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Communities, connections, and careers: building personal and professional networks through community media work

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ABSTRACT

Community broadcasting is anecdotally considered a 'training ground' for the mainstream media. However, there is little empirical research that supports these claims around skill development and career outcomes. Similarly, while community broadcasting is broadly recognized as contributing to social cohesion, the focus of much of this research is on audiences rather than the experiences of community media practitioners. This article is based on a broader programme of research that interrogated the experiences of people with significant involvement in the Australian community broadcasting sector to examine the impact of community media participation on career pathways. Here we consider a key finding: working or volunteering in community radio plays an important role in developing robust and meaningful networks, connections, and relationships which are central to shaping personal and professional pathways. These findings draw on rhizome theory to highlight the importance of community broadcasting for building and maintaining diverse and enduring networks.

Introduction

The value of community radio is well-documented. Communities benefit from access to local news and information, diverse viewpoints, and channels of media production (Anderson 2019; Forde, Foxwell, and Meadows 2003; Foxwell 2012; Rodriguez 2001). Community broadcasting can also be considered a cultural resource, contributing to social cohesion, and a sense of community (Backhaus 2022; Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell-Norton 2002; Moylan 2019). Individuals benefit from participating in community media through 'fun' (Order 2017) and important training opportunities (Anderson et al. 2022; Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell 2003). However, there is little empirical work that supports the engrained anecdotal view of community media as a 'training ground' for mainstream media work and how this takes place. The research on which this article is based emerged out of informal discussions within the Australian community broadcasting sector about what 'alumni' were doing: from national news broadcasts to the halls of parliament,

community broadcasters seemed to be everywhere; enjoying successful and diverse career pathways a long way from their humble beginnings at their local community radio station. The research began as a way of both evidencing the anecdotal discussions taking place in the sector and addressing a clear gap in the academic literature. This article details one key area of findings, namely the role of participation in community media in building and maintain personal and professional networks.

From networks to communities

While an in-depth analysis of the theories and practices of networking lies beyond the scope of this research, it is important to briefly situate the work in some key definitions and discussions. Networking is well-established in the fields of business, psychology, social science, and, more recently, education (Muijs, West, and Ainscow 2010). In the digital age though, networks have transcended academic and professional fields, with Castells famously arguing that we now live in a 'network society' (Castells 2022). A network, at its most fundamental level, can be defined as 'a set of actors connected by a set of ties' (Borgatti and Foster 2003, 992). The network society, similarly, is characterized by the pervasiveness of communication networks and the institutionalized power relations embedded within (Castells 2004). Contemporary discussions about media and networks tend to focus on social media (Aichner et al. 2021), with broadcasting and other forms of 'legacy' media fading from discussions. In fact, there is a distinct lacuna in this space, with the bulk of broadcast literature focussed on technical definitions and applications of networks rather than sociocultural definitions. So, while the networks themselves are of tangential importance to this research – more telling is the importance assigned to these networks by the people and organizations involved – there is a clear need for further inquiry into the role of traditional forms of media in building sociocultural networks in the digital age.

While networking theories have much to contribute to understanding community media (Santana and Carpentier 2010), of more conceptual value here is the idea of 'community' which is, unsurprisingly, central to the work and ethos of community broadcasting. The 'community' of community radio is a topic of debate, though there are two dominant schools of thought. The first views community through a geographic lens, defining community as based on the immediately proximate geographic area. As several authors (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2007; Hess and Waller 2014) have noted, geographic proximity is neither a precondition for, nor a quality indicator of, a community. A further issue with a geographic definition is assumptions of homogeneity which flatten diversity and erase marginalized groups within the boundaries of the assumed communities (Sihlongonyane 2009). Yet geographic definitions persist, at least partially, due to the limitations of the medium itself. In many sectors across the world, the broadcasting power of community radio stations is limited to a small area, because of either the accessibility of technology or legislative requirements. For example, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) defines 'general community interest' as 'geographically-based – the interests of the entire community of the geographic area of the licence' (ACMA 2010, 4). In the Australian context, despite the critiques, geographic community broadcasters play a vital role in providing local news and information, particularly in regional and remote areas – a service whose value has increased in

recent years with the increasingly syndicated and city-centric media landscape (Hess 2020). This goes some way to explaining the continuing prevalence of geographic interpretations of community despite the critiques and tensions.

