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- ARTICLE -

Against the Odds: Community Access Radio Broadcasting during the Canterbury Earthquakes

Some reflections on Plains FM 96.9

Brian Pauling & Nicki Reece[*]

Abstract
Plains FM is a community access radio station in Christchurch, New Zealand. Access radio is a particular form of community radio that provides an alternative outlet for organisations, groups and individuals for whom traditional media outlets are difficult to access. For twenty-five years PlainsFM has provided a voice for hundreds of programme-makers, broadcasting in many different languages, offering a diversity of content that permits the public expression of a wide range of ideas, opinions and beliefs. Editorial control lies with the programme-makers, not the station management. Plains FM is the source of many interesting, often compelling, stories. In the hours after the September 2010 earthquake Plains FM was the only local radio station actually on air. This paper draws on the memories of staff, volunteers and broadcasters to consider the unique role of the station as a media outlet during and immediately after the traumatic events of September 2010 and February 2011. It also attempts to locate those stories within the concepts of civic engagement, social utility and media theory.

Introduction

Access radio is a unique form of community broadcasting. The emphasis is on providing resources and training for community groups and individuals to make their own programmes for broadcast. They are encouraged to conceive, create, produce and

[*]Dr Brian Pauling is a programme leader and researcher at the New Zealand Broadcasting School, CPIT Christchurch. He founded the Broadcasting School in 1984. He also started Plains FM, the first independent community access radio station in New Zealand. He has been a UNESCO National Commissioner, chaired the New Zealand Library and Information Advisory Commission and was elected a member of the board of the international Broadcast Education Association in 2011.
Nicki Reece is the manager of Plains FM. She is a graduate of the New Zealand Broadcasting School and has been employed in New Zealand radio in a number of capacities over many years. She is also well known as a singer and entertainer.

present their programmes with any 'outside' help limited to basic radio skills training and access to the technical resources.

The Broadcasting Act of 1989 established a Broadcasting Commission to ensure that key 'public good' elements of broadcasting were not lost in the drive to de-regulate, privatise and commercialise broadcasting. It quickly changed its name to New Zealand On Air (NZ On Air), a name that more readily reflects its principal local content remit.

The Broadcasting Act established NZ on Air's key requirements in Section 36c of the Act as:

- to reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture;
- to promote programmes about New Zealand and New Zealand interests;
- to promote Maori language and culture;
- to ensure a range of broadcasts is available to provide for the interests of women, children, the disabled and minorities, including ethnic minorities (in 2001 the list was extended to include youth (14-21) and spirituality/ ethics).

NZ On Air also received a Ministerial Directive requiring it to fund access radio (Hunt 1990).

By combining the requirements of the Act with the ministerial directive and by capturing the enthusiasm of community groups eager to broadcast, NZ On Air developed a policy of meeting many of its 36c legislative requirements through funding access radio. Since 1989 access radio broadcasters in New Zealand have, understandably, tailored their programming to meet Section 36c criteria so as to be eligible for NZ On Air funding. Consequently, community access radio in New Zealand enjoys a level of state funding and support that would be the envy of community radio in most other jurisdictions.

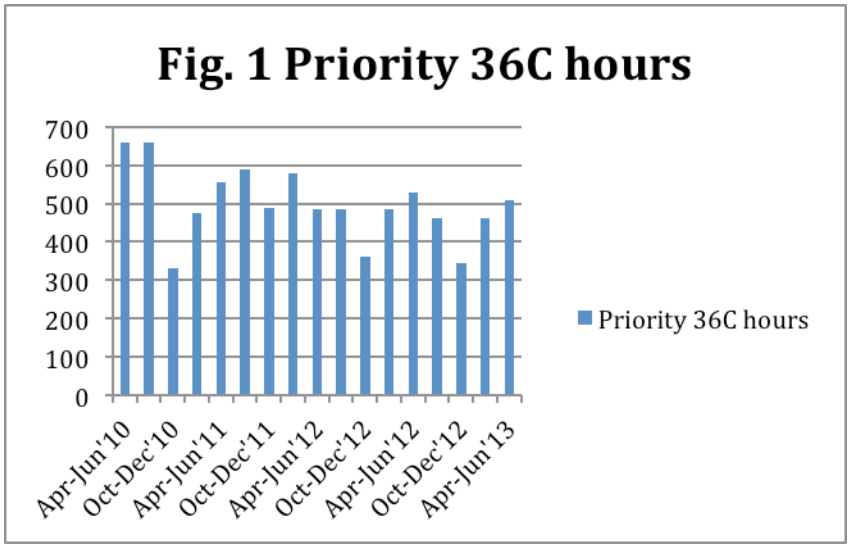
New Zealand has twelve community access stations. Each station is a reflection of its community. Population density, range and diversity vary between these stations' communities, from the pastoral backdrop of the rural Wairarapa to the large city 'melting pot' of Auckland's multi-cultural ecology. The current funding conditions provide up to $250,000 a year to each station on a ratio of 60:40. Stations are expected to provide 40% of their operating expenses. They do this by charging air-time fees, fundraising, sponsorship and limited advertising, all of which is permitted under the terms of the licences. Broadly speaking access radio is at its 'purest' when individuals or groups classified by Section 36c criteria are assisted to make programmes for broadcast about their issues to their respective communities (Pauling & Ayton 2009, 30). Programmes by, for and about Section 36c-defined groups are the ones that currently attract strongest support from NZ On Air.

