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***INTERNET ACCESS: COMMUNITY BROADCASTERS AND THE
EXPERIENCE OF SPACE AND PLACE***

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-Wanda Coates

Introduction

Local relationship and local relevance has long been upheld as one of community broadcasting's major strengths. Yet, while undoubtedly essentially local, it is increasingly true that its ability to serve and represent local community interest is being compromised through economic pressures. At the same time issues of the local and global juxtaposition are on the horizon as stations begin to make greater use of Internet based communications for collecting program content. Questions about how community radio station participants are actually negotiating spatial relationships differently, through their recently available access to new communication and information technologies, is the subject of this paper.

This paper describes some of the key differences, in terms of negotiating spatial relationships, between Internet use by ethnic broadcasters at a metropolitan ethnic radio station, and music programmers at a regional generalist station. In doing this, the following question is addressed: What different spatial meanings is the Internet given when accessed by a migrant programmer in comparison to the music programmer in these respective situations?

New media and issues of place and space: the value of empirical research

Some recent empirical studies have been directed towards understanding the relationship between new media technologies and issues of space and place. For example, Moores' study of satellite television and everyday life investigated the role that media and information technologies play in domestic environments and in the determination of spatial relationships for household members. Through this research Moores elaborated three categories of influence; the first related to routine practices of 'boundary maintenance' between the home and the outside world; the second was the theme of travel, both real and imaginative, to spaces and places outside the immediate domestic realm; and thirdly were issues of collective identity using the concept of 'reach' to analyse TV viewers' 'identifications with various image spaces or territories of broadcast transmission' (Moores, 1996, p.47).

Other studies have focused in particular on the Internet. In a study of a wired community project located on the outskirts of Edinburgh, known as the Craigmillar Community Information Service, Slack and Williams (Slack & Williams, 2000) looked at the contradictory relationship between community and information technologies. In approaching this subject, they were concerned with what they saw as Castells' overly deterministic and pessimistic arguments for the reconfiguration of space and time, brought on by the development and uptake of information and communication technologies. Castells argues for the substitution of a new 'space of flows' for the traditional 'space of places' in the information society, 'leading to an erosion of importance that physical place has' (Slack & Williams, 2000, p.316).

Slack and Williams, critical of Castells analysis, argued that his approach obscures situated understandings and fails to address 'the lived reality and interactional realization of relationships between space and place' (Slack & Williams, 2000, p.317). Alternatively, Slack and Williams locate the growth and uptake of information and communication technologies at the point where the local and global intersect, where there is a potential for each to influence the other. In their study of the community information service, they regarded 'the local as obdurate, serving in part to 'hold down' the space of flows' (Slack & Williams, 2000, p.317). Using the concept of social learning in order to examine the interplay between local and global in the shaping and reshaping of the Craigmillar project, they were able to explicate three types of learning: 'learning by doing' through practical activities of experimentation; 'learning by interaction' through which local knowledge and experience is applied more broadly; and 'learning by regulating', wherein policy concerns and national strategies are manifested (Slack & Williams, 2000, p.331). It is this interplay, they claim, 'that is neglected in the overly optimistic and pessimistic accounts of information society' (Slack & Williams, 2000, p.331).

Taking into account arguments for greater empirical understanding of local/global juxtapositions in relation to new communication technologies, the following discussion reports on findings from such a study which investigated Internet use in community radio stations.

Research background

The subject of Internet use within the Australian community broadcast sector is a particularly interesting area for exploration given the decision of the Federal Government

in 1998, to provide funding through the Community Access Network project for the placement of Internet ready computers in every fully licenced community radio station in Australia. The radio stations reported on in this here were 2 out of 140 or so stations that received these computers in May of 1998. Field observations and interviews were conducted at each station during 1999.

Introduction to first station – 2NCR

The first station is a regional university based community station, 2NCR-FM. This station is located at Southern Cross University, in the regional city of Lismore, three hours South of Brisbane in the northern reaches of NSW . 2NCR-FM community identifications tend to be general, conforming to geographic definitions of locality, and broad ideas of community. These ideas are contained in descriptive terms for the area such as ‘Lismore and surrounds’ the ‘North Coast’, the ‘Northern Rivers’, and the ‘Rainbow Region’. While there are a number of programs which express identification with specific sectors of the community, most programming tends to be more general in nature, with music programming, and in particular specialist music programs, forming the major part of the programming base.

Radio 2NCR is well resourced in terms of community radio standards, a situation which has largely resulted from a long-term history of University support. Whilst this is the case, it is also true (at the time of research) that the physical environment of the station is barely adequate, being both cramped and fragmented. Studio and reception space are very small and divided into a number of tiny connected rooms. No specific space is available for volunteers to meet or work in. The administration offices, while better catered for space wise, are located in a separate building on another side of the Plaza.

