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Community media and ethical choice

Ellie Rennie, Leo Berkeley & Blaise Murphet

Abstract

The Internet provides a means for non-professional media-makers to produce and publish their own video and audio content, as community television and radio have done for several decades. While the web seems to exemplify the principles of media access and diversity championed by the community media sector, it also raises challenges for broadcast community media participants and their online equivalents, not least being the co-opting of the term 'community media' by large commercial interests. A symposium held in Melbourne by Open Spectrum Australia ('Quality/Control', State Library of Victoria, Oct 2008) brought together people with a wide range of community media experience to discuss this and other issues, particularly the possibilities for greater cooperation between broadcast and online community media participants.

This paper draws on participant contributions at the symposium to explore the relationship between broadcast and online community media. Despite shared values, we identify different, and possibly incompatible, cultures within the two groups. We argue that this disjoint stems from two different systems of control or validation (licensing and networks), as well as producer-centered accounts of community media that are out of sync with the contemporary media environment. Instead, we propose that theory and practice begin to address issues of consumption in relation to community media, including identification, navigation and the notion of ethical choice.

Introduction

Community media was established to provide individuals and communities with the means to participate in the media. Now that online commercial and public service media outlets also invite non-professional media-makers to contribute content, access via community media appears to be a redundant concept. Is community media still an 'alternative media' platform, and if so, what is it an alternative to? In this paper we examine whether systems of ethical choice can provide a framework for community media across broadcast and online platforms. Our discussion assumes that there is an ethical dimension to community media, which can be identified as part of a broader communication rights agenda. Although this assumption still needs testing, the philosophical underpinnings of community media, together with new media developments and challenges, suggest there is a basis for ethical choice in the media. This paper is therefore intended as a concept piece, laying down the core ideas for further research and debate.

Community media historically positioned itself as different from both commercial and government-funded media. The primary concern of community media practice and theory has been the redistribution of what Raymond Williams called 'the means to communication', whereby 'with the ending of the division of labour within the modes of production of communication itself, individuals

would speak “as individuals”, as integral human beings’ (1978/1980, 57). In forums such as NWICO (in particular the MacBride Report of 1980), community media received recognition as a counter-balance to the inequities of global media systems (see Ó Siochrú Girard & Mahan 2002).

The Web 2.0 era broke down the amateur-professional divide and redefined the terms of media access (Rennie 2003; Benkler 2007; Leadbeater & Miller 2004). Commercial web sites like YouTube, Twitter, Wikipedia, Flickr and Wordpress allow ordinary members of the public to participate in the production of the content they and others consume. Public service media is also becoming more local, generating ‘citizens’ media’ initiatives and digital literacy training. For instance, in 2009 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation was allocated \$15.3 million for ‘regional broadband hubs’, called ABC Open, where interested individuals will soon be trained to provide user-generated local information for distribution on ABC local websites. According to the ABC’s Head of Radio, Kate Dundas, the hubs are a ‘concrete step towards being the “town square” in local communities’, reflecting the ABC’s expanded mission to encourage and foster regional communities to develop skills in contributing to digital content (Sinclair 2009). Yet, in the UK, a proposal by the BBC to add twenty minutes of local video content to regional websites was rejected by the governing body that oversees it (BBC Trust), on the grounds that it would stifle diversity and threaten the viability of local commercial media. In Australia, the threat applies as much to community media as to local for-profit media. As Margaret Simons reported in the independent news outlet, *Crikey*, of the hundreds of applicants for fifty new positions in ABC Open, ‘Many come from community media and are what might be described as web 2.0 enthusiasts’ (Simons 2010).

Australia’s community broadcasting sector was established with localism, diversity and training at its core. Why is this role now moving to the ABC? Meanwhile, broadcast groups attempting to move into online media – such as CAAMA Online News – are struggling to find funding, technical guidance and direction. Non-profit web-based media organisation, EngageMedia [\[1\]](#), has gone offshore for funding to conduct projects that fulfil community media values and objectives. Australia lacks a significant lobby force when it comes to communication rights in the online environment. We raise this not as a ‘call to arms’, but to illustrate how the media landscape has altered in a way that requires either a new foundation for community media, or acceptance that the outcomes are no longer the exclusive product of the original community media ‘project’.