Plains FM was the first independent access radio station established in New Zealand. It celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2013. This paper retells stories about the station, its staff and volunteers in the aftermath of the two largest earthquakes (out of more than 12,000 over three years) that struck the city, the first on 4 September 2010 and the second on 22 February 2011. The first part of the paper tells the stories, frequently using the words of interviewed staff and volunteers who directly experienced the events. It endeavours to capture the essence of the station's performance, the highs and the lows, the emotions as well as the facts with minimal mediation. The second part focuses on the direct learnings that were the outcome of the experiences. Again the focus is on the perspectives of the staff and volunteers. In closing, the paper attempts some contextualisation and analysis to put a frame around the recounted experiences.

Plains FM began as an experiment in community broadcasting by a group of students at the New Zealand Broadcasting School. Today it provides a voice for many programme makers, broadcasting in different languages, offering a diversity of content that permits the public expression of a wide range of ideas, opinions and beliefs. Editorial control lies with the programme makers, not the station management. Prior to the earthquake 120 volunteers broadcast 74 programmes consisting of around 862 hours of community programming a month. Twenty-three of those programmes were broadcast in a range of 12 languages other than English. The programming is overwhelmingly local, the station does not network and its studios are centrally located in downtown Christchurch. Nicki Reece is the current station manager.

The station's output in the Section 36c category of programmes (see above), which qualify for NZ on Air funding and are the backbone of access programming, significantly declined during and after the earthquakes. Volunteer creators of minority interest programmes in the all-important areas of women, children, the disabled and ethnic minorities, for a host of reasons, abandoned the station and Plains FM has not returned to its pre-quake levels. Figure 1 shows the output of such programmes in hours per quarter year from before the quakes until mid-2013.

The station's performance in the all-important Section 36c category of programmes from before the earthquakes and through the earthquake period is indicated in Fig. 1. The station has still to return to its pre-quake performance levels.



Some Earthquake Stories

4 September

David Lam Sam rose early on the morning of 4 September 2010. This was as usual. He liked to 'be well prepared' for his four-hour Saturday morning Samoan-language programme, Talofa Radio, on Plains FM. So, he was up and dressed before the earthquake hit at 4:35 am. His first concern was for his parents, who lived in New Brighton. He immediately got into his car and drove over to see them. The trip was uneventful; his parents were OK but he did wonder why all of the traffic was going in the 'other direction', until the thought of a tsunami made sense of it all. Establishing that his family was safe and heading for higher ground on the 'mountain' (Cashmere Hills), David felt his programme was his priority and he needed to get to the station:

> I really, really wanted to come here to start the programme at six. It was about an hour to find my way back here. I arrive at around five or ten to six, but all that time I was struggling on the road because the water comes up and then I had to go back . . . and over where the bridge was in Dallington, I had to jump the car over a rope that broke and I realised that I wouldn't make it [to the station] if I did something silly.

David explains what it was like entering the building:

> Because it was my first experience, I never thought that there would be aftershocks and the only thing in my mind was the earthquake was done and that was it - 'no more'. So, like I said, I was never frightened, I was never scared. I drove here, parked my car and I walked straight here. And no one was here. I was sitting in the station and I feel the building start shaking and I never thought it was like that! But I never thought of any building collapse or anything like that. Then Robert turned up and later Nicki and Lele.

Initially, the broadcast team thought that the best advice they could give to the Samoan community, most of whom lived on the flat and near the sea, was to head for 'the mountains' in case there was a tsunami. They felt the need to tell people 'not to go near the damage' and to 'go for the high ground' (Lam Sam). They took a number of calls on air from people seeking advice and, given their limited understanding of what was happening, gave this advice – an example of the perils of not having adequate information.

