



Community radio, radicalism and the grassroots: Discussing the politics of contemporary Australian community

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Abstract: In late 1999, researchers from Griffith University in Australia embarked on a two-year research project of the Australian community radio sector. That project, which is nearing completion, investigated the role of community radio; the profile of community radio personnel; the training contribution of the sector; use of new technologies, and the cultural contribution of the sector, among other things. In general, it was designed to provide a comprehensive snapshot of the Australian community radio industry as it stands today. During the project, some interesting data emerged which reveals much about the Australian sector. The data shows that, contrary to popular perceptions, the Australian community radio sector is relatively conservative in its outlook, possibly caused by a significant shift to the 'right' in the past 10 years which seem to have coincided with its move into regional areas, and its increasing commitment to commercial goals. Community radio is no longer the site of radical or grassroots political action that it was once perceived to be, although it is still strongly anchored in its 'communities of interest'.

Key terms: community radio; politics; radicalism; grassroots; culture; public radio

Background to the community radio sector

Community radio in Australia represents one of the largest growth sectors in the Australian media industry. In 2001, the Australian Broadcasting Authority listed just over 200 community broadcasters and about 150 active aspirant stations working toward a full license. This indicates an increase of nearly 400 percent on the number of stations in 1985 when there were just 56 licensed stations, with the number of stations more than doubling since 1995. In comparison, there are currently 255 commercial licenses. The first official community radio station went to air in Australia in 1972 (5UV-AM). It had developed after a long period of lobbying by various groups of broadcast enthusiasts. The primary motivators behind the push for Australian community radio can be identified in four categories: fine music enthusiasts; ethnic communities; universities and colleges; and progressive, or left-wing political groups (Bear, 1983: 22). The Public Broadcasting Association of Australia, the first lobby group for the community radio sector, expressed a clear ideology of alternative broadcasting, anti-commercialism, democratisation and localism when it was formed in 1974 (Bear, 1983: 23).

Community radio and 'radicalism'

The common perception is that community radio – originally known as 'public' radio – began as a radical and alternative source of information and news for the public. In many ways this perception is not misplaced, but if we look at the four major lobbying groups which established community radio -- fine music enthusiasts, ethnic groups, universities and colleges, and radical political groups – we can say that perhaps two or three of those were dedicated to progressive political and social issues. Well-known confrontations between the conservative Fraser Liberal government in Australia and broadcasters at radical stations such as Brisbane's 4ZZZ and the national capital's 2XX helped to further the reputation of community radio as the site of radical politics. To further consolidate its reputation, the 1975 Working Party on Public Broadcasting indicated it was the responsibility of the community radio sector to provide all groups that had no effective voice in the mainstream media with a full opportunity to participate and broadcast their messages (1975: 7; see Barlow, 1999: 86-87). Further, numerous authors have attributed the birth of the community radio movement to the Whitlam Labor government (Seneviratne, 1993; Rosenbloom, 1978), now considered one of the most reformist governments ever elected in Australia. Thornley, however, gives equal credit to both the Coalition and Labor government, but notes the first licenses were granted during the Whitlam era (1995).

Generally, however, the literature implies grassroots – and to some extent radical beginnings – for community radio. The growth of regional stations in the late 1970s appears to have added a newer, more conservative angle to the sector. This movement into regional areas has continued consistently for the past 20 years, with about 60 percent of community radio stations currently serving regional (rather than metropolitan) communities (Forde, 2000). Community radio's role in regional areas is particularly important in light of the recent concern over commercial radio services to regional areas. *Local Voices: An Inquiry into Regional Radio* (2001) found that although there had been a substantial increase in the number of radio services to regional areas, networking and syndicated services from metropolitan centres, pre-recording and automation diminished a real commitment to local content. The implications of networked and syndicated services for regional listeners is best explained by one submission to the Inquiry (2001:61):

'One of the greatest complaints from people in Roma, for example, has been that the announcer in Townsville simultaneously serving all these markets may be heard to comment 'Not another rainy day' as the tropical storms fall in Townsville. Unfortunately, Roma is in the midst of the worst drought in 40 years and the local people are suffering badly. These types of comments can be quite hurtful'.

