Communicating Culture: community media in Australia

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Introduction

The cultural importance of alternative and independent media becomes obvious when looking at the present Australian mediascape—arguably the most concentrated in the Western world (*Communications Update* 2002). A shift in the past 10 years from broadcasting regulation to a 'light touch' approach by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) has accelerated the transformation of citizens to consumers. It has been accompanied by a political shift to the right and the re-emergence of intolerant and often racist ideologies. This was no more clearly demonstrated than in November last year when the ultra-conservative coalition government of John Howard was re-elected, based largely on its decision to imprison asylum seekers entering Australia by sea from Southeast Asia. With virtually no serious political voices raised in opposition, Australian politics remains the captive of conservative political and economic forces. During the run-up to the federal election late last year, few voices of opposition emerged from the mainstream media. It was one of the most deplorable recent examples of media complicity in Australia's history. It is only at the time of writing this that a Senate inquiry has begun to uncover the subterfuge that kept the real facts of the asylum-seekers' plight from the eyes and ears of the Australian public.[1]

Western frameworks for 'imagining' Australia as a nation emerged from the journals of European explorers who ventured to the shores of the Great South Land from the late 17th century. In the journals of Dampier (1697) Australia was seen as the 'primitive other'. 'The miserablest people in the world' was his description of Aboriginal people on first contact (Turner Strong 1986, 175-179). Illustrators of medieval maps imagined the undiscovered continent as inhabited by monsters with backward-turning feet and who walked upside down—the inverse qualities of human beings—hence the name 'antipodes' (Turner Strong 1986, 176; Gibson 1984, 142). Indigenous Australians were already stereotyped well before James Cook's historic voyage of discovery in 1770. Interestingly, sympathetic descriptions of Aboriginal people were omitted from the published versions of Cook's journals in England some years later (Williams 1985, 46). Ways of thinking about Indigenous people were well-established before the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788—settlement (now Australia Day) for the Europeans; an invasion for the civilisations which had inhabited the continent for perhaps more than 60,000 years. The first Aboriginal prisoner was taken on New Year's Eve 1788 and a pattern of race relations, along with ways of framing Indigenous people, had been set (Stanner 1977). Of the estimated 250 Indigenous languages and 500 dialects spoken in 1788, around 50 survive with 20 expected to remain in common usage (Schmidt 1993; Blake 1981, 6).

In colonial Australia in the late 18th century it was the influence of the imperial power, Britain, that influenced the emergence of an Australian journalism and media system. Spain, Holland, France, and Portugal all had press traditions as old as those of Britain—and all of these nations were involved in early exploration of the Great South Land. One close neighbor, the Philippines, has a press tradition extending back to the 16th century. But while British press traditions influenced the setting up of the first newspaper in Australia—the *Gazette* in Sydney in March 1803—the spread of journalism and the press system was highly varied across the colony because of differences in governance and geography. By the 1840s, all Australian colonies had an established newspaper. The spread of journalism was erratic, along the coastline and coastal rivers. Following establishment of the *Sydney Gazette,* the press first moved to settlements in Tasmania before spreading to other outposts such as Perth, in Western Australia, in 1829 and what is now Brisbane in 1846. The style of journalism that emerged in Australia in the late 18th century was imported from Europe but was nevertheless influenced and shaped by the dynamic social and cultural environment of the new colony (Schultz 1997, 30). It was during this period that modern Australian journalism—and, we suggest, a framework for 'imagining' Australia—was born.

A movement towards concentration of media ownership post World War II coincided with the establishment of an 'irrevocably commercial'—and conservative—press in Australia. Federal government policy changes in the mid to late 1980s set up a framework that has led to perhaps the most concentrated system of media ownership in the West. The dominant players include Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (dominant interests in newspapers, pay television, magazines, book publishing, film production, online news, recording industry production, National Rugby League, and Australian Associated Press); John Fairfax Holdings (newspapers and magazines); and Australia's richest man, Kerry Packer's PBL (television, pay television, magazines, cinema exhibition, online news, and gambling interests). Eight of the top ten selling magazines in Australia are owned by the dominant media players (*Communications Update* 2002). Daily newspaper circulation in Australia has more than halved since 1950 (Schultz 1997, 37)—evidence of fragmenting audiences and the creation of monopoly newspaper markets in all but two of Australia's capital cities (Cunningham and Turner 1997, 4). These trends have created a framework in which it has become increasingly difficult for the voice of the citizen to be heard.

