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Programming community radio within a fractured suburbia: An action research study of access and programming participation of urban sub-cultures

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Abstract

Encouraging grassroots access to community media is one the fundamental tenets of any responsible community media organisation, and is imperative to the survival of the community media sector as a whole. Access and participation have supported the growth and development of community media as a citizen-owned medium.

This paper will present three models for identifying new and emerging cultural and sub-cultural groups within sub-urban communities and determine modes and motivations of participation within broadcasting. It will also discuss mechanisms needed to ensure that suburban communities, which exist within a wider, perhaps more dominant suburbia have the necessary skills, access and resources to create their own media.

The theoretical aspect will be supported by case studies of each model as tested at 2RRR, a community radio station located in the suburbs of Sydney, which has been active in encouraging innovative forms of grassroots participation over the past five years.

Reference

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Introduction

Volunteers are the lifeblood of community broadcasting. Many community stations rely on volunteers to undertake tasks ranging from managerial to operative (Couldry and Dreher, 2007, Forde et al., 2002a). The recruitment and subsequent retention of volunteers within a community broadcasting station is as important to the future of a community radio station as the size of the listening population or its financial stability (Van Vuuren, 2001, Martinez and McMullin, 2004, Neysmith and Reitsma-Street, 2000). This process is complicated by regulatory environments that in many countries, including Australia and the United Kingdom, ask stations to formalise and justify their community and volunteer relationships. Furthermore, these regulatory actions subject to audit a variety of formal and informal processes that determine the impact, quality and relevance of a stations operation (including programming) to their community (2007, Bryant and Pozdeev, 2010, Barlow, 2006, Price-Davies and Tacchi, 2001). The inherent nature of the regulatory actions, both legislatively and practically, privilege programming as central to the role of the community in the management of the station (Walker, 1997) and to some extent may also privilege larger, more mainstream stations over the smaller ones (especially in terms of actions that are connected with the digital transition process) (Hallett and Hintz, 2010)

Using a participatory approach to action research, centred on a co-operative model of inquiry researching with and not on the local community (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, Heron and Reason, 2006) a number of different programmer recruitment models were implemented at a community radio station located in Sydney, Australia. This study was in response to an identified need within the station to recruit new programs that were relevant to their local community and from sub-cultures or cultures that were under-represented in the mediascape. The study started in 2005 and ran for three years ending in 2007. In 2010-11, a post-analysis was undertaken of the impact of the recruitment models was undertaken, utilising a series of interviews and observations between the researchers.

The fractured suburbia

The positionality of sub-metropolitan community radio stations (sub-metros) in the Australian market is an interesting and challenging one. The definition of these stations is not well explained in either law or regulation, with the licensing authority usually

labelling them ‘generalist’. However in the sector and in a practical sense, their identify is fairly well understood. Sub-metros are granted broadcasting licenses to represent small communities within a larger metropolitan area such as Sydney or Melbourne. They are usually on low-powered transmitters, operate on relatively small budgets and are specifically licensed to serve the needs of their geographically identified community According to Deuze (2006) these types of stations support the production of collaborative content for a cross section of smaller, niche audience yet they struggle for an identity within the wider urban community, locked out from the transition to digital broadcasting afforded to metro radio stations occupying the same market (‘Sub-metro community radio stations face an uncertain future’ - https://indymedia.org.au/2010/07/24)

However, the notion of sub-metro communities in a multi-cultural and fractured city like Sydney is complex, with conflicting perceptions of ethnicity across media forms, expressed in the debates of the on-going viability of religious stations and their right to represent an authentic voice of a diasporic community within the wider urban area (Foster et al., 2011, Norrie, 2011). Initially licensed to support growing urban communities, sub-metro stations sought to support a burgeoning process of community identity, representing smaller urban communities, often linked with local council areas.

However, technology, transport and property prices have progressively fractured the ideal, with people identifying with communities outside of where they live. Urban residents identify with an area through work, nostalgia, aspiration, family ties or social interactions and not just because they reside in a postcode, represented at ‘urban playgrounds’ complex and rent with an evolving understanding of engagement with the buildings and boundaries (Gleeson, 2007).

