

# Social Solidarity and Constituency Relationships in Community Radio

*Charles Fairchild*

## The Central Ambiguity of Community Radio

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Community radio stations are, by their very nature, compelled to deal with numerous institutions of governance, be they arms of the state or the market. Given its marginality to mainstream politics and economics, this “third sector” of broadcasting often faces crises that are both the intended and unintended consequences of larger systems of power. These can only be successfully navigated if the character of the relationships between community radio stations and the main actors in the governing infrastructure of the state, the public sphere, and civil society are thoroughly understood. For decades, the ideology governing most areas of political and economic

power has been defined by a specific brand of “economic fundamentalism” called neoliberalism (Kelsey, 1995). One primary consequence of neoliberalism has been the socialization of cost and risk and the privatization of profit and power (Chomsky, 2000, pp. 188–189). The mechanisms used to turn over public assets for private profit have had varied and dramatic impacts. Yet, while the logics of neoliberal governance are pristine, they have long had consequences that are paradoxically unintended and yet perfectly in keeping with their animating intent (Pollin, 2003).

Many community radio stations in Australia have been forced to face down crises caused by strict adherence to neoliberal ideology by the state and corporations. They have done so by clarifying the major issue lurking behind these crises:

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This research work for this article was made possible by the Sesquicentennial Research Fund at the University of Sydney. I conducted research at five radio stations: 2SER and FBi in Sydney, and 2XX, ArtSound FM, and 1WayFM in Canberra in January 2004, September 2005, and from August to November 2007. I am very grateful for the support and participation of the staff and volunteers of each radio station.

Why do we need community radio? Is it merely a safety valve for dissent or a form of general public expression? Does it mimic the function of a public sphere but without the binding influence of publicly formed opinion on power? Is it a pressure point whose power is limited but can occasionally be brought to bear in a consequential way? Or is it a lever that ordinary people can use to empower themselves? The precise character of community radio's social functions are the central ambiguity of the form. Given its multifarious nature, making any crisp and brittle distinctions between these social functions is neither necessary nor useful. Whether we call it "radical," "alternative," or "citizen's" media, community radio is all of these, sometimes simultaneously (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Rodriguez, 2003). But these descriptors have stark limits, only describing ideal functions, not actual ones. Each is heavily dependent on constantly evolving social contexts in which the very meaning of terms such as *alternative*, *radical*, and *citizenship* are being constantly redefined. Instead, to answer these questions, we have to understand how the social organization of the kinds of cultural production facilitated by community radio stations is shaped by ways in which participants at these radio stations make sense out of their practices and experiences. If we can understand these processes of making meaning in relation to the contexts in which they exist, contexts that can often be unfriendly, then we can understand how to make this often-misunderstood media sphere stronger and more resilient.

My primary goal here is to re-imagine community radio as the means through which ordinary people organize themselves by creating a series of what I call "constituency relationships." Community media organizations are unusually complex ways of constructing "social solidarity," a uniquely democratic form of social organization that is largely the consequence of a series of acts of mutual choice. "Social solidarity" is a particular way of organizing people through the mutual construction of a series of broadly recognizable worldviews to both produce and maintain a series of lived social relationships (Calhoun,

2002, pp. 161–162). Most forms of community media must inevitably make deals with their participants based on some form of social solidarity if they are to have any hope of survival. Crafting and maintaining the constituency relationships that make this solidarity possible is what I call the "problem of the public."

This article is based on fieldwork in Canberra and Sydney from 2004 to 2005. While the evidence offered here comes from the study of the relationship between community radio and local music scenes in Australia, the arguments I have drawn from this evidence are more widely applicable. The radio stations I've studied create a space for local cultural production that is substantially outside the mainstream. The practices and experiences of this sphere's participants consistently demonstrate values that contrast dramatically with the supposedly dominant values of Australian society. However, this cultural sphere can only exist if these institutions can successfully negotiate and maintain an officially recognized role in a larger system of economic and cultural power that is fundamentally contrary to their interests. The practices participants use to respond to these contrary forces help define and clarify the practical limits of their efforts. Any understanding of the roles community radio plays in fostering local cultural production has to take into account both the formal and informal relations between radio stations and larger institutions of governance, public or private, ideological or material.

