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**Ro-TV: Process and participation**

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## Ro-TV: Process and participation

Michelle Johnston

### Abstract

*RO-TV is a community television program, produced in collaboration with Rotary WA that demonstrates the ideals and objectives of community media. This paper discusses the pilot series of RO-TV in both a theoretical and practical sense. The production technique employed by the program and the experience of the program's participants is explored in terms of the theoretical principles and ideals of community media.*

As a University lecturer in Film and Television I have produced many hours of programming for Perth's community television station, Access 31. When approached to produce a television program for Rotary Western Australia I saw an opportunity to explore some of the principles of community television in both a practical and theoretic sense. The program was produced and broadcast over the summer of 2004/05, and became the subject of my Honours Project. My experience in its production and the outcomes of that experience are discussed in this paper. Of particular interest to community television program makers, I believe, are the program's production style and technique, and the value of participation for those involved in the program's production.

There is an expectation that the programs that feature on community television generally, and hence Access 31 in particular, will serve the local community in some way. This expectation is expressed in the Guiding Principles set out in the Community Television Code of Practice in Australian broadcasting law and Australian Broadcasting Authority regulations<sup>1</sup> and by community television advocates. The Community Television (CTV) guiding principles, in particular, promote cultural diversity and harmony, democracy through access to the media, diverse programming choices, independence in programming and editorial choices, and the promotion of community involvement in broadcasting. They are the same expectations that Graham Murdock has of television as a communication medium and its capacity to support the cultural rights of the individual. To paraphrase, he defines them as:

- 1) Rights to information—access to the widest possible range of information and information sources.
- 2) Rights to experience—access to the widest possible range of human stories, in the form of both actuality programs and fictional programs.
- 3) Rights to knowledge—explanations that translate information and experience into knowledge through the provision of frameworks of interpretation.
- 4) Rights to participation—broadcasters, including public service, have traditionally allocated audiences to the role of listeners rather than speakers, spectators rather than image-makers. Viewers now demand the right to speak and representation in television has undergone something of a sea change in recent years (1999: 11-12).

American community TV advocate, Dee Dee Halleck, reflects the CTV Guiding Principles when discussing community television in terms of its ability to empower 'the other' (2002: 84). Those disenfranchised, less powerful members of a community are the

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<sup>1</sup> The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) merged with the Australian Communications Authority on 1 July 2005 to form the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

'others' rarely seen or heard on mainstream television. These are the 'others' that the CTV guidelines describe as being under-represented in the media and for whom 'the principles of democracy, access and equity' are to be pursued (CBAA undated). These non-traditional voices were identified by UNESCO's MacBride Report in 1980, a report that called for a 'new world information order' (Halleck 2002: 85). Entitled *Many Voices, One World*, the report recognised that wealth and power are directly linked with access to information, and that the current status quo tips the significant balance of power in favour of western commercial media. It proposed ways by which 'other' voices might be heard and so empowered. The MacBride Report agenda was not implemented due to the backlash from western media corporations and, as Halleck points out, community television faces its own difficulties in providing a voice to 'others'. These small, under funded stations are struggling for survival all over the world. However, while much of what we see on community television is a duplication of mainstream programming there are significant efforts at creative and innovative programming that are 'vitaly important to local communities' (Halleck 2002: 90). She makes the point that these video access centres provide the 'technology to present (as opposed to *re-present*) people otherwise excluded from any public sphere' (91).

Kevin Howley reflects the conclusions of the MacBride report in his book *Community Media—People, Places and Communication Technologies* (2005). While technology alone cannot be considered the one magic ingredient that will rescue economically disadvantaged individuals, it must be recognised that there is a growing 'digital divide' within most industrial societies. The technological 'haves' hold the balance of power over the 'have nots'. The poor cannot afford the technology and therefore do not have the same access to information or the means to communicate.

