Is community radio in crisis in the Global North?: Lessons from Australia and the United States

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Abstract

This article explores the relevance of community radio in the Global North. Its significance in the Global South is uncontested (Gumucio Dagron, 2011; Rodríguez, 2011; Tacchi, 2002), however, in the Global North the role of community radio is not necessarily so clear. According to a 2017 study published by New York University, newer digital services are changing the way people listen to content, endangering the future of traditional radio (Miller, 2017). In this environment, the relevance of community radio can be put into question. Based on three different case studies – two in Australia and one in the US – our analysis explores community broadcasters' strategic initiatives that, although different, intend to address specific communication needs in particular audiences. Our analysis suggests that the future of community radio in the Global North depends on its ability to detect needs and audiences *at the hyper-local level*.

Keywords

Community media, community radio, Global North, sustainability, low-power FM radio

Introduction

The significance of community radio in the Global South is uncontested (Gumucio Dagron, 2011; Rodríguez, 2011; Tacchi, 2002); in media ecologies where only precarious Internet access is available to the majority of the population, community radio still has the potential to serve various information and communication needs (i.e., serving as a local public sphere, showcasing local voices otherwise left at the margins, connecting people and organisations, facilitating local governance and community participation in decision-making processes). In contexts where a good Internet connection costs 20% of the monthly minimum wage, people may have cell phones and access to the Internet, but their main sources of information, communication, and entertainment are still radio and television (Couldry & Rodríguez, 2016).

However, in the Global North the role of community radio is not so clear. According to a 2017 study published by New York University, new digital services are changing the way people listen to content, endangering the future of traditional radio (Miller, 2017). Important contributions of community radio to the public sphere, such as diversifying voices and cultural practices, facilitating forums for civil society participation, and connecting local organisations are at threat

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of being taken over by digital platforms. In the Global North, younger users are gravitating to podcasts and abandoning traditional forms of radio broadcasting (Miller, 2017). According to *Wired*, the year 2008 marked a key moment in the progressive substitution of digital over radio. That year the iPhone 3G was released to the market with a new function that allowed users to download audio files. The number of podcast listeners climbed from 8% to 15% in the United States (Quah, 2017).

In 2000, *Wired* magazine documented the beginning of Internet radio. While some media activists and radio producers pressured the FCC to open the radio spectrum for community broadcasters, others gravitated to digital radio. At the time, *Wired* wrote:

> Using audio-streaming software and services like Yahoo! Broadcast (www.broadcast.com) and Live365.com (www.live365.com), at least 9,000 stations have established an online presence that can reach listeners around the globe. And because the medium is free of the frequency interference problems that limit the number of FM stations in a given area, any number of webcasters can start their own stations - without an FCC license (Wired, 2000).

However, in January 2016, due to surges on the cost of music copyrights, Live365 cancelled its webcasting operations, silencing 5000 online radio broadcasters (McIntyre, 2016), making it clear that the media ecosystem in the Global North is shifting and swaying.

Emerging digital technologies such as podcasting, music streaming platforms, and web radio are often cited as threats to the future of community radio. Pete Tridish, a former community radio broadcaster and founder of Prometheus Radio Project talks about 'the crisis of community radio in the Global North' (Pete Tridish, personal communication, October 2016). Yet community radio keeps growing in various contexts in the Global North. On 7 January 2011, the then United States President, Barack Obama, signed the *Local Community Radio Act of 2010* (US Congress, 2011), which established a legal framework for community broadcasting. After years of struggle on the part of media activists, the Act finally opened up radio frequencies for community groups seeking a low-power FM radio license. Since then, Low-Power FM (LPFM) radio is on the rise in the United States. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC, n.d.), more than 750 new community broadcasting licenses have been issued since 2014, in the wake of new legislation facilitated through the Local Community Radio Act.

As such, the US LPFM sector is currently in the process of forging an identity as the 'new kid on the block' in a constantly shifting mediascape. In Australia, however, community broadcasting has been formally licensed since the early 1970s and since this time has flourished as a well-established media sector including more than 450 community radio stations and an audience of 5.3 million people (McNair Ingenuity Research, 2017). In this article we explore how community radio in the Global North is trying to maintain its relevance. Based on three different case studies – two in Australia and one in the US – our analysis explores community broadcasters' strategic initiatives that, although different, intend to address specific communication needs in particular audiences. Our analysis suggests that the future of community radio in the Global North depends on its ability to detect needs and audiences *at the hyper-local level*.