Where in the past the focus has been on access and production, our contention is that community media must now be investigated from the consumption end, including user navigation in the online environment and the visibility of organisations and the movement. This is a challenge to practice and theory: How do we understand community media if we shift attention away from production and access and towards consumption, and can this assist community media organisations in making better use of the online environment? What new practices and ideas will emerge?

In late 2008, we convened a symposium to explore the relationship between broadcast and online community media and invited groups from both sides to participate. We proposed the idea of a community media label that would apply to broadcast and online community media groups that met certain criteria, much like the Fair Trade label found on some coffee, chocolate and handicrafts. Why a label? Our hypothesis was that participation in community media (for audiences or producers) involves ethical choice and that greater transparency of the institutional structures that populate the online environment will extend community media values in the long run. The online environment works

according to different systems of use, navigation, authentication and access. The label was a conceptual experiment intended to shift the discussion to the *visibility* of community media, as well as *public awareness* of information rights and the *navigation* systems required by audiences in the new media environment.

Around 70 people attended the symposium. Community broadcasting representatives included the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council (NEMBC), Melbourne's community radio sector (including stations PBS, RRR, SYN and 3CR), Melbourne's community television station C31 and Indigenous community television (ICTV, which is based in Alice Springs and broadcast in remote Indigenous communities). The organisations we categorise here as 'online organisations' included GetUp, EngageMedia, apc.au and the Creative Commons Clinic. Experts from outside the community media sector also attended, including the ABC, the Australian Communications Media Authority (ACMA, Australia's media regulator) and the academic community. We have used the transcripts of the day as discussion points in this paper [\[2\]](#). The proceedings provided us with a starting point to begin to define the issues, opportunities and obstacles of ethical choice in the media.

First, we look briefly at how the concepts of production and consumption have been treated in community media theory. We then consider the notion of ethical choice in relation to media consumption and examine the values that underpin the sector as a building block for ethical choice. In the final sections we look at the historical context through attempts to 'rebrand' as a technology neutral sector. We examine the problems of membership and authentication, and discuss some well-founded resistance to the label.

Production versus consumption

Since the 1960s, politically and culturally diverse groups in Australia have sought access in the form of broadcast licences and basic resources to enable them to produce content. Advocates argued that broadcast spectrum is a public resource and, as such, its use should not be restricted to corporations (private or government-funded) and the professionals that work for them. Community broadcasting became the accessible infrastructure, in physical and governance terms, that enabled non-producers to create and distribute media content reflecting their own interests, or community interests that fell outside of the purview of mainstream media. The struggle for the 'means to communication' was fought and won, first by community radio advocates in the late 1970s, followed by community television in the mid 1990s. The sector's peak body, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) was formerly constituted as the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia in 1974, changing its name when the educational and experimental licences were consolidated under the community broadcasting licence category in 1992. The Community Broadcasting Codes of Practice endorse 'the encouragement of community access and participation in all aspects of station operations, from programming to management' (Community Radio Broadcasting Codes of Practice 2008). Community broadcasting is now Australia's largest media sector, with 526 radio and television licences across the country, 80% of them in rural, regional and remote areas (Roitman 2010).

Although the means to make and distribute media is clearly at the heart of community media, the Australian community media sector has also cautiously attempted to include audiences in its agenda. The CBAA has been commissioning audience research biannually since 2004, with the latest figures revealing that the nation's community radio listenership increased by 20% between 2004 and 2008 (with 57% of the population listening to community radio in an average month). However, the Indigenous and multicultural segments of the community radio sector have chosen not to participate in quantitative

studies, considering it ‘an inappropriate way of evaluating their community and cultural contributions’ (Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2007, 4). Those stations that do not participate in quantitative studies often still attempt to define their relationship with audiences; by promoting ‘independence’, thereby catering to non-mainstream tastes, or cultural and linguistic diversity, which is sold as filling a gap in available media choice. The audience has therefore been present and acknowledged, despite the ongoing attempt to break down, or at least disrupt, the audience-producer divide.