Nicki, the station manager, recalls that the earthquake woke her, and that her first thoughts were for her family and she began checking on them around. It was a couple of hours before she turned her attention to the station and was 'utterly surprised, shocked even' to realise that the broadcasting team was in the studio and the station was live to air. She immediately headed into the station:

> When I arrived and I came in [to the station] I was amazed to see you, David . . . and I was thinking from my point of view 'is it safe for you to be here'? So I remember asking you, 'do you wish to carry on?' And I was looking at your faces and you looked a bit stunned. I think that you were just beginning to realise the drama and the damage that had been done.

But they wanted to stay. David said:

> I thought Nicki would say 'go home', but thank God she said we could carry on. The Samoan community love listening, especially to their own. The Saturday morning programme is popular because people were resting, not working, so that they can listen . . . and this is especially so for the old people at home.

Very quickly the team got into a pattern, Nicki checking all the sources of information and feeding details to the on-air team for broadcast in Samoan to the community. The first thing they did was 'calm people down' and reassure them that there was no threat from a tsunami and they told all of the 'listeners up the mountain in their cars . . . that they could come down from the mountain' (Lam Sam). The whole focus of the programme became the earthquake. Prayers were said and in between songs they took phone calls, answered individual queries and gave advice and information on what to do for safety, where to go for help, where the power was on, where it was off and reports on the extent of damage as the magnitude of the event became known. At 10:00 am they 'ended the programme nicely and peacefully and went home' (Lam Sam).

The next programme was also live. Women On Air's two presenters, Ruth Todd and Laura Gartner, both showed up and, despite reservations, were determined to go on air and try to do their usual programme with news updates fed to them by Nicki peppered throughout the two-hour show. Women on Air has been a popular Saturday morning programme for 18 years. Ruth Todd, Women on Air volunteer broadcaster, recalled:

> At six o'clock I switched over to Plains and heard the Samoan programme and I thought, excellent, Plains is up and running. I drove into the studio and Laura joined me to do the programme. The whole time we were broadcasting there were aftershocks – 'do we go or do we stay?' It was surreal. Unusually, we were not interviewing any people live that day . . . so we were able to drop a few [pre-recorded] items easily. With Nicki's help we fed information through all the time and it just felt that that is what a community radio station should be doing. Information was trickling through from Civil Defence and along with formal information, sports cancellations, you know the usual, we also were telling people not to go out in their cars, don't go here, there and everywhere, social service constant numbers and reassuring messages.

Nicki Reece, the station manager, made it clear that the volunteer broadcasters did not need to be at the station. She also felt the pressure on herself for the safety of others:

> I said you don't have to be here if you don't want to be, no pressure on you to stay. Shit, if anything happened to them…I felt a huge sense of responsibility that you were here, in the building. And my husband told me he was fearful of me being in the building also.

Ruth Todd added:

> We managed to keep going. It might have been folly but we did. You get involved in what you're doing and it didn't seem the wrong thing. I felt perfectly safe really. Nobody had died [in the earthquake] and, at that stage, there appeared to be minimal damage. I felt 100% safe. There were lots of aftershocks but we didn't make any on-air comments about them. We looked at each other! I was impressed that Nicki was here in control doing the things that Nicki does!

The station became a good outlet for story telling. For example, Women on Air recorded the stories of women living on their own and had interviews with 'people living in garages with children' (Todd). Ruth Todd further related:

> We got real stories from real people while other radio stations had moved on or got tired of telling/hearing them. Plains FM told stories like no other station and continues to do that. Plains FM also told more stories than any other station Some people were reluctant at first but when they did tell their stories you could just see something lift, they were getting it off their chest. They were talking to you and you were very sympathetic and I could tell that this was a very good thing. [Sometimes] we didn't get to the matter that we'd invited them in for.

Staff member Ed Swift turned up for a period and helped contact broadcasters who were due on-air over the weekend, and put a message on the station website. Remarkably, only one live-to-air programme maker did not make it to the studios

On the Monday morning Ed did his usual Mornings Show (extended from 90 minutes to 180) and talked with the following people:

Jon Mitchell, Civil Defence Emergency Management

Mayor Bob Parker

Superintendent Dave Cliff, Christchurch Police

Dr Alistair Humphrey, Canterbury Medical Officer of Health

Ian Simpson, CEO Earthquake Commission

Amy Adams, Selwyn MP

Major Clive Nicholson, Salvation Army

Sam Johnson, Organiser of Student Volunteer base

Damage to the station's buildings and studios were minimal. One toilet was closed, pump sanitisers were installed in the other, and signs warning that water must be boiled were put up in the kitchen.