Local Voices (2001) found the principal reason for the lack of commercial radio services to regional areas related to commercial viability. Not surprisingly then, many community radio stations are now finding themselves to be the only local radio voice, placing increasing pressure on them to represent the diversity of views in their local communities, rather than focusing on the 'marginalised' voices previously ignored by the existing commercial stations. Ewart confirms that regional media outlets are particularly important in establishing the culture, and 'norms' of their audiences (2000) – along with local newspapers, community radio is now, in some regional areas, responsible for the portrayal and fair representation of quite diverse rural communities.

As far as capital city community radio is concerned, the prominent standing of the fine music stations has always hindered any claims of the sector to be truly radical. Additionally, resource problems identified by community broadcasters in the early days, and through the first half of the 1980s have continued, with many stations being forced to adjust their content to attract a broader sponsorship base. Bear notes that as early as 1983, barely 10 years after the first license was granted, that the original ideals of community (then 'public') radio had largely 'been lost':

...they are too poor to be truly innovative in their programming. The original high ideals, the *raison d'être* of the public broadcasting to be genuinely alternative, to 'democratise the airwaves', to offer genuinely new and challenging ideas, opinions and styles have to a large extent been lost (1983: 27).

This trend has continued. In light of decreasing core funding from the Australian Federal government (Forde et.al, 2001a) more community radio stations are relying on commercial activities to keep their operations alive. On average, Federal funding forms less than 10 percent of Australian community radio's income – the rest is provided by fundraising and sponsorship from local businesses. There was a great deal of recognition throughout the 1990s that many community radio stations, while they may be anchored in their community of interest, are threatened by increasing calls for audience share and higher sponsorship levels. The community broadcasting representative body, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA), has noted that the drive towards commercialism – fuelled by the government's reluctance to properly fund the sector, and its encouragement of higher sponsorship levels – is hindering community radio's ability to continue to provide the opportunity for access and participation, let alone radical content (Thompson, 2000: 7). Thompson further argues that the greatest issue facing community radio at the turn of the century was this increasing commercial pressure (1999):

The question is whether the increasingly competitive and commercially oriented environment in which community radio operates will force stations to abandon the ideals on which the sector was established in order to survive.

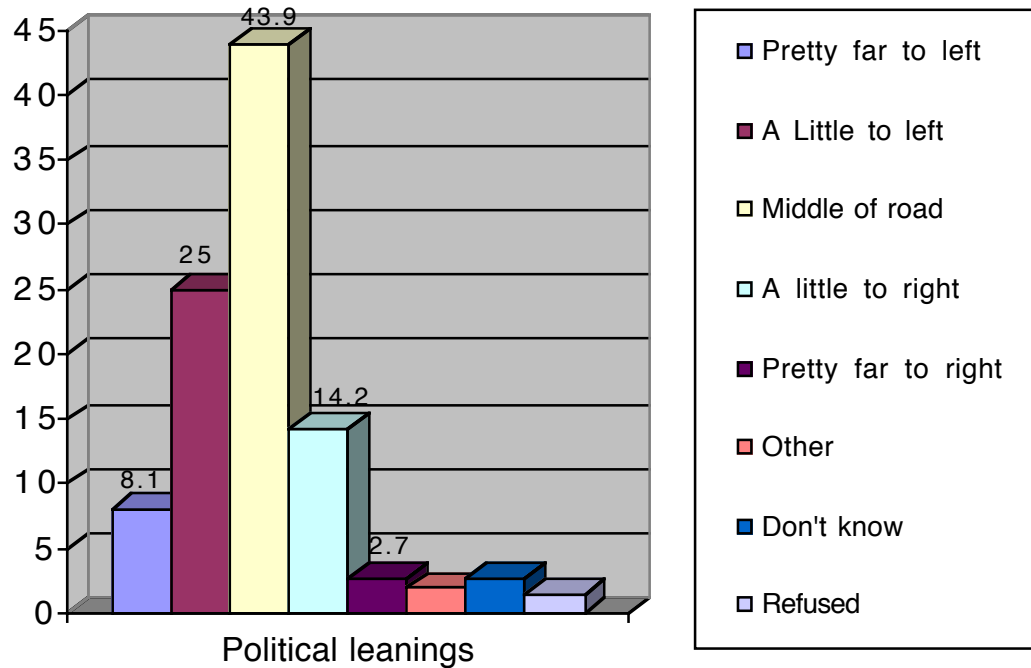
High ratings simply means tighter commercial formats, and targeting programming at markets which will appeal to sponsors – the high disposable income 18-35 market.

