Perfect Match?
Qualitative audience research and the community media sector

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Abstract

Griffith University researchers in 2002 presented the final results of a national survey of community radio stations. The final report 'Culture Commitment Community – The Australian Community Radio Sector' contained a wealth of information on the sector and covered many 'station–based' perspectives on issues such as localism, funding and sponsorship, Indigenous and ethnic programming and training. A key criticism of this report was the lack of data on community radio audiences. Two years later, an expanded research team received funding from the Australian Research Council along with financial and in-kind support from Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) and the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) to investigate community radio and television audiences. This project is the first comprehensive qualitative audience study of the community media sector in Australia and responds to a need within the sector, from policy bodies and the broader Australian community, to better understand community broadcasters and their diverse audiences. Internationally, this project, in both scale and approach, is unprecedented. Thus, it heralds an exciting and pioneering stage in community broadcasting research. This paper outlines the aims and objectives of the project and our methodology for accessing Australian community media audiences. A qualitative engagement with the diversity of audiences characteristic of the community media sector has demanded new ways of doing audience research. This paper discusses some of the methodological hurdles we have crossed in our attempts to negotiate the research terrain and we raise some of the questions associated with the qualitative method and assert its validity and portability as a tool for better understanding and knowing the nature and composition of community media audiences in Australia.

A team of Griffith University researchers in 2002 completed a national survey of Australian community radio stations. This project was jointly funded by the Australian Research Council, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, and the Community Broadcasting Foundation. The final report, *Culture Commitment Community: the Australian Community Radio Sector* (Forde et al, 2002), was the culmination of more than 350 telephone surveys with station managers, news and current affairs workers and station volunteers, along with 13 focus groups undertaken in metropolitan and regional centres, generating more than 35 hours of discussions. The research investigated various aspects of the Australian community radio sector including volunteer demographics, training, funding and fundraising, news and current affairs services, Indigenous and ethnic services and the local cultural role of community radio stations. In particular, the project 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 with an estimated value of $145 million each year. The common thread during this encounter with the diverse Australian community radio sector was the significant role these stations perform as a local community cultural resource. Through program production

processes, the sector plays a significant role in contributing to public sphere debate, especially at the local level (Forde, Foxwell & Meadows, 2003; ATSIC, 1999). This report provided some long-overdue research attention and an overview of the sector's operations for policymakers, sector bodies and stations.

While this research was welcomed by the sector, the key criticism was a lack of audience data. In their analysis of global community broadcasting, Price-Davies and Tacchi (2001) note the 'lack of co-ordinated information and data available' for scrutiny in both national and international contexts—this is especially the case with audience research. Australia's community broadcasting sector—one of the first established globally—has not received sustained academic or government attention with regard to audiences (van Vuuren 2002, Thornley 1995, Moran 1994, Barlow 1999; 1997; 1995, Bear 1983;1979). With the growth of international and national 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—but the audience remains silent (Forde, Foxwell and Meadows 2003a; 2003b; 2002, Atton 2002, Downing 2001, Rodriguez 2001, Ewart 2000, Forde 1999; 1998). The handful of audience surveys carried out in the Australian community media sector over the past 10 years or so have focussed on individual stations—and virtually all have sought quantitative data. While the empowering possibilities of local media production have been canvassed and acknowledged globally in the past 10 years, analysis of local audience reception has not received similar research attention (Atton 2002; Downing 2001, Molnar and Meadows 2001, Rodriguez 2001).

In recent years, the phenomenal growth in the Australian community broadcasting sector has necessarily raised questions about the relevance of this media to the local communities which are its *raison de etre*. The Australian community broadcasting sector boasts around 250 radio stations and 100 additional aspirant groups seeking licences. More than 60 percent of the fully licensed broadcasters are in non-metropolitan or regional areas—around 35 places in Australia have community radio as their only local broadcast service (Forde et al 2003). Community TV stations have been broadcasting on a trial basis in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth from 1994. In 2004, the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) issued the first permanent licences for community television. It is thus an important moment in Australian broadcasting history to investigate the nature of these emerging local audiences (Rennie 2001). The local and often specialist nature of such audiences has demanded new ways of doing audience research which are appropriate to the sector. Our current project, 'Regional Remote and Radical: Australia's Community Broadcasting Audiences Talk Back', is designed to achieve a greater understanding of who these community audiences are and the role of programming in their local cultural contexts.

