Community radio and the notion of value: a divergent and contested theoretical terrain

Simon Order[1]

Abstract

The community radio sector in Australia is under-funded and under-resourced. Many of the 270-plus stations in Australia (CBAA 2012) struggle to maintain long-term viability and manage their day-to-day financial operations. Practitioners in the sector use a range of strategies to attract funding; however, there are no magic formulas for keeping their heads above water. Approximately 10 per cent of funding comes from government grants (Forde at al 2002: 98–99), most of which are one-off grants for specific projects. If the value of a community radio station could be determined, then surely it would be easier to attract funding from government or other sources. In this paper I examine the concept of value in the context of the community radio station. I explain why the assessment of value is important. Since the value of community radio is a divergent and contested theoretical terrain, a clearer understanding of value would most likely enable stations to attract more funding. I explore the notion of value in relation to community radio through four theoretical lenses. The first lens is the *lens of definitions*, where the value of community radio can be determined by how it is defined. As a medium, community radio can sit under various umbrella 'alternative media'–type definitions. The definitions can also be entwined with notions of value, obfuscating the theoretical territory. The second lens is the *lens of oppositional power*. Community radio as a type of alternative media has long been associated with 'oppositional' stances to mainstream media themes. The value of this oppositional power is questionable and may be overstated. The third lens is the *lens of social power*. Community radio as alternative media has the potential to empower participants personally or politically. The fourth lens is the *lens of participation in media production*, where community radio encourages participation in media content production and administration.

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1   Simon Order is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media, Communication and Culture, Faculty of Arts, Education and Creative Media, Murdoch University. This paper was presented at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Conference 'Cultural ReOrientations and Comparative Colonialities', Adelaide, 22–24 November 2011.

The value of participation has been celebrated; however more research is necessary to establish the true value. These four lenses corral areas of critical debate and offer avenues for future enquiry into the community radio sector. Overall I conclude that more work needs to be done before community radio stations are able to measure their value against clear standards towards a better funded future.

Introduction

Why is measuring the value of community radio important? According to the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), the sector globally has always faced challenges of financial sustainability that distract community radio practitioners from their primary tasks. AMARC proposes that unconditional public funding is one way to ensure financial sustainability while allowing the sector to concentrate on the community participation and creative programming that make it an alternative to commercial and public broadcasting (AMARC 2007: 7, 23). Whether funding is public or private, AMARC argue that 'donors need to know if their money has been put to good use' (2007: 51). What value will donors and other stakeholders receive from community radio as a result of their funding? AMARC discusses the 'social impact of community radio', the 'effectiveness of community radio' and 'evidence that community radio works' (AMARC 2007: 50). Some accountability is sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of the sector. Some measure of community radio's value is required.

During their 2006 conference in Amman, AMARC asked members to assess their community radio station by focusing on two aspects. Firstly, members were asked to assess the effectiveness of the process of delivering community radio (station management, operation and programming) (AMARC 2007: 51). While global communications technology offers such a varied platter of available media, community radio practitioners need to consider why consumers would listen to their station. There is no room for complacency in an ever-shifting mediascape, especially, as others have commented, when community radio has historically been branded a second-class or 'ghetto' radio (Griffiths 1975: 7) or perceived as an amateur-sounding medium (Meadows et al 2007: 33). Shedding this legacy will mean producing a credible, professional-sounding alternative to commercial and public broadcasting (AMARC

2007: 52). Value in this context relates to the effective delivery of community radio for the benefit of both the community and the participants.