The process by which licenses divided suburbs, streets and groups arbitrarily through council boundaries created challenges for stations to serve and create a local community identity, especially where one side of a street may be considered part of the community and the other side excluded. This artifice created a fertile environment for stations to represent a community that was wider than the boundaries, whilst at least superficially appearing to be representing their community. A number of stations were investigated and asked to change their promotional identity because they adopted this duality, reaching into the wider suburbia whilst licensed for a sub-metropolitan area.

These stations included 2NSB and 2RES in Sydney, who promoted themselves as jazz and blues focused stations whilst equally representing small communities in the north and east of Sydney.

Recruiting programming volunteers

Within the community broadcasting sector, volunteerism represents one the key tenets of a viable radio station (Price-Davies and Tacchi, 2001). On average in Australia, each licensed station has 271 volunteers, which far exceeds the number of paid staff (Forde et al., 2007). The volunteer base in community media frequently works twice as many hours as volunteers from other sectors (Forde et al., 2002). The reliance on volunteers and the subsequent demands on their time lead to possibility of volunteer burnout or the inequitable sharing of workload and responsibility, with few volunteers carrying the 'burden' for the rest (Ostrom, 1990, Van Vuuren, 2001). These outcomes may have an impact on the volunteer retention and recruitment, which arguably are fundamental for the continued survival of the sector, especially in the area of programming and production which is most heavily reliant on volunteers (Forde, 2001).

The recruitment of programming volunteers represents a different and perhaps more complex problem. Located within the democratic nature of community media as a concept, there is a connected belief that 'everyone has a right to be on community radio' (Siemering, 2000). This inherent right is supported in both a legislative sense and organizational structure by the notion that the volunteers and the community 'own' the station (Gordon, 2006). In terms of legislative environments, community involvement in the processes and practices of programming through policy and procedures aim to ensure the ongoing relevance of programming to the specified community, either in terms of 'social gain' (as in the UK) or representing those not 'adequately served by other media' (as in Australia) (CBAA, 2008, Gordon, 2006). Public access to media is central to the policy agenda that supports the growth of civil society, a voice alternative to the mainstream and the media's democratic potential (Stein, 2002, Carpentier et al., 2003)

This rather utopian vision of community media is contested by the limitations of spectrum and time, but more, as Barlow (1988) suggests by the demands of the audience (the

community) for quality programming and programming that is 'worth listening to' (as opposed to a numbers driven or perhaps 'self-indulgent' approach to broadcasting) (Barlow, 1988, Siemering, 2000). The emancipatory aims of community involvement in programming are further diluted by the skills requirements of programming volunteers, who require training in media law, technical skills, program production and presentation and increasingly computer and multimedia skills (Rooney and Graham, 2004). Further, governance practices designed initially to support the ownership of the station by the community may themselves present barriers to entry for programming volunteers in terms of participation fees, limited or competitive access to participation or artificially created structures designed to limit participation to certain specified groups (Bryant and Pozdeev, 2010).

Background to the action research case study

2RRR is a sub-metropolitan community radio station located in the inner-west of Sydney, Australia. The station has been licensed since the early 1980s. The station was staffed by one part-time station manager and 120 programming volunteers. The station mission was developed in response to the perception of then board of directors that the station was losing relevance to the local community, which was supported by the decreasing involvement of locally based or connected volunteers measured by the number of programming applications. The mission explicitly identifies the role of the station as a provider of programming that serves the diverse set of communities that comprise the stations licensed area.

Over the five years prior to the commencement of the study there was a significant decline in the number and quality of applications for airtime. Despite a number of proactive efforts to reduce the barriers to entry in terms of training (including training scholarships and a recognition of prior learning scheme), the total number of applications received consistently fell. In terms of quality, when applications were assessed against a standard set of programming selection criteria (which themselves were benchmarked against the sector wide legislated codes of practice including measurements such as relevance to the local community, duplication of existing content and appropriate levels of broadcasting skill), the number of applications rejected or sent back to the applicant for further work or clarification increased by approximately 10%

each programming allocation period (which occurred every three months). This resulted in a significant increase in unfilled airtime slots on the station.

