Fifty years of resistance and representation: a historical account of Australian community radio

Heather Anderson, Griffith University
Bridget Backhaus, Griffith University
Juliet Fox, University of Melbourne
Charlotte Bedford, University of Adelaide

Abstract

This article outlines the early history of the Australian community radio sector. It focuses on three of the country’s oldest stations – Radio Adelaide, 4ZZZ and 3CR – to document the establishment and growth of the sector over the past fifty years. Two theoretical lenses are identified from the literature on Australian community broadcasting, loosely categorized as citizens’ media and empowerment media, and these are evident in the narratives of the case study stations. A third framework – social movement theory – is proposed for further understanding the value of community broadcasting and its contributions to the wider media landscape.

Word count: 8361
Introduction

Community broadcasting is an essential part of the Australian media landscape. Formally enshrined in legislation in 1978, the community radio sector in Australia is one of the most well-established and longest running in the world. A number of community radio stations will commemorate 50 years of broadcasting in the early and mid 2020s, and, far from mellowing with age, the sector continues to thrive as a site for facilitating media diversity, access, participation and representation.

This article outlines the early history of the Australian community radio sector. Using a collective case study approach (Stake 1995), it focuses on three of the country’s oldest stations – Radio Adelaide in Adelaide, South Australia, 4ZZZ in Brisbane, Queensland and 3CR in Melbourne, Victoria – to document the establishment and growth of the sector. Two theoretical lenses are identified from the literature on Australian community broadcasting, loosely categorized as citizens’ media and empowerment media, and these are evident in the narratives of all three case study stations. While it is acknowledged the community broadcasting sector in Australia does not exist purely as a vehicle for social justice, and many stations are quite conservative (on-air and off), we argue that community radio grew out of a social movement to democratize the media landscape, thus a social movement lens offers a promising area of future research.

The Australian community radio landscape

According to the Broadcasting Services Act 1992, Australian community broadcasting services are to be used for community purposes, are not-for-profit, and are freely available to the general public. Stations are further governed by the Community Radio Broadcasting Codes of Practice which detail operational standards, guiding principles, and policies for programming (CBAA, 2020). Community broadcasting represents the largest independent media sector in Australia: there are more than 450 community radio stations drawing a listenership of almost 6 million people, or roughly 1 in 4 Australians (McNair yellowSquares, 2019).

Community radio listeners tune in for a number of reasons, though primarily to access local news and information, to hear local voices and personalities, and also to listen to specialist music (McNair yellowSquares, 2019). Australian community radio stations serve a range of communities of interest including: First Nations people, youth, senior citizens, religious communities, special interests such a music and fine arts, LGBTIQ communities, ethnic communities, as well as those providing services for
people with print disabilities (CBAA, 2020). Community radio also plays a vital role in providing information and sense of community to rural Australians. 76 percent of Australian community radio stations are located in regional and remote areas, with one-third of these stations reporting that they are the only media outlet producing local programming in their area (CBAA, 2020).

While the Australian community radio sector enjoys a robust listenership, the support of government waxes and wanes. The federal government budgets of both 2013 and 2016 threatened significant cuts to the sector, in both cases it took significant national campaigns to overturn the decisions (Henry, 2016; CBAA News, 2013). Given the limited nature of government support, the sector is largely self-funded and thus faces significant challenges in terms of financial sustainability. While there are a limited number of grants made available through the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF), an independent, not-for-profit funding agency, these grants represent just 7.5% of sector income (CBF, 2020). Under-funding and lack of resources are chronic problems for the sector (Forde, Meadows and Foxwell, 2002a; Price-Davies and Tacchi, 2001). Stations are limited to just five minutes of advertising per hour (ACMA, 2008), restricting that source of income and forcing stations to rely on other funding sources such as sponsorship, subscriptions, and selling airtime (Order, 2016). Such funding models have resulted in somewhat of an identity crisis for the sector, forcing stations to adopt more commercial formats to attract listeners and sponsors; the “creep of commercialism” is an ongoing concern (Forde, Meadows and Foxwell, 2002a, p. 98-99; Meadows, Forde, Ewart and Foxwell, 2009; Order, 2016).

