

Conducting your own qualitative audience research

Introduction

In 2006, Griffith University researchers completed the first national qualitative audience study of community radio and television in Australia, *Community Media Matters: an audience study of the Australian community broadcasting sector* (2007). The final report for this research, and our previous station-based project, *Culture commitment community: the Australian Community Radio Sector* (2002), are available at the Australian community broadcasting sector's web portal, CBOonline (http://www.cboonline.org.au/index.cfm?pageId=51_0_1_0). Both projects have provided an enormous amount of information which the sector can use for various initiatives. On a national scale, the research can be used as evidence in policymaking circles and for the information of international and domestic community broadcasting enthusiasts and scholars. In Australia, community broadcasting stations can use the research in combination with the McNair quantitative audience survey results (2004, 2006, 2008) for licensing requirements and for the information of current and potential sponsors. It offers a useful resource for stations to improve their services.

These research projects, combined with the 2006 CBOonline Survey, have provided the sector with important information about the ways in which stations conduct audience research. The CBOonline data found that 31 percent of all stations surveyed have undertaken, commissioned or subscribed to an audience measurement survey in their area. One in 10 stations reported undertaking audience surveys every couple of years and just under a quarter of stations used this audience research to guide the station in making better programming decisions. Slightly less (17%) used the audience research as a marketing tool for potential sponsors. About one in ten (11%) used the data for promotional strategies.

According to the CBOonline data, stations tend to use less formal methods to gather knowledge of their audiences. Phone calls from audience members (71%), face to face conversations with presenters and volunteers (65%), and feedback from audience members dropping into the stations or at station functions (64%) figured prominently in the 'other' ways stations find out about their listeners and viewers. Stations also reported letters received from audience members (58%) and general station involvement with the community (58%) as other methods of gathering knowledge of their audience. Fewer than half of the stations (44%) used email communication. This type of audience feedback is 'anecdotal' and 'uncoordinated' and while it is useful, it does not provide a coordinated package of information from which a station can draw upon easily when required. This is especially the case when making funding submissions to government and/or non-government organizations for grants, sponsorship etc. And it carries little weight with potential station and program sponsors because it is not seen as independent, systematic and rigorous — the foundations of all reliable research.

One of the key goals of the Griffith University audience research project was to provide a portable and inexpensive, yet rigorous, method for individual stations to undertake their own audience research. The information below is intended to provide you with the tools

to do this. Conducting your own qualitative research is a way of formalising methods of knowing your audiences, like conversations, phone calls etc, by collecting data using an independent, systematic and respected research method — focus groups.

Why qualitative research?

Community broadcasting sectors are confronted with several quandaries in regard to audience research. Often stations cannot afford to be part of the larger commercial based audience surveys. Community and volunteer participation, not-for-profit operation and the mandate to be representative and connected to their communities of interest distinguish community broadcasters from other media. Such stations often appeal to smaller audiences which are inadequately grasped by purely quantitative research methods. Community broadcasting is often about niche or specialist audiences — either defined by geography or specific interest. And as community broadcasters operate on a not-for-profit basis, they are not solely guided by commercial imperatives. The fundamental purpose of community radio is to serve their communities — as outlined in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*. During our first national research project, *Culture commitment community (2002)*, the issue of a lack of audience research across the sector was a recurring topic of discussion and debate. A participant at one Adelaide audience focus group neatly summarised the principal difference between community broadcasters' approach to audiences to that of the commercial sector:

We don't think, 'What's our market and how can we sell to it?', which is what the commercial media does. We think, 'Who do we want to have as our audience and what kind of programme can we do?' and then consequently we think how can we make some money out of that, and it's kind of that way round for us (Adelaide Focus Group, 2001).

Our second national audience based survey, *Community Media Matters An audience study of the Australian community broadcasting sector (2007)* devised a methodology to address the problem of knowing and understanding the sector's audiences. Our goal was to use methods which were appropriate for a sector which sometimes services comparatively small, but significant audiences. We also aimed to develop a method which was affordable and portable — something which individual stations could use to better know their audiences. We wanted to provide more depth to the available quantitative surveys.

Qualitative research provides an opportunity to better understand the reasons why people listen to community radio, what they like about it and what they don't. It gave actual audience members a chance to tell their own stories in their own voices about their community broadcasting experiences.

A key principle of qualitative research is immersion in the research context — in other words, to get up close and personal with research participants to find out what they think and why they think a certain way. The idea is to *talk to people who want to talk* rather than the random sampling techniques used by quantitative research. In many ways, qualitative research is like the informal methods of gathering audience data already used by many stations. We used the qualitative research method, focus groups, to formalise the process.

