Commodified communication: Digital compatibility challenges for community broadcasting

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Abstract

This article asks the question: is digital logic compatible with the democratic aims of community broadcasting? The focus is on the Australian community broadcasting sector, and the purpose is to step back from the minutiae of creating and distributing community radio content to consider the logics, commodifying processes, and commercial consequences of digital disruption. To address this concern, I will first consider how digital platforms interplay with the logic of the market, facilitating an ever-expanding monetisation of communication. Secondly, I will reflect on the means of production and the shifting digital sands that increasingly place once publicly held communication modes and methods under corporate influence or control. Thirdly, I will look at the impact of the digital on the producer and the listener. The article presents a theoretical interrogation of how community radio is impacted by the growing spread of a digital logic under neoliberalism. The article extends Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas's (2014) alternative media research agenda by emphasising the need to account for historical context, anchor analysis in a political economy of communication framework, and acknowledge complexity within all communication processes. Finally, it calls on future research to critically engage with concerns around media democratisation and digital logics within the wider space of communication for social change.

Keywords: community radio; digital logic; digital capitalism; media democratisation; political economy of communication

Introduction

This article raises concerns around the impact of digital logics (Hassan and Sutherland 2016) on the Australian community radio sector's central purpose of extending democratic communication. It does this by outlining a series of theoretically based themes that illuminate the emergence of a digitality that serves for-profit technological efficiency at the expense of democratic media participation.

Digital logic describes a set of rationales and frameworks that elevate speed and efficiency through the use of digital (as opposed to analogue) technologies. It is a myopic approach that is grounded in quantitative, calculable units and the application of the digital to serve the expansion of capitalism (Hassan and Sutherland 2016; Fraser, Jaeggi and Milstein 2018). In essence, it is a capitalist logic that harnesses digital technologies in all their forms in the pursuit of profit and expansion. Here digital logic is understood within the context of 'digital capitalism' (Schiller 1999), a term used to describe the central role that communication and information products and technologies play in driving consumption and financial gain under present-day capitalism. Digital capitalism is a useful term as it draws our attention to the ongoing presence of a capitalist system—based on growth, increased profits, and exploitation—while also centring the role of the digital in its present-day manifestation.

The term 'digital disruption' stems from the early work of now Harvard Business School Professor, Clayton Christiansen, in his 1997 book *The innovator's dilemma: when new technologies cause great firms to fail*. Essentially, he argued that successful businesses can

become so focused on their own products and current customers' needs that they fail to see the 'next big thing' from the digital innovators. Put another way, his thesis described the drive to create new markets or transform existing ones by implementing product simplicity or affordability, often replacing existing products and markets. Christiansen's thesis was originally considered neither distinctly positive nor negative, but has essentially been reinvented as generally describing an ultimately positive change.

Within a capitalist framework, digital disruption is reinterpreted as a great force for democratisation. Namely, digital disruption opens up markets, fosters participation, and enables broader populations to consume new items. It is the ultimate growth opportunity. In relation to media and communications, Google representatives Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2010, proposed that the new media space created by digital disruption might be called the 'interconnected estate' (as opposed to the fourth estate). They described this new space as 'a place where any person with access to the Internet, regardless of living standard or nationality, is given a voice and the power to effect change' (75).

Without doubt, digital disruption represents a rapid and dramatic shift for the space of media and communications, lurching it from analogue production and distribution to digital. The rise of the computer, the internet, social media and mobile digital technology continues to exert enormous impact on media ownership, production and distribution. Analysis of this type of digital disruption has focused primarily on new opportunities for digital innovation (McQuivey 2013; Productivity Commission 2016), the promise of technological utopia (Castells 2012; Dahlgren 2012; Shirky 2008, 2010), the prominence of fake news and the broken business model of advertising and print media (Morozov 2017). Of primary concern here is a deeper understanding of the origins of digital disruption and its effect on the democratic capacities of the Australian community broadcasting sector.