Secondly, AMARC suggested an assessment of the effectiveness of community radio stations in contributing to the social progress of communities in their broadcasting area and an analysis of the impact of such contributions (AMARC 2007: 51). AMARC believe that their evaluation uncovered a need to demonstrate the richness and positive experiences of the community radio movement. They stated: 'Community radio practitioners and stakeholders have not taken the time and efforts to present systematically the achievements of community radio worldwide' (2007: 8). There is a need to develop assessment tools and quality indicators that highlight the value of the social impact of community radio on individuals and communities, on both the producers and the listeners. Concise and clear assessments demonstrating the social impacts of community radio would be vital tools for aspiring broadcasters. Such assessments would show regulators and legislators the value of community radio. Broadcasting that offers evidence of community values, public opinions, diverse cultures and languages, which are important to a society, can only be useful to governments (AMARC 2007: 52). Without evaluative tools for the sector, the value of social impact will remain an intangible notion. More research in this area is long overdue.

Atton has maintained that in the short period since 2000 research into alternative media[2] has expanded. Atton cited media journals that have dedicated whole issues to alternative media research (*Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 2003; *Media, Culture and Society*, 2003; *Media History*, 2001; *Media International Australia*, 2002). Significantly though, he believed the theory is still highly contested with much work to be done (Atton 2007b: 17), especially since alternative media rarely appears in 'dominant theoretical traditions of media research' (Atton 2002: 7). He suggested that the dominant Marxist and Gramscian ideas of alternative media are of counter-hegemonic, radical and anti-capitalist publications which, although they

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2   Community radio is a medium that has variously been described as community media, alternative media, citizen's media, radical alternative media, democratic media, emancipatory media, independent media, participatory media, citizen's journalism and social movement media. I discuss this in the next section on the lens of definitions. In this paper I use 'alternative media' as a generic term to identify the theoretical field.

provide some theoretical space, may be limited in scope. He asserted that there is a dearth of developed theoretical frameworks for alternative media (ibid).

Kitty Van Vuuren in 'The value and purpose of community broadcasting' (2009) similarly suggested that the 'discourse of community broadcasting is a highly contested terrain' (2009: 175) where dominant themes are transient. The principles that emerged during the inception of the Australian sector in the 1970s are wide and represent the diverse ideas of interest groups and government departments of the time (Barlow 1998: 43; Thornley 1999: 131). These have endured and still offer no easily identifiable framework of value. Widely divergent views from practitioners, the government, media and society at large all have an impact on the sector, and in Van Vuuren's view (2009) contribute to ideological tensions within Australian community broadcasting. Because of this plurality, she believes that it would be wiser to identify *who* decides on the objectives for the sector initially rather than what those objectives are.

There is some agreement among these theorists that the value of community radio is not clearly understood. The following lenses of discussion examine areas of uncertainty or debate, suggesting a need to evaluate community radio more precisely.

The lens of definitions

While my focus in this paper is community radio, I will draw upon relevant theory from subject areas that include community radio under their own umbrella terms to explore notions of value. The range of umbrella terms in common usage includes: community media, alternative media, citizen's media, radical alternative media, democratic media, emancipatory media, independent media, participatory media, citizen's journalism and social movement media. Focusing on the definitions of these key terms provides one powerful insight into the understanding of value for community radio. The definitions reveal much about how practitioners and theorists conceptualise the *raison d'être* for their particular media and thus where they perceive value. All of these terms could be applied to community radio and thus

are pertinent to the discussion. In this section I will explore the definitions of four terms and their entwinement with notions of value.

The first term that needs to be discussed in relation to the value of community radio is 'alternative media'. Alternative media is an oft-used umbrella term to describe community radio yet it is also entwined with the notion of 'alternative' as a value intrinsic to community radio. The definition and the value are indelibly linked. When considering whether to use the term 'alternative media', Chris Atton has suggested that 'we shall find that their differences lie less in the definitions they imply and more in the emphasis they place on how to conceptualise "media" and "communication", and how the terms relate to social and cultural practices' (2007b: 18). While in much of his work Atton opts for the term 'alternative media', his concern is that the term is overloaded with meaning because it encompasses a large range of media forms including newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, blogs and other websites, pamphlets and posters, fanzines and zines, graffiti and street theatre, songs and music, independent book publishing, and independent record production. Atton's definition of alternative media refers to services that exist outside of the mainstream media. They may include 'media of protest groups, dissidents, fringe political organizations, even fans and hobbyists' (Atton 2002: 3). The producers are often amateurs, writing or broadcasting as citizens, activists or members of a community and may be concerned with representing the views, interests and opinions of those not adequately represented by the mainstream media. Such producers may offer some media access to those marginalised or demonised by mainstream media. The tendency to operate from a non-commercial standpoint offers a notion of independence from the market and commercial pressures on their content (Atton 2007b: 18). The definition of community radio and the determination of its value in this context refer to an *alternative* free space for community participants to produce their own media without the normal constraints of the mainstream.

