

# 2005 Vol 5 Issue No. 2 — Media Communities

> EDITORIAL

## **'The rise and rise of community media'**

*by Susan Forde, Michael Meadows, Kerrie Foxwell*

In their analysis of global community broadcasting, Price-Davies and Tacchi (*Community Radio*) note the 'lack of co-ordinated information and data available' about the community broadcasting sector on both a national and international level. With the growth of research examining the role of 'alternative', 'grassroots', 'radical' and 'citizens' media forms, this situation is changing with community media increasingly identified as a site for innovative and more participatory media forms. [1] The rise of community media outlets and the subsequent increasing research attention given to community media is undoubtedly linked to the content crisis currently being experienced by the mainstream media. While reports indicate increasing profit margins for major Australian and US media conglomerations such as News Corp, PBL, and John Fairfax [2] circulation figures indicate consistently decreasing audiences particularly in the daily newspaper market. [3]

A United States study which examined the state of the US news media found the majority of journalists were unhappy with the state of their profession, primarily because of the increasing impact of commercial pressures on their work. Two-thirds of journalists felt that increased bottom-line pressure was 'seriously hurting' the quality of news coverage (Pew Research Center 1). Commentators further found: "...they [journalists] fear more than ever that the economic behaviour of their companies is eroding the quality of journalism. In particular, they think business pressures are making the news they produce thinner and shallower. And they report more cases of advertisers and owners breaching the independence of the newsroom" (Kovach, Rosenstiel and Mitchell 27).

These issues of concern to the mainstream are inherently connected to the consistent decrease in audiences for mainstream daily newspapers over the past 20 years, signified by the death of large numbers of newspapers and more recent falls in classified advertising revenue (*ANHG* 13). The search for solutions to decreasing audiences for the mainstream media continues (*Project for Excellence in Journalism*):

*A growing number of news outlets are chasing relatively static or even shrinking audiences for news. One result of this is that most sectors of the news media are losing audience. That audience decline, in turn, is putting pressures on revenues and profits, which leads to a cascade of other implications. The only sectors seeing general audience growth today are online, ethnic and alternative media... Without investing in building new audiences, the long-term outlook for many traditional news outlets seems problematic. Many traditional media are maintaining their profitability by focusing on costs, including cutting back in their newsrooms. Our study shows general increases in journalist workload, declines in numbers of reporters, shrinking space in newscasts to make more room for ads and promotions, and in various ways that are measurable, thinning the product.*

*([www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/narrative\\_overview\\_eight.asp?media=1](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/narrative_overview_eight.asp?media=1)).*

There is evidence, in this US study and others, that the independent and community media sector is in fact the only sector that is actually growing in the Western media landscape.

Research works by authors such as Clemencia Rodriguez (*Fissures*), Chris Atton and John Downing attest to the growing importance of community, 'grassroots', alternative, radical media sources. Regardless of the difference in terminology, all words really refer to different parts of the same sector – the non-commercial, niche publications and broadcast outlets which do not belong to any of the major media ownership chains. The Project for Excellence in Journalism reported only a few months ago in the United States that, along with the niche ethnic press, the alternative press in the US was the only part of the news media that had an increasing, rather than a shrinking, audience.

*In terms of growth, the only sector that may match the explosive numbers of the ethnic media is the alternative press. In the booming economy of the 1990s, the number of alternative weeklies grew rapidly, drawing national advertising. In recent years, the sector's growth has slowed, but not stopped (Project for Excellence in Journalism*

*[www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/narrative\\_ethnicalternative\\_alternative.asp?media=9](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/narrative_ethnicalternative_alternative.asp?media=9)).*

There are obvious signs that the US growth of alternative media outlets is also being felt in Australia and Europe – the phenomenal growth experienced by the community radio sector over the past decade is just one example. The number of community radio stations in Australia now surpasses the number of commercial broadcasters. The Australian Broadcasting Authority lists around 340 community broadcasters and 50 active aspirant stations working toward a full

license. In comparison, there are 255 commercial licenses. In 37 places in Australia, community radio is the only broadcast service (Melzer).

Recent data about community radio audiences indicates that one-in-four Australians have listened to community radio in the past week....and 40 percent have listened to it in the last month (McNair). These are surprisingly high audience figures for the community radio sector and suggest an increasing audience for community and grassroots media outlets. Previous work has revealed a shift by community radio into regional Australia, the emergence of significant numbers of Indigenous and ethnic stations, and the existence of an estimated 25,000 volunteers across the sector who perform work estimated at \$145 million each year. Our research has suggested that the sector plays a significant role in contributing to public sphere debate through its program production processes (Forde, Meadows, Foxwell *Creating a Community; Community Radio; Culture*).

