

Re-imagining public journalism for community radio news-gathering

Abstract

This paper explores the use of public journalism within a community radio news context. It argues that the central tenets of the public journalism movement can help to inform a news gathering and production approach tailored to the needs of community media. Discussions around community radio are framed using Carpentier et al's model of alternative media as rhizome in order to take into account the diverse and specific nature of individual stations. This paper examines a particular case of public journalism used within the *The Wire*, a national, daily current affairs program broadcast on community radio. Public journalism was employed throughout the story production process in order to modernise and refine public journalism methods to better meet the needs of community radio stations and their audiences.

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Introduction

Public journalism emerged in the 1990s as a response to disengagement between journalists and the publics they served. Newspaper editor and one of the fathers of public journalism, Davis "Buzz" Merritt, suggests that the movement is about looking for ways that journalism can do more than simply tell the news. He argues that journalism should play an integral role in "reinvigorating public life by re-engaging people in it" (Merritt, 1995, p. 263). Key to this is recognising the audience as citizens, active participants in the democratic process, as opposed to 'listeners', 'readers' or 'viewers': passive recipients of information (Rosen, 2000, p. 680). Public journalism enjoyed a brief period of popularity but the high investment, in terms of money, time and manpower was, more generally, not matched by quick and strong results (Romano, 2010b). The benefits however, when the projects were continued to completion, were impressive. Levels of audience engagement were higher and community relationships were stronger (Davidson, 2010; Sirriani and Friedland, 2001). Journalists formed closer bonds with their communities and prepared reports of sensitivity and depth on the issues facing these communities (Romano, 2010a). Despite the lack of uptake on a broader scale, the promising results have inspired many attempts to adapt public journalism for the modern ages. Online blogs have emerged prominently within academic literature as the Heir Apparent (Haas, 2005; Nip, 2006, 2010), but in an Australian context, a particular adaptation of public journalism might prove useful in guiding attempts towards the enhancement of such values in the community media sector.

Such a development would seem particularly timely in the Australian media when the community radio sector in Australia is one of few media sectors that is steadily growing. At a time when newspaper readership is in decline and the online medium struggles to attract advertising and to overcome the paywalling of relevant material, community radio stations continue to open and the sector reaches more people. Such an expansion might be explained, in part, through the findings of listener surveys indicating that audiences appreciate the local focus and personal approach of community radio.

Theoretical framework

Community radio as rhizome

This paper seeks to frame the discussion on the potential relationship between public journalism and community media through the use of the concept of the rhizome. The rhizome, is a construction suggested by alternative media scholars Carpentier, Cammearts and Bailey (2008) in their

seminal text, *Understanding Alternative Media*. This concept is an extension of Deleuze and Guattari's 1987 metaphor which juxtaposes arborescent thinking, linear and hierarchical, with rhizomatic thinking which is chaotic, non-linear and variable. The rhizome, as a metaphorical approach to community radio, emphasises connections and relationships; "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 7). Framing community radio as rhizome acknowledges the diversity of the sector and the complex relationships between stations, their listeners and the broader community. This approach overcomes attempts to define community radio using the dichotomous framework of the 'mainstream vs alternative' debate as well as discussions based on funding models (Cammaerts, 2009). Community radio as rhizome highlights three aspects of the medium: interconnectedness, fluidity and alternative media's role as a meeting place for civil society (Carpentier et al., 2008). While these aspects of community radio are explored using many different terminologies, the literature surrounding community radio largely supports the rhizome construct (Daniels, 2012; Forde, 2011; Lowrey et al, 2008, Van Vuuren, 2001). This paper argues that community radio as rhizome supports a re-imagining of public journalism to suit the needs of community radio news.

The interconnected nature of community radio is a key aspect of the rhizome metaphor. The role of community media acting as a support network and also connecting various aspects of communities aligns with much of the existing literature. A common thread throughout is that communities themselves rely on these support networks and connections to function effectively. Potapchuk and Crocker (1999) describe "bridge-building organisations" like community radio stations as essential to maintaining civic capital and collective collaboration. Lowrey, Brozana and Mackay even go so far as to argue that community organisations themselves can support the construction of their communities. They note that "structure and location are not community in and of themselves, but rather they encourage and intensify the process of community... Community news media, then, are media capable of fostering the process of community" (2008, p. 288). Community media acting in this capacity has been briefly examined in an extensive survey of community radio listeners in Australia. One of the key reasons that listeners tune in was that "community media quite simply gave them a sense of being part of the community" (Forde, 2011, p. 110). It is widely accepted in the literature that community media plays an essential role in connecting, and even constructing, communities and therefore could be considered rhizomatic.

