

COMMUNITY BROADCASTERS PROVIDE AN IMPORTANT LOCAL CONNECTION FOR A VARIETY OF COMMUNITIES, BUT THEY FACE A RANGE OF CHALLENGES, PARTICULARLY IN THE DIGITAL AGE.



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# COMMUNITY CONNECTION

**A**t a time when more and more radio and TV programming is networked, local content is harder and harder to come by—unless you are one of the growing number of Australians who listen to community radio or watch community TV.

Unlike commercial media, community broadcasters shun mass appeal and the lure of advertising dollars. Instead, an army of volunteers provides accessible and independent content to local communities.

As part of an inquiry into community broadcasting, members of the House of Representatives Communications Committee have been meeting community broadcasters to learn what makes them tick.

“It’s a sector that runs on passion and commitment, and

there’s always a lot of positivity,” says Kath Letch, station manager at one of Australia’s biggest community broadcasters, 3RRR in Melbourne.

Ms Letch has been in community radio for more than a decade, including five years as chair of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA).

She believes the critical element of community broadcasting is its local focus: “It’s about people who are part of a community being able to broadcast to that same community.

“Stations are licensed to service different communities of interest, but they’re all very committed to that relationship between the community of listeners and community of broadcasters. Australia has been really lucky to have that kind of development.

It’s quite unique in terms of worldwide broadcasting.”

To receive a licence from the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), stations must show a specific connection to a community of interest. Categories of communities include general geographical, print handicapped, ethnic, Indigenous, religious, youth, senior citizens, arts, fine music and Australian music.

While it took two decades for the first 100 community stations to be licensed after the early 1970s, that number has more than trebled over the past 15 years.

Today, the sector includes 360 long-term licensed community radio stations, four metropolitan TV services and 80 remote Indigenous community television services, as well as 40 aspirant broadcasters on temporary licences.

This variety reflects the diversity of the communities they serve. To present a typical station profile is almost impossible, but some generalisations can be made such as tight budgets and limited access to government funding.

In 2002-2003, the average budget for a community radio station was just under \$178,000, but many stations survive on less.

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Some rural stations operate on average budgets of around \$71,000.

Not many can boast an annual budget of around \$700,000, like Melbourne's ethnic broadcaster 3ZZZ, which generates the bulk of its funding through membership, sponsorship and its annual fundraising drive.

Station manager Martin Wright says 3ZZZ also receives around a quarter of its budget in grants from the federal government via the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF), which distributed almost \$8 million to community radio stations in 2006-2007.

With such strict financial limits, the free service of volunteers is community broadcasting's most crucial element. According to the CBF, there are 23,000 volunteers and 960 paid staff across Australia. It estimates that the work of volunteers, averaged at around 10 hours a week, is the equivalent of a contribution of nearly \$212 million per annum to the economy.

Community broadcasting is also a valuable training ground for careers in commercial media. Many journalism students, volunteers and presenters make the transition to the more lucrative jobs,

including personalities such as Rove and HG Nelson.

“People have an intense desire to communicate with each other and share ideas, feelings, thoughts and things that they love,” the CBF's Deb Welch says.

“It's also a means to serve the community. Even though people might feel this is diminishing in our contemporary society, I think there is a very strong impetus in people to want to contribute to their community.

“And you get to be the star. You get to be the person who is up front doing the broadcasting, not the person who's in the backroom stuffing envelopes.

“It's a really valuable volunteer experience that involves you gaining a lot of skills and being able to do things that exercise those while bringing enjoyment to people. In that sense, it can't be beaten.”

One such dedicated volunteer is Hakki Suleyman, presenter of the Turkish Cypriot program on 3ZZZ radio in Melbourne, who gets behind the microphone three hours a week to provide information to his community in their native language.

Mr Suleyman covers everything from taxation information to death notices. But addressing life's certainties is not all the program offers the estimated 80 per cent of the Turkish Cypriot community who tune in. Often the program provides an information exchange for people who are otherwise detached from their community.

“A lot of people don't speak or understand English. They're isolated and so more problems come into the community more broadly,” he says.

Isolated communities, especially Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, also consider that their community radio and television broadcasts are essential.

As well as broadcasting local news, the Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS) provide vital information on health and education, according to chair of the Australian Indigenous Communication Association, Patrick Malone.

“One of the things we talk about all the time is building up self-esteem of people in communities and putting up role models,” says Mr Malone.