Australia's broadcasting system emerged in the early 1920s—a combination of America's virtually unregulated and Britain's highly regulated approach. Within a few years, separate commercial and government-funded radio sectors had been established and set the framework for the current Australian communications environment The first television station in Australia in 1956 (in time for the Melbourne Olympics) was commercial, preceding the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Commission channel to air. The introduction of community radio on the new FM band in the mid-1970s was the first real opportunity for truly independent voices to be heard on the Australian airwaves, including those of the multicultural and Indigenous communities. Corporate concentration of ownership in the Australian broadcasting industry followed the pattern in the newspaper industry and by the late 1980s, Australian commercial television was controlled by three corporations. This pattern persists with the Seven Network Ltd (television, pay television, publishing and online interests), PBL, and Ten Network Holdings (television and advertising interests) controlling commercial television in Australia (Communications Update 2002). Multicultural lobbying power translated into the government-funded Special Broadcasting Service and national television channel in 1984. Although the audience reach for SBS TV remains small, it nevertheless offers a wide range of programming diversity in a range of community languages. Its award-winning independent news and current affairs programs are in many cases the equal to or superior to the best offered by the ABC—a national leader in Australia in quality, independent news and current affairs production. But both the ABC and the SBS have been under sustained funding pressures from indifferent successive federal governments who seem overly sensitive about public broadcasters' ability to uncover corruption wherever it may lie. With the commercial television ownership pattern firmly set, by the time Pay TV was introduced in 1995, within a few years, company names linked to these 'new' stations bore a striking resemblance to those in the so-called 'free-to-air' sector. By the end of 2001, pay TV had reached about 20 per cent of Australian homes (*Communications Update* 2002).

This is the modern Australian communications environment in which alternative voices increasingly struggle to be heard. In more recent years, the World Wide Web has become a valuable resource for grass roots organizations globally and locally to exchange information and ideas. Despite its propensity for inequality as a communicative medium, the net seems to have become a vehicle which serves both the corporations and those at the other end of the spectrum best of all (Hunter 2001, 11; Castells 2000, 425-426).

But this paper is about more positive developments. Apart from mainstream commercial and government-funded radio and television stations (ABC and SBS), Australia boasts a dynamic independent community media sector—print, radio, television and online publications that challenge the status quo, or at the very least, offer an alternative spin on local and global affairs.

Defining community media

In this discussion, we use the terms 'independent' or 'community' to define media that offer 'a clear alternative' to mainstream news and political journalism—an approach adopted by Forde (1997; 1998) in her studies of the independent press in Australia. It is the case that many independent media producers offer perspectives that differ little from the mainstream in some respects, but there are other elements

(intent, focus, size etc) that distinguish them. The community media sector is a cultural resource that is used to facilitate cultural citizenship in ways that differentiate it from other media. Various studies have argued, for example, that Indigenous media production in Australia, the South Pacific and Canada has contributed to a re-conceptualising of Habermas's notion of the public sphere (Molnar and Meadows 2001; Avison and Meadows 2000). Similarly, in her work with the independent press in Australia, Forde (1997, 1998) suggests that journalism in that sector represents a crucial activity that extends contemporary ideas of the public sphere and democracy. More recent work by Forde, Foxwell and Meadows (2000, 2001, 2002) suggests that rather than adopting the idea of a single, all-encompassing public sphere, we might think in terms of a series of parallel and overlapping public spheres—spaces where participants with similar cultural backgrounds engage in activities concerning issues and interests of importance to them. In this way, participants articulate their own discursive styles and formulate their own positions on issues that are then brought to a wider public sphere where they are able to interact 'across lines of cultural diversity' (Fraser 1993, 13). What we might term a 'community public sphere' should be seen as a discrete formation or space that develops in a unique context and it is the product of contestation with the mainstream public sphere.

So community media might be thought of as a *process* of cultural empowerment. And it may be that content production is not *necessarily* the prime purpose of community media. What may be as (or more) important are the ways in which a community media outlets facilitate the process of community organisation and the cultural relationship between content producers and the community they serve (Tomaselli and Prinsloo 1990, 156). Community media in Australia play an important cultural role by 'imagining' the notions of culture and citizenship through shared meanings, values, and ideals. Put simply, it is a process of 'making sense' of the world and our place in it. In this way, local media *both produce and maintain* the culture of a community and in doing so, play a central role in creating a community public sphere (Ewart 2000). Community media are thus resources for building multiple and complex media and cultural literacies through participation on a localised and personalised scale.