Despite struggles for sustainability, the Australian community radio sector has proved remarkably resilient to other challenges. Community radio is said to be under threat in the Global North due to neoliberal media policies (Cammaerts, 2009) and the rise of digital media and podcasting were broadly heralded as the demise of community broadcasting (Miller, 2017). Yet there are compelling arguments to suggest that this is not quite the case in Australia, with programs focused on grassroots community engagement proving resilient to the incursions of digital and commercial media (Anderson and Rodríguez, 2019). Community engagement and hyperlocalism remain key strengths of community radio, as demonstrated through examples like Radio Seeds, a program produced by women with lived prison experience (Anderson and Bedford, 2019), and the Remote Indigenous Media Organisations, which are owned and operated by First Nations Australians and broadcast positive stories about their communities including in-language programming (CBAA, 2019). Despite the challenges, community radio continues to play an important role for communities who are ignored by mainstream media, acting as a source of information, social connection, and identity.
While community radio has a long history in Australia, the same cannot be said for the scholarship surrounding it. It is really only the last two decades that have seen the growth of a vibrant research culture focused on community radio, its role in Australian society, and in the broader global context. Forde, Meadows and Foxwell (2002a) highlight the limited literature that documents the early stages of community radio implies grassroots and, to some extent, radical beginnings. Now however, as an established sector and related field of research, there is a sufficient body of work to identify the key theoretical themes used to interrogate community radio in Australia. These can be broadly classified into a citizens’ media perspective and empowerment.

The first key theoretical framework that has guided community radio research in Australia is that of citizens’ media. Drawing on Mouffe and McClure’s work on radical democracy, a citizens’ media perspective offers a way of examining power relations and voice within a pluralist society (Fox, 2019; Rodriguez, 2001). Rodriguez (2001) argues that citizens’ media are important sites where communities are able to actively enact citizenship. In Australia, several authors have drawn on this framework as a way of understanding how community radio contributes to democracy and social change. In her widely cited work, *Community Media: A Global Introduction*, Australian researcher Ellie Rennie refers to citizens’ media as a way of moving community media theorizing into line with “contemporary thinking about power, citizenship and media use” (2006, p. 188). In terms of research specifically focused on the Australian sector, Ewart found that community radio is “a crucial point of connection with Australian society” for newly arrived and more settled immigrant communities, and makes a “significant contribution” to civic lives and the functioning of democracy (2012, p. 132). More recently, in a transnational study of community radio stations in Timor-Leste and Australia, Fox employed a citizens’ media framework to analyze the role of community radio in social change by deconstructing the “disturbance of multiple layers of power through alternative media practice” (2019, p. 61). A citizens’ media framework, in different forms, has been widely used and is broadly applicable to much of the research into community radio in Australia.

The second key theoretical frame that has been employed by Australian community radio researchers is empowerment. The seminal work of Meadows, Forde, Ewart and Foxwell (2007) was critical in introducing empowerment as a broad theoretical framework for community radio. In their significant study into community radio audiences in Australia, Meadows et al applied this empowerment lens as a way of understanding the community radio sector’s impact at the level of community (and the individuals within), the media, and society, more broadly. An empowerment framework has links with a citizens’ media approach. As Foxwell et al (2008, p. 10) explain, it is the fissures in power relations instigated by community broadcasting that empower “individuals and communities themselves as well as having
broader societal impacts in terms of participation in the public sphere, democracy and citizenship.” An empowerment framework can be observed in the work of several other scholars working in community radio in Australia. An early example is van Vuuren’s work on community development, which found links between participation in volunteer networks both within and beyond the community radio stations led to increased social capital (2002). More recently, Anderson and Bedford (2017) have employed an empowerment framework to explore the role of community radio in communities experiencing social disadvantage, such as prisoners and their families. The role of community radio in empowering groups - in this instance, young people - to develop cultural identities and its potential to improve opportunities for social inclusion was also highlighted by Baker (2007). Empowerment, therefore, represents a second valuable theoretical lens through which to view and research community radio in Australia.

50 years of community radio

The history of community radio in Australia is still being written. As mentioned above, the sector continues to grow; often nurtured rather than hindered by so-called digital disruption (Anderson, Bedford and Fox 2019). The broadcast landscape may have changed significantly, however, the ethos of the community radio sector has remained constant since it was legislated in 1978. Threads of citizens’ media and empowerment theories are evident in the narrative of its establishment and development.

Prior to the 1970s, the Australian radio sector comprised of two tiers - the government-owned national radio service, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (now Corporation; ABC), which was heavily influenced by its British counterpart, the BBC, alongside a commercial sector similar to that of the United States (Lewis and Booth 1989). For the most part, Australia did not have a tradition of pirate radio to predate its community radio sector, as was the case in parts of Western Europe in the late 1960s (Dunaway 1998). There were, however, moments of pirate broadcasting, particularly in the larger capital cities, operated by draft resistors and their supporters during the Vietnam War and very quickly jammed by government authorities (Melzer 2010).