The second dominant interpretation is that of a community of interest. These communities are defined as 'having a specific, ascertainable common interest' that makes them an identifiable community (Tacchi 2003, 2185). Communities of interest may intersect and span across geographic and cultural boundaries through shared interests (Gumucio-Dagron and Rodríguez 2006). The community of interest definition is also applied within the Australian community broadcasting sector. There are community broadcasting services that are produced by and for First Nations communities, multicultural and multilingual communities, LGBTIQ+ communities, young people, older people, people with lived experience of disability, and those with special interests in music and the arts. It is important to understand the definitions of 'community' prevalent in the Australian community broadcasting sector to frame and contextualized the networks and relationships built through community broadcasting.

From communities to rhizome

While 'community' may describe the day-to-day connections and interactions of community radio practitioners and audiences, conceptualizing community broadcasting as rhizome offers a broader theoretical lens through which to view the networks themselves. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), and first proposed by Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier (2007), community media as rhizome offers a theoretical approach that encapsulates the fluidity and contingency of the medium as well as how community media connects disparate elements of society. Community media as rhizome (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2007) was proposed alongside three other theoretical approaches to alternative media – 'Serving the community', 'An alternative to mainstream', and 'Part of civil society'. However, a precursory work (Carpentier, Lie, and Servaes 2003) suggests that the rhizome approach should be granted special attention as it offers a more society-centred approach to media studies while also offering more depth and complexity to both the civil society and alternative to the mainstream approaches. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) suggest several rhizome characteristics: connection and heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying ruptures, and cartography and decalcomania. The connection and heterogeneity of a rhizome imply that any point of the network can connect to any other point. Rhizomes exist as 'substantive multiplicities', that is not multiplicities that are elements of a single unit but rather inherently multiple in themselves. Asignifying ruptures suggest that while rhizomes may be broken, they will start again along old or new lines. Finally, cartography and decalcomania describes a rhizome's rejection of structure: it is 'a map and not a tracing' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 13). It is clear to see parallels between the attributes of the rhizome and that of community media. A key benefit of community media lies in the 'catalysing role they can play by functioning as the crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate' (Carpentier, Lie, and Servaes 2003, 62). This mediated interaction need not take place at the individual level and can involve groups, organizations, and interpretive communities (Carpentier 2015). Indeed, this is a key strength of rhizome theory in relation to community media: 'a rhizome ceaselessly establishes

connections' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 7) yet is not defined by them; similarly, community media builds linkages not just in civil society, but also with other segments of the state and market without losing its identity or becoming assimilated (Carpentier, Lie, and Servaes 2003). Viewing community media as rhizome provides a way of understanding both the haphazard and organic connections made by community media both within and between communities, while recognizing that elements of community media retain more hierarchical structures – reliance on grants, licencing requirements, and so forth (Carpentier 2016). Considering alternative media, in this case community broadcasting, as rhizome avoids an entirely media-centric perspective and places the fluid networks that operate through and alongside community media within their broader context (Santana and Carpentier 2010). The rhizome offers a valuable theoretical perspective for viewing the role of community media in society, but it also offers insight into the connections that are forged at the individual level yet mediated through community media.