The politics of the sector

In line with this increasing push towards greater commercialism in the sector – and interviews that our project has conducted with station managers and volunteers suggest this pressure is very real – there is evidence that the sector is itself becoming more conservative in its politics. Last year's syndication of conservative 'shock jock' John Laws' talkback program throughout the sector, and the fact that a number of stations chose to pick up the show, was evidence of this and caused some concern in the sector's representative bodies. No longer a reservoir of left-leaning politics, or at least progressive, politics, our study has shown that community radio station managers are relatively conservative, with an increasing number of conservative voters holding senior positions within the sector.

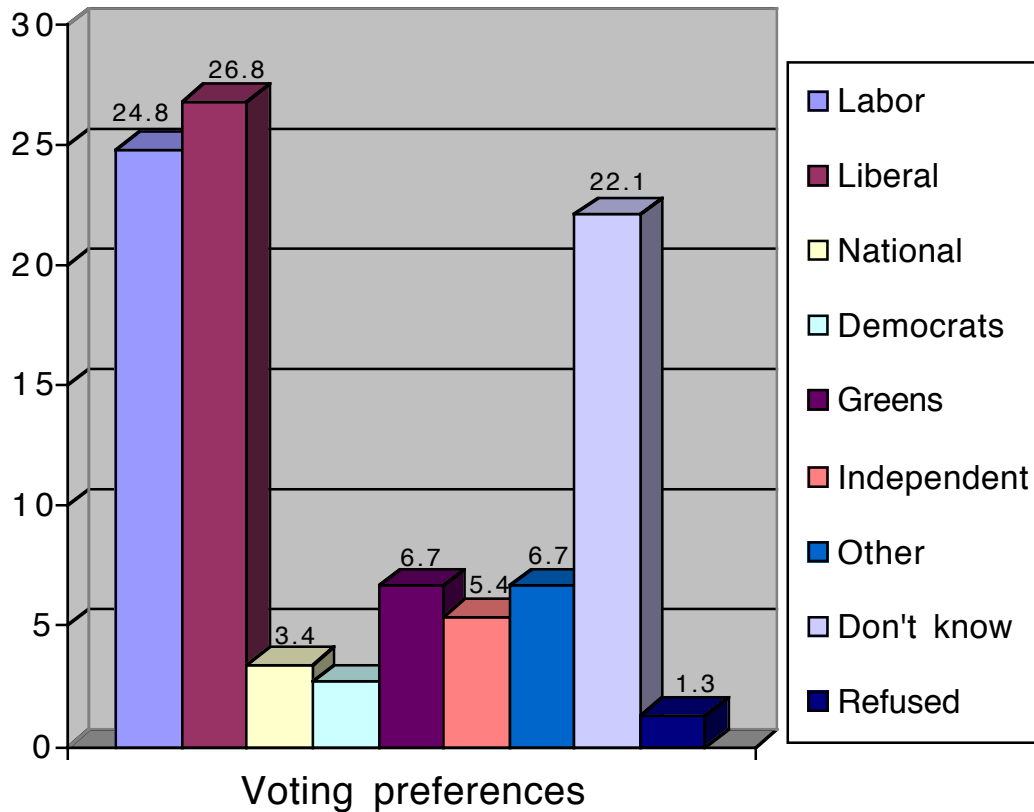
When asked where they would place themselves on the political spectrum, about one-third of community radio station managers felt they sat to the left of centre, with a sizable 45 percent nominating 'middle of the road' as the category that best described them. About 16 percent felt they were a little or pretty far to the right.

