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Digital disruption in the Australian community radio sector: Introduction

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Community broadcasting is largely made up of 'traditional' and 'legacy' media platforms that have not substantially changed in Australia since their emergence in the 1970s. That is, they remain predominantly broadcast services via AM and FM frequencies. However, there has been a massive growth in digital media and communication technologies—much of which has been successfully integrated into community radio content delivery and promotion, to complement traditional modes of broadcasting. The Australian community broadcasting sector, dominated by radio, has often led the way in experimenting with innovative, digital technology that delivers time-shifted content to a mobile audience, although this has received little scholarly attention. The increasing reach, and cost, of digital-based content delivery does pose significant disruption to community broadcasting—both positive and negative.

This duality is most recently reflected in a national review undertaken by regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The Issues Paper and subsequent public consultation explores 'The future of delivery of radio services in Australia' (2019). The latest Community Radio Listener Survey conducted by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) and McNair yellowSquares establishes the ongoing strength of radio, showing 5.9 million people listening for an average of 15.7 per week, primarily through AM and FM services (CBAA & McNair yellowSquares 2019). Additionally, the ACMA Issues Paper explores the impact of online streaming and DAB delivery on radio industry practice, asking for feedback on three possible scenarios for services - to make greater use of FM technology; to progressively migrate to digital radio; or to online streaming. While the consultation outcomes are yet to be published, submissions overwhelmingly highlight the ongoing importance of AM/FM for affordability, accessibility and reliability, central to the aims of the sector. Amidst the celebratory rhetoric of internet access and media democracy, traditional broadcasting bridges an enduring digital divide. This is especially evident in regional and remote areas where AM/FM remains the primary means of receiving information. Indeed, the First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) response to ACMA's Issues Paper clearly demonstrates the significance of First Nations radio for social cohesion, language preservation, emergency weather events, regional journalism, and regional and remote employment opportunities.

The papers presented in this issue ask how the growing influence of digital technology is disrupting community radio. The ACMA review of radio delivery is a timely example, which highlights the complex relationship between digital development and community

broadcasting, with radio stations embracing online opportunities for community engagement and sharing content while equally campaigning for the retention and expansion of traditional platforms.

Community radio is valued for its capacity to provide democratic participation, media access and a voice to those underrepresented in mainstream media spaces. The logic of the digital brings with it imperatives for efficiency, speed and cost-effectiveness—how do these logics compare with the ongoing central intentions of community radio practice? Are digital platforms compatible with the democratic and participatory intentions of the community broadcasting sector?

Simultaneously, digital technologies have opened up new spaces for community involvement in media production and delivery. The rise of the podcast is one such example. What points of difference are community radio able to present to listeners and producers alike, in order to justify their ongoing existence? In a ‘fake news’, ‘post-truth’ media environment, how can community radio assert their authenticity, independence and value within the digital media environment? Speed and acceleration are also at the heart of the digital revolution—what impact do they have on the time required to make quality community radio content?

Arguably, the increasing digitisation of the community broadcasting sector directly correlates to its escalating commodification. What challenges does this present in relation to marginalised communities that the sector is specifically supposed to service? And how does it complicate community radio’s central function of promoting democratic participation? Concurrently, community broadcasting helps shape digital technologies, utilising them for the promotion and distribution of content that can reach a broader audience and effect greater social change.

At the 2018 Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBA) national conference, an academic research workshop brought together scholars and practitioners attempting to understand how digital technologies disrupt community radio, as well as those working with new methods or related fields that may inform future research in the sector. Contributions provided a critical perspective on the topic and encouraged research that challenges whether the digitisation of technology within the community radio space untethers it from its democratic, low-cost intentions, or whether digital disruption can only lead to the increased commodification of communication. Our aim was to deeply consider the research agenda related to community broadcasting, including the question of how research may be of direct benefit to the sector.

The workshop provided a timely review of community radio research while uncovering new frontiers in the field. It also offered an opportunity for the research community to engage with a sector that is increasingly swamped by new ‘community’ based digital media initiatives. Moreover, an increasingly digital landscape suggests there are new untapped opportunities to disseminate community radio content (from podcasts to social media promotion), yet these opportunities require that specific methods be identified and evaluated.

This special edition includes articles developed from four of the six papers originally presented at the 2018 workshop. It is positive to note that, while framed as an academic ‘break-out’ group, the session was well-attended with an audience predominantly comprised of community radio practitioners. Likewise, the panel members all shared a

connection to community radio, either as volunteers and/or staff in the sector. As pointed out by Bedford in this volume, personal experience is an increasingly recognised addition to the study of music, politics and culture, one that values the voices of direct involvement. Like Chris Atton (2015), we acknowledge the important role of researcher as active participant and seek to add to a growing body of work that prioritises reflexive engagement through direct involvement.

