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A catalyst for change? Australian community broadcasting audiences fight back, in *Notions of community: an edited collection of community media debates*, (ed) Janey Gordon

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Abstract

Something unique is happening in the Australian community broadcasting sector. Recent studies have revealed that Australia has possibly the highest level of community radio listenership per capita in the developed world. The sector began more than 30 years ago and now reaches one-quarter of the population over the age of 15 who tune in at least once each week. The first qualitative audience study of the sector, completed in 2006, has revealed an extraordinary level of passion amongst listeners to community radio and viewers of community television stations from urban centres to the most remote regions across the country. But it also offers a powerful critique of mainstream broadcasting, with audiences essentially abandoning commercial radio, in particular, because of its inability to provide them with local news and information, Australian music, and programming that is reflective of Australia's cultural diversity. This chapter reflects on the first hard evidence that suggests ways in which community radio and television are meeting the needs of Australian broadcasting audiences. The Australian government in 2007 relaxed limits on foreign ownership of Australian media, fuelling a further ownership re-orientation in what is already the most concentrated media market in the world. Despite the negative impact of globalising media forces, community broadcasting in Australia is empowering audiences to re-engage in the processes of democracy at the grass roots' level creating social coherence *through* diversity.

A catalyst for change? Australian community broadcasting audiences fight back

Introduction

Australia has possibly the highest level of community radio listenership per capita in the developed world. The sector began more than 30 years ago and now has around 400 licensed independent community owned and operated radio stations attracting one-quarter of the population over the age of 15 who tune in at least once each week (McNair Ingenuity 2006). A significant proportion of the Australian population is choosing community radio over its competitors in the commercial and national broadcasting sectors (ABC and SBS). The commercial radio sector has just 274 operating licenses but at AU\$945 million, has almost 20 times the turnover of its community counterpart (ACMA 2006). Despite this enormous financial disparity, community radio produces more local content, plays more Australian music, and supports a greater diversity of Australian cultures.

While quantitative measures alone are strongly suggestive of a shift in Australian radio audience preferences, until recently, little was known about why this is occurring. The first qualitative audience data gathered from the community broadcasting sector in Australia suggests that a unique transformation is taking place (Meadows et al 2007). It reveals an extraordinary level of passion amongst listeners to community radio and viewers of community television stations from urban centres to the most remote regions across the country. They have a strong sense of ownership of 'their' stations and are attracted by on-air voices that sound 'just like us' (Meadows et al 2007). Audiences are turning away from commercial radio, in particular, because of its *inability* to provide them with local news and information, Australian music, the opportunity to 'create communities', and programming that is reflective of Australia's cultural diversity.

The Australian government in 2007 relaxed limits on foreign ownership of Australian media, fuelling further ownership re-orientation in what is already the most concentrated media market in the world. Within months of the changes coming into law, the Fairfax and Rural Press organisations merged, there was a consolidation of major magazine publishers—ACP, Pacific Publishing and News Limited magazines—along with private equity buyouts of both the commercial television Seven and Nine networks (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance 2007:15). Despite the negative impact of local manifestations of such globalising media forces, community broadcasting in Australia can be seen as a catalyst in empowering audiences to re-engage in the processes of democracy at the grass roots' level.

An earlier national station-based study of the community radio sector concluded that it is an important cultural resource—'a medium for representing, maintaining and reproducing local cultures' (Forde et al 2002:13). Commercial media seems increasingly unable to deal with the diversity of cultures that now characterise 21st century Australia. This is largely because of the unprofitability of smaller— particularly regional—cohorts of 'consumers' and the likelihood of offending them (and losing advertisers) through the broadcast of unpalatable political viewpoints, Indigenous and ethnic language programming, specialist music formats and so on. We conceptualise community media workers as involved in a form of participatory democracy and active citizenship located 'within the everyday achievements of ordinary people' (Rennie 2002:12). The emphasis on 'the ordinary' or 'everyday' is an important element that emerged from community broadcasting audiences across the country.

