

Community Media in the Prosumer Era

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Abstract

How is media convergence impacting on established, 'broadcast-era' community media? This paper takes SYN (a community radio licensee in Melbourne) as a case study and employs media ethnography and policy analysis to identify contemporary challenges facing community media.

Community media requires a different approach to convergence than that which is commonly associated with the professional creative industries. In the community sphere, convergence is led by members and encouraged through open, participative processes. The 'open source organisation' is proposed here as a useful way of thinking through the challenges of convergence and the limitations of Australia's existing communications policy framework.

Introduction

The categories of 'old' and 'new' media don't strictly apply to community broadcasting. The sector possesses many of the characteristics of 'new' social networking media: it relies on community affiliations and the circulation of information occurs through volunteer effort. Community media has always been 'prosumer' – in that it enables consumers (audiences) to become producers. However, community broadcasting is distinctly 'old media' in its technologies, codes of practice, legal restrictions and standards. If this is a new 'era', are we ahead of our time or have we been left behind?

I have been participating in SYN over the past 18 months to determine

- If community broadcasting has a role in today's media environment.
- How convergence is impacting upon this distinct sector.

SYN stands for the Student Youth Network, a media organisation and community radio licensee based in Melbourne, run by and for people under 26. Over 5000 young people have been participated in SYN since they commenced full-time, city-wide broadcasts in 2003. The organisation also works with around 150 schools and community organisations, providing basic media training and airtime.

It makes sense to examine youth stations when talking about community broadcasting in the digital age. Young people spend more time online than other age groups and are early adopters of new technologies (Livingstone 2007). SYN is also part of an informal network of youth arts and media which emerged about a decade ago. That network has been heavily involved in new technologies and continues to stretch technological and critical boundaries in both hi-tech and low-fi directions.

The shift from old to new media is often described as 'convergence'. Convergence can be a misleading term. As Henry Jenkins points out, it is often thought of as a black box: something which rolls two or more completely different functions into one device. Or it might be thought of as multiplatform content – an exciting idea for screenwriters but one

that seems to work best when audiences run with it themselves (think Machinima or slash fiction). He encourages us to see media convergence not as the rush towards functionality within single devices, but as 'a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content' (Jenkins 2006, 3).

As long as convergence means devices and production techniques, the topic 'community media and convergence' will always fall back into a 'keeping up with industry' discussion. My starting point is not 'how is SYN coping with new media' but 'what is the relationship between the young people at SYN and the media they produce and consume'? What does convergence mean in that particular context?

In the final part of the paper I will attempt to turn this discussion towards some concrete policy recommendations. First it is necessary to define the new media environment that we are dealing with.

Convergence

User-generated content is an essential component of Web 2.0 and one which looks set to endure. We are all familiar with its features by now: entertainment based on social networking (MySpace, FaceBook and YouTube) and information needs met via search engines, blogs and wikis. The phenomenal rise of user-generated media is the result of an alternative system of production, one which transcends the constraints of physical capital. In the mass media era, community presses and broadcast outlets were the only significant avenue through which individuals could take part in production (aside from letters to the editor or talkback formats). As Jenkins writes, 'the culture industries never really had to confront the existence of this alternative cultural economy base' until now. 'Home movies never threatened Hollywood, as long as they remained in the home' (Jenkins 2006, 136).

Digital divide aside, the internet has enabled more people to engage in information and cultural production and dissemination, with even fewer barriers to participation. Many commentators see nonmarket production and cooperative effort as the key to post-industrial social and economic change. In the words of Yochai Benkler,

These changes have increased the role of nonmarket and non-proprietary production, both by individuals alone and by cooperative efforts in a wide range of loosely or tightly woven collaborations (Benkler 2006, 2).

The 'information network' system, as Benkler calls it, is transforming labour, capital flows and the circulation of information. Lawrence Lessig (2001) speaks of these changes in terms of innovation and technological advancement. Central to both accounts is the idea that innovation results from technologies which allow for participation in their development. In other words, new ideas and technologies are arising out of the non-market-based activities of ordinary people – friendship groups and hobbies – rather than through professionalised industry and private gain. The old community media ideals of access and participation have been realised on a mass scale.

Some see these information networks as having a positive impact on public connection. Axel Bruns (2005) writes that blogs and open publishing forums turn readers into 'gate watchers', transforming the formerly one-way system of journalism into a public conversation.

Moreover, our newfound interactivity makes us more willing to question information and to hold the media to account, signifying a new system of media ethics (Lumby and Probyn 2003).

But it is not all positive. Some fear that amateur media spells the end of the public sphere as we know it. Andrew Keen, in his book *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), warns that old media faces extinction as new business models begin to lure resources towards increasingly trivial and inaccurate information. In Keen's view, amateur media is distracting and dangerous because it lacks safeguards to ensure that the information distributed is truthful and morally acceptable:

'The new winners – Google, YouTube, MySpace, Craigslist, and the hundreds of start-ups all hungry for a piece of Web 2.0 pie – are unlikely to fill the shoes of the industries they are helping to undermine, in terms of products produced, jobs created, revenue generated, or benefits conferred. By stealing away our eyeballs, the blogs and wikis are decimating the publishing, music, and news-gathering industries that created the original content those Web sites "aggregate"'. (Keen 2007, 27-28).