Castells (2000, 425-426) argues that social change in society happens through two mechanisms: a denial of the logic of dominant networks through the affirmation of values that cannot be processed by the network (this might include groups linked by religious, national or cultural values); and alternative networks that build bridges of communication to other networks in opposition to codes of the currently dominant networks (this might include groups with ecological, feminist or human rights' objectives). All of these use the Internet and electronic media hypertext—the same technology as the dominant networks. Castells concludes that the real power is the 'power of instrumental flows, and cultural codes' that are embedded in these networks (Castells 2000, 425-426). Community media clearly are already involved in this process.

So 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 power and community power (Hochheimer 1999, 451). In this way, community media play an important cultural role by encouraging dialogue between diverse components of a community—this process is integral to community social structure. This is clear in successful Indigenous media enterprises—where production practices and organisation have strong links to traditional community frameworks, they are far more likely to be sustainable (Morris and Meadows 2001). Regional media in Australia, for example, play an important cultural role for their communities by constructing culture through meanings, values, and ideals. This happens in various ways—through news and information programs, talkback, request shows etc. In this way, local media both produce and maintain the culture of a community (Ewart 2000).

For many years now, studies of community media have begun to draw on the experience of media producers internationally (Molnar and Meadows 2001; Browne 1996; Dowmunt 1993; Girard 1992; Thede and Ambrosi 1991). These activities are taking place within an environment where dominant media models are coming under sustained criticism for their inability to service the audiences they claim (Schultz 1994). A recent trend in Japan, for example, is the development of community FM radio linked to local shopping centres. Mini FM stations in Japan began broadcasting, mostly illegally, in the 1970s. The number increased at the start of the 1980s but this 'boom' ended with many stations disappearing after a few years. In 1992, another style of community FM radio station emerged in Japan when FM-Iruka hit the airwaves in Hakodate City in Hokkaido. It was the first community radio station to be licensed in Japan (Ishikawa 1996, 10). This model of community radio—with its strong commercial emphasis—has

emerged in response to particular local needs in Japan. But despite its commercial links, it manages to maintain a community-oriented agenda. Ishikawa (1996, 15) has suggested that a similar approach to local media across Japan could work to promote and maintain community culture—important public sphere activity. It might help communities to deal with the effects of the globalisation of mainstream media which tend towards abandoning the local. And as he points out, for the first time in Japanese history, broadcasting is in the hands of the citizens, albeit in a particularly Japanese way.

In this paper, we want to focus on the two most resilient elements of the community media sector in Australia—newspapers and broadcasting. The emphasis will be on broadcasting, drawing from a current project investigating the role of community radio as a cultural resource.

Community media in Australia

Newspapers

Compared with the burgeoning independent press sector in the United States or Europe, Australia's offerings might seem small in number. And they are. But they nevertheless represent a significant space in which alternative perspectives on 'making sense of the here and now' are possible (Adam 1993). Forde's investigation in the late 1990s identified around 30 regular publications across Australia reflecting an enormous diversity:

> …from the low-key, 20-page A5 publication *The Stirrer*, published by the Universalist Association of New South Wales, to the glossy social justice magazine *Eureka Street* and through to the commercially successful political comment and arts newspaper *Adelaide Review* (Forde 1998, 124).

The cost of establishing new local newspapers remains a major stumbling block in Australia because of the dominance of the major media corporations and limited access to distribution. From the late 1980s, the trend has been for newspapers to close in Australia rather than start up. But a sturdy band of independents maintain the rage on shoestring budgets and with a heavy reliance on volunteer and low-cost labour. Three distinct audience profiles can be identified: general, ethnic and Indigenous.

Susan Forde's work has identified that many of the contemporary independent and alternative newspaper titles have emerged from significant moments in the Australian labour movement—'general strikes, the anti-conscription movement of World War I, the Great Depression, the 40-hour week campaign and so on' (Forde 1998, 116). Such publications included the 1887 emergence of the *Radical* followed by what is claimed as the first trade-union-owned daily in the world, the *Barrier Daily Truth* in 1898. The World War I group, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), was a catalyst for the revolutionary publications *Direct Action*, *Solidarity* and the *Worker*. These publications gave way to a spate of others in the same vein in the 1920s and 1930s (Forde 117-119). Although many did not survive the pre-World War II movements that spawned them, the precedents established had paved the way for their successors. By the early 1960s, new political movements influenced a significant expansion of the alternative and independent press, almost always challenging the status quo and the mainstream media's representation of society. One of the most popular was the satirical magazine, *Oz*, perhaps best known for the trial and conviction on obscenity charges of its three editors—Richard Neville, Martin Sharp, and Richard Walsh. Neville went on to edit the London *Oz* and raised the ire of the establishment there, too, in a landmark court case. Other significant successes of the period included *High Times*, *The Digger*, *The Living Daylights* and *Nation Review*—using satire and comment and targeting audiences influenced by 1970s counterculture. An Alternative News Service was set up at this time by the Australian Union of Students and distributed a bulletin of national and international news from sources both establishment and non-establishment from around the world (Forde 1998, 120-121). The labour movement was well-represented through a range of publications. The more pragmatic 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a more mainstream format for some titles with many achieving commercial success. In the late 1990s, Forde (1998, 127-130) described the contemporary scene as including publications defined as left-wing alternative (e.g. *Green Left Weekly, Socialist Worker, The Stirrer*), 'soft' left social justice (e.g. *Sydney City Hub, The Republican, Eureka Street*), independent conservative magazines (e.g. *Quadrant, Adelaide Review*), internationally-focused alternatives