Again, the CTV Guiding Principles also identify the need for wider community access to broadcasting technology. Yet when the technology is placed in the hands of amateurs, as is often the case in community television programming, the resulting aesthetic tends to alienate audiences and relegate these programs to the status of home videos lacking any real social relevance (Howley 2005: 11). Furthermore, while we may acknowledge that community television has an important role to play and is essential to the creation of a democratic media and a public sphere, it is also fair to suggest that such a small media sector is incapable of having any real political impact. In answer to this parallels can be drawn between community TV and the example Kevin Howley provides of community newspapers such as the Salvation Army's *War Cry* and the Canadian *Street Feat*. In the distribution of the papers (and in the production of community television programs) the poor, marginalised and disenfranchised momentarily move into the public eye and the public consciousness—'a strategy that the editors of *Street Feat* describe as "a stone in your shoe"' (Howley 2005: 63).

In researching the role of community television I began to look for evidence of the CTV ideals that are reflected in the sources cited above. To what degree did the programs broadcast on community TV reflect the CTV Guiding Principles? How far did they reflect Murdock's ideas about cultural rights. Was there evidence that Halleck's 'others' were finding a voice on Access 31? What sort of aesthetic could identify a program as being non-mainstream and therefore read in a different way, while at the same time avoiding the status of amateur video as described by Howley?

It should be said that most programs represent at least one or two of the CTV Guiding Principles. For example, all reflect an attempt at widening the community's involvement

in broadcasting, and several programs such as *Tele Latina* and *Awwaj Arabic Show* are produced by small groups that represent a culturally diverse Australia. However, I was interested in seeing what sort of program could be produced that would embody all the Guiding Principles. Indeed, was it possible to produce such a program and, if so, what would be the obstacles to its success?

When Robyn Thorpe, head of public relations and marketing for Rotary WA, came to me in July 2004 with an idea for a program I saw this as an opportunity to put the CTV ideals into practice. The program was called RO-TV and it allowed me to test not only program objectives that met CTV guidelines, but also a production style that supported these objectives. Here was the opportunity to produce a television program that Graham Murdock identifies as the type that 'provide pleasure and promote the core capacities of citizenship' (Murdock 1999: 16). Like the Canadian *Challenge for Change* filmmakers (Linder 1999: 3-4; Olson 2000) who invited their subjects to participate in the filmmaking process, RO-TV would be a program made *with* people rather than *about* them.

Seeking to produce a pilot series of twelve half-hour programs and with no experience in television production themselves Rotary recruited me, as an industry professional and university lecturer, to assist them in this venture. University students would participate in the production either as volunteers or as part of their course work. Pre-production on the program began in November 2004, and the program was produced in Curtin University's television studio.

### **RO-TV Objectives**

Community television is able to represent those community groups that are often marginalised or misrepresented by mainstream media, and Rotary was working with many of these same groups. However, one initial concern was that Rotary might see the program merely as a public relations vehicle with the aim of promoting Rotary rather than fulfilling any specific community TV objectives. Would RO-TV be nothing more than a call for public assistance? Further discussion revealed that their aims were more ambitious and more closely aligned with CTV ideals: RO-TV's objectives were to represent the community groups with whom Rotary were affiliated, to discuss the social issues that were associated with these groups, and to disseminate the message that 'help is here'. In an interview conducted on completion of the twelve programs, Robyn Thorpe talked about what her vision had been for the series:

I wanted it to be different from the normal stereotypical things you see on TV. I wanted it to be community based. I wanted it to be a community team to do the show. I didn't want it to be a sterile show about Rotary—that would be as boring as.... I had a vision of the broadness and variety of what I wanted.

The program was made without the pressure or expectation of commercial objectives. As a pilot series RO-TV needed to demonstrate that, through sponsorship, it could be financially self-sustaining but this factor did not influence content in any way. Sponsorship was forthcoming based on the reputation and respect Rotary has earned both in the local community and internationally. However, as a non-commercial venture the program makers enjoyed the freedom to experiment with the program's style, and to deliver content that reflected the program's objectives and nothing else.