Scope of the study

The primary purpose of the study was to develop pro-active strategies of program recruitment in order to respond to the identified needs of the local community. The authors, who were the only consistent members of the program allocation committee during the study, approached the project initially in an organic and informal manner. In 2006 however, a more formal participatory action research methodology was used so that that a more reflective approach could inform the impact of the study. As the study would involve implementing models that may result in the development of actual on-air programs, it was important to us that the process did not treat the local community or the applicants as experimental constructs but as real people (Heron and Reason, 2006). Equally, however it was important for us to be involved at a deep and engaged level in the process of recruiting programmers as we possessed part of the required organisational or local knowledge (Greenwood et al., 1993).

There was further intent on our behalf to initiate a change in the culture of the organisation in terms of programming allocation (McTaggart, 1991). Previous allocation processes were predicated on the notion of scarcity, whereby there were significantly more applications than available airtime. This had informed the decision making of the board of management who were the final decider in terms of allocation. The need to shift to a culture of program seeking as opposed to program selection would be critical to the ongoing viability of the station.

To support these outcomes, the study used a self-reflective spiral approach to the design and implementation of the recruitment models, where the results were critiqued and reflected on in the program allocation committee, and amongst the individual participants (Kemmis, 2007, McTaggart, 1991). These reflections and subsequent model development strategies were shared on an email group and in meetings amongst the participants.

The models of program recruitment

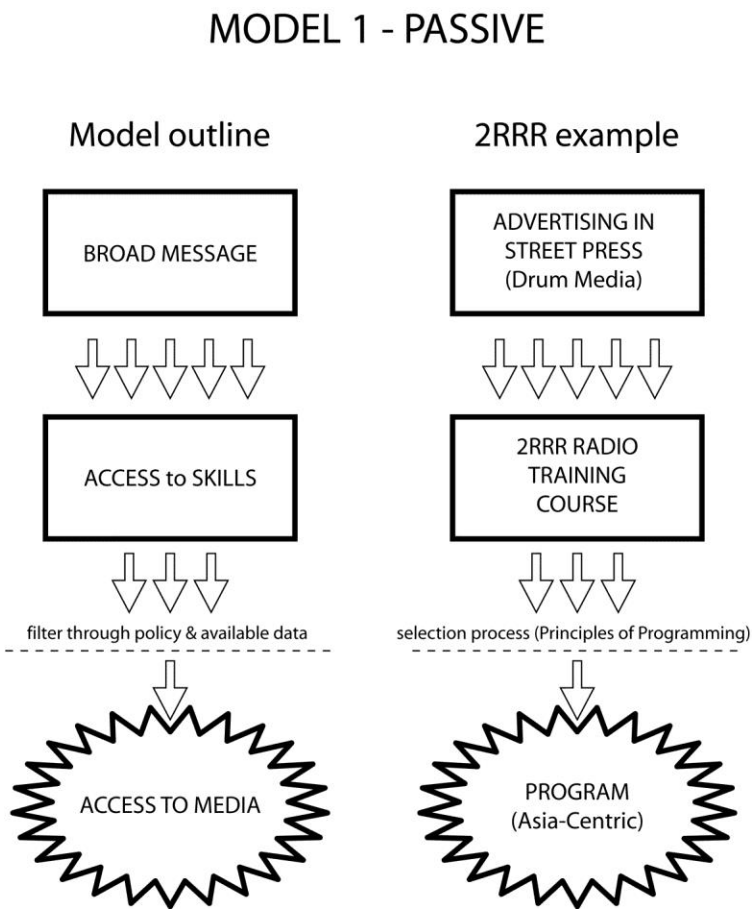

Figure 1. passive recruitment

Figure 1 describes the program recruitment and allocation process we were using at the commencement of the study. The first stage of this model utilised a broad reach mass-media such as Sydney-wide street press to inform the potential programmer of the existence of broadcasting opportunities on the station. In later iterations, the street press was replaced by local newspapers or announcements on the stations on-air program.