Typically, commercial and public broadcasters assess their audience/s using traditional audience surveys such as those performed by private organisations such as AC Neilsen. However, community broadcasters are often not in a financial position to participate in these surveys; or they find the audience survey format inappropriate to their particular media; or they doubt the relevance of audience figures to their specialist, diverse and often, numerically (by comparison) unimpressive audience numbers. Nevertheless, as 'Third Sector Media', they are confronted by a broader mediasphere and policy climate where audience numbers *are* routinely the gauge for a station's success in securing a certain audience. The sector has

thus had to confront this preference for quantitative audience figures characteristic of commercial publicly-funded Australian media such as the ABC and SBS. A recently completed quantitative survey of Australian community broadcasting audiences is at once a response to the industry imperative of 'numbers' and an opportunity to set the record straight—the report confirms that Australians are actually tuning in to their local community broadcasters in significant numbers (McNair Ingenuity 2004). Unlike commercial and public networks, community broadcasting audiences are, by definition, local and diverse. While we are able to appreciate the value, and indeed the power of, quantitative audience surveys—especially in the broader mediasphere—we have adopted the use of qualitative methods in our study to capture the subtleties of audience reception of, and response to, their local broadcast media. Establishing a qualitative engagement with community broadcasting audiences has raised many methodological challenges. Here, we present some of these and our responses to them in establishing a research method which enables community broadcasters to address the broader issues of affordability and which simultaneously represents the idiosyncrasies of the sector's audiences.

Quantitative Research and Community Broadcasting Audiences
Our national qualitative project, 'Regional, Remote and Radical: Australia's Community Broadcasting Audiences Talk Back', follows the national quantitative study completed by McNair Ingenuity Research in 2004. The organisation was commissioned by the sector's peak representative organisation, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) to conduct a large-scale survey of the Australian population in order to measure the size of the community radio audience. This overview fills a critical gap in knowledge about the sector, especially given its phenomenal growth over the past decade. The report found that just under one quarter of the population aged 15 or more listened to community radio in a typical week and that 685,000 people (aged 15 and over) listened exclusively in a typical week. These statistics are critical to the sector, especially in terms of acknowledgement of its central, cultural role along with offering individual stations some basis for seeking sponsorship. The figures give the sector reliable and certifiable data upon which a myriad of claims, justifications and evidence of 'service' can be based. The quantitative project also provides some guidance for the qualitative audience research project.

While the McNair report (2004) is useful for an overall picture of Australian community broadcasting audiences, the local and often specific nature of these audiences remains largely unknown. Certainly, Australian community broadcasting is defined by a diversity of audiences (and participants). This diversity can be categorised by delineating programs which serve traditional metropolitan and regional, ethnic and Indigenous, print-handicapped communities (among others). In addition to this categorisation of community radio stations, other programming formats capture in greater detail the scope of community radio services—formats such as arts, specialist music (such as that fostered by the chain of fine music stations), youth, Christian and sport programming, to name a few. The qualitative audience research project enhances the quantitative data by focusing on the finer detail of community radio audiences and overall, aims to capture the diversity of the sector's audiences. For example, the McNair Ingenuity Research (2004) found a significant difference between 'metropolitan' and 'non-metropolitan' listeners. Metropolitan listeners cited 'diversity in programming/they have specialist music or information programs' as the key reason for listening. In contrast, 'non-metropolitan' listeners cited 'local information/local news' as their main reason for listening. The qualitative project will investigate in greater

depth the reasons for such differences, why audiences choose to listen, and the role local programs play in their everyday lives. The qualitative project and its emphasis on an in-depth and contextualised understanding of community radio audiences aims to add a significant dimension to our knowledge of community radio audiences. This is especially the case where audiences may be comparatively small, such as some ethnic and Indigenous audiences, but nevertheless provide a critical service and/or cultural resource to their specific 'community of interest'. The NEMBC, for example, had specific objections to the quantitative study, arguing that an exercise in 'counting' would fail effectively to capture its role in ethnic communities.

Qualitative Research and Community Broadcasting Audiences
During our previous station-based study of Australian community radio, two interrelated issues emerged in relation to audience research. Firstly, stations generally agreed that their inability to participate in the larger commercial audience surveys adversely affected their ability to provide potential sponsors with market information. Typical of this dilemma, a participant commented that:

> It doesn't matter what your philosophical point of view is—when it comes sponsorship they are all going to ask the question 'What am I going to get out of it apart from a nice warm glow feeling that I am helping the radio station?'…That is something we are lacking in community radio. We do not have that statistical information [about audiences]…(Brisbane Focus Group, 2001).

