



Community Broadcasting Foundation Ltd

presents

Community Radio: The Joy of Social Connection

A research report by

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*“Participation in community radio could be described as
the perfect antidote to loneliness”*

The Joy of Social Connection, Murdoch University

Foreword

With around a third of Australians experiencing loneliness at some time and around 10 per cent experiencing it in any given year, it is a growing issue in Australia with a serious social cost.

Research shows that loneliness and social isolation have been shown to be just as much of a threat to our well-being as obesity, smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic. Lonely people are more likely to experience drug abuse, depression, alcoholism and suicide. Loneliness is also linked to heart disease, stroke and negative socio-economic outcomes.

Increasing community connection and social cohesion is widely recognised as the path to reducing loneliness.

We commissioned Dr Simon Order, Academic Chair (Sound and Radio) at Murdoch University's School of Arts to investigate whether loneliness could be reduced through the power of community radio.

His research reveals that community broadcasting is ideally suited to assist in increasing social connection for lonely people. "Community broadcasting in Australia should be valued as a medium to reduce social isolation and enrich community cohesion," Dr Order said.

Engaged, connected people live empowered lives that make a difference to them and to society as a whole. With over 450 radio and television stations around Australia in metro, rural and remote locations and covering all types of demographics, community broadcasting is the solution.

The Community Broadcasting Foundation funds stations to help reduce loneliness, reduce the stigma of being lonely and create that increased community connection.

We are delighted to present Murdoch University's report, Community Radio: The Joy of Social Connection.

"Loneliness is causing major social problems. The Community Broadcasting Foundation supports local independent radio and TV stations to create community connections that are vital to a thriving, inclusive society"



Peter Batchelor
President - Community Broadcasting Foundation

"Community broadcasting in Australia should be valued as a medium to reduce social isolation and enrich community cohesion"
Dr Simon Order



Community Radio: The Joy of Social Connection

A research report commissioned by the Community Broadcasting Foundation

Dr Simon Order
Murdoch University

Introduction

“Loneliness is the disconnect felt between desired interpersonal relationships and those that one perceives they currently have” (Baker 2012, v). According to a recent study by The Australia Institute (Baker 2012), the incidence of loneliness in Australia is growing. Three out of ten Australians experienced loneliness between 2001 and 2009, with 13 per cent experiencing repeated episodes of loneliness. Those slightly more likely to experience loneliness and reduced levels of social connection are men, lone parents with young children and people living alone. The prevalence of loneliness outside these at-risk social groups, however, does not discriminate markedly by location or gender.

The personal and social consequences of loneliness are significant for those affected but also for policy makers. The Federal Government’s vision for social inclusion/cohesion¹ is of a society “in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society” (Australian Government 2011).

The Social Inclusion Agenda aims to enable all Australians to learn, work, engage and have a voice. Unfortunately, the disconnection of lonely people from their community diminishes their opportunity to engage with others. The Social Inclusion Board cites *volunteering*, *community participation* and *sociability* as social inclusion indicators and these foster a significant trend away from loneliness (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2009).

Community broadcasting is uniquely positioned to provide opportunities for volunteering, community participation and sociability.

Overall this paper argues that community broadcasting in Australia should be valued as a medium to reduce social isolation and enrich community cohesion. The joy of social connection articulated by community radio volunteers and listeners is tangible.

From the listener’s point of view, community broadcasting provides the familiar voice that keeps us company on our daily commute, a trusted friend every day and every lonely evening – helping maintain a connection to the outside world. Over five million² Australians listen to community radio

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¹ Social inclusion was a policy focus for the Rudd/Gillard Australian Labour Party government. The Abbott Coalition Government scrapped the Social Inclusion Board in 2013 and has shifted its policy rhetoric to favour ‘social cohesion’ – which is mostly used in multicultural contexts and more recently in the addressing of religious radicalisation.

² 2017 Wave #2 National Listener Survey results released in January give total listenership aged 15+ as 5,299,000. Refer: <https://www.cbaa.org.au/broadcasters/get-data-national-listener-survey-station-census/national-listener-survey-fact-sheets>

across Australia every week (CBAA 2015) or 27% of the total population (McNair 2015, 2). 3.7 million Australians tune into community television each month (CBAA 2010, 16). With such a big reach, community broadcasting is perfectly placed to tackle the far-reaching social issue of loneliness.