Globally, community broadcasting dates back to the 1940s - Radio Sutatenza, Colombia [1947] and the first station of the Pacifica Network, KPFA, California [1949] are early examples (Lewis 2006). However, it was in the 1960/70s that radio stations and independent media enthusiasts began to organize as national movements, demanding a democratization of the media in response to a multitude of concerns to existing structures. The Australian community broadcasting sector crystalized in the early 1970s, concurrent with the free radio movement – represented, for example, by a surge of local independent
radio stations established across Europe (Lewis 2006) and the formation of the National Federation of Community Broadcasters in the USA.

In Australia, the main agitators for a third sector in broadcasting came from four ‘distinct and unrelated threads of political, cultural and social movement’ (Melzer 2020, n.p.) - ethnic communities, universities, grassroots/ left wing political groups and fine music enthusiasts, the earliest (and perhaps most unexpected) group to lobby for community radio. Each of these groups contributed a unique perspective to the social movement to expand media diversity, access, participation and representation.

The 1960s fine music movement valued the superior quality of FM broadcasting, for its high fidelity, stereo output and limited noise interference. Music Broadcasting Societies (MBS) were established to lobby the government to open the FM spectrum to public broadcasting, after experimental FM radio stations were shut down to make way for television spectrum. Furthermore, according to Langdon (in Radio Adelaide [n.d.]), the MBS campaign was consumer-group-driven, which moved debate around broadcast policy into the public arena for the first time. This is significant, because prior to this, policy influence mostly came from industry and focused on technology rather than access or audience. By encouraging public input into discussions about new radio services, and adopting a listener-supported model similar to that at the Pacific network in the United States, the fine music movement initiated a broader push for community access to the airwaves (Radio Adelaide, n.d).

The Australian community broadcasting movement lobbied at a national level because telecommunications are managed by the Federal government. In the 1970s, Australian politics was mostly a two-party system, represented by the conservative Liberal-National Country Party Coalition and the centre-left Labor Party. Both instigated change to the broadcast sector, that resulted in the three-tiered system that exists today. In early 1972, an Australian Broadcasting Control Board inquiry and subsequent Report on Frequency Modulation Broadcasting (Australian Broadcasting Control Board 1972, p.90), initiated by the (Liberal-National Coalition) Federal government, recommended:

‘a new type of service, comprising FM stations, to be known as Public Broadcasting which would be conducted on a non-profit basis to cater for the needs of educational, religious, professional, musical and other like interests, but would be available to the general public.’

As a result, the government began allocating the first low-powered radio licences, which were neither commercial nor national/public in nature.
The initial roll-out saw the establishment of education licences in the early 1970s. Radio had been used as an extension to education programs at university (but not broadcast via a formal licensing agreement) since 1961, however it was a decade later, in June 1972, when the University of Adelaide’s Department of Continuing Education began broadcast just off the AM band as VL5UV (later 5UV), under the *Wireless Telegraphy Act*, restricted to 12 hours of educational content per week with no music. To begin, the station was not licenced to allow community access (this changed in 1975), however, 5UV (now Radio Adelaide) is widely recognised as the longest-running community radio station in Australia (discussed in detail below).

The December 1972 national election saw a change in leadership to the less conservative Whitlam Labor government, which continued the broadcast reform agenda of its predecessor. Sydney’s fine music station, 2MBS-FM was formally licensed in December 1974 and, at around the same time, proposals were being made to the Federal government’s Media Department for an ethnic-only radio sector, to address the lack of multicultural broadcasting in Australia. It would take another five years before an ethnic community radio (sub)sector was formally established.

In late 1975, there were 12 licences under the *Wireless Telegraphy Act* (including 4ZZZ), and two under the *Broadcasting and Television Act* (2CT and 3CR), approved in principle when Prime Minister Whitlam was sacked by the Governor General on November 11. After a short and tense time, when community radio lobbyists were unsure of the status of these aspirant stations, the Fraser Liberal-National Country Party Coalition government announced it would honour the proposed licences. The same government fully enshrined public (now community) broadcasting as the official third sector of Australian broadcasting in 1978.