John Downing and his co-authors in *Radical media* understand the notion of 'alternative' quite differently to Atton. Downing and his co-authors believe that 'to speak of *alternative* is almost oxymoronic. Everything, at some point, is alternative to something else … [And] to some

extent, the extra designation *radical* helps firm up the definition of alternative media' (Downing et al. 2001: ix, emphasis added). Downing's analysis of radical alternative media focused on the media of the left and its ability to oppose and sublimate dominant capitalist messages. He argued that it is impossible for socialist left media successfully to oppose the dominant media hegemony of capitalist bourgeois ideology. It will always be a David versus Goliath battle, doomed to failure. Rather, Downing suggested that the emphasis on 'radical' is about progressive politics and participation in a progressively structured media production organisation. Alternative media and community radio stations often adopt a democratic mode of internal governance, rejecting traditional hierarchical corporate governance structures. This kind of organisation takes the radical action of prioritising collective decision making as an important value (Downing 1984: 23–25).

The definition and value in this context of radical alternative media refers to two ideas. Firstly, there is the value of a democratic opportunity that community radio affords to radical politics or other alternative marginalised groups, giving them some voice on the airwaves. Secondly, it is an organisational prefigurative political[3] stance (Breines 1989: 46; Downing et al 2001: 71) that is valuable as a democratising agent in society (Downing 1988: 169). Downing and Atton proposed different understandings of the definition of 'alternative media' and by default the value of 'alternative' for community radio. Indeed, Downing changed the terminology to 'radical alternative media' to enhance his particular understanding.

Clemencia Rodríguez's preference is for the term 'citizen's media'. Similar to Downing, she believed that value and empowerment lies less in a battle with the mainstream and more in the power that comes from quotidian citizen participation in restating and reshaping of participants' cultural codes. Rodríguez believed that citizenship is not a passive legal right but something to be enacted on a daily basis via participation in media production. Definition and value in this context refer to the participation that shapes the participants' identities and

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3   'Prefigurative politics' is a term first used by Wini Brienes (1989) to describe the organisational structures of activist movements of the left in the 1960s that rejected hierarchical structures of organisational governance and practiced participatory democracy in their decision making. For some it is an embodiment in their organisation of what they would like to see in a future society.

results in empowerment or an active cultural citizenship (Rodríguez 2001: 19–22). Thus the term 'citizen's media' is more resonant with Rodríguez's understanding of the value of participation and cultural practice. While Rodríguez and Downing speak a similar language, their different definitions emphasise where they place any notion of value. Rodríguez's citizen's media emphasises value through citizenship while Downing's radical alternative media emphasises the progressive nature of the participants and the organisational structure.