The absence of pressure to perform at a commercial level is a luxury enjoyed only by community TV producers, and it is this factor that allows them to provide the diverse

and alternative programs that cater to a minority audience. The principle of acknowledging the needs of minority groups is reflected in Habermas' theory of the public sphere (Price 1995: 21-39), and is stated as one of Graeme Murdock's four conditions essential to the pursuit of citizenship. According to Murdock, if citizenship is to be supported by the medium of television then it is necessary to ensure four basic conditions:

- 1) It must provide a relatively open arena of representation, providing barriers against influence from government, state and the corporate world.
- 2) It must provide a common cultural space that ignores traditional divisions and allows for the widest possible discourse.
- 3) It must balance the promotion of diversity of information and experience against citizen's rights of access to frameworks of knowledge, and to the principles that allow them to be evaluated and challenged.
- 4) It must ensure that the full range of its services remains equally available to all. It must defend their status as public goods and resist their conversion into commodities (1999: 16).

With the program's objectives decided, a set of production guidelines was created that would support these objectives. How could the production style for RO-TV be different to mainstream television programs and therefore give the program an integrity that would encourage audiences to read the program in a different way? The aim of the guidelines was to involve the subjects of our program in the making of the program. As far as possible, the stories seen on RO-TV would be told by the subject. The program makers would facilitate the journey of the subject's story through production and out to a television audience. The degree to which the subject would be involved in that journey was yet to be determined. Time constraints and the ability of the students to adopt this approach to production would ultimately determine its success.

Finally, there was one element of production that our program would have in common with mainstream television. To avoid the amateur aesthetic discussed earlier RO-TV had to be of a professional standard. Television, and indeed all screen production, is about communicating to an audience. Professional television productions utilise visual language and conventions to communicate in a clear and effective way. One reason an audience will engage with a professionally produced program is because they are not distracted from content by poor production technique. Professionalism had to be an important ingredient in the production of RO-TV if the program was to communicate effectively to an audience, and an audience was to continue watching. The program however need not appear highly polished in terms of production technique. The presence of production elements such as special effects and fast paced editing, which are often associated with professional production, also suggest a high degree of intervention from the program makers. However an aim for this program was in fact to minimise the presence of the program makers' voice in order to deliver the voice of a subject directly to the audience.

Robyn Thorpe had been involved with another community television program on which she presented a guest segment about Rotary. The lack of professionalism in the production of this program served as a lesson for her on the importance of professional production standards.

You must present a professional image of the organisation you are portraying at all times. ... Rotary wasn't sure if they were doing the right or wrong thing by being on that [previous] show (Thorpe 2005).

### **RO-TV Content**

The stories featured on the program reflected the wide and diverse range of community groups with whom Rotary work. In most cases, a location story was produced and then followed up with a studio-based interview discussing the topic in more detail and including new voices. For example, there were several stories and studio based interviews on Rotary's youth development programs. A location story on the Rotary Youth Leadership Association (RYLA) Camp was featured, and then several participants were invited into the studio to talk about their experiences and the benefits of the program. Another program featured a story (*Caitlin*) about the family members who care for a four-year-old cerebral palsy sufferer. They spoke about the challenges of caring for a disabled child and the effect that has on their family and their relationships. Yet another program featured a group of volunteers who produce wheelchairs from recycled materials. The chairs are designed specifically for people in third world countries, and Tsunami victims will now be beneficiaries of their work. Families affected by drug abuse, the Cord Blood Donor Program, Food Bank and polio were all featured on RO-TV and are examples of the diverse range of stories seen on the program.

Our aim was to present stories that attempted to look at issues from a different angle. Using the *Caitlin* story as an example, stories about disabled people, the injustices inflicted on them by society, and the feel-good stories of how they are helped, are not uncommon in mainstream television. Channel Seven's Telethon is one example where a disabled child features highly in the promotion of a worthy cause. Our story was different because it featured the confronting condition, Cerebral Palsy. Victims of this condition (I learnt not to call it a disease) are rarely featured on mainstream television because it is a physically unattractive condition, and it is difficult for sufferers to communicate. Ignorance, as our family confirmed, is one of the biggest problems they face from the general community. The story also presented an alternative viewpoint on the issue of disability—that of the child's parents. The child is well cared for, but who cares for the carer?

### **Interview Style**

In support of the CTV ideal of giving a voice to marginalised communities and individuals, RO-TV adopted an approach to interviewing that is very similar to that used by oral historians. The idea was to minimise the influence of the program makers in producing stories and to allow people to speak for themselves. In their paper *Learning to Listen*, Katherine Anderson and Dan C Jack make the observation:

Realising the possibilities of the oral history interview demands a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint (1998: 169).