While 5UV in Adelaide was initially established as an educational broadcaster, station staff and supporters strongly argued for the capacity to provide public access and participation, joining a chorus of voices that represented the fourth and final lobby group of the time – grassroots and left-wing political organisations. The motivations of this group align most closely with the international movement to agitate for a more democratic media and the inclusion of a wider range of voices on the air. This encapsulates the overall groundswell of campaigning for a community broadcasting sector, that ranged from those who felt marginalised to those who believed traditional media sources were not acting in the interests of the people. This included those “who just wanted to hear music that was different from that broadcast on commercial stations” (Jolly 2014, p. 4).
As already mentioned, the main campaigners for a third sector in broadcasting came from distinct political, cultural and social movements—fine music enthusiasts, ethnic communities, universities and grassroots/left-wing political groups. According to Thornley (2001, p.3), ‘while many people thought there was a need for reform, the only thing these people had in common was a belief that current broadcasting services were defective’. However, Anderson (2017) suggests a connection between these seemingly disparate groups that all contributed to the broader international movement to democratize the media, that emerged (in the ‘Western world’ at least) between the late 1940s and 1960s.

Formed in 1974, the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia – an early incarnation of the CBAA – lobbied on behalf of all four ‘interest’ groups, to develop and oversee the establishment of community broadcasting and ensure this occurred in response to community demand, rather than by government prescription (Thornley 2000). This also points to a commonality of purpose. Similarly, an early version of the CBAA Handbook (year unknown), states the early pioneers of community broadcasting shared three motivations: to make broadcasting accessible, particularly to those with minimal access to other media; to expand the range of meaningful programming choices; and foster diversity of media control by opening ownership to community organisations. As such, community broadcasting in Australia was born out of a diverse but dedicated social movement for media democratization.

A collective case study

In the second part of this article, we use a collective case study approach (Stake 1995) to further describe the Australian community radio sector and consider its capacity to empower and engage people in their own media representation. The stations discussed below played a formative role in lobbying for the sector, and are amongst the oldest to be broadcasting today. Three of the authors have significant ties to these radio stations, both as practitioners and academics, and their research on these stations has contributed previously to the literature in the field (see for example Anderson 2012, Bedford 2019, Fox 2019). The following draws on that research, collected through a mixture of interviews, archival research and participatory observation methods. It is not uncommon for research into local grassroots media to be authored by scholars who are practitioners themselves (Rodgers 2018). This helps avoid the objectifying nature of much research, while acknowledging and synthesising the direct connections between researcher and that which is being researched. According to Reed-Danahey (1997), such reflexivity – being aware of one’s own position in the context of researcher rather than denying (or even hiding) it - allows scholars to orchestrate fragments of their own awareness into narratives that resonate with audiences.
3CR—Radical Radio

3CR first went to air on 3 July 1976 from the back of a Community Aid Abroad (CAA) trading outlet in Armadale in Melbourne’s south-east. Broadcasting to a small 16-kilometre radius on 840kHz and holding a restricted commercial broadcast licence, 3CR was heralded as Australia’s first community owned and run radio station (Gorman 1976; The Age 1976; Bowers 1976; Lipski 1978).

Key founders of 3CR were acutely aware of the Independent Inquiry into Frequency Modulation Broadcasting: Report (1974). As a consequence, 3CR’s governing body, the Community Radio Federation (CRF), was formed at a public meeting of interested groups and people on 23 June 1974 in Carlton, Melbourne. Initially the CRF was interested in applying for a Public Broadcasting Licence—the details of which were still be worked through by the Federal Government of the time. However, in January 1975 the Australian Broadcasting Control Board advertised for a restricted, AM, commercial radio licence operated by a not for profit for the Melbourne area, and the CRF decided to apply alongside ten others. It was a competitive process with public hearings and the CRF was successful. Unlike other early licences of the time, 3CR’s licence was granted under the Broadcasting and Television Act, while others were issued under the Wireless and Telegraphy Act. 3CR was granted the licence on 10 October 1975.

