



## Australian Community Broadcasting Series

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### ***Commitment To Community: Results From A National Survey Of The Community Radio Sector***

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Griffith University, Brisbane.

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Conference, 'Radio, Television and the New Media',  
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**Australian Broadcasting Authority Conference  
'Radio, Television and the New Media'  
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**'Commitment to Community: Results from a national survey of the  
community radio sector'**

Dr Susan Forde, Ms Kerrie Foxwell, Assoc Professor Michael Meadows.  
Griffith University, Brisbane.

***The Research Project***

Towards the end of 1999, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, the Community Broadcasting Foundation and the Federal Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts helped fund a major project examining the current state and role of Australia's community broadcasting industry. Co-ordinated by researchers from Griffith University's Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, the project is the first comprehensive attempt to collate research on different aspects of the industry including training, use of new technologies, news services and of course, connections to communities served and/or participating in community broadcasting. The first component of the study, a survey of all community radio stations in Australia has been completed. This paper will focus on the data collected during this initial survey of 149 Community Radio Station Managers in Australia.

The survey itself was designed to cover a broad range of issues pertaining to community broadcasting. Station Managers were questioned about subscription levels, volunteer participation, their perceived contribution to the local community, training offered, news services and some basic demographics about their income, age, education, etc. The results from this survey will inform future stages of the project - in particular, a series of focus groups with community radio workers across Australia and participant observation at selected stations.

Specifically however, our research project aims to address the current dearth of literature on Community Broadcasting in Australia. Despite the unique condition of discrete community broadcasting legislation and the phenomenal growth and overall health of the sector, there is little written on Community Radio. Our project will go some way to ameliorating this situation and hopefully, provide the definitive data necessary for community radio to attain a more prominent position in the Australian political agenda.

***Introducing Community Broadcasting In Australia***

Community broadcasters are those that variously bear the tags 'local', 'access', 'radical', 'alternative', 'rural' or 'non-profit'. Community

broadcasting in Australia is often referred to as the 'third tier of broadcasting' distinct from commercial and state-funded services. While community broadcasters face similar dilemmas to other tiers of broadcasting (such as concerns surrounding digitisation and spectrum allocation), their fundamental distinguishing feature is philosophy (see Barlow, 1997, for discussion). Indicative of the sector's philosophical commitment to community is the Industry's Code of Practice (required under section 123 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*) which requires community broadcasters to 'seek to widen the community's involvement in broadcasting and to encourage participation by those denied effective access to, and those not adequately served by, other media'. Further, operating on a not-for-profit basis frees (to a great extent) community broadcasters from commercial imperatives which can guide program choice, formatting, etc. in the quest for audience maximisation.

Central to the community radio industry is a commitment to local access and participation to groups and individuals who would otherwise be denied access (Thomas 1993) or similarly, who are not adequately catered for by commercial and/or state-funded services. Indicative of these groups and individuals are prominent 'communities of interest' present in the community broadcasting sector: Ethnic; Indigenous/Aboriginal; Print-handicapped; Religious; Fine Music; Generalist; and politically progressive stations (see Moran (1992) for discussion). Each of these sub-categories of community radio have their own history of development, as do individual stations. However, uniting the community broadcasting industry is an undertaking to enable 'ordinary citizens' opportunities for access and participation in the broadcast of their ideas, dreams, opinions, culture, etc. In illustration, access to broadcasting services in indigenous communities has provided opportunities to 'maintain and develop [indigenous] language and cultural identity instead of being ...passive recipients of alien communicators' (Venner, 1988:43). Unlike commercial or state radio, community radio stations see audience members as potentially active participants in core activities such as program production, marketing, administration, and station management.

### ***Funding to the sector***

The community radio sector in Australia is a diverse and dynamic industry which has experienced phenomenal growth since the first fully licenced community (previously 'public') radio, 2MBS-FM went to air in Sydney in 1974.\* In 2000, the Australian Broadcasting Authority listed 198 community broadcasters and 137 active aspirant stations working toward a full license. In comparison, there are currently 255 commercial licenses. Indeed, there is an air of enthusiasm for the community broadcasting sector, as indicated by Federal Minister Richard Alston's keynote address to last year's CBAA Conference (Gold Coast, November 24-26, 2000). Unfortunately, enthusiasm for community broadcasting has not translated into funding increases comparable to the growth in stations (Alston, 2000). Between 1987 and 1995 there was a 66 percent increase in the number of stations without a comparable increase in funding to the sector's peak national representative body, the CBAA (Moran, 1995:158).

If we look at core funding levels to the sector between 1985 and 2000, the figures show that funding has decreased on a per-station basis quite significantly. We should note that these figures reflect core funding only -- that is, funding which we might say is guaranteed to the sector on an annual basis. In 1985, a total of around \$1.27m was provided by DCITA to 56 stations, representing a little more than \$22,000 per station. This funding level increased right through until 1995, when it peaked at an average of about \$25,000 per station. In 1996, core funding began to decrease, as a result of the government introducing the new 'targeted' funding. Nevertheless, core, or 'guaranteed' annual funding is now down to a level of just under \$17,000 per station per year, well below the 1985 levels, particularly when considered in real terms. Targeted funding is currently approximately \$4.5 million over three years. If we take targeted funding into account -- which is not guaranteed, and which has to be justified by the sector each three years -- the figures are still fairly low. Including targeted (\$4.5m over three years) and core funding (\$3.3m), the per station amount in 2000 was \$24,600, lower than the per station figure for core funding in 1993-94 and in real terms lower than the 1985 figure of \$22,000 per station. We can summarise that concerns about underfunding and under-resourcing are generally acknowledged and frequently bemoaned throughout the industry.

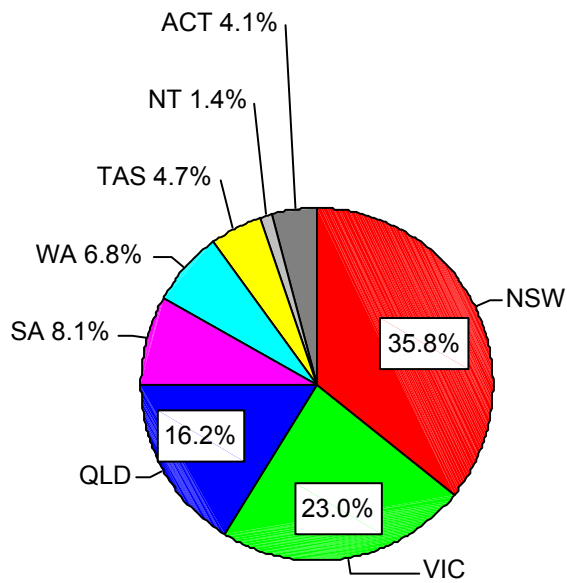
Certainly our present era characterised by the globalisation of communications and associated threats to local identity and infrastructure combined with forecasts of inequitable outcomes for sections of the community adds ballast to the unique role of community broadcasters. Community broadcasters are in an excellent position to thwart some of the negative implications of globalisation at the 'local' level (Barlow,1997:129). However, state funding is yet to reflect the crucial role of community broadcasters in a global information age. Nevertheless, our research has shown that despite inadequate responses from government especially in terms of recurrent funding, community radio workers remain deeply committed to the concept of 'community'.

