The trouble with community radio research, or, how methodological setbacks can inform theoretical development
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Abstract

Participatory research design appears as an attractive option in the study of community media organisations. It puts the generation of the research question, the design of data collection methods, and the analysis of the results in the hands of the researched. This approach can demystify the research process and can be an empowering experience. But, as I found out with my doctoral research, the researcher needs to carefully assess an organisation's capacity to undertake do-it-yourself research, because, when things go wrong, this approach can also reveal conflicts within an organisation, as well as give rise to tension resulting from the divergent needs of the researcher and those of the researched. This paper describes the troubles that arose during fieldwork conducted at a community radio station, how these unexpected events forced a reformulation of the research question, and how this eventually led to an improved theoretical insight.

Introduction.

Since 1994, I had attended the annual conferences of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA), where community broadcasters frequently talked about the need for more research about their communities and audiences. For some, this need was partly motivated by the possible threat of commercial radio stations moving in on their town. One former station manager summed it up as follows:

> It won't be long before someone could move in here and set up a commercial station for largely this area and perhaps taking in [adjacent shires] ... And I think…they've [local community radio station] got to lift their whole quality of their programming and provide programming and music content that meets the needs of the local community. And that could be done through surveying (Personal Communication 1999).

Most community broadcasters, however, don't have the experience or the budget to carry out their own research. At some stations tertiary students had conducted marketing surveys, but most community broadcasters were unaware of approaches that go beyond traditional quantitative research. Also, the nature of research, the difference between qualitative and quantitative research, and the strengths and weaknesses of a range of techniques are not always understood by community broadcasters. Fortunately, this hasn't stopped some stations from experimenting with ways to gather information. At the start of my doctoral fieldwork in the late 1990s, the program manager at one participating station was designing a survey to assist with changing the program format, and at another station volunteers were doing kerbside surveys on the main street of their town to find out if shoppers were aware of their station. There seemed to be a demand for training in community radio research, and the sector's success in broadcasting training demonstrated that there existed a culture of do-it-yourself education, so participatory research seemed tailor-made for the sector.

I had previously gained practical experience in facilitating participatory research projects with farmers in North East Victoria (Van der Gragt and van Vuuren 1992) and with a community radio development project in South Africa (van Vuuren 1995). Armed with practical experience and brimming with confidence I decided to invite three community radio stations to take part in my PhD project. With my assistance they would develop their own research projects, and together we would collect a huge amount of data that would benefit them, as well as me. The opposite turned out to be the case. In this paper I will describe the questions that I sought to address and the assumptions on which I based my initial research design. I then turn to the events that unfolded at the first community radio station that took part in my project, which led to the abandonment of the participatory research model in favour of a more traditional data collection method. Most importantly, I show how this methodological 'failure' demanded a reorientation of the research questions, which subsequently led to a theoretical contribution to our understanding of the public sphere. In short, I show how reflection upon a methodological setback can be turned into a theoretical advancement.

The early research questions
At the start of my PhD candidature, I was concerned with community media's alternative and participatory ideologies—as an outlet for alternative political and cultural expression, and as a site of empowerment and democratic invigoration with media ownership being in the hands of grassroots citizen's associations—and how these structured the relationship between community media and democracy. I drew on Hochheimer (1993: 475-478) who proposed two models describing the differences in the ways community radio stations are oriented towards their communities. In the first, community serves as a resource *for* the radio station and business is conducted in such a way that the primary interaction is between sender and audience. This model is not unlike the relationship between broadcaster and audience in mainstream media. The second model turns this on its head, and considers the radio station as a resource *of* the community, whereby it serves to act as a channel for community members to share information between themselves. The kinds of questions that emerge from these models include the degree to which audiences or community members are brought into the program production process; the structures and processes that are in place to encourage new participants; and decision-making and conflict resolution processes. In other words, Hochheimer raised the professionalism/community development dichotomy that is not unfamiliar to Australian community broadcasters (Barlow 2002). The professional model tends to put a greater emphasis on the quality of the content broadcast on community radio, while the community development orientation is more concerned with providing access to ordinary people and under-represented social groups.

My study intended to explore the issues raised by Hochheimer, and aimed to address the following questions:
- Who participates in community media and which groups in a community are more likely to participate than others?
- How do individuals and groups from the community participate? Are they passive listeners, financial supporters, or active volunteers?
- What is the nature of the connections between the community broadcaster and its host community?