Culture, defined in the anthropological sense as ‘a whole way of life’, is a useful term in considering the impact of community media processes because it is expressed, represented, reproduced and maintained through the media. The media play a pivotal role through the dispersal of ideas and assumptions about the world in news, information, and entertainment programming, as Kellner and Durham conclude (2006:xxi):

Culture is produced and consumed within social life. Hence, particular cultural artefacts and practices must be situated with the social relations of production and reception in which culture is produced, distributed, and consumed in order to be properly understood and interpreted. Contextualising cultural forms and audiences in historically specific situations helps illuminate how cultural artefacts reflect or reproduce concrete social relations and conditions—or oppose and attempt to transform them.

Of course, media are not the only places where culture is communicated: the process occurs between individuals, within and between groups and communities. This is taken up by McCallum (2007) in her investigation of the notion of ‘local talk’ in creating public consciousness, opposing the mediated frames that dominate mainstream processes. Culture, as Hall (1980:60) postulates, is ‘threaded through all social practices and is the sum of their relationship’. It is about our everyday frameworks for understanding and communicating our experience of the world and importantly our place within it. Thus, community broadcasting is well-placed to enable the dissemination and affirmation of a diverse range of ‘everyday’ cultures which serve to assure a place for millions of Australians within their local communities.

It is difficult to suggest a single framework which encompasses the activities of the local and global manifestations of community broadcasting. The ways in which it serves a plethora of communities, alongside the different ways in which media are produced, suggests that a single framework is difficult to sustain. Debates over the very meaning of ‘community’ is indicative of the general status of theory surrounding the operations of community media in general. It is variously referred to as ‘citizens media’ (Rodriguez, 2001), ‘alternative media’ (Atton 2001), ‘radical media’ (Downing 1984; 2001), ‘grassroots media’ and so on. Different researchers focus on different aspects of the sector which generate predictably different ideas about an appropriate definition. Howley (2005:2) offers a broad description, arguing it should include...

...grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity.

Although this includes the central motivations and objectives of the sector in terms of community, media and society, what is immediately relevant to one station may not be to another. For example, while some politically-active stations may agree with a ‘profound sense of dissatisfaction’ with mainstream media, others, particularly regional stations, might find resonance with the ‘community relations’ aspect of this definition. Given the size and diversity of stations and audiences we have encountered, we, too, have grappled with a single definition and model which encompasses and frames the diversity of our experience. We propose a framework which theorises the sector’s nature and processes in terms of empowerment, creating social coherence *through* diversity.

Community broadcasting, culture and empowerment

Empowerment is *the* recurring concept emerging from the previous station-based study (Forde et al 2002) and the audience-based project on which this chapter is based (Meadows et al 2007). In the research literature dealing with these issues, ‘empowerment’ tends to be attached to broader concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’. But we are suggesting the idea of ‘empowerment’ as an overarching term which encapsulates most, if not all, of the sector’s operations, functions and services. Grossberg (1987:95) defines the concept as ‘the conditions of possibility that enable a particular practice or statement to exist in a specific social context and to enable people to live their lives in different ways.’ Adopting this argument, the community media sector empowers station workers, community representatives who use the station’s facilities and audience members to ‘live their lives’ through the media ‘in different ways’.

Community media is not necessarily empowering for ‘everybody, everywhere’. As van Vuuren (2006:380) argues, at the level of station management and operation, ‘a process of exclusion ensures that access to broadcasting is limited to those individuals and groups’ whose opinions align with a station’s purpose and will thus maintain *its* ‘value and purpose’. However, on a continuum of potential to empower, community radio fares much better than other media. Rather than being subjected to the financial pressures which limit the broadcast options of commercial media, community radio and television stations are free to broadcast the ideas, beliefs and practices—in other words, the cultures—of a multitude of communities defined by interest and/or geography. Community media, albeit not without their faults, empower everyday people with media access which, in the 21st century, is the most powerful medium for the communication of culture.