Community media theory has generally steered away from media consumption as a site of enquiry. Instead, the focus has been on how alternative forms of production and micro-distribution generate and sustain minority groups and subcultural movements (Atton 2002, Duncombe 1997). Another strand of literature has looked at production as empowerment and engagement, arguing that the small-scale or transient nature of this activity makes it no less significant than big media (Rodriguez 2001; Downing 2001). In both bodies of work the audience is secondary to production, or subsumed within it by the overcoming of the audience-producer divide. Only recently has the producer-centred nature of the field been questioned from within. As Nick Couldry asks: ‘Is our priority still, as it previously was, to understand better the production practices that underlie “alternative media”? Or is it now just as important, particularly in a world where there are so many different “alternative” media outputs, to study their audiences?’ In other words, to better understand ‘how particular media contribute to everyday practice, and not just that of the producers themselves’ (2010, 25-26). The communication rights agenda is also beginning to focus on media consumption, namely the effectiveness of getting messages to audiences, finding that access and participation refer to a ‘right to speak’ yet do little to further or account for the ‘right to be heard’ (CRIS Campaign 2005).

Ethical choice

One way to deal with issues consumption and visibility – without abandoning the values which separate community media from the commercial and public service media – is to consider community media through a framework of ethical choice. Beyond the media realm, in daily life and politics, consumers are expected to think about what it is that they consume. As Soper argues, the agents of change in contemporary society are both producers and consumers, creating alternative economies and generating different notions of the ‘good life’. Ethical considerations are led by consumers, not by producers as the Marxists and critical theorists assumed, and are ‘fuelled in large part by moral and material revulsions generated by the affluent lifestyle itself’ (Soper 2008, 199. See also Soper 2004; Littler 2009; Bauman 2001, Bourdieu 1984).

Ethical decision-making is what Hamilton describes as a second order of decision-making – not so much the decision to act as the reflection on whether an action is the right action to take (Hamilton 2008). When applied to consumption, ethical choice suggests that power resides with the consumer, however minimal that power may be, and requires a conscious decision to use that power. The choice itself is subjective and based upon an ever-changing environment and culture. Ethical choice is therefore not a fixed or prescriptive belief in right and wrong, but a varied and changeable moral system that is considered as part of the condition of postmodernity (see Bauman 2001).

Although the choice to consume ethically is an individual act, the systems that enable that choice are collectively organised and can be both cooperative and centralising. The Fair Trade label, discussed below, promotes ‘good’ labour and environmental practice amongst the producers that choose to take part and involves a strong element of compliance to work. The need to generate a ‘consumer

consciousness' – awareness of the values associated with the product – suggests that there is an educative element to such systems.

Studies into the workings and outcomes of fair trade consumption reveal the contradiction in ethical choice. Ethical consumption can involve desire and a willing participation in commodity culture; it does not necessarily involve deprivation and is often associated with quality products, reinforcing consumer class systems. As a movement, ethical choice has frequently been criticised for being complicit with market capitalism, the very system that has created the inequality that the consumer is seeking to redress (see Littler 2009). Ethical choice therefore leaves the individual 'doomed to seek a "biographical solution of systemic contradictions"' (Ulrich Beck quoted in Bauman 2001, 23)

The contradictions of ethical choice also occur at the level of individual behaviour. As Brown (2009) demonstrates, consumers create moral boundaries around some types of consumption and not others. A consumer may decide not to shop at Walmart because of the company's bad reputation concerning workers' rights, yet decide against purchasing fair trade coffee – promoted because of good labour practices – due to the higher price (869). Consumers can exhibit wilful ignorance, avoiding or not seeking out information on some products in order to avoid the potential inconvenience that comes with knowledge and responsibility. Such limitations deserve consideration in relation to media choice where the implications of communication rights are complex and where 'goods' are not material products but information flows. To discuss ethical consciousness in the media therefore requires a consideration of what the alternatives are and whether such choices can ever have significant appeal compared to mainstream media that infringes on communication rights.