In addition, community TV stations have been broadcasting on a trial basis in the capital cities of Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth from 1994. The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) is expected to issue the first permanent licences for community television throughout 2004. Community radio and television have been touted as the 'most vibrant and hopeful response to the trend towards globalisation and commercialism', probably because local communities identify strongly with local cultural issues (Morel; Pedergart; Lephaille; Herman and McChesney 200).

It is being recognised internationally that in the face of globalisation, what needs protecting is 'cultural diversity' rather than 'cultural exception' and it is community broadcasting that has a particularly important role to play in this process (Dabbous-Sensenig 42). The community media sector worldwide is diverse and expanding, yet manages to maintain special links with its varied communities—described by some as a 'participatory relationship' (Girard *Passion* 13). The empowering possibilities of local media have been canvassed and acknowledged globally in the past 10 years but virtually all this work has focussed on production rather than reception (Atton; Downing; Molnar and Meadows; Rodriguez).

### **Community media in the global environment**

A scan of global media developments reveals a diversity of approaches: from the state-controlled broadcasting systems in the Pacific and Papua New Guinea, Africa, Asia and Latin America (Molnar and Meadows; Lopez-Vigil 8-9; Truglia 10-11; Camara 20-21; Mdlalose 14), through NGO-sponsored development projects (UNESCO 2003), to 'innovative and vibrant programming' in South Africa (Onkaetse Mmusi; Tacchi and Price-Davies). Community media seems to have found a place in post-invasion Afghanistan and East Timor (Girard and van der Spek). Japan's unique community broadcasting sector is based around large shopping centres

with many of the radio and TV licensees being local government authorities (Yamada; Ishikawa 10).

In the United States, a recent resurgence of pirate radio reflects community dissatisfaction with licensed local broadcasters who are becoming less distinguishable from mainstream media (Robinson 17). Meanwhile, US public, educational and governmental (PEG) access television attracts around one million volunteers producing in excess of 20,000 hours of new programming each week, prompting critical debates over the potential of this sector for encouraging increasing public involvement in the public sphere (Alliance for Community media; Higgins 15). Further north, the community media sector in Canada has been well established since the 1970s with more than 200 campus and Native community radio stations operating and access TV commonplace on cable networks. Pilot 'access' radio projects are underway in England and Ireland reportedly making a promising start on delivering their social gain objectives (Everitt; Tacchi 69; Tacchi and Price-Davies).

While much of Eastern Europe grapples with the transition from monopoly state-controlled radio, public broadcasting in Western Europe is under threat from a creeping concentration of media ownership and threats to pluralism, diversity and the quality of information (Konstantinova; Peters). Despite this, the European Broadcasting Union (2003) has reported that state-funded radio listening has increased across most markets in the past few years. Countries such as France and The Netherlands continue to support extensive community broadcasting sectors while the brief of the Paris-based *Confederation Nationale des Radios Libres* includes community radio in former French colonies in North and West Africa.

The World Association of Community Radio broadcasters, AMARC, has been grappling with financial difficulties and in 2003 closed its European bureau but it continues its philosophy of seeing community radio as a medium for stimulating debates over cultural diversity and a wide range of human rights' issues (Morel). It was the radical radio that emerged across Europe in the 1970s that set up a framework for modern participatory community broadcasting by pushing the boundaries of what was permissible (Downing 182-188). This is what Rodriguez (*Fissures*164) defines as 'citizens' media', emerging from communities within local contexts. And perhaps one of the most interesting 'citizens' media' systems is based around community TV in Catalonia. Here, around 100 stations have been producing various kinds of local programming since 1984 in a curious 'a-legal' environment. Several local networks have been established and although much of the sector has been criticised as being 'local' rather than 'community' television, it has played a crucial role in the promotion of the Catalan language as the primary language above Spanish in this fiercely independent region of Spain (Prado and Moragas; Gatnau).

## In this Issue

It is this international 'explosion' of community media that this special issue of *Transformations* builds on. Drawing on work from the United States, Australia, Britain, Greece and Africa, this special issue suggests that the community media initiatives occurring around the world represent a real change in the way media outlets report news and communicate with their audiences. Kevin Howley frames an important discussion about community radio by placing it in the context of debates about globalisation. His paper suggests that while community radio's strength is, by its very nature, in its ability to be local, the industry is 'increasingly transnational in its scale and scope'.