Facing the onslaught of an increasing globalization, driven largely by transnational media corporations, the efforts of community media practitioners and the support of their audiences might seem insignificant. But Couldry (2002:27) asserts that the difference in power between mainstream and community media outlets is exactly the point—community media is a weapon of the weak and is thus worthy of academic interest. The growth in community media outlets in Australia and elsewhere heralds a small fissure in power relations between the mainstream media and the ‘communities’ they inelegantly define as consumers. It is a small crack in traditional relations between media producers and their audiences which has placed some power in the hands of local citizens. It is an opportunity, as Grossberg (1988:170) argues, to celebrate the—albeit comparatively small—power of local citizens to challenge the dominant ideologies characteristic of mainstream media. He continues (1988:170):

Most cultural criticism focuses on culture’s critical relation (negativity) to the dominant positions and ideologies. Politics becomes defined as resistance to or emancipation from an assumed reality; politics is measured by difference. But empowerment can also be positive; celebration, however much it ignores relations of domination, can be enabling. Opposition may be constituted by living, even momentarily, within alternative practices, structures, and spaces, even though they may take no notice of their relationship to existing systems of power.

So the relations of power between audience members and media producers is, at the very least, *disturbed* by the production and reception of community media. This is precisely the reason why analysis of the content of community radio and television is not the sole focus in our research. Rather, we have examined the ways in which these local media facilitate ‘community organisation’ and the cultural relationships between media workers and the communities from which they emerge (Tomaselli and Prinsloo 1990:156). It is apparent across the Australian community broadcasting sector, but particularly evident in

Indigenous and ethnic communities where the ‘fatal diversity of language’ (Anderson 1984)—and we might also add, culture—means local media take on a critical performative and mediating role.

The Indigenous broadcasting sector is made up of 96 stations (including 21 dedicated Indigenous community radio stations), producing around 1600 hours of Indigenous programming each week. This is in addition to 80 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services with community radio and television facilities, although most re-broadcast existing radio and television services (Community Broadcasting Foundation 2007). But it is radio, in particular, that has given Indigenous communities a voice in the face of continuing mainstream media stereotyping and racism (Meadows 2001). As one North Queensland listener to local Aboriginal radio station, 4K1G, observes:

It provides places like Palm [Island], Woorabinda, the Cape [York] and other Indigenous communities, particularly the Indigenous population in the mainstream, with a voice, a balance, projecting our stories, our culture, our language the way we want to hear it but giving it to the wider audience too, people who live in the mainstream, people who don’t often come in contact with Indigenous people (Interview, Townsville 2005).

This resonates with Rodriguez’s assertion that we avoid defining alternative media in terms of its *opposition* to mainstream media and rather focus on the ‘transformative processes they bring about within their participants and their communities’ (2002:79). This focus on ‘transformative processes’ describes the impact of community broadcasting in the context of people’s everyday lives. The fissure in power relations is empowering for communities who, prior to the establishment of the sector, were muted in their interaction with existing media. One listener to Melbourne’s popular community radio station 3RRR summed it up like this:

It is something that actually brings the community together, whereas a lot of the stuff in the world today seems to be isolating us. You know, you can get all the information you need, sitting at home in front of your computer, and that sort of thing. Whereas, this is something that actually gives you a reason to get out and into your community, and a community that is open and accepting of you (3RRR Focus Group 2005).

As this comment suggests, while community empowerment is enabled through media, the focus here is on the community and a station’s role in ‘community development’. Kitty van Vuuren (2002:390) argues that we should value this ‘community development’ function more than its ‘broadcasting function’. She draws attention to the ‘quality and management of volunteers, the sector’s training capacity and the nature of the various networks of which community broadcasting is a part’.

In this *mélange* of influence, we should not overlook the fact that although media are of central importance in ‘winning consent’ for particular ideas and assumptions about the world, they must take their place alongside other cultural institutions in society which influence public opinion—libraries, schools, universities, associations, clubs etc—in the production of this consent. Media are nevertheless the ‘most dynamic’ element of this theoretical framework (Gramsci 1988:38-381). We argue that community broadcasting, too, makes a significant contribution to this process.

In a society where the media performs a central role in the production and maintenance of cultures—through the broadcast of music, news and information, representations of community and generally, a community’s ‘whole way of life’—the participation by community members in media processes is recognised as a site of empowerment. This

dissolves traditional boundaries between media producers and their audiences. This is nowhere more evident than in Indigenous broadcasting:

The audience are the producers and we get constant feedback from them as to what they want and also that they're prepared to just get up there and do it themselves. And the separation of production processes from audience? It's a unique situation. It's something that the government should treasure (Interview, Yuendumu 2006).

