

# **Parish-Pump Parochialism, Media Diversity, and the Contribution of Community Media to Democracy.**

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## **Abstract**

The Australian government has recently introduced changes to media legislation intended to encourage the transition to digital media services. Critics of the new legislation have argued that the new rules will open the door to increased foreign ownership, as well as reduce the number of media proprietors. The debates have tended to confine their focus to the ‘big’ players, while ignoring the impact of the ever-expanding independent and community media sector. In Australia ‘community’ media tends to refer to the non-profit broadcasting sector, but there is also a large community information and communication technology sector, as well as an astonishing growth in local independent community newspapers. This paper examines these three sectors and assesses their contribution to advancing media democracy.

## **Introduction**

[W]e revel in our parish-pump parochialism. It is something local communities will never find in bigger regional newspapers. Surveys show that the ‘local rag’ is highly valued by those communities that are still fortunate enough to retain their own newspaper: It is part of their community psyche, their lifestyle—just like their neighbourhood and their businesses. (Creighton 2006)

So says Wendy Creighton, the editor of *The Fassifern Guardian*, a weekly independent newspaper established in 1901, serving the Shire of Boonah (population 8500 in 2003), about 75 kilometres south west of Brisbane. The editorial from which Creighton’s quote was taken was published in response to the Australian Government’s planned introduction of new cross-media

ownership rules. The new rules are intended to ensure that Australia won't be left behind in a digital world (Coonan 2006). They have since been introduced, but not without attracting considerable criticism.<sup>1</sup> The new rules make it possible for broadcast media to purchase newspapers, which had until then been prohibited; and they also open the door to increased foreign ownership. Many critics suggest there is no public benefit to be gained from the new rules, and they effectively allow for further consolidation of media ownership in an already concentrated market (Dwyer *et al.* 2006).

Regional centres are considered especially vulnerable to the impacts of the new media legislation. For example, prior to the introduction of the new rules, the city of Toowoomba (about 100 km west of Brisbane) had eight media proprietors; it is now possible for that number to be reduced to four. Reduction in the number of media owners can result in reduced diversity of opinion. More fundamentally, however, the new rules encourage further syndication of news and information services, with the result that a city the size of Toowoomba, with more than 100 000 residents, could end up without a local news service.

During a trip to Toowoomba, Antony Funnell, the presenter of ABC Radio National's *Media Report*, observed that none of the city's different radio stations broadcast a single news or sports story about Toowoomba and the surrounding region (*Media Report*, 5 October 2006), and this was prior to the introduction of the new rules. According to Dianne Jones, a journalism lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland, one of Toowoomba's three commercial television stations offers a daily half-hour news bulletin, except on weekends; and one of three commercial radio station in Toowoomba, has a local news bulletin, but it is produced and presented at an affiliated

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<sup>1</sup> [Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/cross_media/submissions/sublist.htm)  
[http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita\\_ctte/cross\\_media/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/cross_media/submissions/sublist.htm)

station on the Gold Coast, about two hours away, and the station has no journalists in Toowoomba to gather news. Toowoomba also has a local daily newspaper, the *Toowoomba Chronicle*, which has a monopoly in the market (*Media Report*, 5 October 2006; Jones & Feldman 2006: 45). So, in effect, there are two news rooms in Toowoomba, and either of these could close with the possibility of further media mergers. The Toowoomba example is not unique. Eighty percent of Australian regional daily newspapers are owned by four companies: News Corporation, John Fairfax Holdings, Rural Press and APN News and Media; almost 90 percent of non-metropolitan commercial television stations are owned by three companies: Prime Television, WIN, and Southern Cross Broadcasting; and 61 percent of all commercial regional radio licences are owned by three companies: Macquarie Regional Radioworks, Broadcast Operations, and Grant Broadcasters (Dwyer *et al* 2006: 6).