Issues such as funding, historical background to the industry and the nature of contemporary community radio have impacted on the design of our current study. Specifically, what we want to look at today is the outcome of the national survey of station managers we conducted and to consider these results in the context of these broader issues.

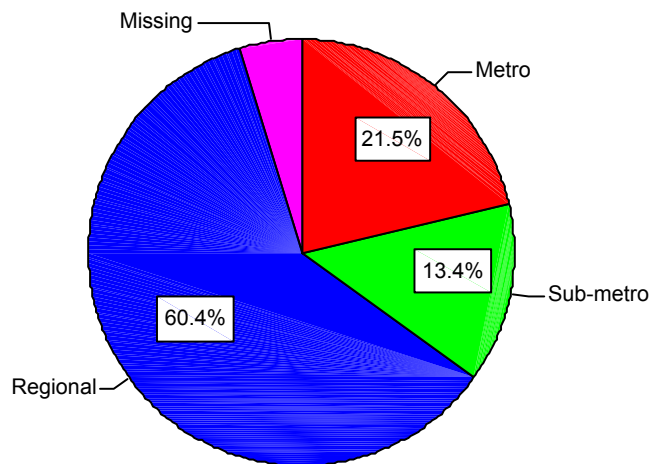
### ***Overview of Contemporary Community Radio in Australia***

The state distribution of stations we surveyed indicated that the majority of community radio stations reside in Victoria and NSW. Importantly however, approximately 60 percent of community radio stations serve regional communities. This is particularly relevant in light of the recent withdrawal of commercial radio services from regional areas.

## State Distribution of Community Radio

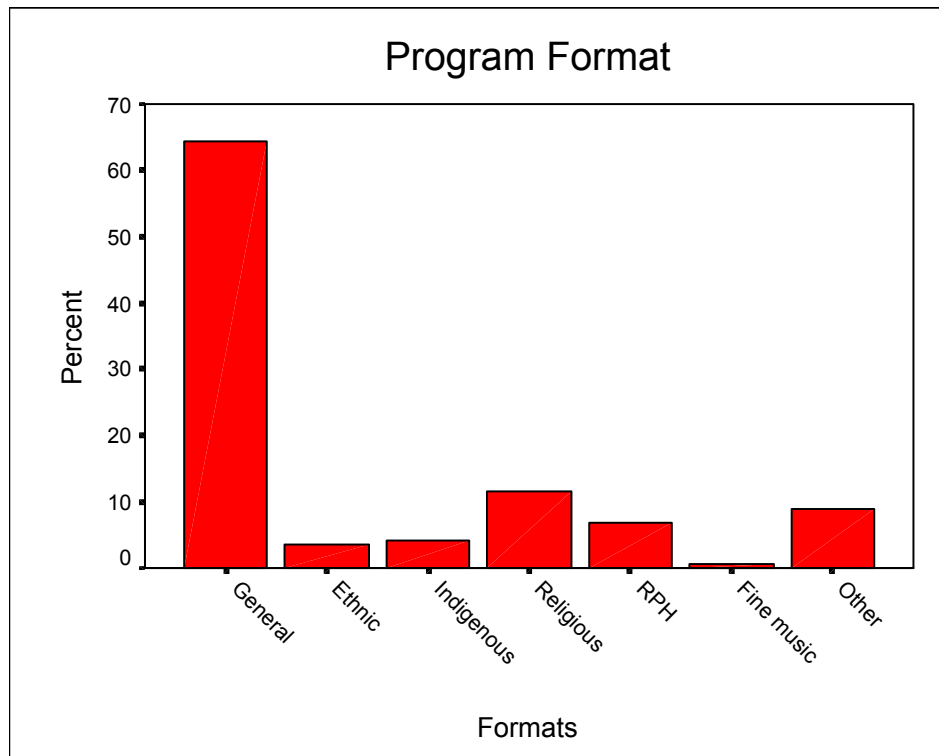


## Service Area



In part, the preponderance of regional stations reflects the recurrent Australian 'tyranny of distance' theme which demonstrates the importance of services to often remote and isolated areas. More importantly, the high presence of regional stations affirms the 'local' role of community

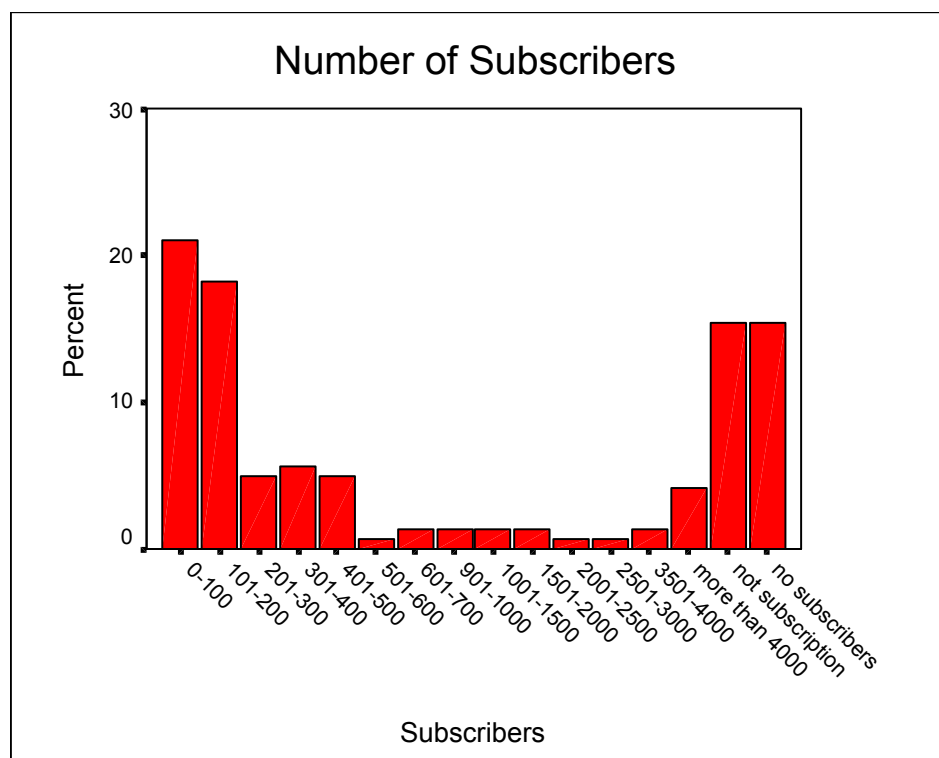
broadcasters in providing alternative media and producing program content which is immediately relevant to local communities especially in terms of community news, local events, current affairs and local music. Also, regional areas do not experience the saturation of services which occur in metropolitan areas and are often one of only a few station choices. Nevertheless, metro and sub-metro areas account for approximately 35 percent of community radio stations and occur mainly along the eastern seaboard where the majority of the Australian population resides.