## Social Networks Created Through Constituency Relationships

To understand how community radio is "embedded" (see Bromell, 2001) in the world, we have to understand what distinguishes this form of cultural production from the multitude of other forms of cultural production that surround and contextualize it. This is not as easy as one might think, in large part because the form is so intimidating in its diversity. As many can attest, community radio stations

are as varied as the localities that produce and sustain them (see Girard, 1992). As a result, much scholarship on the form gets caught between the necessary goal of showing how specific practices are drawn from equally specific contexts and the demonstrable need for a general explanation of the form's social importance and sustainability. Recent work on Australian community radio is broad and often comprehensive (Forde, Meadows, & Foxwell, 2002; Marcato, 2005; Spurgeon & McCarthy, 2005; van Vuuren, 2002). Yet almost all of this work seeks to find the cure for what ails the sector without much agreement on what that sector actually is. Conversely, a recent spate of work on alternative media more generally have proceeded precisely by trying to forge specific definitions of the term (Atton, 2002, pp. 28–30; Downing, 2001, pp. 69–72; Rodriguez, 2003, p. 190). While these works have produced valuable conceptual frameworks, I am not convinced that community media can or should be defined in normative terms. Normative definitions of community media run the risk of imagining institutions founded on exclusions based on political affiliation, ideology, geography, or specific models of what counts as citizenship and civic participation. Instead, focusing on the type, character, and quality of the relationships organizations have with their various publics can help us to craft a clearer understanding of the character of community media. Community radio stations in particular often succeed very well when they act as what Liora Salter presciently called a “fulcrum,” balanced, perhaps precariously, between the multiple interests, issues, participants, listeners, and publics they exist to animate. No one is implicitly excluded, as the boundaries of community or participation are not cordoned off in advance. Instead, boundaries are established only as a consequence of the actual practices of specific participants in particular institutions. These boundaries cannot be established by fiat but must evolve through practice (Fairchild, 2001, pp. 98–106; Salter, 1980, p. 114).

Community radio is a stubborn medium that does not lend itself to easy description or prescription. So I want to build on existing studies by focusing on the irreducible aspects of community

radio that can help define its often ambiguous social functions. First, community radio is unavoidably part of civil society. It exists through the kinds of voluntary participation in community institutions that define this often misunderstood social arena. Community radio stations are exactly the type of institutions that define the contours of civil society. They are self-governing, nonstate actors that exist as non-profit-seeking expressions of the mutual and collaborative intent of ordinary people to effect social change through discursive means (Deakin, 2001, pp. 4–10). This alone is enough to make it an “alternative” expression of citizenship and, given recent attacks on the institutions of civil society in Australia, on occasion even a “radical” one (Maddison, Dennis, & Hamilton, 2004).

Second, community radio exists to create social networks through means that are not market based. Access is not based on one's ability to pay for it, either directly, as a fee-paying subscriber whose money guarantees access, or indirectly as the specifically conjured and desirable demographic object sold to advertisers. The value placed on community radio's participants and audiences is not based on a commercial contract but on a civil one. Despite the fact that the civil character of community radio has often proved far more controversial than one might expect, it is not simply a matter of ideological convenience; it is a matter of definition (El-Guhl, 2005; Fairchild, 2001, pp. 106–114). Importantly, this is not a determination internal to these organizations. For example, in Australia, the extent to which community radio can reproduce the values of commercial radio is severely hampered, not just by ideological objections from those who govern the community media sector but also by the practical measures taken by regulators and commercial media to make sure the sector doesn't compete with them too successfully (Farouque, 2002b). While some community stations are more defined by market relationships than others, it is doubtful that these values will ever be allowed to constitute the social basis of the sector, as the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) has repeatedly ruled against licensing community radio aspirants that

appear to be profit-making enterprises (Javes, 2003; Marcato, 2005). This is one of the few paradoxes of neoliberalism from which community radio can claim some measure of benefit, if only for the rare burst of regulatory clarity it provides.

Finally, community radio is distinct not only because of the type and character of the social networks it helps create or facilitate but also because of the ways in which these networks are constructed. Community radio stations do not exist simply as sets of ideals or regulations or even as unique and dynamic relationships between organizations and their participants, mediated and linked by particular kinds of content produced in particular ways. They exist as a series of overlapping social networks based on the material, literal connections, and relationships embodied in a range of creative cultural practices shaped and governed both by regulations and the larger dynamics of power in which they exist. These networks stretch well beyond the stations themselves, shaped by a wide variety of institutions of governance, formal and informal, practical and ideological, actual and conceptual. As I have argued elsewhere, community radio stations are constituted by a constantly evolving range of affiliations that defines the contours and limits of the expressive practices that go on air. As such, the lived experience of these institutions is unalterably multidimensional. They look different to everybody who comes into contact with them. They reflect the experience of those who populate them but cannot be conflated with those experiences. They exist as actual places through which lived experience is funneled and produced, embodied in a wide range of creative cultural practices (Fairchild, 2005, pp. 308–309; see also Carpentier, Lie, & Servaes, 2003; van Vuuren, 2002).