From the volunteering standpoint, community broadcasting allows for real, local issues to be discussed and for community connections to be established. It allows for community voices to be heard - regardless of age, gender, ability, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Community broadcasting can help reduce loneliness by first, encouraging and increasing volunteerism, second, reducing the stigma of being lonely and thirdly, helping create more community connection.

A review of existing research and literature on this topic shows three main areas where targeted strategies will assist in social reconnection. First, loneliness caused by low levels of community connection; second, isolation associated with ethnicity, especially for emerging migrant communities in Australia; and thirdly, societal isolation that is associated with minority groups.

Low levels of community connection

“Loneliness is epitomised by lower levels of community connection. Not surprisingly then, disconnection from the community was one of two statistically significant factors associated with a shift to loneliness,” (Baker 2012, 19). Of all the benefits cited by community radio participants in relevant studies in Australia, social interaction and participation in networks were ranked among the most common personal motivations for volunteers (Order 2013b, Van Vuuren 2001, Rennie, Buttner, and Kelleher 2013, Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell 2002a, 39). From this perspective, participation in community radio could be described as the perfect antidote to loneliness or in other words, a way to foster the joy of social connection. A pertinent example is the case of RTRFM in Perth, Western Australia, where researchers stated:

The concept of the RTRFM family is a very powerful notion of community inside and outside the station and the notion is underpinned by strong evidence demonstrating a two-way street between the station and its community. Lines of communication are active and open (Order 2013a, 328, 335).

And volunteers were equally buoyant about the social dynamics the station had to offer:

I enjoy belonging to this community. It feels like a big family, that’s important (RTR10).³

It’s bloody awesome being here. That changed my whole life. There’s a real community around this place. When I first started as a volunteer I was a nervous kid and really wasn’t part of the community but that has changed and I really am a part of this place. That certainly keeps me going here and wandering the streets, it’s like being in ‘Summer Bay’.⁴ You run into people that dig RTR and what it does and it’s a good feeling (RTR11).

Although the RTRFM community is certainly not homogeneous when looking at the diversity of its output, its members demonstrate an extremely strong sense of homogeneity when it comes to the station. They emphasise the “community value, the RTRFM family; a sense of fun; a great working environment; a good work ethic; a good industry”; and “a kind of homeliness that is RTR” (RTR6).

³ RF, RTR, RPH refer to anonymous community station volunteers who participated in interviews about their station for the purposes of research around the value of community radio (Order 2013a)

⁴ Summer Bay is a fictional, fantasy, sleepy coastal location on the popular Australian soap opera, *Home and Away*, which attempts to depict the Australian dream.

Researchers at Melbourne's SYN community radio/TV station⁵, revealed similar motivations for participation, where the age demographic of participants and listeners was a much younger 12-25. Friendship is an important aspect of the SYN experience. 83.91% (292) of all survey participants made new friends as a result of participating in SYN. Of those, 38.70% (113) made between five and nineteen new friends, about one third (31.51%, 92) made fewer than five friends, and 29.79% (87) made twenty friends or more (Rennie, Buttner, and Kelleher 2013, 17). 97.13% of survey participants would recommend others to participate with SYN. The most frequent reasons for recommending SYN were to gain experience in the media industry and for making friends. For example:

I certainly would [recommend others to participate]. Radio, TV, friends - what more could you want? It's a great career pathway for those who want to work in the media (but also great for those who don't!) and just a great way to express your own ideas (Participant cited in Rennie, Buttner, and Kelleher 2013, 21).

These kinds of reports are a powerful testament to the efficacy of community media to reduce perceptions of loneliness and isolation

A majority of participants stated that they were "better now than before SYN" (Rennie, Buttner, and Kelleher 2013, i), in other words, they had improved as a result of participation with SYN particularly in terms of networking with individuals and organisations, and training others. Similarly, most participants stated that they had improved at expressing ideas, being confident at speaking out, thinking critically about the media, feeling good about oneself, and taking on responsibility. These kinds of reports are a powerful testament to the efficacy of community media to reduce perceptions of loneliness and isolation.

Researchers also surveyed community stations in Queensland, 9CRX, 2TEN and 4RRR (Van Vuuren 2006). This study focused on the idea of social capital, which could also be perceived as the antithesis to loneliness. This quote from Onyx and Bullen (1997, 25-26) situates social capital as a factor integral to community cohesion.

Social capital is the ability of people to work together for common purposes in groups, organisations, and at the workplace (Fukuyama 1995, 6). Social capital creates the possibility for community development and it is also a key product of community development (Onyx and Bullen 1997, 25-26) (cited by Van Vuuren 2001, 3).