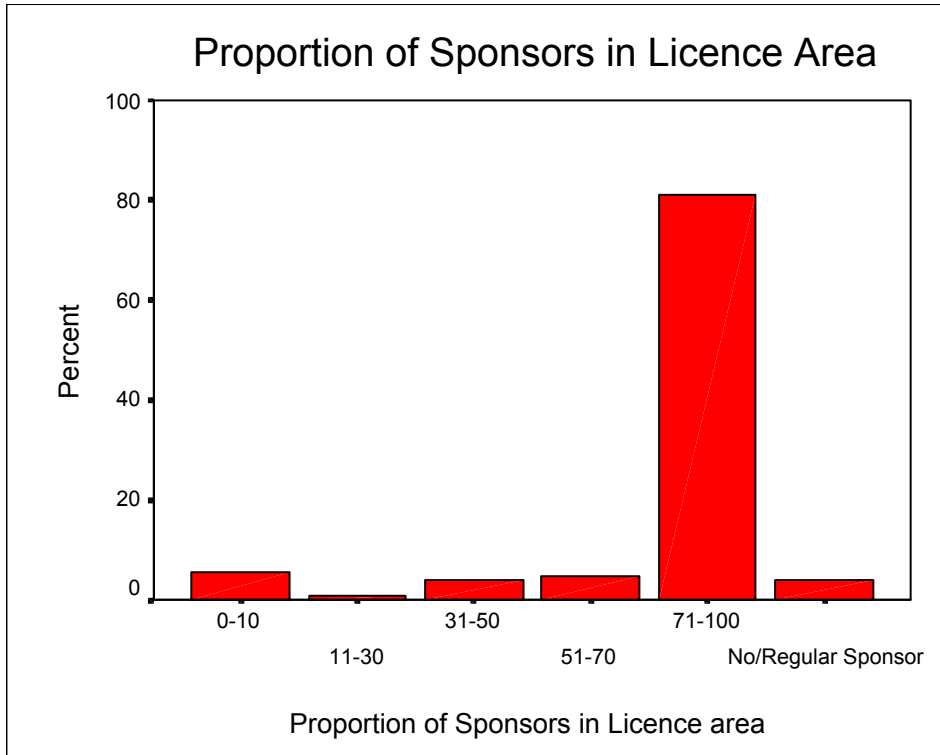
Over 60 percent of stations adopt a generalist format. The remaining program formats serve 'communities of interest' that are insufficiently served by mainstream stations. Simply, community broadcasters are able to prioritise content directed to marginal sections of the population such as ethnic minorities. As not-for-profit organisations, they are not driven by audience ratings and the profit motive. Rather, community broadcasters have as one of their primary aims the active participation and representation of communities which may otherwise be marginalised in mainstream radio content. Additionally, community radio clearly provides access, and an opportunity for participation for ordinary community members who would otherwise have no real or recognised input into the cultural life of their communities.

## **Level of Participation in Community Radio in Australia**

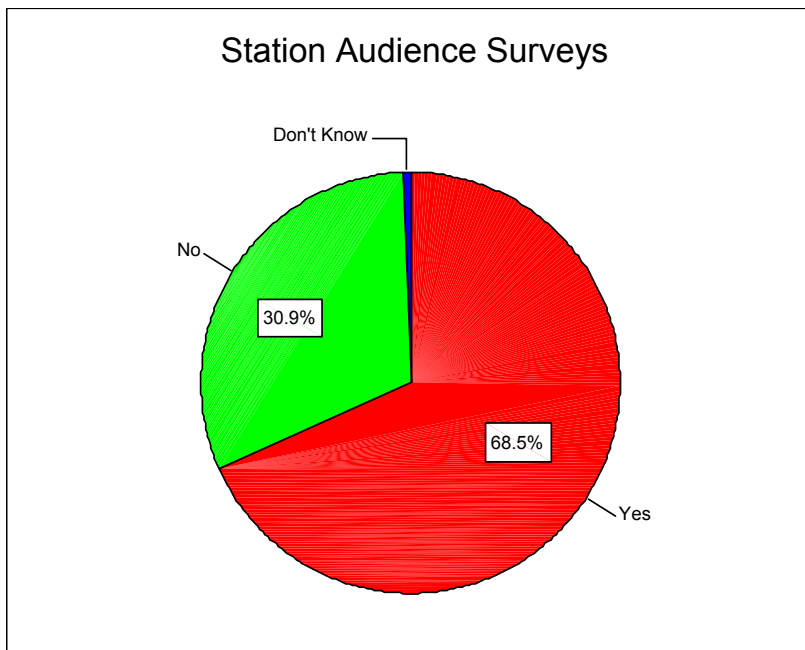
It is a truism that volunteers are the critical component of community radio stations. Of the stations we surveyed, approximately three-quarters reported 30 or more volunteers and just over a quarter reported having more than 100 volunteers. On average, stations enjoyed the active involvement of 65-70 volunteers. Thus across the sector of about 200 fully licensed stations, a conservative national estimate of volunteering would be 14000 regular unpaid participants. If we include aspirant stations in these figures and give them a slightly smaller average of volunteers, we can further estimate a minimum of 20000 Australians regularly volunteer in community radio. In this the International Year of the Volunteer, this is heartening news. While there are some paid positions within community radio stations, 30 percent of stations do not employ any staff and 35 percent of stations employed three people or less. The majority of community radio paid positions are in sales and administration, thus highlighting the role of volunteers in program/content production. In addition to the direct volunteering efforts of Australian citizens, subscription levels at stations are a further indicator of the local commitment to community radio.



Within the sector, the recent growth in the number of licences and the impact this is having on audiences and presumably, subscription levels has been a hotly debated topic. This is particularly the case in the development of narrowcasting licences and their potential effects on community broadcasters. Our research shows that over half of the station managers we surveyed reported 500 subscribers or less and about 10 percent of stations reporting 1000-5000 subscribers.



In line with the sector's commitment to local businesses, over 80 percent of sponsorship\* came from organisations in the licence/local area. This is a fair indication of the productive reciprocal relationship which exists between local businesses/organisations and their community radio stations. Further, approximately 90 percent of stations reported the adaptation of sponsorship guidelines to ensure that the content of sponsorship messages and the sponsor affirmed the local/non-commercial commitment of community broadcasting.