But we still have to make a qualitative leap from ideals to reality by asking the kinds of research questions that can help us trace the lines of practice and experience that lead people to participate in this distinct branch of civil society. If we invert the widely held notion in media studies that audiences are constructed by media institutions, we can then ask to what extent are these institutions constructed by their constituents? Of all forms of

media, surely this question is most relevant to community radio. The character of the relationships formed within this particular type of civil institution are not formed by audiences or listeners, but by participants, defined by relationships in which all listeners are assumed to be potential contributors. In the broadest and most literal terms, we are talking about political participants, or more exactly, constituents. Constituency relationships are defined by a mutual recognition of the rights of constituents to participate in formal institutions, institutions that are statutorily required to recognize the agency of their participants in mutually agreed on ways. Commercial and even many public institutions are simply not held to the same standard. They are free from having to recognize the agency of the public in terms of operations and programming and are rarely subjected to the interventions of the public in forums they do not control or dominate (see Fairchild, 1999).

Australians have been increasingly constituted as consumers with choices, not citizens with rights. They are economic units, not political participants, living in a consumer society, not a civil one. The relationships through which community radio is constituted stand in plain contrast with these dominant values expressed by most institutions of the state and the private sector. I have found this to be true even of the most politically conservative or market-oriented stations I've studied. In fact, this is the only unifying principle I've found in my research to link the participants at the five stations where I've carried out fieldwork. Each station is run by people who seem to have little in common with those at other radio stations, except for the character and quality of the social networks in which they participate and the practices that define their participation. In the normal course of events, people from the stations I've studied don't even so much as compare notes with those at other stations, much less work together. Yet, regardless of their specific goals, ideological proclivities, and the programming that results, each station I've observed survives on the back of a remarkable amount of often passionate, mostly unrecompensed, voluntary work undertaken in a context in

which such work has a history of being treated at best with patronizing neglect if not outright hostility. What I will do with the balance of this work is to give two brief, illustrative examples of the depredations of neoliberalism on two community radio stations and how both used their ability to construct and maintain constituency relationships to survive.

## The Constant Work of Survival

When doing my research, I am routinely confronted with the glaring contrasts of values between the ways in which community radio stations work in relation to the larger forces that surround them. The nonmarket dynamics of the social networks through which these stations are constituted contrast dramatically with the larger political and economic contexts in which these networks exist. These contrasting sets of social facts clearly demonstrate the points at which these social networks bump up against the limits of their material expression. The people I have been talking with in Sydney and Canberra exhibit several important similarities. They work long hours mostly without pay to produce their radio shows; they labor endlessly to help open and publicize new venues for musicians; they do much of the heavy lifting required to make their radio stations work without much in the way of obvious material benefit. Community radio stations are not formed from isolated atoms of cultural production but are often pivotal centers of gravity for the actual and potential productive activity of numerous and particular groups of people and organizations to come together and strengthen the networks that enable them to produce their music or their radio programs, to spread information, and to organize activities that often have no other form of public expression and acknowledgment.

The vast majority of people I spoke with told me they became involved in community radio through previous social and political affiliations that existed independently of the radio station. In

fact, most presenters I interviewed did not simply walk into a radio station and apply to present their own program. Instead, most had been approached by someone at the station for an interview or advice. Originally interested in seeking publicity and support for other activities, most gradually increased their involvement in the radio station as a means to that end. This kind of relationship reflects a more widespread dynamic in these stations, a dynamic defined both by formal monetary agreements and, just as often, by informal barter relationships. Importantly, these relationships are the central way of inciting the varied forms of public participation in these organizations on which their existence depends. It is these defining aspects of public participation in community radio that tie these stations and their constituencies together.