In a practical sense, community media empowers communities or groups by enabling dissemination of their ideas to a much larger audience. In this role, community media challenges the status quo nature of mainstream media by providing a space where citizens can encounter, debate or experience alternative viewpoints and lifestyles. This is in stark contrast to the mainstream where voices of the elite have the power to set the agenda. Community radio and television have the potential to enable the representation of other ideas and assumptions and this is its strongest contribution to 'communicative democracy'. This is the mandate of the community broadcasting sector in Australia and it is unfair to gauge its efforts only in comparison to the mainstream—and vice versa. The point is that given the saturation of mainstream media services, the reach of community radio and television is critical to providing and affirming a sense of difference and, by extension, belonging, in the communities to which it broadcasts. Rodriguez eloquently captures this idea (2001:154):

Citizens' media do not have to compete for global markets; they do not have to reach all audiences; they do have to 'talk to everyone' and therefore, local dialects, local issues, and local codifications of social reality find their way into citizens' media programming...citizens' media are in a privileged position to delve into, to explore, and to articulate (differences between subordinate groups)—unlike mainstream media which tend to generalize and smooth away such differences.

The evidence from the Australian audience study confirms that community radio and television empowers disempowered, disenfranchised and disadvantaged groups in Australian society, enabling representations of their way of life, priorities and agendas. This includes Indigenous communities, ethnic communities and less obviously prison communities, gay and lesbian communities, print-handicapped and vision-impaired communities, younger and older communities and so on (Meadows et al 2007). Community broadcasting thus enables citizens, regardless of social demographics, to interrupt the established dominance of mainstream media and society, by inserting their own content, style and cultural perspectives into what we have described elsewhere as 'community public spheres'. This is inexorably linked to the processes of the broader public sphere where ideas from a diminishing range of perspectives compete for public attention (Forde et al 2002). This brief exchange in the 3RRR Melbourne Focus Group (2005) touches on the idea:

Participant 1: When you think about it, groups like the Palestinians don't have a voice in the mainstream at all. But they are at least given the chance to articulate their views. And that's terribly important. And that also brings people into a community doesn't it?

Participant 2: It educates the people who can't get access to an alternative.

Community media for disadvantaged citizens incorporates the everyday but is absolutely critical for the survival of the community and individuals within it. For example, in remote Australia, Indigenous community media performs a vital service in not only maintaining social and cultural networks but also in providing critical information on

education, health, community services, etc. Clearly, there is a marked difference between providing a medium for a local sporting club to announce fixtures and providing a newly-arrived refugee with information about community health services. The distinction draws attention to the range of services offered by community radio, in particular, in empowering its participants and listeners—at the level of the individual and their communities. Carpentier et al (2003:55-56) highlight this very point:

Topics that are considered relevant for the community can be discussed by members of that community, thus empowering those people by signifying that their statements are considered important enough to be broadcast. Societal groups that are misrepresented, disadvantaged, stigmatized, or even repressed can especially benefit from using the channels of communication opened by community media, strengthening their internal identity, manifesting this identity to the outside world, and thus enabling social change and/or development.

Citizens of community media are empowered in terms of their capacity to participate in democratic processes. Here, we are talking about ‘media’, and more broadly, ‘communicative’ democracy. Empowerment at this level refers to the impact of community media in enhancing broader societal concepts, especially related ideas such as citizenship, democracy and the public sphere. These are familiar terms in literature on community media. They are terms which, at first glance, seem somewhat removed from the day-to-day efforts of station volunteers and the listening habits of community radio audiences. However, it is precisely individuals’ engagement at this level which make the terms relevant to the processes of community broadcasting. The nature of community media and the multiplicity of ways in which they function in terms of democracy and citizenship complicate attempts to frame concepts at this level, as Rodriguez (2001:160-161) suggests:

Too many analyses of the democratization of communication lack acceptance and understanding of the diffuse nature of power struggles and negotiations. Only when we learn to design theories and methods able to accompany the fluidity of citizens negotiating power will we do justice to people and their actions of shaping everyday lives. What we commonly do—formulating a theory of how social change should happen and dissecting specific cases in relation to such criteria—will continue our 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 our attempts to impose order and organization will only cause our alienation from these processes.