(e.g. *New Internationalist*), and a small group of occasional publications not easily categorized (e.g. *NEXUS New Times, The Bug, New Dawn*). By the turn of the millennium, the state of flux which perhaps best exemplifies the alternative and independent press scene had resulted in the closure of several (including both *The Republican* and *Eureka Street*).

Forde's studies of alternative and independent newspaper personnel reveals a dominant proportion of media workers in this sector fulfilling functions similar to independent press sectors in Germany, the United States and South Africa. She summarized her findings like this (Forde 1997, 128):

> …alternative press journalists and editors identify giving context to the news, motivating readers to take political action and/or to engage in political discussion, and providing a forum for minority groups and other 'voiceless' members of society as their major functions. They perceive that these three functions remain unfulfilled by the mainstream media.

The ethnic or multicultural press in Australia continues to expand. There were several pre-war publications in various community languages (primarily Greek and Italian) but these, along with mainstream media, were censored when hostilities broke out and some did not survive. Australia's post-war migration provided the boost needed for a wide range of publications to emerge. Many are published in community languages with around 64 titles in 17 different languages listed officially with the Audit Bureau of Circulation at the end of 2001. Almost one-third of the titles (19) service the ethnic Chinese community with others focusing on Vietnamese (7), Greek (7), Arabic (6) and Japanese (5) audiences. Other publications target Spanish, Macedonian, Indian, Indonesian, Croatian, Serbian, Italian, Thai, Sri Lankan, Korean, Irish, and Iranian audiences. By far the largest publication is the Vietnamese language daily, *Chieu Duong* (*The Sunrise Daily Newspaper*), with a circulation of 98,000 nationally. The national Arabic language daily, *Ad Diyar* (*The Arab World Newspaper*), is next with a circulation of 35,000. There are undoubtedly many more newssheets in community languages which circulate locally.

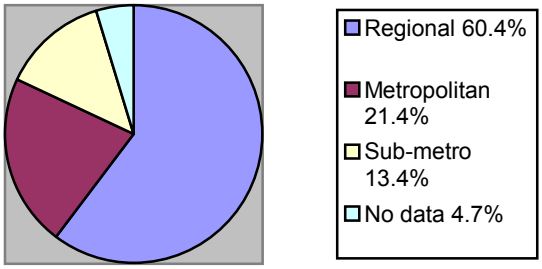
It is significant that an inquiry into Australian broadcasting in 2000 was the first mainstream public acknowledgement of the existence of the Indigenous media sector since the first Indigenous newspaper in Australia, *The Aboriginal,* or *Flinders Island Chronicle*, appeared on remote Flinders Island near Tasmania in 1826 (Molnar and Meadows 2001; Rose 1996). Twelve years later in the Torres Strait, one observer described a local publication in these terms: 'The natives have their own type-written newspaper, which keeps them informed on news concerning themselves…' (Patterson 1938, 28). There was sporadic publication of newspapers during the 1950s and 1960s with Aboriginal Land Council newsletters emerging as a strength during the land rights' struggles of the 1970s. A perceived threat from satellite television in the 1980s set the publishing wheels in motion again with the emergence of the only remaining publication from that period, the national tabloid, *Land Rights News*. The 1990s saw a resurgence in Aboriginal newspapers led by the successful Lismore-based monthly, the *Koori Mail*, which began publishing in mid-1991 and became financially self-sufficient at the turn of the new millennium. Several others like *Land Rights Queensland* have managed to survive although diminishing resources have placed enormous pressures on them. Despite the number of Indigenous print media outlets, there are few Indigenous people working in the Indigenous print media industry either as journalists or in sales and marketing. One reason for this is the lack of outlets available because of the high start-up costs required. Access to culturally-relevant training is another key element missing for Indigenous journalists. It is not unusual, therefore, to find non-Indigenous Australians occupying key roles in Indigenous publications.