Political Leanings of Station Managers



A more revealing profile of the politics of the sector is elicited through the question: 'If a Federal election were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for in the House of Representatives?' The results of this question show that more community radio station managers would vote for the conservative Liberal Party than the Australian Labor Party if an election were held tomorrow. If the Coalition votes (i.e. the Liberal and National parties) are combined, they outweigh the Labor vote by about five percentage points.

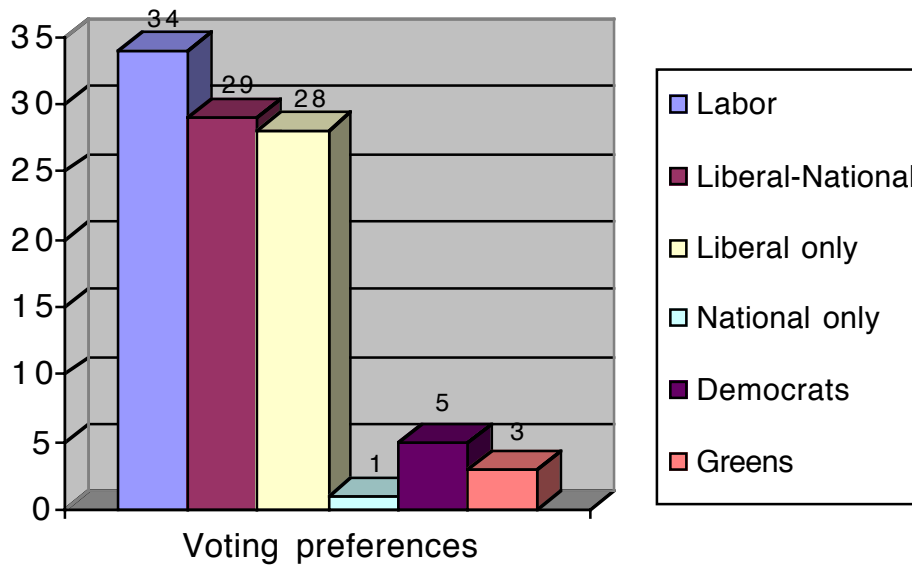
Voting preferences of station managers



About one in ten said they would vote either Australian Democrats or for the Greens, with a large 22 percent undecided about how they would vote. This also indicates that a large percentage of community radio station managers are 'swinging' voters, who are swayed by a different major party at each election. Our only regret is that similar survey was not conducted of Australian community radio 20 years ago, as it would have provided a key indicator of the major shift that many perceive to have occurred in the community radio sector.

It is interesting to note that these figures, while they have startled some people in the community radio sector, very closely reflect the politics of contemporary community radio *listeners*.

Voting preferences of listeners



SOURCE: ROY MORGAN, MARCH 2000

Roy Morgan research from March 2000 shows that while votes for the Labor Party marginally outweigh votes for the conservative's coalition (34 percent versus 29 percent), if the combined vote of the Liberal-National, and ordinary Liberal Party are combined, more than half of community radio listeners are voting Liberal or National. A little under 50 percent are voting either Labor, Democrats or Greens. Generally then, while on initial examination it might seem that community radio station managers are more conservative than the sector's reputation and history might indicate, it seems the politics of station managers are quite 'in tune' with the politics of their listeners. Essentially, both Australian community radio station managers and listeners are more likely to vote conservative than they are likely to vote Labor, Democrats or Greens. While some have attempted to explain this shift in terms of community radio's increasing presence in rural areas, which are traditionally more conservative, the Roy Morgan Research showed that there was little difference in the politics of community radio audiences in the city and country (Roy Morgan results available at <http://www.cbaa.org.au>).