Introduction to second station – 4EB

The second station studied, 4EB, is distinctive as a community broadcaster for its ethnic specialisation, being Queensland’s only community owned and operated full time ethnic radio station, and one of only five in Australia. The station complex, located in central Brisbane, is well resourced, with studios and station space which is both modern and extensive by community broadcast standards. As an ethnic broadcaster it incorporates over 48 different language groups, all culturally distinctive but connected by their common diasporic experience and emphasis on both local community and country-of-origin. The local communities served by 4EB broadcasts tend to be cohesive with varying degrees of

family, religious, community and cultural networks existing before and outside of the radio broadcast. Individual programs take their place within and extend upon these existing sets of connections.

Another distinctive feature is the attention given to spoken word in programming at 4EB. As part of the ethnic funding conditions, ethnic broadcasters are required to provide 50% spoken word content in each program. Language is consequently an important element in their program presentation, and produces a strong bond between broadcasters and their ethnic audiences.

Internet use and different spatial orientations

This section illustrates briefly several of the major themes relating to spatial orientation and Internet use that arose from the field work that was conducted at each of these two stations. The first section looks at 2NCR-FM and describes internet use through the articulation of a number of internal spatial references, while the second section describes the orientation towards particular external spaces which was a dominant feature of internet use at 4EB.

2NCR-FM

Space as the expression of broadcasters, internal, special interests

The first sense of ‘internal space’ orientation at 2NCR-FM refers to the internal world of the presenters personal interest in a particular subject. One of the major themes that arose from the 2NCR fieldwork and the use of the Internet by broadcasters was the value given to subject, or specialist interest, over that of location of information. This was particularly evident in relation to internet use for the retrieval of information related to the interests of specialist musical programmers. Being interest driven, the location of sites accessed by 2NCR broadcasters in this category tended to be secondary and sometimes totally immaterial, to that of subject.

One presenter who exemplifies this position and who I will call Bob, presents two specialist music programs expressing his passion for older styles of popular music including vintage country and western and obscure music from the 40s through to the 60s. Bob does a lot of research for these programs, collecting biographies, presenting obituaries when performers die and producing tributes at other times. Bobs programming reflects his intense interest in the music genres he presents and his use of the Internet is consequently, entirely subject driven. The benefit of the Internet to his musical interests is in the

comprehensive nature of collected information contained within single websites or between linked sites:

There is one major site that I use which is the World Bing Crosby Fan Club, which has a What's News in Music section which is dedicated to artists and musicians who have been recording before the year 1960, so it has a whole news page with articles sent in from newspapers all around the world, like last week I got one which was a news story about a life size statue of Perry Como that had been unveiled and they had a Perry Como festival, so I was able to print that off. There was a story about Arny Arnold retiring from music at the age of 90 and doing his last concert in Los Vegas, and things like Helen Forest passing away. I can go and print all that out and bring it with me. I'll take that into the program and read it out like a news story.

Space as physical issue for the actual location of the computer

The second sense of 'internal space' at 2NCR-FM is the spatially restrictive environment in which the computer is actually located. At 2NCR, understandings and implications of space associated with the new computer were more intensely related to issues of the immediate physical surroundings of the computer itself than to communications with specific remote locations. When the CAN computer arrived at the station in its assorted cardboard boxes a space was created to accommodate it in one of the smallest and most busy places at the station, the reception area. This was a very small space. A few alterations were made to make room for the new computer and an associated working area. The program coordinators desk was moved to a position under the window and a desk was brought in and put against the far wall for the new computer and shelving was mounted on the wall above it. Both the program coordinators computer and the CAN computer face out into the small room and their screens are easily visible from any position in the room.

Space as a personal privacy issue

The third sense of 'internal space' at the station, closely related to the previous point, is internal considerations of privacy and its relationship to Internet use. In this situation issues arise from the invasion of privacy while using the computer or concerns for respecting the privacy of others while they use the computer. One of the participants described their experience of this issue:

I'm inclined to not like people looking over my shoulder when I'm at the computer, and I don't do it to other people. They're interested to see what's coming on your screen and all that, but I wouldn't do it to anybody, and I don't particularly like them standing behind me looking over my shoulder if I'm writing e-mail or something. It's just a bit weird I suppose. I don't think that people do it intentionally, I think that its just an interest thing [they want to know] 'what are you looking at?'