Again, in support of the subject's voice as opposed to that of the program makers, RO-TV stories would use a documentary style of production rather than the journalistic style that is usually employed for magazine programs. As Dee Dee Halleck suggests, people can be presented rather than *re*-presented by the program (2002: 91). In defining documentary, Bill Nichols categorises four different modes of representation: expository,

observational, interactive and reflexive. Traditional 'voice of God' type documentary, TV news and current affairs are examples of the expository mode of representation. This style of documentary generally speaks for, or on behalf of, its subject. The observational mode is sometimes also referred to as direct cinema or cinema vérité, but the essential characteristic of this style is the non-intervention of the filmmaker. The interactive mode differs from the observational in that the presence of the filmmaker is acknowledged. The illusory sense is peeled away to reveal that the filmmaker is present and therefore will influence the film. Finally, the reflexive mode of representation shifts focus from the subject itself to how the subject is represented. Rather than emphasising the relationship between filmmaker and subject, the emphasis shifts to the relationship between filmmaker and viewer (Nichols 1991: 32-75).

In attempting to give our subjects their own voice, RO-TV would avoid the expository mode of representation. The style of production instead reflects a combination of both the observational mode and the interactive mode.

The observational mode stresses the non-intervention of the filmmaker. ... [These films] rely on editing to enhance the impression of lived or real time. In its purest form, voice over commentary, music external to the observed scene, intertitles, re-enactments, and even interviews are completely eschewed (Nichols 1991: 38).

The production methods employed in observational documentary encourage audiences to relate directly to individuals, gives an emphasis to ethical issues, and 'encourages belief; Life is like this, isn't it?' (Nichols 1991, 43)

However, unlike the observational documentary, RO-TV makes extensive use of the interview. In this respect the program reflects the interactive (or participatory) style of documentary. The interviewee is encouraged to speak for his/her self, the voice of the interviewer is heard, the presence of the program maker is acknowledged. In her paper, 'What the wind won't take away', Marjorie Shostak eloquently supports the value and importance of listening to these individual and diverse voices:

No more elegant tool exists to describe the human condition than the personal narrative. Ordinary people living ordinary and not-so-ordinary lives weave from their memories and experiences the meaning life has for them. These stories are complex, telling of worlds sometimes foreign to us, worlds that sometimes no longer exist. They express modes of thought and culture often different from our own, a challenge to easy understanding. Yet, these stories are also familiar. It is just this tension—the identifiable in endless complexities and paradoxes of human life. As we cast our net ever wider, searching for those close as well as those far away, the spectrum of voices from otherwise obscure individuals helps us learn tolerance for differences as well as for similarities. What better place to begin our dialogue about human nature and the nature of human possibilities? (1998: 413)

The importance of allowing our subjects to tell their own story was emphasised to the group of students who assisted in the program's production. It was suggested, where appropriate, that the program makers should sit down and talk to the individuals involved before doing an interview. Before the camera was even removed from its box, they needed to get to know the people involved and vice versa. They needed to encourage the subjects to participate in the program by contributing ideas about how

their story is told. They needed to ask them what was important to them, and what they wanted to say. After all, the program was attempting to give them a voice.

After a chat, the RO-TV interview was recorded with the interviewees knowing they were free to take the conversation in whatever direction they chose. The interviewer was not seen in shot, though was often heard asking questions. The resulting uncut interviews often had a stream of consciousness feel to them. For this reason many of our interviews had a sense of being very personal and honest. Bill Nichols, in his book *Representing Reality*, describes this approach to interviewing as:

....musings directed to the audience in a soliloquy, the pseudomonologue appears to deliver the thoughts, impressions, feelings and memories of the individual witness directly to the viewer (1991: 54).

