audiences might be otherwise meeting – they were, in many cases, strangers from the same community who needed to come together to discuss the radio or television station.

While it was possible to conduct some of the ethnic and Indigenous focus groups during cultural festivals and the like, it was not possible to do this for the 27 focus groups for generalist metropolitan and regional community television and radio stations. As a result, the authors decided to offer a $1000 cash incentive to participants – all focus group participants from the range of 52 focus groups would have their name placed in a draw, and at the completion of the project a winning entry would be drawn. This solved a short-term problem of attracting enough participants to a metropolitan Brisbane, and a regional Queensland focus group – although the large majority of respondents insisted they would have attended the focus group regardless of the incentive. The authors will continue to monitor whether this method is significantly enhancing the authors' participation rates or not. One of the limitations that has emerged is that the success of the focus group is dependent on the

enthusiasm of the selected station for the project – stations that are committed to ensuring good numbers at the focus group inevitably run their broadcast announcement on high rotation and provide administrative support to the research team where necessary. However, some under-staffed stations or outlets that are "in limbo" are less enthusiastic to assist with the research and this can impact on attendance at the focus group. The authors' overall sense, though, is that the benefits of involving the stations in the research, as a "participatory" research model, outweigh some of the limitations that the authors have encountered.

Specific approaches for ethnic and Indigenous audiences

Discussions with the authors' advisory committee have led to the representative body for ethnic broadcasters, the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasting Council, advising them on 11 languages and specific programs that could be targeted for the authors' focus groups. Their brief was to identify a sample of languages representing a mix of established and emerging communities, large and small communities and so on. With more than 100 languages now broadcasting regularly on Australian community radio, it was not a simple task to reduce this down to 10. The authors have also analysed current ABS reports in order to attain an overview of languages in Australia, and received information from Centrelink regarding their own recent research into preferred information sources for range of established and emerging language communities. After due deliberation the NEMBC has suggested the following 11 language groups which represent ethnic programming from a range of metropolitan, regional, youth and seniors perspectives, along with also providing a mix of both established and emerging ethnic communities. The language groups proposed are Macedonian, Vietnamese, Turkish, Chinese, Greek, Filipino/Tagalog, Indonesian, Croatian, Serbian, Tongan and Sudanese. This list, at the time of writing, was under discussion by the researchers and the project's Advisory Committee but is likely to be accepted considering the large amounts of time and effort that the NEMBC dedicated to devising this list and to ensuring its representativeness on a range of

levels. Chiu and Knight found focus groups featuring a bi-lingual translator worked best if the focus group participants were free to talk in their own language, with the translator doing the bulk of the mediation work – the primary researcher was best in these situations to primarily observe interactions, emotions and group dynamics (1999: 105). The authors expect the authors' focus groups which are run in one language only – the native tongue of the focus group participants – will run similarly to this with the primary researchers analysing the data after a full transcription is provided by the bi-lingual moderator, and with the moderator's input.

Our method in approaching and talking with Indigenous community media audiences differs quite significantly from the authors' approach for generalist metropolitan and regional stations, and also diverges from the approach used for ethnic community groups. A crucial element for success in Indigenous audience research has required members of the research team to strengthen existing relationships and create new ones in selected areas to establish a dialogue with community elders and local broadcasters. This is essential if the authors are to have any hope of being given reliable information (Morris and Meadows 2001; Michaels 1985). In order deal appropriately and effectively with these audiences, Indigenous researcher Derek Flucker is working with the research team specifically to assist in liaising with Indigenous communities and in the application and analysis of data from these sources (this role was previously filled by Christine Morris). Thies' "research as dialogue" model was engaged which suggests preparatory discussions with the communities being researched, to give them the opportunity to have some input into the way the research is structured (Thies 1987; and Sanderson & Allard 2003). Sanderson and Allard (2003: 25) reinforce that:

> Such an approach gives the community at least partial ownership of the research project and makes seeking permission from the community for the research to go ahead far more meaningful.

It was decided early, along with advice from both IRCA and AICA, that traditional focus group method was inappropriate and would not be successful in Indigenous communities which were regularly seeing researchers come and go without ever really "giving back" to the community. The underlying principle is that research of this type must, as far as possible, try to align itself with everyday activities. If it is seen to be too far outside the ordinary, then people are entitled to ask: "Why bother to participate in this? How will it help them or the authors' community?" Thus, the authors' approach will entail a mix of focus group interviews in urban and larger regional centres, and more interactive strategies for remote audiences. This has already manifested in the attendance by Chief Investigator Michael Meadows and the Indigenous researchers at a range of Indigenous media events – at the time of writing, the BRACS Radio and Video Festival in Alice Springs; the Garma festival in Arnhem Land which they received special permission to attend; the Laura Cultural Festival in Cape York along with attendance at a range of industry-organised meetings and conferences (attendance at other events, such as the famous Stompem Ground in Broome; the Torres Strait Cultural Festival and the Croc Festival in Geraldton are planned for the latter half of 2005).