The second stage was determining the skills level of each of the potential programmers. It assumed that the potential programmer possessed the financial ability to gain the skills required for media creation or was able to demonstrate a previously acquired competence. In terms of 2RRR, these skills were delivered through a radio training course that was not cost neutral to the participant, and came with no guarantee of successful airtime allocation. On completion, the potential programmer was able to apply for airtime, with the application filtered and assessed against the generic criteria

described earlier. The model is passive as it does not seek specific types of program, just potential participants and filters them after they have participated in the training process (which itself is a revenue generator for the station).

Limitations and benefits of the model

There was an identified financial advantage in using this model, where the participants are pulled through a training process that generates revenue without necessarily resulting in airtime allocation. This created a culture of entitlement on behalf of the participant, and one of status in terms of the board of directors, who saw the training course as the only pathway to gaining airtime. Subsequent models would seek to change this culture as it placed barriers to access that impacted on the recruitment of community relevant programming (especially in terms of capacity to pay).

One of the primary advantages we identified of this model was the relatively low volunteer skill level required by volunteers to implement to the process. Significantly, we also observed a lower time commitment in terms of allocation and program approval, as the criteria reduced much of the process to a 'tick-box' one, where the programmer themselves provided much of the information.

In terms of the benchmarks outlined earlier in terms of quantity and quality of applications, we observed a continued decline in both training course participants and in the number of successful participants translating their training into program applications. A potential reason for this may be that the passive model tends to recruit people interested in the medium of radio, as opposed to having a particular interest for which radio might be an appropriate medium. This observation was supported by our training course exit surveys that indicated the primary reason for participation was an interest in radio. Equally, studies by King and Mele (1999) and Jeffrey (2002) support the notion that passive recruitment of programming volunteers only attracts people interested or with access to the media, which holds little or no transformative value (King and Mele, 1999)

With our action research approach, we sought to share these results (in a propositional form) with both the volunteers running the training course and with the directors in order to gain their perspectives (Heron and Reason, 2006). From this process we identified a

number of communication dead-ends that impacted on the success of the model. Firstly, the program allocation committee was offered only scant access to the training course participants, which resulted in mixed messages being communicated to the potential programmers about the types of programs being sought. Secondly, interactions with other volunteers outside of the committee sometimes led to proliferation of inaccurate or dated interpretations of the process. This may have been caused by skills deficits of the volunteers involved in those roles, in terms of programming procedures or as a result of a communication breakdown or conflict with the agreed process.

Finally, evaluating the rejected applications, there was a strong sense of non-specificity about the content and the understanding of community relevance. A number of applications resulting from this model were generic, identifying a need to do radio, just not what specific type to which audience. This may have been caused by some of the conflicts we addressed earlier, but equally the individualistic aspect of the model, which seeks programmers as opposed to community groups, may have led to a disconnection between the decision makers in a community and the potential programmers. An example of this came from a potential programmer who submitted a number of applications for programs aimed at specific target audiences in the community (gay and lesbian and Jewish cultural news as two examples) for which he was neither a community member, nor had he consulted the community in the formation of the application. When probed about this by the program director he answered that he simply wanted to do radio. He just wanted to know what sort of show we wanted him to do. This type of response was not uncommon at this stage of the research.