The station sent out a communication to all programme makers, which advised:

> Plains FM is still on air and just outside the city cordon area. However, St Asaph Street and Madras Street are closed to vehicles. If you are coming in to do a programme, the best place to park is on Barbadoes Street and you can access the station by foot. If you are doing a live show and are updating your listeners with the latest information, please use information from a reliable source. Official updates can be found at [websites listed] and we'll try to have a summary copy in the on-air studio for you to use. If you aren't coming into the station for your programme, studio booking or if you have queries please call us. Stay safe!

The station was undamaged and for the staff and broadcasters it was 'business as usual', although the many broadcasters in languages other than English continued to give out key official advisory messages and information, doing their part to keep their listening community's spirits up. The station's breakfast show hosted by Ed Swift featured earthquake news during the weeks that followed.

A strongly remembered feature of this time was the fact that volunteer members from the culturally and linguistically diverse programmes did many key message translations themselves and in their own time. No system was in place via government agencies or

Civil Defence to facilitate this process or assist with the logistics of this extra workload on those volunteers. Not only did these broadcasters continue to broadcast after the earthquake, but they also took on extra responsibilities to ensure their communities received vital information.

The major quake of 4 September and the subsequent aftershocks did prompt the station manager into thinking about the role of the station during times of civil emergency and what specific resources the station could offer from its unique community base. The station had no formal relationships with any official disaster agencies. Indeed, it queried whether some agencies even knew of the station's existence, let alone what it did. Was there a specific role that a station that caters for the minority languages of migrants and refugees could undertake at such times? Indeed, was there a larger community role that a local station like Plains FM with its resources, both material and human, could play times of emergency? Ironically, a request from the station manager to the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs to collaborate and make a formal emergency plan was suggested by Plains FM management but did not progress.

However, investigations of these matters were to take second place to the demands of focusing on a major refurbishment of the station that had been months in planning and was about to begin. As the aftershocks diminished and, like most other Cantabrians, people at the station thought the major threat was well and truly over, things got busy with planning the alterations and any urgency around disaster events, understandably, faded somewhat.

But the threat did not reduce. Much worse was to come. And four months later it did.

22 February

There is some irony in the fact that Talofa Radio was also broadcasting live on Monday February 22 at 1:00 pm. However, this time the outcome was significantly different. Etena Pouli, along with all the other people on the station, 'ran from the building' and were unable to return. The station had full power, but phone systems were down and people's first concern was for their own safety and seeking information about family.

After this event the station's building was designated as inside the no-go 'red' zone, a large cordoned area consisting of the entire central business district that, because of risk to human life, was monitored by police and military security to prevent entry. It was impossible for anyone to gain access to the station. Rising levels of frustration were felt by staff and volunteer programme-makers at the inability to access the station and broadcast to their communities. The station was undamaged structurally, had power and was very much on the edge of the red zone, but staff were not permitted to access it. They were 'so near to helping but yet so far when you have a wall of bureaucracy to overcome' (Todd). As the station manager, Nicki Reece, noted:

> People were crying out for accurate information, detailed updates about their neighbourhoods and reassurance. They needed much more than generic key messages broadcast from radio stations managed and mainly transmitting from outside of Christchurch. They also needed it 24/7.

Laura Gartner expressed her frustration:

> I live in the red zone. I thought why don't I just go down, go in and get what you need? It was ridiculous that we couldn't get in . . . the power was on.

Staff, particularly, felt for the core station listenership – migrants and refugee communities. They needed to be able to hear their community leaders speaking to them regularly and in their own language. They were not able to provide that service for over five weeks. Ruth Todd said:

> On my first week back [in the city] I felt disappointed that we were not doing something. [Student radio] RDU was, Chris Diack from Southland [with his caravan 'suitcase'] radio in New Brighton was. I understood that we sort of couldn't but I thought there must be a way. But [in the end] I trusted that there wasn't. It just seemed . . . this just isn't right.

When the station eventually returned to air in early April, things were 'hugely different' (Reece). A lot of regular broadcasters had 'fallen by the wayside' (Reece). Some broadcasters were lost out of fear of coming into the city. Other programme-makers had lost their sponsors, who were facing their own problems, including the loss of their businesses. This meant the loss of programmes because groups could not afford the air-time charges. It was 'quite upsetting for the station to lose a lot of broadcasters, all of who faced their own problems' (Reece). A key difference between Plains FM and other stations was recognised, as Todd noted:

> I realised that other radio stations were run by professionals who had to be [at work]. Plains FM was run by volunteers who didn't have to be there. But the station was still very earthquake focused helping the community getting through.