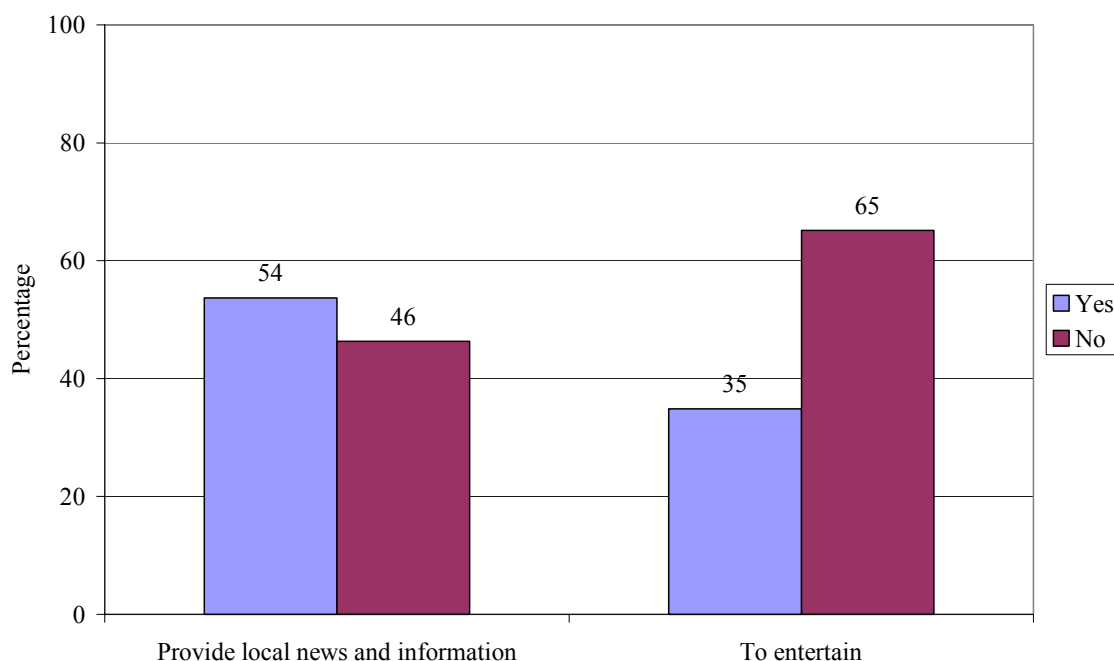
It is important to note that community radio stations are interested in what their listeners think of their service. Station Managers surveyed reported that about 70 percent of community radio stations had conducted an audience survey at some time. More than half of the stations had conducted an audience survey in the preceding five years.

It is problematic (and perhaps disabling) that community radio stations do not have sufficient funds available to raise their profile in the community. A comparison between typical commercial advertising budgets and (for example) the CBAA budget for 'Community Broadcasting Week' provides startling evidence of the uneven playing field which is radio broadcasting. In 1995, the ABA a commissioned report 'Radio Research - Listening to the Listeners' (AGB McNair) asking respondents if they had heard of community/public radio and if they knew how to access it. Only 38 percent of the respondents were aware of community radio, while 83 percent and 88 percent of the population respectively were aware of AM commercial and FM commercial. According to the ABA's 1995 figures, awareness in the Australian community of community radio is about the same as awareness of SBS radio (ABA Update, October 1995). It appears that there is a large proportion of the community which is unaware of community radio stations or at least, their distinct role in the broadcasting industry.

***What Role Does Community Radio aim to fulfil?***

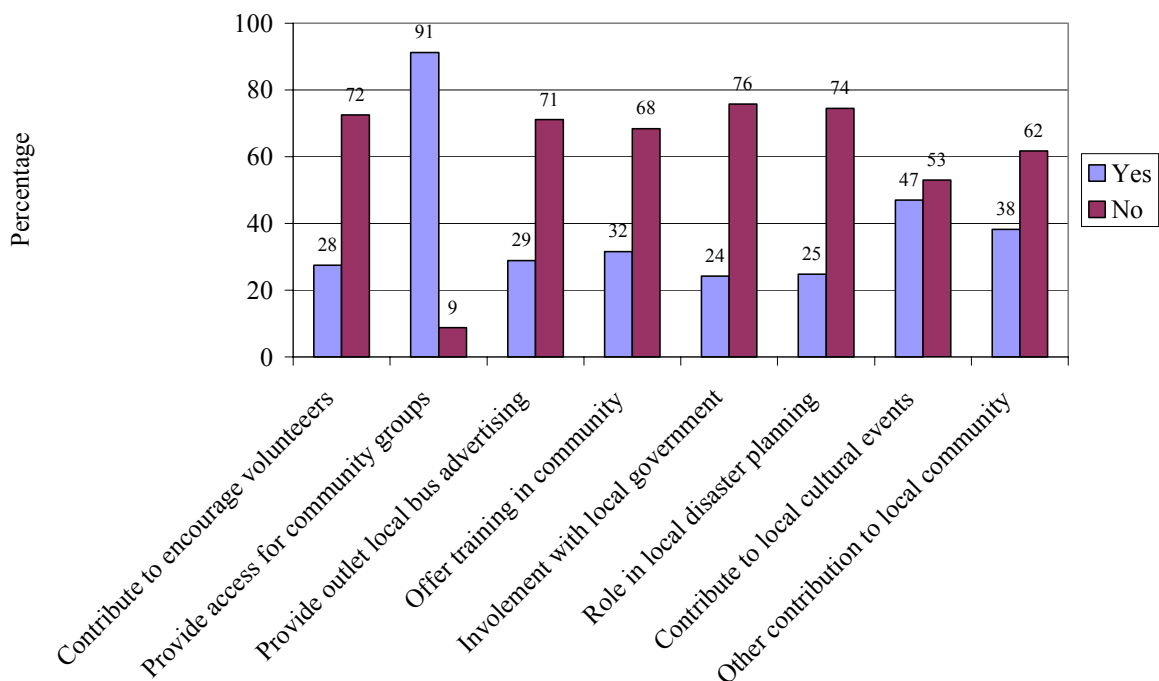
The most popular response (without prompting) to the role of the station in the community was the provision of local news and information. Over a third of station managers also cited their role as entertainment.

**Most common responses to: What do you consider to be your station's most important role?**



Frequently, those respondents in the 'other category' regarded their role as 'specialist' stations catering to ethnic groups, indigenous communities, religious groups etc. as one of their station's most important roles. Another frequent response in this question was the role of community radio as an 'alternative to the mainstream'.