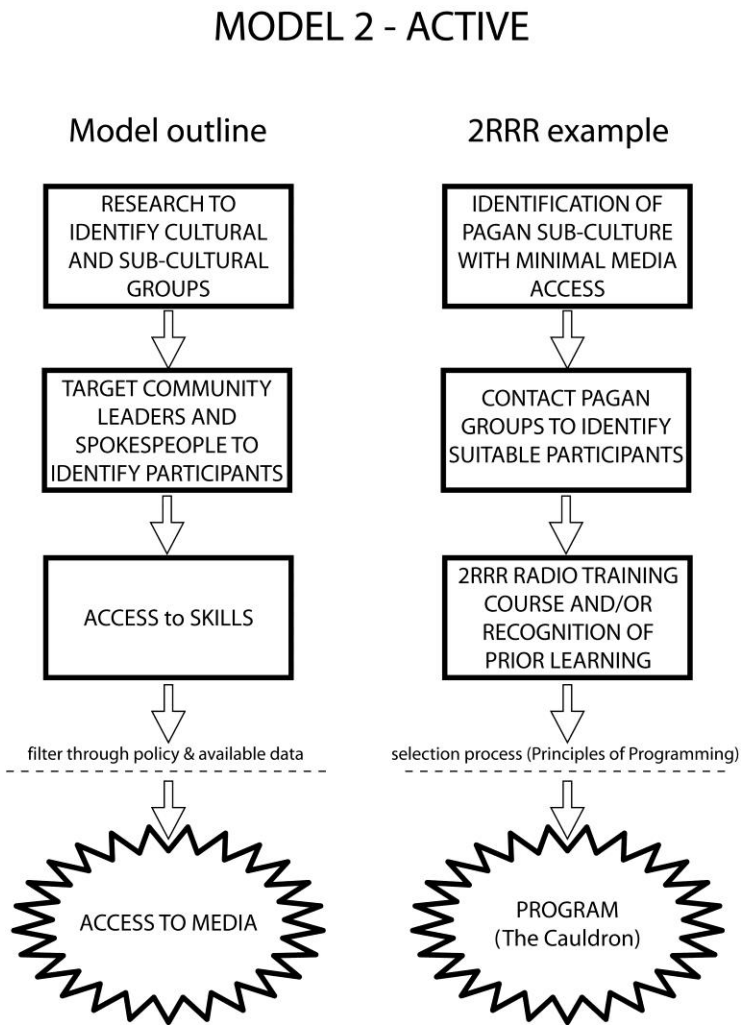

figure 2: active recruitment

Subsequent to the analysis of the first model, but continuing with modes of passive recruitment, the study moved towards a more active approach that directly aimed to encourage participation from within specific groups of the community. Initially, through census data and local council research, under-represented community or sub-cultural groups were identified. This research also aimed to identify the media that was best suited to communicate with the widest audience within that group.

The primary message of the advertising was to identify the key people within the community who could be involved in a dialogue about the appropriateness or relevance of a radio program to the needs of their community. Part of this dialogue would be to seek potential programmers from within the community itself. Once identified, these

programmers would be put the training processes at the station, as with the first model. A successful example of this came from the stations recruitment of a programme designed to meet the needs of the pagan community. Through census data and anecdotally from some of the stations other programming it was identified that there was a significant proportion of the local area that identified themselves as pagan. Through established pagan on-line groups, two potential programmers were identified. This program content and timeslot were negotiated with the programmers and 'The Cauldron', a weekly show about the practice of the pagan religion in and around the local area commenced three months later and remained on-air for three years.

Limitations and benefits of the model

In terms of our critical reflection as a program allocation committee, we found that this model required significantly higher time commitment and a broader and more flexible understanding of the local community and the stations role within it. We identified the skills of strategic planning, community liaison and research as being pivotal to ensuring the success of this model.

As this was the first iteration that deviated from established practice described in the first model, it was interesting to observe the resistance that occurred from the board of directors, as some of the believed that programmers recruited in this process had not undergone the 'rite of passage' that those in the first model (including them) had followed. Arguably, this is an issue in many change driven processes, however it did result in a number of applications being rejected at board approval stage, despite being evaluated by the program allocation committee.

The model overcame a number of the limitations of the first model in that it improved significantly the quality of the applications, and the subsequent success rate of approval. In terms of the programs that went to air as a result of this model, we also observed an increased commitment to promote the program to their local community. This was measured by evaluating their planned promotional strategy (as contained in their initial program application) and their actual promotional activity).

In terms of organizational engagement with the results of this stage of the study, there was resistance from some of the board of directors in terms of the content of the

programs that emerged. Again, this may be attributed to skills gaps with these specific directors connected with the higher skill level required to implement this model.