It has long been accepted that diversity of ownership is crucial to democracy, because it provides opportunities to hear more than one side to a story, to hold political leaders accountable, and to curtail the influence of large corporations (Wilson 2006: 90). The argument further assumes that where there are fewer independent sources, there is less opportunity for the disclosure of controversial issues, or critical scrutiny of authorities (Tiffen 2006: 111-112). More fundamentally, however, there is increasing recognition that a community needs to be represented by local media, 'because without it you don't have a community' (Wilson 2006: 94). The ever-increasing consolidation of the mainstream media thus provides a strong case in favour of support for community media.

A neat concise definition of community media is difficult to pin down (see the website of AMARC, the World Association of Community Broadcasters<sup>2</sup>), in summary, however, community media can be understood as:

- a celebration of local culture in response to globalisation;
- a diverse outlet for the freedom of political and cultural expression in response to the domination of state and commercial monopolies; and
- a site of empowerment and democratic invigoration with media ownership and control being in the hands of grassroots citizens' associations.

I will now consider what community media are available to Australians, and their contribution to the advancing media democracy.

### **Alternatives: Community Broadcasting**

Australia's community broadcasting sector is now well established. The sector was first licensed in the mid 1970s, and today there are nearly 360 licensed community radio stations.<sup>3</sup> There are also about half a dozen community television stations, located mainly in the State capital cities. Community broadcasting is licensed under the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, with licences granted to not-for-profit companies and organisations that represent community interests and that have processes in place to ensure that the community can participate in management and operations. The sector is regulated by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, and premised on the concept of self-regulation, which means it is complaint-driven (that is, a person who is dissatisfied with a broadcaster must first take their complaint to the broadcaster). Self-

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<sup>2</sup> [http://wiki.amarc.org/index2.php?topic=What\\_is\\_community\\_radio&lang=EN&style=amarc&site=amarc](http://wiki.amarc.org/index2.php?topic=What_is_community_radio&lang=EN&style=amarc&site=amarc)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/\\_assets/main/lib100052/lic031\\_community\\_radio\\_broadcasting\\_licences.pdf](http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib100052/lic031_community_radio_broadcasting_licences.pdf).

regulation requires the sector to develop and monitor Codes of Practice, which are registered with the Authority. The Codes rest on a set of guiding principles that encourages community radio and television stations to:

- promote harmony and diversity in contributing to a cohesive, inclusive and culturally diverse Australian community;
- pursue the principles of democracy, access and equity, especially to people and issues under-represented in other media;
- enhance the diversity of programming choices available to the public and present programs which expand the variety of viewpoints broadcast in Australia;
- demonstrate independence in their programming as well as in their editorial and management decisions;
- support and develop local and Australian arts, music and culture in the station's programming, to reflect a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity; and
- widen the community's involvement in broadcasting (CBAA 2006).

More than 60 per cent of community radio stations are located in rural and regional areas, where about 2.5 million people (46 % of people aged over 15) listen to community radio each month, and 339 000 listen exclusively to community radio.<sup>4</sup> For rural and regional listeners, the most commonly cited reasons for listening to community radio include: local news and local information; for local voices and local personalities; and because local people can air their views and local stations provide easy local access. The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia claims: 'with the increasing networking and syndication of national and commercial

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<sup>4</sup> The data presented here are available from [www.cbonline.org.au/media/stats/2005/PRR\\_CBD\\_03-4.pdf](http://www.cbonline.org.au/media/stats/2005/PRR_CBD_03-4.pdf).

radio, the value rural and regional Australians place on the localism of community radio is not surprising' (ibid).

Nearly all stations broadcast 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Music content makes up 70 percent of programming; 30 percent of content is talks based, including news bulletins (5%) and current affairs programs (6%). However, one fifth of community broadcasters offer no local news, one fifth produce their own news, and the remainder rely on networked services, including news bulletins purchased from commercial news services (Forde *et al* 2002: 83). Many stations have an online presence with websites that provide information about the history and structure of the station. Most of the sites include lists of business and corporate supporters and sponsors. Some have the means to stream their programs. Some provide information about local events, but few use their sites as an alternative means to disseminate news and community information.