Secondly, stations were aware that 'audience share' was not an absolute priority and as community broadcasters, servicing an audience ignored by mainstream radio services was an important contribution to their communities of interest:

> We don't think, 'What's our market and how can we sell to it?', which is what the commercial media does. We think, 'Who do we want to have as our audience and what kind of programme can we do?' and then consequently we think how can we make some money out of that, and it's kind of that way round for us (Adelaide Focus Group, 2001).

To some extent, the McNair study has furnished the sector with some much-needed statistical data although how individual stations will be able to use this, and its attractiveness to potential sponsors at the local level is yet to be seen. Nevertheless, the quandary these stations face in terms of presenting their audiences as an attractive option for sponsors while maintaining their responsibility to serve local communities of interest is apparent. Evidence of the ways in which community broadcasters are servicing their 'communities of interest'— and, indeed, who these communities are—is a key objective of the qualitative audience research project.

Globally, there has been a significant increase in the number and popularity of qualitative research projects. Seale et al (2004:1) report that texts on qualitative research have increased exponentially in the past 10 years. Our core qualitative method for this project, focus group research, has also experienced increasing popularity. While not without its critics, qualitative research—and specifically the focus group method—is primarily a cycle of 'shared activities and understandings' (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999:18) where relationships between the

researcher and the researched are potentially transformed to enable a more democratic process—essentially, it is about shared responsibility, knowledge and power (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999: 18). This approach, with its emphasis on democracy, sits well with the sector's own philosophies of democratic access and participation in broadcasting. Our efforts to establish an appropriate audience survey method does not assume that qualitative research has an 'inherent' capacity to alter the relations between researchers and the researched (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001: 18). A critical aspect of this approach is to find ways to channel knowledge and findings into practical ends. In this configuration, the cycle of participation and sharing is satisfied by careful attention to the way the data is presented as well as ensuring the research has empowering practical possibilities for research participants. At the local level, this research promises to serve stations in terms of enabling them to better know their audiences and to provide them with increased information for potential sponsors. This data will be useful for both supplementing broad quantitative research results and also in terms of showcasing the diversity and specificity of community radio audiences. At the level of policymaking, qualitative research captures the 'audience first' philosophy of community broadcasting and, in line with the industry's legislative requirements, looks beyond markets and statistics to obtain a clearer picture of community broadcasting services in local communities. Another significant benefit of this intimate audience knowledge is the opportunity to adjust programming and thus ensure/validate services to particular 'communities of interest'. This may prove particularly beneficial during various licensing processes undertaken by individual stations. Furthermore, the process has the potential to empower community broadcasters through providing them with a cheap and effective method for investigating their audiences. This is a significant goal of the research team: to ensure that the participatory and active role of participants in this project is transferred into a tangible and useful method for future application.

Regional, Remote and Radical – Australia's Community Broadcasting Audiences Talk Back
The qualitative audience research project has received funding from the Australian Research Council, along with financial and in-kind support from the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, the Community Broadcasting Foundation and the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia. Broadly, the aims of this project are:

- To identify the nature and diversity of community broadcasting audiences in urban, regional, and remote Australia;
- To investigate perceptions of existing community media by audience sub-sectors (e.g. urban, regional, remote, ethnic, Indigenous, print handicapped etc);
- To evaluate the 'community value' of community broadcasting through research into audience and community use;
- To identify audience needs for future community media development;
- To develop, refine and apply a community media audience research methodology appropriate for the sector's diversity; and
- To complement a separate but relevant quantitative audience study of the sector.

The overall approach we propose offers an array of qualitative methods, designed to meet the project aims as well as complementing the existing McNair Ingenuity quantitative data. This will enable us to investigate not only the audience's response to, and perceptions of, community broadcasting, but also the notion of the 'community value' of the sector through

the role it plays in providing access to local community groups who might otherwise remain isolated from the communication process. One of the reasons why there is a paucity of research into community broadcasting audiences globally is the difficulty of identifying them because of their diverse and dispersed nature (Meadows 2002). We believe we have developed an approach that will overcome some of these difficulties. Ewart (2000) has found that that 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. Community media are thus important—and overlooked—resources to enlist and to incorporate into research methodology. We plan to use community broadcasters to help us to identify their audiences to enable further focus group work to be done. We aim to achieve this through the application of three primary methods of data gathering. The previous station-based study of the community radio sector by Forde, Foxwell and Meadows (2003a) used these methods successfully although we are proposing a modified approach to identify audience focus groups.