The Australian community broadcasting sector was established in 1972, concurrent to an 'explosion of local independent radio' across Europe, known as the free radio movement (Lewis, 2006), as well as the establishment of similar radio sectors in North America. In contrast to the US, lobbying for a community radio sector in Australia (then referred to as public radio) was initiated as a national campaign, capitalising on the newly released and unused FM spectrum, and targeted directly at the Federal Government. Australia did not have a tradition of pirate radio to predate its community radio sector, as was the case in parts of Western Europe in the late 1960s (Dunaway, 1998). The country's national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), was heavily influenced by its British counterpart, the British Broadcasting Corporation

(BBC). From its inception, community radio in Australia represented a 'Third Sector' of broadcasting, which exists alongside commercial operations and government-funded stations. As such, the Australian community radio sector was institutionalised from the very start (Anderson, 2017) – uniquely so, within a broadcasting system that grew out of a British model of national public broadcasting, but also included a commercial sector similar to that of the United States (Lewis & Booth, 1989).

Forty-odd years later, radio still dominates the Australian community broadcasting sector. There are over 450 radio station licensees and an additional 50 community television licensees across the country (McNair Ingenuity Research, 2017), representing a variety of geographic communities. The largest proportion of listeners are in regional areas (41%), with a further 25% in rural areas and 34% across metropolitan and suburban locations (CBF, 2016). Stations vary greatly depending on the community to which they broadcast, from radical and political to religious and educational. Community radio stations also serve the many interests and needs of specific communities of interest – including senior citizens, youth, arts, fine music and other specialist interests, as well as providing specific services for people with print disabilities, and ethnic, Indigenous, and religious audiences. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) requires that all new community stations guarantee open membership and, regardless of structure, any community broadcasting organisation must be 'publicly accountable' – this means the station must demonstrate how its activities meet community interests and public objectives, and regularly report to its members (CBAA, 2010). As non-profit organisations, surplus funds at each radio station are not distributed to members but reinvested to achieve the objectives of the organisation.

While the Australian community radio sector can broadly be defined as a social movement mobilising around issues of media democratisation, not all community radio stations can be defined as social movement organisations, given the diversification of the sector over the past 40 years (Anderson, 2017). The CBAA first recognised a drive towards commercialisation over 15 years ago, which has hindered the sector's capacity as an alternative media platform (Anderson, 2017). In addition, there has been a general lean to more conservative politics, possibly led by an increasing shift towards community radio being the only form of local media in many regional areas (Forde, Meadows & Foxwell, 2002b). In fact, according to Forde, Meadows and Foxwell (2002b: 25–34) the average community radio worker is closely aligned to the 'average' Australian with 'middle of the road' political leanings. Regardless, there are community radio stations that do engage in radical, alternative and grassroots media production and two extensive studies (Forde, Meadows and Foxwell 2002a; Meadows et al, 2007) highlight the transformative roles played by community broadcasters, describing community radio as an important cultural resource for the Australian community.

Given the longevity of community radio in Australia, it can most certainly be considered as an institution and legitimate third sector of the country's broadcasting landscape. As such, there is much that the fledgling Low Power-FM movement in the United States can learn from the Australian example. This is not to say that community radio 'down-under' is not facing its own challenges amid global digital disruption. For example, in the 2016 Federal government budget, a cut of $5.6 million dollars from the community broadcasting sector budget was proposed (FECCA, 2016: 12) until a nationwide campaign forced a reversal of the decision. Despite its standing as a legacy media, Australian community radio constantly needs to justify its continuing existence.

In this article we outline the emergence of two relatively new community radio programs in Australia that were established to respond to specific community needs. These radio shows are examples of community engagement projects in the sector that demonstrate that there are certainly still fissures in the mediascape where traditional community radio can play an important

role, in an ecosystem now saturated by the digital. We then introduce a third case study – an emerging Low Power-FM radio station in Philadelphia, USA – to discuss how it is establishing relevance in an increasing era of digital disruption, drawing parallels with our Australian examples.

Before introducing our case studies, it is important to highlight a distinct difference between our Australian and US examples, with the former being individual radio programs and the latter a radio station. While we recognise this is not exactly comparing 'like with like', we argue there is room for such cross-comparison. Rather than search for the 'perfect' Australian community radio station through which to explore the challenges of an emerging US LPFM sector, we choose to examine specific programs that are relatively new themselves and, as such, still establishing their own relevance. In many respects, a radio station can be considered the sum of its programming. We propose that focusing on specific radio programs, or what Jallov (2005) calls a micro-level case study, provides a robust platform to analyse future potential directions for G-Town Radio, and by extension, other Low Power-FM stations in the US.