The Australian community broadcasting sector plays a very important role in media training for the broadcasting industry more generally. About 86 percent of stations offer organised or formal broadcasting training, and many stations have training agreements with universities. During 2003-04, more than 7 800 people were trained at a community radio station.

Despite these impressive results, a major issue of concern is income. The sector operates on a shoestring budget. During 2003-04, total income for the sector was around AU\$50.8 million. Average station income was AU\$190 149. However, some stations operate on less than AU\$1 500 gross per annum, while others, in metropolitan areas, turn over more than AU\$1 million per year.

Sponsorship—a limited form of advertising—was the largest source of income and accounted for more than a third of the total income for the sector. Community radio stations are increasingly forced

to rely on sponsorship, as alternative sources of funding continue to dry up. This encourages many stations to adopt commercial approaches, formats and content, in order to attract larger audiences. Such an approach does not mean a compromise with respect to ‘alternative’ and diverse content, especially where this concerns music and entertainment, but it does appear to put a gag on alternative *political* content. A number of studies have reported instances where community broadcasters are discouraged from making comments about local controversial issues (see van Vuuren 2001; 2006a). What this suggests is that diversity in ownership, including community ownership, contributes to media democracy in terms of *cultural* democracy, that is, it provides an avenue for the expression of different and minority tastes; but it does not guarantee diversity of political opinion.

### **Alternatives: Community Information and Communication Technology**

Another area of growth in Australian community media is the community Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) sector, for example, internet access centres and telecentres (see van Vuuren 2006 for a fuller discussion). They were established as early as 1990, and many have received federal and state government support since 1991. The number of community ICTs in Australia is difficult to determine. Access to the internet and setting up your own website is not regulated, as compared to community broadcasting where access is subject to licensing. There are many examples of websites that were set up for specific local community use and that are sustained by local community support in the form of donations, volunteer labour, or with local advertising, but that are not required to be not-for-profit. However, those attracting government support are not-for-profit, owned and operated by local communities, and have as their objectives community development, access to communication and information technology, and training. A federal government program called Networking the Nation (NTN) encouraged the establishment

of hundreds more community ICTs, especially in rural and regional centres. Because these have received government support, they are also listed in publicly available databases and we therefore have some idea about the size of the sector. About 600 community ICTs operated during the 1990s, and most offer basic computer training, digital photography, email and internet access, and web page design.

The NTN project has been described as the most ambitious communications infrastructure program ever attempted in Australia. It aimed to ‘enhance telecommunications infrastructure and services; increase access to, and promote use of, services available through telecommunications networks; and reduce disparities in access to such services and facilities’. Nearly AU\$500 million was distributed to more than 750 projects around Australia. It provided three-year ‘seeding grants’ to a range of community initiatives with the intention to kick-start private sector services, which were to become ‘self-sustaining’ and not require ongoing federal government assistance. Not-for-profit community organisations were encouraged to identify their own telecommunications needs in preference to ‘top-down’ approaches, and they were encouraged to form partnerships with business and local and state governments, with Australia’s three levels of government (federal, state and local) considered key drivers in the adoption of regional telecommunications infrastructure, as they increasingly deliver their services online.

The NTN fund supported a broad range of activities and projects, including more than 70 projects that targeted Indigenous communities; the installation of more than 260 mobile phone facilities; the provision of public Internet access in more than 2000 locations; the establishment of Points of Presence and/or Internet Service Providers to provide inexpensive internet access; nearly 300 projects that offered computer training and Internet skills, training almost 950 000 people; the

establishment of 165 websites and portals mainly for community services, educational and business users; and the installation of videoconferencing in nearly 700 locations for use in health care and education. The NTN program created about 980 full time jobs, 1 465 part time jobs, and involved more than 18 000 volunteers. Nearly 7 400 organisations contributed time, funds, management expertise and administration support. The program also attracted an estimated AU\$197 million in funding and support from other sources.