When all of this is taken into account, ethical choice, in this context, might not necessarily mean an overhaul of media structures, but a gradual shift and one that is possibly only ever partial. Couldry provides a useful starting point for thinking about media ethics, which he sees not a moral rule so much as the awareness that 'if [media] regularly act unethically, there is good reason to think that a basic feature of our collective and individual life will be damaged' (2006, 122).

A familiar system of ethical choice (to consumers and researchers alike) is the Fair Trade initiative which involves the implementation of voluntary global production standards (see Brown 2009; De Pelsmacker, Jassens & Mielants 2005; Dickinson & Carsky 2005; Harrison, Newholm & Shaw 2005). The label promotes common values amongst the producers it represents, but also generates a value of its own by encouraging collective empowerment and capacity building. Coffee is a popular Fair Trade commodity; 16 000 tons of it was purchased by consumers in 17 countries in 2002 alone (Raynolds, Murray & Taylor 2004, 1110). The most prominent of labelling organisations (for fair-trade food products), the Fairtrade Labelling Organization International (FLO), utilises 19 labelling initiatives across the world, responsible for the licensing and promotion of the Fairtrade Mark; organisations are audited by an separate company, FLO-CERT, which monitors certification and compliance (Fairtrade Labelling Organization International 2009). The Fairtrade Mark represents common values that are applied and acknowledged through a collection of standards, but all maintain the broad 'common principles' of social, environmental and economic development (Fairtrade Labelling Organization International 2009). Similarly, the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) stipulates ten 'standards of fair trade', which organisations must adhere to in order to be identified as an organisation that practices fair trade, including the creation of opportunities, ensuring a fair price for labour and a commitment to acting with transparency (World Fair Trade Organization 2009). Both of these standards share a common aim to facilitate sustainable socioeconomic

development, but to ensure a fair price and fair working conditions. However, despite these common values that serve as the principle behind labelling initiatives, the sheer number of labels, standards and organisations involved in fair-trade proves to be both a point of contention among labelling organisations, and can be confusing for consumers (FLO 2009, De Pelsmacker Jassens & Mielants 2005).

Media ethics has traditionally been conceived as something taught to journalism students to prepare them on their responsibilities towards the public. It has entailed codes of conduct rather than a general consciousness about the consequences of media. In the new media environment, however, pressing ethical issues are less about the 'truthfulness' of the media, as how personal data is used, including issues of privacy and freedom. Would a label that signifies communication rights work in practice? What principles and kinds of organisations would it include? As we discovered, labels can be controversial, with the potential to homogenise and control diverse activities and groups. Labelling for ethical media consumption could also raise similar problems of authentication, authority and compliance as have occurred with Fair Trade initiatives (discussed later in this paper in the context of the sector's existing peak body). However, we found the concept also provoked useful discussion on where online and broadcast media meet, as well as the divergent aspects of their roles and values.

Community media as ethical choice

Online community media organisations differ from commercial social networking media in that they are 'community operated and controlled infrastructure that guarantees access and participation' (symposium participant). Community media organisations in the online environment are often community-governed, not-for-profit associations. Although being a not-for-profit doesn't necessarily equate with ethical behaviour, a significant portion of these organisations were established to maintain communication rights. They allow for participation in the running of the organisation and the development of technologies and exist to serve identifiable social needs rather than market gaps. They don't use personal information for marketing and tend to consider ethical issues when it comes to advertising. Not-for-profit media will not intentionally restrict the way we access information through technological gate keeping. Content uploaded to YouTube, however, immediately becomes the property of the site, and the rights of the user are minimal. In other words, community media does not, or should not, infringe upon civil liberties and open innovation and has actively sought to counteract those that do.

