Quality/Control:
A labelling system for community media


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1. Introduction

In the 1960s and 70s groups of people around Australia campaigned for access to the radio spectrum. The establishment of community radio was not just about making media; it was a rights campaign that introduced an alternative vision of how the media should be used and controlled. The groups had little in common with each other and their business models were sketchy. However, they managed to convince the government that community radio would benefit society and enhance media diversity.

The internet has brought with it a new set of rights issues. Whilst the corporate media now encourage participation, social networking is not the same as community media. Mostly, it is content that commercial media companies can hook ads onto, or a means to drill into our lifestyle choices and consumption habits for the purposes of market research. Some companies are restricting the way that we access the internet, what sites we can visit and our ability to create viable alternatives.

Just like the early days of community radio, there are many grassroots media organisations that are working to achieve democratic and ethical alternatives. Such groups are campaigning for access to the internet, developing open technologies and providing training. They are essentially ‘community media’ organisations – the online counterparts to community radio and television broadcasters.

Late last year, Open Spectrum Australia (a kind of ‘think tank’ for community media) decided to bring together community media groups from both platforms to discuss the issue of media convergence. In order to provide a focus for the day, we came up with a communication rights ‘campaign’ of our own and asked for feedback.

We proposed a labelling scheme for community-based media. The label would be used by online, broadcast and print media groups, assisting audiences and producers to differentiate a community media outlet from public service or private media. Why a label? We wanted to increase the visibility of community media, raise public awareness around information rights and provide an easy navigation system for audiences in the new media environment. We hoped it would unite broadcast and online community media and encourage groups to utilise each other’s talents, skills and technologies.

Around 70 people attended the day, including representatives from NEMBC, ACMA, Melbourne’s community radio sector (PBS, RRR, SYN, 3CR), C31, Indigenous community television (ICTV), GetUp, Engage Media, apc.au, the Creative Commons Clinic, as well as experts from the ABC and the academic community. The proposal sparked an interesting debate about the future of community-based media, the convergent media landscape and the status of information rights.

2. What We Proposed

Labelling community media is somewhat counter-intuitive. After all, community media is a diverse field and independent by definition. At the same time, community media is part of a broader movement for communication rights which is reliant on raising public awareness.

A label, like a brand, is a clear and recognisable image with a meaning attached to it. In this case, the label would signify community media organisations. There would need to be minimum criteria that would apply
to all who used the label (for instance, groups would need to be community owned and not-for-profit). Organisations would choose to use the label, rather than being ‘licensed’ to do so. The label could be used by community media organisations around the world.

Audiences and producers would look for, or search, the label in order to identify ‘friendly’ sites and stations – in the same way that we might look out for the organic food label when shopping for groceries. Essentially, we saw the label as an enabler of ethical choice in the complex media environment.

The rationale behind the label is as follows:

- **Because old walls are breaking down**
  How do we distinguish between commercial and non-commercial media? Not so long ago, community media was the most obvious means for non-professionals to participate in media production. Now that the internet has become a vehicle for media participation, anyone can easily create or recreate information and creative works. In direct contrast to the traditional media, these sites are not easily identifiable as ‘community’ or ‘commercial’. We are witnessing a convergence across different sectors of the media, where commercial, community and public service media are entering into each others’ territory.

  Essential difference still remain. Community media outlets are focused on social needs, training, not-for-profit business models and community governance. We wanted to develop a system that makes it explicit what type of media we are dealing with online and in a multichannel radio and television environment.

- **The need for navigation tools**
  Web labelling and rating systems are appearing in response to the vast amount of information on the web. Search engines assist us to chase specific topics, but they do not tell us what kinds of sites we are visiting, or what interests they serve. Moreover, there is controversy around how search engines such as Google select and rank information (Battelle 2005). A symbol that can assist us to search for non-profit media distribution sites, via a clearly defined terms, helps overcome some of these issues. The label was therefore a means to create better visibility for not-for-profit media.

- **Brands are web currency**
  We navigate the web through symbols and brand recognition. A brand conveys information and helps us to make choices. These qualitative markers are the currency of the post-industrial knowledge economy, aiding in the circulation of ideas and products. As Adam Arvidsson writes, the brand is the ‘manifestation of the value-logic of informational capitalism’. Brands denote something that is essentially multi-dimensional, adding a more complex form of value (Lury 2004). The value might be something which is ‘ethical’ or altruistic, as opposed to typical consumer products. Of course, brands can be used to obscure issues and information as well as clarify and audiences can distort a brand’s original message. Developing a brand for community media would be a difficult task due to the diverse nature of the field. However, a label that stands for particular information rights could be achievable (something like Fair Trade coffee labelling).

- **Ethical decision-making**
  The label idea is therefore much more than simply a branding exercise. We wanted to develop a visual system that enables ethical choice in support of information and communication rights. Such systems already exist to some extent. Ethicists have pointed out that there are two types of decision-making: decisions that are made in a moment without thinking too hard, and ones that come as ‘second thoughts’, where we review our decision based on how we want to live in the world (Hamilton 2008). Ethical decision-making is the second kind of decision. To make ethical choice easier and widespread, we need something to identify ‘friendly’ sites.
• **Communication rights, not ‘trustworthy’ media**

As it turned out, our idea for a labelling scheme was not entirely new. Others have proposed labels for ‘trustworthy’ established news media, that tell us whether or not a website is spreading misinformation. Tim Berners Lee, one of the founders of the World Wide Web, believes that we need a ratings system and has been promoting it through his new foundation¹. The problem with such ratings schemes is that they assume the traditional mainstream media behave according to straightforward, unquestionable ethical principles (which is simply not the case). Moreover, a ratings system for ‘trustworthy’ news sites is likely to marginalise community media rather than strengthen it. Community media promotes access and independence over traditional reporting conventions.