3CR’s establishment is a key case study in social movement media activism, with tens of organisations, and thousands of people, participating directly and indirectly in its creation. Present at the inaugural meeting of the CRF was a vast array of active social and political organisations from across the Melbourne area. It is worth considering the diversity present at that very first meeting, as documented in the minutes—Association for the Blind, Port Philip Conservation Council, Community Aid Abroad, Trade Action Pty. Ltd., Public Transport Group (Express), Caulfield Community Service, Transport Action Group (Doncaster/ Templestowe), South-Eastern Ratepayers Alliance, Watherside Workers Federation, Latrobe University S.R.C., Gay Liberation, Northern Region Education Committee, Women’s Electoral Lobby, Australian Performing Group, The Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Alternative Radio Association, with apologies from the Williamstown Conservation and Planning Society. Additionally, the Australian Wildlife Protection Council and Citizens Action Federation had supported the formation of the CRF, while Western Region Arts Development Group, “Unita Popolare” (Italian-News Group), Parents without Partners, “Blackboard” (Education Group), Working Women’s Group, Builders Labourer’s Federation, Stop Omega Committee, Learning Exchange, Environment Alert, Women’s Liberation (Vic), Australian Conservation Foundation, Australia-China Society, Victorian Folk Music Club, Technical
Teacher’s Association of Victoria, Light, Power and Construction Group, the National Trust, Public Interest Research group, North Melbourne Association, Nursing Mother’s Association, Box Hill Residents Association, Art in Society, Socialist Media Students and Melbourne College of Education Drama Students had expressed interest in joining the CRF (CRF 1974).

The affiliate structure, whereby organisations became members, gave 3CR a critical edge in demonstrating community participation during the licence application process, and by November 1976 it extended the number of affiliate members to 150 (from 100) due to the high demand. Once on air the station’s radical nature came into focus and attracted the ire of many conservative politicians and commentators. As noted in the station’s book, Radical radio: Celebrating 40 years of 3CR, ‘In 3CR’s original licence application its bias and political intention were spelled out. However, both the style and content of broadcasts were sometimes confronting to audiences used to the polite middle-class voices and conservative values of 1970s radio. As a result the station was immediately on the radar, attracting criticism for its outspoken programming, particularly on Palestinian issues’ (2016, pp. 8-9).

A close analysis of the programming content on 3CR over nearly four and a half decades is beyond the scope of this short case study history. Suffice to say, on-air content continues to span a vast array of issues with a heavy emphasis on social and political concerns through spoken-word content and a firm commitment to providing a voice to those who are under-represented or misrepresented in the mass media. By providing access and promoting participation from a range of groups, 3CR empowers everyday citizens to communicate with and for their communities (Foxwell et al, 2008). Right from the beginning the station championed builders labourers, wharfies and plumbers, while providing unprecedented access to bands and the local performing arts. An eclectic mix of gardeners, prisoners, jazz aficionados, feminists, freedom fighters and anti-nuclear campaigners were on-air in the early years and are present in new forms in today. Many early shows continue on, such as The Concrete Gang (construction industry news), Nostalgia Unlimited (1930-50s music), Jazz on a Saturday, The Gardening Show, and Alternative News (3CR 2016). In the beginning, weekly programming was part-time, with full-time broadcasting starting in December 1979.

It was not until the 1987 licence renewal process that the station’s licence changed from restricted commercial, to a special interest public broadcasting licence. Under the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 realignment of all relevant stations under the ‘community radio broadcaster’ label, 3CR retained its focus through a community interest of ‘community access’, being the only station to have such a category.
(ACMA 2019) – a hangover perhaps of its unique start and point of difference within an expanded sector. Subscriptions, an annual Radiothon, projects, some radio services, and grants are some of the funding streams that keep the station afloat, and it is possibly the only station that has no commercial / for-profit business sponsorship announcements. The station is also in the unique position of owning its own building and AM transmitter site, indicative of the emphasis on independence that station founders had placed on 3CR at its inception.

In 2020, 3CR Community Radio operates in Fitzroy, Melbourne (Naarm), broadcasting via 855AM, 3CR Digital, and online via www.3cr.org.au with streaming, podcasts and audio on demand services. It continues to be governed by the Community Radio Federation (CRF) with the original, unique arrangement of affiliates, station workers and subscriber representatives continuing to form the governance structure of the station. The station has a small staff team of six, a technical team of three, and some 400 volunteers who produce and present around 130 shows each week. Program content continues to closely align with the station’s original intentions with weekly shows by unionists, women, First Nations people, LGBTIQ community members, people with disabilities, along with a diverse array of community language shows, eclectic music programs, environment and social justice shows. A focus on issues of political justice and social equality, alongside a democratic organisational structure, allows 3CR to provide greater representation and empowerment to marginalised groups, while politically engaging citizens (Fox, 2017). ‘It remains at the forefront of social movements across Melbourne and beyond, and continues to tell the stories and air the voices of people and communities disenfranchised by the mainstream’ (3CR 2016, p. 279).