These relationships have distinct dynamics in each city in which I've done research and each radio station at which I've conducted fieldwork. One such station is 2XX, one of Australia's oldest community radio stations. Located in Canberra, the contextual dynamic in which this station operates is defined by the fact that the city is, in essence, both a large regional centre and something of a company town, being the seat of the federal government. The life of the city is defined by the unusually high socioeconomic status of its residents, provided by their reliance on the steadying economic influence of a generally expanding federal government bureaucracy. The music scene in Canberra is defined by a small number of formal, high-profile venues and a larger number of smaller, less formal ones. At the time I was doing research, only community radio stations allowed local musicians to sell their CDs through their offices or have their music played on their broadcasts. Also, given the transience inherent in Canberran social life, the pull of Sydney, just a few hours down the road, is particularly strong on young ambitious musicians. This means that Canberra's community radio stations tend to be very solicitous of local musicians of whatever stripe, offering an extensive and public commitment of airtime to locally produced

music. This odd fact often has interesting consequences. For example, after watching several interviews on a few weekday afternoon slots, I had the opportunity to speak to some of the musicians, few of whom appeared to have any intention of making the work they had just presented on air commercially available. Making music was simply one more interesting thing they did, but they were not necessarily going on the radio in the hopes of brisker sales of what was usually a nonexistent commercial product. One particular by-product of this circumstance is that several local music programs were dominated by conversations simply about the personal meaning of the wide array of local music on offer, as opposed to the all-too-familiar tales of the life of a working musician.

The situation for music presenters in Sydney is, not surprisingly, quite different. FBi radio is a prominent organization within the city's large and diverse collection of music cultures. It is inundated with local music and rarely has trouble in filling the programming time devoted to local music. The question for FBi is the comparatively luxurious question of how to shape and use that programming time for the greatest mutual benefit of the station and local musicians. This means that this station implements far more formal, specific, and strategic procedures for dealing with a wider range of musician inquiries as well as more developed policies detailing exactly which kinds of local music to promote than their counterparts in Canberra. While the context and circumstance of Sydney community radio stations inevitably shapes the type and character of the relationships it has with musicians, these relationships often have a similar dynamic to those found in Canberra. Similar forms of informal barter and formal commercial exchange exist at stations in both cities, distinguished primarily by their specificity in Sydney and their generality in Canberra. The manner in which the social relationships that animate each of the stations I have studied are constructed differ markedly due to the context in which the participants work. However, there are underlying similarities that define the dynamics of these relationships that can often be surprisingly

hard to see, obscured as they sometimes are by particularities of the kinds of programming that result from these relationships. This fact is often most evident during a crisis.

The contemporary Australian public sphere plays host to numerous circumstances that can cripple a community institution, especially one that depends on such complex networks of mutuality for survival. Two specific threats to 2XX and FBi came from the push to privatize a broad range of public infrastructure and the introduction of so-called market values into the public sector. Each effort has had significant consequences for community radio in Australia, consequences that were not planned and have only recently been publicly acknowledged.

In 2004, 2XX found itself teetering on the brink of insolvency and dissolution, a situation brought on by an arrangement uniquely exploited in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). 2XX had accumulated substantial debts to an organization called Broadcast Australia, a private entity and subsidiary of Macquarie Bank, one of the world's richest purveyors of formerly public infrastructure. 2XX was taken off air and not allowed to broadcast until they could demonstrate that the debts would be paid. Macquarie had acquired a monopoly on broadcast transmissions in the ACT when it bought the assets of NTL Australia from a struggling U.S. company in 2002 (Hughes, 2002). Broadcast Australia (BA), the entity through which Macquarie managed its monopoly, began to charge all radio stations in the ACT the same substantial fee to use the Black Mountain Broadcast Tower, the only radio tower capable of reaching any substantial portion of the local population. There are few other places a radio station could go to send out a comparable signal, hemmed in as they are by the extensive regulatory system surrounding placement and use of broadcast towers. Macquarie had knowingly bought what economists euphemistically call a practical monopoly. BA's strengths included a predictable revenue base, potential for high revenue growth, predictable operating costs, costs that are largely fixed (none of which Macquarie incurred when Black Mountain

Tower was built). In fact, at the time of purchase almost all the forecast revenue was “locked in with long term contracts” with several public broadcasting organizations. This is a textbook operation in the annals of privatization: The risks and costs of constructing the facility were socialized and the profits and power that resulted were privatized (Hughes, 2002; Macquarie Bank, n.d.). The public sector built the transmission tower, assumed all the associated costs, serving the public good by providing comparatively equitable access to a common resource. When the government sold the tower, the resulting situation saw community groups across the territory sending their donations to 2XX, the only station that gives these groups a public voice, to a bank whose record-breaking profits have come largely from squeezing every last cent out of what used to be important pieces of public infrastructure.