There is increasing acknowledgement of a crisis of democracy and a failure of media and communication systems to adequately perform their democratic functions (McChesney 2013; Hassan 2011; Morozov 2017). It is necessary for the community radio sector to engage more closely with these concerns, especially given its fundamental role in expanding the project of media democratisation (Hackett 2000; Padovani and Nordenstreng 2005) and communicative democracy (Jakubowicz 1990).

Community radio—and community broadcasting more broadly—plays a central role in the project of media democratisation, which sits in contrast to digital logics and digital capitalism. Australian community radio remains a leading entity within the global landscape of community broadcasting. Its contribution to media democratisation is well documented and broadly heralded (Meadows et al. 2005, 2007; Forde et al. 2002; Anderson 2012). What remains less charted is the impact of digital technologies on the primary democratic intentions of the community broadcasting sector. My argument is that there are potentially undemocratic consequences of an uncritical engagement with digital technologies and that more focus should be placed on this possible conflict by the Australian community radio sector. This article does not seek to undertake either qualitative of quantitative research in addressing this problem, but rather to lay out a series of theoretical frames and pose a set of questions through which the challenges of the sector might be further analysed.

Community broadcasting in Australia continues to set itself apart from other communication forms as a not-for-profit media space dedicated to community participation, access and information. The sector has kept abreast of technological advances, embracing the digital in the form of podcasts, online streaming and on-demand services, digital editing and production, as well as promotion, engagement and fundraising via social media platforms and websites. While none of this is particularly new, there has been little pause for thought about the path that we currently hurtle along, and the possible implications, contradictions and complications that it has for the sector's historical and politically progressive social change agendas. By critiquing the digital disruption in this way, the intention is neither to side with a dystopian vision of technology, nor to equate the role of technological advance with a utopian path, but rather to question its impact under the forces of digital capitalism.

In the following sections I will consider how community radio's central democratic purpose is challenged under digital capitalism within three broad themes guided by the work of Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas (2014). The first section contextualises the rise of digital technology and consider the corporate logics at play with the mass distribution of information in a networked society, that is, the commodification of communication and information. The second section considers community-controlled communication and the importance of owning the means of distribution and determining the terms of content access, along with the social, economic and political shaping of technologies. The third section raises questions around the negative personal and societal impacts of communication technologies that are significantly determined by digital logics. The discussion opens up research agendas that question more closely community radio's capacities for communication for social change under digital capitalism and draws attention to the ongoing need for the democratisation of media led by non-commercial community radio production and distribution.

The commodification of communication
The Australian community broadcasting sector was established in the 1970s to provide a media space owned and operated by local communities wherein they could determine and create their own media content (3CR 2016). In a not-for-profit environment community radio would provide a voice for those denied effective access to the 'mainstream media', thereby enhancing democracy by increasing the diversity of issues aired and expanding media participation. Beginning in an era of analogue technology, the allocation of AM and then FM radio frequencies across four and a half decades has resulted in 357 full-time licenced community radio stations operating throughout Australia in 2019 (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2019). With all radio content originally distributed free to anyone with a radio receiver, research shows that the programming and community participation produced contributes to the Australian public sphere, the community's access to and participation in the media, and the diversity of voices present across the media landscape (Forde et al. 2002; Meadows et al. 2005, 2007). Although it is not without its faults and challenges (Fairchild 2006, 2012; van Vuuren 2006), the Australian community broadcasting sector is a global leader (Gordon 2006; Buckley 2011).

The pace of digital technology creation and uptake is breath-taking. Even in the relatively short period that I have been engaged with the community radio sector (1991-2019), I have seen the introduction of computers, mobile phones and the internet into everyday station use, the rise and fall of DAT tapes and mini-discs, amongst others, and the start of digital broadcasting, online streaming, podcasts and audio-on-demand.

Simultaneously, for the first time last year the world saw the top five most valuable companies by market capital shift from global resource companies to media and information communication corporations (Buss 2018, 42).