Closely related to the interconnected nature of community radio is the fluidity of its approaches to broadcasting. Fluidity refers to the flexibility and contingency embraced by community broadcasting, a stark contrast to

the rigid practices of mainstream or commercial media (Carpentier et al., 2008). Examples of fluidity are ubiquitous within community radio; alternative media explore alternative approaches to most aspects of day-to-day operations - funding, programming, presenters, and so on, tailored to suit the specific needs of the stations' specific audiences. Carpentier et al note that this aspect of community radio as rhizome also recognises "both the diversity of the media landscape and specificity of the different media organizations within this media landscape" (2003, p. 51). An example of this can be seen in Van Vuuren's case study research at a community radio in South East Queensland, she observed that:

Weather reports are provided by local professional fishermen; a local taxi company gives traffic reports; a market report comes from the Brisbane-based wholesale fruit and vegetable market; and the station broadcasts a job search program with the assistance of employment agencies (2001, p. 15).

This illustrates the specificity of the station's programming and also the flexible and resourceful nature of the approach to broadcasting. The fluid and interconnected nature of community radio programming however is not limited to weather reports and public service announcements. The type of news and current affairs coverage broadly adapts a fluid approach to news in line with the theoretical concept of the rhizome. In this regard, Forde, Meadows and Foxwell note that "the community radio sector is fulfilling a broad but largely unacknowledged role in the Australian mediascape, particularly as a source of local content" (2002, p. 3). In sourcing suitable content for news, community journalists acknowledge that what is news to the listeners of Joy FM in Melbourne may not be news to those tuning in to 8CCC in Alice Springs. The provision of local content presents yet another example of the fluidity of the medium, with community radio stations adapting news content to serve their audiences.

The final aspect of exploring community radio as rhizome is the role of alternative media as a meeting place for civil society. Carpentier et al elaborate on this point by noting that alternative media acts as a "crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate" which in turn "deepens democracy by linking diverse democratic struggles" (2008, p. 31). In 2002, prolific community radio researchers Forde, Meadows and Foxwell conducted a major study of the community radio sector and found that "diversity of news information and delivery of alternative news" were not among the list of broadcasters' priorities. Their research also revealed that "one-fifth of the sector did not provide any form of local news service at all" (Forde et al., 2002, p. 83). As

providing news, and particularly current affairs, coverage is a resource-intensive endeavour, many stations subscribe to syndicated national news services. In the same study, Forde et al interviewed focus groups who subscribed to syndicated news services, a regional Victorian station found such “programs to be inappropriate to their local area... because of the different ‘culture’ of the urban and regional communities” (2002, p. 86). A more recent study, also conducted by Forde (2010), found that only one quarter of Australian community radio stations produced their own news. This lack of emphasis on news fails to create a meeting place for democratic, civil discussions to take place. Sirianni and Friedland also note this “perceived failure of the press to constitute a public sphere in which citizens could understand and engage productively with public problems” (2001, p. 186). The importance of this role is explained by Potapchuk and Crocker who describe the media as “the lens through which public will is formed” as audiences are influenced by what they hear and see (1999, p. 191). It is this aspect of community media as rhizome that best reinforces the need for a re-imagining of the traditional approaches to news-gathering within community media as, currently, the news is failing to engage with its audience and create a meeting place for civil discussions.

The potential of public journalism

Re-thinking the prevailing approaches to journalism within community radio presents an opportunity to support and expand on this role as a meeting place. This paper argues that public journalism could be a more appropriate avenue for community radio news than more common approaches. Pioneering advocate for Australian public journalism, Cratis Hippocrates, explains the approach as “designed to give the community an opportunity to have a voice on an issue and to have an issue completely discussed, in a user-friendly manner, with a range of points of view represented” (1999, p. 66). A journalism that facilitates these kinds of deliberative discussions within communities would further reinforce community radio as rhizome. This paper advocates for re-imagining the tenets of public journalism to better suit community radio as rhizome and therefore better serve the listeners of community radio stations.