To answer these questions I anticipated the need for a multi-faceted research approach that took into account an entire community, its pattern of social relations, and the

interrelationship between messages, senders and receivers (Hollander 2002: 35-36). The approach included investigations of:

- The host community with respect to its geography, history and demography, and the presence of other media;
- The listeners, and what it is about community radio that appeals to them, how they use the station, and what motivates some to support their station financially;
- Sponsors, businesses, government and community organisations, and what it is that motivates their use of the station;
- The community radio organisation, including its stated objectives, organisational structure, management processes, and fundraising strategies;
- Program formats and content; and
- The individual volunteers, the nature of their motivations and their active participation.

At this stage I had no clear idea about the concept of 'community' aside from the much-used definitions that described these stations in terms of geographical location, or based on interest. Nor did I have a clear conception of the relationship between media and democracy, except for the normative claims in favour of community media, the arguments supporting a pluralist public sphere, and the notion of the Fourth Estate. The initial research approach was primarily conceived as an evaluation of the performance of typical Australian community radio stations in terms of the normative claims put forward by the sector as a whole. As the doctoral research progressed, however, I found that the concepts of 'community' and 'democracy' required clarification and discussion, and further, that the relationship between community media and democracy presented issues unique to the community sector that went deeper than a normative evaluation. However, this realisation did not come to me until after I encountered trouble with the conduct of the research at the first of three community radio station that took part in the project.

Selecting cases for participatory research
In order to provide depth to the research, as well as allow for some comparative analysis I adopted the case study method (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 37-44). This method has long been the favoured approach in the study of community media because it can account for the diverse experiences that take place in local contexts (Berrigan 1977; Downing 1984; Girard 1992; Howley 2005; Jankowski, Prehn & Stappers 1992; Rodríguez 2001). Furthermore, this method is also better suited to exploratory research questions that concern phenomena about which we know little.

To decide which community radio stations to include in my study, I developed selection criteria based on a survey of Australian community radio websites, a review of community radio literature, discussions with staff from the CBAA, data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and my own 20-year experience of the sector. There were also some pragmatic considerations such as accessibility, travel and accommodation costs (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 38) and, most importantly, the community radio stations had to be willing to participate in the research. The three cases included in the study (whom I shall call FM101, FM88, and FM77 to protect their identity) were all located within 500 kilometres of my home in Brisbane. They had all been licensed for more than 10 years and were the only community radio station in their towns. All three stations presented 'generalist' programs aimed at a broadly representative audience. Two of the stations operated in remote communities with populations of less than 10 000 residents, while the third operated in a larger regional

centre with a population of more than 50 000 residents. All were incorporated associations with the board of directors or management committee elected by the membership. One station employed a full-time manager, the second operated entirely with volunteer staff, while the third had employed part-time staff in the past but, at the time of the field work, was entirely run by volunteers.

The case study method is also the preferred approach to participatory research. Participatory research differs from other approaches to research in that the generation of the research question, design, data collection and analysis are in the hands of the research subjects. It stems from a critique of orthodox research inquiry, which is often exploitative and can disadvantage the communities in which the research takes place (Reason 1994: 328-329). In contrast, participatory research rests on Paolo Freire's concept of 'conscientisation'—the empowerment of people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge. Participatory research shares a number of principles with community development, including the demystification of the research process, and a collaborative process between the people and the researcher that empowers, motivates, increases self-esteem and develops community solidarity (Kenny 1999: 24-25; Reason 1994: 329).

I intended to meet my research aims by observing how the participating stations would develop their own research strategies to find out more about their communities. I anticipated that volunteers would frame their own research objectives from a particular point of view and these views would form the basis of an evaluation that would inform my own research objectives. I expected to run workshops with groups of volunteers to assist them with the development of their measurement tools, such as questionnaires, sampling strategies, and the weaknesses and strengths of, for example, telephone surveys. Volunteers would process the data themselves and then put their own interpretation on the results. I intended to commence the project with relatively simple techniques such as a small survey consisting of no more than five questions to be put to visitors to the station, followed by a larger survey of the membership, and gradually building up to more complex audience research. In this way the method would combine a range of qualitative and quantitative techniques and be structured into a series of steps 'built around central concepts and concerns' (Real 1989: 69-70). An element of repetition was built into the data collection techniques so that volunteers would feel more confident about the research process as it progressed to the next stage.