In order to understand our current predicament with the elevation of the digital across social, economic and political activities it is necessary to briefly consider its rise and expansion under neoliberalism and the resulting digital capitalism, or in other words, to account for the rise of digitality within a historical context (Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas 2014). It is also necessary to reflect on some of the overarching predictions and ongoing myths that relate to the democratising impacts of technology. What we are witnessing is not a new type of society, as such, but rather a significant technological expansion of the imperatives of capitalism. Through the use of the internet and the creation of the 'networked society' (Castells 2007; Hassan 2013), key capitalist tendencies are greatly extended—profit-making, private property expansion, and the massification of audiences for product consumption. Central to this situation is a clear set of commercial imperatives which lead to a digital logic that is engaged with the commodification of everything.

Many consider the rise of computers and digital technologies central to propelling capitalism in the post-industrial age. Numerous scholars have outlined the manner in which digital distribution in particular, and the vast production of digital devices associated with it, saved capitalism at a time when it was in crisis (Harvey 2010). Market-based financial transactions are central to capitalist digital engagement, but so too is the creation, flow and consumption of information. Media and communications have been impacted intensely by the centring of digital technologies within capitalist activities. As discussed below, this is due primarily to the free labour (and therefore considerable profit) derived from online interactions, as well as the ubiquity of devices and the speed of connectivity. Arguably, the expansion of production and use of computer-based technologies has come with many benefits for humanity, but if computers are the central solution, what was the problem? A wider question might be: How do computers contribute to the social progress of humanity?

The challenges that the wholesale commodification of communication presents to community radio in Australia are too many to address here. They range from corporate control of transmission hardware and software programs to commercial ownership of online platforms that host community radio content; from station–community engagement across capitalist social media (Fuchs 2013) to the prioritisation of data analytics above notions of social value and social good. What is pertinent, perhaps, is to ask: Why is this a problem? Nick Couldry (2010) observes that neoliberalism spawns a 'crisis of voice', wherein social communicative processes and the value placed on democratic communication is reprioritised within a society dominated by commercial imperatives.

Across media and communication studies the scope and accessibility of big data— Twitter feeds, Facebook usage, online digital participation—contributes to its prioritisation. This in turn results in significant funding allocations, dedicated subjects, research focus and prioritisation of quantitative, computational approaches over qualitative interpretative ones (Fuchs 2017). Further still, it contributes to a broader trend of 'digital positivism' (Mosco 2016) that can lead to amnesia about media's embeddedness 'into society's power structures and social struggles' (Fuchs 2017, 40).

It is worth considering the difference between accessibility and findability (Michalis 2018, 206) in this context. When large distribution platforms (which are also content producers) are paying for findability, how does the community radio sector respond? This question also raises the issue around data and numbers. How does the high value of mass consumption under digital capitalism translate to a community radio broadcaster that prioritises the voices of marginalised issues and people?

The Australian community broadcasting sector does not sit outside the broadscale commodification of communication under digital capitalism. Taking account of the historical context (Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas, 152-157) of digital and commodified communication enables the sector to more deeply understand the impact of digital logics on community media production and practice. A historical perspective removes tendencies to concentrate merely on immediate, decontextualised presentations of media practice and enables deeper considerations of 'transformations, shifts, and contradictions that unfold over long loops of time' (Wasko, Murdock and Sousa 2011, 2). Situating the sector within neoliberalism and digital capitalism and questioning how it is impacted by digitality (Hassan 2019) is an important starting point in any further consideration of how to promote the project of media democratisation. In the following section, I will consider the nature of community-controlled communication and outline more closely the political economy of a communication framework needed to interrogate notions of technological determinism and power.

Community-controlled communication
Central to the idea of democratising media and communication is the core ingredient of community-owned and community-controlled media. To understand the importance of this aspect of community broadcasting in Australia it is necessary to anchor any analysis of alternative media in a political economy of communication framework (Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas 2014). The Australian community broadcasting sector set out to expand media ownership, access, diversity and participation, and while many would agree that there has been a level of success (Forde et al. 2002; Meadows et al. 2005, 2007), others would argue that with the digital disruption such services are rendered redundant (National Commission of Audit 2014). A political economy framework helps us to interrogate participation, democratic communication and power in relation to digital disruption and the accompanying ideology of technological determinism.