A follow-up question (with prompting) asked station managers to describe the contribution their station makes to the local community. More than 90 percent of respondents nominated the provision of access (and participation) to community groups as an identifiable contribution their station makes to the local community. The only other category which achieved more than half positive responses was the station's contribution to community cultural events. About 40 percent emphasised 'other contributions' to the community - again, 'other' contributions included the representation of 'specialist groupings' such as ethnic communities, young people, etc. 'Other contributions' frequently referred to the station's contribution as a local alternative to the mainstream radio stations and as a forum for the broadcast of local music.

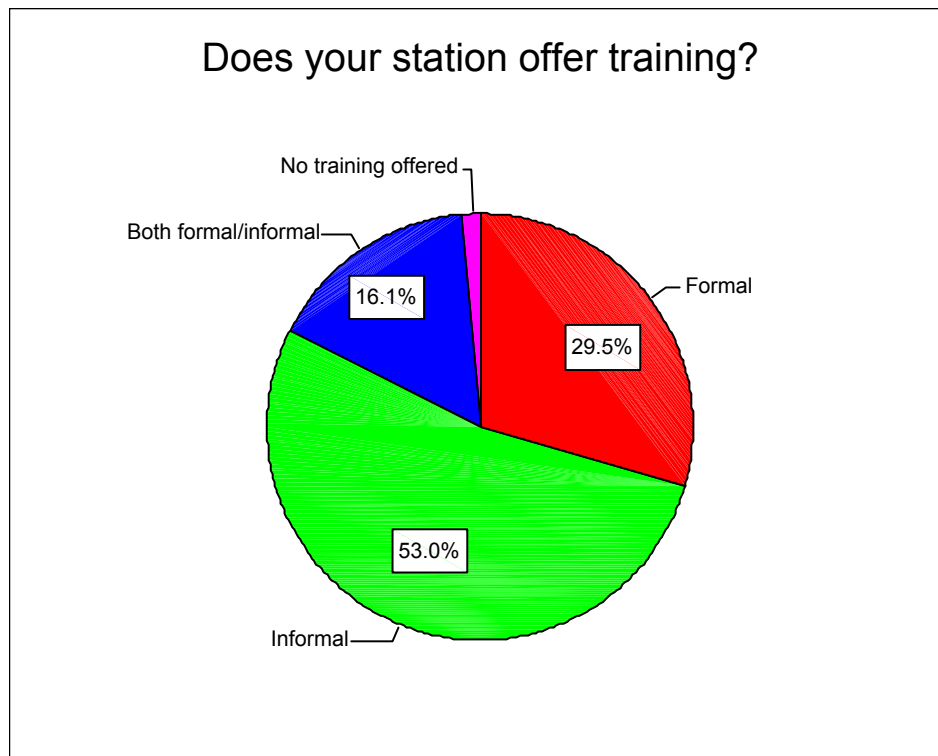


### **Training**

Training is emerging as a vital function that community radio is fulfilling within the broader media landscape. The study by the Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts in 1996 found community radio was playing an important 'gateway' role in many media workers' entry into the industry, providing training and real-life work experience for volunteers, and university and high-school students. The training role will be examined in substantially more detail in later stages of

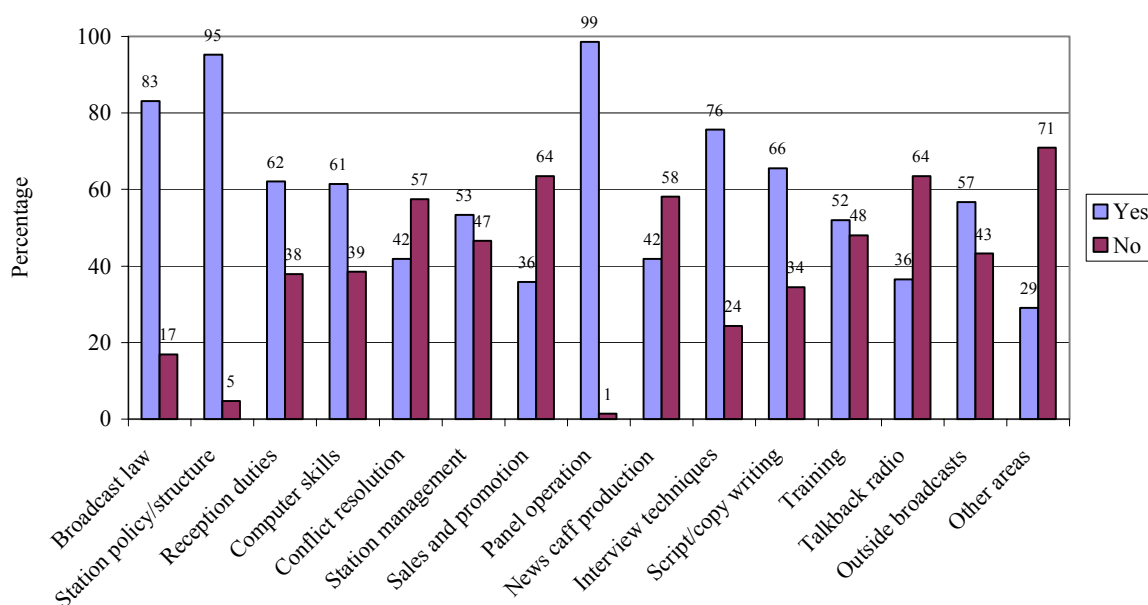
the project, but the station managers have offered some data on current training in the industry.

Only 1.3 percent of stations – that is, two stations – said they did not offer any form of training. Almost one-third of the stations offer formal training exclusively, and a further 53 percent offer informal training. A further 16 percent offered both formal and informal training programs, bringing the total percentage of stations that offer some form of formal training to about 45 percent.



Just over half of the stations required trainees to be members of the station, and almost one-quarter charged a fee for the training. Most stations did not require trainees to be 18 years or over, which highlights the commitment of most stations to providing experience and training for high-school aged students. Overall, the 150 station managers interviewed estimated that about 4400 people had been trained at their stations in the past 12 months. Most had trained 20 people or less in the previous 12 months, with a substantial 20 percent training 40 people or more. There were some very clear training areas that the stations focused on as a group. Almost all provided training in station policy and structure, which one would assume was a type of detailed 'orientation' for new volunteers. All stations except two provided training in panel operation, and more than 80 percent provided training in broadcast law. Three-quarters trained volunteer staff in interview techniques.

## Training areas



These are all important areas of training which are providing community radio with skilled volunteers who will be able to pass on their skills and knowledge to fellow community broadcasters, or to use these skills in the mainstream broadcast industry, as many community broadcasters do.