Method 1—Key people interviews (station coordinators, sector representatives, language group representatives) to identify key themes emerging from the quantitative research which need to be explored in greater depth; to identify data collected by previous audience studies; to note perceived attitudes towards audiences and audience research; and to put in place strategies to identify focus group participants. The key people interviews for the community television sector had been completed at the time of writing and as we suspected, all are enthusiastic and willing participants and thus a key resource in the research methodology.

Method 2—Key group interviews (community groups, sponsors, local musicians, artists etc who have regular interaction with community broadcasting) will enable us to identify the nature and extent of local access to community broadcasting; to define the 'community value' of local broadcasting to such groups; and to determine the educational value of community broadcasting to local communities. This component recognises that in order to evaluate Australian community broadcasting, the sector needs to be examined from the perspectives of those who work or volunteer in the sector (our previous study), those who access and utilise the sector but may not necessarily be audience members, and those who listen. Our early fieldwork interviews with key people in community television indicate this component of the study could in fact prove to be more valuable than we initially anticipated—perhaps even that these key group interviews may provide some way of 'quantifying' the community service aspect of community radio through these planned interviews with community groups.

Method 3—Focus group discussions will form the core of the study. We are conducting between 45-50 focus groups: 25 metropolitan and regional, 10 ethnic language groups, 10 Indigenous and 5 community television. Each of the proposed groups will include between 6-10 audience members representative of the sector's geographic, cultural and linguistic diversity. The approach will be to first identify 6-10 people for each focus group, based on a list of potential participants collected by selected stations. A '1-800' number will also be established to enable audience members to bypass station administration if appropriate. We will liaise with community stations in each sample area to use local broadcasts to invite members of their audience to participate. Once stations have collected the names and contact details of potential participants, we will then select an appropriate number at random to make up audience focus groups. This approach is a logical and effective way of identifying

particular community broadcasting audiences where traditional sampling methods—for example, a random telephone survey—are more problematic. This was the experience in a qualitative study of 4AAA in 1998 (Meadows and van Vuuren 1998). Once an audience sample has been selected, members of each focus group will be encouraged to nominate their priorities for discussion before canvassing common themes to be explored in every focus group. This process of focus group research organisation and execution is more collaborative than other methods and can be an empowering process for participants (Criterion Research 2002, Catterall and Maclaran 1997).

Emerging Methodological Issues
The scale of this project and the trial of new methodology is unprecedented in community broadcasting research. Consequently, we have encountered some 'critical moments' (Horsfall et al, 2001) in refining our methodology which we anticipated, to some extent, during the development stages. This section outlines some of the methodological issues and decisions encountered so as to clarify approaches for future projects and to ensure the direction of this project is understood. As such, this discussion contributes to emerging academic literature which makes explicit the processes involved in adopting qualitative research methods (Byrne-Armstrong et al, 2001; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Seale et al, 2004). As Seale et al (2004:2) suggest, qualitative research practice is not a linear process. It involves 'an engagement with a variety of things and people', including the research team's own past experience and aspirations. They conclude:

> Out of this mix arise particular research inquiries. Sometimes we can learn from these, and if practicing researchers are encouraged to write about their inquiries in a methodologically reflective way (though not in a purely self confessional manner), we may learn a great deal (Seale et al, 2004:2).

Presenting our methodology is an opportunity to gather other ideas, responses and issues relevant to the research. We also hope that this provides some background and insight for fellow researchers seeking a similar type of research engagement.