Jon Pike builds on this suggestion through an important examination of the work carried out by the IndyMedia movement, which has received a great deal of research and general media coverage since its inception during the World Trade Organization protests of 1999. At the time of writing this, the seizure of IndyMedia servers in London—apparently at the request of the US Justice Department—had effectively shut down 20 different IndyMedia websites across Europe. Activists searching for a legal response had identified complicity by governments in the UK, the USA, Switzerland and Italy. Perhaps this, more than anything else, demonstrates the potential power of alternative voices (Rodriguez *Email Communication*). Pike focuses on the St. Louis collective of the Independent Media Center and considers the collective within the context of Freire's concept of critical pedagogy, and Melucci's networks which examine the way social and communications networks democratise everyday life.

Still in the United States, Australian researcher Charles Fairchild offers a valuable comparison of community radio policy practices in the US, Australia and Canada. Fairchild focuses on the policy difficulties faced by US community radio, particularly in terms of the extreme deregulation of the US broadcasting landscape and the lack of effective community media policy. Fairchild issues a timely warning to community radio sectors in Australia and Canada, which have operated in a far more supportive and fruitful environment than their US counterparts:

*For those outside of America, it is useful to realise that reliance on limited sources of funding, support and participation, as well as ambiguous policy and slack community outreach can harm community radio in ways that are sometimes surprising in their consequences.*

Australian writers John Cokley and Chris Capel perhaps provide a shining example of how community participation and outreach can be used to best effect, with their description of experiences in reviving a rural community newspaper, the *Barcoo Independent*, in regional Queensland, Australia. Journalism educator John Cokley, and rural public servant Chris Capel joined forces to revive the newspaper after being approached by enthusiastic community

members from the town of Blackall who were keen to revive their newspaper that had closed in 2001. Through cooperation and pooling of community resources – with the aid of government and James Cook University – the *Barcoo Independent* was revived as a publication and is now under full community control. This near-subversion of hierarchical control is in evidence in the operation of Bush Radio in South Africa.

Tanja Bosch takes up practical and theoretical issues based on her own work as a community radio station manager there. She draws on the concept of the rhizome, in both metaphorical and theoretical ways, to argue its appropriateness as a symbol of the multiple connections Bush Radio has with its communities. The blurring of roles in day-to-day radio production at such sites suggests an organic process which further complicates the very notion of community but seems to serve audiences remarkably well. She suggests it might be defined as a curious melange of both 'structure' (*habitus*) and 'anti-structure' (*communitas*).

In contrast, Robert Moore and colleagues report on the difficulties faced by sub-Saharan countries who are struggling with concepts of 'community' – after being reinvented from small colonies to self-government independent countries, nations such as Zambia, Namibia, Malawi and others are struggling to generate a sense of community and to make connections across cultural borders. Moore et al argue that community journalism – which they believe is the newer, exportable form of public or civic journalism – is taking place in community media outlets around sub-Saharan Africa and leading to local community development. Moore et al's paper also highlights an important issue in the community media debate – they argue that the sub-Saharan communities determined that one of the most important aspects of a successful community media outlet was its commercial viability and success:

**Community media is a business. It requires income, market share, identity, and a programming niche.**

In contrast, Pike argues that the IndyMedia's strength as community media outlet – serving the community of activists in the St. Louis area – is its very non-commercial nature which gives contributors necessary freedom to be primarily concerned with content rather than commercial imperatives. Vatikiotis' examination of Greek grassroots media practices similarly found that the outlets he examined were committed to non-commercial, public-sphere oriented journalism which presented 'an alternative culture that opposes the commercial one'. Greek grassroots media were attempting to represent social issues that did not appear in the 'official' public sphere, and by doing so were creating their own, alternative public sphere.

This special Media Communities issue of *Transformations* brings together some new ways of thinking about community media; and also highlights some of the contradictions in the global community media movement which are clearly the result of the huge diversity currently existing

in the 'sector', if it can be considered that. Research into media communities around the world is exposing forms of journalism, activism, social networking, cooperation and community development that have been seeking broader acceptance and exposure for many years. The contributions received for this volume suggest that it is now time, in light of the crisis in mainstream media audiences and content, for the burgeoning community media forms to be assessed in terms of the contribution they are making – and can potentially make – to improved community and civic engagement.

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#### **Endnotes:**

[1] See Forde, Foxwell and Meadows *Community Radio; Creating a community; Community radio and local culture*; Atton; Downing; Rodriguez *Fissures*, Ewart; Forde *Journalistic practices*[\[return\]](#)

[2] *Australian* 13 August 2004 19; 27 August 2004 23; 27 August 2004 21. [\[return\]](#)

[3] *Australian*, 13 August 2004 22 and 19 August 2004 Media & Marketing liftout 46; *Mediaweek* 16 August 2004 1, 6. [\[return\]](#)

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