It was now a priority for the station to work to get new programmes to air and retain the programmes that survived. The earthquakes were very much a key topic of conversation on all the programmes that returned to air. Many people interviewed on the station in the months following re-opening faced the standard questions, 'how are you, where were you and what were you doing at the time?' There was a strong feeling that 'it was quite therapeutic for a lot of people to talk about it . . . but it helped so much in my recovery – selfishly. So we picked it up then, but it felt too late, a bit of an anti-climax' (Belcher). Belcher added:

> we got feedback from listeners that that was what they wanted to hear. We got heaps of feedback by email and phone.

However, the station staff felt the need to do more, as Belcher explained:

> We were very frustrated about the tight reign the council had on information and we wanted to get the information out straight away so although we also did notices on air about what was closed and what was open and where people had relocated we felt [the need to do more]. The idea of The Quake Panel came from a need that we were seeing in…. all the different communities in the region…. for information to be disseminated. There was a lot of confusion about. New websites, new organisations had [sprung up] but [it was hard] to find out about them. I personally felt like it was my duty to try [and do something].

The idea was simply to give a platform for people to speak. For those who had knowledge and information, they could use the station to 'spread the message'. For those affected by the earthquakes, they could use the station to 'tell their stories':

> Everyday our duty on Plains FM was to allow a variety of people to come on and share their voice. (Belcher)

'The Quake Panel' was broadcast live twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 9:00 am for one hour. Some programmes were re-broadcast and all episodes were made available as podcasts online. With an average of five contributors per programme over four months, an archive resource was created of very many different stories from very many different people. That archive will be a valuable tool for future earthquake research, as Belcher pointed out:

> We tried to have a balance of guests with a range of VIPs contributing - Mark Solomon [Kai Tahu Kaiwhakahaere], Kennedy Graham [Green MP], Sam Johnson [Student Volunteer Army founder], [Mayor] Bob Parker, Peter Townsend [Chief Executive of the Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce], scientists from Landcare. The aim was to have things explained in a way that could be understood [by listeners]. People were glad that we were talking about things that were a wee bit controversial or not getting enough attention.

The programme had content that was not available elsewhere particularly for minority communities:

> One chap rang up. He was a migrant businessman and he was going through a lot of hassles with insurance and trying to reopen somewhere else while his suburb was being fixed. He thanked us so much for the information the programme contained about the issues of migrant businesses. (Belcher)

Overall, each panel had a 'nice blend' of people and 'they would help each other to open up. It was easy to get people to talk about their passion' (Belcher).

Two examples of 'The Quake Panel' give a picture of how different this radio station was in handling local issues. One panel featured actor Ross Gumbly, Creative New Zealand art advisor Chris Archer and Martin Trusttum from the CPIT Creative Industries Department:

> We did this whole thing on art and the place it had in Christchurch [post earthquake], and what it was like for artists with galleries devastated and things and we just had such a laugh. (Belcher)

It was very rare for earthquake matters to create humour. Most media focused on serious matters with the emphasis in the reporting being on the personal, social and economic costs of the disasters and the provision of information. This panel was indicative of how, when people tell their own stories, the 'funny side' is permitted to come out.

The very last panel was the story of what happened to *The Press*, Christchurch's daily newspaper. Two journalists, Beck Eleven and Keith Lynch, talked about their experiences and how they reacted and coped as journalists over this time:

> It was amazing to me that they had lost a building but kept a paper going working out of small portable cabins in a paddock. (Belcher)

Again, it is uncommon for one medium to give space to another to tell their stories. By devoting a whole hour to the topic, 'The Quake Panel' gave its audience a rare insight into how the city's local newspaper coped with providing a continuous service to the community.

Feedback from listeners and participants suggest that the series was uniquely valuable. It gave an opportunity to reflect and 'make sense of it all'. It allowed people to tell their stories of trauma and recovery. It permitted a range of support organisations substantial air-time to promote their services. It provided a platform for debate around contentious issues allowing people to 'go hard' on matters that they were passionate about. But 'it's very difficult to get New Zealanders to debate – they're too polite' (Belcher).