Sampling Procedures for Metropolitan and Regional Audiences
A defining feature of focus group research is its rejection of 'statistical representativeness' in favour of a 'theoretical sample' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which aims 'to generate talk that will extend the range of thinking about an issue' and thus recruits 'groups that are defined in relation to the particular conceptual framework of the study' (McNaughten & Myers, 2004: 68). This project adopts this conceptual idea while giving due consideration to the statistical data gathered from the McNair Ingenuity research and the ABS. Conveying the difference between a 'theoretical sample' of qualitative research as opposed to a 'statistical sample' of quantitative research has been an issue in negotiations with our industry partners. It is some reflection of the embedded nature of quantitative methods in audience research and the relatively unknown power and purposes of qualitative approaches. Favoring 'theoretical rigour' over 'statistical rigour' has raised many questions about 'bias' and 'objectivity'. While station selections are not random, the '1-800' number prevents stations from screening potentially problematic audience participants. Explaining to the sector that a qualitative research project carries some acceptance of 'bias' and actively seeks participants who will be 'willing to generate talk' (McNaughten & Myers, 2004) has forced us to revisit the

philosophical foundations of qualitative research and to clarify its validity as an appropriate tool for community broadcasting research.

Given the size and diversity of the sector however, selecting 45-50 representative focus groups remains a challenge. There are of course, many ways to classify potential community broadcasting audiences. Geographic location is an obvious criterion and was central to our research focus on the role of community broadcasting in regional and remote areas of Australia. However, the seemingly easy delineation between metropolitan and regional audiences is dismantled upon closer examination of the sector. Regional stations can be further delineated by their proximity to the coast, by local industry, or by programming format, amongst other criteria. In a similar vein, metropolitan stations can be classified according to their programming format, as 'sub-metropolitan' stations, according to the nature of their subscriber base, whether they are large or small stations etc. Stations can be further categorised according to their time as 'fully-licensed' stations. The selection of these groups is based upon our own experience of the sector, advisory committee, and continuing informal meetings with community broadcasting participants at a range of venues. Ultimately though, the sample was drawn, trying to balance as far as possible the multifarious elements that define community broadcasting—geography (urban, regional, remote), target audience (eg. youth, linguistic choice, cultural background, disability etc), inevitably along with room for some flexibility. Based on our prior experience and the invaluable input from our advisory committee, we are confident our sample is 'theoretically' relevant to the diversity of Australian community broadcasting audiences.

Indigenous Focus Groups
A crucial element for success in Indigenous audience research will entail members of the research team strengthening existing relationships and creating new ones in selected areas to establish a dialogue with community elders and local broadcasters. This is essential if we are to have any hope of being given reliable information (Morris and Meadows 2001; Michaels 1985). In order deal appropriately and effectively with these audiences, Indigenous researcher Christine Morris is working with the research team specifically to assist in liaising with Indigenous communities and in the application and analysis of data from these sources. We have adopted a multifarious approach to ensure our dealings with Indigenous people are culturally appropriate and fall within accepted local protocols. The underlying principle is that research of this type must, as far as possible, try to align itself with everyday activities. If it is seen to be too far outside the ordinary, then people are entitled to ask: 'Why bother to participate in this? How will it help us or our community?' Thus, our approach will entail a mix of focus group interviews in urban and larger regional centres, and more interactive strategies for remote audiences. Previous research experience (Morris and Meadows, 2001) has underlined the importance of establishing reciprocal relationships with Indigenous listeners or viewers, prior to any attempt at information exchange. Practically, this will involve extended visits to selected communities to establish a dialogue with key people before any focussed data-gathering begins. The nature of the exchange will vary from community to community. For example, central Australkian Indigenous media producers are seeking international audiences for their products and members of the research team are assisting with this, drawing on expert knowledge and our own system of networks. In other communities, it may involve negotiation for the delivery of various forms of training for local community representatives as part of the methodology. Both Morris and Meadows have been involved in this process in their prior work, particularly in the Torres Strait. This

work involved employing a local research assistant to work with—and to learn from—the team as well as the delivery of specific hands-on training in broadcasting skills to nominated community members (Morris and Meadows 2001).

To extend the probability for gathering reliable data, the methodology includes tapping into local cultural events where significant numbers of Indigenous people gather. Annual events such as the BRACS Radio and Video Festival in Alice Springs (2004), *Garma* (Arnhem Land), the Torres Strait Cultural festival, *Stompem Ground* (Broome), *Larapuna* (Tasmania) and the Laura Cultural Festival (Cape York) offer opportunities for the researchers to identify and access Indigenous audiences. Prior contact with relevant communities, supported by follow-up meetings at the time of such events, will increase the likelihood of accessing Indigenous participants. It is highly doubtful whether Indigenous people would respond to conventional focus group organisation. This is particularly the case in regional and remote communities where 'other business' is always prioritised over that involving yet another team of visiting researchers. This element of the data-gathering process is the most risky and will need to be carefully managed. The experience of Morris and Meadows suggests the inevitable obstacles can be overcome (Morris 2003, Morris and Meadows 2001, and Meadows and van Vuuren 1998). A key element of the dialogue necessary for this kind of research is the involvement of organisations representative of Indigenous media in Australia—the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) and the Australian Indigenous Communications Association (AICA). Both have representation—along with other key sector elements such as Radio for the Print Handicapped (RPH) and the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasting Council (NEMBC)—on the project advisory committee.

