The digital disruption of news and current affairs in the community broadcasting sector: An Australian perspective

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Abstract

Changes in digital innovation have directly affected community radio broadcasting in Australia, thanks to the rapid growth of digital technologies. There is no denying the impact of digital disruption on community radio stations more broadly, as well as on the ways community radio programs are now produced, and the choices made about programming; even if we limit our attention to the production of news and current affairs. This paper maps the increased opportunities that digital disruption brings for community radio broadcasting in Australia to produce and disseminate news and current affairs content. More to the point, it draws on publicly available data to outline current trends in accessing syndicated news and current affairs programming within the Australian community radio sector, and considers both the consequences and repercussions of these increased opportunities. With the peak body for Australian community broadcasting – the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia – about to launch its Enhanced National News Project, this paper is timely and, while perhaps raising as many questions as it gives answers, it aims to highlight potential avenues for future research in this area.

Keywords: community radio; news and current affairs; journalism; syndication; digital disruption

Introduction

The growth of digital technologies poses significant questions for community radio practitioners and researchers alike. This paper focuses on the increased opportunities they bring to disseminate news and current affairs content within an Australian community broadcasting context. It considers both the consequences and repercussions of these increased opportunities and acknowledges that celebration of the increased capacity to share information through digital-based content delivery platforms does not necessarily consider what this means for locally situated news and current affairs programming. What effects has the ease of distribution afforded by the digital landscape, within which community radio is now well and truly situated, had on the Australian community broadcasting sector, given that local news and information are key reasons that audiences tune in (Meadows et al. 2007; Anderson 2005)?

Considering the ever-escalating advances in connectivity, computer power and mobility, it is not surprising that disruptive technologies tend to be digital in nature (Commonwealth of Australia 2016). According to Skog, Wimelius & Sandberg (2018, 431):

> … digital disruption is often framed as a type of environmental turbulence induced by digital innovation that leads to the erosion of boundaries and approaches that previously served as foundations for organizing the production and capture of value.

What does this mean for the community broadcasting sector? There is no denying the changes in digital innovation that have directly affected the ways radio stations operate

and radio programs are produced, even if we limit our attention to the production of news and current affairs. This includes the ways community broadcasters gather, produce and disseminate information, but it also influences choices related to programming; specifically, whether to utilise syndicated content rather than – or as well as – locally produced material.

In this paper, I focus on the erosion of boundaries and approaches caused by digital disruption (to paraphrase Skog, Wimelius & Sandberg, 2018, above) and consider how this has changed the foundations of news and current affairs production in the community radio sector. To begin, I map the most significant changes to news and current affairs production in the Australian community radio sector over the past three decades, drawing on my own experiences as a community radio practitioner. I then draw on research literature to discuss the value, vulnerabilities and potential of local news and current affairs production, both in Australian and other comparable Western mediascapes. Thirdly, I highlight current trends in the production and syndication of news and current affairs programming in the Australian community radio sector, drawing on publicly available data and my own practitioner-based knowledge. There has been a lack of research into Australian community radio at a sector-wide level since the seminal work of Forde, Meadows and Foxwell-Norton (2002) and Meadows, Forde, Ewart and Foxwell (2007). Considering the peak body for Australian community broadcasting – the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) – is about to launch its Enhanced National News Project, this paper is timely and, while potentially raising as many questions as it gives answers, I aim to highlight potential avenues for future research in this area.

Digital disruption in the community radio space
Technological advances, not only in radio but also in computing and internet reach, have had a profound effect on the practices and products of local radio (Hood 2011, 295). This most certainly applies to community radio in Australia, and to the production of news and current affairs at these stations. Australia's community radio sector is one of the most well-established and longest running in the world, with a number of community radio stations having already commemorated 40 years of broadcasting. Schmidt and Cohen's 2010 announcement that 'connection technologies – tools that connect people to vast amounts of information and to one another – will make the twenty-first century all about surprises' (75) still holds true for community radio practitioners who have experienced that transition first-hand.