Resulting from these governance tensions and linking to McTaggart's (1991) notion of eclecticism and diversity as central to a participatory approach, the constitution of the program allocation committee changed and its membership broadened to include a number of other volunteer members. Their involvement was brief (less than three months) and the committee returned to be driven by the authors. Once again, on reflection, we believe that the high skill level required along with the increased time commitment partially contributed to these changes in the team.

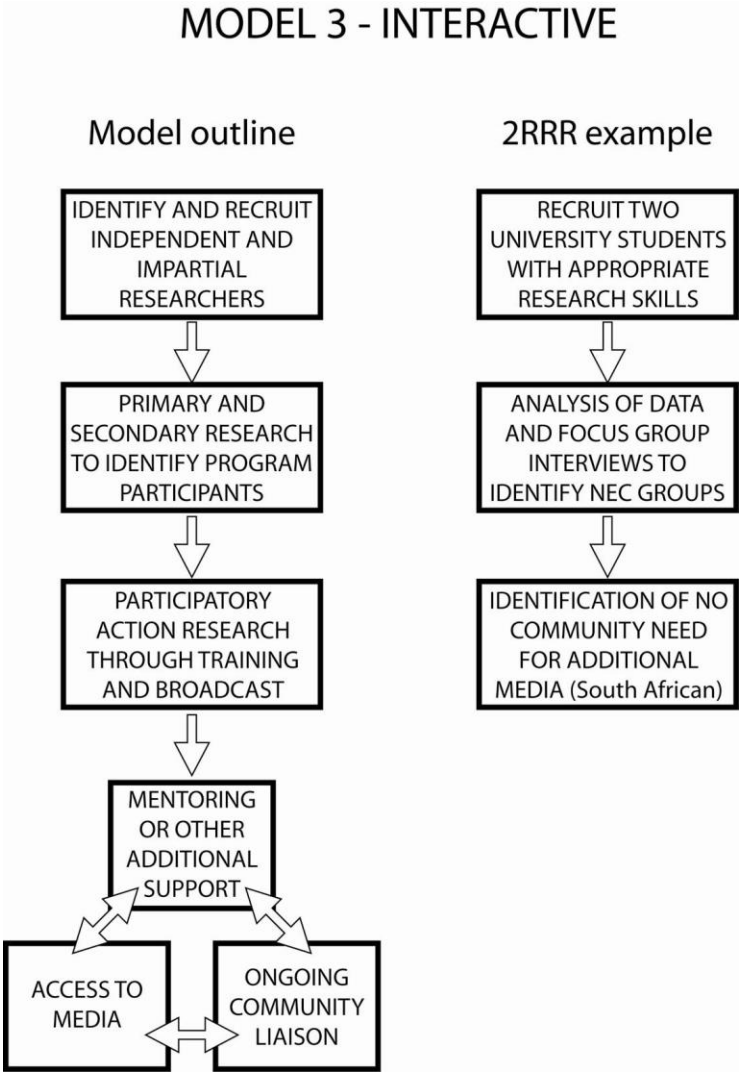

figure 3 – interactive recruitment

This model involved the application of our own self-reflective methodology to the communities we were engaging with. In this model, the station acted as the catalyst (and participant if asked) for a participatory action research project within the community itself. As with the second model, exploratory data is used to identify potential under-represented community groups. This process was undertaken by a research intern in order to maintain distance between this process and our existing action research project. We were also trying to isolate the impact of the issues of governance myopia exhibited by the board of directors in the operations of the first two models. The interns conducted a number of extensive research projects on the local community, matching needs to the existing programming, not just of the station but of others that also served the local community.

The research team identified a number of key stakeholders to be involved in a collaborative research process. As participants were identified and involved, the station would provide training, and as required skills levels were met, access to airtime. The process was not designed to finish as soon the program went to air, but the participants were encouraged to continue their action research project through the program itself, seeking the opinions and involvement of the community itself. The aim of this was to increase the capacity of the program itself to maintain its relevance and engagement with the community.