An ethical consciousness is thus already present within the community media movement, which offers an alternative way of making and distributing media in a system of information abundance. The ethical 'behaviour' has to do with the way that organisations endorse and sustain an open and free media environment. However, this intention, present in organisations, is not always clear to users and audiences.

Symposium participants observed that there is little public understanding of how the various alternatives on offer relate to each other and why they are worthwhile choices to make. In this respect, media ethics is falling behind other arenas of social life. Those within the youth sector pointed out that young people don't necessarily understand the distinction between community and corporate 'social' media. A lecturer also commented that 'if I think about my students, if they want to upload video they'll go straight to YouTube, so they'll go to the most populous, they won't have any kind of critical thought about the terms and conditions of that site, they won't have any possible ideas about alternatives'. Another participant commented:

Engage[Media]/SYN/PBS would never broadcast videos of 17year olds being bullied in the schoolyard,

so that's the real point of difference. Yes, there's participation on Myspace or in the blogosphere or whatever, but organisations that have clear guidelines, values, structures, will take responsibility for what happens in their spaces, and I think that this is where community media is significant... we take responsibility for what we do, and as the media continues to fragment we'll continue to take responsibility (symposium participant).

Ethical decision-making does occur through online media engagement, although not necessarily in relation to community media. Online communities of any kind can be 'associated with specific virtues (and the) ethical commitments that sustain (them)' (Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004, 5). This can also extend to an awareness of communication rights. In their study of YouTube, Burgess and Green (2008) point out that users have successfully resisted changes by the patron that infringe on people's privacy and autonomy. Such protests are not simply a 'rights-based complaint' but portray an expectation that 'an ethic of care' should be present within these forums. The people they call 'lead YouTubers' believe in the cultural diversity and sustainability of the media they have chosen to participate in and see a mutual responsibility between the 'patron' platform and users:

The specific issues raised as part of these complaints work to reveal the implicit 'social contract' that had structured their participation, but which is only made explicit once it appears to be broken, at which time discourses of entitlement, fairness, and labour politics emerge (Burgess & Green 2008,13).

However, they also point out that it is only retrospectively, 'at the moment of perceived corporatisation, that these discourses of entitlement and fairness emerge' (10-11). Unlike YouTube, the ethic of care in community media is not a retrospective ethical reflection. It is something that occurs not in relation to corporate behaviour, but as a foundation principle – one that theoretically should enable the user to know what he or she is dealing with *before* he or she gets involved.

Burgess and Green raise an important issue. While the emphasis on production in community media theory and advocacy has closed off a conversation about our own decision-making as media participants, new media theory has also largely missed the point in discussions of online community media. Early internet theory echoed that of community radio and television decades before: 'A digital nation privileges bold new experimentation to improve citizen access and effective use of new technologies while using innovative approaches to address long-standing social problems' (Wilhelm 2004, 4-5).

Internet theory created blurred boundaries between different media initiatives, arguing that community occurs naturally online (although not without difficulties, see Jones, 1997; Baym, 1998), consisting of personal and political alliances. Helpful interventions came from writers such as Wittel (2001) who attempted to differentiate online communities from network sociality, suggesting that community entails stability, coherence, embeddedness and belonging, whereas network sociality is primarily on an exchange of data or simply 'catching up'. Although the attempt to differentiate types of online participation is useful, theories of online communities stop short of identifying the place of such community affiliations in relation to the political economy of the media as a whole. As one symposium contributor observed, we are seeing 'a certain fragmentation of community, and then an appropriation of community at the same time' (symposium participant). So whilst participation has now become a common concept in media theory, the issue of navigation – how we search and make choices online – remains important. As one contributor to the symposium stated:

You want people to be able to find you, ie on search engines, and it seems to me that for out-of-market audiences, non-local audiences, when Google throws up all these choices and you say ‘which one do I click on’, well maybe there’s something about this crowd (who I’ve never heard of) that makes me think I should go to that point rather than someone else, [in a situation] where I’ve got no way of differentiating the quality of all of these groups. Online, [the label] has to do with *how you get found* (Symposium participant, our emphasis).