It is possible the students did not see anything particularly radical or different in this approach to producing the program. None of them have worked in mainstream television, and their experience as students often includes documentary production. For me, it was a very different approach to program-making. After many years of professional television production I knew that the angle of a story is usually decided before a journalist or program producer even meets his/her subject. An interview is conducted and questions asked in a way that is most likely to produce a foreseen outcome. Refer to almost any text on the subject of TV journalism or short story production and a common set of guidelines and procedures will emerge. As an example, *Television Field Production and Reporting* by Frederick Shook provides the following advice to production novices:

....the focus [of a story]....is as simple as summing up the story in your mind before you start to shoot; ....write the pictures first....; a strong television news story is like a good commercial or a mini Hollywood movie; ....look for a closing shot....You can build the rest of your story toward the close because you already know how the story will end (1996, 1-25).

Shook emphasises the need to deliver drama, and the use of devices to engage the viewer's attention. In addition, he quotes Pudovkin's notion that editing, 'is the conscious and deliberate guidance of spectator thoughts and associations', and then extends this point to the journalist editor who wields this control when editing a story. Finally, on the subject of interviewing, Shook advises always to research your subject, know the answers to 60 per cent of your questions, to always retain control of an interview, and to keep interview 'bites' short when editing (1996: 154 -170).

And there are good reasons why Shook offers these guidelines for television production, and why industry practitioners take this approach when producing programs professionally for a national broadcaster. It is an uneconomical use of time and resources to pursue a story, with a crew at hand, unless you know that the story will be of interest to your target audience and produced in a timely way. The main objective of TV journalism and production is to present a story in a succinct and objective way, while also maintaining an element of entertainment that will deliver ratings numbers and advertisers' dollars. Mainstream television programs, whether they are magazine, news, or current affairs, do not have as a priority the provision of a voice to marginalised groups, or the creation of a truly democratic media.

The degree of success we had in our interview approach can be attributed, for the most part, to Robyn Thorpe. As the RO-TV presenter, and the person responsible for organising and conducting nearly all the interviews seen on RO-TV, her energy produced the results we were hoping for. Robyn would spend a lot of time talking to interview subjects before location shoots, as well as prior to studio interviews. By the time the interview was conducted a rapport and trust had been established—they were friends.

That process was important to the outcomes we got. I could easily have just called up and said we're going to send a crew out. You tell your story and then come back and we'll see you in the studio. We could have done it that way—I think they [TV producers] usually do. And you can see it—the plastic interviews. There's no feeling. It's like it's happening to someone else (Thorpe 2005).

In taking this approach to the interview, Robyn was surprised to learn that people generally did not expect the free rein offered to them. When subjects were asked, 'What do you want to say?':

The first question, almost without exception, that they asked me was, 'Am I allowed to do that?' Do what? 'Tell our story?' And they would say, 'We've done this before and we get told we have to say this and this, and say that because it's right'. And I said, no this your story. Once they did that they relaxed. And that probably came across in the interviews....They were therefore happy to say how they really felt and their integrity came through....People didn't think their [own] stories were interesting (Thorpe 2005).

A story about the Paraplegic Benefit Fund featured a young quadriplegic man, Carl, who counsels other young men when they suddenly find themselves in a wheelchair as the result of an accident. Robyn describes his reaction when she approached him for an interview:

He initially said, 'Why do you want to talk to me? And I said, why wouldn't I? You are so inspirational to other people. He goes, 'Probably. I just don't want other guys to go into depression'. Does he realise how many other lives he has indirectly helped? (2005)

### **Production Technique**

In support of our interview style, production technique was also considered and an observational documentary style adopted. Rather than the camera simply being a passive eye, camera operators were encouraged to take the camera as close to a subject as possible. Engaging the camera with the subject would also engage the audience. A hand held camera was appropriate to the style of our program if it meant reducing the distance between camera and subject, and allowing the camera to capture scenes as they happened. As much as possible the audience should believe that they are hearing a story as told by the subject of the story, in a way that the subject would want to tell it. To this end, voice-overs from a narrator or journalist were avoided, and long takes in interviews were encouraged to minimise use of cutaways. The use of a jump cut was preferable to an irrelevant or distracting cutaway as is often employed in news and current affairs programs. A cutaway, while it maintains continuity, draws attention to the process of editing and therefore reflects the program makers intervention. And finally, the use of location sound was also encouraged in an effort to engage the audience in the subject's world.