In the Australian context, Forde et al prefer the terms independent or community media. They argued that such terms demonstrate a clear 'alternative to the mainstream' (Forde et al 2003: 316). They drew on Nancy Fraser, who used the term 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser 1992: 123) to describe the formation of alternative public spheres of discourse to the mainstream. The interaction and sharing of experiences of community media participants within these subaltern counterpublics, as Forde et al suggested, could be considered 'a form of alternative media literacy' (Forde at al 2003: 316). They also suggested that Australia, in comparison to other countries, contains a diverse range of community radio cultures (political, religious, ethnic, musical, youth) (2003: 316). Thus, in comparison to 'citizen's media' or 'alternative media', the terms 'independent' or 'community media' are more inclusive and appropriate to a diverse Australian society. Value in this context is determined by notions of independence. Firstly, this value suggests an independence of personal thought which in turn enables a critique of the dominant mainstream media messages. Secondly, this value suggests a sense of an independent community enabling and generating independent media messages of their own. Forde et al used similar language to Downing and Rodríguez yet the subtleties found in their definitions of independent, community or radical alternative media point to where they believe value may be emphasised for them.

Rather than adopting a different definition, Peter Lewis (1993) opted for a more inclusive term. The publication resulting from Peter Lewis's work with UNESCO, *Alternative media: linking global and local* (1993), explored the impact[4] of alternative media. During the data

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4   'This study is not concerned with "impact" only in the limited sense of "effects studies". The answer to the question "what impact did project X have?" may in any case not even be recoverable in terms of quantitative

gathering stage of the study, the guidelines below were sent to potential contributors (sites of alternative media). The guidelines indicate the range of possible definitions and thus value for the term 'alternative media'. As general objectives, Lewis suggested these guidelines may imply that alternative media seek to 'supplant' mainstream media (1993: 12). In his earlier 1984 UNESCO study of urban community media he proposed that alternative media 'expand the services of mass media' by 'doing things which mass media systems cannot do' (Lewis 1984: 1). According to Lewis, alternative media differ from the mainstream media in the following ways:

a) *motive or purpose*, eg rejection of commercial motives, assertion of human, cultural, educational ends

b) *sources of funding*, eg in different places state or municipal grants are rejected or, in others, advertising revenue

c) *regulatory dispensation*, eg alternative media may be supervised by agencies different from those usually concerned (Ministry of Communications or Culture) or be autonomous, or local

d) *organisational structure*, eg the media may be consciously alternative in their way of operating

e) alternative in criticising *professional practices*, encouraging the use of volunteers or production, participation and/or control by 'ordinary' people; trying to adopt different criteria for selection of news stories for instance

f) *message content* may be alternative to what is usually available or permitted. An established medium (eg satellite channel) may be used for this purpose.

g) *the relationship with audience/consumers* may be different. This might relate to the degree of user/consumer control, or to a policy of allowing media 'needs' and goals to be articulated by the audience/consumers themselves.

h) *the composition of the audience* may be alternative, eg young people, women, rural populations, etc

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data. There may still, however, be answers at the level of social, political and cultural analysis' (UNESO 1993: 13).

i) *the range of diffusion* may be alternative, eg local rather than regional or national

j) *the alternative nature of research methodology* may even construct a picture of media provision or use that can qualify as alternative (Lewis 1993: 12).

These aspects provided potential contributors to the study with plenty of scope to define alternative media for themselves. Lewis's guidelines are a telling indication that the field is far from unified in its objectives. Value in the context of this definition of alternative media accommodates the full range of notions, including those of Atton, Downing, Rodríguez, Forde et al and others.

While the definitions discussed in this lens trace similar ground to each other, the perceptions of value in relation to community radio are different. There seems little agreement on terminology. Subsequently, the definitions say more about how practitioners conceptualise their media practice as a valuable activity, rather than the explicit value of that activity. The following lenses may offer more specific notions of value for the community radio sector.

The lens of oppositional power

Chris Atton in 'Alternative media theory and journalism practice' (2008) argued that media theorists traditionally overemphasise the oppositional value of alternative media as challenging the mainstream. In this simplistic binary model alternative media cannot hope to compete with the mainstream media's resources. This model also encourages alternative media to judge itself by mainstream values of success, such as audience reach and production quality. Atton (2008: 215) outlined two main approaches within this model of alternative media studies and argued they are of limited use.