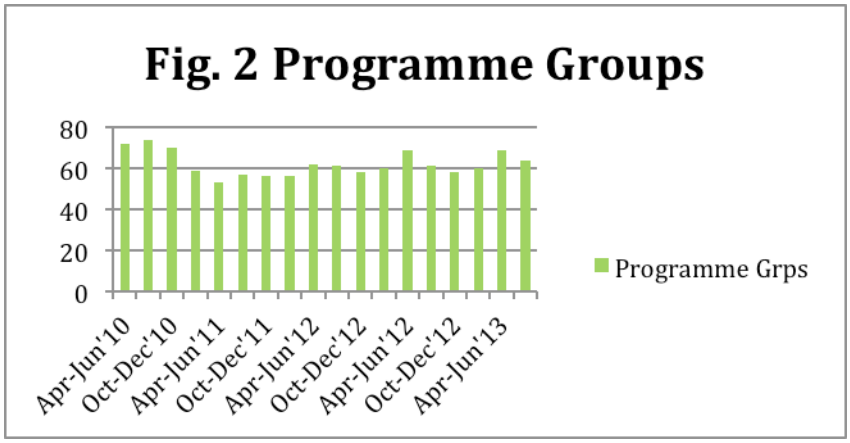
Not long after returning to air the June quakes hit, as Reece noted:

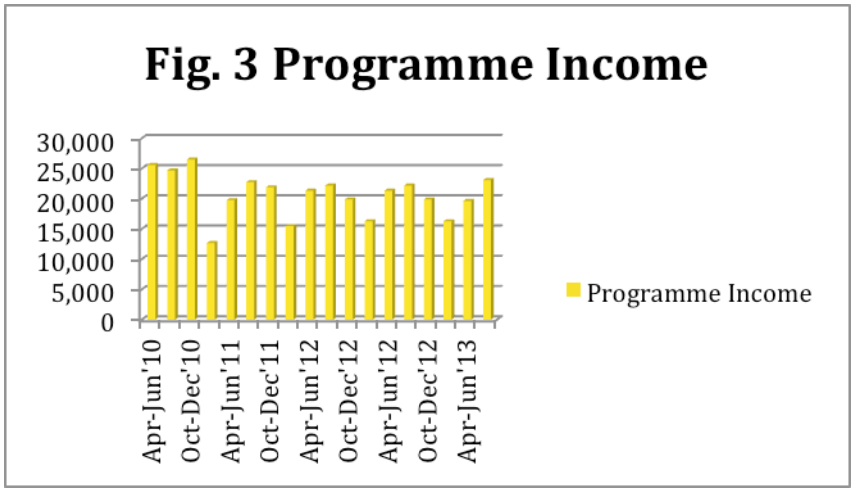
> Two big ones that brought it all back. People didn't feel secure and lots of people left Christchurch. It was so hard. It was like wading through golden syrup. Every day was a struggle.

It took considerable time for regular programme-makers to return. Each earthquake event created disruption and delays to the volunteer broadcasters' schedule.

Prior to the September earthquake, 74 groups or individuals (see Fig. 2) had broadcast programmes, providing airtime revenue of nearly $25,000 (see Fig. 3). There was a small drop-off in the number of programmes in the next quarter with 70 programme-makers broadcasting, but a small increase in revenue to $26,500. The first quarter of 2011 was a different story. The closure of the station for a number of weeks combined with the personal difficulties of broadcasters and their sponsors following 22 February saw a sharp decline in income to $12,700 and just 50 groups or individuals broadcasting. With the station back on air in April things picked up slightly with 53 broadcasters and revenue of nearly $20,000 in the second quarter, increasing again to 56 broadcasters and nearly $23,000 in the third quarter and remaining at that level through to the end of the year. In mid-2011 the station applied to a Ministry of Social Development emergency earthquake fund for funds to offset lost airtime income in order to break even. The station was granted $8,000.

A further disruption to the station during this period was the completion of major internal refurbishment planned prior to the earthquakes, budgeted at nearly $400,000. This also impacted on the station's traditional performance. As the graphs indicate (Figs. 2 and 3), the station has yet to return to its pre-earthquake programme output levels:





Between the February and June events, the station manager and the local broadcasters society, the group representing Plains' programme-makers, began a push to get the station equipped with tools that would permit it to continue broadcasting in a major emergency. In mid-2012 the Lions Club Section 202E provided $57,000 towards an emergency preparedness project. This provided the station with a 12.5 KV on-site generator, a small portable generator, smartphone and tablet technology and an upgraded station van. A simpler, remotely accessible broadcasting software system is scheduled to be in place by the end of 2014.