This mixed array offers a wide range of perspectives on news and current affairs to both generalist and specialist audiences alike. Skeleton staff structures, a reliance on volunteer labour and minimal funding has means that the independent press sector in Australia will remain small. While much of the activity involved takes places at the periphery of the mainstream public sphere, the ability of the independent press sector to raise important issues ignored by the mainstream has an impact on public sphere debates, particularly regarding politics.

Broadcasting

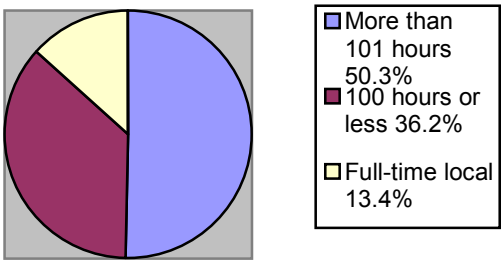
There are around 200 permanent community radio stations in Australia with a further 150 aspirant licence holders. In addition, there are seven community television license holders covering all capital cities with an additional station in Lismore in northern New South Wales.[2] In comparison, there are currently 255 commercial radio licenses. Community radio in Australia emerged in 1975 when the federal government freed up spectrum on the newly-introduced FM band. Fine music and 'radical radio' led the charge in Sydney and Brisbane. FM was to remain the sole province of community radio until commercial pressures during the 1980s saw a continuing progression of Australia's commercial radio stations making the switch. Community radio began as an urban phenomenon and while its major audiences remain within the boundaries of most capital and provincial cities, most stations are now in regional, rural or remote parts of the continent (Figure 1). This is most likely the result of a continuing 'winding-back' of local services in non-urban areas by both commercial and publicly-funded mainstream media. Equally, it is an important indicator of a growing relationship between community radio stations and their local communities of interest. The vast majority of all stations (63 per cent) cater for a broad-based local audience rather than specific sections of it. These 'generalist' stations provide access and an opportunity for participation for ordinary citizens who would otherwise have no real or recognised input into local cultural life. The remainder are 'specialist' format stations catering (in descending order of frequency) for specific audience needs: religious, RPH (radio for the print-handicapped), Indigenous, ethnic, and fine music formats.

Figure 1. Distribution of community radio licences



Community radio stations are inexorably tied to the local through their commitment to local programming. It is through programming that local stations are able to reach out into their communities—beyond the volunteers; beyond the sponsors; and beyond the personal preferences of station staff (Figure 2). Of those stations that produce a news and/or current affairs service, more than 40 percent estimate that at least half of their program content is based on local issues (more than 50 percent of stations do not produce their own news and current affairs). With a handful having the luxury of a paid employee to do this work, it falls largely on the shoulders of volunteers. Nevertheless, it is through such cultural networks that ideas and assumptions about communities and their place in the world are created and negotiated.

Figure 2. Hours per week of locally-produced programs on community radio



Community broadcasting relies on volunteers and there are at least 25,000 working regularly across the sector in Australia. Most stations have, on average, 65-70 volunteers but the numbers vary enormously from region to region; city to city. This is a significant proportion of local populations and again suggests that community radio stations are sites where important local cultural activity is taking place. While there are some paid positions, 30 percent of stations do not employ any staff and 35 percent employ three people or less. With most community stations servicing regional areas with relatively low socio-economic indicators (e.g. high unemployment, low business activity), the potential for subscribers and sponsors is variable but limited. However, when sponsors *do* support local community radio, more than 80 percent of them are from local organisations. This is a fair indication of a productive dialogue between local businesses and organisations and their community radio stations.

Community radio can claim to represent multicultural Australia in the very real sense of providing local and culturally specific broadcasting opportunities and services to the kaleidoscope of Australian cultures and cultural pursuits. The idea of community is bound up the local nature of news and community service announcements, the role of stations in exposing new and local music talent, and programming that offers a unique broadcasting service—as this volunteer observes:

> I don't know much about the commercial side of radio, but from what I've seen, every minute to them is critical [to] the dollar value, so I guess they only play songs that are going to bring in some money. And it seems that community radio, like us, we give the opportunity to all those people who are up and coming and they've just got a chance to be heard…(Brisbane Focus Group, 27 April, 2001).

Community engagement, then, is a primary focus of community radio in Australia. More than 90 per cent of stations identify the provision of access to (and participation of) community groups as a significant contribution their station makes to the local community. It is in these ways that community radio is able to extend the idea of the public sphere. One recent example in Australia concerns the arrival of Albanian refugees in Tasmania in 2000. It prompted a unique response from one Hobart community radio station which started an Albanian program, using journalists from the refugee population in the area to broadcast news from Kosovo and important government information about their stay in Australia. Volunteers from this station drove 40 minutes each way to pick up the Albanian journalists. Another example of this specific community cultural work is the role played by the network of Radio for the Print Handicapped (RPH) stations who read stories from newspapers, magazines and books on air for visually-impaired listeners.