Case Study One, *United We Read Radio Story-time*, PBA-FM, 89.7FM
Elizabeth, Adelaide, Australia

United We Read Radio Story-time aims to support reading in families with lower levels of literacy. It was initiated as an action research collaboration between the University of South Australia and United Way South Australia, who operate *United We Read* (UWR), an early intervention book program in the lowest socio-economic suburbs of Adelaide, that aims to build foundation literacy skills in children aged from birth to five years (full methodology for this research project can be found in Anderson, 2016). The UWR program involves a monthly literacy kit posted to each child, which includes an age appropriate storybook and parent help sheet as well as information about family events focused on building a rapport with parents as well as literacy. The book program was launched in March 2014 and at the time of writing there are nearly 400 children registered, mostly based in the suburbs of Elizabeth Park and Elizabeth Downs.

Elizabeth Downs and Elizabeth Park are North and North East Suburbs of Adelaide, located approximately 25 kilometres from the city centre. According to the latest census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), the collective population of the two suburbs was 8,930 with just under 70% born in Australia. Less than 45% of people living in Elizabeth Downs and Elizabeth Park, over the age of 15 who identify as being in the labour force, are employed full-time, with nearly one third working on a part-time basis. The two suburbs have an approximate unemployment rate of 19.8%, more than double the South Australian average. They are mainly working-class suburbs with a median household income of AU$794 per week, significantly lower than the South Australian median of AU$1,206. Latest figures from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) show that almost a third of children in the Elizabeth area (32.6%) are 'developmentally vulnerable' in one or more domain, and fare worse than state-wide and national averages in a range of domains including language and communication (AEDC, 2018). For example, 28.8% of children are developmentally vulnerable in the language domain, compared to 6.5% Australia-wide. National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results for schools in the suburbs targeted by the UWR program have consistently been shown to be behind national averages (NAP, 2018). Elizabeth Downs Primary School performed 'substantially below' national comparison figures on all measures (reading, persuasive writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy) in years three, five and seven, while Elizabeth Park Primary School was 'substantially below' national averages in all but one area.

Research supports several ideas underpinning the *United We Read* program: the benefits of reading to children are widely accepted and have been extensively studied by educators over the past three decades, with studies confirming, for example, that reading aloud to young children

contributes to their later vocabulary (Richman & Colombo, 2007), their speech development and overall acquisition of literacy (Saracho & Spodek, 2010). A recent analysis of a longitudinal study of Australian children concluded that cognitive self-regulation (and its associated academic and social benefits) can be enhanced by having more books in the home and reading to a child on a daily basis (Walker, Harrison & Shahaeian, 2014).

The importance of family and parental involvement in children's literacy acquisition has been highlighted by numerous studies. A review of 16 family literacy interventions, representing 1,340 families, concluded that parent involvement had a positive effect upon children's reading acquisition (Senechal & Young, 2008: 880), while earlier studies have found clear evidence of a positive association between parents' literacy practices at home and children's later literacy (see for example Bus, van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995). However, the quality of adult book reading affects their children's language and literacy (Reece & Cox, 1999) and it is not enough to simply provide access to books, particularly in cases where English is parents' second language, or where English-speaking parents have low levels of literacy themselves. In an effort to address these issues, the *United We Read* program has been exploring approaches aimed at helping parents engage their children in the books provided, such as providing support material for parents to help make the most of reading, and running regular storybook sessions for families at a local community centre. *The United We Read Radio Story-time* was introduced specifically to assist families with lower levels of literacy to use the book program to its fullest potential.

The *United We Read Radio Story-time* broadcast on PBA-FM, a community radio station that services the Elizabeth regions of Adelaide, as a pilot to explore how a story-time radio show might add value to the *United We Read* program, and to investigate if such a radio show can further engage children in their love of reading and assist parents' involvement, regardless of their own levels of literacy. The first series ran for 10 episodes and the books were chosen from the *United We Read* collection (sponsored by Penguin Books), which had been previously distributed to families enrolled in the program. Preliminary findings demonstrate that the radio show certainly has the potential to promote children's experiences of an early intervention book-reading program, however, the medium is more successful with children over the age of three. It also appears that radio can assist to engage parents' involvement, on a number of levels. Parents who struggle with reading aloud received direct benefits while others said it created spaces for increased one-on-one reading time with their child. Despite these positive outcomes, the radio show has not yet commenced a second season, which will be discussed below.

