Putting the citizen back into journalism

Michael Meadows

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What is This?

Putting the citizen back into journalism

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Abstract
Around four million listeners in an average week tune into community radio stations around Australia, primarily to hear local news and information. It has created arguably the highest per capita listenership globally for a national community broadcasting sector. This article argues that community journalism is playing a crucial role in addressing the 'democratic deficit' by fostering citizen participation in public life in many different ways. This suggests the failure of mainstream – and so-called 'citizen' journalism practices – in many respects and emphasises the central place of audience research in understanding the nature of journalism's multifarious 'discursive formations'. It suggests that the nature of community journalism aligns it more closely with complex 'local talk' narratives that foster the meaning-making process at community level, playing a crucial role in recreating a 'public conversation' and a heightened sense of citizenship.

Introduction

Despite concerted efforts by a wide range of media organisations and entities in Australia, the credibility of journalists working in the mainstream remains firmly lodged around the level of 'advertisers, real estate agents and car sellers' (Australian Press Council, 2006; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2007). One poll even rates journalists' credibility alongside that of sex workers (*Readers Digest*, 2007)! Interestingly, Australian television journalists consistently outperform their newspaper colleagues in the credibility stakes although it is hardly something to celebrate when 85 per cent

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believe newspaper journalists are 'often biased' versus 74 per cent for television reporters (Roy Morgan Research, 2007a). Mainstream journalists regularly rate about midway on Australian professional ethical responsibility lists, consistently headed by nurses, pharmacists, doctors and teachers (Roy Morgan Research, 2010). The representative organisation for the majority of Australia's journalists (the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance) has attempted to address such negative perceptions through a series of professionally orientated seminars, publication of an annual summary of local issues of concern (*Press Freedom*), along with critical reflections on journalism practice in its regular publication, the *Walkley Magazine*.

However, the 'democratic deficit' inherent in mainstream journalism practice remains a serious obstacle to reclaiming the place of journalism as an 'essential element' of democracy (Hackett and Carroll, 2006; Pickard, 2011: 181). Mainstream journalism practices – shaped as they are by their host media institutions – have contributed to a broad disengagement of audiences with the political process (Couldry et al., 2010; McChesney and Pickard, 2011). One compelling conclusion from this array of perspectives is that reporting news is too important to be left *only* to journalists (Forde, 2011; Meikle and Redden, 2011; Usher, 2011).

There has been a swathe of research dealing with journalism ethics, investigating the shortfalls of current journalistic practice, and designed to critically reflect on the way journalists do their job – and perhaps more importantly, the way they are *perceived* to be doing their job (Barker, 2008; Chomsky, 1997; Davies, 2008; Deuze, 2005; Hamilton, 2004; Holmes, 2010; Lewis et al., 2008; McChesney, 2003). In more recent years, citizen journalism, however it has been defined, has become a catchcry amongst the panoply of perspectives on this phenomenon: one end of the spectrum claims it represents 'the end' of journalism – or at least a major crisis – while at the other, the place of 'quality' journalism is being reaffirmed (Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Deuze et al., 2007; McChesney, 2011; Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). But much of the rhetoric around citizen journalism is based on activity by a very limited, privileged minority who have access to the means of producing alternative views about the world, primarily through the internet. The web, of course, has always offered an uneven set of outcomes for its multifarious users: most people in the world are yet to log on for the first time and the disparity in access between the developed and developing world remains acute (Internet World Stats, 2010). Radio remains one of the world's most widely accessible forms of mass media, with community radio, in particular, one of the fastest-growing sectors globally. It offers an important site, at the level of the local, where 'citizen journalism' practices might be explored (Forde, 2011; Forde et al., 2010).

Community media have existed for as long as mass communication itself. It all began, of course, at the level of the local where media enabled public sphere activity and promoted a 'public conversation' (Bovee, 1999; Carey, 1997). I use the term 'community' throughout to denote media produced in an environment where there are strong connections with either a local community or a particular 'community of interest'. The relationship between producers and audiences is a critical element of this definition on which I elaborate later. So, for the purposes of this discussion, the category 'community' could include such terms as 'radical', 'alternative', 'grass roots', 'participatory', 'citizen', or 'independent'. The defining element is the nature of the relationship

between producers – in this case, journalists – and their audiences (Forde, 2011; Forde et al., 2010; Tomaselli and Prinsloo, 1990).