Public journalism was introduced by media practitioners and scholars in the 1990s. Categorized by Romano (2010b) as a form of “deliberative journalism”, public journalism differs from traditional journalism through its approaches to sourcing and reporting news. It relies on relationships with the community to ascertain what is important to them and, therefore, what is news as opposed to the ‘news of the day’ dictated by other media outlets and major government and commercial organisations. As simple as it seems,

public journalism has so far struggled to be fully integrated into newsrooms on a permanent basis. This paper argues that the reason for this is the lack of guidelines that explain the common characteristics of public journalism and how these characteristics can be practically applied. As Davidson points out “It is not often clear, however, how the ideals of public journalism should be translated into newsroom practices... this has probably been part of the reason for the failure of public journalism to take greater hold within the mainstream” (2010, p. 35). Charity (1995) outlines a number of practical approaches in a ‘handbook-style’ publication, *Doing Public Journalism*, however his focus is predominantly on newspapers and is increasingly dated. Nonetheless, the text provides a useful foundation from which to base public journalism projects and informed the early stages of this research.

While there have been significant amounts of research and experiments conducted in the USA, there have been only limited encounters with public journalism in Australia, particularly in a community radio context. One such experiment in public journalism was conducted at a major metropolitan newspaper, *The Courier Mail*. Romano noted that several journalists “expressed confusion about how to serve an identifiable ‘community’ through civic journalism while working for a publication that served many disparate communities across the state” (2010b, p. 72). This potentially identifies an advantage community radio stations could have over other media as a means of public journalism; the participatory nature of these stations means that they are an important part of the community they serve. This potential advantages has however, been largely unexplored. When referring to community journalism within the broadcasting industry, Daniels (2012, p. 188) notes that:

“The area is under-researched compared to many other aspects of journalism and mass communication, there is considerable opportunity here for scholars to develop and test new approaches, to advance existing theories or suggest new concepts, and also to examine issues that have been overlooked for decades”.

By exploring the potential applications of public journalism within a community radio newsroom, this research aimed to address these knowledge gaps.

When returning to the concept of alternative media as a rhizome of the community, the use of public journalism in community radio presents ample opportunities to strengthen ties between the station, the journalists and their listeners. Community radio already has a distinct advantage in this respect as the stations are already an intrinsic part of their communities. Forde, Foxwell

and Meadows support this sentiment, explaining that news and current affairs coverage within the sector already relies “heavily on local meetings, conversations, regular contacts, and local newspapers for story ideas” (2003, p. 332). By encouraging community radio journalists to extend their practice to engage more deeply with their listeners and the local news, all aspects of the station’s programming can become deeply embedded in the community. This in turn has the potential to strengthen community radio’s rhizomatic presence and the community as a whole. As influential public journalism author Jay Rosen explains, “the power of the press thus empowers others besides the press” (1995, p. 160).

Case study

The applications of public journalism in a community radio newsroom setting were tested using a case study approach. This case study employed a constructivist, phenomenologically-driven methodology in order to examine existing practices within *The Wire*’s newsroom and incorporate public journalism. Within this case study, auto-ethnography and reflective practice were employed to collect data which was then analysed using phenomenological and thematic analyses. This study was an example of practice-based research using journalism as creative practice. Employing this research paradigm is an effective way of exploring an aspect of journalistic theory through the development of a creative work, in this case a piece of radio journalism, and reflections on the process (Lindgren and Phillips, 2011). The case study was undertaken using the rhizome metaphor as a framing device. This helped to maintain perspective on the role of community radio and what using public journalism aimed to achieve.

The Wire is a national news and current affairs program broadcast daily on community radio around Australia. The program is created by three consortium stations: 2SER in Sydney, Radio Adelaide and 4EB in Brisbane. The program recently secured funding to include paid content from contributor stations RTR FM in Perth, Joy FM in Melbourne and the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) based in Alice Springs. With a potential listener base of over one million people, the program is available to over 200 stations via satellite through the CAAMA radio network, the Community Radio Network and the Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM) Network. The program is produced out of the consortium newsrooms, each with a producer and a team of volunteers. *The Wire* broadcasts from Monday to Friday: the Sydney newsroom produces the program on Monday and Tuesday, Adelaide on Wednesday and Thursday,

and Brisbane on Friday. The content of each program is guided by an editorial policy that includes:

- Contributing new and useful information, analysis and comment, adding to public awareness and understanding of important issues,
- Giving particular attention to the voices of women, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, people on low incomes and others under-represented in social decision-making,
- Drawing ideas and information as far as possible from communities, organisations, and individuals directly involved in social action or directly affected by policies, decisions or proposals (2015).