4ZZZ—Agitate, Educate, Organize

4ZZZ official began broadcast in 1975, approximately seven months prior to 3CR. In addition to being one of the earliest community radio stations to receive a full-time licence, it is also the longest running FM station in the state of Queensland. 4ZZZ is licensed to serve the general community with an emphasis on special interest and marginalized audiences and its motto is AGITATE EDUCATE ORGANISE. Its studio and office are located in Fortitude Valley in inner city Brisbane (Meanjin) and the station broadcasts to the Greater Brisbane area, as well as internationally via radio on demand, live streaming, podcasting. The station also operates a digital channel (ZedDigital) that broadcasts content unique to the channel. According to its Media Kit, 4ZZZ has a weekly listenership of 250,000 people per week across these platforms.
4ZZZ grew out of the notoriously conservative political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the State of Queensland. Stories of excessive police violence at protests and complaints about blatant media bias are a common narrative of this era in Brisbane, the State’s capital city. The lack of coverage and perceived indifference given to police brutality by the mainstream media in Brisbane led to a call to establish an alternative media outlet and in 1971, at a public meeting held by local activists, focus turned to the idea for a permanent radio station. According to Anderson (2017), radio was an attractive platform at that time, as it was regulated under federal, rather than state, government control, and so in theory at least, the state government would have limited power to interfere in any new venture. Radio was also a relatively affordable medium in financial terms and, as mentioned above, the federal government was investigating a third tier of broadcasting on the recommendation of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board.

The call for a community radio station in Brisbane was just one part of a national social movement to agitate for a third sector of broadcasting in Australia, described above. The proposed new radio station in Brisbane was intended as an alternative source to the mainstream media, which would act as a training ground for media skills, work towards demystifying the media, and broadcast Australian music which was, at that time, sorely under-represented in the Australian mediascape (Anderson 2017). Popular music was core to the proposition. Its founders did not want to confine the station’s scope to broadcasting only to a minority audience, arguing there were significant audiences unhappy with the limited choice offered by public and commercial radio (Knight, 2007). To this day, 4ZZZ still aims to present a mix of independent and alternative music and talk-based programming.

4ZZZ commenced full-time broadcast, originally as 4ZZ, from its studio in the University of Queensland at midday, on December 8, 1975. While not an ‘educational station’, it did receive strong support from the University of Queensland Student Union, which provided initial office and studio space as well as significant financial contributions. It went to air with a statement on public broadcasting by announcer John Woods, which as purposively understated, with no mention of Whitlam’s sacking and only veiled references to politics (Stafford, 2004).

The station initially employed 12 full-time staff on wages of AUD$100 per week, and utilised many volunteers, both on-air and off. While there are fewer employed staff at the station in 2020, they are paid award wages, and volunteer labour is still the backbone of 4ZZZ’s operations. At the time of writing there are seven paid positions at 4ZZZ (including one full-time station manager) and an estimated 250 people volunteering for the station at any given time, in both broadcasting and off-air roles. 4ZZZ provides free and informal training to volunteers in all areas of station operations. There is no access fee for broadcast
time, however, all volunteers are expected to become subscribers to the station and announcers are required to assist in major fund-raising events. 4ZZZ first operated under an egalitarian collective structure employing consensus decision-making strategies. This process was described by members as “an empowering and educative tool and an important aspect of the radical nature of the station’s political structure” (Anderson, 2017, p. 261). However, this has since transitioned to a more traditional model, with a Board of Directors and delineated lines of management. This shift is outlined in detail in Anderson (2017).

In its early days, 4ZZZ made a conscious decision not to seek sponsorship revenue hoping instead to cover costs through subscriptions (membership fees), donations from student unions, and by staging musical events (Knight, 2001). As such, it borrowed heavily from the model of “listener sponsorship radio” pioneered by the United States’ Pacifica Radio Network in the 1940s and adopted by other early community radio stations in Australia, especially those from a fine music background. A similar financial model is still in operation; however sponsorship now plays a significant role, including from for-profit businesses – a key difference to 3CR. According to the 4ZZZ 2019 Annual Report there are 2,200 subscribers to the station, and subscriptions were the station’s main source of revenue for that financial year, closely followed by sponsorship (one third of income in 2018/19) alongside grants and, to a lesser extent, fundraising and donations.