This qualitative research method will provide you with affordable data which can be used for:

- License renewals
- Program and station improvements
- Sponsorship: feedback for sponsors and potential sponsorship targets
- License requirements: serving your communities of interest

The focus group and the facilitator

Focus groups are discussions exploring a specific set of issues. The group is ‘focussed’ in that it involves some kind of collective activity — such as... simply debating a set of questions. Crucially focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by the explicit use of group interaction to generate data. Instead of asking each person in turn, the focus group researchers encourage participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others’ experiences and points of view. At the very least, research participants create an audience for one another (Kitzinger and Barbour 2001: 4).

In the quote above, the researchers identify the key characteristics of a focus group. It is a place where people come together to discuss, with each other, a topic of mutual interest. The focus group is mediated by a facilitator, an independent person who has an agenda (a broad list of topics of interest) and if needed, guides the discussion. The facilitator does not have ‘total control’ of the focus group but rather guides the discussion *where necessary*. The focus group should be like a group conversation where people share ideas and opinions. The facilitator should allow the conversation to flow, even if the conversation seems off the topic, enabling the group dynamics to gradually evolve. The discussion, which can range from one to two hours, should be recorded. We used minidisks with small omnidirectional microphones.

Of course, the facilitator needs to ensure that the issues of interest to the station are discussed but this should be a gentle rather than direct process. Often, this will occur towards the end of the discussion, once participants have raised issues of importance and have established a rapport with others. We have found that in most cases, there is significant correspondence between issues of interest to the station and those of the focus group participants.

The focus group agenda explores issues of interest to the station. We have provided a suggested focus group agenda at the end of this appendix, based on our own national audience survey. Stations will have issues specific to their community of interest and should be able to establish their own agenda. It is critical that participants are given the opportunity to raise issues themselves — at the beginning of the discussion, participants are asked what issues they would like to raise and these are recorded on a whiteboard or something similar. If the conversation is not forthcoming, broad questions can be asked based on the focus group agenda and participants can be encouraged to discuss responses

amongst themselves. At no point should the station focus group agenda be disclosed to the participants.

Selection of an appropriate facilitator is crucial to the success of the research. We suggest somebody outside of the station, like a local councilor, librarian, teacher, academic etc — somebody with developed interpersonal skills and with some experience in meetings. It is important that the facilitator does not defend the station or question the value of input from focus group participants. A facilitator's role is to guide the discussion and listen, not to contribute.

Participants should be given informed consent forms to sign which state that they agree to be involved in the research, that their statements will be used, that they will remain anonymous, and that they can choose to withdraw at any time. The consent form should also ask for participants' permission for you to record the discussion.

How to organize a focus group

Stations will need to establish a committee to organise the focus group. This committee will be responsible for:

- Designing the focus group agenda
- Setting an appropriate time, date and venue best suited to your participants
- Organising refreshments
- Organising broadcast announcements, emails, local newspaper ads etc to attract participants
- Informing station volunteers about audience research and raising momentum within the station
- Organising potential participants — phoning back, etc within a week of the focus group date.
- Identifying a facilitator
- Collating the data
- Reporting the data

During our audience research, we developed a five-step approach that was critical to a successful outcome for our focus group research:

- Broadcast announcements aired 2-3 weeks prior to the focus group on high rotation
- Focus group plugs from on-air presenters
- Email to member/subscriber lists where possible
- Notice or story in local media
- Encourage momentum from within the station

Stations might want to consider a range of incentives to encourage participants to attend — a raffle or station membership, CDs, movie tickets, and so on.

You could ask potential participants to call the station to register their interest. Have a form next to all station telephones so that volunteers can easily write down details of callers: name and contact telephone number. This makes it easy for the coordinating group to call back closer to the focus group date to encourage the person to attend. We found this sometimes entailed calling people several times to ensure they would come along on the day.

The ideal number of focus group participants is 6-12. If stations receive a high number of willing participants, it is better to conduct more than one focus group. This means the research will be duplicated and this aids in the verification of results. We tended to over-book our target focus group numbers by 4-5 because, almost inevitably, several people failed to attend on the day. Try to organise the focus groups with a range of ages and gender. This will be dependant on the station's format. For example, a 'generalist' station will select participants based on age and gender while a 'seniors' station will be primarily focused on gender.

Be careful not to screen participants. The research objective is honest feedback. For this reason stations will need to ensure the transparency of participant selection. It might be worthwhile assigning the focus group organisation to a team of volunteers who are not presenters or on the management committee.