Keen is also concerned that there will be no industry left to nurture talent or to create standards and professional codes.

The category of 'youth' is always deployed when change is afoot, betraying the worst of our real and imagined cultural shifts. The consumption, production and content-sharing habits of young people – so-called 'digital natives' – are a central problem in what Keen and others see as the demise of the public sphere.

In many respects the new media landscape suits community media. I argued in my book (Rennie 2006) that community media's time has come: changes in the way we access and participate in the media are making all media more like community media.

However, there is also the real danger that community media will be confused with social networking and other forms of amateur media production. Community broadcasting, due to its participative, accessible and cooperative nature, has found itself under pressure to justify its claim to state-derived resources when media participation is seen to occur at no cost elsewhere. And yet, there are essential differences between the organised and structured sphere of community broadcasting and the types of amateur media that are occurring across commercial and non-market spaces. The task, which has barely begun, is to understand how community media operates as a distinct field of the media as well as its relationship to other media sectors.

A new research agenda for community media might include:

- The role it plays in supporting public information and engagement – in ways that are both similar and different from commercial and public media. (The Griffith University audience study is a useful starting point. See Meadows 2007).
- The contribution of community media training (and what that means for the creative industries labour market)
- The changing status and role of third sector organisations.

The first two points are intimately tied to the third. As I will demonstrate, convergence in community media has as much to do with organisations as with media technologies. SYN's success is due to the structures of access and participation it has built in the past and the way in which those structures facilitate the cultural inquisitiveness of its membership.

SYN and Convergence

SYN can be traced across multiple-platforms. The organisation produces for radio, television and the web, but SYN is also present in various guises on Facebook, Myspace and YouTube - groups which are intended for their members and audiences. An impressive amount of work occurs online, via Basecamp – a software package for project management and discussion forums (around 50 members sign in at least once a week). Basecamp discussions range from how poorly the SYN netball team is performing to program issues and broader debate (such as whether feminism is still relevant). The collaborative systems of the organisation are facilitated through this social-networking-type dialogue. SYN is an organic, spreading media entity that has tentacles in many spaces and technologies. Much of this activity is only loosely governed.

In terms of attitudes towards media it is fair to say that the young people at SYN, no matter what their technical levels, are not afraid of technology. They established a Facebook group called the 'Brontok appreciation society' – a fan-club for a computer virus that found itself a friendly home in The House of SYN (SYNners find it amusing when it shuts-down their computer). However, it would be wrong to assume that SYN volunteers are enamoured by new technology. In response to a newspaper article on the Nine network's decision to broadcast a program featuring YouTube content (Madden 2007), one SYN volunteer posted the following comment on Basecamp:

I personally find all this YouTube sh-t annoying. It's like they think young people won't care about anything unless it's on YouTube or MySpace. I couldn't give a rats whether it's on either' (Basecamp, 10 September 2007).

As this quote suggests, convergence, to SYN members, means much more than old media organisations keeping up with new media fads. I find it interesting that the youth sector is also experiencing a zine revival, as it suggests that convergence culture reaches into DIY and low-fi media, not just digital technologies.

The notion of convergence proposed by Jenkins – a set of audience-led connections between existing media – is useful in relation to community media as it gets beyond basic distribution strategies and devices. However, in a community media organisation, production, social interaction, consumption and training are all blurred. Convergence becomes an even more complex set of connections across media content and platforms.

When I first began visiting SYN, the discourse at the station was that 'radio is dead'. This attitude has changed over time to an appreciation of radio as just one media practice among many. The station's primary concern in relation to convergence is how to make other media training and development as accessible and straightforward as current radio methods.

At their last strategic planning camp, SYN members came up with a plan to restructure the organisation. Rather than SYN being a radio station with television and online components, it was decided that programs would become the top level of organisation and that each would have television, radio and web content. The website, rather than radio, would become the centre of SYN production. Even though this plan is still to be fully implemented, SYN is already quite far down the line in terms of conceiving itself as a convergent media organisation. They do not define themselves according to the platform on which they work (i.e. a radio station) but in terms of the practices, methods and culture that facilitates media production overall. Former station manager Bryce Ives said in September that, even if broadcasting ceased to exist and all media moved online, SYN would still be the same.

Ives's insight comes back to the role of the organisation. New media theory identifies open source software as a fundamental technological and social feature behind the internet's development. We also need to look at what we might call 'open source organisations'. The basic idea behind open source is that if you make the code of the software visible and give everyone the ability to copy, build and adapt the software then you will have a more robust and relevant technology than if you paid a couple of experts to make it. An 'open source organisation' is open in its technology and governance – it is accessible, allows for participation at all levels and produces innovations out of cooperative effort. The key factor that differentiates SYN from other stations is their dedication to the principle of access. Aside from the age limit, which ensures that new recruits are always welcome, SYN also achieves access through its programming grid, which rotates every block and only allows programmers two consecutive blocks in a row. The accessibility of the organisation, and its high turnover of volunteers, creates an openness which encourages collaborative effort and adaptability.