In this section, I draw on my own experiences as a community radio journalist and scholar with more than 28 years of practitioner experience and 15 years of researching in the field. My experiences are with metropolitan community radio stations, most significantly at 4ZZZ in Brisbane, which in the early 1990s was already a well-established and comparatively well-resourced station. 4ZZZ was established in December 1975 by activists, journalists and students at the University of Queensland as a direct response to media concentration and the oppressive political climate that was Queensland, Australia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The radio station is now considered an established cultural institution and an integral part of Brisbane's living cultural heritage (Anderson 2017).

It is not uncommon for research into local grassroots media to be authored by scholars who are practitioners themselves (Rodgers 2018, 74). This helps avoid the objectifying nature of much research, while acknowledging and synthesising the direct connections

between researcher and that which is being researched. Such reflexivity, being aware of one's own position in the context of researcher rather than denying (or even hiding) it, allows scholars to orchestrate fragments of their own awareness into narratives that resonate with audiences (Reed-Danahey 1997; Crawford 1996). As described by Berry and Patti (2015), 'reflexively conveying "subjective terminologies" of lived experience … invite(s) readers to … juxtapose them with the stories of their own lives' (266). I suspect readers who have worked/volunteered in community radio or as journalists more broadly since the rise of digital technologies will recognise some version of the following observations.

For the most part, equipment has become cheaper and more accessible. In the late 1980s/early 1990s, it was common to record and edit using reel-to-reel technology, which was not particularly portable. By the 1990s, 'my' station owned a Superscope cassette recorder, and tape-to-tape editing was a popular method that could be employed at home if one possessed a 'double tape deck'. The capacity to record telephone interviews was possible, but usually needed to be conducted at the radio station itself; despite the wide range of 'spy kits' on the market, none ever seemed to produce a telephone recording of broadcast quality. Even if a radio station had the luxury of a telephone recorder, the majority of interviews were still conducted face-to-face, and often live to air in the studio. Station budgets did not allow for an excessive number of phone calls. Volunteers were discouraged from placing interstate calls and (in the case of 4ZZZ at least) were expected to reimburse the station for international phone calls.

As pointed out in a Productivity Commission Research Paper on digital disruption in 2016, the types of digital technologies we now perceive as prolific generally allow replication at a low cost and are particularly useful for the value they add, 'by enhancing the gathering, processing, storage and transmission of data and delivery of information in digital form' (Productivity Commission 2016, 18). This is certainly the case for the hardware needed to perform as a community radio journalist; in the late 2010s, most tools of the trade are incorporated within a smartphone. With a few basic attachments, the smartphone can act as a voice recorder, phone recorder and editing suite and given that 89 percent of Australians now own one (according to Deloitte's 2018 Mobile Consumer Survey), there is a strong chance most community radio journalists are able to take advantage of these features.

The Free Software Movement, which promotes the universal freedom to study, distribute, create, and modify computer software (Free Software Foundation 2004–2018), has opened up access to an extraordinary suite of applications and other software that promote the production and distribution of independent media. Thanks to file-sharing apps, stories can be filed immediately, saving on transport time and costs (keeping in mind the voluntary nature of much community radio activity). Without doubt, the internet (and its associated infrastructure including cloud computing) is the most significant and important enabling technology, fundamental to any digital disruption narrative, because it 'enable(s) subsequent technological innovation' (Productivity Commission 2016, 18).

As a community radio journalist in the 1990s, I relied upon letter-writing and subscriptions to magazines and newsletters (hardcopy, of course) to stay informed about international and even interstate news, information and campaigns. From the additional perspective of an activist, the introduction of the internet felt as though 'the movement' had truly gone global. The Indymedia network, launched in 1999, introduced many of us

to the democratic potentials of the internet (for those with access) to link social–political movement allies around the world and create 'a different perspective on "globalisation" ' (Pimlott 2015, 38).