Case study Two, *Radio Seeds*, WOW-FM, 100.5 FM
Semaphore, Adelaide, Australia

Radio Seeds is a monthly one-hour talk-based radio program, broadcast on WOW-FM in the western suburbs of Adelaide and produced by women of lived prison experience. It aims to support women in prison and those who have recently left, and to educate the wider community about the issues faced by women with a criminalised history. The show has been broadcasting since February 2017 and grew out of an earlier action research collaboration between Seeds of Affinity: Pathways for Women, the University of South Australia and the University of Adelaide (full methodology and further information is available in Anderson & Bedford, 2017).

Like the *United We Read Radio Story-time*, *Radio Seeds* was established to fill a gap in community services, identified by a local grassroots community organisation. Seeds of Affinity: Pathways for Women (known more colloquially as 'Seeds') is a not-for-profit, volunteer run community group that helps women to support each other upon their release from prison. The organisation began in 2006 and was founded by a group of South Australian women with lived prison experience. According to its website, Seeds 'works together to challenge the ongoing

stigmatisation faced by women leaving prison, and to build a community where women felt a sense of belonging, solidarity and self-worth.'

The *Radio Seeds* radio program grew out of a series of radio workshops conducted by two academics/community radio practitioners, who had worked extensively in prison broadcasting, and had approached Seeds of Affinity to suggest experimenting with radio. A number of Seeds women showed strong interest in radio, bolstered by the close proximity of a local community radio station, WOW FM. These women immediately recognised radio's potential to reach women, in prison and out, as well as the opportunities it presented for building relationships in the local community to raise awareness of the issues faced by women on release from prison. The theme of *What I Know Now* emerged almost immediately (Anderson & Bedford, 2017).

These initial workshops culminated in the radio series *What I Know Now*, a program focused on sharing the knowledge held by women who have successfully transitioned from a prison sentence to life in the free world – knowledge they wished they had upon release. During the workshops, participants developed skills in recording voice-overs, preparing and conducting interviews, scripting radio packages, and explored a variety of story-telling techniques to produce a radio series, which comprised of four short features. These focused on positive case studies and real-life experiences to guide and encourage women prisoners through the release process. The project was launched through a live broadcast on a local community radio station, WOW-FM. In the hour-long show, the women talked about their experiences of making radio, introduced their stories, and selected music. The launch achieved national and local television and radio news coverage and gave participants a taste of live broadcasting. The radio segments were podcast via a WordPress site and the Seeds of Affinity Website and were also re-broadcast nationally via the Community Radio Network.

Inspired by the success of *What I Know Now*, Seeds of Affinity provided support for a number of their members to become involved with WOW-FM. After receiving more training, these women became official radio announcers at the station and *Radio Seeds* was established. This hourly radio show features live interviews, pre-produced packages, shout-outs from prisoners recorded inside prison (most commonly at the Adelaide Women's Prison but also more recently at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre), group discussions and community information. *Radio Seeds* continues as an action research project with the aforementioned academics, who supply in-kind production support on a regular basis and have become, for all intents and purposes, fully-fledged members of the Seeds of Affinity community.

Women in prison, or immediately post-release, are quite often vulnerable, isolated and misinformed about their rights and the support they are entitled to; Carlton and Baldry (2013: 61) describe the period immediately following release as 'not only usually a traumatic time but … also framed by a woman's history of previous imprisonments and releases'. Conveying the positive message *What I Know Now* was at the core of the project from its inception and informed the direction of the radio series from workshop planning to final broadcast. As one participant said early in the project, 'so I can feel like I've achieved something, so that being in prison hasn't been in vain, so I can help other people' (Anderson & Bedford, 2017).

Anecdotally, *Radio Seeds* is producing similar outcomes to those of *What I Know Now*, as recorded by Anderson and Bedford (2017). While a concept that can be tricky to encapsulate, empowerment has certainly been an integral component of making radio at Seeds of Affinity. It is clear that the participants use the language of empowerment to define, explain and understand their experiences, in a variety of different contexts. *Radio Seeds* validates the knowledge of the participants, reframing their past experiences as information worth sharing for the benefit of others. Furthermore, the *Radio Seeds* women hold complete ownership of the project; even the simple act of choosing the music to be played in between spoken-word segments is a meaningful and sometimes contentious process. The high level of thought and preparation put towards *What I*

Know Now continues with the *Radio Seeds* regular radio show and demonstrates the investment of the participants.

