

culture commitment *community*

the australian community radio sector



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executive summary

This report covers a range of issues associated with the current Australian community radio industry. In particular, it addresses the structure of the sector; the characteristics of those working in the sector; localism; Indigenous and ethnic programming; news and current affairs services; training, and funding.

Our primary findings indicate that:

- the community radio sector is fulfilling a broad but largely unacknowledged role in the Australian mediascape, particularly as a source of local content;
- the sector is under increasing pressure from policy-making bodies to increase sponsorship and income levels, which is affecting the content and operations of many stations;
- on a per-station basis, current funding levels are slightly lower than when the sector first received direct monies from DCITA in 1985. This represents a significant drop in funding in real terms;
- more than 60 percent of community radio is broadcasting to regional areas – in light of the increasing withdrawal of commercial radio from the regions, the sector is proving the only source of local news and information for many towns;
- experienced workers in the community radio sector are training work experience students and unskilled community members on a daily basis. We estimate approximately 4000-5000 Australians are trained annually in the sector in mostly unaccredited training programs;
- around 70 percent of the sector are engaged in training programs involving external organisations, usually universities;
- almost all of the 23 journalism programs around Australia use community radio as a site of work experience for their students. Indigenous radio stations in particular have forged close links with journalism programs and are providing a key indicator of ‘reconciliation in action’;
- sector representatives feel strongly that they have become a significant *de facto* trainer for the Australian media industry. This work remains largely unacknowledged and unrewarded;
- more than 20,000 Australians are involved as volunteers in the community radio sector on a regular basis;
- volunteers contribute about \$2.79 million in unpaid work hours to the Australian community *each week*. This equates to more than \$145 million in unpaid work each year;
- volunteers in the community radio sector are working least two and a half times longer than volunteers in the general community;
- 80 percent of stations broadcast a news service, although this is usually a syndicated service. The National Radio News service is the most used, followed relatively closely by commercial networked news from either the Macquarie or Southern Cross news networks;
- Indigenous community radio is growing and continues to provide communities with a first level of service as well as acting as a bridge between cultures. The National Indigenous News Service is unique in providing a service primarily staffed and produced by Indigenous people;
- Ethnic community radio stations are providing an essential service to the new wave of migrants to Australia, despite sometimes hostile media attention from mainstream outlets. Anecdotes from the ethnic radio sector provided some of the most moving comments to this project;
- participants in the focus groups have suggested a review of the CBAA fee structure to take into account uneven station revenue flows. Other suggestions include consideration of a more equitable distribution

of funds by DCITA and unrealistic expectations for local ethnic language content under CBF funding guidelines;

- as a result of funding decreases, stations are finding it increasingly difficult to remain afloat without significantly adjusting content to attract a larger audience. Some stations feel this is forcing them to adopt more commercial formats, which is against the principles of community radio as outlined in the *Broadcasting Services Act* (1992);
- government, associated agencies and community organisations should be made aware of the existence and nature of the community radio sector and be encouraged to use it as a way of disseminating information to local communities. A national campaign is required to raise community awareness of the sector and its achievements. The government advertising agency, OGIA, should be encouraged to investigate sponsorship of community radio and its national satellite networks to make more effective use of the sector to distribute information relevant to local communities;
- regular audience surveys are required to enable individual stations to assess their programs and content. Due to the high cost of official audience surveys, there is some suggestion that funded audience surveys would be useful to both the sector and policy-makers; and
- based on the results of the surveys and focus groups, we believe that the community radio sector as a whole is an important cultural resource for the Australian community. While some stations may need to connect more directly with their communities, most in the sector are closely integrated and entwined with their local community or their community of interest.

These issues are addressed in more detail in the ensuing chapters.