Community broadcasting in Australia

Given the diversity of approaches across community broadcasting sectors globally, it is important to consider the context of community broadcasting in Australia. Formally established in 1978, Australia is home to an established and diverse community broadcasting sector. With 18,600 volunteers contributing to over 500 services (THINK: Insight & Advice, Community Broadcasting Foundation, and Community Broadcasting Association of Australia 2023), the sector is embedded within and supported by communities across the country. Community broadcasting is dominated by radio, which makes up most services (Backhaus, Anderson, and Bedford 2023). Australian community broadcasters are governed by the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*. According to the Act, community broadcasting services are freely available to the public, not-for-profit, and used for community purposes. In addition to the Act, community broadcasters must adhere to the *Community Broadcasting Codes of Practice* which provide policy guidance on programming and operational standards. The Codes also offer high-level advice on the sector's guiding principles, which encourage independence in programming, support for local arts and music and community involvement in broadcasting, alongside a commitment to access and equity, harmony and inclusivity, and to 'enhance the diversity of programming choices available to the public and present programs that expand the variety of viewpoints broadcast in Australia' (CBAA 2008).

Training also represents a crucial facet of the community broadcasting sector in Australia, with the Community Media Training Organisation (CMTO) acting as the sector's peak body responsible for delivering accredited and pathways training to community broadcasters. The CMTO offers a broad range of courses including self-paced, online offerings on station essentials (such as media law, workplace health and safety, and broadcast basics), 'Pathways' courses delivered at stations by trainers on various facets of broadcasting, leadership and enterprise, and technical skills, and formal tertiary qualification certificates in creative industries, screen and media, and several others (CMTO 2024). Most stations are involved in a wide range of training activities including internal volunteer inductions and informal mentoring, as well as training programmes offered externally through webinars, online course, accredited training programmes, and short courses (Forde 2015). Both volunteers and paid staff members have access to training based on what is available at

individual stations and offered by the CMTO and other sector organizations. The CMTO also offers low-cost, online training courses as part of their self-paced offerings and supported places in their Pathways and Certificate programmes. The sector's emphasis on training can perhaps be credited with community broadcasting's reputation as the 'training ground' of the mainstream media (Anderson et al. 2021; Forde 2015; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2007). Indeed, previous research (Anderson et al. 2021) confirms that the Australian community media offers a plethora of formal and informal training in a broad suite of skills that prepares participants for both future employment and personal development.

Methodology and methods

Methodologically, we draw on Ali's (2023) notions of 'humanising technology' through the concept of 'lived policy'. Such an approach situates media legislation and policy (such as the aforementioned *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* and *Community Broadcasting Codes of Practice)* within the experiences of 'everyday life and everyday people' (Ali 2023, 597). As such, a lived policy approach incorporates ethnographic and qualitative methods to better understand 'how policy is lived, experienced, and even felt, not only discussed' (Ali 2023, 604). Given that community radio stations are required to be freely accessible (via the *Broadcasting Services Act*) and encourage community participation (via the sector's Codes of Practice), training is a vital component and contributor to meeting these policy obligations. This, we argue, needs to be interrogated, through a lived policy approach, via the people directly involved.

An initial pilot study was conducted which involved six in-depth interviews with creative industries practitioners (see Anderson et al. 2021) The findings of this research strongly suggested a need for an expanded study with both a broader focus – beyond the initial parameter of those working in the creative industries – and a broader sample. In collaboration with the CMTO, a survey was developed and disseminated, targeting anyone who had engaged in any form of training through the CMTO, from fully accredited courses to short webinars. The survey captured demographic data, information about courses completed, employment and volunteer activities, and the role of the CMTO training therein. Also included was a series of questions based on the findings of the pilot research which focussed on career pathways, skills development, networks, and social responsibility. Participants could complete the survey anonymously but also had the option to agree to be contacted about further participation in the research.

From a pool of 79 survey respondents, 30 potential interviewees were selected using maximum variation sampling with the aim of identifying a diverse range of participants. This approach to sampling is particularly useful when attempting to capture core experiences and values (Gray 2018, 216). Diversity was considered through a range of factors including age, gender, geographic location, cultural and linguistic background, types of training completed, and current employment. Subsequently, 25 interviews were conducted, with five potential interviewees declining to participate. Interviews took a semi-structed approach and a shared set of guiding questions informed by the pilot research. The length of the interviews ranged from 11 minutes to over one hour, with the average length just under 32 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then independently analysed by each member of the research team. The approach to analysis involved reflexive

coding influenced by Palmer-Wackerly et al. (2021). Following this initial analysis, the patterns and broad topics were shared between the research team, which were then combined and refined to construct key themes. Networks and connections was identified by each member of the research team as one of the primary themes within the data.