Ethnic and Indigenous Languages

Discussions with Indigenous and ethnic community participants will be translated and recorded in English for analysis. This could involve up to 20 different languages. Discussions with our advisory committee have identified the importance of selecting a sample of ethnic community focus groups representative of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community broadcasting sector. We have also analysed current ABS reports in order to attain an overview of languages in Australia. With more than 100 languages now on the community radio airwaves, the selection will include a sample from the largest to the smallest (and most recent, for example, refugee) speech communities. Sensitivities and approaches involved in cross-cultural research will be crucial to the project's outcomes. This encompasses various issues relevant to Indigenous and ethnic communities. For example, the selection of ethnic language groupings will involve a particular sensitivity towards pre-existing tensions between groups. Our attendance at the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasting Council (NEMBC) conference alluded to some of these tensions which will not necessarily negatively impact on the operation of the focus groups but which must be taken into consideration by both the researchers and ethnic radio stations and their representatives. Our involvement with the NEMBC, which has asked ethnic stations for suggested language groupings should ensure an appropriate selection. Advice from the NEMBC and key people in the ethnic radio sector have suggested ways to achieve a cross-section of languages and focus groups in the sector—through consideration of metropolitan/regional status; whether the station is the only one providing information in a particular language; whether there are newspapers in the same language being produced within the station's footprint; and whether it is an established post-WWII language or an emerging/refugee language.

In both Indigenous and ethnic focus groups, a primary consideration is to promote an environment where often marginalised communities feel comfortable about sharing their experience of community radio. Focus group research is a particularly useful method for allowing participants to 'generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary' (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999: 4). Translators will give audience members an opportunity to discuss issues in a 'vocabulary' which is both familiar and appropriate for Indigenous and ethnic audiences and contribute to an overall research environment. The location of focus groups will also be important to these sectors of the industry as these can influence the content of discussion (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999:11). Sensitivity to location and language will ensure that focus group participants are given the best opportunity to relay their experience of community broadcasting.

Conclusion

In our previous study of the community broadcasting sector, we used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods—telephone surveys and focus group discussions. The crude delineation and definition of quantitative and qualitative research methods for both past and current research into the community radio sector suggests a linear path to findings and reporting. This is a misrepresentation of our experience with the sector thus far. For the most part, our research has followed a particular tradition of qualitative research which embraces immersion in the research area and to some extent, avoids the 'cool distance' (Atkinson et al, 2003:18) characteristic of quantitative research methods. While we are aware of the debates about the value of quantitative versus qualitative research (see Bruhn Jensen & Jankowski, 1991; Atkinson et al, 2003; Byrne-Armstrong et al, 2001; Seale et al, 2004), we are not dependant on their outcome. We are dedicated to revealing the too-often, taken-for-granted assumptions of qualitative research. This distinguishes critical and reflective focus group research which empowers citizens from uncritical market research models which seek consumers (Cunningham- Burley et al, 1999). Qualitative analysis promotes an engagement with a sector where diversity is the catchcry. This approach, we believe, offers the best opportunities for enabling greater appreciation and understanding of the nature of community broadcasting audiences

Key outcomes are accessibility and the ultimate usefulness of the research to its primary participants—this is the basis of the reciprocal relationship with our research participants. Our development of an inexpensive, portable and accessible audience survey method will begin to fulfil this responsibility and to ensure the continued relevance of broadcasting services to their local communities of interest. Quantitative research is a useful method for stations, especially in terms of providing 'hard data' in seeking sponsorship. The international trend towards focus group research, coupled with the particular nature of community broadcasting audiences, suggests this union is a 'perfect match' in offering a critical evaluation of the cultural role of community broadcasting in Australia—by listening to the voices of those most often ignored: the audience.

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