The Open Spectrum proposal is not about ‘truth’ but about the principles of access, community governance, representing minority voices and open technologies. It was proposed as a means to assist audiences to make their own judgements and to differentiate between commercial, government and community media sites. The label was not intended to privilege some forms of content over others or to mark-out ‘trustworthy’ or ‘objective’ media content.

### 3. The Outcomes

In the past, community media groups have focused their energies on empowering people to be become producers of the media. Today’s communication landscape is more complex. We thought that a label might shift the focus to media use and consumption – raising awareness of distribution outlets that are working to keep communication free, accessible and equitable.

It became clear at the symposium that such a label would only apply to distribution sites (community media outlets, whether they be websites, radio and television stations, or print publications) rather than content (as in the audio, video or text media). Content should be free to move across different media outlets. We didn’t want to create something that restricted the flow of information or creative works².

The symposium also revealed some significant tensions between online and broadcast community media. The new media groups were concerned that the labelling scheme would inflict a licensing model on a sphere which is otherwise creatively amorphous and open. They suggested that the labelling scheme would be interpreted as a means for ‘old media’ to protect their interests in a new media environment. However, the new media groups did see value in a communication rights campaign. Engage Media (Anna Helme) and Creative Commons (Elliott Bledsoe) suggested that for such a label to work, it would need to be via a peer-review system. All organisations using the label could add themselves to an online register and peers would informally monitor who was using the label to ensure against misuse.

**Where to from here?**

Representatives from both groups also asserted that organisations already have their own brands and networks to define themselves as community media. Applying a uniform label might mask the character of individual stations/organisations. The symposium did, however, uncover a set of shared values, including: media diversity, participation, access, independence, a local perspective and the importance of not-for-profit organisations. Everyone agreed that there were benefits to promoting community media values and developing a public education movement.

The Open Spectrum symposium raised more questions than it answered. Some were of a practical nature, involving how the label might work: What type of review/moderation system is appropriate? How do we
ensure that the label retains integrity, without infringing on the diversity of the community media sphere? What technical tools (such as a database) are required? Should it be a tiered system, allowing organisations to select different versions of the label so that it adequately represents their particular make-up? We need to do a lot more work before such a system could be put to use. Open Spectrum Australia plans to develop a web space to continue this discussion. We will only pursue the label idea if there is support from community media groups.

We also identified other important issues: First, it is not clear that there is any public awareness about why community media institutions exist and how they protect our information rights. The community media sector, in Australia at least, does not behave like a ‘movement’. Although radio, television, print and online groups may share similar aspirations and philosophies, the sectors do not work together to carry out joint education or advocacy on information rights issues. For a sector that spends much time and energy keeping communities in touch with issues that directly affect them, it is strange that so little attention is focused on how we use and encounter the media.

Whether or not we end up with a label for community media, these are important issues that the community media sector must now face up to. Open Spectrum Australia intends to keep the debate going. We are currently looking at how we can encourage media education on communication rights in Australia.

4. References

Arvidsson, A. & Peitersen, N. (2008), The Ethical Economy (Online version), Chapter 1: http://www.ethicaleconomy.com/


5. About Open Spectrum Australia

Open Spectrum Australia (formally known as the Community Spectrum Taskforce) generates research and debate on issues related to grassroots and community media. Our written reports and public forums draw on a large network of academic and industry expertise. Open Spectrum Australia aims to raise public awareness and influence policy in the areas of information rights, media access and digital literacy.

Open Spectrum Australia’s priority areas:

- Maintaining an equitable and accessible digital media environment;
- Understanding how media convergence is impacting on grassroots media and its diverse communities;
- Raising awareness of the role of the ‘third sector’ of the media generally;
- Ensuring that community media initiatives are accommodated in communications policy (including, but not restricted to, digital broadcasting);
- Uniting digital, broadcast and print media communities around common concerns;
- Designing workable third sector solutions in a rapidly changing media landscape.
The Open Spectrum Australia network includes the following people and organisations:

- Ellie Rennie (Chair), Research Fellow, Swinburne University of Technology
- Leo Berkeley, Programs Director (Media and Journalism), RMIT School of Applied Communication
- Greg Dec, Station Manager, C31
- Peter Lane
- Andrew Garton, Secretary, Association for Progressive Communications, Director, apc.au
- Grant McHerron, Director, apc.au
- Peter Bain-Hogg, Director of Development, Renegade Films
- Kim Montgomery, Content Development Manager, ACMI
- Bryce Ives, Heywire, ABC
- Karen Woulfe, Treasurer, RMITV
- Engage Media
- SYN Media
- State Library of Victoria
1 The Journalism Iconoclast has proposed an ‘online ethics seal’ modelled on Creative Commons that addresses five areas of concern with the reliability and trustworthiness of information on blogs and web sites: sourcing, opinion vs. objectivity, fact checking, conflicts of interest and linking: http://patthorntonfiles.com/blog/2008/10/07/the-online-ethics-seal-together-we-can-be-more-transparent/

Cyberjournalist.net and the Blog Honor Badge site present a proposal for a similar system but with less focus on journalistic ethics and more on transparency about commercial influences on a website:
http://www.blogkits.com/bloghonor/
http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/000215.php

Tim Burners Lee, one of the founders of the world wide web, wants to develop a web ratings system to help people find trustworthy news sources:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/7613201.stm

2 A labelling system already exists for content: the Creative Commons (CC) licence. CC allows content-makers to specify the terms and conditions upon which that content is repurposed and distributed (Appendix 1). The Open Spectrum label complements, rather than replicates, the CC system by identifying open, non-commercial distribution outlets.