Carpentier et al (2003:58-59) draw attention to the link between community media and civil society. In this configuration, community media is situated between the domain of private economic (i.e. for profit) organizations and private personal and family relations on the one hand—and public state-owned economic organizations and state and quasi-state organizations on the other. As an intermediate organization (like charities, political parties, pressure groups, etc), community radio and television function as a part of civil society crucial to democracy by fostering citizen participation in public life. The instances of ‘micro-participation’ enabled by community broadcasting contribute to a broader ‘macro-participation’ as participants actively adopt civic attitudes and actions and perform a pivotal role in a healthy democracy. The authors argue that the distinction between community media, the state and the market fosters social antagonisms which do not capture community media’s role, or potential role in broader society. The antagonistic relations borne out of a media sector which, on numerous fronts, opposes the state, the market and mainstream media, places community media in a position of

‘discursive isolation’, unable to engage with some of the most powerful and critical discourses and their attendant institutions (such as the state, the market and the media) in any meaningful sense.

As a remedy to this ‘discursive isolation’, Carpentier et al (2003) assert a more fluid conception of state and civil society relations by applying Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theory of the rhizome. Rhizomatic thinking is characterized as non-linear, anarchic and nomadic, connecting any point to another point. In contrast, arabolic thinking is linear, hierarchical and sedentary represented by a tree-like structure where branches subdivide into smaller branches (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 in Carpentier et al 2003:61). The relevance of the rhizome to community media is to ‘highlight the role of community media as the crossroads of organizations and movements linked with civil society [and]...incorporate the high level of contingency that characterizes community media’. And they continue (Carpentier et al 2003:61):

Both their embeddedness in a fluid civil society (as a part of a larger network) and their antagonistic relationship towards the state and the market (as alternative to mainstream public and commercial media) make the identity of community media highly elusive. In this approach it is argued that this elusiveness and contingency, as is the case for a rhizome, forms its main defining elements.

This theoretical approach concurs with recent applications of radical democratic theory to community media where power is enacted and citizenship expressed in a multiplicity of forums, including political action in the quotidian. Rodriguez (2001:158) encourages adoption of a similar framework:

...citizens’ media are similar to living organisms that evolve and develop uniquely in permanent interaction with their complex environments/contexts: at some point they strengthen their struggle against one target, but later they can abandon a target and take on a new one, which, in turn, can be abandoned to focus on a third one. It is in the play of articulated historical conflicts and struggles where the richness of citizens’ media resides, in terms of their potential as forces of resistance. But this same richness will be overlooked if we attempt to see citizens’ media as one-dimensional static platforms aimed at unified goals.

In part, the rhizomatic approach questions some of the radical foundations of community media arguing that their antagonistic relationship with the state and the market neglects their bridging position between the state and civil society. Carpentier et al (2003:61) again:

Community media establish different types of relationships with the market and/or the state, often for reasons of survival, and in this fashion they can still be seen as potentially destabilizing and deterritorialising...the rigidities and certainties of public and commercial media organizations.

This reflects our own experiences of community broadcasting in Australia. Radio stations, in particular, often find themselves in an uneasy situation of compromising their principled stance towards the state and the market while consistently seeking either funding (from the state) and sponsorship (from the market). Their supposed distance from the state and market is further complicated by the range of community groups, including state, quasi-state and private organizations which produce programming through the stations for broadcast to local communities. But many see this as an advantage, echoed by this Focus Group participant in Adelaide (2005):

...the great thing about it is because, it has the potential to be organic—that you can have all sorts of people presenting programmes...[I] couldn’t care less if

they've got an audience of one at Murray Bridge who happens to be interested in something or whether it's a popular programme and they've got, you know, a couple of thousand people listening, riveted to the radio. That's the beauty of [community radio] because it's not the commercial pressure that comes with advertising that you must produce consistently programmes that rate highly so that you get the advertising dollar.