The theoretical framework of political economy has a focus on 'the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of wealth and the consequences for the welfare of individuals and society' (Wasko 2004, 309). A political economy of communication approach recognises that capitalism expands not only through faster, more efficient computerised communication systems, but also through the making of meaning and the setting of agendas by the dominant elite. More broadly, political economy is a framework through which to contemplate how the world works and provides a clear set of concepts and frames through which to question the digital world in which we live. As Janet Wasko articulates, 'a careful analysis of capitalism, its structures, the consequences of those structures and the contradictions that abound is more than ever relevant and needed' (2014, 268).

The connection between communication and democracy can best be understood through Karol Jakubowicz's (1990) term 'communicative democracy'. That is, rather than communication being one contributing factor in a functioning democracy, the premise of democracy itself is based upon egalitarian communication (Hackett 2000, p. 65). The

continuing appropriation of the means of communication and of everyday information-sharing activities by digital capitalism is a direct threat to both access to communication, and communicative democracy. Community control is a key feature of community broadcasting and reflects its intention to democratise the space of media and communications. Community control manifests as financial and structural independence, and a non-corporate, collective framework, which are all foundational features of the community radio form (Gordon 2006; Howley 2010; Buckley 2011; Tucker 2013). As Mohan J. Dutta notes, 'Democracy is realised in the everyday forms of participation at the grassroots, devoid of the requirements of property ownership and capital' (2015, 138).

It is worth considering the language that permeates descriptions of digital disruption and digitality: that of freedom; of innovation; of open access, empowerment and participation; of expanded communication and extended wealth and rights (Castells 2007; Schmidt and Cohen 2010; McQuivey 2013). These terms sit in stark contrast to a neoliberal digital reality described as enclosed, one-dimensional, undemocratic, limited and monopolistic (McChesney 2013; Harvey 2005; Fuchs 2013; Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2016; Hassan and Sutherland 2016; Dreher, Waller and McCallum 2018; Murdock 2017). Let us consider for a moment one key aspect that is also a central tenet of the community radio form—participation. To do this it is worth drawing on the wide frame of communication for social change, which is critically defined as self-determined communicative practice that seeks to contribute to a strengthening of community-controlled knowledge production.

Thomas and van de Fliert (2015) contextualise participation within the framework of neoliberalism and communication for social change by observing that we live amidst a mass of mobile and digital communication technologies, yet 'very few people have the capacity to make their voices heard and acted upon in meaningful ways' (85). This is because power, and the power to participate, is contingent on an equitable sharing of resources, yet neoliberalism is active in incorporating modes of 'participation' into ongoing systems of exploitation. In contrast, the participatory space of a community radio station requires the equitable allocation of cultural resources and the supported facilitation of citizen-based agency and power.

The wrapping up of participation within neoliberal agency (Gershon 2011) reflects the ideology of technological determinism. In some ways the term 'digital disruption' obscures the ongoing capitalist logic at work within present-day society and leads to an illusory notion of what technological advances might bring under current social, economic and political paradigms. Similarly, technological determinism obfuscates the influence of capitalism, and contributes to the premature celebration of the impact of technology on social progress. Fuchs observes that 'Studies of "web 2.0" and "social media" are dominated by techno-deterministic approaches that assume that the rise of these technologies results in a more democratic society' (2013, 26). It is this type of assumption in relation to media and democracy that impacts heavily on the value placed on community broadcasting, as it presupposes that previous modes of democratic communication are no longer required.

There is a wealth of other concerns connected to the ideology of technological determinism and its potential impact on communicative democracy. These include, in no particular order, persistent concerns about access and the digital divide; the entanglement of technology in the business of surveillance (Mosco 2016); the exploitation of user

labour to generate profit (Fuchs 2013); and the ill-conceived prediction (and ongoing delusion) that the internet would revolutionise society (Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2016). Fortunately, there is a growing body of reflective media and communication scholarship that scrutinises the early predictions of the impact of digital technology and communication and much of the work is grounded in a political economy of communication analysis.