The station engaged in one complete cycle of this model which focused on the new and emerging migrant communities. An action research team comprising of national ethnic broadcasting bodies and local migrant support groups, supported by station management worked with two research interns (who undertook the majority of the research) to determine the broadcasting needs of the migrant groups in the community. In terms of frames of reference, we suggested that there was not necessarily a program recruitment outcome for this research. If the team identified a migrant group that was not best served by broadcasting on our station, then that was to be considered an action from the research.

The initial exploratory research identified a South African migrant community within the licensed area as a potential participant. The tem engaged with community leaders, through them further to community members. The data that was collected was analyzed

and critically reflected upon by both the action research team and the program allocation committee. The outcome was that the community itself saw no need for a radio program as their community wanted to integrate into the local community and as a result were more interested in local news as opposed to news from 'home'.

Limitations and benefits of the model

The interactive recruitment model has some fundamental differences to the first two models. Firstly, it is a cyclical rather than a linear process, where the focus of the process has shifted from the attainment of airtime as the final goal (and terminal point of the process) to where the research and community liaison continue through the program life. Secondly, in positioning the research and collaborative processes to be inclusive of the community it supported the continued involvement by the station in the development of the program, which in previous iterations ended with allocation.

This model requires a significantly higher level of skill and time commitment than the passive and active models, especially in terms of research participation. The model of participatory action research used, whilst designed to produce meaningful results through the participation of the people in their own system, does require an understanding of skills such as collaboration, development of social action and application of local knowledge to a specific circumstance (McTaggart, 1991). The model three action research project utilised hundreds of volunteer hours, as opposed to the significantly smaller allocations required by the other models (up to 95% less time was required per allocation in model one). In terms of training, there is the potential that this model may require a more targeted training; utilizing work based learning mentoring, reflection and continual professional development in order to support the ongoing development and organic growth of the programs recruited.

Revisiting the study

The study ended in 2007 with a change in staffing and a significant shift in the balance of power in the board of directors. Shortly after cessation of the study, it became apparent that there were no lasting cultural changes within the station. This lack of change was in spite the success of the initial study's volunteer recruitment in making significant positive impacts on communities and the station during the four year duration of the project. The programs that were recruited by the project (such as about disability advocacy) were left

up to individual volunteers to manage, produce and present. The volunteers were not actively supported by the board or management. After some time, these volunteers were no longer able to be involved with programming, due to changes in personal circumstances. They were not encouraged to utilise their extensive contacts within the community to recruit new suitable programmers to continue to meet this community need. The changes in community engagement introduced by the action research project did not resonate in a sustained way with the board of directors or the rest of the station.

The project itself was extremely easy to dismantle by the new board and management. This was, in a large part, due to the outcomes of the project being poorly understood by the remaining board of directors and new manager of the station, as well as the skill and time required to adequately manage such a project. The knowledge gained through conducting the action research project has not formed part of the collective intelligence of the station; it has either not been effectively passed along to the successors in the station management, or has been ignored by the new managers of the station. Recently, the new board has been active in rewriting the programming policies of the station. In these, much of the objective criteria have been removed, such as the inclusive definition of community need for access to airtime (for example, by insisting that people who resided outside of the geographic area could still maintain strong links with communities within the area). These objective criteria have been replaced by generalist statements, with several of the board members stating that volunteers who resided within the geographic area served by the station were preferable to those who did not, regardless of any other criterion. These statements have led the authors to interpret the current direction of the recruitment of program volunteers to be based on personal preference of the programming committee, with a very narrow interpretation of the community of interest of the station.