Belatedly, Civil Defence and other organisations also began to realise the value of the station to the community, particularly the number of languages broadcast and the strong migrant and refugee audiences this attracted. After the major quakes Plains FM was prominent in the Civil Defence discussions around the need to include culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in disaster planning. The Christchurch City Council commissioned a report on best practice guidelines for CALD, which noted the 'under-utilisation of radio and ethnic media' and highlighted the 'importance of Plains FM access radio' (Wylie n.d., 63).

Discussion

Practical Issues

Reflection on the station's performance during the disasters highlighted a number of issues. There was much frustration after 22 February with the inability to access the station and communicate, in particular, with its migrant and refugee communities. There was a need for the station to have access to technologies that would enable on-going transmission during emergencies. This included:

- a generator to enable broadcasting during power outages;
- portable studio equipment to permit broadcasting from any location;
- a portable studio to transmitter link (STL) to enable access to the transmitter from any site;
- a small portable transmitter to take over transmission at reduced power if the main transmitter failed.

Also needed was a communications system, not reliant on computer technologies, to contact staff, broadcasters and volunteers and to manage resources during emergencies. A 'telephone tree' structure that could get messages out quickly to key people, but if necessary could function on a physical contact basis if phones were down, has been suggested.

Plains FM needed a higher profile with decision-makers. The lack of awareness within the Pakeha-dominated elite of the existence and role of Plains FM became apparent

during the disasters. Civil Defence, the government and city council, although notionally aware of the station, failed to utilise its immigrant and refugee contacts in any significant manner. All key messages during the early stages of the earthquakes were delivered, almost exclusively, in English and English sign language. Thus, already marginalised communities were further disadvantaged by not having access to information in a timely manner and in their own language. Plains FM's many minority language broadcasters were a neglected resource.

There is irony in the latter issue. The state has deemed access radio as a major way of meeting Section 36c of the Broadcasting Act. It has invested millions of dollars over many years to majority fund these stations. Yet the state apparatus failed to notice the existence of Plains FM and take advantage of this service during the crisis.

Theoretical issues

Radio is the most prolific of the mass media. Globally, radio's range and scope is enormous, from the immensely powerful short-wave transmitters of Christian religious broadcasters and state 'propaganda' stations located in prime geographical positions, to the thousands of little 'milli-watt' stations (below one watt in power) scattered throughout the backrooms of small communities. At one end, it provides substantial profits for large media conglomerates operating networks in most countries; at the other end, it provides a voice for the powerless, the oppressed and the marginalised.

Part of radio's success as a mass medium is because it is by far the cheapest way to produce and disseminate information to a mass audience. Set-up costs are comparatively low compared to television and print. Distribution costs are also minimal. Perhaps the main reason for radio still being a predominant medium after nearly 100 years lies in the unique nature of sound and the aural experience. Radio is the only medium that it is possible to access whilst doing other things (try reading a newspaper and driving a motorcar), But, more importantly, the nature of aural communication can be summed up in the often used phrase 'theatre of the mind'. Listening to radio provides images based on sound. The listener has to take those images and 'complete' the picture in their own mind. Thus, in a way, radio engages the sense of hearing at an intense level, producing, in media guru Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, a 'hot' medium (1967).

It is radio's nature that makes it such an attraction for communities around the world to engage with. It is also a most effective and efficient medium to support community activities. However,

> [e]xcept for a few notable examples the academic community has paid scant attention to radio broadcasting when compared to that afforded to other forms of mass and/or popular media. This is despite the global extent of its reach, despite the eighty or more years that have elapsed

> since public broadcasting began, despite its continuing importance as the primary medium for most of the world's population. (Dolan 1999, 63)

Further, as Rudin points out, radio 'has not developed a distinct theoretical framework of its own' (2011, 60). While some radio scholars (e.g., Crisell, Hendy, Starkey) may challenge this statement, if it is indeed the case for radio in general, then it is the more so for the specialised and localised iteration called community radio.

Modern radio is most heavily researched around commercial radio criteria that focus heavily on audiences (psychographic and demographic), ratings, reach and frequency delivering to advertiser needs. Also, most research on public radio focuses on many of the same criteria, no doubt trying to justify state expenditure, with the added focus on meeting the goals stipulated in charters or similar documents (Radio New Zealand often leads its publicity with the statement that it has 'the largest audience of any radio station in New Zealand'). In the case of community radio the focus again is on structure, audiences, content analysis and statistics, rather than developing theory (see Carty-Mole 2010).