The now-normalised 24-hour news cycle produces a relentless volume of news and information that can be drawn upon to compile news and current affairs programming for community radio. Journalists can now subscribe to and receive media releases from a plethora of sources including government departments, not-for-profits, and marketing companies, through email and RSS feeds, as opposed to physically visiting their radio station to check fax machine offerings. International news is as accessible as that from the local council, and locating and contacting sources has never been easier. When we add to this the capacity of social media networks for both locating and disseminating ideas and information, it is a tall order to frame digital disruption as anything but a positive influence for community radio journalists. However, one might also point to a digital disruption of ethics. As Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas (2014, 152) point out, alternative uses of new information and communication technologies 'are not clearly divorced from their corporate originators … social justice and social movements' uses of platforms as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube remain(ing) within the corporate frameworks that underpin these platforms'. Outside the scope of this paper, further scholarly attention needs to be given to the ways community radio stations navigate such complexities.

Schmidt and Cohen (2010, 75) refer to the internet as 'the interconnected estate'. When I first began volunteering in community radio in the early 1990s it was common for stations to share content by posting cassettes using the Australia Post mail service or through personal connections. Programs such as *Women on the Line* from 3CR were received, previewed and rebroadcast, either in whole or in part, on a weekly basis. Stations can still pick up *Women on the Line*, sans postage costs and transit delays, through the CBAA's Community Radio Network (CRN) service (formally the Community Radio Satellite or ComRadSat, established in 1993). The syndication capacities of the CRN will be discussed in further detail below.

Like the rest of the media landscape, the digital capacities of the community broadcasting sector are advanced and constantly evolving, although surprisingly, 2 percent of stations still do not have internet access (Survey Matters 2016); the vast majority are connected via a fixed ADSL cable or fibre line. A significant 94 percent of community radio stations operate a website and an increasing number are using social media plug-ins and online payment systems (Survey Matters 2016). It is clear that digital disruption to all aspects of managing a radio station has been harnessed positively by the sector. Likewise, the ways in which community radio journalists approach their craft, from the research stage through to post-production and even dissemination, have changed beyond what my 21-year-old self would have recognised.

The value of local news and current affairs
To begin, it should be noted that 'local' information can be considered local geographically or culturally, for example relating to the interests of the town to which the station broadcasts, or to a certain group within that community such as prisoners, youth or queer audiences – described by Forde, Meadows & Foxwell-Norton (2002, 12) as 'communities of interest'. Similarly, Hess (in Carson et al. 2016, 140) uses the term 'geo-social' to 'describe the role of local news outlets, which have a solid link to a physical place', while occupying a wider social space with influences that are not geographically

bound, such as social movements. This paper takes a wide-brush stroke to the definition of 'local', incorporating both geographic and cultural conceptions of the term.

Counter to this, much of the recent literature that examines localism through a news and current affairs lens tends to have a geographic or spatial focus, drawing on the language of 'hyperlocalism'. While varied in meaning, 'hyperlocal media' generally refers to 'new and usually digitized forms of media oriented to "very local" areas, which furthermore are often seen as an alternative to more established local media outlets' (Rodgers 2018, 74). According to Meijer (2013), hyperlocal news has the potential to more accurately represent and facilitate reflections of daily life and neighbourhood reality.

While not new but certainly newly digitised, some community radio stations can also be classed as hyperlocal, depending on the audience and community interests they serve. It is acknowledged many community radio stations in Australia broadcast a wide range of information and music, and therefore can not be accurately labelled as hyperlocal in the purest sense of the term's definition. However, it is the local nature of community radio (i.e. the locally produced and presented on-air sound and content) that listeners identify as its most valuable asset. This is discussed in detail below. As such, it is relevant to include literature on hyperlocal media in this discussion.

Williams, Harte and Turner (2015, 689) conducted what they claim to be the largest content analysis of UK hyperlocal news content and survey of UK community news practitioners, to investigate assumptions about the fourth estate roles of hyperlocal media, which can also be applied to an Australian context. They found hyperlocal news is very community and locally oriented, publishing mostly locally sourced stories using local community groups and members of the public as sources. This form of community news also publishes a large volume of information about local government politics and generally chooses a local angle, even for stories of international or national significance. Indeed, Carson et al. (2016) found civic leaders favoured local media over its national, state and metro counterparts, because they were perceived as more effective in conveying local information and building social capital. Such a local focus has the potential to foster social cohesion by 'representing communities back to themselves' (Williams, Hart & Turner 2015, 689) and encouraging an awareness in audiences 'that they share common interests with many others in (their) communities' (Richards, Chia & Bowd 2011, 103).