Some suggest that when the hype is stripped away from current citizen journalism claims, it emerges more as the latest incarnation of an existing 'discursive formation' rather than a transformative process (Hall, 1992: 278). And this is where the context in which citizen journalism functions becomes paramount.

By virtue of their very nature as described above, community media enable a particular set of communication, and thus journalistic, processes. Rodriguez's concept of 'citizens' media' (2001) is perhaps more useful in exploring this idea because it focuses on the notion of what these media *are* rather than what they are not (i.e. an alternative to the mainstream), even though this conceptualisation cannot ignore their 'alternative' brief. Rodriguez (2009: 14) suggests that our conceptualisation of citizens' media – community media, as I prefer to call them – is 'too thin', concluding that we need to better understand the relationship between social movements and media technologies. But while social movements still influence the emergence of community media and journalism in various parts of the world, it is not a universal impetus. In Australia and the UK, for example, community radio has enabled forms of community journalism which are not necessarily nor easily linked to identifiable social movements. The processes and outcomes are more complex, reflecting perhaps the diverse nature of the communities who are producing these media. Forde (2011: 2) extends this approach, suggesting that 'independent' or 'alternative' journalism is not merely 'a reaction to the mainstream, but in some cases takes very little account of mainstream journalistic practices and values'. She continues (2011: 20):

> But alternative journalists are practising journalism in ways that are engaging audiences, including ordinary people, and creating a more active public by moving outside the definitions of professional news that we have become accustomed to consuming, and teaching in journalism education.

I suggest in this article that one way of theoretically locating this movement is by exploring and better understanding the nature of the relationship between journalists – however they define themselves – and their audiences. Community and independent media offer an ideal context within which to investigate this process (Forde, 2011; Forde et al., 2010).

The evidence on which I base this article comes from recent studies of the community radio sector in Australia – a survey of volunteers (including journalists) and a national qualitative audience study (Forde et al., 2002; Meadows et al., 2007). They were the first such qualitative investigations undertaken globally of an entire community broadcasting network and offer insights into a schism between mainstream journalists' perceptions of their role and those of their audiences. The survey of community radio workers, including station managers, volunteers and journalists (sometimes three in one), revealed the sector as an important cultural resource, particularly as a source of local content. The audience study concluded that listeners to metropolitan and regional community radio stations in Australia tune in for four principal reasons: they perceive it to be accessible and approachable; they like the laid back, 'ordinary person' station presentation style; they want to access local news and information; and they appreciate the diversity

represented in station programming in terms of both format and content, arguing that it is far more representative of Australian society than mainstream media (Meadows et al., 2007). Access to 'local news and information' remains a primary reason why people tune in to community radio, suggesting the central role being played by these local media in providing the context for the emergence of a particular incarnation of 'citizen journalism' (Forde et al., 2002; McNair Ingenuity, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010).

For the purposes of this discussion, I use the term 'audience' in a way that attempts to recapture the meaning from the dominant media interpretation, most commonly conflated with 'consumer'. The stark disparity between the terms 'consumer' and 'citizen' underlie my argument. Aligning 'audiences' and 'citizens' offers a much deeper understanding of the processes that are likely to create and sustain ideas of culture as 'a whole process of living' (Grossberg, 1988; Williams, 1977). Culture is expressed, represented, reproduced and maintained through the work of journalists and the media. They play a pivotal role in its reproduction through the publication of dominant ideas and assumptions about the world (Adam, 1993; Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1982; Meadows, 2001). Journalists, like other media workers, have been caught up in the global shift towards infotainment and public relations and it seems important to reclaim the ground that has been lost to the corporations. It is not merely a case of resisting 'progress' or the inevitable march of information technology – technologies do not necessarily come with specific instructions on how they should be used (Katz, 1977). The responses from diverse audiences for local radio and television in Australia confirm international arguments that the idea of journalism, whatever it has become, needs to be constantly re-examined.

Why are community media and journalism important?

As I suggested earlier, community media provide a critical context for community journalism practice. For most audiences in the developed world, mainstream television remains the primary source of news and current affairs. News consumers in the USA, for example, use multiple platforms to access information, with the internet a growing first preference (Purcell et al., 2010: 2; Roy Morgan, 2007b). The internet is touted by many as the saviour for news and journalism (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010) but the uneven application and success of the web as an online news medium and the constantly shifting social communication patterns which frame it make such predictions at best unrealistic.