The first approach to alternative media is to paint the mainstream media as 'monolithic and unchanging' where 'the power of the mass media marginalizes ordinary citizens: not only are they denied access to its production, they are marginalized by its reports' (Atton 2008: 215).[5]

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5   Atton (2008) gave the example of Glasgow University Media Group (Eldrige 1995), who have analysed BBC texts such as news and current affairs to show bias towards certain groups in the community, namely

Although Atton's primary interest is in alternative print journalism, his theorisation of alternative media is relevant to community radio. He argued that the independent media provides an alternative framing of news. This stands in contrast to the dominant media's inbuilt bias against social movement groups. This bias is manifest in the selection of stories, treatment of stories and general delegitimisation of their causes. He believed that 'independent accounts can provide a powerful counter to the enduring frames of social movement coverage in mainstream media' (Atton 2007a: 74). However, the concern is that alternative media coverage largely speaks only to its own community. Part of the reason for this view is that they lack the resources to reach a wider audience.

Furthermore, Atton cited Ashley and Olsen's study *Print media's framing of the women's movement, 1966 to 1986*. The study examined print media coverage and argued that the mainstream media portrays ideological groups such as the women's movement as homogenised social deviants bordering society's fringes, and as disorganised 'bra burners, angries, radicals, libbers and militants' (Ashley and Olsen 1998: 273). This homogenisation of dissenting voices by the mainstream media reduces the credibility of protest and social movements to small media bites. Atton exemplified this point by referring to a photograph of a masked anti-globalisation protester at the G8 Genoa riots in 2001 standing proudly on a riot-damaged car. The mainstream media reduced the whole social movement to this single moment (Atton 2007a: 74). Arguably when the mainstream media reduces social movements to this low level of credibility, their accompanying alternative media outlets are similarly branded, subsequently limiting their media reach.

The second approach to alternative media studies that Atton outlined is the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky (1988). This model reflects the way media commercialisation and market concentration have reduced citizens to mere consumers incapable of contributing to genuine public discourse. Some in the American right actually believe that citizens' contributions and alternative media hamper democracy (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 2–19).

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politicians, business leaders, and law and order professionals, while workers and trade unions are marginalised and often demonised. The work challenges the objectivity and impartiality of the BBC and suggests that professional journalists have a narrow view of societal groups.

Hackett and Carroll (2006) termed this a 'democratic deficit'. This deficit includes a general under-representation of people in relation to ethnicity, indigenous descent, gender and class in the mainstream media. The democratic deficit also portrays a trend towards media tabloidisation, thrill-seeking controversy and shallow reporting. There has also been a move towards homogenisation of content across media networks, where local content is reduced because it is cheaper to use networked content (2006: 3–10). The hope in this approach to media studies is that alternative media can balance this deficit (Splichal 1993: 12–13). For Atton, alternative media studies have mostly been reduced to approaches that paint a picture of conflict/separation between citizens and the media. Steve Macek in 'From the weapon of criticism to criticism by weapons' was critical of this brand of media studies however. He argued that

> At its worst, it [this brand of media studies] is overly polemical, shrill and dogmatic. At its best, it consists of careful empirical documentation of, and empirically-grounded theorizing about, the deficiencies and contradictions of capitalist or state-run media systems (seen as instrumental in propping up the hierarchies and oppressive power relations in which they are embedded). (Macek 2006: 232)

Downing, in his analysis of European alternative media in the 1970s and early 80s, was also sceptical of oppositional notions of power. He stated that 'The various alternative movements of the latter part of the 20th century know much more clearly what they did *not* want (nuclear holocaust, nuclear pollution, militaristic budgets, capitalism, Sovietism) than what they propose to put in their place' (Downing 1988: 169, emphasis added).

With these approaches to oppositional value, it is obvious why alternative media are celebrated. They provide a space for those disillusioned with the mainstream. As Atton stated, 'They appear more democratic and socially inclusive' (2008: 216). They construct an alternative reality, often in contrast to the mass media's messages. They are attractive to those disillusioned with the mainstream.