The radio content itself provides valuable information for women inside prison or making the transition to post-prison life. Each episode gives practical information and advice on a wide variety of topics relating to surviving both inside and out. At the same time, the show is also listened to by people who have never been incarcerated. As Walsh, Rutherford and Crough (2013: 122) explain, 'for true social and political change to occur, not only must marginalised voices be heard, but also they must be able to elicit attentiveness and responsiveness from the mainstream community and its seats of power.' The general public probably knows less about imprisonment than about any other stage of the justice system (Blakely & Bumphus, 2005; Roberts & Hough, 2005; Surette, 2007) and media representation of prison issues is inadequate and often sensational. *Radio Seeds* directly challenges these stereotypes, and especially those of women who have lived the prison experience.

Case study 3, *Germantown Radio*, WGGT-LP 92.2 FM
Germantown, Philadelphia, United States

Germantown Radio, better known as G-town Radio, is a poster child of the media activists' struggle to democratise the airwaves in the United States. G-town Radio was born in the back room of Knotsquat, a regal Victorian house on Baltimore Avenue in West Philadelphia. Knotsquat played a key role in the LPFM struggle. The house, bought for one dollar from the city of Philadelphia to avoid its demolition, was converted into a communal living/creative space in the 1990s. Knotsquat housed artists and activists, among them several media activists with radio inclinations. Inspired by Stephen Dunifer's call for DIY radio broadcasting in the Bay Area in California, West Philly's media activists created *Radio Mutiny*, their own pirate radio station in the basement of Knotsquat. *Radio Mutiny* served as an incubator for many would-be radio people in Philadelphia. Friends of Knotsquat and *Radio Mutiny* embraced the open-door policy, created their own radio programs, their own music playlists, and used the available technologies to share radio content with the surrounding community within the reach of the pirate signal. They fell in love with radio.

At the time, the *Local Community Radio Act* was still years ahead of being passed, thus the founders of G-town Radio opted for an online radio station. In the summer of 2006 G-town Radio began broadcasting online from the home office of Jim Bear, one of its founders. Progressively, G-town Radio opened its doors to volunteer programmers and, with the support of Prometheus Radio Project, applied for a LPFM license to the FCC. In 2015 the FCC granted G-town Radio the necessary permits to launch a community broadcasting initiative and gave the volunteers two years to begin broadcasting on the FM frequency. By this time, G-town Radio had grown into a more or less stable operation showcasing approximately twenty volunteer programmers producing original radio content. G-town Radio moved out of Bear's house and rented a small house on Mapplewood Mall, a narrow and quaint pedestrian boulevard paved with cobblestones and lined by weeping willows. Quarterly dues paid by each radio programmer covered rent, electricity, Internet service, and music copyright fees.

After nine years of webcasting, G-town Radio finally went on the air on 15 January 2018. The journey, from 2006 when G-town Radio began webcasting, to January 2018 was marked by a never-ending succession of challenges. These included navigating the labyrinthian process of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) license application process, following up FCC requests for more information, technical reports, accounting and financial reports, finding a good soul that would allow G-town Radio to install a radio antennae on their roof, and navigating the city of Philadelphia's Department of Licenses and Inspections. However, the most serious challenge has been how to connect to the local community. G-town Radio's FM signal covers a

large section of north west Philadelphia. The centre of the signal's radius is Germantown, a neighbourhood of 44,168 residents, with a large African American presence (77.2 %) (Census 2010 data, in The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011: 12).

Discussion: Community radio does not have to be in crisis in the Global North

G-Town Radio's goal was always to operate as a community radio station under a LPFM license, and the recent transition from webcasting-only to FM broadcasting (accompanied by a live webcast stream) has brought with it a series of self-reflexive processes among the station's programmers and board of directors, discussed in more detail below. It is one thing to use the Internet to deliver content to the whole world; another, very different, is to broadcast a signal to your local community, to families, community organisations and businesses that are also your neighbours. The station's transition from online to LPFM radio is most certainly traversed by the question of relevance. This leads us to ask, what is the comparative advantage of community radio over other digital platforms? What are the intrinsic benefits of, in the case of G-Town Radio, making the shift from Internet broadcasting to becoming a *bona fide* radio station? Thinking of our Australian examples, why would a community engagement media project choose radio as its platform rather than, for example, webcasting or podcasting alone? Asking these questions assists us to recognise how community radio in the Global North is sustaining its relevance, and playing a strong, unique role in an ever-changing media ecosystem. Informed by international research on community radio (most recently, for example, see Anderson, 2017; Copeland, 2018; Doliwa & Purkarthofer, 2017; Hayes, 2018; King, 2017; O'Brien, 2019; Wilkinson, 2019), and supported by the experiences of our Australian case studies, we suggest the following. First is community broadcasting's collective nature; producing radio content is generally a collective enterprise, as opposed to podcasting, which tends to be more individualistic. Second, radio signals are always linked to a geographic community. Third, radio signals have the potential to reach a geographically located community simultaneously. To support these claims, it is pertinent to consider why community radio, as opposed to other broadcasting platforms, was the best medium for our Australian case study examples.