Other literature, using the language of localism rather than hyperlocalism, presents similar findings. Local media are vital to the ways in which audiences come to understand their communities beyond their own life experiences (Friedland 1996). They offer critical, independent commentary on local issues, providing a forum 'for the expression of local views on issues of community concern' (Franklin 2006, xix). Localism is vital to a news-rich democratic society, where citizens should be 'well informed on local issues via an independent press that provides government accountability' (Scott, Gobetz & Chanslor 2008, 86). However, in her study of local commercial television news in Sydney, Australia, Muscat (2018, 231) warns this media has the potential to create 'conflicting attitudes among viewers as the news outlets generated mediated social capital through mechanisms of surveillance or exclusion that often do not resonate with their lived experiences'.

While this paper focuses on the Australian community radio sector, international comparisons can be made with other Western nations that have similar mediascapes. In the United States, localism is a recognised public policy goal of the Federal

Communications Commission (FCC) and a standard of performance to be met by broadcasters in order to meet licence requirements. Supporting this, a decision of the Supreme Court in 1994 (*Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. v. FCC*) affirmed the importance of local public affairs programming and local news as well as matters of local concern (Scott, Gobetz & Chanslor 2008). According to Scott, Gobetz and Chanslor (2008, 85), localism more generally 'requires a broadcaster to serve the interests covered by its transmission signal; if localism is successfully met, then the public interest is said to be served'.

Disruption of localism

Across the media sectors, major media companies are cutting costs due to declines in revenue – a significant consequence of digital disruption outside the scope of this journal article – and as a result, local news from such outlets risks being too uncritical, presenting a limited range of perspectives (Williams, Harte & Turner 2015). Trends towards consolidation of media ownership and the rise of social media have also led the withdrawal of local services in much of regional Australia (Richards, Chia and Bowd 2011). Likewise, in the UK, studies have found the 'on-going crisis in the UK news industry is endangering the "local-ness" … of local news', as outlets rely more on public relations and official sources in response to staff cuts and increased workloads (Williams, Harte & Turner 2015, 681).

Radio has experienced a disproportionate level of national consolidation compared to other publishing platforms (in the West at least) and has become adept at 'perfecting the art of seeming local' (Cooper 2007, 80). The 2012 Australian *Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation* found evidence that regional radio was substantially cutting back on newsgathering, 'leaving some communities poorly served for local news' (Finkelstein & Ricketson 2012, 60). This has significant impact in Australia, given the demographics of the country with a relatively small population spread across a large geographical mass, and a growing trend for media organisations to centralise their local news services in larger cities (Carson et al. 2016). Indeed, Richards, Chia and Bowd (2011, 103) found regional Australian audiences considered news from larger metropolitan media to be 'from a distant, wider world which is seldom relevant to their local situation'.

According to Williams, Harte and Turner (2015), news becomes less local in focus when the use of cheap news agency fillers becomes more prevalent. However, there is disagreement in the literature about the effects of network ownership on the quality and quantity of local news. Compaine (2004), for example, argues that large media corporations have more significant resources to invest in local news production, whereas others such as Corrigan (2003) warn that economies of scale result in stations becoming mere content providers that share the same news stories across affiliates. Scott, Gobetz and Chanslor (2008, 95) found that, compared to their larger chain-based station counterparts, small-chain television news departments broadcast more local news and locally produced video, and used local reporters more often in the field. This supports the same authors' claim that large corporate ownership of newsrooms detrimentally impacts on the capacity for local journalism to perform its vital democratic functions. Contrarily, Bowd (2011, 81) found that increased corporate ownership of regional newspapers in Australia did not necessarily correlate with 'a shift away from community "ownership" of a publication', especially from the perspective of journalists working at said papers.