Despite the impact of globalisation, some argue *because* of it (Ferguson, 1992), patterns of news use vary according to cultural context, making global predictions about the future of journalism and news increasingly unreliable. In Australia, for example, a steady drift of audiences away from television news and current affairs is not being matched by increasing online news audiences. It seems that the overall audience for television news and current affairs in Australia is in decline, particularly evident amongst young people (Deuze et al., 2007; Turner, 2005; Young, 2009: 157). Despite some evidence that the circulation of some quality European newspapers is increasing (largely because of an emphasis on investigative journalism; Föderl-Schmid, 2010), globally, news markets are under pressure. Australia, Austria and France are amongst a handful of OECD nations in which the market decline between 2007 and 2009 is less than 5 per cent. During that

period, the newspaper market receded more than 30 per cent in the USA and around 20 per cent in the UK (OECD, 2010: 7). While there is evidence of increased use of the internet for accessing news in the USA, overall, people are using multiple media sources to access news – television, online, radio and newspapers (Purcell et al., 2010: 3).

The OECD study barely mentions community media and, when it does, essentially conflates this with the internet. There is no acknowledgement of the exponential growth and recognition of community radio globally and the impact this might have on more effectively engaging citizens in the broader processes of democracy; a process with which traditional, largely commercially orientated media continue to struggle (Alia, 2010; European Parliament, 2008; Forde et al., 2010; Lewis, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2009). The largely US-based public journalism movement set out to do precisely this but despite spirited defences and critiques, the evidence suggests that it has been unable to break free of the constraining framework of the mainstream with its agenda-setting and sourcing practices firmly linked to 'common sense' elite networks (Ewart, 2002; Haas and Steiner, 2006; Schudson, 1998). One of the problems here is that mainstream journalists who have largely *uncritically* adopted the media's fourth estate role remain essentially separated from their communities – and thus, their audiences.

Given the critique of mainstream media processes I have outlined, it is perhaps little wonder then that community media globally are experiencing something of a surge in both expansion and in their ability to attract audiences. The important benefits related to their potential for enhancing social cohesion should be seen as a driving force behind the significance of a particular form of community-based journalism (Forde et al., 2010; Lewis, 2008; Meadows et al., 2007). And while the community media sector might be expected to attract those relegated to the periphery of the public sphere in terms of media misrepresentation (cultural and linguistic communities, visible minorities, women, gays and youth, etc.), this is not necessarily the case. Increasingly, there is evidence that the community radio and television demographic now includes audiences who are well educated and affluent – surprisingly 'mainstream' in character but perhaps not in preference (Meadows et al., 2007).

The first national audience study of the Australian community broadcasting sector, and possibly the first of its kind globally, revealed a widespread dissatisfaction with mainstream media and journalism across the country (Meadows et al., 2007). For some, this perception of failure by the mainstream has come, in part, to define 'community media' (Howley, 2005). As suggested earlier, others argue that we should investigate community media and journalism for what they *are*, rather than what they are *not* (Atton, 2002; Forde, 2011; Rodriguez, 2001).

The j-blog is arguably the primary outlet for citizen journalists. However, most rely heavily on recycling existing information, most often produced by mainstream sources (Reese et al., 2007). Mainstream media in all their forms essentially represent a one-way flow of information from producers to audiences; or, perhaps more accurately in the case of commercial media, delivering audiences to advertisers. Indeed 'editorial interference' is a term often used by news organisations to describe levels of audience engagement that go beyond the narrow confines of mainstream journalism practice. Community media offer a very different potential and, in an increasing number of cases, reality.

The extraordinary diversity and success of community radio in Australia is indicative of the sector's ability to engage audiences in ways that seem to baffle the mainstream (CBOnline, 2008: 24–25). The sector was established in the mid 1970s on the then emerging FM band with a brief to offer alternative programming to that produced by both the national broadcaster (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) and the commercial radio sector. Most of the 350 community radio stations broadcast 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Although the commercial radio sector has around 270 operating licenses, its annual turnover is about 1 billion Australian dollars compared with the not-for-profit community sector's annual revenue of about AU$70 million. Community radio stations get 60 per cent of their operating costs from the community through program sponsorship and subscriptions. The remainder comes from the distribution (in 2009–10) of AU$9 million federal government funds across the 350 station sector. Around 23,000 volunteers, primarily in the generalist and ethnic community radio sub-sectors, counter this financial disparity, producing more local content, more Australian music, and reflecting a greater diversity of Australian cultures than the commercial and government-funded national broadcasters (CB Online, 2008: 24; Forde et al., 2002). Biennial surveys of 5000 people over the age of 15 since 2004 confirm that in an average week, 4.5 million Australians or around one-quarter of the population tune in to a community radio station (McNair Ingenuity, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010).

