COMMUNITY BROADCASTING SECTOR SUSTAINABILITY REVIEW

Summary of stakeholder discussion—Sydney

This document provides a high-level, deidentified summary of the discussion at the workshop held in Sydney on 10 July 2024, and does not reflect all views given.

September 2024

Strengths of community broadcasters in Sydney

- Provides deep connection to target communities, and relevant content to local interests and needs.
- Represents a wide range of community voices and perspectives, including those often overlooked by mainstream media.
- Vital supporters of local music, arts, and culture, providing a platform for emerging artists.
- Vital in disseminating essential information to the community, including news, emergency broadcasts, and public service announcements.

Challenges for community broadcasters in Sydney

- The cost of living crisis has led to a significant drop in available sponsorship revenue, making it harder to compete with less available funds, particularly with commercial radio stations.
- Access to grants is challenging, particularly for larger stations. There's a lack of operational grants for stations with higher turnover, forcing them to rely on sponsorship.
- The shift towards online platforms and digital content consumption is impacting traditional listening.
- The crowded media landscape, with numerous radio stations and online options, makes it difficult to attract and retain audiences.
- Catering to diverse audience segments with varying interests and preferences is challenging.
- The urban landscape in Sydney is constantly evolving, impacting signal coverage and reception.
- The cost of maintaining broadcasting sites in Sydney is significant, adding to financial pressures.
- Investment in technology and digital platforms would enhance broadcasting capabilities.

Calls for reform

- Increased funding for operational grants, particularly for mid-sized stations.
- A more flexible grant system with an outcomes-based approach.
- Policy support for community radio, including advocacy for the sector's role in media diversity.
- Increased collaboration between stations to share best practices and resources.
- Government and industry collaboration to address infrastructure costs and improve coverage.

Community participation

- Many stations are reliant on volunteers as they provide a cost-saving advantage, have deep community connection, enhance the station's relevance and offer a foundation for future industry professionals.
- Attracting, retaining, and managing personnel effectively requires dedicated resources and training.
- Identifying and recruiting the necessary expertise for Board positions is difficult; with a lack of specific skills in the market (e.g. journalism or technical expertise).
- Maintaining consistent, engaging, and relevant content across various platforms is demanding.
- Paid staff play a crucial role in providing leadership, strategic planning, and overseeing operations. However, most stations have a small number of paid staff - often focused on management and admin.
- Budget limitations restrict the ability to hire additional staff, impacting capacity and programming.
- There is a need for investment in staff training and development to improve skills and knowledge.
- Community participation beyond listening is essential, however attracting and retaining members requires capacity and effective engagement strategies.

Calls for reform

- Targeted audience engagement strategies, including digital platform and youth initiatives.
- Invest in audience research to understand listener needs and preferences, and an interactive platform for audience feedback and participation.
- Invest in volunteer training, staff cadetships and development programs.
- Recognise and appreciate volunteer contributions, including creating positive workplace environments.

Sponsorship

- The 5-minute sponsorship limit can be restrictive, especially for stations reliant on sponsorship revenue. However, increasing the limit is not the answer due to listener preferences and commercial competition.
- The distinction between sponsorship and advertising, coupled with regulations around government funding and sponsorship, creates confusion.
- Growing regulations/compliance requirements are burdensome on governance and leadership.

Calls for reform

- There is a need for flexibility and simplicity with sponsorship – do not increase the overall sponsorship limit, but rather introduce averaging or a daily total.
- Simplify or remove tagging requirements, and remove ambiguity between sponsorship and advertising.

Funding priorities

- The grant process is perceived as favouring larger stations with more resources/expertise in grant writing.
- Rigid grant categories and line items limit the ability of stations to adapt to changing needs and priorities.
- The emphasis on short-term projects hinders long-term capacity building and sustainability.
- Increased operational funding to support core activities would help ensure long-term viability.
- Investing in journalism and news production was identified as a crucial priority to maintain the sector's role in providing diverse and reliable information.
- Funding for audience development initiatives was seen as essential for attracting and retaining listeners.

Calls for reform

- Shift from line based to outcome-based funding to allow greater flexibility for stations.
- Significant increase in grant funding, particularly for operational costs and news and journalism.
- Dedicated funding for capacity building activities, such as training and staff development.
- Support for programs that promote diversity and inclusion.
- Streamline the grant application process to reduce the burden on stations.