

Community Participation In The Development Of Digital Radio - The Australian Experience

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Background

This paper is motivated by an ARC-funded Linkage with Industry project that is interested in:

- The intersection of community arts and community media
- Participatory arts and media practices, and their organisational settings
- The means and methods used by community arts and media to facilitate the development of 'storytelling' capacities in the Australian population
- The uses and values of stories facilitated by community arts and media.

Underlying assumptions

Community broadcasting is an important and unique institution in the Australian mediascape because it facilitates:

- 'bottom up' solutions to problems of managing and operating broadcast spectrum, infrastructure and services, and
- continuous development of media practices, services and technologies that are inclusive, and foster social participation, as well as self- and community representation.

These features distinguish community broadcasting from other commercial, public service and social network media.

Digital Radio

Community-based access to broadcasting spectrum comes under pressure from a variety of sources, including:

- growth of spectrum markets that generate much-needed revenues for governments
- public policy interrogation of the 'public benefits' of allowing community-based, not-for profit broadcasting licensees to occupy valuable spectrum (e.g. spectrum discussion paper released as part of the Convergence Review)
- resource limits of the community broadcasting sector itself.

The community broadcasting sector is nonetheless participating in the development of digital radio services.

Our paper

- Reviews the development of digital community radio
- Describes services at the launch of digital community radio in April/ May 2011
- Assesses the impact of market, policy and resource constraints on the early development of services
- Provides a baseline study for future review and evaluation of the impact of community broadcasting (and 'bottom up' and inclusive participatory influences enabled by it) on digital radio and the larger fields of Australian media, culture, economy and society.

Development of digital community radio

The framework for digital radio is a test site for examining how the conditions of new platforms, including the ways in which technologies are regulated and designed, can restrict and encourage, shape and constrain, participation in innovation.

Community participation in digital radio is presently limited to:

- Metropolitan-wide services
- Who share 2/9 of available digital radio capacity
- But do not share in the ownership of multiplex infrastructure.

In a number of locations spectrum allocated to digital community radio services does not meet the accepted base for radio or CD audio.

Digital community radio services

Table 1

	Number of multiplex available*	Number of stations allocated digital spectrum	Number of digital services on-air	Service type		
				Digital simulcast of existing service	New digital service	New program blocks in digital simulcast of existing service
Adelaide	1	6	6	4	2	
Brisbane	2	7	6	1	2	3
Melbourne	2	9	9	8	1	
Sydney	2	8	8	6	1	1
Perth	1	7	7	5	1	1
Total		37	36	24	7	5

Community Digital Radio Services in Australia (launched April-May 2011)

* Current policy states that designated community radio stations have to share 2/9 of all the multiplex capacity available

Sources for Tables 1, 2 and 3:

1. <http://digital.radius.org.au>
2. Web pages of respective stations
3. Personal communications with staff members of CBAA
4. Personal communications with staff members of respective stations

Digital community radio services

Table 2

New channel on the air		Description	Category
Sydney	Inspire Digital	Content distribution network collaborated by: 2CBA - Hope 103.2 of Sydney 4FRB - 95Five of Brisbane 5RAM - Life FM of Adelaide	Christian
Adelaide	Inspire Digital		Christian
Brisbane	Inspire Digital		Christian
Brisbane	4BI Switch Digital	New service of Switch 1197 AM focus on dance music, electro and other sub-genres.	Youth
Melbourne	IRIS Vision Australia	Targeted at under 40 female audience. Lifestyle programs and with a younger music mix.	RPH
Adelaide	IRIS 5RPH Adelaide	Incorporated content from 3RPH in Melbourne.	RPH
Perth	6SON Sonshine Digital	New service based upon Christian teachings sourced from local churches.	Christian

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Digital community radio services

Table 2 (cont.)

Hybrid services on the air: break away from simulcast, new programme blocks			
Perth	Curtin DiGital	Dedicated a portion of programme time to the harder-edged artists from the era of 60's rock, folk-rock, blues and soul, now rarely heard on mainstream radio stations.	Music
Brisbane	4EB Global	Selection of time-shifted blocks from existing analogue service and some new non-English language programmes.	Multicultural
Brisbane	Zed Digital	Non-mainstream music during the day and a hybrid of new programmes and existing analogue programmes at after hours.	Music
Brisbane	4MBS Light Classics	Lighter classical, fine music & jazz. Live programming only between 6am-noon. "Breakfast"- 6am-9am will be simulcast through 4MBS.	Music
Sydney	2SER Digital	New music service on Sundays, simulcast on Mondays through Saturdays.	Music

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Table 3

Melbourne	3MBS Fine Music	Digital broadcasting effectively creates a second 3MBS radio station, opportunity to diversify programming in the future.	Music
Melbourne	Light Digital	New channel to be launched in Dec 2011. Light FM is set up aiming at communicate Christian hope to people in Melbourne.	Christian
Sydney	2000 FM	A hybrid service of the Multicultural Community Radio Association (MCRA). The digital channel will feature new programs based on a more youthful and regionalised program schedule.	Multicultural
Melbourne	SYN Youth Radio	SYN will begin adding new digital-only programs to the airwaves in conjunction with a simulcast of their analogue broadcast on 90.7FM.	Youth

Community Digital Radio Services in Australia to be Launched

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Impact of market, policy, technology and resource constraints on service development

Logistics of digital:

- Generated considerable anxiety within the sector about the capacity to develop new services given technical and resource constraints, and new digital policy/regulatory framework
- Favoured simulcasting of existing services
- Favoured an evolutionary approach to new service development
- Favoured sub-sector collaboration in new service development
- Exacerbated tensions arising from uneven development of digital community broadcasting infrastructure and services
- Encouraged focus on digital content not just carriage, and whole-of-sector approach to developing web-based tools that can benefit the whole sector
- Encouraged increased reliance on pre-produced content and increased production and post-production capacity.

Conclusion

Although it enabled participation, the policy and regulatory context at the time that community digital radio services launched was not conducive to service innovation.

Nonetheless, community broadcasters have taken the opportunity of digital spectrum allocation to:

- establish new community-based services, and with more to evolve from existing analogue services
- foster new relationships and a greater level of information exchange and ideas within the sector. E.g. frequent meetings of station managers
- Experiment with content-centred strategies for facilitating participation in services with considerable support for this kind of activity for the first time in the sector's history.

Conclusion (cont.)

Further research is needed to consider:

- the long term re-positioning of community broadcasting as community digital media, and how whole-of-sector initiatives might assist
- the benefits of community digital media, and how community-based and controlled broadcasting spectrum contributes to the population-wide distribution of opportunities for acquiring the multi-literacies of social participation and representation
- the distinctive methods of collaboration and facilitation that are developed in community media in the processes of building economic and social assets in organisational, informational and cultural forms.

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