So why are audiences supporting community radio in Australia at levels which may be the highest per capita listenership of any community broadcasting system globally?

One compelling answer to this question – from the mouths of audiences – is empowerment. So what does this have to do with journalism? The answer, of course, is everything. Grossberg (1987: 95) usefully defines empowerment as 'the enablement of particular practices, that is … 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'. Implicit in this explanation is the high level of engagement that community broadcasting audiences identify with their local stations and the largely volunteer workforce that keeps them on the air. This includes the many media workers, mostly volunteers, who are working as journalists.

Whose journalism?

The shibboleth 'citizen journalism' now seems to refer to virtually anyone writing anything that bears some resemblance to 'the facts' or 'the truth', however *they* are defined (Deuze et al., 2007). The point is that its definition remains fluid and elusive. Preferring the terms 'independent' or 'alternative' journalism, Forde's investigations reveal a long history of independent media in Australia, the UK and the USA 'filling the gaps' left by the mainstream (Forde, 1997, 1998, 2011). In a similar vein, Usher (2011: 265) suggests citizen journalism has been around in the USA 'since the heyday of the popular press'. And in Australia, editor of the *Bulletin* news magazine, JF Archibald, invited and published extensive citizens' literary and journalistic contributions between 1880 and 1900 – either the world's first experiment with public journalism or 'a strange case of authorship'(Lawson, 1987). But is this journalism? Adam (1989: 46) offers a useful framework here, describing journalism as 'the primary method of framing experience

and forming public consciousness of the here and now'. This broad interpretation incorporates a wide range of cultural practices that extend beyond narrow conceptualisations which tend to focus on journalism's claims of fourth estate status, objectivity and professionalism – claims that are difficult to sustain (Carey, 1980). As Forde (2011: 2) reminds us, a common accusation made against non-mainstream journalism is that it is 'unprofessional', whatever that means. There are several important points to make here.

The first concerns the age-old debate over definition. What do citizen journalists actually do and who are they? While not wishing to deny the contributions of many passionate j-bloggers around the world, much of the content that appears on such websites is sourced from existing mainstream sources with little, if any, original material (Deuze et al., 2007; Lowrey, 2006; Reese et al., 2007; Robinson, 2006). Not all citizen journalists publish blogs, of course, but are primarily limited to contributing their work to either existing mainstream or alternative media outlets, including social networking media like Facebook and Twitter. Some studies go so far as to classify citizen journalism sites according to criteria such as 'superior' or 'highly regarded' to identify a particular cohort of online news sites (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). But whose values are involved in such categorisations?

The second point to make is that if we conceptualise citizen journalism – or community journalism, as I prefer to call it – in terms of the processes involved rather than its products, then we may be closer to understanding what it is and how it relates to other forms of journalism. Indeed, an increasing number of studies of community media (and, more recently, community journalism) suggest that the processes involved may be more important than what is being produced (Forde et al., 2010; Tomaselli and Prinsloo, 1990). Focusing solely on empirical indicators (website structure, content type, 'level' of sourcing, number of hits, etc.) tells us little about community journalism process. We need to consider community journalism as a 'discursive formation' (Hall, 1992: 278) – a set of cultural processes and practices. This includes newsworkers' attitudes towards financial support and advertising and, perhaps most importantly, their conceptions of news values (Forde, 1997, 1998, 2011).

Thirdly, perhaps the biggest threat to the 'discursive formation' of community journalism is that it is being institutionalised or incorporated into mainstream processes. This applies as much to existing media structures and networks as to academic departments. The moment that community journalism is appropriated by an environment where economic imperatives prevail, then it becomes something else. This is drawn partly from the experiences of the transformation of cultural studies from a theoretical (and practical) project into an academic enterprise during the 1980s (Hall, 1992: 286). There are some parallels here, largely because of the association of citizens', radical and alternative media with the power relations inherent in social movements (Downing, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001). But it is important to remember that community media have evolved globally from diverse social, political and cultural contexts, some of which do not include social movements (e.g. community broadcasting in Australia; and see Atton, 2002). A focus on the nature of the relationships at the level of the local seems a logical way to explore, better understand and define these diverse 'discursive formations'.