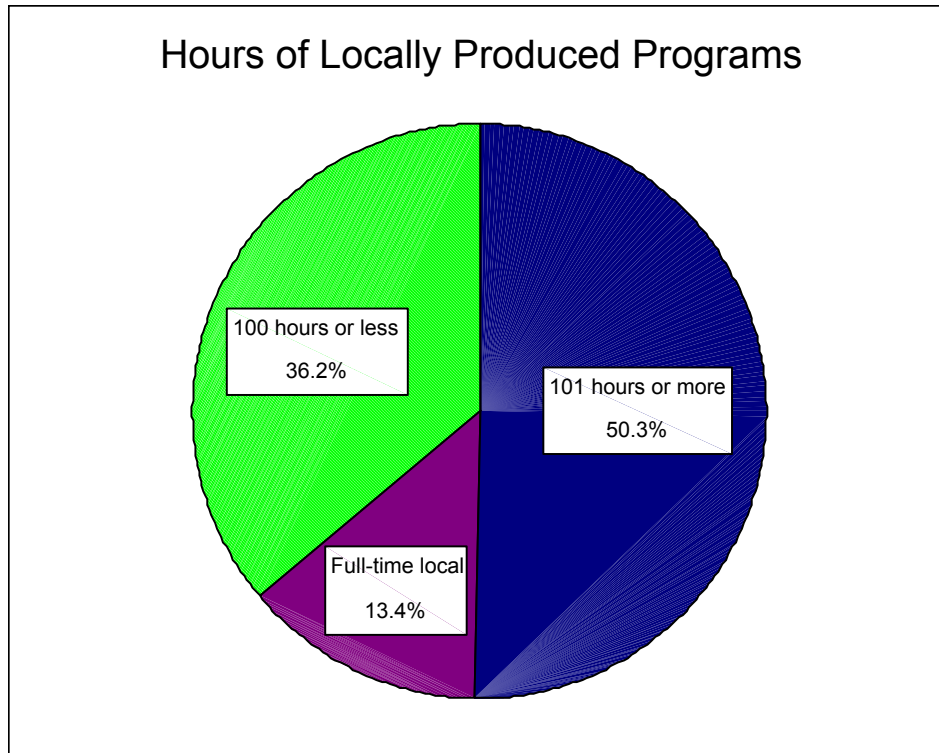
Importantly, more than half of the stations are providing training in digital audio production, which indicates some attempt to embrace the new technologies. Two-thirds also train volunteers in computer skills. These areas – looking at the use of new technologies – will form a substantial part of the national focus groups which began in April this year.

Despite this high level of training occurring in the sector, only 13 percent of training programs are accredited. One-fifth of stations offer formal training to outside institutions such as universities (where student involvement is tied to the curricula), and a further one-half are providing work experience opportunities for university students and high school students on a less formal model. Most of the training and work experience is clearly occurring in an informal and unaccredited manner. Again, accreditation and formal recognition of the high levels of training that are occurring in the community radio sector would assist in the recognition of the important training role community radio is playing in the Australia broadcast industry, and indeed the 'free' training that community radio is providing to both public and private sector employers.

### ***Community Radio - Promoting Active and Informed Local Communities***

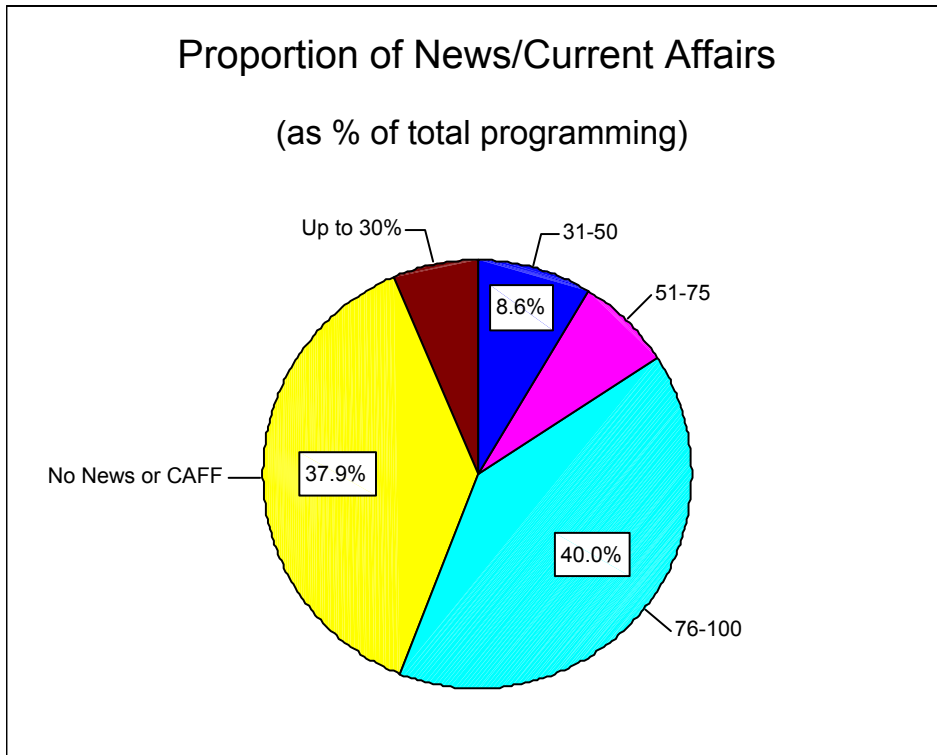
When community broadcasting was first enshrined in legislation, the then Minister for Post and Telecommunications, Tony Staley (1978:2) commented that community broadcasters, 'should have a better

appreciation of the interests, hence needs, of their broadcasting communities than anyone else, including government'. Our preliminary results indicate that the cultivation of 'local knowledges' remains a strong element in community radio endeavors. Evidence of this is found in the number of hours dedicated to locally produced programs. Two-thirds of station managers reported 100 or more hours of locally produced programs each week.



Local production of news and current affairs is another indicator of community engagement. Of those stations that did produce a news and/or current affairs service, more than 40 percent of station managers estimated at least half of their program content was based on local issues (more than 50 percent of stations did not produce their own news and current affairs). Of the stations producing current affairs, over a quarter produced programs up to five times per week.

Of the stations that did have a news service, about 10 percent had the 'luxury' of a paid news employee. Similarly of those stations that did have a current affairs service, about 10 percent were paid employees. Predictably, the recurring reason for no locally-based news or current affairs services was a lack of resources and training. Also some stations such as fine music formats did not see news and current affairs as applicable to their station.