“Broadcasting is one way of doing that. I've seen it happen. A lot of young people have come into courses I've been involved with and are put up as role models, and that's something that other people aspire to.

“In Indigenous community broadcasting, if you are the broadcaster that's usually your main job, so there is a big difference in the way it is perceived out in the communities.”

Another community to benefit from this style of broadcasting is people with print handicaps, an estimated 17 per cent of the Australian population.

Vision Australia Radio operates Radio for the Print Handicapped (RPH) stations throughout Victoria and



3ZZZ station manager Martin Wright.



3RRR station manager Kath Letch

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southern New South Wales, with around 800 volunteers, five permanent staff and around 150,000 listeners each week.

Along with extracts from newspapers and magazines, government organisations and various community and disability organisations contribute specific information to RPH's programming—information which might otherwise be inaccessible to its audience.

"The main thrust of the station is turning print into sound", says Vision Australia Radio manager Stephen Jolley.

"We get phone calls and letters that say things like, 'I don't know what I'd do without RPH' or 'I can't think how I survived without it before'. They really appreciate the depth of information that is available in the print media that some have never experienced before. Also, it's a different style of radio. Our broadcasters broadcast their readings in a friendly, companionable sort of way. A lot of people live alone and the radio is very

important to them. What we do is making a difference for them," he says.

To assist RPH stations deliver their content in the digital age, Mr Jolley would like the federal government to revisit laws preventing copyrighted material being broadcast over the internet or other digital delivery platforms.

"We want to be able to position ourselves to make best possible use of emerging technologies. Some of them are beyond emerging, they're here now—such as the internet and digital radio. We want to be able to deliver our service via these digital processes as well as the analogue processes because of the superior service, increased flexibility and increased quality of audio," he says.

"It's not just funding that we need from the Commonwealth, it's shaping the regulatory environment to suit what can be achieved with technological changes in our society.

"At the moment, we can't stream our programs as freely over the internet as we can broadcast them, because the copyright provisions we have for radio aren't extended."

Channel 31 Television in Melbourne is also facing a technological challenge to retain its audience. One of four permanently licensed community television stations in Australia, Channel 31 Melbourne first went to air in 1994. Currently, it broadcasts 90 new locally produced programs a week, for a total of 58 hours of airtime.

Unlike community radio, community television receives no regular government funding, and therefore it generates its own income largely through sponsorship.

Channel 31 chairman Peter Lane describes the station's programming as relevant, local and close to the audience.

"This leads to the strengthening of communities within themselves and the demystification and the breakdown of prejudice and the growth of understanding between communities," he says.

"These programs aren't just entertainment. They actually grow harmony. They grow understanding. And they grow people's ability to live together in a way without prejudice. That's the critical importance of community broadcasting."

He says Channel 31 is losing audience numbers because of digital. At present, he explains, community television is analogue only. As more people take up pay TV and digital set-top boxes, Channel 31 is struggling to keep viewers who are finding it too

complicated to switch back to analogue.

"What that means is that we lose the audience," says Mr Lane. "And if that continues, then the Channel 31s will go broke prior to going to digital."

He warns that a 'hot swap', where analogue transmitters would be turned off at the same time as digital transmitters are turned on, would be a "death knell" for community television.

Channel 31 has told the inquiry community television needs access to the digital spectrum, and a \$20 million package from the federal government to help them go digital through simulcast. That way, community television would become available to both existing audiences as well as digital viewers.

Although the digital threat is not as immediate for radio as for TV, it still has broadcasters concerned. Digital radio is scheduled for introduction in capital cities in 2009.

Announcing a digital radio policy framework in 2005, Communications Minister Senator Helen Coonan said "the government's framework has been built around digital radio being a supplement to existing services in Australia rather than replacement technology".

Nevertheless, the advent of the digital era still has broadcasters like Kath Letch concerned.

"The capital costs of digital are probably the headline issue for the community broadcasting sector at the moment," she says.

"Digital has created a lot of changes in broadcasting. It involves infrastructure which community stations find challenging to deal with in terms of capital costs. I think the transition to digital transmission is a very big financial challenge for the sector."

She told the inquiry while the sector is very resourceful and upbeat about its future, continued government funding is essential to get them over the digital hurdles.

"I don't think the sector suffers from a lack of morale. But there's probably a feeling at the moment that our lack of resources could run all over us," she says. ■

*For more information on the community broadcasting inquiry by the House of Representatives Communications, IT and the Arts Committee visit [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cita](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cita) or email [cita.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:cita.reps@aph.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4601.*