The fourth point concerns the missing element in virtually all of the discussion around journalism in whatever form it is manifested – the voices of audiences. Without a clear

understanding of *how* and *why* audiences engage with journalism, rather than *how many*, we can merely speculate on the impact of such processes. The widely accepted notion of the active audience suggests there will be a diversity of interpretations and this is supported by McCallum's (2003, 2007) concept of 'local talk' which reveals the unevenness in audiences 'making sense' of the news by engaging variously with media, public policies and their own social networks. Ideas and assumptions suggested by media 'frames' are more likely to be adapted and applied according to local understandings and experiences. What is missing in much of the rhetoric about citizen journalism is recognition of the importance of the 'ordinary': on the contrary, claims of the number of followers of a particular site or individual seem more closely aligned with aspirations of celebrity status rather than an attempt to establish meaningful engagement with audiences. It is precisely the work of the 'ordinary' community-based volunteer news workers who put the citizen back into journalism. And they have done this because they come from *and remain part of* their local communities, developing and drawing from their own sets of 'values, traditions and objectives' (Usher, 2011: 275). Community media can be defined in terms of the relationship between producers and audiences. It broadens the notion and definition of 'journalist' and gives us a better understanding of their work wherever they are based (Forde et al., 2010).

'Common sense', 'good sense' and community journalism

Another way of explaining what is happening with journalism at the 'level of the local' (Forde et al., 2003) is to consider it through the theoretical lenses of 'common sense' and 'good sense' (Gramsci, 1971, 1988). In the ongoing theoretical revisioning of 'journalism' influenced by globalisation, multiculturalism and technological change, to name some predominant influences, definitions seem inevitably to be reliant on adjectives – citizen, local, community, alternative, participatory, etc. What has happened to journalism in all this? Mainstream journalism plays a central role in creating 'common sense' explanations for the world and our places within it by reinforcing dominant ideas and assumptions (Coben, 2005; Gramsci, 1971: 330; Meadows et al., 2009). According to Gramsci, journalism that produces a 'common sense' view of the world is also in a position to trigger a process that draws on elements of critical awareness and 'good sense' – progressive ideas that are current at a particular time and within a particular population (1971: 330; Coben, 2005). Importantly, Gramsci argues that 'common sense' contains 'a healthy nucleus of good sense', suggesting that the process can be activated at any time. Journalism operating at community level would seem to be in an ideal position to do this. It works by enlisting the 'communities of interest', or audiences, that 'produce' community media. To have a chance of influencing society, this process must draw from existing ideas. This implies that ideological institutions like media, and cultural practices like journalism, that actively engage with their audiences are more likely to be in a position to procure this philosophical shift. One Melbourne-based listener explained it like this:

> I'd prefer to get an informed personal opinion as opposed to just gloss over something. We see people interviewed on mainstream television all the time or in mainstream newspapers, and

interview the person only because of a very small sound byte, they might only get two or three sentences, very short sentences in a newspaper article even though the article might be quite long to convey their opinion and even less on television, whereas depending on the programming here, you are likely to get a more in-depth version of their opinion. (Focus Group 3CR Melbourne, 2005)

Journalism that is defined by such a relationship is well placed to enable 'good sense' interpretations of the world for its audiences. This is in conflict with a central pillar of 'professionalism' – the identification of media and, by association, journalism – as the so-called fourth estate. Carey (1980: 6) highlights the problem:

… the great danger in modern journalism is one of a professional orientation to an audience: the belief, usually implicit, that the audience is there to be informed, to be educated, to be filled with the vital information and knowledge whose nature, production and control rests with a professional class. The knowledge is defined, identified, presented based upon canons of professional expertise over which the audience exercises no real judgment or control. And in this new client-professional relationship that emerges the same structures of dependency are developed that typify the relations of doctors, lawyers and social workers to their clients.