The station is a music formatted station with no play-lists, although announcers are required to meet quotas related to Australian and local content, recent releases and the inclusion of women and First Nations artists. Programming is divided between “strip” and “block” shows. Strip shifts are basic music programs that broadcast a variety of music styles and information. Block shifts cater for a specific group of listeners. Music styles catered for in block programming include jazz, reggae, blues, punk, urban rhythm and blues, ska, local and Australia releases, world music, electronica, metal and hip hop. Information-based block shifts include similar topics to 3CR and Radio Adelaide (below) including Indigi-Briz (First Nations), Only Human (disability rights), Locked In (prisoner show) and No Apologies (local female-identifying & non-binary artists). The station also broadcasts a current affairs program, Brisbane Line, three times a week. 4ZZZ has gained significant recognition for news and current affairs since it first began broadcasting, from both the wider media and the community broadcasting sector. The station has a colourful history including a high-profile eviction from the University of Queensland in 1988, the arrests of journalists, and controversial police presences at fund-raising events, including a festival in 1996 that resulted in a formal (unsuccessful) complaint being made by the station to the Criminal Justice Commission (Criminal Justice Commission 1997). 4ZZZ continues to pride itself on its
hyperlocal focus and endeavour to empower people under-represented or mis-represented in mainstream media through community broadcasting (4ZZZ Media Kit 2020).

Radio Adelaide – Rich and Real

Radio Adelaide is due to celebrate a half-century of broadcasting in 2022, making it Australia’s oldest community radio station. Over this time, it has retained a commitment to high quality speech content, independent news and current affairs, and an eclectic range of arts and cultural programming. It can be heard across the greater Adelaide metropolitan area (Kaurna country) on 101.5 FM, simulcast on DAB+, and through online live stream and on-demand podcasting. A ‘voice for arts, music and ideas’ (Radio Adelaide 2020), the station produces over 120 hours of original local content each week providing a platform for diverse communities to tell uniquely Adelaide stories. Since its university beginnings, there has been a strong focus on education, including operating the sector’s longest running Registered Training Organisation and a continuing partnership to deliver of University of Adelaide Bachelor of Media courses each semester. Over 240 volunteers are involved in station programming, administration and fundraising, together with media interns, work experience students and over 100 journalism students each year.

Originally started in 1972 through an anonymous donation to the University of Adelaide, the station held the first ‘E-class’ educational broadcast licence in Australia. It was a category of licence rolled out across the country’s capital cities, marking the beginnings of what is now recognised as the most established community radio sector in the world. As Janey Gordon demonstrates in her history of university involvement in community radio, these early stations represent some of the most enduring and resilient in the world, including Triple RRR Melbourne, 2SER Sydney and Curtin Radio Perth (2012).

Firstly as VL 5UV, the station went to air in June 1972 just off the AM band, operating from small underground rooms on the University of Adelaide campus. Continuing education broadcasts were restricted to 12 hours per week and no music. As the then ‘public radio’ movement gained momentum, the station converted to the AM band in March 1974, was renamed 5UV, and permitted to broadcast community programming, shifting to the access and participation model which characterises the sector today. This included the introduction of foreign language broadcasts the following year coordinated through Adelaide Ethnic Broadcasters Incorporated (EBI), becoming the foundations for a national ethnic broadcasting network of community radio stations (Radio Adelaide, n.d.). In 1989 Radio Adelaide relocated to new, off-campus, city-centre premises, purpose built to include three on-air studios, two production studios, open plan offices, and a communal production space.
While Radio Adelaide operated semi-autonomously, the university continued to provide the station with premises and support services for over 40 years. It was a level of support which contributed to the station’s capacity to innovate, adding digital radio in 2011 and streaming online, as well as to instigate firsts in First Nations programming and multicultural language services (Bedford 2019). However, it was a partnership which began to dissolve in late 2014 through a protracted and challenging process when the University of Adelaide announced the sale of the premises (outlined in Bedford 2019). As Gordon shows, university support has played a prominent role in the start-up of grassroots and alternative media around the world, representing a ‘natural environment’ for the aims of community radio (2012). Equally, there is a history of hostile separation, with some of the most enduring stations navigating difficult transitions to financial and political independence, not least the forcible eviction of 4ZZZ by the University of Queensland in 1988.

The withdrawal of university financial support for non-profit community initiatives is unsurprising in an era of increasing academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades 2004). Of note, however, is the longevity of the Radio Adelaide partnership and the fraught process, from which the station is continuing to recover as it tries to re-establish itself as an independent entity. While the announcement to sell the building was a shock to the station’s community of staff, volunteers and listeners, the decision initially came with a commitment to relocate. Yet as the costs involved in re-establishing a radio station of comparative size and complexity became apparent, the commitment was put on hold in May 2015, just over a year before the building was scheduled for demolition.