This Queensland study is particularly significant because the three stations have different volunteer demographics. 9CRX⁶ attracts predominantly male volunteers over 50 years of age, 2TEN has an age range spread across the spectrum and an equal gender grouping, while 4RRR attracts much younger volunteers. The results show that community radio, as an antidote to isolation, functions effectively across a range of ages and irrespective of gender.

One of the key results of this of this research (Van Vuuren 2001, 3) focused on the reasons for community radio membership. Both of the highest factors are significant because they point to a mitigation of factors contributing to loneliness. "At 9CRX and 2TEN the reason to 'support and contribute to the station' rated highly, while at 9CRX 'community involvement and social interaction' and 'contribution to the community' rated significantly" (Van Vuuren 2001, 14). In a similar vein, the researchers asked participants what they perceived as the benefits of volunteering. The researchers

⁵ SYN Media is a youth-run media organisation located in Melbourne, Australia. SYN holds a full-time community radio licence, produces programs for Melbourne's community television station (C31), conducts a range of online content activities, and provides media training.

⁶ The 9CRX call sign used in this study is not an actual radio call-sign, it was employed to provide anonymity for a participating station.

concluded that, “volunteering at the three community radio stations is characterised by a mixture of personal, organisational and community motivations” (ibid). What is more pertinent, however, are the specific benefits (see table 1).

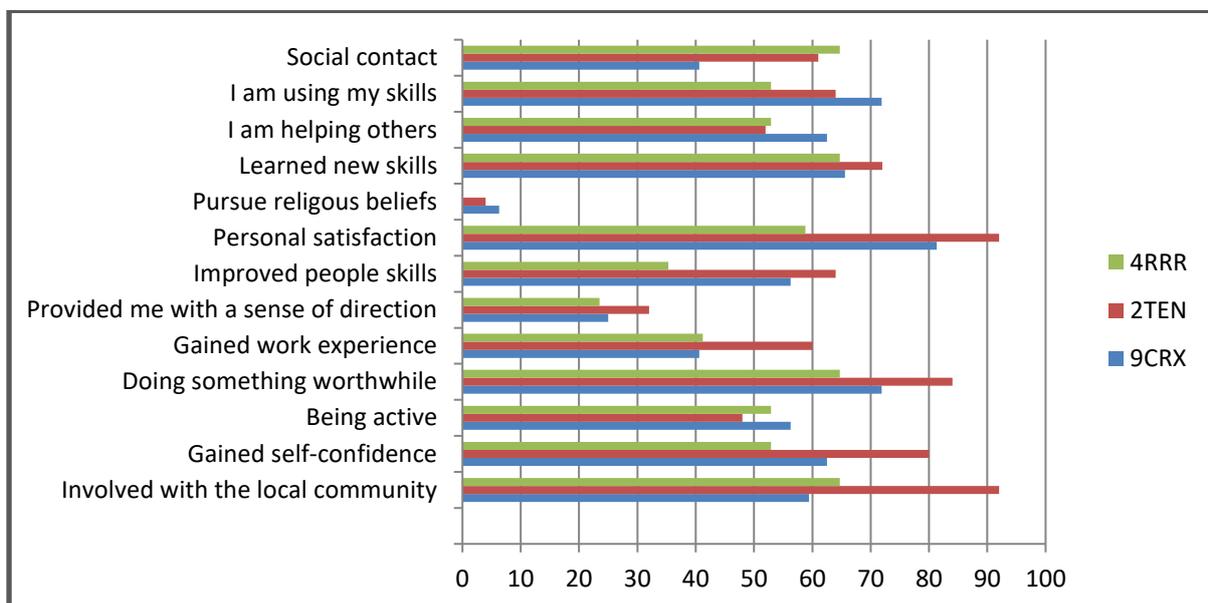


Table 1 – Percentages of people who mentioned these benefits of volunteering (adapted from Van Vuuren 2001, 15)

The benefits listed in Table 1 either specify involvement with other people or are linked to a positive sense of self. Clearly, those who participate in community radio in Van Vuuren’s study are at low risk, unlikely to fall victim to social isolation. The notion of social capital is a strong developmental framework to explain the success of community radio in connecting people socially.

Community radio is also strongly linked to the Australian volunteer sector. There are obvious human resource synergies. Community radio stations have long existed on shoe-string budgets where volunteers are an indirect source of income. Volunteer in-kind labour sustains a viable business model; without volunteers the community radio sector would fail. With so much importance placed on the involvement of volunteers for this sector, it is vital that individual community radio stations and their management regularly reflect on why they attract and retain volunteers. There is a significant relationship between volunteering and social inclusion (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2009).