So almost by definition, mainstream journalism – the purveyor of 'common sense' – cannot be part of the community it claims to serve because of the existence of a barrier between audiences and producers. The editorial policies of the vast majority of newsrooms, if not all, discourage active engagement with audiences (and sources) over meaning. In fact for most, this is seen as editorial interference. The genre of community journalism, as I have defined it here, has managed to tap into the 'imaginative capacities' of its audiences far more effectively than the mainstream (Adam, 1993; Anderson, 1984). The passion that flows from audiences for local community radio news reflects this, as this comment suggests:

[Triple Zed] … does do good local news, because there is someone who is either presenting it, or a friend of a friend that has been involved with that particular story or issue. And so sometimes, their local news coverage is probably as good as anything you'll find. (Focus Group Brisbane, 2005)

McCallum's (2007: 27) use of 'local talk' as 'a powerful resource for understanding public opinion' highlights the complexity of community-level narratives and discussion, essentially 'sense-making', when compared with the narrow assumptions of the impact of mainstream journalism. This alerts us to the importance of this process in making sense of ideas and assumptions promulgated by media as part of the process of the formation of the public sphere. It also suggests an important role for community radio, in particular, in enabling such 'local talk' processes through the 'ordinary' nature of station personnel, including journalists (Meadows et al., 2007). Commercially orientated media audience analysis tends to focus on the primary objective of delivering audiences in appropriately defined categories to advertisers. While this does not preclude some level of audience engagement with commercial media (and their journalists), it is significantly constrained by this framework. Despite the existence of codes of ethical practice,

ultimately most journalists work for and are influenced by organisations that are profit orientated. It is that economic reality – or as Deuze (2005) terms it, 'occupational ideology' – that is often ignored in much of the rhetoric around professionalism and media freedom. Thus it is the community element of journalism that places it closer to such complex 'local talk' or meaning-making processes. As one community radio station worker suggests, the local is important and it is evident in 'the sort of topics that they [community radio station 2SER] cover. You just would never hear about anywhere else and they're really important, you know, important information about things that affect people, ordinary people' (Focus Group Sydney, 2005).

The changing role of news and information

Community radio audiences in Australia consistently express strong support for the community broadcasting sector's role in providing *local* news and information, largely because of its virtual absence in both commercial and publicly funded news bulletins. While some regional newspapers do provide this service, albeit tempered by the constraints of commercialism, contra-deals and advertising expectations, audiences for community radio say they are underserved by the mainstream when it comes to local news and information (McNair Ingenuity, 2010; Meadows et al., 2007). Community broadcasting audiences' perspectives on news challenge mainstream definitions, as this listener from the coastal community of Byron Bay explains (Focus Group Byron Bay, 2005): 'There's a lot of news on it [Bay FM] but it's not necessarily the way it can be defined on other stations.'

For community broadcasting audiences, local news is often not framed in terms of mainstream news values but more commonly overlaps with what some may term 'community service announcements'. This ranges from information about local sporting events or community meetings to vital local advice about cyclones, floods and bushfires (Focus Group Townsville, 2005; Focus Group Katherine, 2005; Focus Group Tumut, 2005). One local community radio journalist observed (Forde et al., 2002): 'We provide mainly positive news with a regional angle. We cover news that others don't cover, particularly in the outback.' Mainstream journalists are unable to focus on such specificities given their large readership or broadcast footprints. It is precisely this void that community journalism is able to fill. And in around 30 small townships in Australia, community radio is the *only* source of local news and information apart from regional ABC radio (Meadows et al., 2007).

There are many examples given by community radio audiences of their local stations using journalistic processes to report on local problems, but in a different way (Forde, 2011). It is commonplace to hear 'ordinary people' as newsmakers and sources on community radio news. As one journalist confirmed (Forde et al., 2002): 'We're prepared to deal with people who couldn't get spots on the mainstream media.' In the coastal township of Byron Bay in northern New South Wales, a backpacker tragically died in a fire in 2005. The local community station, Bay FM, spontaneously organised an extended live, call-in counselling session to enable listeners to come to terms with the tragedy. The session was able to provide listeners with important factual information unavailable through other media (Focus Group Byron Bay, 2005). It was, in effect, live coverage of the

aftermath of the event. In a less tragic situation in Bendigo, the community station again stepped in to assist a local resident:

> The commercial station wouldn't do it. We know a lady, we had a really bad storm and her dog ran away because of the storm and she rang one of the commercial radio stations and they said no, we can't do it. And they rang here and they put the announcement over, and they did it for a couple of days and she did find her dog. (Focus Group Bendigo, 2005)

But is this journalism? Is it news? Is this the role of journalism?