### Process and Participation

One element of community television that the CTV Guiding Principles do not specifically recognise is its ability to build community and empower people through participation in the medium of television. Case studies in the US have shifted the focus from the analysis of the content of Community Television programming to the participation of citizens in community television production (King and Mele 1999: 603-623). John Higgins conducted a case study on a mid-west community television station in the US. His conclusions show that:

media literacy is an outcome for all respondents, media demystification is a consequence for most participants, the community television experience is best conceptualised as a process, and societal change within the community television experience is best understood as a process involving a dialectic between the individual and the collectivity....community television provides a foundation that encourages individuals and groups to believe they can make a difference on the broader society.... (1999, 624).

The process of producing a community TV program has been as valuable, if not more so, as the outcome of the program's reception by an audience. The students involved in the program's production met people within the community they would not otherwise have met. Their views of the world were sometimes challenged and even changed as a result of their interaction. Feedback from students in the form of journals illustrates the value of their experience. One student who had never donated blood recorded this comment in her journal after participating in a story shot at the Blood Donor Bank:

I thought it may be good to donate my blood sometime. It may be able to help other people, and someday I may be helped by them (Student A 2005).

Another student, after shooting a story with a plastic surgeon who travels to third world countries to perform surgery on children with deformities, comments:

It was also nice to know that [the Doctor] does not only do cosmetic surgery for the sake of vanity....I understand more about what they do and why they do it (Student B 2005).

The relationships established during the course of RO-TV's production are another example of the importance of the process. Robyn talked about this element of the program making experience in her interview:

I didn't expect the crew and the team from Rotary to become so close. I think we built a really quite special relationship during that shooting time....I work with teams—build teams—that's what I do. To me that's part of working together. But we became more than a working team. We became kind of friends. I expected team building and good relationships. But it was better and deeper and more open and genuine than I expected it to be (2005).

So far the benefits of participation have been discussed mostly in terms of the students who produced RO-TV, rather than those who participated as subjects. Ideally formal follow up interviews can be conducted with the participants but in this case the limitations of our project did not allow for this. However, the Rotarians with whom we worked (many of them in their senior years) along with the various subjects of our

stories, had the opportunity to meet some very intelligent and caring young people (my students), who are also from culturally diverse backgrounds. As a result, I would suggest that since the integration of these diverse groups is not an opportunity that would present itself in the normal course of life, there were benefits from this interaction for all involved. Furthermore, the feedback from viewers in the form of email and phone calls indicated that participants benefited from being heard on the program. Offers of support, requests for more information and general comments to say 'we hear you' were received weekly while the program went to air. As stated earlier when discussing Caitlin's story, the education of the wider community about cerebral palsy was an important outcome for this family.

### **Program Assessment**

RO-TV is a program that reflects all the CTV Guiding Principles. It represents a diverse range of community groups in a way that mainstream television does not, and provides an opportunity for these communities and individuals to present their own personal viewpoints. RO-TV demonstrated independence in its production of content because it was not influenced by external factors such as commercial objectives. Rotary, in partnership with the large number of community groups with whom they work, now have the skills and knowledge to participate in community television and to expand their program both nationally and internationally. The dialogue and relationships created by the program contributes to the harmony of a cohesive, inclusive and diverse Australian society.

Therefore, if the success of RO-TV is gauged only by the degree to which it reflects CTV Guiding Principles, then it could be concluded that the program was successful. However, there are other criteria by which the program can be assessed.

The objectives of the program were a particular priority for me. To feature a diverse range of community issues and discuss these issues from a fresh perspective was one element of the program that was successful to a point, but could have been done better. A wider range of discussion issues would have benefited the program in terms of its ability to inform and maintain the interest of an audience. Lack of time was the biggest contributing factor in restricting access to a wider range of community groups and issues. The process of seeking out participants, making contact, and encouraging their involvement is a time-consuming one. For this reason, the voices that were heard on the program tended to be those within Robyn's immediate circle of contacts, albeit a very large circle. Extending the program's reach to a much wider range of participants is a goal for future series.