For *United We Read Radio Story-time*, live radio was integral to its delivery. At first consideration, it might seem just as straightforward to produce audio recordings of the books and make these available to families via podcasting on the United We Read website or on CD or USB. However, there are two significant barriers to this approach. First, assumptions cannot be made about Internet access for podcasting, or even families having computers in the home, especially in the low socio-economic areas targeted by the program. Despite initial suspicions that radio receivers might not be common in Australian suburban households, this proved not to be the case, with all families signing up for the pilot research project already having access to a radio receiver in their home. Second, copyright law in Australia limits the capacity to distribute recordings of published books through podcasting or reproduction of CDs. Even licensed broadcasters are required to seek permission from the copyright owner if they wish to broadcast all or most of a literary work (whether during one broadcast or over a period of time). Therefore, only those for which Penguin Books had broadcasting rights were included in the series. United Way would not have been able to produce audio versions of the books without breaching copyright law unless they were broadcast on a licensed radio station – and community radio stations are best placed to meet this type of grassroots, locally based need.

Like the *United We Read Radio Story-time*, airspace for *Radio Seeds* was only ever going to be forged within the community radio sector. WOW-FM recognised the benefits of the *Radio Seeds* concept, and, true to its remit to represent the voices of its local community, provided the opportunity to broadcast. At a local level this is incredibly powerful as it also created a new community network between WOW-FM and Seeds of Affinity, fostering and bridging the growth

of social capital within the western suburbs of Adelaide. While *Radio Seeds* does publish past broadcasts on a WordPress site, these community connections could not have been created through Internet broadcasting alone. Given Seeds of Affinity's priority is to support women of lived prison experience (with media production as a side-project) it makes sense that the organisation partner with an existing community radio station rather than establish their own Internet radio station or similar

For *Radio Seeds*, the location of its host radio station plays a very important role in that it is 400 metres from where Seeds of Affinity meet. This is not only convenient but means that all women attending Seeds can visit the station on broadcast day, even those on home detention. Home detainees can apply to leave their approved residence to shop, attend appointments and participate in other approved programs – one of which can be Seeds of Affinity meetings – and their activities are monitored by an electronic bracelet. Because WOW-FM is located so close to Seeds's meeting space, most parole officers have been willing to allow a little leeway for women to leave the Seeds of Affinity venue to participate at the radio station.

At the time of writing, less than two months after G-town Radio began its incursion on FM, this community radio station has developed a series of initiatives designed to take advantage of the idiosyncrasies of radio technology and help the station establish its relevance for Germantown, inspired by a series of self-reflexive processes among the station's programmers and board of directors. These initiatives can be expressed as aspirational statements:

- Embrace the hyperlocal
- It's about publics more than audiences
- Find local information and communication needs
- Design reception as much as production
- Network
- Start them young

Each of these statements can be considered against our Australian case studies, along with community radio literature more broadly, to more fully realise the capacity for community radio to maintain its relevance in a digitally saturated media environment.

Embrace the hyperlocal

G-town Radio is aware that its significance is tied to becoming the voice of Germantown. Over the years, G-town Radio has grown a line-up of local volunteer producers who bring to the station the voices of the black left, local artists and musicians, community leaders, and music aficionados. To help bring the sounds of the community into the radio station, and in collaboration with Temple University, G-town Radio enlisted a renowned radio producer to offer a training workshop to its producers. With their newly acquired radio production skills, and in collaboration with The Friends of Joseph E. Coleman Library, G-town Radio programmers are producing content recorded outside the studio, on the streets of Germantown. These factoids are 30 seconds to one-minute long radio programs about Germantown's historical mansions, the 53 trolley, the meaning of Tulpehoken Street's name, and other local places, people, and historical facts, that connect the station directly to its geographic location. Hyper-localism also played a significant part for the *United We Read Radio Story-time* as its associated reading program was targeted at people living in the PBA-FM broadcast footprint. However, the content broadcast on *Radio Seeds* is not particularly focused on a geographic locality, but a community of interest. Which leads us to G-Town Radio's second initiative.