The rhizomatic approach creates a discursive space for community media outlets to not only challenge mainstream media identities in both content and structure, but also to foster potentially profitable relations with the state and the market. In adopting this approach, there is further potential for community broadcasting to act as a conduit for relations between both the state and the market. In short, establishing this agnostic position may enable community radio and television to better participate in public sphere activity by facilitating communication between local communities and larger institutions. As a 'pocket of resistance', community media is a significant site for democratization *through* the media (Wasko and Mosco 1992:13). Carpentier et al (2003) assert that despite their current precarious position, many community media outlets are able to enhance their role as a democratic voice by focusing upon their relations with the state, market and mainstream media and actively engaging with those discourses which are hegemonic (and thus powerful) while still retaining and protecting their identity in terms of serving communities and offering alternatives to the mainstream. This does not mean community media need to embark on a program of expansion but rather better use their ability to articulate and access the local and thus empower local citizens more so, thus acting as a significant conduit for relations between communities, the state and market, as Rodriguez (2001:155) reminds us:

Although this inclination to think 'bigger is better' is perfectly understandable, fostering the growth and expansion of citizens' media should be carefully considered. When it comes to media production, the consequence of losing one's ability to articulate the local constitutes a critical component of the political potential of citizens' media.

Enabling everyday practice

Community broadcasting empowers local citizens to participate in their communities through, for example, the broadcast of cultural events from music festivals to local parents and citizens' group meetings and almost everything in between. Participation in the political life of their communities through the broadcast of rallies, protests, celebrations—community events—is also empowering for audiences. So how do listeners define it? Here are three focus group responses:

I'd say 'community glue'...it glues the community together in so many ways, and allows that opportunity to hear in-depth discussion about what matters to the community. The presenters get on air, and then there's a follow-up, so for me it's that nourishing community feeling and sense of understanding about what's going on in the community (Focus Group Byron Bay 2005).

Commercial radio makes me despair for this country and I find it quite depressing and so listening to Artsound FM reminds me that not everybody belongs to commercial radio land and there is community out there. And in that sense, it's given me a sense of connectiveness and it also reminds me that it's necessary to keep striving for that, that it's not a natural or a given and that's one

reason why I will support community radio because it's an alternative to the mass (Focus Group Canberra 2005).

... in the first few months I lived here [I] made this big, big move from Melbourne which was quite a big move. It was lovely us setting up the house, just to listen to the radio and the announcers and you really got a feeling of what was going on here. Because I tend to take it for granted now, but when I'd just come from the big smoke, it was such a beautiful difference, you had these sort of real people, instead of announcers interviewing local politicians and the stuff that you normally get at the commercial radio stations in the city. It was really good. I look back and that was really great to have the radio there (Focus Group Albany 2005).

In those communities which experience a significant degree of social disadvantage, community broadcasting is a critical service—in many cases about survival. This is particularly so for remote Indigenous communities, newly-arrived refugee communities and associated supportive community groups. Empowering these communities to survive through the broadcasting of critical news and information otherwise unavailable is community broadcasting at its most constructive. The evidence from our study is particularly strong here (Meadows et al 2007). Two examples will suffice.

The first comes from the program, *Talkblack*, the most popular on Indigenous radio in North Queensland. In November 2004, Aboriginal people on Palm Island, near Townsville, stormed and burned down a police station on the island following the death in custody of a young local man. While mainstream media branded the incident 'the riot', Indigenous voices on Indigenous airwaves spoke about 'the resistance' with the Cairns-produced (Bumma Bippera Media) and nationally-broadcast talkback program, *Talkblack*, providing listeners with views other than those from sources such as State politicians and the police—in short: 'black voices and black issues' (Interview, Palm Island, 2006). The program was threatened with legal action by the Queensland Police Union at the time but ignored this, broadcasting Indigenous listeners' uncensored views. The program won an award for the best coverage of Indigenous Affairs at the 2006 Queensland Media Awards. Indigenous audience representatives have identified local radio and television as the only real alternative available to them in such times of community crisis, which for many Aboriginal Australians, *is* everyday practice:

It's keeping our families connected, a lot of us can't read, a lot of us can't write but we all like listening to the radio, a bit of country and western. And it's what these programs are doing. They are community based; they're owned by Aboriginal people; they are controlled by Aboriginal people *for* Aboriginal people (*Talkblack* 2005).