The data collected by the volunteers would inform my own research interests by generating information about how the station management and volunteers decided who should be included in the planning and implementation of research, what issues were of concern, and which sections of the community would be the primary object of their research, thus addressing some of the issues raised by Hochheimer. For example, if they decided to undertake an audience survey that was designed to inform their sponsorship policy (a limited form of advertising) then this pointed to a particular conception of their audience, which could be interpreted as conforming to Hochheimer's first model, in which the community is seen as a resource *for* the station. Such an interpretation could then be modified by the volunteers' research approach to the other groups in their community, including the volunteers themselves. Data to be generated from this approach would provide a detailed and in-depth understanding of each case (Jensen 1991: 5), and the diversity of research techniques would ensure that the research problem was viewed from different perspectives, or 'triangulated' (Hollander 2002: 36; Schatzman & Strauss 1973: 71).

One implication of this method is that research questions are rarely developed beyond a general intention before starting the fieldwork (Schatzman & Strauss 1973: 3-12). It is up to the people, with the assistance of the researcher to decide what will be researched. In my initial contact with the first radio station (FM101) I gave a general outline of my research interests, which were then primarily focused on the relationship between the radio station and its community, and presented the station's management committee with a written outline of the approach. I listed the different groups in the community, with whom the station had a relationship, as identified above, and suggested that the committee take some time to consider its priorities, and we would then work out the details. This approach meant that as a researcher I needed to take a flexible approach and also be familiar with a range of research techniques depending on the approach that the committee wanted to take. I felt confident about meeting this challenge since I had a good understanding of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches and skills in ethnographic, participatory and action research, as well as social and psychological statistical methods, audience research techniques, and content analysis (Meadows, Hippocrates and van Vuuren 1997; Meadows, van Vuuren and Wymarra 1997; Van der Gragt and van Vuuren 1992; van Vuuren 1995). I also felt confident about being able to impart my knowledge and skills in a way that is easily understood by a lay person, as well as being able to guide a project that puts the research in the hands of the researched.

Finally, I was also aware of some disadvantages of this approach, such as the inability to make generalisations, although it is possible to assess how typical the cases are by comparing them with published research and government statistics (cf. Goldthorpe et al. 1969: 1-8, 30-53). Furthermore, the collection of quantitative data, such as volunteers' personal demographic details, allowed for comparisons between case studies as well as with data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and for other studies (De Vaus 1991: 134; Lindlof 1995: 63). Another disadvantage of this research approach is that it presents a snapshot in time, and is therefore not indicative of longitudinal trends. During the course of a community's history, it experiences ups and downs. My field research may have coincided with abnormally prosperous or difficult times. This proved to be the case with FM101 and was an issue recognised by volunteers at FM88, where one participant commented that had I approached the station some years earlier, when there was 'lots of in-fighting, cliques and that', I would have received completely different answers to the same questions put to the volunteers.

In retrospect it has become all too clear that the research project outlined above was way too ambitious for a PhD project. But at the time, I thought that with a handful of case studies and the participatory methods that built on techniques I'd successfully used elsewhere, I would be able to gather a mountain of very useful data, as well as come up with the definitive model for community radio research! Some time after completion of the field research at FM101 (which took six months longer than first planned), I was informed that the research project coincided with a difficult time for the station. At the time I was unaware of the extent of the station's internal strife and how this raised problems for the participatory approach at that station. However, the troubles encountered at FM101 changed the focus of the research question, shaped the more orthodox research method that was subsequently implemented at FM77 and FM88, and generated a more useful analysis.

Troubles with participatory research at FM101
The possibility of FM101 participating in the research was first raised with the station's president in April of the first year of my candidature. Six months later I made a formal approach to the station and attended a management committee meeting, where I tabled an outline of the project identifying the different sections of the community that could be researched. Early discussions with FM101's management indicated that the project would be mutually beneficial, the station would obtain information that could assist it in its fundraising efforts and day-to-day operations, and I would collect data that would inform my research interests. The station had developed a range of documented procedures that guided its relationship with various sections of the community. A perusal of this material indicated that a wealth of information could potentially be gathered, and a participatory approach seemed ideally suited because it could incorporate an educational function and give FM101 volunteers an opportunity to learn some research techniques, as well as gather information that could assist them with their own radio programs and with station operations more generally.