It's about publics more than audiences

The experience accumulated by community radio across the globe is vast and deep. G-town Radio is reaching out and adopting and adapting lessons learned by its global predecessors, to perceive community radio as a technology with great potential to connect very specific publics. The experience of prisoner radio in Australia, for example, suggests that community radio is not about trying to reach large audiences; instead, the technology may be more efficient when used to connect particular publics who experience specific information and communication needs, such as inmates and their families, immigrants, elders, and children.

Find local information and communication needs

Bill Simmering,[1] a renowned public radio producer and founder of a development radio initiative in Malawi, Zambia, and other African countries, has been a strong ally of G-town Radio. From Simmering, G-town Radio has learned that a key element a community radio station is how deeply embedded its local communicators are in their community. Community radio producers who know every nook and cranny in a neighbourhood can detect subtle and hidden information and communication needs; once those needs are detected, the radio station can creatively design strategies to address them. The *Radio Story-time* initiative in Australia is an example of a very specific communication need in the community. Once the need was detected, Australian community radio producers designed a strategy and used the available technology to address the problem. This grassroots project is an excellent example of how community radio can be utilised to directly support the needs of the local community, and address gaps in social services provided to the local area. As we shall see below, this was not enough to sustain the life of this radio program.

Design reception as much as production

Germantown is a neighbourhood with a complex social and cultural fabric that includes numerous collective spaces. The challenge is how to blend community radio into these spaces, designing the moment of message reception with as much care as the moment of content production. During Spring, Summer, and Fall, neighbourhood festivals, fairs, and other community events pepper the calendar. Slowly but surely, *G-town Radio* is becoming a constant presence in these collective spaces, capturing the community's social life, putting people on the microphone, blurring the boundaries between producer and receiver. Toward the future, the hope is to persuade local business owners and other organisations to tune into G-town Radio in their stores and spaces for the public. In a city like Philadelphia, people may not be inclined to listen to the radio, but people waiting for their car to be serviced at the corner auto repair shop may enjoy passing the time listening to the voices of their neighbours on the radio, or listening to an idiosyncratic play list curated by a Germantown resident. In a similar manner, *Radio Seeds* develops strategies to reach a crucial target audience – women still in prison who have extremely limited access to radios at the Adelaide Women's Prison. Producers from the show have held 'Listening Clubs' inside the different units of the prison to garner feedback and suggestions for future story ideas and are negotiating with Correctional Service authorities to allow episodes to be made available on demand through the education unit computers (thus using digital media to complement the original radio broadcasts, rather than compete against them). Furthermore, the listening clubs also include opportunities for incarcerated women to be interviewed about prison news, and to record messages ('shoutouts') to loved ones on the outside, again blurring the producer/receiver roles. Correctional Services has been cooperative with allowing the broadcasts to go to air.

Network

G-town Radio is not the only LPFM in Philadelphia. At the time of writing, five community radio stations operate in different sections of the city. Thanks to a collaboration with Temple University's Kal & Lucille Rudman Media Production Center, G-town Radio has initiated a series of one-day events to network and develop collaborations with the other four LPFM radio stations in the city. The goal is to have the opportunity to meet, to discuss common challenges and lessons learned. Interestingly, mapping the listening areas of all five stations shows that, together, they cover a large portion of the city. This may not be of immediate use, but as we have learned from cases such as hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and hurricane Wilma in Florida,[2] in crisis situations, community radio may become a lifeline for local communities. Networking and establishing strong links now may become useful in the future. *Radio Seeds*, with a community of interest as strong as their geographical community, are taking a national networking approach by sharing content with other (community) radio programs across the country that also focus on prisoner and justice reform issues. From this a fledgling prisoner radio network is being established that can only strengthen the capacity of all the individual programs.