Similar crude interpretations have also been applied to the recruitment of broadcast volunteers from new and emerging communities. Through the initial data analysis in the action research project, two significant cultural groups were identified as potential participants in the programs: Chinese and Korean. In investigating media landscape further, it was acknowledged that both groups had significant access to media, particularly through a range of printed publications such as newspapers, as well as narrowcast broadcast services. As such, these language programs were not further

pursued to participate in the project. However, in analysing both the cultural and media information, the researchers identified a significant number of second generation Chinese and Korean youth who were not represented in traditional media. As such, when the "*Asia-Centric*" program was recruited using the Passive Model, the authors considered this program to have met a significant community broadcast need. Since the cessation of the project, there has been an increased effort by the part of the new board to include generalist Chinese and Korean language programs, despite the evidence of significant representation across a range of media. This has been primarily by identifying local residents who speak the target languages and ascertaining whether they were interested in creating broadcast content. Little regard has been paid to the selection of participants and their links with community, nor their talk content beyond a generalist "Chinese language". The decision to pursue these programs may be influenced by the Ethnic Program Grant, which is a funding grant administered by the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) that aims to fund language programs. Funded programs must adhere to a strict set of guidelines, including the ratio of talk content to music content of the program and the type of information being presented. The broadcast station receives a portion of the grant, with the remainder being paid to the broadcaster/s to support the production of content. The Ethnic Program grant makes up a significant proportion of the station's income, and is likely to have influenced the decision to pursue this type of content: the generalist Chinese program is eligible to receive funding, whereas a program like "*Asia-Centric*" is not.

During the running of the action research project, there was a slow increase of vacant airtime, where the availability of airtime was greater than the number of volunteers wanting to produce radio programming that fit within the station's policies and procedures. This trend was a motivating factor in commissioning the action research, and the volunteer recruitment that occurred during this period assisted in slowing this increase of vacant airtime. Since the conclusion of this project, the trend has continued and there is an increasing amount of vacant airtime. The station has also started taking syndicated programming from the Community Radio Network (a service coordinated by the community broadcasting peak body), which allows the sharing of broadcast content between community stations across the country. Although the aims of the network are laudable, the overreliance of 2rrr in rebroadcasting this syndicated content has inevitably led to less local content being produced.

Conclusion

The overarching intent of this study was to develop a system of program recruitment that was self-sustaining, in that programs would be able to maintain their on-air programmers and production through the support and involvement of their community. It was anticipated that there would be a wider involvement of these volunteers in the management of the station, democratizing the board of directors. Further, it was hoped that the study would improve the relevance of the station to its local community, reducing vacant airtime. The ease with which the project was dismantled indicates that we failed in that intention. The current programming policies are insular and demonstrate significant shortfalls in understanding about community involvement and perhaps most importantly, seem to fall short of compliance. Representation in governance has consistently shrunk to the point where there are now more positions than willing volunteers. There is a significant, yet difficult to define problem in that sub-metro stations have very specific programming requirements and needs, yet certainly in the case of 2RRR, seem to default to programs that appeal to the whole of the metropolitan area. This dichotomy was represented on-air by the use of phrases such as 'Serving Ryde and through them, the city of Sydney'. Further, the language profile of ethnic programming represented communities for example, where there were less than 20 speakers of the language in the entire license area. These examples highlight the complexities of operating a community radio station in this fractured environment. What is more problematic is that in our opinion, it highlights a lack of understanding, by governance of what a sub-metro area means to the people who identify with it.

In line with the legislative changes occurring in the Australian sector, and more broadly with the shift in governance practices towards more a more strategic mindset, a further evolution of these models into a more strategic process may occur when a station starts to identify where their communities may be changing over the next two to five years and becomes pro-active in their volunteer recruitment. The move from a model that identifies what is happening now to a model that will identify the changes in a community over the subsequent planning period, whilst essentially predictive, would through increased literacy and understanding ultimately support a station to become more relevant and adaptive to the changing needs to their community. However, based on the experiences

of this study, significantly higher order skills of planning and research would need to be held and passed on by each successive board of management. The benefits of such an approach would need to be tangible and understandable to the wide range of people that volunteer for non-profit governance. We argue that a process of practice based learning would significantly enhance these capacities. This type of training would involve on-going mentoring, review and application of existing skills matched with training in research and planning and supported by on-going impact driven projects. A program built around these principles may help to ensure that any program of community led recruitment would have a greater chance of success than this study at becoming embedded in practice.

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