The second example comes from the ethnic community radio sector. There is strong evidence from our audience research to suggest that community radio is playing a significant role in the settlement process for many of the 125 distinct cultural groups who now call Australia home (Community Broadcasting Foundation 2007; Meadows et al 2007). The ethnic community radio sector has 123 stations (including seven producing ethnic language programs full-time) broadcasting around 2100 hours of programming each week. Around 4000 volunteer produce these programs in 97 community languages (Community broadcasting Foundation 2007). Some have described the role of ethnic media as contradictory—promoting autonomous public spheres to create alliances on the one hand, but leading to the possibility of greater fragmentation of civil society on the other (Downing and Fenton 2003:190). Analysis of our qualitative audience research involving 10 ethnic language groups supports the former premise but challenges the

assertion of possible fragmentation. In fact, the overall response suggests exactly the opposite. This response was a typical of many (Turkish Focus Group 2006):

The radio, this radio station is not separating us from Australia, as our friend said before, it's integrating us to Australia. It's very important. Our children are growing up Australians anyway, maybe they're having difficulty adapting culturally, but through the radio, they will be able to get some help or adapt anyway. And also we see our differences as richness, in Turkey too, where we come from different backgrounds and things that, backgrounds, we're living the same thing here too and we're happy about that. Everyone's got their own different folklore, folklore and songs and everything else so we have that here too and we're happy with that.

The question of identity and the empowerment possibilities it represents is implicit in this discussion. It is particularly relevant for community broadcasting because of the unmatched ability of the sector to create 'communities of interest', based on criteria determined, for example, by social, cultural, linguistic, or geographical boundaries. One way of theorizing this is to look at the notions of 'common sense' and 'good sense' as espoused by cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci. We might argue that mainstream media, through the 'diffuse, uncoordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment' plays a central role in creating 'common sense' explanations for the world and our place in it (Gramsci 1971:330; Coban, 2005). For example, ideas and assumptions about Islam and Indigenous affairs in mainstream media, for example—rarely based on systematic study—create a 'common sense' around such issues, more often than not leading to stereotyping and, in some cases, racism (Meadows, 2001; Manning, 2006). But it is not all bad, of course, and Gramsci, too, suggests that this 'common sense' contains 'a healthy nucleus of good sense' which, he argues, 'deserves to be made more unitary and coherent' (Gramsci 1971:328; Coban, 2005). In other words, the seeds for creating 'good sense' already exist, which is where community broadcasting becomes particularly relevant. Because of its ability to create 'communities of interest'—in other words, 'homogeneous social groups'—community media are in an ideal position to transform or 'renew' common sense into good sense. Gramsci continues (1971:419): 'At those times when a homogeneous social group is brought into being, there comes into being also, in opposition to common sense, a homogeneous—in other words coherent and systematic—philosophy.' A binding element in the process of creating and maintaining this homogeneous philosophy is a connection with reality—in Gramsci's terms, the 'simple'. He argues (1971:330):

[One must start with]...a philosophy which already enjoys, or could enjoy, a certain diffusion, because it is connected to and implicit in practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a renewed common sense possessing the coherence and sinew of individual philosophies. But this can only happen if the demands of cultural contact with the 'simple' are continually felt.

This implies that ideological institutions like media that have established real community connections are more likely to be in a position to enact the philosophical shift from common sense to good sense. We suggest that, in theoretical terms, community broadcasting exhibits these characteristics. It is the case, as suggested by Hochheimer, that community media should not be seen as the *starting point* for organising people, but rather as an extension of an *existing desire to communicate* to establish a sense of personal and community power (Hochheimer 1999: 451).

These attempts to theorise community cultural production essentially revolve around the ideas of the public sphere and democracy. We suggest that rather than adopting the idea of a single public sphere, we might think of media operating in terms of a series of parallel and overlapping public spheres or ‘public arenas’ (Fraser 1999:126)—spaces where participants with similar cultural backgrounds or ‘communities of interest’ engage in activities concerning issues and interests of importance to them. There is considerable evidence from our audience analysis to support this approach (Meadows et al 2007). What we have termed a ‘community public sphere’ is a discrete formation or space that develops in a unique context and is the product of contestation with the mainstream public sphere. As Atton (2002:153) has suggested in relation to alternative media, it is a process enabling empowering narratives of resistance for participants, produced by those very participants. Fraser (1999: 127) argues that ‘the unbounded character and publicist orientation of publics allows people to participate in more than one public, and it allows memberships of different publics to overlap’. Where our concept of the ‘community public sphere’ may differ from Atton’s notion of alternative media is in that not all community stations see themselves as *necessarily* resisting the mainstream—it is a more flexible and subtle process. In fact, some community radio stations (and their audiences) aspire to mainstream status in terms of both programming and philosophy—but they work within the discursive arena of the local community. Downing and Fenton (2003:188) remind us, too, that Habermas himself—the architect of the idea of the public sphere—in 1996 acknowledged that autonomous public spheres can acquire influence in the mass media public sphere under certain circumstances. However, the authors argue (2003:189-190) that this can lead to a media structure that creates enclaves that threaten social cohesion but which support social movements. Our studies of Australian community radio to this point have found no substantive evidence of threats to social cohesion, rather the opposite. Based on our analysis, the four key defining components of community broadcasting in Australia are:

- provision of local news and information;
- audience access to diverse music formats;
- enabling an important ‘community connection’ role; and
- offering social and cultural diversity in programming.

These criteria essentially exclude mainstream media—the purveyors of ‘common sense’—on practically all levels and instead, embrace an alternative philosophical framework. What has emerged from this is evidence of the production of social coherence *through* diversity. The process is underpinned by empowerment at the level of the community, the citizen, media and society.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored some theoretical ideas which frame our experience of the community broadcasting sector in Australia, drawing on research that has spanned the past seven years. We offer a framework comprising multiple elements to explain its diverse operations, acknowledging the different ways in which, and different ‘places’ where, community radio and television perform diverse functions or services. Media are powerful elements in the representation of culture and as such, participation by diverse communities is an empowering experience, enabling members of a community—or listeners and/or viewers of community broadcasting—to ‘live their lives in different ways’.

At the level of community, media create, then empower 'homogeneous social groups' to represent their own cultures or ways of life. We have distinguished between empowering relatively 'powerful' communities and empowering 'disadvantaged' communities and suggest there is evidence of a continuum of disadvantage which impacts on the role of community radio and television in different contexts. Embedded in this potpourri is the question of identity. The ability of community broadcasting to create 'communities of interest' places it in an ideal position to transform 'common sense' into 'good sense'—an objective proclaimed, albeit in a different language, in the sector's mission statements.

The 'citizens' of citizens' media (station workers, community groups and audiences) have access to a unique avenue to participate in the democratic process. The very existence of the sector enables this engagement by individuals in the public life of their communities. An antagonistic position by community broadcasting in relation to the state and the market may not serve the sector particularly well. However, framing it in terms of a 'rhizome' and adopting an agnostic position, allows a reconsideration of the role of community broadcasting in a 'real world' context. The suggestion is not that community radio and television stations should 'sell-out', but rather that they might consider embracing existing relationships with traditional 'opponents' to facilitate exploring the democratic potential. Allowing for fluidity and complexity in its relations with the state, the market, and civil society, presents alternative avenues of empowerment for the community broadcasting sector, perhaps strengthening this already 'marginally' powerful component of Australian society.

Community broadcasting at least 'disturbs' the established power base of mainstream media and thus impacts on representations of culture. The efforts of community media workers and their listeners are able to interrupt 'common sense' mainstream media representations by offering alternatives— 'good sense'— which showcase the diversity of Australian culture at the local level. This is empowering for participating communities who are either not represented or misrepresented in conventional media. The dissemination of different ideas and assumptions about the world and our place in it affirms a place for millions of Australians by validating their 'whole way of life'. This 'community public sphere' activity inexorably overlaps and thus influences broader public sphere processes.

Our work thus far suggests a need to further interrogate the nature of the producer-audience boundary in community media sectors globally. The evidence from the inaugural Australian qualitative audience study suggests a continuum—from an *absence* of a boundary at all in Indigenous and some ethnic media production to at least a leaky barrier between producers and audiences in the generalist community radio sector. This is evident in widespread audience assertions that the stations and their programs are 'ours'. It offers a further critique of the failure of mainstream media to actively engage with their audiences, and has become a defining characteristic of community broadcasting—in Australia at least. Research into community media globally—and the Australian sector specifically—suggests that something unique is happening here. Researchers, practitioners and audiences alike must remain alert to the democratic potential inherent in the social transformations already evident in this ever-increasing body of knowledge.

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