A breakdown in the relationship between the two parties resulted in a complex and acrimonious separation involving the university brokering a partnership with a separate community radio station to coordinate a move to shared premises, creating a new non-profit incorporated association to hold the broadcast licence, and appointing an external Board of Management. On 28 June 2016, the Chair announced the appointment of a new General Manager. Two days later, Radio Adelaide vacated the university premises and switched to automated music programming while new co-located facilities with youth station Fresh 92.7 were completed. Within one month, the station had returned to live programming, begun inducting volunteers in new station operations, and re-started the university courses, marking a major success in a challenging process.

However, the disconnect between an externally appointed board and management and the station volunteers continued to be problematic, with concerns around adequate community consultation and engagement raised to the licence regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). Rather than driven through grass roots, independent, collective organisation, the business
model devised by the new management collapsed within 18 months. The costly move to co-located space, new operations and loss of staff had severely reduced station capacity, yet on Friday 9 February 2018, Radio Adelaide held its historic first Annual General Meeting, appointing its first community-elected Board of Directors and completing its transition to independence.

Today, the station is supported by one remaining part-time staff member and is struggling to regain financial sustainability, surviving most recently through a crowdfunding campaign. Community support has been central to Radio Adelaide’s survival thanks largely to the station’s long history of community involvement based on diversity and inclusion (Bedford, 2019). Despite the challenges, programming continues to focus on arts and ideas, providing a space for marginalised voices with shows including Pink Rabbit (21st Century feminism), Pride and Prejudice (LGBTIQ+ issues) and Nunga Wangga (First Nations talks), alongside weekly Folk and Blues specialist music shows and Roundabout, a daily easy listening program for seniors run by University of the Third Age.

In contrast to the radical political beginnings of both 4ZZZ and 3CR, the history of Radio Adelaide remains firmly entrenched in its position as an educational broadcaster. Radio Adelaide prides itself in providing an alternative, independent voice, committed to diversity and localness, yet rather than radical social activism, the station identity had remained based in the fine music and intellectual focus of its original educational remit.

**Concluding comments**

As outlined above, the community media movement in Australia was initially driven by a diverse set of interest groups who expressed a clear need for alternative broadcasting, anti-commercialism, democratisation and localism (Bear 1983 p.23); aims which suggest a commitment to progressive politics and social issues. Yet permanent sectors such as in Australia, and latterly the UK, tend to be relatively conservative in organisation and content, with Forde, Meadows & Foxwell (2002b) identifying a further shift to the right of the political spectrum in recent decades, coinciding with a growth in regional areas and an increasing commitment to commercial goals. The foundations of the Australian community broadcasting sector are, however, firmly entrenched in a social movement to democratize the media in Australia.

Further research is required that represents the present breadth of community radio stations, many of which are based in rural and regional areas. Likewise, while all three case study stations feature First Nations broadcasting and two include ethnic language in their scheduling, there is a need to examine
more closely those vitally important sub-sectors of the Australian community broadcasting landscape. A collective case study approach should be considered as a method, especially when investigating impact. The rich data that can be gathered by recording histories of radio stations (and individual radio programs), together with the sharing of personal accounts of media engagement and empowerment, is invaluable to understanding the sector.

The case studies and history outlined above can clearly be viewed through the lenses of citizens media and media for empowerment. By encouraging public input into discussions about new radio services, early community radio activists were creating alternate means by which they could enact their citizenship, participating in policy formulation and legislative change. Community access (vital for citizens’ media) was, and still is, a consistent message of the national campaign in support of community broadcasting. Empowerment is a closely linked theoretical framework, given the transformative nature of citizens’ media. The broad range of marginalized groups catered to by the case study stations demonstrates a commitment to empowering those communities who most benefit from alternative media outlets and opportunities.

The authors suggest a social movement theory lens would also benefit community broadcasting studies. This would open a variety of questions of value to the sector. For example, how has community radio's non-commercial nature uniquely contributed to social movement activism across Australia? How can we better understand the impact of community radio content on the discourses of the wider media landscape – especially in regards to the messages of social movements. A deeper appreciation of Australian community broadcasting is crucial, given its reliance on listener and government support for its survival.

References


Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (Cth) s. 15 (Austl.)


---

i The term ‘community broadcasting’ replaced the earlier ‘public broadcasting’ in 1992 once the ABC had appropriated the latter term.

ii 4EB in Brisbane was the first licensed ethnic community radio station, commencing broadcast in 1979, following experiments in multicultural broadcasting on the ABC and the establishment of the government-owned Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) in 1977.