In consultation with the station's Management Committee I developed a four-month research program, which would allow me to gradually ease into FM101's volunteer community. According to Schatzman and Strauss (1973: 58), the presence of a researcher can create disturbances in a given situation that may influence the success of the research. I therefore took on the role of participant observer and became a volunteer. I was rostered for reception duties, which provided the opportunity to meet the volunteers, as well as allowed me to observe the day-to-day routine, which would assist in the research design. Early discussions and observations of day-to-day activities indicated that the participatory approach could satisfy a number of research questions: who participates in community radio, the prevalence of some groups compared with others, and the formation of alliances between the station and other community groups. The project, however, was contingent upon the assistance of the volunteer coordinator, as well as a large enough group of volunteers who were interested in taking part in the project. Notices were put up around the station to explain the project and how volunteers could be involved and I was given a list of station volunteers to contact. The Management Committee would approve all materials before implementation.

The field work commenced in October and I initially limited my activities to collecting station documents, taking audio recordings from selected programs, attending outside broadcasts, and with getting to know the volunteers. By late November trouble began to emerge. Requests for information were not met and on a number of occasions I found that the station had shut its doors during its usual office hours (a pattern that persisted until the end of my field research by September of the following year). The timing of the research was partly a problem. As I was to learn later on, many people are on holidays between November and February, and this is therefore a notoriously difficult time for voluntary community organisations to meet their staffing needs. There were no volunteers available to look after the reception desk, and no paid staff to make sure the station's doors remained open. There were also changes taking place among volunteers in coordinating positions. I had wrongly assumed, however, that the station would be inundated with students who were looking for something to do during their holidays and that there would therefore be coordinating staff on hand. The holiday season also delayed responses to the written proposal put to FM101's Management Committee earlier in September. It was not discussed until they met again, in January of the following year. At this meeting, which I did not attend, the committee decided that I should go ahead with the project. In response I prepared a list of specific questions that

could be included in the research, but I received no feedback, apart from the station President urging me to push ahead with the project.

The first stage of the research was designed to add to activities already undertaken by the volunteers. Volunteers rostered for reception duties would ask visitors to the station to fill in a brief questionnaire consisting of about five questions, which would provide some information about their use of the station. A shorter version of the survey was designed for the telephone. This technique had proven successful elsewhere and was able to provide information about who used the station and how they used it (van Vuuren 1995). Materials were prepared, a number of volunteers were asked to look at the questions and give some feedback, and the volunteer coordinator was briefed, but she was unavailable to assist. Explanations and instructions were put in every volunteer's mailbox. The reception survey took place over one week in January. I met with the first volunteer rostered on for the first day who reported no difficulties with carrying out the task. He ensured the next volunteer was briefed at the change of shifts, because I was unable to be at the station during much of the week. I was tempted to be present at the station, but expected that I would end up doing the work myself, thus compromising the participatory element of the research. However, I rang the station during most shifts to sort out any problems. At the end of the survey period it became clear that the process had been unsuccessful. A number of volunteers had not turned up for their shifts and instructions were therefore not passed on, some had not remembered to ask questions, and others felt uncomfortable about the process. As a result, the data could not be used.

By this stage I began to have doubts about the suitability of the participatory approach as there appeared to be a number of barriers that worked against it. Firstly, the station did not have sufficient volunteer staff able to take a central role in the project, perhaps in the form of a sub-committee where the project could be workshopped, and which would take on the responsibility of organising volunteers. This should probably have been sorted out beforehand, so that there was a clear point of contact between myself and the station. Furthermore, I should have sought greater clarification about the resources that the station could commit and then scaled back the project, perhaps revising my research focus, which I ended up doing anyway. In hindsight it became clear that I worked with assumptions based on my experience of large city-based community radio stations with volunteer numbers in excess of 300 people, and with paid staff skilled in administration and programming. This was not the norm among non-metropolitan community radio stations, where some stations operate with as little as 20 volunteers.