There are many forms of journalism at work here and elsewhere, beyond the constraints of mainstream newsrooms and industry- and self-determined definitions (Usher, 2011: 276). Contributing to the emotional and social well-being of their audiences is a significant element of community radio programming and journalism (Meadows and Foxwell, 2008, 2011).

Unlike many journalism academics, community radio audiences do not agonise over the problematic notion of objectivity: it has been largely dismissed in favour of honesty or advocacy, as these comments suggest:

> And in fact, they'll sometimes admit they are being unprofessional about it, because they're so passionate about it which … makes it more, to me, more objective. (Focus Group 3RRR Melbourne, 2005)

Listeners to community radio across Australia offer definitions of 'news and information', along with the format in which it is produced, that challenge traditional understandings. There is also evidence of shifting perceptions of news and formats in the mainstream with audiences for television news and current affairs drifting away from bulletins to more diverse formats – breakfast television and satirical news programs, for example (Young, 2009: 157). Community radio audiences have embraced a much broader definition of 'news and information' than many news organisations, journalists and journalism education programs might acknowledge. This includes stories ranging from floods to locating a nebuliser for an asthmatic listener at the same time as national media report on crocodiles swimming down a main street (Focus Group Katherine, 2005). Much of this information, audiences say, need not be presented in a formal news bulletin, probably because it does not fit the definition of 'formal' news. They prefer news and information to be presented *in context* – arts news in an arts program, sports news in a sports program, and so on (Focus Group Yeppoon, 2005).

Community radio, in particular, facilitates an important 'community connection' role as well as more accurately reflecting Australia's social and cultural diversity than mainstream media. It does this not only through program production, but also through extensive social networking taking place largely 'behind the scenes'. One community journalist described it as responding to 'community feeling and community needs' (Focus Group Port Augusta, 2001). Another (Focus Group Adelaide, 2001) observed:

> We care about different things. We're not all journalists. There are people from all different backgrounds and that affects what comes into our bulletin, into our programs and that reflects community values.

Yet another described the process as 'not journalism as such, but it's just being a part of a community and bringing those things in with it' (Focus Group Adelaide, 2001). The primary impact of community radio, and community journalism, is in the processes of production rather than the products themselves. This suggests a different role for community journalists who are, by definition, part of this process. It embeds them firmly in local networks, as this survey respondent suggests (Forde et al., 2002): 'We reflect the community's concerns and interests … and to actively campaign to further local residents' interests.' The work of community journalism involves close and interactive links with a culturally diverse array of community organisations and groups.

Although not directly relevant to journalism practices, community radio audiences perceive that station programming plays a crucial role in managing community mental health by empowering them to better understand and control issues that impact on their emotional and social well-being. This includes audiences' expressions of pride, self-esteem and happiness stemming from their engagement with community radio. Although the overwhelming tenor of audience commentary on the impact of community radio is positive, there were nevertheless references – directly and indirectly – to negative feelings such as shame, depression, sadness and anger, particularly within marginal communities. However, in virtually all cases, these negative emotions were raised in the context of having being countered by engaging with their local stations, thus boosting their sense of emotional well-being. Equally, audiences reported that community broadcasting is playing a positive role in supporting their social well-being again by countering feelings such as loneliness, boredom and isolation. Across Australia, without qualification, audiences commented on the ability of community radio and Indigenous television to draw people from various communities of interest together. In doing so, many spoke about the negative influences of commercial broadcasting in terms of what it could not offer when compared with community radio and television (Meadows and Foxwell, 2008, 2011).

Tsagarousianou (2004: 64) has identified this kind of 'community connection' as an important element in her exploration of diasporic communities. Her study of communities in the UK draws attention to the importance of 'connectivity' and cultural politics that make 'the imagination and activation of the complex nexus of transnational/diasporic linkages and dynamics possible'. Community media and journalism fulfil multifarious roles in this process, including, in one Sydney example, 'defining the identity of Fiji and South Asian Indians' (Chand, 2004: 152). As one journalist described it: 'We are more culturally sensitive to the issues. We don't sensationalise as much and we don't insult any groups or culture' (Forde et al., 2002). The ethnic community radio sector in Australia promotes this ethos on a broader scale. Importantly, the news featured by these stations is primarily about events and issues *in Australia* with news from ancestral homelands important, but less preferred (Forde et al., 2010).