As Carson et al. (2016, 133) point out, in an environment that is investing less in journalism as a whole, 'the contribution of local journalism to the functioning of a democratic society has taken on greater importance'. This makes it even more important for community, independent and alternative forms of local journalism, of which community radio is a part, to engage in local news and information production. Jurkowitz (2014) found that smaller, often not-for-profit news websites are the largest component of an expanding digital news sector in the United States. Williams, Harte and Turner (2015) demonstrate the capacity of hyperlocal community news to broaden the range of local news choices, as well as the growth in popularity of this form of news. Likewise, the community radio sector in Australia continues to grow. According to the 2019 *State of the Community Broadcasting Sector* report (CBAA 2019b) there are more community radio stations than ever (356 with permanent licences and 102 on temporary licences). Audience research in May 2018 revealed the highest national listening audiences to date, with 5.97 million unique community radio listeners in any given week (CBAA 2019b).

Local news, current affairs and syndication on Australian community radio
Localised information has always been 'an essential characteristic of community radio' that plays an important part in strengthening local identity and self-respect (Barlow 1997, 122). The most recent audience surveys claim 49 percent of community radio audiences listen for local information and news, while 34 percent say they tune in to hear local voices and personalities (CBAA 2019b). Community radio stations, especially in regional areas, are finding themselves more and more the only local voice in their area and it appears this is a remit stations take seriously – in 2015–2016, 72 percent of content broadcast on community radio was produced locally (Survey Matters 2017).

It is clear the provision of local information and news, immediately relevant to the everyday lives of listeners, is an important aspect of maintaining community culture (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell-Norton 2002, 37). In Australia, three-quarters of news and current affairs content broadcast on community radio is specifically relevant to the station's communities (94). Just over half (53.7 percent) of station managers interviewed for *Culture, Commitment, Community* said the provision of local news and information was their station's most important role. Anderson (2005) found that spoken-word program producers at one case-study station had internalised localism as a news value; while local content was not an overt focus of any of the participants in that study, it was implied in terms of discussion relating to 'community', and local stories featured prominently in sample broadcasts. There is a definite need for new research into the Australian community radio to revisit the value of localism from the perspective of volunteers and staff.

The CBAA fosters localism through its Codes of Practice, although not explicitly in reference to news and current affairs. In its guiding principles, the CBAA says stations should support and develop local arts and music and increase community involvement in broadcasting (CBAA 2008). Code Five pays special attention to the showcasing of Australian music, and indeed many stations also apply quotas to encourage locally produced music. This is significant because music programming dominates community broadcasting; according to the Survey Matters (2017), in 2015/2016, more than 75 percent of community radio broadcast hours were dedicated to music.

There is, however, no specific corresponding mention in the CBAA Codes of Practice (2008) of the need to showcase local news and current affairs, beyond providing

communications assistance during times of crisis. In fact, less than one-quarter of community radio broadcast time is dedicated to spoken-word content, with only three percent of broadcast time given to news and four percent to current affairs content (dropping to as low as two percent for regional and rural/remote stations) (Survey Matters 2017). This is curious, considering the majority of listeners surveyed said they tune in for local news and information. More encouraging is evidence that 70 percent of community radio current affairs is produced locally, however, the same cannot be said for news bulletins, 59 percent of which are sourced from external sources (Survey Matters 2017). It could be speculated that the demand for a regular 'professional-sounding' news bulletin service is beyond the capacities of the majority of volunteer-run, under-resourced stations.

There are a number of community sector–based content exchange (or syndication) services that community radio stations can contribute to and/or access programming from, aimed at overcoming challenges to producing original content. The CBAA (2019b) reports 45 percent of community radio stations have formal systems in place to exchange such content. According to Survey Matters (2017), the CRN is the most widely used syndication service, both for access to specific programs and as a sustaining service, especially overnight. On average, a community radio station will broadcast 13.6 hours of CRN content per week, although regional and rural/remote stations report higher usage (17.2 and 20.2 hours respectively).

The Community Radio Network offers over 100 programs to subscribing stations, including a regular news bulletin service (*National Radio News*) and a weekdays national current affairs program (*The Wire*). The CRN is accessible through both a live satellite feed and its Digital Delivery Network, and allows stations to:

> … augment … local content with specific programs of national relevance, build upon … programming with short inserts, or use the service as a fall-back when presenters can't make it or (stations) need something to broadcast overnight (CBAA 2019a).