Volunteering Australia suggest a “sense of purpose” and the “difference made to the community” are primary motivators for volunteers (Volunteering Australia 2012) Anecdotaly, community radio volunteers have reinforced these reasons; however, a close examination of their responses to interview questions about participation suggests a broader array of motivations. Research was conducted to understand community radio volunteer motivation of older adults who volunteer at 6RPH in Perth (Order and O’Mahony 2015, 14). The analysis reveals that the development of a “purposeful identity” through volunteering in a community radio context is a primary motivation and consequence for older adult volunteers.

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When the concept of “purposeful identity” is teased apart by the researchers a clearer picture of why volunteering in community media is so effective emerges: volunteering alleviates loneliness and isolation in our communities. The three most common reasons for volunteering at 6RPH all relate to working with other people. First, volunteers mention positive personal growth in a supportive environment. There is a sense of the development of the ego (Clary et al. 1998), similar to the way work can help with our positive identity. This was significant especially for older and retired volunteers. For example, one interviewee explained their reasons for volunteering as follows:

They are fairly selfish reasons. When I am asked what I am doing in my retirement, I can promote the radio station and [say] listen to me. It has given me some purposeful identity outside being a retired person. I identify my retirement activity as reading on the radio. I am aware of the community need to help visually impaired people and this is what the station provides but I am not consciously driven by the need to help them. It is purely egotistical (RPH6).

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Second, an equal number of volunteers spoke about motivation in terms of the desire to acquire and express skills, knowledge and abilities. Volunteers explained the process of expressing their broadcast skills in a number of ways including:

There is a degree of craft involved with it (RPH3).

I just feel that I take it as seriously as if I was being paid hundreds of dollars an hour (RPH2).

I tend to look at it like a performance and I just want to improve my performance (RPH3).

I like being creative. It's some way in my world; I can be creative because I don't have it in my work thing (RPH6).

The craft of radio has always been seen as a skill that requires dedication, training and practice to produce the best possible results. Improved understanding and the development of skills are attractive to volunteers.

What is crucial to both a sense of “personal growth” and the “desire to acquire skills” is that both these notions exist in an explicitly social paradigm in the community radio context. Community radio stations provide broadcast training and seek to empower their volunteers. Not only is this great news for the volunteers but it makes human resource sense for station management. This sentiment of volunteer empowerment is echoed throughout the sector (Rodriguez 2001, 18, Van Vuuren 2006, 381, Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell 2002a, 56).

At the more explicit level of the social context, the “social” function was the second most common motivation for station volunteers at 6RPH. This comment by one 6RPH volunteer is illustrative of the sentiment:

The camaraderie, the kindness and the friendship in this place is pretty unique. The moment you walk in the door, there is just a lovely atmosphere, there's no bitchiness, there's no fighting, it's great. Our Christmas parties are some of the happiest I've ever been too, just a lovely group of people. I take it seriously, I do the best I can, I think I've improved. 990 [6RPH Information Radio] definitely gives me a focus for the week. To be able to help our coordinators out is a good feeling. They are so good with managing people (RPH2).

For this volunteer, the social motivation for volunteering encompasses the enjoyment of the company of others as well as being able to assist others in the day to day work of the station. In conjunction with this social aspect of volunteering there was a feeling of equality among the volunteers. All the volunteers felt they were treated equally.

That's why I like it here. There's no hierarchy here, even when the manager comes in, I don't like that in any organisation, the pecking order. What we have here is very egalitarian I suppose, which I really like (RPH4).

Members felt that they were generally left to exercise their own initiative with much of their program content, and any major format changes were open for discussion with supervisory staff. New program ideas were always well received and given appropriate attention. On a day-to-day level, this contentment certainly made the station a very happy to place to be and most members expressed this. The trend towards workplace collectivism is common among community media organisations in Australia and can be a powerful attraction for volunteers (Barlow 1999, 93, Hochheimer 1993, Van Vuuren 2006a, 381, Downing et al. 2001, 71, Breines 1989, 46). The nature of work place collectivism encourages contributions from organisation members on matters of operational governance. Inclusion at the operational level is often sought, where possible, to maximise volunteer empowerment.