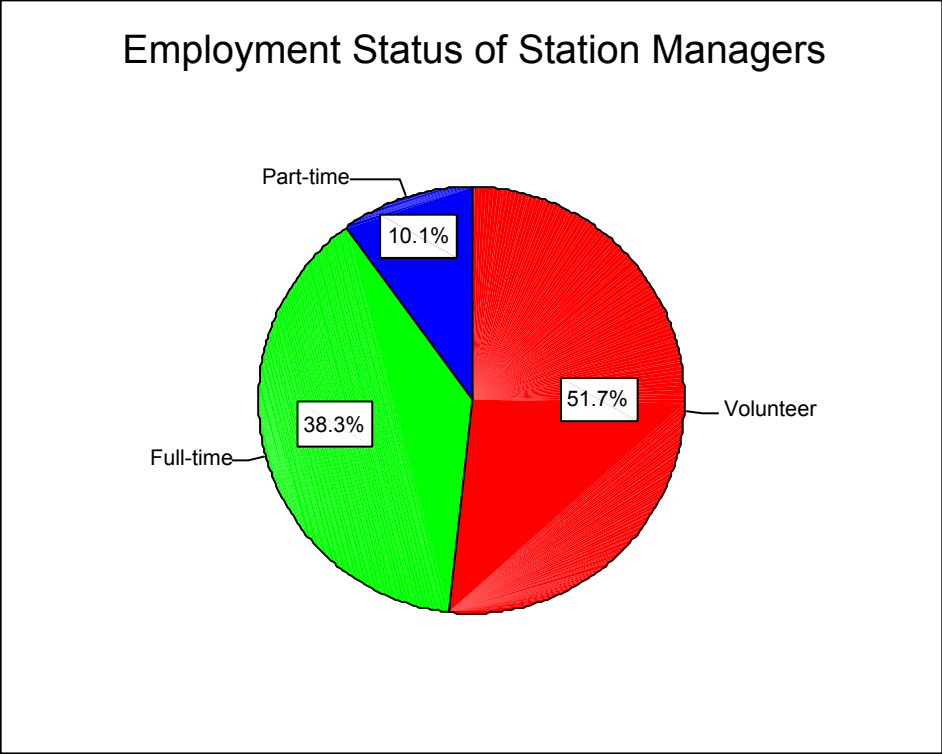


The production of news and current affairs is arguably one of the more demanding and time consuming areas of community broadcasting. It is an area where community broadcasters can best encourage active and informed local citizens particularly in terms of access to, and the production of, public information. This is particularly pertinent to discussion and fear surrounding the potentially detrimental effects of the globalisation of communication industries (see Barlow, 1997). Issues pertaining to the production of news and current affairs will become clearer during the remaining survey rounds and through our focus groups.

### ***Who Manages Australian Community Radio Stations?***

Our initial survey of station managers elucidated some interesting conclusions about the level of commitment and involvement characteristic of all volunteers. Given the demanding position of Station Manager, one could have assumed that the majority of these posts would be paid. This is clearly not the case. Surprisingly, over 50 percent of station managers are volunteers. Of those station managers that are fulfilling their position voluntarily, about one-quarter are pensioners or retired people.

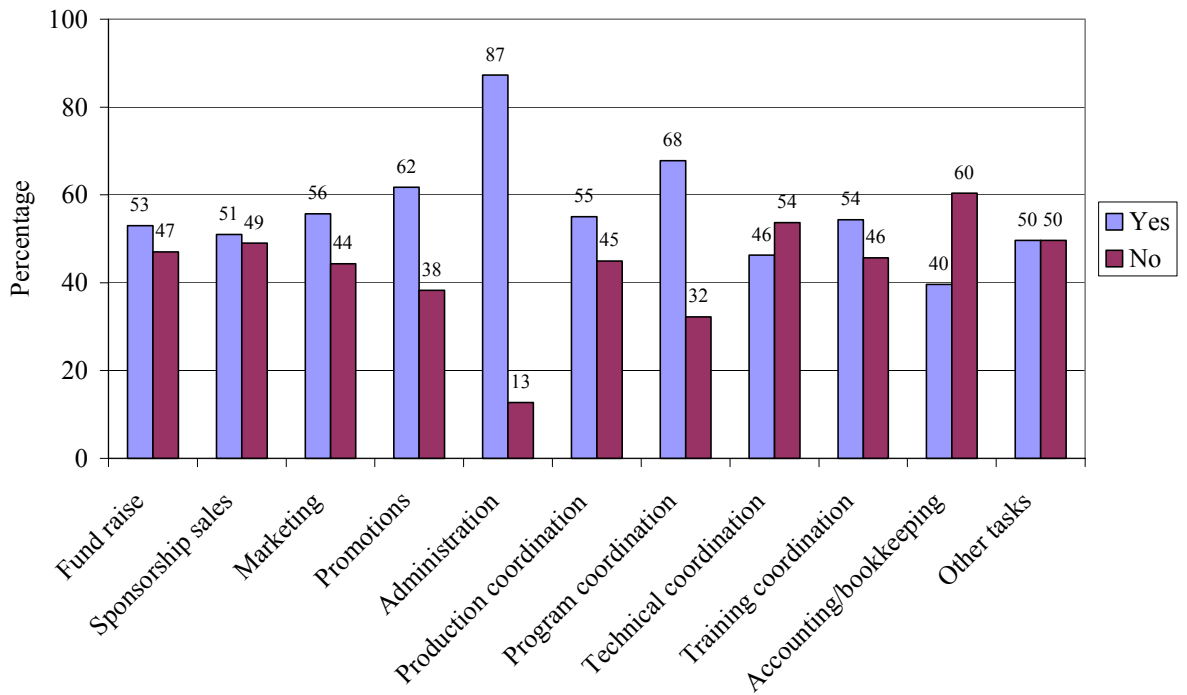
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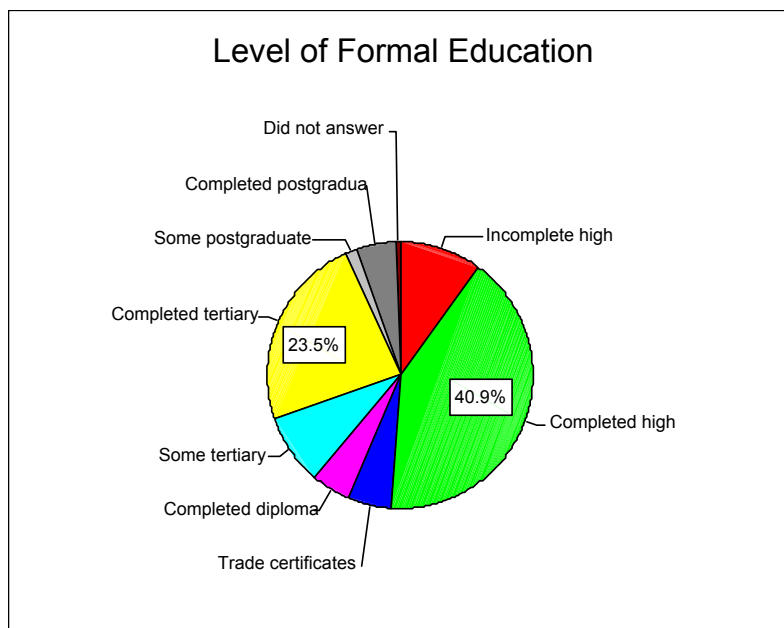
More than 70 percent of station managers are male and the average age is 49. This indicates that while community radio has prided itself on its open access and more equitable policies on involving women – indeed, the sector’s executive has featured a number of prominent women in recent years – the policies are not translating to the daily operations of radio stations. While clearly not a definitive profile of the 'average' community worker, these results do produce some interesting facts on who manages the sector. Our results also show that most station managers have been involved with their community radio station for at least six years with around 30 percent involved for 10 years or more. This reflects a long-term and very promising commitment on the part of senior people within the sector.