The next most popular content exchange service is the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS), a satellite program feed available free to community radio stations that also subscribe to the CRN. The NIRS provides programming by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasters, including national coverage of current affairs and Indigenous issues. According to NIRS General Manager, Chris Graham, there are approximately 120 government-funded Indigenous community stations in Australia, all required to take a nationally syndicated Indigenous news service as a condition on their funding, and as NIRS is currently the only service available, it can be inferred that all of these stations access the service (Graham 2019, personal correspondence).

A range of news bulletin services are currently accessed by community radio stations, the most popular of which is *National Radio News* (*NRN*), provided through the CRN. Produced at Charles Sturt University, *NRN* broadcasts every day of the year, with 14 bulletins each weekday, 6 am to 7 pm, and seven bulletins a day on the weekends. According to CRN Operations Coordinator, Andrew McLellan (2019, personal correspondence) a minimum of 75 stations (27 percent of CBAA member stations) take the *NRN* service (at the time of writing), making it the most used news bulletin service in the sector. Air News (a for-profit company producing independent news bulletins for community and commercial radio audiences), utilised by 19 percent of stations, is the

next most popular service, followed by the BBC World Service and Macquarie News, owned by the Nine Entertainment Company (McLellan 2019, personal correspondence). That some stations choose commercial news networks is not surprising. Atton and Hamilton (2008) acknowledge community media often have 'little interest in political activism of any kind' and aim to promote 'more neutral "universal" values of local communities [such as] place, tradition, conservatism' (91). Likewise, Forde, Meadows and Foxwell-Norton (2002, 25) found the Australian community radio sector was 'most likely to place itself in the middle of the road politically', with station managers considered more conservative than the average community radio volunteer.

Where to now?
A previous iteration of the CBAA Codes of Practice (from 2002) included in its preamble a warning that, at the risk of failing to meet their licence requirements to represent and involve their community, stations should not rely too heavily on syndicated programming. This statement has been removed from the most recent (2008) version of the document. Despite this, and the increased capability to access syndicated programming, the amount of locally produced content broadcast on community radio in Australia has held steady around the 72–78 percent mark since 2002/2003. However, regional and rural/remote stations report slightly lower figures, both at 68 percent local content in 2015/2016 (Survey Matters 2017). In other words, regional, rural and remote community radio stations are relying on externally produced content for almost one-third of programming. This is compounded by previously cited figures that 59 percent of news bulletins on community radio stations come from external sources. As such, there is potential for concern when we consider the need for local news and current affairs in regional, rural and remote areas as they become increasingly neglected by mainstream media services.

The CBAA has received $2.8 million in federal government funding (over four years) to establish and manage the Enhanced National News Project. This initiative seeks technology-based solutions to the problems of news production for a national community radio sector. The project will focus on increased staffing and training, and foster networking between existing community radio newsrooms to improve the current NRN service and support localism in news bulletin services. According to the CBAA (2019c), the project 'will amplify the diverse voices, stories and perspectives of the Australian community and build capacity for local reporting, particularly journalists in regional and remote communities'.

This focus on capacity-building for newsrooms at regional, rural and remote community radio stations is welcomed, given the shortfalls in local content currently being produced at these stations. If the Enhanced National News Project succeeds, it will make it easier for local broadcasters to read pre-prepared news stories and build their own bulletins supplemented by syndicated materials, and it will potentially foster interest in producing more local news and current affairs. Local media make vital contributions to their communities, that more accurately facilitate reflections of everyday life and represent realities beyond one's own life experiences. As such, community radio has the potential to foster social cohesion. As the Enhanced National News Project is rolled out, there is definite potential to extend current research into local regional media (including community radio) as social capital (see for example Richards, Chia & Bowd 2011).

At the time of writing, there is no publicly available information about the specific types of programming taken up by particular stations, making it difficult to comment on the

volume of news and current affairs programming that is sourced from syndication services and broadcast on community radio in Australia. Further research is also needed to map the types of content being accessed through syndicated services. Additionally, qualitative in-depth research could enrich this data by exploring the reasons why stations do or do not produce their own local news and current affairs, keeping in mind that local news and information are key reasons for audiences to tune in to community radio stations. The question 'How can a national service promote localised news coverage?' would sit well against the rollout of the Enhanced National News Project.

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