Privatization has had many unanticipated consequences that have been every bit as consequential as the aforementioned example. One of these has been the institution of market-values tests in the public sector (Spurgeon & McCarthy, 2005). Simply confining ourselves to the bureaucracy that deals with broadcast regulation, the institution of market-values tests means that all decisions made by the public sector have to be analyzed for their potential harm or benefit to the Australian economy. With the advent of a regime of “self-regulation” for broadcasters and the auctioning off of commercial radio services through the *de facto* purchase of frequencies, important changes have been made to the ways in which radio is regulated and, more importantly, the ways in which broadcast policy is crafted and implemented (Farouque, 2002a). When FBi applied for its license in the late 1990s, they won a license that covered the entire Sydney region. The fight for this license was a difficult contest against numerous other aspirants that lasted nearly a decade. One of these aspirants, adjudged by the ABA to be a barely disguised commercial operation, took its failure very badly (ABA, 2001; Davies, 2001). Given the shape of the Sydney radio market, it was unlikely that any further community licenses would be

offered. Realizing this, the spurned applicant gathered together supporters and made a mass application of memberships to FBi in a transparent bid to stack the membership, elect a new board, and take over the license. An extensive, expensive, and precedent-setting court action ensued, which FBi eventually won (Molitorisz, 2003). However, the case significantly taxed the financial and operational foundations of the fledgling organization, setting back the launch of the station significantly; the delay even “raised concerns the station would never get off the ground” (Javes, 2003).

This fight was unusual in large part because it was an indirect consequence of the “marketization” of the public sector. The length and intensity of this battle was exacerbated by the fact that the spurned applicant had no other options to gain a license. Their proposed service was not necessarily projected to be a huge revenue-generating operation. Commercial radio licenses in Australia are extremely valuable commodities, with metropolitan properties often fetching over one hundred million dollars on the open market. This has the effect of pricing out almost all applicants who don’t already have significant investment capital at the time of application, regardless of the potential value of their future services. In essence, the licensing process has been privatized, with market values trumping any public goods test in the licensing process. As a result, even those applying for noncommercial licenses are finding it that much harder to make their claims to the ostensibly public airwaves stick. These claims are increasingly being tested in unexpected ways with demonstrable effects on community broadcasters, forcing them to defend their claims to “free” spectrum access beyond the formal terrain of licensing procedures.

In both cases, the existential crises faced by the stations were overcome through a variety of means, all of which were based on the existing relationships each had with a variety of social networks to which each was bound in relationships of mutual benefit. In each case, individuals and organizations contributed the means for survival. Staff at 2XX noted with satisfaction and gratitude that, after a series of

urgent appeals for support went out through Canberra, they were inundated with offers of support, helping them to raise over \$10,000 in a matter of days (“An Antidote on Air,” 2004; “Community Radio Back on Air,” 2004). FBi, which had not yet begun to broadcast when facing the legal challenge to their membership, was still able to survive through similar means, including donated services and extensive volunteer efforts to maintain the subscriber base and sponsorship relationships in the unusually long run-up to their official launch. Both stations used a clever mix of social organizing, solicitation of donations, expanding sponsorship arrangements, and fully exploiting the few market mechanisms open to each organization. Each station triangulated between political organizing, volunteer support, and commercial solicitation through the unique array of relationships that constituted each organization.

## Conclusion

What we might call the problem of democracy rests in the freedom it needs to breath in the mundane and ordinary acts it often takes to exercise those freedoms, freedoms that grow out of the contradictions, contests, and negotiations that exist between the world in which we live and the world we imagine. Community radio exists because of these kinds of contests and contradictions, as the deal community radio stations make with their constituents is essentially a protracted sort of public negotiation. The public participation and organizational openness on which community radio is founded inevitably bring a tenuous hold on the future. They must recognize their audiences not just as consumers or listeners but as political constituents who exist within complex webs of power. In order to survive, these stations must balance themselves carefully within the full range of their constituents and recognize them as the people who give them purpose.

I’ve found in a wide variety of circumstances that community radio stations most often accept the inherent tensions produced by the housing of

an immense variety of interests within the same cultural space, a space at odds with almost all the larger systems of which it is a part. Community radio exists in a sphere in which the difficulties encountered in trying to construct a community organization based on openness and participation are not simply organizational distractions but are their animating purpose. A broad and contradictory set of social facts define the range of practices for most of these radio stations and sustain them on the very thin and volatile margins of a public culture that is constantly evolving through rules and forces larger than all of us. Many of the community radio stations I have studied in Canada, the United States, and Australia face similar problems. The kind of cultural production on which they base their existence becomes more and more necessary even as the conditions needed to produce it become harder to maintain. It should not be surprising that neoliberalism, a thoroughgoing ideology whose practitioners declare themselves uniquely able to explain and remedy all social ills, has severe consequences even for those who, by their actions if not their sentiments, so completely reject their prescriptions.

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