Of the nine editorial guidelines, these points pertained most directly to the research questions at hand. As a current affairs program, *The Wire* has more scope to include stories that are not necessarily linked to the news of the day, but that still hold significance for the community of listeners. In addition, the researcher worked with the program for over four years and, as the Brisbane producer, had an in-depth understanding of what content was appropriate. Lindgren and Phillips argue that radio production is “a practical skill based on experience, rather than a process informed by academic methods and rigour” (Lindgren and Phillips, 2011, p. 77). As such, the case study’s primary focus was practical: creating audience-appropriate content fit for broadcast. This focus ensured that the aspects of public journalism that were incorporated into production were tested in a real-world setting.

The experiment aimed to produce a current affairs radio package that incorporated tenets of public journalism while still adhering to the editorial guidelines of *The Wire* and principles of community radio broadly as outlined by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2008). In terms of logistical guidelines, stories on *The Wire* are generally between three and seven minutes in duration and contain at least two interview talent. In accordance with these guidelines and the editorial policy, a package was produced for broadcast. Three interviews were conducted around the issue of breast cancer screening rates in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, a topic identified by the local community as one of importance to them. As a current affairs story, the topic was not linked to the news of the day and was created as a longer, more narrative-focussed package and included mobilising information aimed at assisting listeners in similar situations. In terms of what was practically created, “Breast cancer screening in multicultural women” is a six minute current affairs story in package format. The story featured excerpts from the three interviews conducted and was pre-recorded for broadcast on Friday, June 6, 2014 on *The Wire*. The story was also uploaded to www.thewire.org.au.

Discussion

The most significant finding of the research was public journalism's implications for news gathering in a community radio setting. Public listening was identified as a defining characteristic of public journalism and is widely discussed within the literature (Campbell, 2007; Charity, 1995; Rosen, 1995). It was found that employing public listening in the news-gathering phase of production was an effective way of engaging with listeners. Public listening goes deeper than jotting down or recording the answers to simplistic, time-poor questions prevalent in the news gathering approaches of traditional journalism. Public listening is about building meaningful connections within the community to gain trust and elicit the real concerns of the people. It relies on citizens to identify important issues and help set the agenda for what stories and issues should be covered. A powerful tool for journalists, actively listening to the community to set the news agenda and foster deep engagement between the media and its audience ensures a more concrete investment from the audience in their news.

Academically, public listening presents nothing but opportunities for a community radio newsroom. Practically however there are two potentially problematic issues with an approach that focuses on public listening. The first is tapping into public conversations themselves and the second is the amount of time it takes to meaningfully engage with these conversations. The first potential barrier is something that public journalism practitioners have been grappling with since the beginning of the movement. As Nip (2010, p. 144) explains, public listening often "placed journalists in the position of wandering around the streets and talking to people haphazardly". This challenge has the potential to be alleviated by technology however this removes the personal aspect, arguably a primary focus of public listening. The second barrier refers to the time taken to conduct public listening. Charity (1995, 21) suggests "patience, empathy and a carefully structured set of questions" are the key to optimising the public listening process. Initially, this would be a steep learning curve for journalists accustomed to eliciting just the who, what, where, when and how from its talent. An interview incorporating thorough public listening can require up to four hours of preparation for every hour of conversation (Sirrianni and Friedland, 2001), a daunting prospect for those on deadline. In an effort to overcome these barriers, and returning to the concept of community radio as rhizome through exploring the interconnected nature of community radio stations and their listeners, the initial phase of the case study involved exploring ways to engage with the community in a meaningful yet practical way. In accordance with traditional approaches to public journalism, a community meeting was