A recurring theme across the community radio sector is the pressure to remain 'community-orientated' in an increasingly commercial environment. This is an oft-cited area of difficulty for the sector where the desire to be primarily 'community' is met with the everyday realities of 'paying the rent'. The tension between 'paying the bills' and 'community access and participation' is likely to remain, especially in a climate of increasing numbers of licences and no comparable increases in federal government funding levels. Despite these constraints, around 50 per cent of community radio stations see their primary role as providing local news and information to their audiences—important public sphere activities—while around 65 per cent see entertainment as their primary role.

The sector is funded by the federal government in two ways: targeted funding which tends to be *ad hoc*, and directed to specific projects (currently around $4.5 million over three years); and 'guaranteed' core funding ($3.3million in 2000-2001). This represents about $24,600 per station per year—a level of support that has been in steady decline in real terms since 1985. As a result, concerns about underfunding and under-resourcing are generally acknowledged and frequently bemoaned throughout the industry.

Despite this financial struggle for survival, community radio plays a pivotal role in providing broadcasting industry training in a broad spectrum of skills. The community sector is the *defacto* training ground for the mainstream media (Forde, Foxwell and Meadows 2002). For years, stations have noted the movement of trained personnel to the ABC and the SBS, local and commercial stations, through to international news organisations such as BBC and CNN. This does not begin to account for technical staff now involved in commercial radio who have got their start in community broadcasting. Stations across the nation are also actively pursuing and maintaining mutually beneficial partnerships with local universities, high schools and TAFE colleges, providing work experience and training opportunities for students—more evidence of the sector's cultural contribution to local and broader public sphere activity. Because of its very nature,

community radio is in a unique position to train journalists to be sensitive to Australia's multicultural and Indigenous populations—skills desperately needed if recent events in Australia are any guide. Mainstream media practices often lack fundamental knowledge of cultures which differ from the dominant Anglo-saxon white model and this ignorance frequently results in misrepresentation of issues. One Indigenous community radio worker put it more eloquently:

> …that's one of the biggest problems with mainstream media. They haven't got a clue about how you talk to blackfellas, or which blackfellas you talk to about what…they expect me to be able to play a didgeridoo, and carve an emu egg…I ask them 'See that boat out there on the harbour? Captain Cook came on that. Hey, reckon you can sail it?'…(Brisbane Focus Group, 27 April, 2001).

Despite the advance and availability of new media technologies across the community sector, there is a reluctance by many to move away from ideas of 'community' they have developed over the past 25 years or more. Recurrent in these debates is a reminder that community radio (and radio generally) is an 'organic' entity. In the midst of challenges from technology and big business, community radio's commitment to the local is seen by many as a crucial element which will ensure its survival. This is how one volunteer described the community radio experience:

> The thing that I think most of us love about radio is its humanness. It's very conversational, it's not flashy really, it's very humble. Natural and humble in its own little way and actually that's why more people listen to the radio than use any other form of media still. I always find it amazing that despite all the hype about whatever new technology is coming through at the moment, being DVD, or Internet or whatever, it is still the case that more people listen to the radio than use anything else and it hasn't changed…(Adelaide Focus Group, 4 July, 2001).

Multicultural radio and television in Australia have become core elements of Australian society through both a government-funded arm and community radio. The ethnic radio sector uses around 100 different languages in its 1700 hours of broadcasting each week.[3] SBS TV, which began in 1984, was the first media organisation to introduce strategies to combat racism. Broadcasting English language subtitled programs translated from 60 languages, it is still the only Australian mainstream broadcaster to openly adopt a policy of anti-racism. SBS TV produces around 800 hours of quality, first-release documentaries each year—the major supporter of this genre on Australian television. Both arms of the ethnic broadcasting sector play an important role in facilitating dialogue between the varied cultural communities that comprise the Australian broadcasting audience.[4] But commercial media and the national and multicultural television alone cannot provide the local diversity in programming sought by local audiences and it is here that community radio comes into its own.