If convergence is not about devices or production methods, but about culture pursued across dispersed media forms, then SYN is on track. Convergence is encouraged within community media organisations which are open to people with different skills and interests, yet brings them into a shared culture and social world. In such organisations, convergence often means different people producing different types of content for different platforms, rather than everyone producing multiplatform content (as industry seems to think). SYN producers seem to want to focus one type of media production at a time (focus group, July 2006). However, many appear likely to try different media at a later stage. This observation was backed-up by a survey conducted by the Institute for Social Research in December 2007. The online survey was completed by approximately 350 media workers. Almost 55% of those surveyed had volunteered or worked in community media at some point. Surprisingly, 94% had worked across more than one type of community media (radio, print, television and web-based) and over 55% had worked across 3 or more different media.

Of course, there are some fundamental principles that need to be addressed. Producers still need to begin podcasting and television producers need to vodcast. It no longer makes sense to talk in terms of **radio**, **television** and **online**. Instead, stations need to create strategies for **audio**, **video** and **text** producers. However, if convergence is located in culture and networks, community media ultimately has the capacity to be more flexible than industry and to use 'cultural convergence' to achieve its aims.

Technical and Sector-Wide Considerations

I have argued that convergence occurs through culture and that it is assisted by open source organisation structures. Nonetheless, there are technical issues that need to be addressed within the community broadcasting sector if convergence is to reach beyond a few isolated, innovative stations.

SYN has been lucky: they have access to IT students as well as the RMIT server. Last year they also received a large grant from VicHealth to develop a new syn.org.au site which will allow producers to upload content to their program's page. Other stations do not have the luxury of student volunteers, university bandwidth or access to youth development grants. Convergence will only occur across the sector if resources and skills are shared between stations.

One idea, which was suggested to me by SYN's current IT volunteers, is for the sector to build a basic website (using open source software) which all stations can copy and adapt to their needs. Stations would only need to pay for website design, not construction. A sector-wide IT support community could be formed by uniting individual station IT volunteers who could provide assistance to all stations, possibly for a small fee. Government support for bandwidth costs may also be worth pursuing.

The SYN player initiative is a good example of community media innovation arising through open source methods. Developed by volunteer Tudor Holton, who is touted as an open source genius by SYNners, SYNplayer is both a playout system for radio stations as well as an administration system (for membership management, uploading content to the website, scheduling, production and so on). The technology has developed over the past 5 years through constant road-testing and adaptation, mostly through volunteer effort.

In contrast, the new syn.org.au website, that is being built by a commercial company, has been an endless source of frustration. The funding was pursued as a means for SYN to achieve its convergence aspirations. However, an interim site, which was built quickly and at low cost by volunteers, is making the outsourced site seem onerous and management-heavy.

There are also larger issues to consider. Australia's broadcasting policy is not equipped to deal with a convergent media environment. As it stands, online community media organisations (for instance Vibewire and Engagemedia) are excluded from funding and representation by our peak sector bodies. Community television is underrepresented in the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia due to the small number of stations (and hence votes) compared to radio. Online community media (or print, for that matter) has never been represented.

Perhaps a first step is to expand the Community Broadcasting Foundation into the Community Media Foundation (following the UK's Community Media Association) and provide additional funds to support online community media as well as targeting funding to assist the sector to move online. In the past there were moves to change the CBAA to the CMAA. Now that convergence is truly upon us, that motion deserves revisiting.

Conclusion

There are two common misconceptions when it comes to online community media.

The first is that all online amateur media is ‘community media’. Community media is essentially very different from user-generated content and social networking media, even though it is fuelled by similar factors (altruism, social bonds, hobbyist technologies and so on). Community media organisations are community-governed, not-for-profit associations. They provide access to production and distribution (as do other user-generated new media) but also allow for participation in the running of the organisation and the development of technologies. Community sector organisations are socially-responsive and proactive in that they cater for groups who are not otherwise adequately represented and develop technologies to serve identifiable needs rather than market gaps. These organisations are professional and industry-like, with an emphasis on standards, training and ethical responsibility when it comes to information dissemination.

The second misconception is that online media occurs ‘naturally’ and does not require funding to be sustainable. The rise of non-market media – such as social networking, content-sharing and open-source collaboration – has fundamentally changed the way we produce and share information. However, it has not changed the need for sustainable organisations, reliable income-generation for community enterprises or reward for labour.

In a media environment increasingly characterised by non-market media use, production and participation, community media provides a structure and method which can take amateur media to the next level. It can impact on the media industries, respond to changing audience needs and maintain public connection.

A fundamental principle that has emerged from the SYN research is that convergence works best when the technical aspects are made simple and where organisations are flexible and open. That way, convergence can occur through the normal processes of community media – through social interaction and a shared culture – rather than through some forced attempt to keep up with industry.

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