A similar sense of the social effort and belonging is apparent elsewhere, particularly at RTRFM in Perth. Being part of a community organisation was important for some of the RTRFM members but a common thread running through all the member interviews was the desire to be part of the specific RTRFM community. Volunteers at RTR commented:

The only real person who is above anyone else is the general manager [station manager] but in an operational sense, there is no feeling of that, he doesn't wield his authority or anything, so it feels very much like a collective effort (RTR6).

The station manager has regular open opportunities for vollies [volunteers] to discuss ideas or suggestions to take further ... He particularly is more approachable and more willing than his predecessor to listen to ideas about the place (RTR11).

We all have an equal stake in the station. We are all here because we love RTR and even if there are disagreements, there's usually the general understanding that that's what binds us, is that we want the best for the station (RTR6).

These citations relate to positive social cohesion, inclusion and access; the key policy implications mentioned by the report on *Loneliness in Australia* (Baker 2012, 24). Community radio at many levels provides the site for volunteers to connect to a station community as well as a listening community. The joy of social connection expressed by community radio volunteers is tangible in their words and their actions that maintain their volunteering. For listeners, community radio offers connection with the many offerings of ideas, music, culture, arts, language and current affairs, which they associate with. They may develop social connections via the station's outreaching characteristics. They may develop a positive sense of self through association with like-minded listeners.

This aspect of community radio's potential to foster social connection can be evidenced by the large amounts of community information broadcast via community service announcements, community event calendars and interviews. On average community radio stations broadcast community

They [the listeners] may develop social connections via the station's outreaching characteristics

information for fifty-two individuals and organisations per station per week – 1,726 hours per week nationally⁷. This commitment to supporting local organisations and events suggests a strong potential for facilitating ongoing connections between listeners and those bodies.

Ethnic Diversity

A post war immigration boom has seen 6.5 million people migrate to Australia. That's approximately 24 percent of the population who are new settlers to Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship Edition 2008). Some come to Australia as refugees, with poor English language skills and find they are struggling and alone in a foreign culture. Others may have language skills but don't know anyone and want to learn about their new culture. New arrivals in Australia can face social isolation which includes difficulty with finding housing, suitable work, and media in their own language or related to their culture. The associated loneliness with these challenges can be significant. Access to understandable information is vital for moving through these migration challenges and therefore also for positive mental health (Sawrikar and Hunt 2005).

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Unfortunately, researchers have demonstrated a continuing failure of the mainstream media in Australia to “inform, enlighten, question and imagine” audiences from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Forde, Foxwell, and Meadows 2009, 36, 65). Commercial media especially are not willing to sacrifice audience share and advertising dollars through the provision of programming for smaller and ethnically diverse markets (ibid). The role has fallen to public sector broadcaster SBS at a national level, but more pertinently community broadcasting at the local level. The grassroots and niche communities of established and emerging migrants are served by community stations, and also able to participate in the provision of their own broadcast radio media. Migrants are able to speak to their own communities, offering a voice to the voiceless, providing social connection and enhancing social cohesion in their newly adopted country.

Community radio is one of the few mediums that offer ethnic cultures news from home and a connection to their culture (Luckman 2004, 24). Australian ethnic broadcasters also provide an environment for the sustainability of ethnic languages and those intimate links to personal identity (Singh 2002). More specifically, radio broadcasts in ethnic languages can be about communicating with those in genuine need. A Centrelink study (cited by Forde, Foxwell, and Meadows 2009) which surveyed established and emerging ethnic communities, revealed that community or SBS radio broadcasts in their own language were the second most preferred way to access vital Centrelink information. These broadcasts are a source of community information and therefore facilitate community cohesion.

Research has shown an important link between strong cultural identity and positive mental health in adolescents in ethnic communities in Australia (Sawrikar and Hunt 2005). Refugees who have recently arrived in Australia often suffer from trauma and emotional disturbance arising from their earlier life or the rigours of relocation. Ethnic community radio stations play a vital role in maintaining community connections, developing local networks and offering culturally relevant music (Meadows et al. 2007a, 1) thereby reducing some of the mental health challenges new arrivals may face. Community development strategies which frame a positive future for young people in refugee communities are of vital importance. They promote positive mental health within supportive social environments and thus reduce trends towards depression, emotional disorder and isolation (Brough et al. 2003, 206).

⁷ Section 5 ‘Community information’ of the last Station Census at <https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/CBAA-Station-Census-Report-Dec-2013.pdf>

The National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council state that:

For new immigrants and refugees early access to ethnic community radio makes a profound difference to their settlement outcomes. It provides a sense of belonging and inclusion and empowers people by hearing their language on-air. Community radio provides a vital source of information and contact in rural and remote areas, particularly as immigration levels continue to grow (NEMBC 2015b).