the source of inspiration for the story. This form of public listening is widely regarded as best practice within the public journalism literature (Campbell, 2007; Charity, 1995; Merrill et al, 2001; Rosen, 1995). As it was not feasible to gather a representative sample of *The Wire's* national audience within the course of everyday program production, the focus of this project was segmented to focus on female listeners of producer station 4EB. 4EB regularly holds a Women's Luncheon where female broadcasters and members of the community gather to discuss topical issues. *The Wire* has no budget to facilitate these kinds of community forums, so the research made use of 4EB's existing program. The forum discussed a range of issues relevant to broadcasters and the larger community. A topic that arose at the luncheon was breast cancer screening rates in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, a major demographic of 4EB as a multi-lingual broadcaster. This topic was generated by the community and discussed at length by those present. Some broadcasters opted to run public service announcements during their programs and others pledged to use their relationships with the language groups to facilitate ongoing conversations with support services. It was unanimously regarded as an important issue that community radio, particularly 4EB as an ethnic broadcaster, could play a major role in influencing. Further research into the topic was conducted following the community forum and initial fact-finding discussions with potential interviewees were conducted. While the topic of the story had emerged quite organically from the community, research revealed it was also an issue of broader significance nationally which made it an appropriate story for *The Wire's* broader audience.

The approach to public listening used in this project, while valuable, would by no means be a practical way of sourcing story ideas every news day. This particular approach to public listening was more reminiscent of the 'town hall' style public forums. The tight deadline of each show and the fact the newsroom consists almost entirely of volunteers means this would be nearly impossible on a regular basis. It should however be encouraged where possible, as various public meetings are a regular part of each consortium station's activities. Tapping into station resources such as meetings and forums is an excellent way of gauging community interest in particular topics and makes use of the rhizomatic aspect of community radio through reinforcing community connections and exploring. While further research would be needed to ascertain the topic's relevance to *The Wire's* national audience, these meetings represent a cost-effective way for the program to engage in the more traditional form of public listening. As a way of setting the news agenda, public listening holds great appeal to *The Wire*. A recurring problem for many years has been how to generate original stories rather than just providing an alternative angle. The volunteers, at least initially, tend to

rely on what is being covered in other media and press releases, discussions around how to encourage news generation have been ongoing among producers for many years. 4EB's Women's Luncheon is just one example of an event that could be attended by volunteers in order to engage in public listening for story generation. The consortium stations, 4EB, 2SER and Radio Adelaide, are active organisations among their respective communities and host a wide range of events that could be used for this purpose.

Using public journalism, particularly public listening as a news-gathering approach, yielded positive results. The package produced was comprehensive and relevant to the audience, and received positive feedback from those involved. While the project was considered successful, more in-depth, quantitative research is required before public journalism could be meaningfully implemented within a community radio newsroom. Though outside the scope of this research, audience surveys and listenership numbers would be valuable data that could potentially further support the case for public journalism within a community radio setting.

Conclusion

This paper examines the potential applications of public journalism to community radio news-gathering. The research aimed to establish several simple ways in which public journalism could be integrated into everyday community radio new practices to yield democratic benefits within the community. A literature review focussing on the roles of alternative media, specifically community radio, and past experiences with public journalism informed a case study set within *The Wire*, a national news and current affairs program broadcast on Australian community radio. Previously identified key aspects of public journalism were then tested in a practical sense in the form of a radio package for broadcast.

Community radio has significant potential to engage with listeners on a deeper level for positive democratic outcomes. Community radio was chosen as the medium for this experiment due to its inclusive and democratic nature, its rhizomatic presence, as well as its relative stability compared to other forms of media. The sector has been experiencing growth in both the number of listeners and stations despite the struggles facing the rest of the media industry. While the majority of talks and music content already contribute to what the communities want to hear, news coverage has the potential to contribute more to building deep connections with listeners. This would however, require a new approach to journalism. Public journalism, a form of deliberative journalism, is an alternative to traditional journalism that

focusses on reporting on what is important to the listeners and providing the listeners with the tools to actively improve the community.

The research and accompanying work of journalism has refined public journalism to fit within a community radio newsroom. The research in conjunction with the creative work has proven the hypothesis that a few key public journalism principles can be easily integrated into news-gathering practices in community radio news rooms to foster greater public deliberation and growth of civic capital. These findings are significant because they represent an effective implementation of an alternative approach to journalism that has great potential for benefits within stations and the larger community. This project has laid the ground work for future larger-scaled, more in-depth research into the topic such as implementation of the principles over a longer time period and consequent surveys of broadcasters and audience members. Alternative media has a long history with alternative approaches to content and content creation, news and journalism should be no exception to this tradition.

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