Discussion

It is difficult to conclude whether our results represent a real shift in the politics of Australian community radio, or rather whether the early perceptions of community radio as a site of radical and progressive politics were simply misplaced. Without previous data, there are no concrete comparisons to be made. What we can say, however, is that community radio in Australia sprang from a movement dedicated to grassroots political action, alternative music forms, and participation and access for ordinary community members. We can safely conclude that the latter two motivations have been maintained, while there has been some decrease in the sector-wide commitment of community radio to grassroots and progressive political action, such as that epitomised by 'left-wing' and student-run stations. This, of course, does not imply that such a niche does not exist in the sector – it certainly does, and it is still prominent in sector representation. Increasingly, however, new stations are looking to sponsorship and larger audiences to compensate for scarce Federal government funding. Indeed, the onslaught of economic rationalism throughout the 1990s, which has certainly continued into the new century, demands that community radio justify their existence through their bottom line. As our project has discussed elsewhere (Foxwell 2001; Forde et.al. 2001b), this is an entirely inappropriate way to evaluate community radio which should be valued for its social contribution and benefit, rather than its ability to 'break-even' or operate in financial profit.

The increasing shift into regional areas, and the newer trend which has seen community radio stations as the sole radio voice in some regions, has undoubtedly further contributed to the erosion of the 'radical' image of community radio. Focus groups conducted as part of this study saw station managers and volunteers from country radio stations sitting down to discuss sector-wide goals with political activists from metropolitan, university-based stations. The disparity of views – in terms of the aims of the stations, their community role, and their commitment to commercial activities – were pronounced at group discussions conducted around Australia.

Despite these changes, however, it is important to note that Australian community radio has remained committed to notions of access and participation for both its members and general audience. Unlike commercial or state radio, community radio stations see audience members as potentially active participants in core activities such as program production, marketing, administration, and station management. This pattern has continued from the early developmental days of Australian community radio in the mid to late-1970s, right through until the present day. This has occurred regardless of whether the stations are fine music, or politically progressive, or ethnic broadcasters. Figures from our study indicate that approximately three-quarters of Australian community radio stations reported 30 or more volunteers, and just over a quarter reported having more than 100 volunteers. On average, stations enjoyed the active involvement of 65-70 volunteers. Thus across the sector of about 200 fully licensed stations, a conservative national estimate of volunteering would be 14000 regular unpaid participants. If we include aspirant stations in these figures and give them a slightly smaller average of volunteers, we can further estimate a minimum of 20000 Australians regularly volunteer in community radio. While there are some paid positions within community radio stations, 30 percent of stations do not employ any staff and 35 percent of stations employed three people or less. The majority of community radio paid positions are in sales and administration, thus highlighting the role of volunteers in program/content production.

Conclusions

While the politics of community radio, therefore, *may* have shifted in the past 25 years, the sector's overall commitment to access, participation and empowerment for ordinary community members has not wavered. In sectors such as ethnic broadcasting, community radio is playing an increasingly important role in making immigrants feel welcomed and informed about their new country (Forde et.al, 2001b). Indigenous broadcasting is playing a vital role in keeping alive indigenous cultures which have for 200 years been threatened by colonial settlement, and in giving voice to indigenous peoples so long ignored by our mainstream media outlets (Molnar and Meadows, 2001).

Community radio is also playing an essential part in promoting and maintaining Australian culture through its support of cultural industries such as radio drama, poetry, writing, and art (Forde et.al., 2001b). This indicates a clear adherence to community radio's initial goals to "provide all groups that had no effective voice in the mainstream media with a full opportunity to participate and broadcast their messages" (Working Party, 1975: 7). While the shifting politics may indeed indicate an increasing diversity of voices in Australian community radio, our research indicates that it has not served to diminish access, participation or empowerment for those groups with 'no effective voice' in Australian society.

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