However, there is a field of theory of which community radio can be considered a subset – community media. While this is a broad field covering all media, and latterly digital media, community radio could be tested against the ideas within the wider field. A range of theoretical perspectives on 'community media' has relevance to community radio, as identified by Nafiz (2012, 40-48). For instance, Downing's notion of Radical Alternative Media (2001) argues that community radio permits the 'voices and aspirations of the excluded' to be heard, suggesting a confrontational model that challenges the norm and calls for change through radicalising the community. Rodriquez's notion of Citizens Media suggests community media responds to the domination of mainstream commercial and establishment media by permitting cultural and ethnic minorities in pluralistic societies to gain a 'sense of self-esteem and empowerment . . . that are rarely acknowledged . . . by dominant media forms and practices' (Howley 2010, 18). McQuail's Democratic Participant Theory (1983) argues that traditional public broadcasting services have failed to deliver on expected democratic values because the elite has captured them; community media thus grew out of citizen dissatisfaction with the existing media and its inability to provide for divergent community needs. Carpentier, Lie and Servaes' Community Media through a Multi-theoretical Approach (2007) locates four theoretical types of community media: 'a launch-pad' for individuals to engage with community, an alternative to mainstream media in terms of both content and structure, the concept of community media as a 'third voice' supplementing commercial and state media, and as a tool of civil society aimed at 'deepening' society's democratic roots.

Testing the earthquake period of Plains FM's broadcasts against these produces some correlations. The ethnic and minority language broadcasts during the period fit with Citizens Media. 'The Quake Panel' delivered a form of local content not possible on

existing commercial and public broadcasting networks, thus fitting Democratic Participant Theory. And many of the broadcasts through the earthquake period provided 'third voice' exposure that supplemented existing media as well as first-time broadcasting experiences and an alternative to mainstream media, thereby fulfilling the criteria of a Multi-Theoretical Approach and providing a tool for deepening society's democratic roots.

As an aside, while the period under review did not demonstrate clear examples of Radical Alternative Media, it has been argued elsewhere (Pauling 2012) that community access radio does provide an outlet for more extreme and fringe elements of the community to express their ideas. Examples exist of comments and opinions that would not be acceptable on other radio platforms but are tolerated by the access radio audience and fraternity, perhaps because of the comparatively small size of the audience or because, unlike other existing radio, access programmes behave more like television programmes – they are 'appointment listening'. People tune in to what they want to hear and tune out to everything else.

A further approach discussed elsewhere (Cruickshank & Pauling 2000) is the concept that what is said on community access radio is perhaps more important than what is heard. To quote Brecht, 'Radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus . . . if it knew how to let the listener speak as well as hear' (Brecht 1999, 52). It would appear that the many people who broadcast on the station and 'told their stories' accrued significant benefit, as Belcher noted:

> We got real stories from real people while other radio stations had moved on or got tired of telling/hearing them. Plains FM told stories like no other station and continues to do that. Plains FM also told more stories than any other station. Some people were reluctant at first but when they did tell their stories you could just see something lift, they were getting it off their chest. They were talking to you and you were very sympathetic and I could tell that this was a very good thing. [Sometimes] we didn't get to the matter that we'd invited them in for.

The actual process of broadcasting had therapeutic benefits for the individuals concerned and perhaps by extension for the communities they came from and represented. In this case, the 'voices and aspirations of the excluded were heard' (as per Downing 2001); there appeared to be a 'sense of self-esteem and empowerment' that would not have been achieved through mainstream media (as per Rodriquez 2001); certainly the nature and form of many of these broadcasts would not have been possible on traditional public broadcasting services (as per McQuail 1983); the voices heard on Plains FM may have been a 'launch-pad' for these individuals to engage with community, maybe for the first time; and they were that 'third voice' not heard on commercial and state media (as per Carpentier et al 2007).

This paper has attempted a number of things. It has recounted some of the stories of community broadcasting in earthquake-ravished Christchurch and provided some insight into the role of community radio in a disaster. It highlights how officials neglected a unique communications outlet available to them to reach ethnic and other minority groups that make up the Plains FM listening audience during the crises, and tells of efforts to ensure this will not happen again. It also reflects on how the station itself could be resourced to more readily respond to its audiences' needs in times of disaster. Some effort has been made to contextualise the broadcasters' experiences with reference to a small range of literature specific to radio.

Community access radio has been in existence in New Zealand for over 30 years. It probably deserves more substantial academic attention. Nothing has as yet been published about New Zealand community radio that approaches the attention is has received in some other countries.

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