In recognising that search and navigation are important aspects of media consumption, with ethical choice-motives attached, we beg the question of what we are looking for when we seek out certain types of media. This is where values become important for understanding where community media fits in the new media environment.

Community media values

The ethical choice label ‘experiment’ was intended to gauge whether online and broadcast community media organisations could be identified under one media umbrella as a ‘convergent’ media sector. A critical issue is whether shared values transcend technological differences. In an article for AMARC Africa, Wijayananda Jayaweera, from Unesco’s Communication Development division succinctly describes community radio values as being ‘about ownership, accountability, ethical behaviour and learning from peers’ (2009). The symposium revealed a similar set of shared values in online community media, signifying the point at which community broadcasting and online community media are already united. Although many online groups do not have to conform to the parameters set out in the Broadcasting Services Act, ‘with some kinds of community media there are lots of shared values and shared concerns and shared desire for change, and to educate and mobilise people’ (symposium participant). Both broadcast and online groups are positioned as providing services that are not found through mainstream sources. One participant commented that commercial outlets were using the word ‘community’ to ‘cheaply describe content that other people made’. However, he pointed out that ‘at the other end of the spectrum are [groups such as] EngageMedia and informal networks based on principles of access and democracy’.

Community media is also about collaboration and the infrastructure/institutions that allow that to occur: ‘not just necessarily telling your story, but helping people tell their story, or telling a story together, providing an infrastructure, that is what community media was/is about... setting up a station or doing some training, maintaining transmitter, getting a grant...working together’ (symposium participant).

However, others pointed out that values such as social justice and cultural exploration were something distinctly different to organisational values, such as being not-for-profit. Organisational similarities in community broadcasting can often result in very different kinds of media being produced. Some argued that community media is such a varied field that any efforts to unify and promote shared values would fail, even within the radio sector. For instance, 3RRR and Light FM both adhere to the same structural framework, ‘but they are entirely different services and don’t have much commonality of audience or reach’. Thornley’s study of the Australian community radio sector supports this observation, demonstrating that a lack of commonality has been a feature of community broadcasting from its inception:

The divergence in philosophies of different community radio stations today is obvious. Some stations cater for the diverse needs of their communities and concentrate on a volunteer effort to provide the

service. Other stations are almost like mini-commercial stations, catering for a particular demographic within their community with an emphasis on financing the service with the maximum number of sponsorship announcements allowed. (Thornley, 2002, 4)

In the television sector, former station manager Greg Dee pointed out that C31 differs from the Optus Aurora channel (available on the Foxtel pay TV platform), which has ‘no guaranteed access to community members, no community leaders on their board and no community involvement in the channel’. The organisational values and structures of community broadcasters therefore make them distinctly different to commercial media.

The online community media groups demonstrated a stronger and more defined commitment to open technologies. In a prepared short presentation, open source programmer Andy Nicholson stated that EngageMedia preferences

peer-to-peer over broadcast models, community controlled online media over corporate online communities, emergent open standards and protocols over hierarchical technology. The game is changing for community media, moving from passive based connection/subscriptions to p2p, and production of open content.

In this respect the values of independence, openness and non-commercialism can be stronger within online community media organisations than their broadcast counterparts.

No Logo: The limits of ethical choice in the media

Despite these shared values, the symposium revealed little or no existing cooperation between broadcast and online community media practitioners. The broadcast sector appears mostly tied to the broadcast paradigm, in that the sector is reliant on regulatory mechanisms in describing its direction and responsibilities.

In the Australian broadcast sector, community media is clearly defined by legislation (Broadcasting Services Act 1992) and enforced by a government authority (the Australian Communication & Media Authority). Access to spectrum is premised on users abiding by these legislated values, which mark community media as distinct from commercial and government-funded public broadcasters. One symposium participant asserted that community media is determined by policy, rather than policy enabling an existing phenomenon: ‘The reason community broadcasting sector evolves as it does is because there’s a certain amount of funding and other infrastructures... and they need to know who they are to access those resources and legal frameworks’.