In March an attempt at surveying the station's membership raised further problems and further exposed my big-city bias. The membership survey involved the design and mail-out of a questionnaire survey. I assumed that members would be regularly contacted with a newsletter, and a questionnaire could be inserted in the mail-out to gather data about their age, gender, education, occupation, income and other matters of interest to the station. For example, FM101's new volunteer program manager was interested in obtaining feedback from the membership about a proposed format change. Problems arose immediately with this survey. One person from the management committee took part in this activity, but it proved difficult to generate interest among volunteers in workshopping the research process, which would have provided me with data about their attitudes towards the station's listeners. Problems also arose with locating the membership coordinator in order to arrange the mail-out and there was confusion over who was responsible for this task, as the previous coordinator had resigned from the position and it had become the responsibility of the treasurer. At the time, FM101

claimed to have about 2300 members, and we decided to sample this data, which was stored on the station's computer, to keep the costs down. However, the station's computer and photocopier were kept at a volunteer's home because there was no room to house this equipment at the station. Address labels for the mail-out were never printed and I was informed some months later that the task proved to be too much for the volunteers. Furthermore, had the photocopier been located at the station's premises it would have been far easier to involve volunteers in collation and mail-out of the questionnaire. The project would have been visible to the volunteers. Later in the year it came to light that the database was in a mess, and had to be sorted out manually. It turned out that the station had 750 subscribers, not 2300.

Further troubles arose with distribution of the questionnaire. There were concerns that a mail-out would become too expensive and for this reason the station had not sent a newsletter to its members for some years. Given that the station's membership mainly lived in the local area we decided to try hand delivery of the questionnaire. This approach worked successfully at community radio station in Brisbane, where a team of volunteers delivered the monthly program guide to over 4000 subscribers. At FM101 only a handful of the station's 60 or so volunteers were able to give some of their time to the project. It also came to light that some volunteers were suspicious of the project and they deliberately misplaced questionnaires. We assumed that 500 questionnaires had been distributed, but only 40 completed questionnaires were returned, so this survey was also abandoned. The experience indicated that a telephone survey might have worked better, but this requires a telephone system that can handle multiple calls, and the stations I worked with rarely had more than two lines. This exercise further exposed my own assumptions that the station's volunteers were willing and able to undertake what was essentially an administrative task. Shortcomings in management and administration have been recognised as a sector-wide problem, and have led to demands that funds be set aside for management training. From FM101's perspective my research project could be understood as an administrative process, whereas I assumed that the research understood as a learning activity would be of interest to the volunteers. In any case, the project began to look less and less like participatory research as time went by.

'Outside' research and internal conflict
It gradually became clear that, aside from the issue of my assumptions about the station's administrative capacity, there was a level of internal conflict and distrust present at FM101 that worked against the implementation of the research. At the end of the field research, which by now had taken 12 months, I attended the Annual General Meeting. That meeting was marked by tension and hostility among the volunteers, and brought in a change of station management and a new president. By then I realised that volunteers saw the research as a chore, much like book keeping or filling out program schedules for copyright purposes ('APRA' sheets), rather than as an opportunity to learn new skills. Although volunteers recognise the necessity of these tasks, they prefer to leave them to those who are qualified to do them. They felt more comfortable about leaving particular jobs, such as accounting or technical work, in the hands of professionals. I also had to face up to the fact that the participatory approach had been compromised from the start, in that the research questions did not initially arise out of the community radio station, even though there existed a general desire for more information about FM101's listeners (Van der Gragt & van Vuuren 1992; Wadsworth 1991). The research was not 'owned' by the community but was seen as an 'outside' project.

Although my support for participatory research methods has not diminished, my experience raised the possibility that this method is not always appropriate to particular situations. Participatory research requires a degree of cooperation and coordination from the participating community that may not be possible where a community is in conflict, or where the organisation may not have the capacity to undertake particular tasks. Although my project at first aimed to address the issue of capacity, my own research agenda stood in the way of properly dealing with the issues encountered from the participants' points of view. At FM101, it may even have contributed to the conflict that was already present at the station. At all three community radio stations, there was evidence of some tension between my research interests and the particular concerns of each station. At FM101 and FM88, some volunteers could not see the immediate benefits of the research, while at FM77 volunteers wanted assistance with the recruitment of volunteers, and with their fundraising efforts. Discussion with volunteers at FM88 clearly demonstrated that they expected outcomes from the research that diverged substantially from its purpose:

> *Male 1*: I don't see how it's related at all as far as the radio goes.