Findings and discussion

The findings of this research strongly suggest that participation in community broadcasting leads to the formation of professional and personal networks that have impact beyond the immediate scope of participation. The aim was not to exhaustively map professional and personal networks developed and sustained through participating in community media, but instead to establish the practitioners' perceptions of these networks in relation to both personal and professional development. Overwhelmingly, interpersonal networks were identified by most participants as a key area of personal and professional value derived from their time in community broadcasting.

Professional networks

The development of professional networks and professional networking as a skill were both seen by participants as a crucial benefit derived from their participation in community media. Networking is increasingly seen as an essential skill for career development and advancement, particularly in the creative industries (Felton, Collis, and Graham 2010; Howkins 2002; Landry 2012). There were two elements of professional networks that research participants discussed: the development of specific networking skills, as well as the professional networks themselves.

For many participants, the people they met and formed relationships with during their time in community media were hugely influential on their career trajectories. As one interviewee stated:

> I know I've had relationships that have been really, like absolutely pivotal to my career development and my personal development through community broadcasting.

Another participant, who was managing a commercial media outlet, was able to trace his entire career pathway directly to his community radio experience:

> I was presenting at <community media outlet> and … I got a call from an old colleague of mine …. And she reached out to me, and she said, hey, look, I've been consulting for <organisation> …. I've given them some ideas, they really like it. They've asked me to kind of come and join them full time. This opportunity is real. I want you to be part of it. What do you think?

This experience was not uncommon among the interviewees, particularly in the dense media markets of the capital cities. Here we see an example of what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) conceptualize as the 'deterritorialising' nature of the rhizome in that it establishes connections with both counter-hegemonic groups as well as with the market and the state. This contrasts with the rigid and arbolic networks within both the public and private domains (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2007). On a practical level though, far from just being an accessible source of practical work experience, community media also presented opportunities

to form invaluable networks and industry connections. Community media was also a space to build networking skills in a low-pressure environment. For one interview, her networking skills came from connecting with people and organizations on behalf of the station.

> I think my networking has gotten way, way better. For example, like when I had just moved to Australia back in 2017, I was not brought up how to network with people … but when I network with <community media outlet>, I realised that because it's such a bigger thing than myself, it's about so many other people. Networking has become much easier and asking for things that we want has become easier, forming partnerships has become easier.

These networking skills proved crucial for many of the interviewees and, in some cases, were directly attributed to long, successful careers.

> I still have a lot of people and friends and colleagues now from that time, so the networking was just invaluable and that is how ultimately, I got my first job at the ABC [national broadcaster] as well a few years later.

The interviewees widely acknowledged the significance of the networks and networking skills they developed through their participation in community media, with many expressing how these networks have paved the way for various career opportunities and emerging possibilities.

Social relationships and communities

In addition to establishing professional relationships and networks, community media is also an important space for establishing and maintaining social connections and friendships. This was a strong theme both throughout the interviews and, inadvertently, within the methods. As the research team are all former and current community media practitioners, arranging the interview schedule was a delicate and, at times, challenging balance of matching participants with interviewers who had no prior relationship, either personal or professional. In addition to anecdotal evidence of the friendships established through community media, there is a robust body of literature that support the role of community media in social cohesion (Forde, Foxwell, and Meadows 2009; Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell-Norton 2002; Lewis 2008; Meadows and Foxwell 2011; Order 2017). Much of this work focusses on the experiences of the audiences of community media, however, Fox (2019) has written on the sense of unity among community broadcasters and how these connections feed into grassroots organizing within the broader community. These feelings of unity and of being part of something bigger were also identified by one of the research participants:

> That's probably been one of the main reasons I've been attracted to it: part of a bigger tribe.