Multilingual community broadcasting makes a substantial contribution to social cohesion, community engagement and regeneration by: [1] building active citizenship and increasing social inclusion. [2] Providing unique opportunities for self-representation in the public sphere, particularly for under- or mis-represented minority groups. [3] Creating a rare public space for dialogue that encourages mutual understanding, breaks down stereotypes and counters racism (NEMBC 2015b).

Community radio provides a vital source of information and contact in rural and remote areas

There are more than one hundred generalist Australian community radio stations in cities and towns broadcasting multilingual and multicultural programs. One example is Radio Fremantle, which serves the geographical area of Fremantle, in Western Australia. Radio Fremantle is a generalist community radio station catering to the niche communities of Fremantle. The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that 15.2% of the Fremantle population speaks a language other than English at home (ABS 2011). Those groups are under-represented and thus isolated by the mainstream media. Community radio is their natural home.

A large portion of the weekly programming at Radio Fremantle is allocated to those language and ethnic groups who broadcast from the station, primarily to their own small communities. Researchers have found that participants perceived the value of broadcasting at Radio Fremantle to be in “community development, social outcomes, and connection between the media and local communities” (Order 2013a, 224-5). The Radio Fremantle station case study by Order (2013a) revealed some long standing connections with the many ethnic groups from the community. Participants believed this was one of the primary strengths of the station.

I like the idea of a United Nations type station where all the different groups come in (RF8).

Our Sundays are completely ethnic or religious, Portuguese, Spanish, Persian, Italian, Greek, Serbian, Ethiopian, Afghan, Iranian, Macedonian, we got the Russians and the Croatian Roman Catholic church comes in on a Sunday night (RF7).

In some cases, the ethnic shows on the Radio Fremantle website were listened to by an equal number of people in their home country. Participants believed that community cohesion was enhanced by this global reach. Here is one example taken from a volunteer on Radio Fremantle’s Afghan community show:

We are achieving a lot. Culturally we work to present a lot of things back from home, from Afghanistan. When [the] Taliban were in power, it was a very hard time for Afghan people. My duty was to bring news from home. Fresh news is the important part of journalism and truth to bring to the people. We had a lot of interviews from Afghanistan and my shows became very famous [here and in Afghanistan] because it [the news] was happening on this show (RF6).

Ethnic communities benefit in other ways from ethnic community programming. For example, children growing up in Australia with ethnic parents will sometimes find their parent's culture at odds with, or different from, Australian culture. Youth may feel isolated by their ethnicity within Australian culture but also conversely isolated from their parent's culture by the need to integrate. These kinds of challenges face most migrant families new to Australia. This Radio Fremantle broadcaster decided to incorporate these challenges into his radio show. He aimed to use community radio to positively address social connection issues within his community.

In my show for example we have different shows; we have regular show for youth every two months. We are going to present Australia and Afghanistan where we compare two cultures. It's beneficial for them I think; they get a lot from that. We decided in the beginning that if we only did shows for those people speaking Persian, we are going to lose them, the second generation of our society, those speaking English. They like to have cultural stuff from the country in which they are living (RF6).

The importance of ethnic community broadcasting in Australia should not be understated as a valuable service to ameliorate social isolation and support community cohesion. This unique extensive network of locally produced programs provides a vital social support for Australia's diverse communities (NEMBC 2015a). Niche language broadcasters are able to address their own communities, enhancing social cohesion and reducing loneliness in their newly adopted country.

Societal Isolation

There is a wide range of societal groups where community broadcasting can significantly reduce isolation and loneliness

Community broadcasting also has the potential to help groups in society who may otherwise be isolated by their circumstances. There is a wide range of societal groups where community broadcasting can significantly reduce isolation and loneliness. For example, those serving custodial sentences can often feel isolated from their families. Community radio has been able to act as an intermediary, conveying messages, back and forth, over the airwaves. One Hobart broadcaster explains:

I contacted the prison authorities and asked them if any of the prisoners would like to send a cheerio to their loved ones outside, and I announced it on radio, and we had a lot of people from the outside who wanted to send cheerios to people inside the prison...I couldn't imagine the other radio stations doing that (Hobart participant cited by Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell 2002a, 40)

Local, independent and emerging artists and musicians are another group who can sometimes feel they practice in a lonely vacuum, not recognised by the mainstream. Local artists are unable to access commercial or public broadcasting services to gain some coverage of their work. This inadequate representation in the media is addressed by community radio. During Adelaide's Fringe Festival, for example, community station Radio Adelaide offers an hour of live radio for artists of all types to promote their work:

When a fringe artist registers, and there will be thousands of them that register...[it] essentially means no matter what art form you are attached to, there is an hour of radio and they can come in and reinvent radio as they think it should be (Adelaide Focus Group cited by Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell 2002a, 41).