The extent of the corporate ownership of current media and communications platforms is worthy of detailed consideration and sits in clear contrast to the model of ownership and value embedded in the community broadcasting model. Here it is described by political economy of communication scholar Graham Murdock (2017, 45) in his recent work focused on public service media and the BBC:

> … we are witnessing an accelerating enclosure of digital space with command over routine daily uses of the internet increasingly concentrated in the hands of corporations that exercise monopoly control over their primary areas of operation. Google dominates search. Facebook monopolises social media use. Amazon has commandeered online retailing. Apple is a major provider of smartphones and tablets that have overtaken laptop computers as the primary point of access to the Web. Because of its continuing embeddedness in everyday life, public broadcasting is the only effective counter to the deepening commercial colonisation of digital public life. This role matters fundamentally to the democratic health and general commonwealth of a networked society.

Clearly, there are parallels with the democratic role of Australian community broadcasting. Technology is shaped economically, politically and socially, and the means of transmission matter. Although digital disruption has altered the flow and form of media and communications streams, it has not transformed their democratic capacities. On the contrary, as already stated, it has enclosed, limited, colonised and monopolised many aspects of communicative democracy. For a sector that was founded to counter the domination of media ownership by a few corporations, the central issue of community broadcasting ownership remains significant. The mantra 'by the people, for the people' and 'people powered' may seem tired and archaic, but it is descriptive of the power inherent in community-controlled, self-determined community communication.

Digital impacts on communication processes
One of Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas's (2014) challenges for research in the field of alternative media is to acknowledge the complexity of communication processes. Although the discussion below is far from a comprehensive analysis of this complexity, it does seek to raise some theoretically based themes in relation to the impact of digital disruption at the individual and societal level. In particular, it looks to present some key concerns of the complex effects of digital technology engagement, including the burgeoning of anti-democratic communicative practice and the growing preoccupation with knowing and interpreting the world through big data.

As previously discussed, digital technologies are not neutral; they are moulded according to dominant social, economic and political priorities, and in turn, they shape the engagement, usage, form and function of the information and communication that they transmit. With digital disruption, 'consumers' (rather than citizens) of digital media and communications encounter a host of anti-democratic practices. These include the echo chamber (which amplifies your existing beliefs and attitudes), the filter bubble (Pariser

2011) (which prevents you from receiving anything other than your current likes and preferences), enhanced distraction (Hassan 2011), depression and cognitive dissonance, along with fake news, hyper-individualism, a democratic disconnection, exploitative digital labour (Fuchs 2013) and a host of other attributes that hinder the expansion of communicative democracy.

In considering the impacts of digital technologies it is imperative that the community broadcasting sector also take into consideration the environmental destruction caused by the extent of and demand for digital technology. Environmental damage is embedded in the infrastructures and devices that support digital media and communications (Hackett 2018). More broadly, digitality abstracts us from the deeper, elemental processes of nature and in order to address the current planetary emergency (Hackett 2018) we must place 'the logic of the digital in the service of people instead of instrumental "efficiency"' (Hassan and Sutherland 2016, 224-225). Sustainable democracy (Hackett 2018) requires decision-making based on distant futures rather than short-term profits; on the valuing of human and non-human life above economic growth; and on reinvigoration and elevation of public institutions and cultural organisations that are designed to deliver democracy, such as the community broadcasting sector.

In considering the nexus of capital, patriarchy and race in the digital age, Fuchs (2018) asserts that 'Capitalism is inherently patriarchal and racist in character and uses ideology and discrimination for deepening exploitation and domination' (700). The intricacies of digital systems are frequently hidden, unknown and unknowable, yet, as they expand under digital capitalism, so too do exploitative, anti-democratic and dominating practices. In *Algorithms of oppression* Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) interrogates the racist tendencies of search engines like Google, challenging the idea that they offer an equal playing field for all forms of ideas, identities and activities. Data discrimination is a very real social problem. Noble argues that the combination of private interests in promoting certain sites, along with the monopoly status of a relatively small number of internet search engines, leads to a biased set of search algorithms that privilege whiteness and discriminate against people of colour, specifically women of colour. Closer to home, Andrew Jakubowicz (2018, 72) clearly states how the 'Australian Internet makes it easy to be racist'. Here Jakubowicz's observations restate both the neoliberal technological determinism and the profit motive at play (72):

> Racism can be served either by directing Internet users to racist sites, or delivering racist messages to other sites. Both of these procedures are triggered by agglomerating data from multiple sources, and looking for patterns—patterns that are known to be profitable, though often cloaked in the language of enhancing user experience.