This sense of connection and unity was particularly meaningful one First Nations community media practitioner:

> Through community media … I've met so many amazing people and made so many amazing connections that made me feel really connected to not just my mob, but mobs across the country. So, for me that's been the biggest, the connection to community.

Many interviewees had positive stories about the social relationships formed through participation in community broadcasting. Interestingly, this was never a motivating factor for becoming involved initially. While several interviewees were introduced to community media by their existing networks, establishing friendships was not cited as a reason for participating in community broadcasting. Several interviewees talked about being shy and lacking confidence prior to getting involved, yet these same interviewees were able to establish lifelong friendships through community broadcasting. We posit that community broadcasting acts as a low-pressure environment for relationship-building as there are specific shared tasks associated with participation but also scope for expanding on these tasks to incorporate diverse approaches and interests. What initially begins as a professional relationship – in many cases through informal training and mentoring – seems to regularly transcend the professional-social boundary due to the opportunities community broadcasting affords in terms of exploring unique interests. Further, the task-based nature of participation (producing and presenting a radio programme, for example) offers a safety net for social interactions due to the shared experience of working on the same tasks albeit in different ways. One interviewee linked this process of moving from professional to social relationships to a shared sense of community.

> Everyone's really, really cool. It's a really cool community and it's exciting that it exists. And I guess drilling down, you know within that I do feel like, you know, some of my core mentors or influences or, you know, peer support within that from there or to like dear friends. . . . it does transcend this personal-professional kind of dichotomy. Which is nice, but actually, you know, it actually does feel like a community, which can be hard to find.

The rhizome offers insight into how these social connections and subsequent communities are formed: 'It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation . . . . Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 12). These multiple entryways facilitate access for diverse people and groups who become part of the 'community' of the community broadcaster. Social contact, as well as feelings of belonging and sharing, are a 'defining feature' of a community (Carpentier, Lie, and Servaes 2007, 348). Community broadcasters are established to serve a particular community but may inadvertently establish their own communities that remain connected beyond immediate proximity to and engagement with the media outlet itself.

Relationship building across difference

Diversity is a key strength of Australian community media. It is also central to the guiding rationale of the sector. There is a significant – both in terms of numbers and importance – corpus of literature around the value of community media platforming diverse voices and viewpoints (Carpentier and Doudaki 2014; Kidd 1999; Moylan 2019; Rodriguez 2001; Stewart and Spurgeon 2020; Tacchi 2003). However, there is a dearth of work on what this means for individuals. The findings of this research offer some insight into the importance of participation in community media for expanding social and professional networks beyond usual circles. This has implications for the development of specific skills. One participant noted that the ability to communicate and build relationships with diverse groups and individuals was a crucial and highly transferrable part of her professional skillset:

> So many different people are involved in community radio that you meet all walks of life and I think that's only helped me to be a stronger communicator and to know how to build and maintain relationships really well, because we would have everyone from Malcolm Turnbull [former Australian Prime Minister] to, you know, the high school student that just wants to get some work experience in the office and I think that's given me a really great foundation for relationship-building and I think it's really crucial in anything I do.

Interacting with people of different lived experiences was important both in terms of developing skills and relationships, but also in learning about and connecting with unfamiliar stories and histories. For one First Nations participant from the pilot study (Anderson et al. 2021), it was through community radio that she was able to learn about local First Nations communities and their histories:

> I'd grown up in a very small mining town . . . and then moved to Brisbane. So, it wasn't necessarily my community . . . it was a really interesting time of just learning about the history of the place, learning about the history of Brisbane and Indigenous people.

The opportunity to meet and build relationships with people from different backgrounds is central to the solidarity-building discussed by Fox (2019) and the subsequent increased awareness of social justice issues. In conceptualizing alternative media as rhizome, Bailey et al. (2007, 31) suggest that a key element of this approach is that it explains how community media acts as 'the crossroads where people from different movements and struggles meet and collaborate'. Not only does this clearly hold value in terms of the personal experiences of participants, but potentially has broader implications. The ability to form relationships across difference and connect with issues removed from one's own lived experience has influenced and informed participants' personal and professional lives. If community media truly is the training ground for the mainstream media, this may have greater impacts on Australia's media landscape which is distinctly lacking in diversity (Arvanitakis et al. 2020).