The benefit of this more informal and participatory approach ensures contact is made with community and industry representatives early, and at regular intervals. Both Morris and Meadows have been involved in this process in their prior work, particularly in the Torres Strait. This work involved employing a local research assistant to work with—and to learn from—the team as well as the delivery of specific hands-on training in broadcasting skills to nominated community members (Morris and Meadows 2001). This approach also ensures that the "reciprocity" philosophy which drives the Indigenous component of the authors' research – that the communities should gain some benefit for their involvement – also receives a strong foundation through regular interaction with community people. For example, attendance at the Alice Springs

Indigenous Telecommunications conference led to conversations which indicated a number of communities were interested in the Federal government's new Shared Responsibility Agreements, and in tapping into the Indigenous researcher's ability to identify potential funding and granting opportunities for their community organisations. The researchers were then able to begin work on "returning the favour" provided by the Indigenous communities – who have given them access to their communities to conduct the research – by participating in work which will provide real outcomes for the communities beyond the research project.

Conclusion

There seems little doubt that the rise of community media outlets and the subsequent increasing research attention given to them is linked to the content crisis currently being experienced by global mainstream media. At the same time as profit margins increase for major media conglomerates, their audiences have been in steady decline—particularly in the daily newspaper market. In the United States, one study has found that the majority of journalists are unhappy with the state of their profession, primarily because of the increasing impact of commercial pressures on their work (Pew Research Centre 2003; Kovach, Rosenstiel and Mitchell 2003). While an audience study of local news and content in community media might provide some explanation for the growth of community media (and the decreasing audiences for mainstream news), it would fail to properly evaluate the holistic role that community media outlets appear to be playing. In order to understand these processes it is necessary to develop new ways of doing audience/media research:

> Too many analyses of the democratisation of communication lack acceptance and understanding of the diffuse nature of power struggles and negotiations. Only when the authors learn to design theories and methods able to accompany the fluidity of citizens negotiating power will the authors do justice to people and their

actions of shaping everyday lives. What the authors commonly do – formulating a theory of how social change should happen and dissecting specific cases in relation to such criteria – will continue the authors' myopic understanding of citizens' media. ..[It is] this explosion of communication at the local level that makes citizens' media into empowering tools for democracy. The disruption of established relations of power is a "messy" enterprise, and the authors' attempts to impose order and organisation will only cause the authors' "alienation from these processes" (Rodriguez 2001: 160-161).

It is important to note that the authors began their work on the community radio sector as journalism educators, wishing to delve into the informational role of these organisations and to evaluate the contribution (if any) they were making to the public sphere in terms of providing diverse and alternative news and current affairs. Through the development of the authors' latest completed project, however, and the early phases of this new project it has become clearer to them that the role of the community media goes well beyond the simple notion of "providing alternative or independent information" – indeed it was the sector itself that first pointed out to them that such a framework was far too narrow for what they do. So the authors now find ourselves working within the much larger field of evaluating a community media organisation on a range of levels – its place in the community; its role in community development; as a site for access and participation by "ordinary" citizens; as an example of the variously theorised forms of "citizens", "alternative", "radical" "grassroots" and "independent" media outlets; and, additionally as a source of alternative news and information. Similarly, the discussion here then is broader than a discussion of how audiences perceive community media's contribution to news and information – it delves more fully into their "community" role and the multi-faceted nature of this.

Couldry (2002:26) challenges the agenda of academic media research asserting that a possible reason for the academic neglect of

community media is that it is "media practice outside institutional centres" and "inevitably messy". He continues:

> They operate across many sites and on many scales, with greater or lesser success and breadth of impact. As a result, it often seems more convenient to ignore them, perhaps claiming that their impacts are small, or at least under-researched... if we are concerned with the broader social processes of mediation – characterised by an extremely uneven distributed of symbolic resources – then ignoring alternative media is not only arbitrary, but it misses the key point about them, that they are the weapons of the weak.

The authors have attempted in the authors' methodology to operate within the "messy" realm which is community broadcasting by allowing, to some extent, the community media sector and their audiences to shape the authors' methodology. The authors have tried to capitalise on the sector's premise of "participation" by making this a central and critical foundation of the authors' own research practice. The authors' efforts in community media recognise that this emerging force in the mediasphere signals a small fissure in traditional mainstream media relations between producers and audiences – there are signs of social change occurring at various sites around the world which can be linked to the development of community media and their role in democratisation through media. While numbers can be useful in defining the boundaries of community media, the authors are seeking to answer the more difficult "how" and "why" questions by applying a series of participatory qualitative methods which engage both the sector and its audiences. It is through this approach, the authors argue, that the full impact of this burgeoning sector in Australia might be acknowledged and understood.

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