In a separate presentation, Georgia Webster, The General Manager of SYN, suggested that the organisational structures of community media are facing a crisis, as they are not occupying the spaces where young people are. Her observation was supported by others in the youth sector who felt that the sector hasn’t ‘embraced the movement that’s been emerging, which has happened mainly online’. Online organisations such as EngageMedia and Vibewire have emerged to fill the gap. Although these groups hold the same values as community radio stations such as RRR or SYN, there is ‘no shared space for these organisations [and broadcasters]’.

Online participants at the symposium saw little to be gained from operating within the formal rigidity of

the broadcasting sector's structures, a paradigm they perceived as out-of-date. We observed considerable goodwill on their behalf when it came to sharing perspectives but no particular desire to cooperate beyond that.

A representative from an online group suggested that their organisation didn't feel excluded from the community broadcasting sector as they didn't want to be included in a peak body anyhow. She suggested that 'Making friends and connections with other community practitioners is extremely important, but fitting into those structures isn't':

[Our organisation] fits in other labels, for instance: grassroots media, people's media, alternative media – these are all labels we use depending on the context... In terms of community media, accessibility is very important to us, in terms of making online tools accessible to people in terms of training and actually providing the software. For example: [...] video sharing software, which has been released to the public. Being representative of a particular group or community is important (our particular website it is geared towards social justice and environmental movements for media makers). Also representing diverse cultures and viewpoints... Providing training and offering an alternative to the mainstream... There's still a lot of issues we have with government and commercial media, and their information sharing online.

The different organisational and governance structures that the broadcast and online sectors of community media operate within have created different perspectives on how to implement these guiding principles.

Historically divided

The Fair Trade initiative suggests that, for ethical consumption to work, there needs to be an organisation to define who can use the label and to oversee compliance. Twice during its recent history, the CBAA has considered opening up its membership to non-broadcast community media organisations, a move that could potentially see its role move further towards communication rights in the online environment.

As a membership organisation, the CBAA represents the interests of stations. In 1994 a motion was passed by the membership to consider allowing non-broadcast groups to join:

That the National Committee recommends that the Conference adopt the principle that eligibility for membership of the CBAA be based on technology neutral criteria, on a definition of service, rather than means of delivery or type of licence.

The General Manager of the CBAA at the time, Mike Thompson, warned that the community media movement would lose political power and funding unless it became more inclusive. He further argued that uniting broadcast with non-broadcast groups would achieve greater coherency in the movement. Christina Alvarez, Staff Rep on the CBAA board at the time, travelled out to stations with Thompson and wrote a series of bulletins called 'Future Directions', where the motions and debates were summarised. Alvarez hoped to see the peak body 'representing the movement no matter how those community media activists chose to channel it' (interview 2002). The 1994–1996 changes were intended to accommodate groups such as the Sydney cable television experiment and Catalyst, a group of online activists who collectively wrote the source code that became the Indymedia network (see Rennie 2006, Meikle 2002). It was also anticipated that nonprofit print organisations would get involved, as well as 'telecentres' (community internet access centres), which Alvarez hoped might be collocated with radio stations.

As many of these non-broadcast organisations did not have the required legal structures to be eligible for membership, the CBAA staff did not anticipate a radical change: ‘Even if these resolutions had have been approved by the membership, it would have meant that the next day we would have had three new members. It wasn’t going to be a big thing initially but long-term I thought that there was potential’ (Alvarez interview 2002). For Mike Thompson, the name change was strategic in terms of positioning the sector for future communications funding:

The CBAA is in the business of politics – the politics of advancing the interests of the sector and securing the future for community media. And politics is about perception as much as anything else. The perception we need to create is one of inclusion and our willingness to survive and flourish by embracing new modes of communication (Thompson 1996).

Motions regarding changes to the membership and the name of the organisation were put to the 1995 AGM and then deferred until the 1996 AGM due to technical problems. The motions were rejected in 1996, falling six percent short of the 75 percent majority required for constitutional change. As many observers pointed out, the motion had majority support and there was an expectation that it would succeed in the future.