Space as the local sound environment and issues of legitimacy

The fourth sense of 'internal space' relates the sound dimensions of the area in which the computer is located. In this space sound from various sources can be heard at differing levels throughout the day - the rise and fall of voices in conversation, the sound of the telephone ringing, one side of a telephone conversation, and the hum of the fax machine receiving messages. This area is also served by an amplifier/receiver and pair of speakers through which the stations off-air signal is monitored or, as the case is since the arrival of the computer, through the flick of a switch, the off-air signal is exchanged for computer generated audio. The fact that the off-air monitor has to be switched off in order to put the computer audio through the speakers is another source of tension. One broadcaster explained his problem with this switching system, where, for him, the off-air signal is a legitimate sound to be present in the reception area, whereas, sounds emanating from the computer, have the potential to be out-of-order and even offensive:

I will tell you something that really annoys me: there is an announcer here who accesses radio stations in the capital cities to listen to their program. Its sort of ostensibly 2NCR business because that person is involved in program formulation, [however] I find it really rude that your turning off the on-air announcer to listen to a capital city announcer, and he'll sit there for hours doing that. I find that really, really tedious. Listening to a radio station is well and good, but somewhere else and not using the computer, use some audio equipment for that maybe

4EB – External spatial considerations

Although there was some cross over of spatial issues from 2NCR-FM to 4EB, the relationships between space and the new computers were expressed through a different set of priorities at the second station, with a major emphasis on creating relationships with particular remote spaces. Up until a couple of years ago, before Internet access was available at 4EB, broadcasters relied upon publications, faxes, postal services, other broadcasts, and telephone connections, in order to collect information from and about their countries of origin.

Since the arrival of the Internet almost every broadcast group at 4EB accesses it on a regular basis for information collection. At the same time, not every person at 4EB is Internet competent or even Internet comfortable, however by virtue of group based programming structures, ability to utilise this resource is assured by a process of skill specialisation within programming groups. On the whole, the research showed that

networked computers were used primarily by ethnic broadcasters for making Internet based connections with international spaces, with country-of-origin articulations figuring strongest

Space as the country of origin

The preference for the Internet for collecting information from country of origin is particularly well illustrated in the situation where a broadcaster produces more than one program, spanning both generalist and ethnic categories. One such broadcaster, a Dutch woman, had such a dual role presenting both a program specifically for Dutch audiences and a program named (for the purpose of this paper) 'Our Town' for general audiences. The 'Our Town' program is in English and features Brisbane based information with an emphasis on interviews with local people, whereas the Dutch program is in language and uses information that is particular to her country-of-origin, Holland. Instructively, she described how her use of the Internet in program preparation differed dramatically between the two programs. As she explains, it was through her role as a Dutch programmer the Internet became an important source for information direct from the Netherlands:

...[No I don't use it] for the ...[Our Town] program so much, in fact I can't recall ever getting anything of the Internet for Focus, but for the Dutch program, which I present every fortnight because I'm one of a large group of people who do Dutch programming, we get the news from Radio Netherlands via the Internet, we receive that...and the station being connected onto the Internet, I download it and then I present it as part of my program. Practically everyone of the Dutch broadcasters do this.

Space as a temporal connection with the country of origin

Intensely related to Internet based relationships with international locations are temporal considerations. One way of understanding the difference new temporal categories of Internet connectivity have made to ethnic broadcasters is through direct comparison with the sorts of time delays they took for granted under information gathering conditions prior to its introduction. A Hungarian broadcaster describes how she, although still in the process of learning how to use the station computers for herself, uses on her program Internet derived information from Hungary, accessed and forwarded to her by another member of her group. Between 20 and 50 pages of downloaded information is faxed to her at home a day prior to program presentation, incurring a small loss of timeliness

through this convolution but gaining up to three weeks on her previous sources. She explains the difference:

We had the Hungarian newspaper from Melbourne every week, and that could be two week old news because they are making the paper every week, every Friday I get the paper and it takes one week to get here and the news must be from the previous week, that is minimal two week old news. I got it Friday and the program Wednesday and Thursday, [so] I read it the next week, so its about three weeks old and that was ridiculous but we hadn't got any other source and since we have the Internet its really great...today is not like twenty years ago, you have to have the freshest news. Two weeks or even two hours old news is not news any more.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study has explicated some of the key differences in spatial negotiations between Internet users at two very different community radio stations. It must be reinforced here that while the situations described here represent major issues for participants at each station, in a minor sense, cross overs were present for each of these issues. The major differences in spatial considerations however, do show that issues of physical place and lived experience at each station are brought to bear on the participants experience and negotiation of space, as mediated by the new information and communication technology. These situated understandings go some of the way towards reinforcing the relevance of local realities in intercepting and interpreting Internet derived spaces, thereby making problematic Castells contention for the erosion of the importance of physical place and the replacement of a 'space of place' by a 'space of flows'.

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