Value in this context sees community radio as a place to broadcast messages that are alternative or oppositional to the mainstream. The value of this comes with some caveats though. How effective is that oppositional stance? Are viable alternative policies being proposed or is it purely oppositional? Is the audience reach wide enough to make a difference? Are the production values of the broadcast professional enough to compete with the mainstream? Why would the consumer tune in? These caveats mediate the value of oppositional power in a real world context, however, and mean that the value is unclear.

The lens of social power

In *Fissures in the mediascape* (2001), Clemencia Rodríguez stated that the discovery of three startling global communication trends in the late twentieth century has hastened scholarship around the democratisation of communications. This scholarship focuses on the emergence of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). The first trend is that the amount of media flowing from First World countries to Third World countries was ten times stronger than from Third World to First World countries. Secondly, there was little or no communication moving from Third World countries to other Third World countries. The third trend is that the content from First World countries about First World countries was far greater than any content about Third World countries (Rodríguez 2001: 2–7). In the 1970s Third World UNESCO representatives protested these dramatic global communication trends because the balance of global media ownership and information flow was unevenly skewed towards the power of the dominant western media corporations. The MacBride Report[6] (UNESCO 1980) addressed these issues, suggesting a revision of international communication policies to redistribute communicative power. Alternative media production was seen as an important part of the solution to bring about a more democratic media landscape.

Alternative media have traditionally been valued for their perceived ability to undermine the power of large media corporations (Rodríguez 2001: 5–7). As discussed earlier with Downing and Atton, Rodríguez also considered this to be a flawed model. Rodríguez described

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6   For more see http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0004/000400/040066eb.pdf

alternative media as a 'heterogeneous set of media practices developed by very diverse groups' (2001: 12–13). She suggested that theorists should look at alternative media for what it is, rather than what it is *not*. In her detailed alternative media case studies, including citizens' journalism in revolutionary Nicaragua, community television in Catalonia, participatory video production for Columbian women and Latino community radio in the United States, she examined cultural identity and political and social empowerment of marginalised groups. Instead of researching political intention and perceived media power, she suggested that more research is needed into the social phenomena of participation. This focus on participation will increase the understanding of alternative media's real value (2001: 4).

Researching alternative media at the social grassroots level reveals more about value than the binary approach of mainstream media versus the alternative media. Rodríguez discussed how 'multiple streams of power relationships are disrupted in the everyday lives of alternative media participants' (Rodríguez 2001: 16–17). The power of personal and community identities is constantly in flux as media participants move between participation and their everyday lives. For example, Rodríguez suggested that because an individual is part of a historically marginalised or minority group, this does not mean they symbolically become a member of this specific under-represented interest group and accordingly take on that group's homogenous characteristics or experiences. Their identity and empowerment is more complex because it is based on other variables including gender, social class and age. Power is not a fixed notion in any part of our lives; however social involvement in alternative media can, as Rodríguez suggested, 'Facilitate the fermentation of identities and power positions … alternative media spin transformative processes that alter people's senses of self, their subjective positioning, and therefore access to power' (2001: 18).

Her notions of value theorise less about where power is situated and more in terms of how personal power emerges from grassroots action. Value in this context relates to a sense of empowerment at the personal, political and cultural level. The social power that emerges from involvement with alternative media determines its value. The value of this participation, however, has its detractors.

The lens of participation

In contrast to Rodríguez's theory, Atton is wary of the celebratory approach to alternative media that assigns a lot of value to participation, access, self-management and alternative working practices (Atton 2008: 218–219). Atton argued that there is a gap in value assessments that ignore other aspects of alternative media practices. These other aspects include broadcasting production skills, broadcaster ideology development and their relationship with the audience. To Atton, this underexplored dimension is a weakness of alternative media studies, where 'in its rush to praise and support alternative media, critical research appears reluctant to examine them too closely' (2008: 218–219).