> *Male 2*: We don't want you to feel embarrassed, having visited two other radio stations and us, and hope that you would be able to come forward and say 'I've done my survey, I've got my results, and by the way, how about this, what about that, your security is very bad or very good, your filing system is very bad or very good'. And I would like to think there was an outside input from somebody who's got an overall view of this kind of service, which can then be an independent unbiased advice or input because we are a sort of closed group here.

> *Male 3*: Probably the only one who will use it is when [the station manager] gets it. That's from the manager's point of view sort of goes through it and says 'jeez, I could probably use more news, I could probably use more 30s, 40s'. I mean that sort of stuff.

> *Me*: There are probably better ways to determine that than through this.

> *Female 1*: By the looks of this we need more music...

> *Male 4*: No that's just telling you what the announcer thinks is important about the station and gives you an idea of what the volunteers are thinking. Yeah that's the way that it will help us.

These comments, perhaps most clearly brought home to me how wide a gap there was between my own research agenda and the needs of the station. The troubles that emerged with the membership questionnaire at FM101 forced me to accept that my research design was flawed and it was best to abandon the idea of participatory research. This meant a reformulation of the research question and the scale of data collection was restricted to volunteers and their experiences. The only element of participatory research that was included in the revised design was an opportunity for volunteers to comment on the results of the data collection in a focus group (see Kreps 1990: 107).

Although I was at first disappointed by the events that unfolded at FM101, after reflecting on what had happened (I had kept a detailed field journal), I was able to use the methodological 'failure' to develop my doctoral thesis.

How lessons learnt in the field contributed to theoretical development
My own status as a 'professional' forced me to reconceptualise the professionalism/community development dichotomy raised by Hoccheimer and others. Early in my research I had accepted the view that 'professionalism' hindered the community development potential for community broadcasting (see also Barlow 1998: 266). My research project, however, exposed contradictions in my own attitude towards the sector. Although I had once been an amateur volunteer with little knowledge of broadcasting, organisation or politics, community radio had stimulated my own development towards professional credentials. It therefore made little sense to reject professionalism, even though I did not agree with the kind of professionalism favoured by some. Professionalism can be understood both as a desire to achieve competence in radio production, as well as in terms of community development. In either case, certain tasks require qualified and experienced personnel. During the conduct of the fieldwork, I gradually began to accept that 'professionalism' is an intrinsic element of community broadcasting and serves as a discursive tool that defines boundaries to organisational membership. Put simply, not all community radio stations are set up to encourage access to anyone who wanders in off the street. They may have a specific role to address the needs of particular communities, such as the vision-impaired, or ethnic and Indigenous communities. These communities may demand of their community radio station that programs are presented professionally and that access is restricted to those who are authorised by the community (Molnar & Meadows 2001: 199).

The issue of professionalism fuelled much of the conflict at FM101 and informed a second lesson. Although I was no stranger to conflict in community broadcasting, I had not previously had the opportunity to observe this at an emotional distance. Controversy can be understood as a necessary element in democratic and collective decision-making, rather than viewing this as some kind of hindrance in a station's pursuit of its aims. FM101's internal conflicts contrasted starkly with its on-air sound. On air, the station's volunteer announcers were discouraged from making any kind of controversial or political comment in their radio shows (see for example van Vuuren 2001). Although this can attract the criticism of censorship, it is not uncommon to Australian community broadcasting more generally and is partly a response to the prohibitive costs associated with libel and defamation actions, which could close a station down. Another reason to keep the lid on controversial issues concerns a group's ability to influence the larger public sphere. Jeffrey (2002) reports an example where members from an ethnic minority were discouraged from making public conflicts internal to their community in order to avoid disapproval from society at large.

On another note, FM101's limited capacity in contributing independent points of view in the public sphere, together with the degree of internal conflict observed at the station, suggested that the organisation could not be considered as a unified and organised entity that somehow mediated democracy in the wider community. The implication of this for studying the relationship between listeners, supporters and the community radio station suggested a research project way beyond the scope of a manageable PhD project. Such a project would require taking into account differential access to the station based on complex relationships that go beyond that of a listener choosing to listen to particular content. It would need to take into account personal interactions between the volunteers,

their family and friends, organisational linkages such as those existing between the station, businesses and community groups, and the personal, organisational and ideological dimensions that underpin these relationships. It would also need to identify groups that feel they are largely excluded from the station, such as youth and the politically active.