Station managers fulfil a multi-skilled and generally overarching role within their organisations. More than half of the station managers surveyed reported involvement in fundraising, sponsorship sales, marketing, promotions, administration, production and program co-ordination and training. The largest single percentage (87 percent) are involved in administration and roughly two-thirds (67 percent) are involved in program coordination. Again, these results indicate the willingness and self-motivation of (for the most part) volunteers to engage in a plethora of skilled tasks to ensure the continued operation of their community radio stations.

### Percentage of Station Managers Engaged in Activities

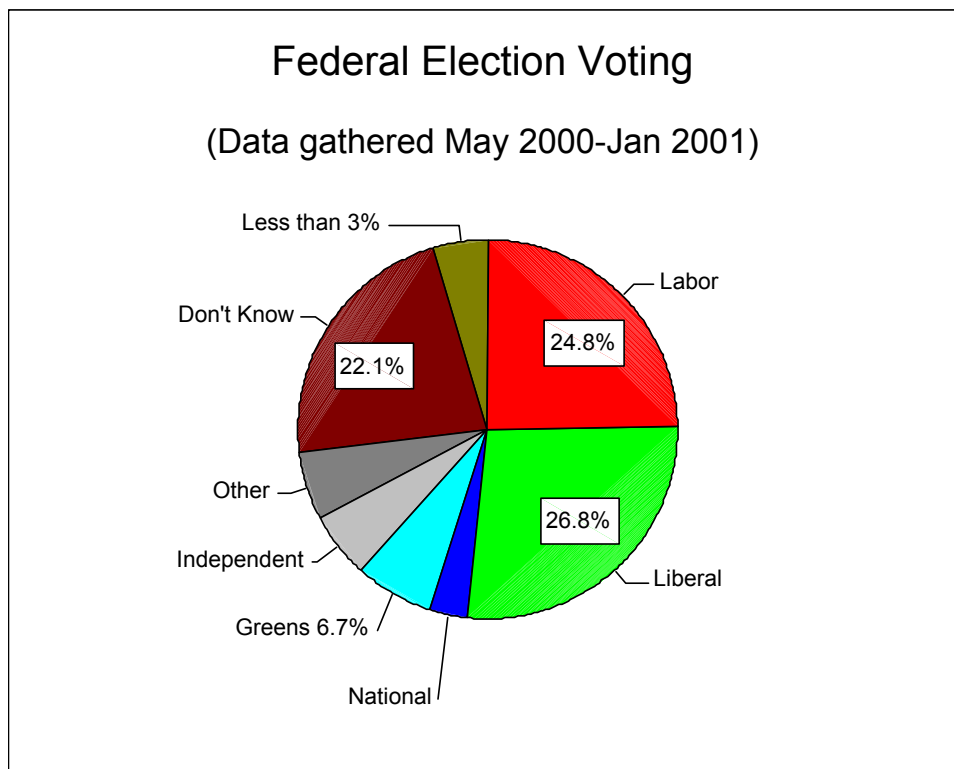


More than half of the station managers did not have any tertiary or TAFE qualifications, although approximately 40 percent had completed at least some tertiary education. The vast majority of station managers do not have university or other qualifications in journalism or media studies. Predominantly, station managers with a tertiary education had qualifications in the humanities/social sciences and science/environmental science disciplines. The paucity of formal media or broadcasting qualifications further emphasises the 'grassroots' structure of community broadcasting. Involvement of the station managers is dependent on personal motivation and philosophy rather than predicated on appropriate qualifications or career development as is typically the rule in the other tiers of broadcasting.



### **Station managers' voting tendencies**

When we presented the preliminary findings from this next (and final) group of results to delegates at the CBAA conference in November last year, it was perhaps the area that raised the most interest within the sector. Certainly, these findings indicate that community radio has made a substantial shift away from its 'alternative media' roots of the 1960s and 1970s, with an increasing number of conservative voters holding senior positions within the sector. About one-third felt they sat to the left of centre, with a sizable 45 percent nominating 'middle of the road' as the category that best described them. About 16 percent felt they were a little or pretty far to the right. Perhaps a more accurate indicator of political leanings is revealed in the question 'If a Federal election were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for in the House of Representatives?'



The results of this question show that more community radio station managers would vote for the Liberal Party than the Australian Labor Party if an election were held tomorrow. If the Coalition votes are combined, they outweigh the Labor vote by about five percentage points. About one in ten said they would vote either Australian Democrats or for the Greens, with a large 22 percent undecided about how they would vote. It would be interesting if there had been a similar survey conducted of community radio 20 years ago, to see how much these political leanings had shifted. We should also note that unfortunately, One Nation did not appear as an option in our survey coding, but support for that group can be said to be

less than six percent as this was the total proportion that nominated a party 'other' than those listed.

## **Conclusions**

There are many issues concerning community radio which have not been canvassed here due to time restraints and the necessity to limit the amount of hard data that can be absorbed in the one sitting. The station managers we interviewed exemplified a commitment to community via their active participation in the production and maintenance of their community stations and further, an underlying philosophical commitment to their 'community of interest'. Many of the station managers were performing their duties on a voluntary basis, or for little financial reward. Station managers identified the provision of local news and information as the dominant role of their stations in their communities, which again reflects their positioning as a source of specifically local content. Community radio is clearly providing high levels of access and participation for 'ordinary' citizens, with around 20,000 people acting as regular volunteers in the sector.

There is, however, broad recognition that funding levels for community radio have not improved in recent years, and in fact figures show that in real terms, funding has decreased. Certainly, core funding, or funding that can be 'relied' upon from year to year, has decreased substantially since 1985. This is a pressing issue in the sector at the moment, and one which requires further consideration from government and sector representatives. In particular, community radio's function of providing training for university and high school students, who later move on to the public and private sectors, requires recognition. Finally, the sector's solid connections to their communities – demonstrated in various ways throughout this first phase of the project – should be acknowledged and nurtured.

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