By the turn of the new millennium, there were more than 100 licensed Indigenous community radio stations in Australia broadcasting more than 1000 hours of Indigenous content weekly (Productivity Commission 2000, 95). There are three Indigenous narrowcast radio services (one is an open narrowcast licence)[5] and a commercial radio station. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have won this access to the airwaves following persistent campaigns. Now most major urban and regional areas have an Indigenous broadcaster complementing the existing mainstream media and in may cases, providing a first level of service to Indigenous audiences. In addition to the community stations, there are two Indigenous radio networks. The National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) was launched on 25 January 1996. It enables Indigenous community radio stations across Australia to either link into national programming or choose to broadcast locally. This gives the NIRS a potential audience reach second only to the ABC. In 2001, the National Indigenous News Service (NINS) began operating on a shoestring out of the NIRS studios in Brisbane. It provides a general, independent, national news service which features Indigenous stories and Indigenous perspectives on general news. Supporting the NIRS is The Aboriginal Program Exchange (TAPE). Established in Melbourne in 1985, it distributes programs weekly on audiocassette tape to Indigenous community radio stations and Indigenous media associations broadcasting on non-Indigenous community radio stations. The move by Indigenous people into radio broadcasting in Australia was a slow but steady one. One major driving force was a negative perception of mainstream media portrayal, as Tiga Bayles (1993, 10-11) explains:

> Negative aspects of the Aboriginal community are sensationalised. The negativity, bias and misrepresentation in the media has forced Aboriginal people to look around and see what media

> resources we can access ourselves. We identified public radio — community radio — as a vehicle for us to get some information out.

A senior member of the Torres Strait Islander community, Getano Lui Senior (1988), once described the coming of Islander-controlled radio to the archipelago as being 'just like a dream. Before [we] sent letters to the other islands. Now it's instantaneous.' As early as 1938—15 years after the introduction of broadcasting in Australia—Torres Strait Islanders had begun to experiment with 'wireless transmitting' or two-way radio. Claimed as a world first (Patterson 1938), the 'unique radio service' had *even* been introduced by a 'group of natives'. It is not known what became of this innovative experiment with early wireless communication and to what extent it was used. From the mid-1970s, the Indigenous community radio sector has remained the fastest-growing segment of the broadcasting environment. Since its establishment in 1990, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has played an important role in the development of Indigenous broadcasting. It has done this by providing funding for a number of media associations and Indigenous community radio stations and it is doubtful that the sector would be as significant as it is today without this support. It is estimated that there are up to 150 Indigenous media associations across Australia. At least 12 of these are major regional associations with radio licences of their own and a range of production interests, including video and television. The Central Australian Aboriginal media Association (CAAMA) is the oldest and it has been an important role model. In the early 1980s, CAAMA was broadcasting via a community radio station in Alice Springs and the ABC. By 1985, CAAMA had its own licence—the first Aboriginal community radio station in Australia (Molnar and Meadows 2001).

Australian government plans in the mid-1980s to launch domestic communication satellites fuelled action by Indigenous communities in demanding some form of control over programming. There were concerns that English-language programs beaming into remote settlements would have a grave impact on communities where English was the second, third or fourth language spoken. One response was the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS), set up to give communities the opportunity to switch off incoming satellite TV signals and substitute their own radio and video programming. This system, while good in theory, has been largely a failure because of a lack of training and inadequate maintenance funding. The way in which BRACS was introduced (i.e. essentially by federal government decree) meant that in many communities, it was always seen as yet another non-Indigenous attempt to solve an Indigenous problem. A consequent lack of community ownership has meant that most BRACS' units are now used for precisely what they were put there to prevent—uncritical reception of mainstream television. It was an example of the *ad hoc* policymaking in relation to Indigenous media that largely continues today (ATSIC 1999).[6]

In the early 1980s, the ABC established working relationships with regional Indigenous media associations and by 1987 had set up the corporation's Indigenous Broadcasting Unit (IBU), which carries on this work today in television and radio. On 15 January 1988, the world's first Aboriginal-owned commercial television station began broadcasting. Called 'Imparja', from an *Arrernte* word which means 'footprint' or 'hunting tracks', the service covers an area from Bathurst Island in northern Australia to Kangaroo Island in the south and includes extensive areas of Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria. The following year, SBS produced a program called *First in Line*—an Indigenous current affairs and information program and the first of its type to be shown in prime time on Australian television. Two years later, SBS consolidated its commitment to Indigenous programming by establishing its own Aboriginal Program Unit. Meanwhile, in the central Australian desert, a number of communities linked up to experiment with videoconferencing technologies, establishing the Tanami Network. Now called the Outback Digital Network, it uses compressed videoconferencing and satellite technologies for a range of purposes, including successfully reuniting prisoners in Alice Springs prison with their families many hundreds of kilometres away (Tanami Network 1993). It has been used internationally to market Aboriginal art, Aboriginal knowledge (for input into conferences, for example), and educational opportunities for Aboriginal people to contribute in areas like culture, languages and contemporary themes. Similar digital and web-based projects are under development on Cape York, in far north Queensland, the Ngaanyatjarra Lands (WA), and the Kimberleys (WA). These services will in turn be used for a range of activities from personal communication to strengthening cultural networks, art auctions via the Internet, and tele-health and on-line education. This will be one of the key areas of Indigenous cultural and economic development over the coming decade.