Our engagement with digital technologies throughout the Australian community radio sector needs to take account of the possible anti-democratic functionalities at work across platforms, devices and systems. Indeed, the sector would also do well to take into account concerns about the 'corrupting' of reality through the conversion of analogue information to digital (Hassan 2019).

Without doubt, digital technology increases the applicability and accessibility of data. Emerging from this digital feature is an obsession with numbers, and a digital, data-led value system. From podcast statistics and unique website views, to Facebook likes, Twitter followers and Instagram engagement, increasing importance is placed on digital

data within the community broadcasting sector (from funders, supporters, programmers and users alike). But what does this data show us, and down which path does it lead us? Data-led community broadcasting under digital capitalism skews our priorities towards popularity by numbers rather than social progress through community-led communication. It encloses our interactions and community engagement within commercial platforms and equates technology with political action, often reducing 'the richly contextual human relations that surround media use into a flat and unrevealing technological determinism' (Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas 2014, 152).

Conclusion
This article considered the problems of compatibility between the logic of the digital and the project of media democratisation in relation to the Australian community radio sector. The term 'digital disruption' leads us to think that there has been a fundamental break with the past and that a new era has dawned. Of course, in some ways there has been, in terms of the types of new technologies available, their expanded usage, connectivity, and capacity. Our personal use of mobile technologies, social media and WiFi systems enhances this 'knowledge' of a new era. What has not been ruptured, however, are the commercial logics at play that determine the increasingly commodified nature of communication production, distribution and consumption.

This is not to say that digital technologies are now statically placed within communities, only to be used for profit-making endeavours. On the contrary, they are socially and politically shaped, and thereby malleable, transient and amorphous. Within the context of community radio, the effective use of communication technologies relies on putting technologies to work for the project of media democratisation. Their use and value must be prioritised outside market-based logics, and inside the original frameworks of community broadcasting as they relate to advancing social cohesion, extending media participation, and increasing the diversity of issues and voices across networks.

There is a need to further consider how the Australian community radio sector is currently undertaking this work, and how it could further its contribution to communication for social change (Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas 2014) despite the challenges of corporate influence over digital technologies and the neoliberal outcomes of a digital disruption.

A primary concern arising from this discussion is the incorporation of notions of digital disruption and a technological utopia that results in the skewing of public policy and government funding toward digital technology and production and away from community-based media and broadcasting. How does the language of station-level promotion, sector-level policy and nationwide funding guidelines unwittingly enable the logic of digitality embedded in neoliberalism, thereby constricting the sectors' ability to effectively roll out the project of media democratisation? What this theoretically grounded exploration also points to is the rich research opportunities to explore community participation and democratic media beyond the digital within the space and experience of community broadcasting.

The rise of digital information and communication *has*, to a certain extent, disrupted politics; it *has*, to some degree, disrupted democracy; and it *has* the potential to significantly disrupt Australian community broadcasting. The good news is that scholars (Downing et al. 2001; Hackett 2018; Anderson 2013) continue to recognise the unique space that community radio presents—alongside other alternative media forms—with its

potential capacity to contribute positively to everything from empowering and giving voice to prisoners, to furthering the work of social movements, to de-commodifying social struggles (Fuchs 2016, 25) and to combating our climate emergency. Hackett (2018) writes that alternative media is 'arguably well-positioned to generate the kind of communication needed to challenge established power as a precondition for addressing environmental crisis' (102). Challenging established power is ostensibly a central (unrealised) aim of the Australian community radio sector.

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