One point that needs to be stressed here, is that the vast majority of community ICT projects functioned as ‘telecommunications’, rather than as ‘media’ organisations, but this changed with the closure of the NTN program, which presented the community ICT sector with its first major crisis. In 2004 around 25 per cent of community ICTs had closed their doors. Difficulties in covering operating costs from a limited revenue base, as well as decreased demand due to increased IT literacy among regional populations, accounted for NTN-funded community ICTs showing the highest rate of reduced and discontinued services. Another problem with community ICTs, was that they effectively operated as de facto arms of government. Many were nurtured and encouraged by government from their inception, and provided a cost-effective way to deliver government services to disadvantaged communities. Dependence on government funding and the emphasis on training meant that their democratic contribution was limited to encouraging access to online services by disadvantaged groups; and they refrained from being overly critical of government policies and thus did not present an opportunity for contributing to political debate.

Withdrawal of the program meant community ICTs needed to look elsewhere for recurrent funding. Some sought to commercialise their projects, but found that they would then alienate the very groups they intended to assist in the first place: women, the unemployed, and the

disadvantaged. Some have also looked at producing marketable online content, for example, tourism information, local news, and as an avenue for local advertising. One ICT established a narrowcasting radio station as an auxiliary project to assist with income generation. The search for income thus facilitates a convergence between telecommunication and media. However, much of the content of community ICTs functions as a community showcase, or notice board, and provides a similar function to what is offered by community radio, minus the music.

Both community broadcasting and community ICTs have attracted a great deal of government attention. The first as a result of its struggle to achieve legislative legitimation and to leverage some government support; the second as a government driven-program designed to ensure that Australians would not be left behind on the Information Superhighway. We therefore have data and a substantial, though incomplete, body of knowledge about these sectors. Meanwhile, an almost invisible transformation has also occurred among the community press. Invisible that is, to national policy makers and the academic community (except for one study by Martin & Ellis 2003).

### **Alternatives: The Local Rag**

Some will rot in the rose bushes, some will go straight to the recycle bin, but research shows that most will be devoured by householders keen for local news and in particular advertising that is relevant to them. (MacLean 2005)

[M]ore than ever today there is a place for the local community newspaper. With regional, State, national and international news and comment available through daily newspapers, radio, television and the internet, local newspapers are emerging as the sole dwindling chronicles of the local news. (Creighton 2006).

While there are a number of useful sources that provide extensive and comprehensive lists of the mainstream media, for example Margaret Gee's Media Guide. There is no comprehensive list of local independent weekly and monthly community news papers. Because they are not easily identified, there exists an assumption that the local independent press is 'dwindling' and facing extinction. However, during 2006, I conducted a small research project, funded by the University of Queensland that suggests the opposite.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of the project was to find out what local communities were saying about the water crisis currently being experienced in South East Queensland (population 2.3. million). This first required a census of the local independent newspapers that actually existed in the region. The absence of any comprehensive list required a number of approaches to help identify these publications, including a search in the local telephone directory, as well as online, by contacting the local government libraries run by the 19 different local governments that are in the region, and by driving to the many small towns to collect them. The online search found 'pdf' files of the printed newspaper, as distinct from online news services, which are updated daily and based on hypertext. The online search also revealed that a handful of well-known local newspapers had shifted to an online format and were no longer available in print. Nearly 50 local independent weekly, fortnightly, and monthly newspapers were identified using this approach, and I suspect there are more in the region. The search also found 'specialist' newspapers targeted at specific ethnic communities, the gay community, and seniors, but these are not considered here. Descriptions of the newspapers that are included in a larger of their content are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to research assistants Karen Hasin Bromley and Stephen Crofts.