'Asignifying ruptures'

A principle of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome which offers insight into the experiences of community broadcasting participants is that of asignifying ruptures. This principle states that: 'a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 9). While many of the interviewees has moved on from community media, there was still a strong sense of connection, both to the stations and to the relationships formed there. There was also an openness and, in some cases, an excitement about the prospect of one day 'going back' to community media. For one interviewee, who had a new job and was living in a different city, the connections were particularly strong despite these significant ruptures:

> Really, I've never left <community radio station>. So, I'm still very much up to date with how they're going . . . We check in every so often and they're like, 'OK, so when are you coming back?' . . . You know, like they're ready to get me back on air which is really nice. I do miss doing live radio and . . . I hope to go back to it and to at least be able to do it every couple of months.

For one participant, the return to community media was a career move that both aligned with her values and enabled reconnection with existing networks.

> I was happy in a way to move away from working in mainstream media and go back into community, because the community radio to me was family and also community and I was able to be myself more.

While these asignifying ruptures were broadly considered to be a positive, almost comforting, prospect for the interviewees who discussed them, there were some tensions. One of the interviewees left the sector due to burn-out. The relationships formed were a contributing factor to this overwork:

> My producer couldn't make it, so I had to fill in. And that was a given. There was no question about that. I had to do it for the show. Or I had to step in and help a mate who couldn't do a package for their broadcast on time. You know, like it's just one of these things where you put your own needs aside for the greater good of the programme. Or the station.

The rupture here is significant, painful, and representative of broader issues in the sector that require further research. Yet what was also revealed in this interview was the power of these rhizomatic connections.

> I'm still sort of healing, I think, because it did really. It hurt. It hurt to have to admit that I was so burnt out that I hated turning my laptop on every day … I will always love community radio. Like it's always going to have such a special place for me.

Despite the stress, overwork, and burn-out, the interviewee was still positive about community media and discussed plans to get involved at other stations in the future. This is representative of a rhizome that was broken at a given spot but will start again in a new and different way.

Conclusion

This article has detailed the role of participation in community broadcasting in formal personal and professional networks. This research, conducted alongside the Community Media Training Organisation, emerged out of informal conversations about what community broadcasting 'alumni' did after they left the sector. The research aimed to both evidence these anecdotal discussions and address a gap in the academic literature around the benefits of participation for practitioners, as opposed to audiences.

Contemporary discussions around networks are often centred around digital media. Broadcasting is especially neglected, with the bulk of literature focussed on technical definitions of networks rather than taking sociocultural perspective. The networks themselves though are of tangential importance to this research – more telling is the importance assigned to these networks by the people and organizations involved. As such, viewing this research through the theoretical approach of community media as rhizome (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2007) offers a rich conceptual underpinning to explore the interconnections of relationships within and across the communities of community broadcasting.

This article draws on data from 79 survey responses and 31 long-form interviews. This data strongly suggests that participation in community broadcasting leads to the formation of professional and personal networks that have impact beyond the immediate scope of participation. The development of professional networks and of professional networking skills were seen by participants as a crucial benefit derived

from their participation in community media. In addition, community media is also an important space for establishing and maintaining social connections and friendships. Further, the networks, both social and professional, established and maintained through community broadcasting were richer and more diverse. The ability to form relationships across difference and connect with issues removed from one's own lived experience had profound influences on participants' personal and professional lives. Finally, rhizome theory and its characteristic 'asignifying ruptures' facilitate an understanding of the connection between interviewees who were long removed from their participation in community media yet still felt a strong sense of connection, both to the stations and to the relationships formed there. The findings of this research clearly demonstrate that participation in community media has invaluable benefits for those involved, from professional networks to lifelong friendships. These robust and meaningful networks, connections, and relationships are, in turn, central to shaping personal and professional pathways.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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