How to use the data: analysis and presentation

Qualitative research at the station can be used in conjunction with the quantitative data if this is available. It is a matter of recognizing trends in your our focus group data and using the quantitative data to support these findings. The focus group agenda will help you isolate these themes. However, unexpected findings which emerge when participants discuss your station represent the key benefit of focus group research. Given the freedom to converse, participants will raise issues which you had not considered, simply because of your close relationship to the station. Sometimes, the opinions of audience members can lead to a defensive stance. Avoid this and treat the opinions of participants as an opportunity for constructive criticism or suggestions.

Identifying the trends in your discussion data is the most challenging phase of the audience research process. After the focus group discussion has been transcribed, you might like to consider distributing the transcription to all members of the committee for independent analysis. After committee members have read the focus group and thought about the major themes, organise a meeting to discuss the outcomes or the knowledge you have gained about your audience.

Look for themes and ideas that recur in a focus group or focus groups (if more than one). Identify key quotes from the focus group which are representative of the themes. You may want to use the themes our national study identified in *Community Media Matters* as a starting point, but be guided by your own audience focus group dynamic. Return to the possible uses for this information and consider possible ways to present the data:

- License renewals

- License requirements — serving your community of interest
- Program and station improvements
- Sponsorship — feedback for sponsors and potential sponsorship targets
- Allowing you to better service your community

Presenting the data is a creative process and you will be able to glean ideas from the ways we have presented focus group data in our reports. Again, a useful way to present your data is to use quantitative findings to support your information. For example, in Australia, we have found that local news and information is a key reason why people listen to community radio. We have also found that in regional areas, the local news and information role is particularly important. This supported the McNair Ingenuity quantitative findings which noted that local news and information is the main reason for listening in ‘non-metro’ Australia. This focus group quote was used to support our findings and those of the quantitative survey:

The local news component on Radio Nag comes through the programs, because most programs have news and information in them and they tell you what is happening locally. It is about local stuff that is happening here that you hear in each of the programs. The groups that present programs like RSL and Land Care talk about what is happening locally too. It is in-depth information and a wide source of information about the community (Radio Nag Yeppoon QLD, 2005).

In this way, you can identify themes emerging from your focus group discussion, compare this with existing data in the previous studies mentioned and draw your own conclusions based on the evidence. What do your audiences say about your station and its role in the community? How does this compare with previous studies of the community broadcasting sector as a whole? If there are differences, can you explain them, using your local knowledge? Perhaps your station is serving a particular audience that is not widely represented by other media, including community media?

This is an example of how qualitative research can provide extra depth to an understanding of the relationship between audiences and community broadcasting producers. The focus group results need not operate in conjunction with quantitative research. Where audiences do not correspond specifically with quantitative or other sector research, qualitative research can still be used to explore the subtleties of community broadcasting audiences.

Finally, make a concerted effort to announce the results of your research on-air. This ensures the station community understands that their feedback will be used in a practical sense to improve the station.

A suggested audience focus group agenda for facilitators

The following information should be seen by focus group facilitators as a general guide for discussion. It is based around a broad exploration of community broadcasting audiences. You may be interested in exploring responses to more specific issues — a new station program or format, for example — and would need to tailor your approach

accordingly. The prompts listed below could be raised only if discussion moves off track or conversation is limited.

Initially, the facilitator should note the number of participants, gender, and their impression of the group overall along with the nature of interactions between group members (e.g. dominant speakers). It is important to note this as these details are not available through a transcript.

If you are conducting an *audience* study, ensure that your participants are listeners/viewers and that no presenters or current station volunteers are present as this will skew responses and may influence what non-volunteers might want to say. Invite participants initially to nominate what THEY see as the important issues and list them, either on a whiteboard or large sheets of paper so that all participants can see them and contribute. Give participants the opportunity to raise issues for discussion. Remember, you are there to ‘facilitate’ — to keep things on track — as far as possible let the participants run the discussion. The best questions to ask participants are always ‘How?’ and ‘Why?’ as they encourage open-ended responses.

Individual Themes

- Listening patterns: what they listen to (programs) and when (frequency)?
- Why they listen? How did they discover community radio?
- Likes/dislikes? Expectations?
- Improvements?
- Future needs?

Community Themes

- Has the station increased your knowledge about your local community? If so, how?
- Has listening/viewing helped your involvement in your local community or communities? Examples?
- Has station given you a sense of community? (or sense of belonging?) How?

Media Themes

- Local news and current affairs? Quality and usefulness of content?
- Do you give feedback to the community radio station? Do you think your feedback is taken into account? Examples?
- Key differences between community radio and other media broadcasters?
- If station stopped broadcasting tomorrow, how would it affect your life?

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Note: This document was primarily put together by Dr Kerrie Foxwell who was project manager on the national qualitative audience study, *Community Media Matters*.