**Table 1**

<b>Monthly publications</b>	<b>Circulation</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Full Colour</b>	<b>Number of pages</b>	<b>% Advertising (pp.)</b>
<i>Cooroora Connect</i>	na	quarterfold		28	37
<i>Cooroy Rag</i>	5 500	tabloid	yes	36	60
<i>Dayboro Grapevine</i>	na	quarterfold		40	39
<i>Hinterland Voice</i>	10 000	tabloid		20	26
<i>Mountain News</i>	400	quarterfold		8	13
<i>Montville Times</i>	10 000	other		24	39
<i>Straddie Island News</i>	na	quarterfold		32	34
<i>The Canungra Times</i>	1 500	quarterfold		32	52
<i>The Local News</i>	na	quarterfold	yes	24	68
<i>The Western Echo</i>	15 700	quarterfold	yes	40	60

**Table 2**

<b>Fortnightly Publications</b>	<b>Circulation</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Full Colour</b>	<b>Number of pages</b>	<b>% Advertising (pp.)</b>
<i>Caloundra City News</i>	30 000	tabloid	yes	20	67
<i>Mango Hill News</i>	na	quarterfold	yes	24	51
<i>Tamborine Mountain News</i>	na	quarterfold	yes	32	51
<i>The Mary Valley Voice</i>	2 600	quarterfold	yes	28-32	41
<i>The Village Pump</i>	na	quarterfold	yes	40	71
<i>The Westerner</i>	11 800	quarterfold	yes	40-48	60

The surprising number of publications suggests that the local independent press is anything but dwindling. Although two publications have been operating for more than 100 years (*The Fassifern Guardian* est. 1901, and the *Crow's Nest Advertiser* est. 1905), most of the other titles have been operating for 20 years or less. This confirms one view that community newspapers are increasing in importance (MacLean 2005). I suspect this is related to the massive population growth that is taking place in south east Queensland, with between 1 000 and 1 500 people migrating into the region every week. New suburbs are being built on the outskirts of Brisbane and Ipswich, and the coastal cities and rural towns are attracting 'sea-changers' and 'tree-changers' referring to those people seeking less expensive life-styles while moving into semi-retirement or retirement. Population growth and the development of new suburbs suggest there is a demand for media that promotes matters of local importance, such as the location of the nearest

plumber, or the nearest tennis club. A local newspaper is easier to establish than a website, or a radio station. You don't need a license and you can ensure all householders receive a copy by distributing it in their letterboxes. A number of the newspapers collected for this study are produced by amateurs, that is, people without media or journalism training, who felt that their community needed its own news sheet. Most, however, are produced by individuals who run them as small businesses.

**Table 3.**

<b>Weekly Publications</b>	<b>Circulation</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Colour</b>	<b>Number of pages</b>	<b>% Advertising (pp.)</b>
<i>Bayside and Northern Suburbs Star</i>	35 395	tabloid	yes	36-44	72
<i>Beaudesert Times</i>	4 500	tabloid	yes	32-40	54
<i>Buderim Chronicle</i>	16 800	tabloid	yes	24-28	60
<i>Coolum &amp; Northshore Advertiser</i>	na	tabloid	yes	36-48	79
<i>Crows Nest Advertiser</i>	1 300	tabloid		12	46
<i>Glasshouse Country News</i>	7 500	quarterfold		36	54
<i>Highfields Herald</i>	2 150	tabloid		12	51
<i>Island &amp; Mainland News</i>	10 500	tabloid	yes	56	80
<i>Jimboomba Times</i>	1 600	quarterfold	yes	96-120	67
<i>Kilcoy Sentinel</i>	1 500	tabloid	yes	16-20	48
<i>Redcliffe City News</i>	na	quarterfold	yes	6-12	32
<i>Tamborine Times</i>	4 600	quarterfold		40-52	74
<i>The Brisbane Valley-Kilcoy Sun</i>	2 270	quarterfold		20-24	46
<i>The Fassifern Guardian</i>	2 580	tabloid	yes	20-24	42
<i>Moreton Border News</i>	4 100	quarterfold		20	50
<i>The Range News</i>	10 265	tabloid	yes	28-36	54