The effectiveness of this process stems from the weakening or, in the case of some Indigenous and ethnic community radio entities, the absence of a barrier between audiences and producers (Forde et al., 2010). It is this particular relationship that defines the nature of community radio, and community journalism, and it has resulted in a 'more engaged and participatory culture' (Deuze, 2006: 271). It is the very nature of the relationship between producers and audiences that has placed

community radio, and community-based journalism, in a privileged position in terms of engaging audiences. The high level of trust that exists within such 'communities of interest' facilitates engagement with alternative ideas and assumptions about the world, clearly contributing to a greater understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. This is in marked contrast to the predominantly narrow, market-driven orientation of mainstream journalism.

Conclusion

The focus in this analysis should be on process not product. The immensely popular social networking dot-com media are primarily engaged in making money by delivering audiences to advertisers. They have changed the way we communicate but on the whole seem more closely aligned with celebrity rather than citizenship. Of course, any media can be appropriated and used by audiences in particular ways – malevolent and benevolent – but continuing debates around commitment to privacy protection challenge their democratic potential. Any form of journalism enlisting such platforms must overcome the same obstacles. An emerging perception of such virtual communities of interest having an 'alone together' status raises more questions about the nature of that particular audience–producer relationship (Turkle, 2011). This is not questioning the potential of such media to facilitate citizenship so much as challenging the assumptions that underlie much of the rhetoric around citizen journalism, which largely assumes an unproblematic engagement with communication technologies like 'smart' phones and the internet, while ignoring the potential impacts of an increasing disengagement with face-to-face communication. It may well be that in terms of enabling meaningful communication 'smart' phones may prove to be anything but that.

Journalism, like other cultural practices, is radically contextualized by the environment in which it exists. Its many different forms around the world respond simultaneously to both global and local influences. This is evident from the burgeoning studies of community media that suggest new ways of thinking about sustainable relationships between producers and audiences intent on promoting a 'public conversation' (Carey, 1997). The absence of this level of engagement in mainstream journalism perhaps goes some way to explaining current levels of audience dissatisfaction with the 'usual suspects'.

Assumptions around citizen journalism have tended to focus on either euphoric or critical claims of its impact, rather than on the nature of the relationship between its audiences and the content producers. The virtual absence of audience studies in broader journalism research generally throws many other claims about its definition and impact into doubt. As McCallum's 'local talk' studies suggest, the often narrow media framing of events presented to audiences is routinely reconstituted into meanings that align with local understandings and experiences. It helps to explain the schism between audiences and the political process, facilitated as it is primarily by mainstream media and journalism (Couldry et al., 2010). Independent community journalists are in an ideal position to offer audiences a real alternative by applying a more appropriate framework for making sense of the world. It is clear from studies of Australian community radio audiences and

volunteers that journalism at the level of the local is already playing a key role in this process, contributing to public sphere debate and attempting to address, albeit in a limited way, the 'democratic deficit'.

Community-based or 'public arena' journalism in Australia has emerged as a result of a range of 'new, interactive relationships between producers and audiences' (Forde et al., 2003; Roth and Valaskakis, 1989: 232). Perhaps reflecting this trend, the Australian community radio sector has attracted significant audiences and is performing a complex cultural role on a number of levels. Reclaiming mainstream journalism from the lure of public relations and the influence of the market remains a challenge. The 'discursive formations' of community journalism offer alternative ways of reconceptualising its elusive role as a form of public conversation. It could be that the most active, successful experiment in public journalism – within a radically local context – is happening right under our very noses. Whatever it is, it demands closer attention as we seek to redefine journalism in ways that must take account of its increasing array of multifarious forms.

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Adelaide, South Australia, Radio Adelaide (also 2001)
Bendigo, Victoria, Fresh FM
Brisbane, Queensland, 4ZzZ
Byron Bay, New South Wales, 2Bay FM
Katherine, Northern Territory, 8KTR
Melbourne, Victoria, 3CR
Melbourne, Victoria, 3RRR
Port Augusta, South Australia, 5UMA (also 2001)
Sydney, New South Wales, 2SER
Townsville, Queensland, 4K1G
Tumut, New South Wales, 2TVR
Yeppoon, Queensland, Radio Nag

Biographical notes

Michael Meadows worked as a journalist for 10 years before moving into academia in 1987. Since then, his research interests around journalism practices have included media representation of indigenous people and issues, indigenous media history and policy, journalism and representations of landscape in Australia, and community broadcasting policy and practice. He is aligned with the Centre for Cultural Research at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. He is a professor of journalism in Griffith's School of Humanities.