

Editorial - Taking Community Media to the Next Level

Barry Melville

While community broadcasters continue to wrestle with regulatory constraints, policy limitations, lack of resources and internal conflict, technology is rapidly transforming the way media content is produced and consumed. Wouldn't it be simpler to just pack it in and just reinvent ourselves as bloggers or podcasters? The answer is that the very same technology that seems to threaten us gives us the capacity to extend our capacities and take community media through to the next level. But it won't just happen. We'll need to embrace new technology and improve our overall performance in a range of areas like governance, management, production and training.

As much as community broadcasting is the result of community support, volunteer energy and aspiration, community broadcasting is also a creature of particular policy and regulatory settings over the past 35 years. Community broadcasting licensees enjoy what might be termed "the broadcasters' prerogative". Our stations have the statutory right to the exclusive use of spectrum to provide broadcasting services in specified geographic service areas to specified audiences. In other words *broadcasting service licences* although they impose restrictions and require strict compliance, also confer rights and privileges.

Will media on demand, user-generated content and cheap universal access to broadband erode the value of "the broadcasters' prerogative"? Or more simply, considering the dual challenge of finding resources and meeting regulatory requirements, are the new IP (internet protocol) based platforms becoming more viable than plain old free-to-air broadcasting?

I contend that community broadcasting is robust but it can only thrive in the wider paradigm of community media and must adapt to the challenge that user-generated content, media on demand, social networking present.

New content-rich, distributive services which use the internet, mobile telephony and other portable devices provide consumers with a range of alternatives to plain old radio listening. Video and audio downloads, mobile games and music, streaming radio and interactive television could ultimately dislocate our audiences, but at present none of them have the *presence* of community media. By presence, I mean the capacity to widely distribute services free-of-charge that aggregate content, add editorial context and directly serve community interests by providing access to members of communities-served.

The community broadcasting sector has been strongly claiming for years: if you want media diversity we have it in spades. The role of community broadcasting is to provide a diverse range of services meeting community needs in ways that are not met by other sectors. Community broadcasting is sustained by the principles of access and participation, volunteerism, diversity, independence and localism.

Innovative use of online technologies is becoming well-established in the community broadcasting sector and the internet is well-used both as a resource base for information and programming but increasingly as an alternative or supplementary delivery platform via streaming and/or downloads (podcasting). Nevertheless providing digital terrestrial platform

for community media will help preserve independent, accessible media that promote Australia's diverse cultural identity.

So what is the 'next level' for community media? It will not just be taking what we have in the analogue broadcasting space and transplanting it onto digital platforms. To take things to the next level we will need to vastly improve our resource capacities, our management structures, our training and our standards of participation and governance. The next level for community media will be about new and exciting collaborations to produce and share content and will be about creating new and dispersed communities of interest that are way beyond the boundaries of existing service boundaries.

The articles in this issue of 3CMedia address the 'next level' of community media from a number of different perspectives.

Ellie Rennie draws upon her study of Melbourne-based community media organisation SYN, that the 'open source' organisation is community broadcasting's substantive contribution to the evolving mediascape. For media to qualify as 'community' initiatives it is not enough that digital technologies, applications and platforms are interoperable and transparent. The organizations which own, management and operate these systems must also be accessible to, and shaped by, the communities of interests they serve. This, Rennie argues, is the crucial difference between user-generated and community media in the Web 2.0 world.

Kerrie Mackie-Smith looks at how podcasting can be used to engage high school students and develop literacy in a number of modes. Once, the school gate led to the farm, the mine or the factory door. Education systems now need to prepare students for an entirely different range of post-school and labour force circumstances. Success at school is the best way to facilitate participation in the information and knowledge-intensive global services economy. In the particular case that Mackie-Smith describes, teachers worked with Radio Adelaide to innovate the curriculum in a number of subject areas. Mackie-Smith's study strongly suggests that incorporating new media literacies and modalities across the high school curriculum can contribute to high levels and rates of student engagement with the curriculum, especially amongst young people at risk of dropping out. The partnership with community radio also delivered other positive, tangible outcomes for students, including certified vocation education training.

Peter Collingwood concludes this issue with an evaluation of how public sphere theory can be used to evaluate media policy. Importantly, developments such as community broadcasting have helped to extend and transform the 'bourgeois' public sphere in a variety of ways. In this paper Collingwood pays attention to the role of media institutions, and especially a diverse community broadcasting sector, in facilitating the circulation of opinion. He argues that in the process of fulfilling this role, community broadcasting provides an important vehicle for assuring the 'communication rights' of social and cultural groups, and in this way is deeply implicated in processes which strengthen democracy.

About the author: Barry Melville is the General Manager of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, which publishes *3CMedia*.