To illustrate his concern about the lack of close examination of alternative media practices, Atton focused on the website *SchNEWS* (schnews.org.uk). Atton dissected their news framing, representation, discourse, ethics and reporting norms. The website's news sources are 'ordinary people' rather than elite experts. *SchNEWS* does not ignore mainstream news sources such as government officials; rather it tends to focus on their failings. *SchNEWS* is suspicious of the elite expert sources used by mainstream media; subsequently its reporting tends to 'betray its own politicized discourse' (Atton 2008: 224), leading Atton to ask whether the news sources are chosen because they share a similar ideology to the site. *SchNEWS* has turned media access upside down, ensuring the opinions of ordinary people are the dominant voices. However, do the media producers dominate the expression of those ordinary voices? Atton drew no conclusions on this example; however he suggested a step away from an assumed celebration of alternative media to consider future research that is 'multiperspectival'. As Atton stated, 'the position of the researcher as ideological advocate needs to be sacrificed for the sake of properly critical media research' (2008: 224).

Atton's arguments about the benefits of participation are shared by other researchers in the media studies field. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) presented their own vision of an ideal alternative media that can change society into a truly participatory environment. Firstly, they stated that alternative media should be *critical* media if it is to have maximum effect.

Participation in media production alone does not bring balance to a mediascape dominated by corporate power (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010: 142). Secondly, they were critical of participatory, not-for-profit, collectively governed media who operate on a shoestring and tend to dispense with professional organisational practice and production values (2010: 143). As AMARC has suggested (2007: 52), community media must be competitive in the mediascape if they are to be effective.

If alternative media are to produce critical content that truly challenges the mainstream, they must improve their public visibility and audience reach. Critical media should use the media production techniques of the capitalist mainstream media to reach a wider audience and thus be politically effective (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010: 143). Giving people a voice in participatory media is not enough if it means their message is not heard (2010: 146). Value in this context of participation is distinctly contested.

Conclusion

Overall, I have argued that there is no unified understanding of the value of community radio; however there is a need to demonstrate the positive outcomes of community radio while the sector struggles to be financially sustainable in a competitive mediascape (AMARC 2007: 50–51).

I have explored the notion of 'value' through four main lenses: the lens of definition, the lens of oppositional power, the lens of social power and the lens of participation. Through the lens of definition Atton offered value in the notion of 'free space', an environment unencumbered by the constraints of the mainstream media, where citizens can produce their own alternative content (Atton 2002: 3, 2007b: 18). Downing believed there is democratic value in firstly giving radical or marginalised groups space on the airwaves (Downing 1984: 23–25) and secondly there is value in organisational prefigurative politics as a democratising agent in society (Downing et al 2001: 71). Rodríguez proposed that value lies in participation in media production that subsequently produces personal or political empowerment or an 'active cultural citizenship' (2001: 19–22). Forde et al (2003: 316) suggested participation in

community radio offers the notions of personal and community independence and alternative media literacy. Peter Lewis (1993: 12) dispensed with concern for definitions and suggested a much wider scope for the term 'alternative media'. While these theorists tread similar ground, there is little agreement on the definitions or perceptions of value.

The lens of social power examines involvement in grassroots media production, offering a more subtle democratisation of the communications role for community media. Rodríguez (2001: 16–17) valued the personal and political empowerment that emerges through participation. In stark contrast, the lens of participation suggests that celebrating this participation as value is insufficient when the content of alternative media is skewed to its own politics (Atton 2008: 218–219) and is heard only by its community. As Sandoval and Fuchs argued (2010: 146), alternative media needs to adopt professional practices if they are to make a real difference to the community.

Notions of the value of community radio at this juncture seem unlikely to fall under any unified model of evaluation. It may be, in following the work of Rodríguez (2001), that detailed case studies of community radio stations reveal more about their own heterogeneous or unique notions of value. Unique notions of value require unique frameworks of evaluation.

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