The production style we chose to support the program's objectives was also difficult to maintain. As mentioned, the process of encouraging the involvement of program participants was time-consuming. The oral history or personal narrative approach to interviews was not employed to the degree I had hoped for. Subject participation during editing would have been an ideal additional step in the production process. However, this never eventuated due to time constraints. Student production teams often lacked the people skills needed to draw out an individual's story—something that requires interest as well as the energy and a desire to do so. It could be concluded that to focus on the content of a story as well as its technical production requires a maturity and level of skill that is not easily found within a student cohort. It also requires an availability of time that is in notoriously short supply when producing a weekly television program. Where the

participatory style of interviewing was employed it was successful in producing the outcomes I had hoped for—engaging, honest and personal stories.

Finally, as an item to be added to the tally of successes for RO-TV, the production techniques employed by the program and the voice this mode of production provided to various individuals and community groups stands as a direct and welcome contrast to much of what audiences are exposed to on mainstream television. For the majority of factual TV programming the program makers and filmmakers tend to speak on behalf of their subjects with the prime objective of creating commercially viable entertainment in the guise of factual and historical information. Dan Sipe, in discussing the value of video for recording oral histories, makes the point:

....film and video, especially as broadcast on television, have spawned a staggering array of historical works which arguably are the major influence on the public's historical consciousness (1998: 379).

Society's history is being recorded and shaped by television. Our understanding of both global and community events is dependent on stories as told by journalists and filmmakers. Bill Nichols echoes this sentiment in discussing a film that documents African famine. The victims of the famine are seen but not heard. This film and its images may well be the total understanding and knowledge of such an event for a vast number of people:

Such representations actively construct a historical reality we may not otherwise see—cobbling much of it together from shards of myth and fact, from the tissue of sometimes contradictory ideologies already circulating within the culture (1991: 12).

Community television and programs like RO-TV can address the issue of how our history and culture is recorded by employing production techniques that minimise the influence of the program maker, however good or noble their intentions may be. By choosing an observational/participatory mode of representation even the illiterate and less influential members of a community will have a voice that is their own.

The circumstances under which RO-TV was produced are unique, and therefore difficult to duplicate for a community broadcaster such as Access 31. When making comparisons between RO-TV and other Access 31 programs, it must be acknowledged that people make community television programs for a variety of reasons. The motivation for making RO-TV was partly fuelled by Robyn Thorpe's passion for community service and the organisation she represents, and partly by my own academic interest in community television. It was these motivating forces that shaped the program. Factors such as my own industry background, the skill levels of the students involved in the program, and access to the University's facilities, all contributed to the program's success. It could be said that it was easy for us to deliver a program that reflects the community television ideal when there was so much working in our favour.

However, it is possible for grass roots program makers to meet their own personal objectives while at the same time embracing the community television ideal. Programs that focus on a niche audience are to be encouraged, but they do not necessarily engage a diverse range of community groups. However, those that have experience in producing these programs can be proactive in their efforts to include as many individuals as possible

in the process of making a community television program. People can be involved both as participants in the program's production, as well as participants within the content of the program. This will firstly multiply the number of people who benefit from participating in the process of making a program, who are empowered by that process, as well as increasing the number of voices heard on community television. And secondly, it will begin to broaden the number of people in the community who become involved in community television and who will develop the skills to produce programs. With this greater involvement and improvement in skill levels will come a higher degree of media literacy within the community and hence a more professional program. A better understanding of visual communication techniques and production will eventually produce a better quality program that will encourage audiences to tune in and continue to watch.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of RO-TV indicates that participation in the production of a community television program can create an awareness of people and issues outside the participants' normal sphere of experience, an awareness that is extended to the program's audience. A production style may be employed that 'presents' rather than 're-presents' a subject, and gives a voice to those members of a community that are rarely heard in mainstream media. Community television and programs like RO-TV are essential to the creation of a democratic media and healthy public sphere.

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### Interview

Robyn Thorpe, Rotary WA, Perth, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2005.

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<sup>2</sup> RO-TV has continued into a second season of production with Robyn Thorpe as the primary motivator and organiser of the program. The experience and skills she acquired at Curtin allowed her to resume production of the program in the studios of Access 31. Plans are afoot for expanding the program to include other community service groups, and to widen their audience reach.

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