The potential impact of 'big' media upon these kinds of newspapers has largely slipped under the radar of policy makers and media researchers. During the course of this project, one very successful local independent newspaper operating in the city of Ipswich, west of Brisbane, was sold to Quest Newspapers, owned by News Ltd, which publishes weekly suburban newspapers throughout Brisbane. After the change of ownership the paper's editorial content improved

noticeably. In contrast, broadcasting legislation protects community radio stations from similar take-overs by commercial radio services. Furthermore, the withdrawal of local commercial radio stations from more remote regions has resulted in an increasing number of community radio stations providing a first level of service to local communities. This research suggests that in less remote communities, the local community press is performing a similar function.

So what are the functions of the local independent press? According to Creighton of *The Fassifern Guardian*, the local press is 'irreplaceable':

Their news and feature pages become local chronicles of record as they report the news and background to the news. They regularly give lavish coverage to the promotion of community events in a way that a major daily newspaper can never do. They help to raise and enhance the profiles of local schools, churches sporting groups, service clubs, and other organisations and businesses. They provide a forum for local public opinion and protest, and they entertain and inform in a strictly parochial way, providing information on parish pump matters that are never within the purview of the mainstream dailies. And they do their best to fulfil their public watchdog roles in monitoring the activities of the three tiers of government as they affect local residents. Local newspapers also generate employment and help their local economies, not simply through their newspaper production, but through other services such as photography, job printing, pamphlets and books. And their success is usually reflected in the growth and success of other local businesses. In turn these businesses boost the prosperity of their communities and often become active in supporting community events.

(Creighton 2006.)

Overseas research, however, suggests Creighton's claims are somewhat overstated. Franklin and Murphy (1998) point out that advertising is the most important function of the community press, while daily newspapers were more likely to report conflict compared to weeklies (Tichenor *et al*

1980). Editorial policy is not wholly irrelevant to weekly newspapers, because advertisers must be convinced that the paper is being read. Consequently, according to Franklin and Murphy, they report little news, and tend to focus on consumer and human interest stories rather than reporting on significant events. My study shows that on average advertising accounts for 43 percent of the content of the monthly newspapers, and 57 percent of the content of the fortnightly and weekly newspapers (Tables 1, 2, 3). The remaining content comprises local news and information. However, the extent to which editorial content is as mundane and devoid of controversy, as suggested by Franklin and Murphy, remains to be seen. Tichenor *et al* (1980: 83-4) found local media avoid editorialising on political issues, although they will report political events. Citing Janowitz's 1952 study, they stress that the community press puts sharp limits on the reporting of controversy, especially in smaller communities. I reported a similar trend in a study of news on rural community radio (van Vuuren 2001).

So far, preliminary analysis of the water crisis coverage in the south east Queensland community press suggests that local newspapers will report on controversial issues, but that this concerns controversy with others *outside* the community, rather than controversy *within* the community. For example, the editor of the *Beaudesert Times* (22 March, 2006) wrote an angry editorial, when his paper had failed to secure an interview with Queensland's State Minister for Natural Resources and Water. For five weeks the paper had sought a response from the Minister about an issue of concern to local farmers. The paper positioned itself as the farmers' champion and implied that the Minister did not care about the Beaudesert community, unlike their own representative who is a member of the party in opposition.