Start them young

 One final aspiration of G-town Radio is that it will become an incubator of young radio producers. In Latin America, community media tend to perceive themselves as media production schools for children and youth (Rodríguez, 2011), and G-town Radio is learning from those traditions. Involving children and youth as producers of their own media content cultivates critical media users, increases community participation in the station, and inspires parents, grandparents, and teachers to tune into the station's signal to listen to the voices of their children on the radio. At the time of writing, G-town Radio does not have the capacity to maintain a child training initiative. However, a partner organisation, Germantown Life Enrichment Center has set up a radio studio where a group of teens is producing their own radio content. In a recent broadcasting, one of these young radio producers expressed her view about the presence of young voices on radio:

> It's all about having a voice, and making other people see your point of view on what you feel is happening, because most people see only what they hear, and if you are able to bring another perspective to the story, then it's like 'wow! I've never thought of that' and more people are aware (G-town Radio, 14 January 2018).

Another teen stressed the value of different voices in the public sphere:

> kids' voices are missing from the radio; especially black kids, and kids of black and brown heritage ... we're missing opinions from black and brown kids. You're missing the chance to broaden your intelligence and your open mind capabilities when you cannot hear the perceptions of people from a different heritage, different homes, and different generations (G-town Radio, 14 January 2018).

Although the teens have been on the air less than a month, they are already aware of the value their own voices have. *United We Read Radio-story time* also needs to consider the capacity to incorporate young people as producers, as well as listeners.

Conclusion

Despite claims radio is being undermined by digital media platforms, there are compelling arguments that support the continuing existence – and the flourishing – of community radio, be this through the introduction of new radio programs on well-established Australian community radio stations, or new community radio stations being established through LPFM licenses in the US. There may be a substantial growth in the digital media market in the Global North, but the Low Power-FM movement in the United States is also on the rise. With over 750 new licenses

issued since 2014, the next challenge for this fledgling sector is to carve its own unique presence – station by station, community by community. G-Town Radio has identified six key initiatives intended to establish this by creating meaningful lasting relations within the Germantown community. By considering these initiatives against experiences from Australian community radio sector, it is suggested that G-Town Radio is heading in the right direction.

The Australian case studies outlined above represent small-scale grassroots examples of community engagement, that demonstrate the specific roles community radio can play within a local community, which cannot be similarly achieved through Internet radio or podcasting alone. However, while the radio stations hosting our Australian case studies have already experienced and responded to the teething pains of creating a relevant space within their own communities, even in a well-established community radio environment, issues of sustainability and community participation need continuous attention and a failure to do this has seen some community radio stations in Australia struggle to stay on air. As stated above, even one of our case studies, shown to successfully address a specific need in the community, has failed to keep up its momentum. As such, is also important to recognise that the community broadcasters involved with the Australian examples (and in the sector as a whole) could reflect on the initiatives identified by G-Town Radio, to assess their own progress. In fact, *Radio Story-time* is currently off-air due to a lack of volunteer commitment to the project, despite its demonstrable benefits. While the radio show definitely did respond to an unmet concrete need within the community, its approach focused heavily on providing content for an audience but gave minimal attention to involving the community in this actual production, failing to blur the boundaries between receiver and producer. Likewise, the original broadcast team may have benefited from 'starting them young' and networking with local schools to involve children in the actual production.

The challenge for community radio practitioners is the same, whether it is at the micro level of producing programming, or the macro level of establishing a whole new radio station presence. To be sustainable and relevant, community radio in the Global North needs to forge meaningful connections – through a hyperlocal approach that ties itself directly to community, factors these communities into both planning and delivery, gives consideration to reception as much as it does to broadcast, and taps into local knowledge to detect and address specific information and communication needs. Furthermore, both networking with other community radio stations and actively involving young people can serve to further strengthen the presence and relevance of community radio.

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Notes

1   Bill Simmering is one of the founders of Development Radio Partners (https://www.developingradiopartners.org/).

2   During hurricane Wilma, Radio Conciencia WCIW- LP (107.9 FM), run by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers played a key role broadcasting in the languages of Maya and Haitian community residents. According to Gerardo Reyes-Chavez, an organiser with the coalition and Radio Conciencia, 'when Hurricane Wilma hit Immokalee in 2005, we realized the deep value of Radio Conciencia. All local radio stations were transmitting alerts on the impending hurricane, but Radio Conciencia was the only radio that was transmitting information on where to go and what to do in Spanish and in the indigenous languages spoken in our community' (Yu, 2013). In the city of Bay St. Louis in Louisiana, WQRZ-LP, a community radio station, was the only source of emergency information. The station was small enough that it could be powered with car batteries when all other sources of energy and information failed this community (see https://www.prometheusradio.org/images/documents/em_resp_cases.pdf).