

The goal of community broadcasting is to provide minority and marginalised voices the opportunity to express themselves and, by doing so, bring about a more democratic society.

Is access enough?

The participation of women in community/access radio in Aotearoa/New Zealand

by Victoria Quade

In different parts of the world, community broadcasting is known by different names. These include: free radio, popular radio, alternative radio, co-operative radio, educational radio and rural radio. In New Zealand it is known as “access” radio, which is the guiding principle of community broadcasting in that country.

Internationally the term “participatory radio” is gaining popularity because this describes the principal characteristic of community broadcasting. Community participation is both a characteristic of community radio and an economic necessity. The small operating budget of most community radio stations dictates a reliance on volunteer labour.

There have been clearly identified feminist programs on access radio since it began in 1981. Indeed, women were vocal lobbyists for greater public representation and participation in the media together with ethnic interest groups, union and Maori activists. Feminist groups were among the first community groups to take advantage of the opportunity to broadcast when access radio was launched.

Today there are access radio stations, owned by nonprofit community groups, in most major population centres of New Zealand. Individuals and groups are able to broadcast on access radio, without censorship, provided they remain within the laws of the land and station guidelines. There is also a strong Maori broadcasting sector which serves the interests of the Maori community.

Access radio in New Zealand is recognised in law and partially subsidized. Most stations employ two to three paid workers who manage day-to-day business and assist individuals and groups in the community to make programs. The larger stations employ five or more workers.

In the New Zealand legislation women are specifically identified as one of the groups for whom access radio exists. Ensuring that a range of broadcasts are available to women and cater to their interests is also specifically identified under the goals and objectives of most, if not all, access radio stations. Not all stations have a regular feminist program but most have programs specifically oriented towards women. This is particularly true of

some Pacific Island community programs where women's role in maintaining the family's health and welfare is recognised as an important part of Pacific Island culture. In other programs there is often an implicit feminist position because of the politics or personal philosophy of the program makers.

There are also good role models for women in community radio; six of the nine fully licensed stations have women as station managers. Also, women are involved at all levels of radio production, including the technical aspects.

Yet, is this enough?

In spite of good role models and a general commitment to women's participation, women remain a minority in the area of technical production. Although many community programs are produced or presented by women, women's programming itself is sporadic. It ranges from strong at Plains FM, a station in the south island city of Christchurch, to minimal in the cities of Dunedin and Wellington. The largest city Auckland, has the weakest position, with no explicitly feminist program, although some of its women-oriented Pacific Island programs are radical in character. Compared with the amount of programming devoted to other interests the position of women is still marginal.

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S PROGRAMMING

Most feminist programs are coordinated by a loose collective of women brought together by their common interest in providing a vehicle for the views, opinions and activities of women. At some stations a single woman will act as a focus or facilitator of a women's program or programs. This role is sometimes undertaken by a paid station worker in addition to her specified job description; none of the access stations in New Zealand have a specific women's position as part of the station's staff. This creates a dilemma for women working in community radio. Leona Bresnehan, station manager of Auckland Access Community Radio, regrets that she is unable to do more to support women's programming but says "there are just not enough hours in the day."

Feminist programs tend to rely on a single personality or particular group to survive. According

to Ros Rice, station manager of Hills AM in Dunedin, this results in "a high burn-out rate."

But lack of funding is the main reason why women's groups discontinue broadcasting. The program or airtime charges required by most stations act as a disincentive. Access radio is subsidised, not fully funded. Individuals and groups who broadcast



Young Pacific island women preparing to present a music program

Becoming operational is an important aspect of empowering women in the media

Victoria Quade (left) discussing program planning with Tendi and Shelagh Magadza (right).

courtesy of Victoria Quade

are generally expected to pay a program fee. Feminist groups are seldom wealthy and few individual women or collectives are prepared to assume personal debt in order to ensure a program's continuance, no matter how strong their commitment. It can be difficult to find commercial sponsorship for a feminist program. Some groups are not prepared to enter into any transaction which might compromise their principles. Others simply

do not have the time or resources to coordinate marketing campaigns. It is no accident that the strongest feminist program is based at Plains FM. It is the only station where there is genuine structural support for women's programming.

WOMEN ON AIR

In 1993, the centenary of women obtaining the right to vote in New Zealand, one group obtained a grant that allowed them to pay someone to coordinate and produce a regular women's program. The result was *Women on Air*, a two-hour extended magazine format program, which consists of live broadcast and recorded features. The aim of *Women on Air* was to promote issues of interest to women and women as broadcasters.

The initial funding of *Women on Air* was limited but it allowed the group to set up an infrastructure that continues to support women's programming. Ruth Todd, the program coordinator, is currently employed for 10 hours a week by a Trust established in 1994 to continue funding and production of the program.

In addition to coordinating the weekly program, Todd is actively involved in promotion and fundraising activities.

Women on Air actively encourages women in the community to participate. The majority of production for *Women on Air* is carried out by them. The group conducts informal training with experienced program makers giving advice and assistance to new broadcasters. It has also brought in professionally experienced women to carry out training. Additional training is available for those who become regular contributors through the station. In addition to training, Plains FM provides office space for the group.

According to Todd, support from the station has helped the group achieve some of its goals. She would like to see the program act as an umbrella "to go towards seeding other women's programs and training."

ACCESS IS NOT ENOUGH

The New Zealand experience suggests that access to the airwaves is not enough. Women participate in community radio but they are still marginalised. There are a variety of reasons for this. First, women often have excellent communication skills and organisational skills, both of which are characteristic of good broadcasters. But they do not always see themselves as possessing those skills, nor do they see themselves taking those skills into the public arena. Further, women tend not seek to

acquire technical skills in the same numbers of men.

Second, in spite of a general commitment to the participation of women, there is little structural support for women in community radio in New Zealand. There may be support for the idea of focused training for women but there is not always the same commitment to making the time and resources available.

Third, the dynamics of many community radio stations do not encourage specific broadcast training for women. The principal activity of a community radio station is broadcasting, not training. Staying on air or obtaining the right to broadcast may take precedence over training activities. In community radio as in other areas, there is a general tendency to examine educational practices only when they demonstrably fail to achieve the goals set for them. As long as there are women involved in community broadcasting at some level, thereby partially achieving an emancipatory goal of community broadcasting, the amount of participation by women may receive minimal attention. This raises a major issue for community radio groups and stations considering action to correct the imbalance of women's participation.

Experience suggests that, at least initially, women need greater structural support than men. They also need encouragement to develop as community broadcasters. Todd thinks this is because women are more critical of themselves than men and that "women tend not to want to go to air until they're ready." *Women on Air* has been successful because it has provided both structural support and encouragement in the form of training.

The primary aim of specific broadcast training for women is to increase women's confidence as communicators. The secondary aim is provide women with the opportunity to acquire broadcasting skills which enable them to develop a more active relationship with the broadcast medium.

From a trainer's point of view focused workshops are labour-intensive and time-consuming, but in my experience, the results are worth it, in terms of the women's changed relationship with the media. ↻

Victoria Quade is a former professional film and television editor. An Australian by birth, she resides in New Zealand. She first became involved in community broadcasting in 1983 and has worked in the community broadcasting sector since 1991 in program development and training. She has developed broadcast training programs specifically for women and is currently completing a Master of Education degree thesis on the training practices and activities of the Australian and New Zealand community broadcasting sectors.