In an interview conducted in May 2002, Alvarez said that there was a feeling of urgency back in the mid-1990s, an attitude of ‘If we don’t become the community Media Association of Australia we will lose all of these funding opportunities, there will be other organisations that will grow-up and represent independent online or TV’. By 2002 the sentiment was that ‘None of those things have happened’. Seven years later the imperative returned, yet the issue did not proceed to round two of the consultation process, although it had been ‘kept open for discussion in the future’ (CBAA 2009).

There is clearly a need for education and advocacy on community media issues. Community broadcasters are beginning to express a need for information-sharing, training and resources to support a greater engagement with the online environment (Roitman 2010). Independent online community media groups have so far been left out of available community media funding. A representative from the online sector pointed out that ‘in terms of supporting community media enterprises and how applicable the funding mechanisms for broadcast community media [are to the] online world, there definitely some problems to address’ (symposium participant).

However, the consultation with CBAA members conducted in 2009 on the constitutional change indicated concern among existing members about diluting scarce organisational resources if the focus of the organisation were to be broadened. On the other hand, it was also very clear at our symposium that online community media organisations can be suspicious of formal, top-down structures. We encountered significant resistance from online groups at the suggestion that they join a common peak body. The online groups also suggested that the label was an attempt by the endangered broadcasting sector to retain some kind of power/relevance. The CBAA’s proposed membership changes are possibly irrelevant if new media groups do not see any benefits.

Conclusion

If all community media ever aimed to do was break down the audience-producer divide, then media convergence should have been an easy transition for community media. To survive in a media environment that is simultaneously growing and fragmenting, community media needs to communicate a

clear identity that extends across all spheres of activity. If we accept that community media is not about platforms but about principles, how can people and groups who believe in these principles work together to help the sector survive and thrive? What strategies can be developed to make these common values more visible and meaningful?

In an editorial for the CBX magazine, CBAA President Deborah Welch responded to our label proposal. Although she didn't exactly agree with the label, Welch concurred that 'its time for us as members of an Association, with licences and an agreed Code of Practice to be very clear, both about who we are and the values we hold' (2008, 2).

Having encountered some resistance to the label from both broadcast and online media, we accept that such a regime will probably never eventuate. However, there are other possibilities that might enable a community movement to group together and identify distribution points for like-minded organisations; technical frameworks 'where sites like EngageMedia, and broadcasters like Channel 31, could start bundling in together and saying "this is open and democratic"' (symposium participant). It became clear during the symposium that, for these groups to join together, there needs to be a certain fluidity in the process: 'If the model was opt in, there would be a whole range of things, whether you are online or a radio station, that we could actually agree on'. The symposium participants made it clear that certification or membership would not work.

Instead, we might look to encouraging a movement around informed and ethical consumption of media, by highlighting the values and qualities that make community media distinctive. Production and consumption have become intertwined to a greater extent than ever before and the challenge we face is how to navigate through the available, abundant content and the 'patron sites' on offer. When we choose to post our content on a particular site, or enter into a public discussion forum with friends, we are making a decision about what kind of media outlet we wish to participate in. Visibility, defining, educating and asserting the difference between (corporate) social networking media and community media is essential for user-producers to make informed decisions about their engagement in the new media landscape. At the extreme end this may mean solutions such as labels, classifications or criteria that alert audiences and producers when they come across a community media outlet that offers privacy assurances and encourage open technologies. A more subtle approach would be to look at how networks, linking and recommendations already enable ethical choice in media engagement. Although a community media label may never come to pass, the debate on community media consumption is just beginning.

About the authors

Ellie Rennie is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology. Email: erennie@groupwise.swin.edu.au

Leo Berkeley is the Discipline Head (Media, Journalism, Screen & Music) within the School of Media & Communication at RMIT University. Email: leo.berkeley@rmit.edu.au

Blaise Murphet is currently completing his MA in Global Media & Communications at the University of Melbourne. Email: b.murphet@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au

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2. Potential identifiers have been removed from all comments other than invited presentations.

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