This kind of coverage and airplay can be life-affirming for those artists. Similarly in Perth, at RTRFM they broadcast a regular Friday *Artbeat*⁸ show dedicated to arts from a local perspective. RTR's

⁸ <http://rtrfm.com.au/shows/artbeat/>

description of this show is as follows: “from the perspective of the artist, the curator, the viewer, the people that fund it and those who cannot live without it. We will look at art in all its forms from visual to performance and all those strange and wonderful things in between” (RTRFM 2015).

The producer of *Artbeat*, Peter Barr, cited numerous examples of where he felt the show was mitigating loneliness among the artistic community in Western Australia:

For some of the artists and musicians, getting their art heard, discussed or promoted is profoundly important, even life-changing in some cases. We have absolutely brought people out of their isolation by giving them a forum to show their work. One particular musician who was struggling with severe emotional and social disconnection wrote to us to express how his appearance on RTR had changed his life. It gave him confidence, new connections and new hope. Local and independent musicians especially, get immense pleasure, hope, connection and renewed confidence when they hear themselves on the radio. Community radio is the only place this happens (Barr 2015).

Some members of society may also find themselves isolated or alienated by their beliefs or opinions. For example: environmental groups, feminist groups or political groups. Community radio has historically catered for broadcasters and audience minorities who feel side-lined, disenfranchised or even repressed by the mainstream media (Downing 1984, 17, Downey and Fenton 2003, 187, Fraser 1992, 124, Van Vuuren 2006, 380, Atton 2002, Forde, Foxwell, and Meadows 2003, 316, Griffiths 1975b, ACMA and CBAA 2008a, Department 1974, 129, Bentley 1974, 14, Senate Standing Committee on Education 1973-5, Department 1985).

RTRFM in Perth is also an example of a community radio station that represents these community interest groups. They coined the on-air tag line of “The Sound Alternative”. *Alternative* has been described by some RTR staff as a sense of place at RTRFM where the disenfranchised, disconnected or marginalised can express their feelings on-air, or at least be represented in some way. RTRFM is described as almost like a hub or a meeting point for those heterogeneous groups, a way for some groups within society to connect with like-minded individuals inside the station and also outside in the community. Stakeholders at a station such as RTR feel they are not so alone. As RTR volunteers have commented:

It’s about the community interest groups, the community scenes in Perth. The broadcasting is almost secondary (RTR12).

We’re left, greeny, hippy, femmo, pinko, commo etc... Also a lot of the talents we get to talk are new to radio interviews, so it’s my job to help them express their ideas and not flog their show too much. It’s a community focus more than anything (RTR7)

I love the diversity of RTR. We still have *Drastic on Plastic* and *Burning Down the House* as women’s issues programs...there’s still *Difficult Listening* (Avant-garde music),...there’s a current affairs program during the week, *Morning Magazine*, *Bordak Bordak Nqalla* (Indigenous show), the *Indy Media* (Independent media) (RTR7).

That is the essence of community radio. We provide stuff for people who are already marginalised and without RTR wouldn’t be able to express their feelings on-air. A Perth without RTR would be a much less culturally rich place (RTR12).

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Isolation can also be an issue for those in the community with health challenges. Radio for the Print Handicapped is a special case of community radio whose work does much to reduce loneliness in the Print Handicapped community. “Imagine your life if you couldn’t read” (Innes 2014). This type of radio selects widely published newspapers and magazines and then station volunteers read them out loud, on-air, without alteration, endowing them with some life-giving expression. These broadcasts can be a social lifeline for those in the print handicap community.

For those with a print handicap, there is a strong sense of social isolation from ordinary community environments where people are able to discuss issues that have been aired in newspapers and magazines. The conversations over the office water cooler, the casual comments at the supermarket, or with friends at a barbecue, are all examples where we take it for granted that social dialogue on news and events occurs. The in-depth commentaries and detailed editorial content of newspapers, magazines and books would normally be unavailable to the print-handicapped audience (Order 2013a, 289). This print-handicapped listener explains:

It’s been absolutely right from the beginning [6RPH] because for the first time ever, as a working person, I can also go to work and something like at morning tea time when everyone’s sitting around and saying “oh did you see in today’s ‘West Australian’ where such and such happened” ... For the first time, well for the last ten years, I can actually join in ... So I’m not alienated within the workplace by acting like the blind bunny who doesn’t know what’s going on in the world (Audience member cited by Meadows et al. 2006, 3).