The coverage of controversial issues that play up divisions between a community and those outside it leaves intact a local media organisation's community maintenance and integration functions, that is, the role of these media in developing community spirit, encouraging growth of community facilities, and in assisting everyday life and commerce (Tichenor *et al* 1980: 83-4). Tichenor *et al* point out that the community press is best understood as an agent of community welfare and progress, rather than as fulfilling a political or partisan function. In earlier studies, such as Janowitz's 1952 study of Chicago's suburban press, respondents did not consider the local paper as a forum for social debate and the exposure of divisions within the community. In another 1963 study (cited in Tichenor *et al* 1980), local community leaders saw controversial content of the local press as a threat to community structure and values. Of course, this begs the question: 'whose values and whose structure?' The value of the community press has long been obvious to business people who use them to advertise to the local community, as well as to local politicians with most of the newspapers included in my study featuring a regular column for local politicians. This suggests that the kind of community that is maintained and into which newcomers are integrated is determined by the structure of that community. Furthermore, any media organisation that relies on support from that community can't ignore those that exercise power within it: the local elite comprising business and political interests.

## **Conclusion**

The brief outline of Australian community media presented here suggest they function in a similar way and are subject to similar constraints—ownership, editorial policies, regularity of publication, location and resources (Ewart *et al* 2005)—of which format is only a minor consideration, whereas greater attention may need to be given to the structure of the community in which such media operate. By way of conclusion I will summarise these functions and suggest another way of

understanding the democratic contribution of community media, with a particular focus on the study of the community press.

South east Queensland is awash with media, there are about half a dozen daily newspapers, nearly 40 commercial weeklies, six local television stations, as well as a number of regional stations, 13 AM radio stations, 19 FM stations, about a dozen special interest newspapers, and the 40 or so independent community newspapers identified in my research. There are also dozens of magazines, journals, local websites, and cable and satellite television services available. When all these media are considered together a rich and varied picture emerges. Within this mix, community media, the local community radio stations, websites and community newspapers, reflect parochial concerns. Their functions include:

- the provision of local information (Kirkpatrick 1995), and they are often the only source of local news (O'Toole 1992);
- involvement in local, regional and urban affairs that draw on, amplify or connote the notions of place, space and landscape (Griffin 1999);
- Sensitivity to local issues and people, provides a 'networking space' (Cokley & Capel 2004);
- a vital role in sustaining, connecting and developing regional and rural communities (Ewart *et al* 2005); and
- a way for a community to recognise and know of itself, thus establishing community norms (Ewart 2000).

Such media must resonate with their readerships and thus reflects local demographic structures, and dominant local political and cultural orientations, which are expressions of local hegemonies.

Overall these seem to differ little between communities. They reflect widely accepted norms and values present in Australian culture: commerce, economic growth and development. However, some interesting patterns emerge when I started to map the particular concerns about the water crisis as expressed in the local media. There are widely differing opinions about what to do, reflecting the impact of the water crisis in people's own communities—their own backyards. For example, residents near the Mary River in the northern part of the region have been lobbying strongly against the construction of a new water storage dam and favour the introduction of water recycling. At Toowoomba, water recycling was rejected at the 2006 water plebiscite, and there residents want to see the construction of more dams, as well as increased access to groundwater reserves. On Stradbroke Island, residents are angry that the mainland wants to drain their groundwater reserves. Many farming groups see the city as the culprit in overuse of water, while the reverse is true in the city. Each of the community newspapers tend to promote a single point of view, which appears to provide little space for the expression of diverse opinions within a community, but when they are taken together as a reflection of diverse opinions within a region, it does suggest that more independent media promotes more diversity of opinion.

Few of these little newspapers are monitored by government departments, who tend to rely on services that monitor mainstream news services. In their survey of voters' preferred information sources, Jones and Feldman (2006) found that one-third of respondents relied solely on brochures, letterbox drops, leaflets and similar material, rather than mainstream news sources; and another third relied solely on the local newspaper. Their study did not include local independent press, because there are none in Toowoomba, as far as I know. However, others indicate that they are popular with readers (MacLean 2005). It follows that taking note of the views expressed in these smaller independent media, especially in towns and communities where these are the only local

media, policymakers could be better equipped to engage with citizens about important issues such as the current water crisis.

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