For the purposes of the workshop we defined digital disruption broadly to include: the advent of digital technologies; transformation of the means of content production and distribution; innovation outcomes; and dramatic increase in digital infrastructure. The selection of articles, presented in this special edition, testifies to the wide scope afforded by such an approach.

To begin this special edition, Juliet Fox's essay, 'Commodified communication: Digital compatibility challenges for community broadcasting', presents a theoretical interrogation of how community radio is impacted by the growing spread of digital logic—one that prioritises speed and efficiency, and harnesses digital technologies in the pursuit of profit and expansion. She asks the question 'is digital logic compatible with the democratic aims of community broadcasting?'.

Within a capitalist framework, digital disruption is reinterpreted as a great force for democratisation; one that fosters participation but also opens up markets and audiences. Fox reminds us to also consider the commercial consequences of digital disruption. She outlines a series of themes that illuminate how for-profit digital media services are emerging at the expense of democratic media participation.

Fox points out the central role played by community radio in the project of media democratisation, and particularly in the context of the Australian community broadcasting sector. There is contemporary failure of the mass media to adequately perform their democratic functions and, as such, it is necessary for the community radio sector to engage closely with the nexus of media, digitisation and democracy.

Fox calls on future research to critically engage with concerns around media democratisation and digital logics. She argues that uncritical engagement with digital technologies has the potential to produce undemocratic consequences, and more attention needs to be paid to the impact of digital technologies on the foundational democratic intentions of the Australian community broadcasting sector.

The next three contributions take a case study approach to discuss the effects of digital disruption on specific aspects of community broadcasting. To begin, Heather Anderson discusses syndication in 'The digital disruption of news and current affairs in the community broadcasting sector: An Australian perspective'. This paper focuses on the increased opportunities to disseminate news and current affairs content fostered by digital technologies.

Anderson outlines the significant changes in technologies that support the production of news and current affairs with a particular focus on syndication technologies. Using publicly available data published through the Australian community broadcasting sector, she examines patterns of uptake for syndicated news and current affairs across metropolitan, suburban, regional and rural community radio stations.

This article draws our attention to the fact that local content is still a primary reason for audiences to tune into the community radio, and as such, future moves towards increased syndication of news and current affairs in the sector should foster local contribution and collaboration. With the upcoming launch of the CBAA's Enhanced National News Project, Anderson highlights the need for further research to explore how a national service can promote and enhance localised news coverage.

Next, Charlotte Bedford discusses the changing ways in which broadcasters engage with audiences. In 'Rethinking the "community" function of community radio online—an aging punk perspective', Bedford points out that, while the strengths of community radio have traditionally been primarily communal in nature, digital disruptions to the community radio landscape have the potential to transform radio making and listening practices to become more individualised and dispersed.

While all four (lead) authors in this volume hold joint academic-practitioner identities, Bedford delves most deeply into autoethnographic approaches, to examine the impact of digital technologies on her own radio involvement. These reflections provide the basis for a case study of a small sub-metro weekly alternative music program, considered over an eight-year period. She highlights the growth of a social media audience and the evolution of an online community based on shared musical tastes and political values.

Ultimately, Bedford argues, while the primary function of community radio is to provide opportunities for local participation in its production, as broadcasting extends online so does its potential to build and sustain communities internationally. It is important for practitioners and researchers alike to consider the processes of managing this online space to best foster dialogue that can act as an extension of traditional community broadcasting ethics and programming.

Finally, 'Media participation by people with disability and the relevance of Australian community broadcasting in the digital era', by Kim Stewart, Christina Spurgeon and Niki Edwards, directs our focus towards the effects of digital disruption as experienced by people living with disability; who are often rendered invisible in media representations and continue to experience a digital divide. Digital media generally carries the reputation of a participatory medium, however, barriers such as technological inaccessibility, social attitudes and cost still exist, compounded by the rapid pace of technological change, that requires assistive technologies be regularly upgraded.

Stewart, Spurgeon and Edwards suggest the community-building and collaborative nature of community radio is well matched to the interests and needs of people with disability who want to produce their own media. However, they also make it clear that community radio can increase its relevance in the digital era by continuing to critically interrogate and improve its accessibility. While the sector has a positive history of affording meaningful opportunities for media participation to people with disability, there is scope for more to be done.

This article emphasises the positive transformations that can occur for people with disability through increased participation and access to the physical spaces of community broadcasting. The authors identify a range of initiatives and strategies that demonstrate how people with disability are embracing a meaningful digital presence through their involvement in community radio.

This 3CMedia Special Edition provides a range of articles considering the effects of digital disruption on community radio from a variety of perspectives. Fox provides us with a theoretical lens through which we can consider its broader context, while Anderson, Bedford and Stewart *et al* highlight specific examples of Australian community radio practice. While all emphasise the integral role played by the community radio sector in promoting media democracy and fostering media participation, this collection demonstrates the multifarious ways in which democratic communications can manifest (and potentially be disrupted), be it through the production of local news and current affairs, niche music programming or community engagement with marginalised people.

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