The print-handicapped audience is wider than normally perceived (Order 2013a, 287-289). Isolation and loneliness can affect the vision impaired, the literacy impaired and the hospitalised. Vision impairment could range from partially to completely blind, but also include people whose disabilities precluded them from physically holding a newspaper. This includes print handicap conditions such as cerebral palsy, other shaking conditions and also arthritis.

Literacy impairment includes all levels of reading challenges in the wider Australian community. Literacy impairment is a sub-group of print disability and is dealt with in some detail on the RPH national website,⁹ RPH Australia places the RPH audience as 22% of the overall population, and shows that 14.1% of the population had a literacy skill level under which they would “experience considerable difficulty in reading the newspaper daily and therefore have a print disability”. This group also includes migrants to Australia who might understand spoken English but not written English.

A community radio study at 6RPH in Perth revealed that volunteers believed the station benefited hospitalised people whose condition made it difficult to read. This included people convalescing at home or in care. It was additionally suggested that hard copy newspapers and written publications were more important to the older generation and reading them out on-air was particularly valuable to people whose traditional news-life had been dominated by printed material. The RPH service combines the immediacy of a daily newspaper and the reach of radio broadcasting: that day’s paper, that day. It reduces the information time gap and social isolation from up- to-date print/visual media that tends to dominate print-handicapped people’s news-life (Order 2013a, 284, 287).

In summary community radio is able reduce the societal isolation experienced by certain niche groups in our community.

⁹ <http://www.rph.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Ipsos-RPH-Secondary-Research-May-2014.pdf> (pp.14-15)

Conclusion

“Loneliness is a persistent social issue in Australia” (Baker 2012, 28). This issue is characterised by ‘social isolation’ and ‘low community connection’ and experienced by known societal groups. This includes ethnic minorities or migrants to Australia whose lack of connection to culture, custom or simply

community information can be detrimental to health and wellbeing. Loneliness also encompasses those isolated by circumstance such as those in prison, those experiencing a mobility issue or illness, with beliefs, political views or artistic interests outside the mainstream; and then there are those who feel sidelined, disenfranchised or even repressed by mainstream culture.

The vital importance of community broadcasting in Australia should not be under-valued as a medium to ameliorate social isolation and support community cohesion. The joy of social connection articulated by community radio volunteers and listeners is palpable in research studies. For listeners and volunteers alike, community radio allows association with ideas, music, culture, arts, language, current affairs, ethnicity, sexuality and even a sense of ‘family’, which are not available via mainstream culture. Participants experience enhanced social connectivity and increased social capital via community radio’s outreaching and collective characteristics. They also

develop a positive sense of self through association with the like-minded. The extensive Australian community radio network provides a vital and vibrant social support mechanism for all stakeholders in our diverse communities.

Participants experience enhanced social connectivity and increased social capital via community radio’s outreaching and collective characteristics

Participation in community radio could be described as the perfect antidote to loneliness or in other words, a way to foster the joy of social connection

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Table 6. Personal benefits of volunteering.

Station	9CRX	%	2TEN	%	4RRR	%	Total	%
Total (n)	32		25		17		74	
Involved with the local community	19	59.4	23	92	11	64.7	53	71.6
Gained self-confidence	20	62.5	20	80	9	52.9	49	66.2
Being active	18	56.3	12	48	9	52.9	39	52.7
Doing something worthwhile	23	71.9	21	84	11	64.7	55	74.3
Gained work experience	13	40.6	15	60	7	41.2	35	47.3
Provided me with a sense of direction	8	25.0	8	32	4	23.5	20	27.0
Improved people skills	18	56.3	16	64	6	35.3	40	54.1
Personal satisfaction	26	81.3	23	92	10	58.8	59	79.7
Pursue religious beliefs	2	6.3	1	4	-	0.0	3	4.1

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CBAA Conference, 25 November 2000

Learned new skills	21	65.6	18	72	11	64.7	50	67.6
I am helping others	20	62.5	13	52	9	52.9	42	56.8
I am using my skills	23	71.9	16	64	9	52.9	48	64.9
Social contact	13	40.6	16	64	11	64.7	40	54.1

(Van Vuuren 2001, 15)