Meanwhile, the issue of democracy was unfolding before me at a 'defensive' level, that is, internally within the organisation (Cohen & Arato 1992: 512-513), and this strengthened my resolve to direct the research focus towards an analysis of the volunteers, and examine the everyday practices of community radio volunteers, their activities, and what motivated them. The method was redesigned towards a more orthodox approach and included a face-to-face questionnaire survey, and a focus group at the conclusion of the field research. The thesis question was narrowed down and rephrased to question the value and purpose of Australian community broadcasting. This question lent itself to a discussion of the tension between professionalism (understood as a programming aesthetic and articulated in the news content component of the PhD thesis) and community development principles (articulated in the volunteer survey). Once I came to terms with the professionalism/community development dichotomy I was able to develop a theoretical framework that was less concerned with evaluating the normative principles of community broadcasting. If I had stuck with a normative analysis I would inevitably have had to favour one model over another. This would have raised a new problem of what to do about all those community radio stations that did not operate according to the desired model. Did this mean that they had no right to exist? And who was I to make that judgment? Confronted by this new problem, I decided to experiment with a reinterpretation of the normative principles (professionalism versus community development) as *structural* principles. That is, the values associated with professionalism, or with community development are used by organisations to define their boundaries and decide who should be included, and who should be excluded from the organisation (van Vuuren 2006). Once I took this step, everything began to fall into place, the earlier methodological 'failures' took on a new life and instead became valuable material that resolved a theoretical problem that had been brewing in the background for much of the duration of the PhD candidature.

That problem concerned the notion of 'community' that underpins community media research. To resolve this I first needed to come to terms with the issue of organisational conflict. The issues at the heart of the conflicts at FM101 were common to many community radio stations. They concerned 'good' programming and who had the right to make decisions. 'Good' programming inevitably raises issues about appropriate content and broadcasting style, who should be given the right to broadcast, and how such decisions impact on fundraising. Those decisions could be in the hands of delegated staff, or they could be in the hands of committees. Neither way is more valid than the other because the preferred approach depends on the specific purpose of the organisation. Some stations are more concerned with presenting information appropriate to their audiences, such as programming for the vision-impaired, whereas others are more interested in broad community participation, where program quality is of secondary importance. Instead, a key issue became the extent to which a radio station's purpose and decision-making processes are acceptable to its users, and this pointed to a structural rather than a normative issue—a structural issue in that conflict pointed to the process whereby a group of people develop rules and norms with which to manage a resource. A resource that is regulated and monitored by its community of users is referred to as a 'commons'. A 'commons' is based on property rights, where property is not understood

as an object but as a social relationship with respect to something of value (Bromley 1992:4). The resource that is of value in the case of community broadcasting is, of course, the broadcasting licence held by the incorporated association that represents the community of users. The association establishes group boundaries (which *are* normative decisions) to determine who will be admitted and to regulate the conduct of the membership. Without such boundaries, an association runs the risk of being taken over by elements hostile to its aims, and this can erode the value of the broadcasting licence to the community. In other words, internal conflict is a process that regulates the value of the community broadcasting licence.

One implication of adopting a commons approach, however, is the widely held assumption that a public sphere must be open and accessible. The process described above clearly suggested the opposite, and furthermore, that this was neither possible nor desirable! If this is the case, how then can community broadcasting contribute to democracy? My research suggested that the sector's strength was located less in its ability to broadcast alternative news and views—although it does do this, especially in the larger capital cities—but more in its ability to set up procedures that determine who is included and excluded in organisational decision-making. My research further suggests that there is no single organisational model that can best achieve this, but that a combination of factors needs to be taken into account, including the purpose of the organisation, its cultural orientations, norms and values (for a fuller discussion see van Vuuren 2006).

But, what about the research subjects?
One of the problems of academic research is that results often take a long time to come out. The events I described above occurred during the first few years of a seven-year candidature. By the time I sent a copy of my thesis to the participating stations, staff and volunteers had come and gone, and those who were still there may not even have remembered who I was and what it was all about. I never did receive any feedback from them. I certainly didn't expect them to read the thesis, which is, after all, full of jargon—the trademark of the professional! I'd like to think that my work was of some benefit to them, and that it helped them to achieve their goals. If I have failed in that, I guess that I can at least console myself with having made a contribution to the field.

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