Federal funding for the Indigenous media sector stabilised at $11-12 million during the 1990s, despite no clear guidelines for allocation of this money to grass roots media associations. ATSIC commissioned a review of the Indigenous media sector in 1998 and published an edited version of the report in 1999, called *Digital Dreaming*.[7] Two years later, an Australian Productivity Commission inquiry into Australian broadcasting took a serious look at Indigenous media production, and for the first time since its inception, the media sector was acknowledged both for its existence and its cultural significance. The commission stopped short of recommending recognition of the special place of Indigenous languages and cultures in the *Broadcasting Services Act*. This has been part of the Canadian *Broadcasting Act* for more than 20 years, and part of New Zealand's equivalent legislation since 1991. The Commission accepted that broadcasting is important for Indigenous communities in that it provides 'a primary level of service in remote areas and in local languages' as well as acting as a 'cultural bridge' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (Productivity Commission 2000, 3).[8]

Indigenous media continues to develop and increasingly is being incorporated into local cultural frameworks. This approach is seen by many as being the only real way of breaking free from a welfare-dependency which has trapped generations of Indigenous people in Australia (Pearson 2000).

Conclusion

Mass communication has effectively replaced other forms of communication between individuals, groups, and communities. Many argue that this has re-defined the public sphere, placing mass communication at its centre. Audiences rely on media for information about their communities and the world—but it is mainstream media to which many turn as there are few alternatives available. From the appearance of the first Indigenous newspaper in 1836, community alliances have worked to produce a wide diversity of media alternatives in Australia that challenge ideas and assumptions about the world purveyed through the mainstream. Albeit situated on the so-called 'periphery', this may be an advantage—developments in the Native broadcasting sector in Canada and in the Indigenous media sector in Australia, for example, have offered new ways of reconstituting public space and have arguably contributed to the process of democratizing the media system (Roth and Valaskakis 1989, 230; Molnar and Meadows 2001). The available evidence suggests that community media in Australia fulfil an important cultural role in providing communities with alternative ideas and assumptions about the world.

Local community media do have the capacity to reflect local cultures in a way that is impossible for either mainstream national or commercial broadcasters. It is at the level of the community public sphere—with community media as a key cultural resource—that community culture is 'made'. This, in turn, informs broader public sphere debates. The community public sphere, operating through its various cultural networks (with local, independent media a crucial element), is thus able to extend the idea of the (mainstream) public sphere. This makes community media an important element of the Australian media environment, playing a significant role in defining the 'mainstream' through its varied cultural processes—creating communities of interest and spaces for upwards of 30,000 volunteers; establishing dialogue with audiences and community organisations; providing an outlet for local businesses; training future media workers; producing local content; challenging mainstream media perspectives on the world. All of this cultural activity is part of the community public sphere with community media the catalyst.

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Endnotes

[1] The Senate inquiry has established that front-page newspaper photographs published during the election campaign, claiming to show asylum-seekers throwing their children overboard as a threat, were nothing of the sort. There is a suggestion that senior government officials withheld this knowledge from politicians—and suggestions that some politicians knew about the dilemma yet failed to act to correct the public misconception. There were active attempts during the election campaign to prevent media from having any personal contact with asylum-seekers. The inquiry was continuing at the time of writing this. See transcripts at http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/senate/commttee/s-maritInc.htm.

[2] See the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia website at http://www.cbaa.org.au/.

[3] See the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council website for more information http://www.nembc.org.au/.

[4] See www.sbs.com.au

[5] Narrowcast licences are issued under the terms of the 1992 Broadcasting Services Act to radio or television stations producing content which is aimed at a specific audience or which has a specific focus.

[6] See the *Digital Dreaming* summary report at http://www.atsic.gov.au/programs/noticeboard/Broadcasting/Digital_Dreaming/Digital_Dreaming_Title_Contents.asp.

[7] See the *Digital Dreaming* summary report at http://www.atsic.gov.au/programs/noticeboard/Broadcasting/Digital_Dreaming/Digital_Dreaming_Title_Contents.asp.

[8] See the Productivity Commission report at www.pc.gov.au/inquiry/broadcst/finalreport/index.html